From Trauma to Memory The "internal group" of origin and belonging in migrant children

Virginia De Micco

Abtract

The intertwining between identity and memory in young underage immigrants is examined through a series of sessions that took place in a Welcome Centre. In the specific situation that involves children occupied in a migratory transit, the construction of the individual memory finds itself engaged on two fronts, as it implies not only a (re)construction of the individual past but also the struggle for a position in an internal "group".

It is along these edges that migrant children find particular difficulties that can be deeply observed, underneath superficial levels of good "integration", using relational and conceptual tools that are able to give back, also inside an ethnographic enquiry, the constitutive complexity of identity plots and their intimate bond with multiplicity ad alterity. A methodology of encounter where psychoanalytic *listening* intertwines with anthropological *gazing*.

Migration calls inevitably and immediately into question the cultural constitution of the individual psyche that is critically discussed in the work and illustrated through striking life stories.

The question of belonging and of the "origin" becomes, for the migrant children of the so-called second "generation", an area of constant interrogation, because they have to rapidly face the necessity of building a sense of identity and belonging along cultural borders that are uncertain and unstable. It is in fact necessary to unravel the traumatic knot linked to the migratory experience by finding tools of cultural *and* psychic representability of one's own migratory "trauma", without which it is impossible to constitute one's own "memory".

Key-words: Identity; Memory; cultural Change; transgenerational Transmission

The material that will be discussed in this article comes from a series of sessions with migrant children that took place within an ethnographic enquiry on a Welcome Centre for underage migrants; it is therefore ethnographic and not clinical. I intended to clarify this in order to underline that there wasn't a requested consultation for any clear manifestation of psychic disorder and the sessions were, therefore, a sort of "raid" in the everyday life of the subjects encountered. This "everyday" dimension, in which multiple clues of deep fractures in the sense of individual identity were already traceable, brought furthermore to light the eventful

journeys that these children have to pass through in order to build a sense of identity across doubtful and unstable cultural borders.

Despite the material was collected during ethnographic fieldwork, the sessions were explicitly managed in a analytical listening form. If, on one hand, no cure situations were encouraged, on the other hand, using some of Winnicott's suggestions, we aimed to activate certain canals of deep communication outside the therapeutic setting as well.

Besides, considering it is an essentially "relational material", as a manner if speaking, this type of ethnographic data presents itself as particularly useful to be listened and read using psychoanalytical tools. It's not about giving further territory of exercise to the so-called 'applied' psychoanalysis, but rather to delineate the possibility of a psychoanalysis that is profoundly "implied" in new social and cultural contexts; contexts that are crossed by deep processes of transformation on an anthropological level that, inevitably, influences the construction of identitary trajectories of the individuals and of the communities.

The modalities of a listening that is psychoanalytically oriented are explicitly recalled in the relational handling of the sessions. This to disprove the quite widespread version that psychoanalysis isn't apt to the cure of migrant's pathologies and doesn't intend the specific forms of their discomfort as *culturally* conditioned, and emphasize how, on the contrary, psychoanalysis can reveal itself as the most appropriate tool to face that discomfort that the anthropologist Appadurai identifies with "diasporic identities". Migration is a "shifty phenomenon", according to J.P. Raison, that is electively characterized by its *dynamism*: it is structurally "shifty", being a "zone" of transits, of transformations, of changes with doubtful results; the place par excellence where the cultural and social *dynamic* "embodies" the psychic and relational one.

The idea that psychoanalysis should atone for a sort of cultural *gap* when approaching the experience of non-occidental populations appears groundless, especially in the age of the so-called globalization where forms of crossbreeding and cultural hybridization make the "borders" of its tradition and cultural experience increasingly subtle and variable. It obviously concerns both migrants and autochthones, who find themselves experiencing different paths of one same "identity crisis"; this can maybe save surprises and bring together "us" to "others" in an unsuspected way . This is, after all, the "mirror function" of immigration (Sayad): forcing the "us" to look itself in the "others' " reversed mirror, so that they do not appear as distant but, on the contrary, unbearably close. A deformed mirror that recalls an image of "us" where the "us" struggles to recognize itself and that can actually refuse --. It shows the crude truth of social and symbolic overpowering in which the 'us' is implied, rather than the reassuring self-representative version where he likes to watch himself.

According to Appadurai the 'diasporic identities', this "historic form" of individual identity, would be specific to an age of globalization marked by two fundamental phenomena: the deterritorialization of communities and of individuals and the

relevance of mass media communication. The former marks a rupture in the organic "solidarity" between a territory, a community and a cultural tradition, whereas the latter glorifies a modality of cultural transmission on a horizontal level, contributing to the deep transformation of cultural inheritance and the configurations of communities in which to recognize oneself: virtual communities, "imagined" [1] communities thereby, rather than communities historically placeable that are able to mark a continuity and an evolution in time.

This enables us to understand how it can result as unsuited, in order to understand the particular discomfort of --second generation immigrants, to strengthen their supposed cultural belonging. A bad use of the notion of culture was in fact pointed out by those anthropologists who studied the migratory phenomenon, where the main risk is to build --- "artifacts" of the native cultures, casting a shadow over the cultural transit, the transformation and the symbolic "labour". With "labour" I intend to show that it isn't a painless operation but, on the contrary, actual "maimed mimesis" can be outlined on a psychological level, as I've shown elsewhere[2]. Nonetheless, the investigation on the modalities of this re-signification of the world and of oneself results as crucial when compared to the possibility of intending the discomfort that is brought to light in this painful dimension of transit. We must therefore escape the double peril of, on one hand, building a rhetoric of crossbreeding and smuggling it as an answer whilst darkening an objective dimension of anxious uncertainty and, on the other hand, a sort of blinding overemphasis of cultural themes that suggests the restoration of the native cultural configurations as the only condition that is able to bring about a cultural, psychological and relational balance. Another version of that "subtly ethnocentric irenicism", as written by Augè, with which the West looks at the traditional cultures, longed for as potentially a-conflictual; a temptation that has involved certain ethnopsychiatric views of the migratory discomfort that, I care to underline, cannot be read with the same tools used to describe the pathological configurations and the therapeutic strategies adopted in non-Western societies, the tools of the so-called "classic" ethnopsychiatry. This is not because the psyche develops itself in a relatively independent, unitary and "universal" way, and is therefore only dressed in one cultural "robe" i.e. intending culture only as a pathoplastic element but, instead, as I will explain later, because what is denied is the dynamic element of cultural and psychic transformation that migration inevitably implies. To witness this process, often painful and lacerating, by remaining stubbornly on the "border": this is the meaning of our journey.

Between identity and memory

---

[1] In reference to those that, in a different context, B. Anderson calls *Imagined communities.*

[2] Cfr. V. De Micco, *Corpi. Nomi. Storie. Vicissitudini dell'identità in bambini migranti.,* in "Rivista Italiana di gruppoanalisi", XXII, 2/2008

The sessions' aim was therefore to investigate the interwinding of identity and memory that emerged in the experience of these children, paying particular attention to the way in which they were able to tell their story: the representation of themselves in "historical" terms implied a symbolizing bond that concerned their origin or, more precisely, a question regarding their origin. In the particular situation of children occupied in a migratory transit, such a construction of individual memory is engaged on two fronts, as it implies a (re)construction not only of an individual past but also implies a struggle to identify oneself in an "internal group". Such a constitutive interrogation regarding one's own origin sets off a journey through which one can *become who he is*, in a movement -- of *subjectivation of one's own origin*, for which one is literally called to identify oneself with one's own body, with one's own name, with one's own ancestors.

It is across these paths that migrant children meet -- particular difficulties that can be analyzed in depth, under the superficial levels of good "integration", through relational and conceptual tools that can show, also inside an ethnographic investigation, the constitutive complexity of identity plots, their intimate bond with multiplicity and otherness. A methodology of encounter, therefore, in which the psychoanalytical *listening* binds to the anthropological *gaze*.

The question of migration brings about, inevitably and immediately, the one of cultural constitution of the individual psyche: of the cultural frame that holds the psychic apparatus. The root of the culturalizing bond lies in the same condition of *Hilflosigkeit*: the human being is doomed (in the sense of *committed*) to sociality by its own biology as it needs another psychic apparatus to give meaning and availability to his own primary experiences. It requires an apparatus of signs and symbols, a cultural apparatus, that is always *already there*, *inside which* and *through which* it can find the proper tools of emotional and symbolic representation to build its interiority. It is in the same condition of prematurity on a biological level that are simultaneously situated the necessity of care, with its burden of immediate insertion in a relational fabric and of unconscious "infiltration" of the rising psyche, and the necessity of inclusion in a symbolic fabric, of affiliation to a descent, to a system of sociocultural representations.

The release from a complete instinctual/natural registry at the birth makes possible and necessary the appeal to a number of different answers, "cultural" answers that are flexible and modifiable and are situated in an "anthropological" context, rather than biological: the space for learning/caring is freed. As can be seen it is exactly the same condition that opens a space so that drive ad unconscious can establish themselves in the psyche *in the place of* the instinct. In this way, far from being opposed to one another, drive and culture find themselves simultaneously established in the psyche: the place of the drive is the same as that of culture.

The *infans* is therefore *hilflos*, indistinguishably and inseparably, with no word and no shell. This is why the cultural linguistic system, through which the mother gives meaning and thereby "contains" him, constitutes a true *semantic shell* without which the psyche cannot develop itself.

Winnicott underlines, as is well known, that if the mother is sufficiently responsive, the child will see himself reflected in her gaze and will identify with that loved image of himself, an image that is however, from the beginning, symbolically embedded: the mother cannot therefore see her child outside those modalities that are culturally conditioned through which she can represent him, echoing in this the function of Bourdieu's "structuring structures". Regarding this matter, Conrotto underlines the symbolizing function of the maternal gaze that allows the child to be "signified by the mother inside the symbolic order that recognizes the difference between sexes and generations" (p.46). Now, considering that we're dealing exclusively with a *specific* symbolic order, a cultural order, we understand that in the moment in which the maternal look gives "birth" to its child as a subject *ipso facto*, she makes him a cultural subject, with all the intuitable consequences that can take place in the moment in which that same "founder look" is lived by a constant "representative" and "affective" anxiety. An anxiety that is born from the maternal uncertainty to be able to "affiliate" her own child to her descent, to her chain of symbolic belongings, to assign him as her own descendant. The children of migration are, in a way, all illegitimate; sons without fathers, without that warranter of a symbolic order[3] that allows to that same maternal look to work in a complete "subjecting" direction.

It is therefore the study of the "multiple singularities of a collective phenomenon", such as migration, to use an expression of the anthropologist Amalia Signorelli, that brings to light the constitutive dimension of culture for the individual psyche. The call into question "from the foundation" of the structural bond between the psyche and the cultural system -intended in the sense of that essential *semantic shell- is* inevitably involved in the migratory experience: it exposes exactly to a renewed risk of not being able to re-symbolize the psychic contents following the new cultural order.

Leon and Rebecca Grinberg, in their pioneering and somewhat unsurpassed work *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Migration and Exile,* underlined how migration somehow constitutes an actual experience of rebirth, with the risk that the impossibility of re-affiliating to the new universe of signification implies an incurable wound in the psychic shell.
Psychic structure and cultural structure, in fact, "keep homologous relations: one is the *double* of the other", as is suggested by Nathan. According to this author, immigrants suffer electively for the loss of the cultural double; this makes the identitary structure particularly fragile, specially that border between inside and outside that represents an inaugural order both for the psyche and for the culture.

---

[3] The father figure and specifically the father function as specific symbolic workers is the most damaged by the migratory experience. Such dismantling of the father function confirms itself constantly also when the migratory flows present themselves with variegated sociological characteristics.

Specifically, he underlines how the migratory transit can jeopardize the possibility of feeling one's own internal reality as something that is rich and *inviolable*, therefore intimately belonging, from the moment that "the inside cannot constitute itself without a relationship with an outside that has an identical structure", that is therefore the *double* of that internal structure, in which, therefore, I would add, that same internal structure con reflect and recognize itself. All this enables us to understand how *fragile* all physical and psychic membranes and shells can become in the migratory experience: they are always at risk of a symbolic rupture[4]. It also enables us to understand the way in which a sudden change in that same symbolic "external" structure, in the cultural context of immigration, where the "internal" structure cannot reflect itself anymore, can be perceived as an active attack from the external environment, an actual burglary of the internal reality that is "violated": it is in this that the sense of inexpressible violence experienced by the migrant appears to gain substance.

That sort of structural coherence between "internal" and "external", moreover, is the main guarantee of the fact that thoughts and words coincide, that words *actually* mean what they mean. When such "coherence" is altered, as in the migratory experience, it's as if a hole was dug in the order of signifiers that can no longer *signify* anything. Words, I'm referring mainly to the "internal" words, to the process of signification rather than to a strict linguistic level, remain like empty shells which a dramatic --- effect.

In fact, when the symbolic order of meanings wobbles, as happens in the migratory experience, one cannot be sure any longer of the self-evidence of the world that suddenly becomes an irresolvable enigma.

What can be intended for "cultural trauma"?

The central question of belonging, of simultaneous affiliation to a group *and* to a symbolic system, or rather to *a group that constitutes a universe of embodied meaning* (to this I intend to refer with the notion of "internal group"), declines itself not only regarding identity but also memory. The latter immediately implies the necessity to unravel the traumatic knot linked to the migratory experience. First of all I intend to clarify what can be intended for "cultural trauma" when linked to migration. The possibility of building an individual memory of the migratory transit, in fact, passes through the necessity of finding tools of cultural *and* psychic representability of one's own migratory "trauma": without some form of representation/elaboration of the specific traumatic element linked to migration it's impossible to approach the constitution of a "memory" of the event itself. Only through this crucial junction it is possible to build a "crossing" of the border that is also a psychic "crossing" and not an irreparable "caesura" and, therefore, a "fall", an irreparable psychic "collapse".

---

[4] Particularly relevant in the migrant population are, in fact, pathologies, often of a psychosomatic nature, of the skin together with those of the oral, anal and genital orifices and of their function of regulating exchanges between the inside and the outside.

The question of the psychic "trauma" linked to migration represents "the" main question that concerned the whole psychopathology of migration: whether it would be possible to consider the migratory event as a trauma itself, able to determine a psychic pathology, maybe of a psychotic nature, or if it is nothing more than a possible scenario in which a preexisting individual psychic "vulnerability" can emerge[5].

The debate, characterized by clear ideological and social battles, is still open: the concept of "cultural shock" that affirmed itself around the sixties had, on one hand, the merit to bring to light the relevance of the cultural difference --- but, on the other hand, it posed problems concerning the evolution and the structure of the psychic apparatus that are still unsolved.

Moreover some authors, among whom Michele Risso, have underlined how it is possible to describe the entire process of adaptation to a new cultural context in terms of everyday microtrauma and of a permanent conflictual process. Now, from a strictly psychological point of view, it is necessary to specify how in such a way we're shifting from a trauma seen as a single event characterized by its "violence" on the psychic structure, therefore by its capacity of burglary of mechanisms of the psychic functioning *tout court*, to a trauma seen as a series of events, inspired by Masud Khan's concept of cumulative trauma. The latter progressively "transform" the psychic structure, making it more vulnerable and increasing the risk of psychic illness. On one hand, we can see how in such a way we open to the overcoming of the idea of a constitutional psychic vulnerability, since the trauma built up throughout the years can affect the psychic structure itself. On the other hand it isn't easy to articulate in psychological terms the idea of a traumatic series that cumulates its effects in time outside the period of formation of the psychic structure, that is outside early childhood. We also have to consider that the same concept of cumulative trauma in psychology is significant because of the tight mother-son dependency during early childhood; it results conceivable only inside a primary relation that organizes the external and internal world by giving it meaning. This appears to be extremely interesting: in order to suggest the migratory experience as the cause of "trauma", we have to recognize its specific value of symbolic and cultural reconstitution.

In this way the migratory experience corresponds to a resignification of the world, of relations and of oneself, causing an actual reapplication of oneself to the world and of the world to oneself: it therefore requires actual acts of symbolic refounding of the self and of the world.

I'd like to underline how it is the everyday life itself that then becomes an important cause of trauma as it becomes exquisitely enigmatic: it is exactly the meaning that

---

[5] Cfr.: Frigessi Castelnuovo D. e Risso M., *A mezza parete,* Einaudi, Turin, 1981, De Micco V. and Martelli P. (edited by), *Passaggi di confine. Etnopsichiatria e migrazioni,* Liguori, Naples, 1993, and Benedice R., *Frontiere dell'identità e della memoria. Etnopsichiatria e migrazioni in un mondo creolo,* Angeli, Milan, 1998.

has to be given to reality that becomes unstable so that reality itself can no longer be used but must be continuously redone.

It is exactly on this anthropological level that we can place the effective cause and the thinkability itself of the individual trauma, of the psychological *vulnus*. It appears to be impossible to trust the world again, a world that becomes a "foreigner world".

The trauma can manifest its effects on the psychological level, or on the psychiatric level *tout court*, but it installs in the specific attitude of symbolic construction of one's world and of oneself. We cannot therefore think of a trauma that is linked to migration outside the fundamental constitutiveness for the psyche of the cultural experience: it is always at the same time psychological *and* cultural. Therefore it can be cured and comprehended only by keeping constantly in mind this double nature.

Another central element to bear in mind, directly linked to the former statements, concerns the apparent invisibility of the trauma; its not manifesting itself immediately. This manifesting not only concerns an eventual fallback in clinical or vaguely psychological terms, linked therefore to a generic individual or relational discomfort, but it specifically concerns the ways of construction and representation of one's experience; it therefore fully invests the modalities in which the main social actors involved perceive and represent their own migratory experience. A number of scholars, among whom Rosoli and Sayad, have in fact noted how migration often shows its "true nature" with hindsight, in a sort of retrospective, whereas Raison actually underlines that the general effects of migration on a population "can be felt on the long term, on the scale of one or two generations". Sayad, for example, observes how many of the migrant workers he met only managed to tell their story, and therefore to represent to themselves all the difficulty and the disappointment of their experience, all the hardship of what they themselves had lived, towards the end of their work experience. Paraphrasing the terms of the well-known English psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, and adapting them to our context, we could say that only at the end of their life they managed to *live* what had *happened* to them, they managed to build the symbolic tools through which to represent and give meaning to their life; to translate the *event* into a *lived experience* and into transmittable memories. In doing so it is the traumatic elements themselves that must find their own visibility and representativeness. Paradoxically, its as if *without the recognition of a trauma it is impossible to build a memory*. It will be once again important to underline how the intervention of symbolic tools such as storytelling, in the specific form of recalling one's experience, enable to give shape –that means visibility and representability- to the experience.

In this way we could say that on the cultural level the trauma, rather than simply indicating a breakdown of continuity on a level of shared representations and of the cognitive-affective styles of relations (the "cultural shock"), concerns the symbolic labour regarding the meaning to give to one's own experience. If this is true in everyday life, as we've seen, it is in a greater measure with regards to certain critical

events. It's not a coincidence that I'm referring to critical events and not to "traumas", because its as though such "events" didn't have the chance to become actual traumas.

In the stories of our little heroes, critical events recur: death or abandonment of the parents, suffered physical and psychological violence, prolonged and violent separation from families. It strikes us however how such events are often singularly absent from their stories, as if they could not find a place in the representation of the self; they appear wrapped in a symbolic labour in which such events are "waiting to know" what they must and can represent for the subject - for that individual cultural construction that is the subject, using Wievorka's beautiful expression. In this operation certain modalities of transgenerational cultural transmission, that in the examined cases do not appear to work properly, are definitively involved. Our little heroes appear, in this way, unable to give a correct cultural meaning to the critical events that stroke them and behave as if these only happened *nearby* and not *inside* them. Traces of painful and unresolved enigmas than need to be "opacified" rather than revealed.

From this point of view we need to look at the trauma not as an event anymore, but as a process. The critical event can become *traumatic experience* in the moment in which a symbolic elaboration takes place, when it can assume a cultural configuration: it can be said, remembered and used to build individual and collective memory.

Until this operation will not be possible, until this job of the social actors will not have prepared the ground for the *cultural "building" of the trauma*, what will be revealed will rather be the active strategies of erasing and hiding, that unique "opacity" in the stories of migrants that Sayad wanted to respect: to leave the migrants the "opacity of their stories", extreme and paradoxical form of resistance. "The opacity of a language that doesn't open from the beginning", he writes, " is doubtlessly the most important and rare information".

It does strike how children and youths show a great difficulty in the organization of a narration relative to their experience. They appear unable to unwind it along the time axis: the before and the after that are delineated don't have much to do with the chronological trend and rather reflect sudden caesuras in their existence. This juxtaposition of universes that appear so distant from one another (the before and the after, that are simultaneously a *here* and an *elsewhere*) emphasizes this trait of discontinuity rather than of continuity. If one of the main characteristics of the autobiographical narration really consists in the returning/rebuilding of the continuity of experience, in our case the main concern appears to be linked to the necessity of hiding something, of forgetting rather than remembering. The absolute necessity of forgetting in order to continue living is a recurring theme in the stories of migrants, it answers both an individual psychic need and a social "request", "implicitly" exerted in the context of immigration.

The social action, its moulding of the individual experience, is here traceable in what, in a way, it imposes to forget.

The symbolic violence, as stated by Pierre Bourdieu, is here exerted in a form of complicity between the individual need to psychologically survive (oblivion as a form of resistance, the "forget in order to live", as shown by Augè) and the implicit submission to a form of social and symbolic bond that imposes to shape one's life in a certain way. The *building* of an individual memory, the possibility, that is, to put one's present in a meaningful relationship with the past, appears as an uneven and conflictual ground compared to the organization of the everyday life, where an apparently a-conflictual mimetic attitude prevails. None of the migrant children and youths showed, or wanted to admit, particular difficulty in dealing with everyday life, but things become increasingly complex if we investigate the specific indentitary function that is memory. The simple request to remember, to find a continuity between present and past, the *here* and *there*, can result excessive for these children; they are involved in an identitary transit, in a symbolic labour that they try to protect themselves from through a sort of symbolic *suspension*, a suspension of meaning that enables them to keep a submerged contact with the past, with their *origin*. Somehow, to bring the past back into the game, to go look inside it, means to find a contact with something that is related to an origin, to a provenance. This assumes, however, a sort of alterity when compared to today, to the everyday life, to the perception of the self; a past, therefore, that in our case risks to collide with the present, being fundamental bearer of the enigma of one's belonging.

Between first and second generation...
As written by Fabietti and Matera: "Being a pillar of any identitary construction, and being representation of a past yielding a construction, memory constitutes the privileged object of cultural and social anthropology (...). But in the process of construction of an identity, memory always has the same meaning and the same function: it offers a meaningful representation of the present (...). Memory is therefore not only a mere "recording" of the past, but a representation of the latter, given by memory on one side, and oblivion on the other". On one hand, therefore, it's for the sustainability of one's present, to preserve its "meaning", that children "rearrange" their memory, on the other it becomes crucial to investigate the *codes of representability* according to which they reorganize their past.

This operation is in fact not feasible for everyone in the same way. It is important to underline for this matter how distant, and sometimes diverging, the experience of adolescents that migrated on their own can be from the one of children migrated with their families. Whereas the former fully constitute a first generation of migrants, representing a first migratory phase for their country, therefore with a stability kept on the symbolic and cultural structures of the community of origin, the latter constitute a second generation of which they share all the problems. It is surprising to see how in a sort of time crush, considering there are only few years of difference between them, such diverse declinations of the migratory experience

overlap and diverge. Therefore a fundamental discriminating element appears to be represented by the migration with or without a family nucleus.

One of the most evident differentiating areas concerns the memory: a memory of the past and of the country of migration, therefore concerning the construction of an "internal group" of belonging. Such interior constellation, mainstay of an identitary process in which past, present and future can find coherent symbolic coordinates, becomes a place of intense and unceasing struggle and interrogation. One's own "internal group" becomes the place for the essential function of interior reflection where to find stability and coherence of one's sense of self. We can thereby guess the effects that the instability of such internal "function" can have on the internal psychic equilibrium of these youths.

For the first generation youths it concerns, in fact, an alive and personal memory; a memory that it is difficult to talk about, a "real" memory, in a way. For the second generation children it often concerns, instead, a memory that is similar to a fairy-tale. For the former the memories are almost unspeakable, they appear to be kept jealously secret, or rather kept secret as if a "crypt". For the latter, on the other hand, the memories are almost "public", built following criteria of representability and acceptability. Furthermore, for the latter the memories that are linked to the place of origin of the parents remain, for the moment at least, absolutely unattainable and therefore unusable to build an effective feeling of the self, to give solidity to the sentiment of taking roots, or better, they often represent a source of anxiety and are looked at with suspect and wariness.

This impossibility of memory intertwines with the invisibility of the trauma that we focused on earlier, and together with the latter it outlines the risk of failure of the mechanisms of transgenerational cultural transmission. I think that there are a series of clues that bear witness for a particular modality where such transmission can sustain itself, in a sort of underground river of clandestine transmission that takes place almost without the knowledge of the social actors involved, present more in the gestures and in a sort of silent communication rather than in words, in a sort of "involuntary memory" that can suddenly re-emerge in the form of things that they "don't know to know". So its "the English that stuck to my head, even though I've never studied it at home" that Willy speaks about, a child of Nigerian origin, or Akim's "secret language", that we'll focus on later. A sort of cryptic and cyphered belonging that must make itself "unrecognizable" for those who "carry" it.

Such elements work as actual *cypher signs* of belonging, of which maybe only later it will be possible to regain possession, make them one's "own", re-cognize and de-cypher them; both in the sense of being able to cognitively "interpret" them and in the sense of letting them out of the affective crypt in which they have been necessarily sealed.

In this situation the Welcome "Centre" becomes an active organizer of individual memories of such children, because of the difficulty, often unsustainable, or of the actual impossibility, to relate the present to the past, and overall the *here* and the *there*: that means the country of immigration and the country of origin that must,

----

instead, remain completely separated as two different areas of experience and memory.

Most second generation children, in fact, organize their memory from the experience in the Welcome Centre that becomes, in a way, the *centre* of their life, of their representation-perception of the self. The group of coevals with whom the experience is shared in the Welcome Home can now take the place of the "internal group" that one can feel to belong to, a group that is intrinsically fragile as it misses that "genealogical" dimension that becomes fundamental in order to root one's subjectivity in the memory of the people.

...Between centre and margin

As recalled by Marc Augè "the space of a collectivity" - and this is even more significant for the "internal group"- "is also temporalized, because it is loaded with symbolic valence: it is the bearer of an identity, because individuals recognize and define themselves through it (...) it's three times symbolic: of the relationship of one with its own self, with others and with a shared past (Augè, 1977)... Memory, on the other hand, carries out the main role of author of such symbolization of the social space, because the attribution of meaning always passes through the recovery of memory".

The memories of the interviewed children, in fact, those organizable in a representation of the self, actively start in the Centre: all second generation children begin their story from the Welcome Centre, as if that was the point of the historical perception where the self can "begin". It's true, on the other hand, that many of them had been hosted in the Centre since they were very young, since birth in some cases, but once again what is interesting to note is the *role as a symbolic centre* of the Welcome Centre. It winds up representing the centre of one's self *tout court*, the centre of gravity of one's existence that cannot be represented for these children neither by the family nor by family "memories". For some, the arrival at the Centre constitutes a sort of rebirth, with the erasing of all sorts of previous memories.

An authentic "therapeutic" function in these cases can often involve the witnessing of the slow and progressive possibility of regaining possession of the individual memory.

Some children, like Akim, are forced to completely disown an important part of their past, specifically of their belonging to a family. For them the Welcome Centre, being a physical place and a deposit for affection, constitutes an actual psychic shell, a mental wrapping to which to stick to; a life outside it becomes unimaginable as it became the centre of internal gravity, having all the rest been erased.

In the case of adolescents who migrated alone, actual first generation immigrants, we rather assist to a difficult evocation of memories. The past cannot be evoked neither in terms of memory nor in terms of meaningful actions (e.g. sending a picture home). Every contact with the past is suspended; with what once existed and still exists in some other place that, however, in the current condition, is seen as literally another world. The renewed application of oneself to the world and of the

----

world to oneself, that is involved in the migratory experience, has to remain on the threshold, or in a free zone , for a period of time that can be long. In this case it really appears that the possibility to regain contact, even only a mental contact through memories, with the past is prevented by the duty, imposed by every rite of passage, of detaching from every element that is linked to the previous situation, to the previous identity.

This "suspended time" corresponds to an actual process of *identitary reformulation*; it implies great changes and transformations in the reformulation of the central function of the "internal group" that we're trying to emphasize.

From the stories clues of change emerge, a change that is happening inside them and the sense of loss it causes: a transformation is happening and this generates difficulty and anxiety because the modalities and the meanings that its assuming are not totally controllable. It is enough to think that, for example, they often talk among themselves in Italian - among Albanian youths in the case I examined. This stirs a question that doesn't have an answer for the time being: what is happening to us? Anxiety multiplied by the perception of collective transformation, that concerns the whole small group and not the individual.

Also the difficulty they have in keeping contacts with the families, for example in sending photographs home, appears to be related to the inability, for the time being, to dominate the transformations related to the migratory transit. This inability --- translates the difficulty of being able to recognize oneself in an image that can be a "support" for a renewed identity. The importance of photographic images, and of all "evidences" that the migrant sends home as elements of a precise representation of the self and of the meaning of his leaving, is well-known: a public meaning, for the communities of origin, and more than a private message. Telephone communications are still possible; the contact with a familiar voice, being a basic affective bond, still has a space. It can be impossible, however, to send a photograph for its meaning of "public" representation, an image that is *shown*; to offer one's image to the gaze of who remained home is too much, its an unthinkable act in the moment in which the meaning of the transformation itself is so unstable and precarious.

Such a condition becomes particularly bewildering for first generation adolescent immigrants who migrated for a family "task" and have a strong cultural belonging to the community of origin. It's as if they feel forced to relate with a new reality using old tools and, above all, they are bewildered by their own cognitive abilities, for example the mastery of the language, that appears to be a "treachery" towards themselves and overall towards their past, or rather their "internal group".

Whereas Willy discovers that "English stuck to his head" and, even if in an unconscious and conflictual way, his double belonging will be able to transform itself into a double competence, Leonard, a 17-year-old Albanian, has Italian *inside* his head and would almost like to get rid of it, get rid of what he now lives in. Whereas for Willy, somehow, living on the border is thinkable, experienceable, even if we don't know whether in any way "resolvable", it appears that it lies for

Leonard on the edge of what is thinkable. Moreover, Willy lives in the Welcome Centre since he was very young, a space on a border, a border that is made livable, whereas for Leonard the Welcome "Centre" appears rather like a margin where to stop only to leave again.

Moreover, as once again observed by Fabietti and Matera, "in the different times and cultures there is a link between the strategies of the practising memory and the image that men create of the group to which they belong in the present." (op. cit., 1999, p.20). It then becomes fundamental, for these children and youths, to be able to build a form of memory that can ensure a bond to the group to which they belong in the present. In a narrow sense, it concerns the group of children related to the Centre, linked to the "memories of the centre", crucial in the reconstruction of one's own past, as already emphasized; in a wider sense it concerns the group of coevals of the country of immigration, with whom they interact mainly in school.

It appears to be mainly through the media, particularly through television programs, that these children try to build a ground of "common narrations" with their Italians coevals. Through the common "language" of television programs they try to outline a sense of belonging to something that, in anthropological terms, we could define as an "imagined community", paraphrasing Benedict Anderson's lucky expression, but that in psychic terms can become an authentic "imaginary group".

So, in a moment of everyday life at the Centre, Manuela and Justice talk about Barbies and cartoon they saw on TV while Willy and Christian share secrets and capacities with Mario on how to defeat the new Pokemon in a Playstation game: fragments of a globalized imaginary at the service of new local identities. In our case, these moments of an imagined globalized universe appear to be at the service of a practicable itinerary of *taking roots* in one's local reality, made of multiple cultural transits, *as much as* they show the *eradication* of a cultural tradition. Leonard, Klaudian and Arian, instead, never lose an episode of their favorite television shows, shows they had been following even before leaving Albania. In the passionate family sagas they seem to rebuild an imaginary thread of memory in which past and present, illusion and reality, constitute the trace of an immutable identity, whereas everything else in their life has changed.

Around the borders of the Welcome Home there is an increase, therefore, of the possibilities of an identitary reformulation of the individuals and of the descendants. This seems to involve a long rite of passage, a passage that appears to correspond significantly to a possible redefinition and reformulation of one's "internal group".

The possibility of effectively facing such an identitary process, even if it appears as an experience that is shared by the group of migrant youths, depends however on the capacities of the individual to find out the symbolic tools that allow an effective reintegration in the new world, that constitues, as shown by David Le Breton, a symbolic form of rebirth that is declined in a strictly personal way.

First generation adolescents -even though they can't apply the cultural tools expressed by the community of origin to face the cultural transit they're living-

possess, nevertheless, certain present and recognizable references to the culture of origin and to the community of belonging.

The affective belonging, and the interior and symbolic arrangement, to a community can be source of pain and nostalgia, but not of uncertainties: "I came here to find a job, not friends", says Arian. This is assisted by the ability to reproduce a microcommunitary asset due to the strong solidarity that exists between Albanian adolescents inside the Welcome Home; a solidarity that not only concerns banal affection but is specifically experiential, a sort of attempt to share the elaboration of the migratory experience and the symbolic labour implied by the cultural transit.

But what happens to he communities of origin for second generation children? We could, in this case, refer to a form of blinding invisibility: paradoxically they stand out because of their disappearance.

In our case, therefore, what we could indicate as a sort of hide-and-seek game between centre and margin constitutes the stake of the individual games: that same place that can constitute a renewed centre of signification of the world can become an undefined border on which to stop indefinitely. How the single social actors are or will be able to use it is something that remains, for the time being, hardly predictable and somewhat random, given to a series of unpredictable individual and situational variables. But this same unpredictability, together with the sudden change of sign the Centre can become, revealing itself as a margin, witnesses the instability implied by the symbolic labour that is bound to the cultural transformation and to the migratory experience. The world that one's struggling to tame can suddenly become unknown once again, in the same way in which one can suddenly become a foreigner in its own world, one of the most lacerating experiences for the so-called second generation of immigrants. Moreover, this same denomination of "second generation" shows how the characteristic of being an immigrant is ambiguously kept through the descent, meeting the requirements of classifying in an 'almost marginal' category those who are not of autochthonous descent. This marginal categorization appears to constantly prelude to a complaint of non-belonging, with the risk of being pushed to the margin.

Memory exercise becomes then a dangerous game as it implies a reformulation of the centre and of the margin, of oneself and of the world, reproposing what appears to be a constitutive paradox of the experience of migrant children, for whom building an identity *passes through* the risk of losing it.

I'd like to quote, in conclusion, Akim's story, to who's "secret memory" are entrusted the last suggestions, that I'd like to leave to the reader's sensibility.

Akim, years? "my mother sold me? She can't have sold me..."
How old is Akim? It seems he doesn't know it anymore either, considering the many different purposes, the multiple purposes, to say it with Proust, to which his age was bent. His "origins" are uncertain. Akim knows he's from the ex-Yugoslavia, "*right from Serbia, where there was the war*", as he likes to point out,

----

but he doesn't remember the name of his town. Even the reference to his family members is confused: he had younger brothers, grandparents and uncles, a strict father in the background. Only the figure of the mother appears to stand out. "*I'm going to tell you the truth, my parents sold me, or maybe that other one, the uncle, he kidnapped me, I don't know, but I know that my mother, no, she wouldn't have sold me, she loved me, I'm sure she's crying for me; one day she said Akim go buy some tomatoes and on the door there was that man, the uncle, who said Akim come here, your mother said you should come with us and that's how he took me to Italy*". At the time Akim was around ten years of age but he doesn't seem to remember anything clearly; he seems to be telling a confused dream. The emotional resonance of such events also inclines to a sort of resignation rather than to anger or to the drama of being taken away from his family. In this detachment there appears to be a sort of disbelief, almost an interior unrepresentability (one can be kidnapped in the same way in which one can buy tomatoes), rather than violence. They seem to be memories that belong to another life, a truth that has been rewritten many times, depending on the most useful version from time to time, so that Akim now finds it hard to actually recall what happened. --His memories begin to be clearer with the arrival in Italy, probably through Friuli, with a difficult itinerary made of everyday violence, blows, forced participation to thefts, bag-snatching, and all the repertoire of organized microdelinquency. "*If I didn't steal enough he would hit me, I'm not lying look one day he sat on me, my breastbone is still crooked*", says Akim while touching his chest. Akim tells everything, once again, with a sort of objectivity, with a lack of drama; even the violence suffered is seen as a sort of inevitable consequence of his lack of "productivity", as if there was no emotional participation from who hit him, not perceived as pure violence but as a disillusioned way of obtaining better "performances".

It is this sort of active subtraction from the emotional response that shows us more cruely the domination carried out through physical coercion, through an emotionless violence that is exerted and suffered in the same way, with a neutral appearance.

From this point of view children are doubly passivized, both because they are the object of physical violence, and because, without an emotional response to such experiences, the building of a memory in which such events can recover their painful meaning is prevented; we're in front of something that we could indicate with the term anesthesia, a hole in the memory, a double inexistence.

For an indeterminate period of time, months or maybe more than an year, Akim lives with the family of the man who kidnapped him, whom he calls the uncle; as often these men ask to be addressed by their children-slaves, in an ambiguous overlapping of models and family attributions and attitudes of respect and submission. Akim, not good enough in stealing, often stays at home with the uncle's wife and their younger children: he helps in chores, makes himself useful, tries to rebuild a homely dimension whose nostalgia is so strong it can't even be felt, thought, but only unceasingly reproduced and ambiguously filled (denied on one side, ambiguously repaired on the other, because it isn't his house that Akim is

looking for but any house where to adapt). He also feels ambiguously bonded to this family dimension in which he wants to continue living: he had a first occasion to flee after a strong fight between the uncle and his wife, during which he could run away, but he doesn't feel like leaving the little children alone: "*the small child was crying and I didn't want to leave him there. I didn't know what to do*", says Akim. In the meantime, they had been traveling through Italy reaching the countryside near Caserta where they found a dismantled cottage where they settled their headquarters. Availing an opportunity Akim decides to leave. It is now that his story becomes dramatic and alive, the long story of the vicissitudes of the days of flee and anxiety where the small space of the countryside dilates becoming a sort of Far West, the background of an extreme adventure with the perils of a tropical savanna. He throws himself in a "*river*" (maybe an irrigation canal, as there are many in these areas) and spends many hours of the night in the water so as to not be found. Wet, when he feels safe, he starts moving away from "his" cottage; that sort of house-prison that had been, in any case, a reference mark in an unknown environment. Akim knows that the only counterpower that can protect him from the uncle is the police; he asks for the closest police-station and asks for help, narrating confusedly his whole story. He is then entrusted to the Welcome Home, whose people in charge will then become his legal tutors. Akim had to tell his story to many different people: policemen, judges, social workers, teachers and at this point his own story, and in a way his memory, his identity, begins to suffer a series of rearrangements linked to the necessity of not comprising his only chance of saving himself. The possibility of doing an actual anthropological leap, to literally enter a new world, the world of custody and guarantees, the world of inclusion, must be kept at all costs, even if this could mean becoming another person. Who is Akim? Akim is who you want him to be. ------- Akim is constantly searching for the right representation of himself to fit the circumstances. His story seems to be his only richness, a good he can exchange. Its meaning is no longer individual but has become public, a space of negotiation and mediation with the social fabric and with institutional interlocutors. It is therefore subtracted to the individual memory and "given" to the adoptive context. It is the same subject who, with largely unconscious modalities, exploits a part of himself, of his "story", alienating himself from "his" memory.

One of the first relapses occurs, for example, regarding his age, because of the fateful threshold of the eighteen years of age that corresponds to the exit from the system of custody for the "underage". It's therefore obvious that he keeps on lowering his age in order to hold on to these benefits for longer. Akim has manipulated this aspect so much that now, even though remembering his actual birth date, he seems to have lost the internal sense of his age and, even though he's almost nineteen, he behaves like a fifteen-year-old and doesn't appear to be able to think himself outside this dimension. Since his memory had to rearrange because of necessities of the present, the future doesn't appear to be disclosing in front of him and he appears to remain stuck in a still and dilated present where he is always fifteen-years-old. Growing and regaining possession of his identity - of his memory

----

and his own story - is in this case too dangerous and seems to imply the risk of falling once again in the world of exclusion, in that other world that rolls by so close but is at the same time impenetrable if compared to "our" world. Akim has also found the cottage where he lived with the uncle. It's relatively close to the Welcome Home, in the neighboring countryside, but seems to belong to another world from which Akim wants to be separated and protected. Even in the Welcome Home Akim makes himself useful: he carved out a privileged niche for himself. He appears irritated in front of the difficulty of having a place for himself, a room of his own. Glancing around the room where our conversation was taking place he says "*this was my room, but then I had to leave it to the younger children, to the new ones that arrived. That's where I kept my things*". He calls "dad" the man in charge of the Centre but cannot call his wife "mum": his mum is the one who stayed home, who loves him in some place in the past.

It is only at this point that Akim's desire to take roots emerges. To he who told such a dramatic story almost without emotion what is really unthinkable is to have to leave the Welcome Home. His suffering and his anger are solicited only by this prospect. The Centre is his home, it's here that he claims "his" room, "his" space: his life outside this protected space is almost unthinkable. He went to school for a couple of years but with scarce results. He was integrated in the third year of primary school, but lived with an intuitable discomfort the inclusion in a group of children so much younger than he was and with needs that were so different from his own. Afraid to lose protection and his juridical and social custody to which, he felt, it was his difficulties and his suffering that enabled him to have access, Akim emphasized his "handicaps". Not only he declared a younger age to his actual age, but he also hid some of his abilities; for example he never said that he had gone to school and could therefore read and write in his language, afraid that this could take him away from the Centre. He also radicalized the detachment and loss of memories of his country, afraid of a more detailed inquiry on his past. He made himself small and defenceless like a child in order to be welcomed like a child. In short, Akim has actively amputated a part of himself, of his memory and of his ability, being afraid of losing the possibility of surviving as a person: he had to resign to partly die, in order to partly survive. A conflict seems to incessantly occur in his everyday modalities of behavior: on one hand he appears to be able and independent, "he makes himself useful", on the other he shows a strong fear that if such individual abilities grow excessively, this might mean the expulsion from the Centre, with all the symbolic cortege of such exclusion. This is where a series of failures, inexplicable in any other way, on the scholastic and work levels, derive. Singularly for Akim the only real bond with his past, a secret bond, is concentrated in his mother-tongue. He spends hours listening to radio frequencies from Serbia, like a sort of lullaby, a memory of his birth land. He lulls himself to sleep to the sound of a language he obviously never forgot, right when he appears to have lost the sense of his past. He is himself unable to say why he needs those familiar sounds, why he needs to attend every night to this secret and lonely encounter, where he shelters in a

----

sense of self that no one can sell nor kidnap. What is not there, what nobody knows exists, cannot be lost.

References

Anderson, B. (1996). *Comunità immaginate. Origini e fortuna dei nazionalismi.* Manifestolibri. Roma (ed. orig. *Imagined communities.* London-New York: Verso, 1991).

Anzieu, D. (1985). *L'Io-Pelle.* Roma: Borla, 1994.

Appadurai, A.(2001). *Modernità in polvere.* Roma*:* Meltemi.

Assoun, P.L.(1999). *Freud e le sciene sociali. Psicoanalisi e teoria della cultura.* Roma: Borla, 1999.

Augè, M.(1997). *Storie del presente. Per un'antropologia dei mondi contemporanei.* Milano: Il Saggiatore.

Augé, M.(2000). *Il senso degli altri.* Torino: Boringhieri.

Bateson, G. (1972). *Verso un'ecologia della mente,* Milano: Adelphi.

Bordieu, P. (1972). *Per una teoria della pratica.* Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2003.

Cardona, G. R. (1987). *Introduzione alla Sociolinguistica.* Torino: Loescher.

Conrotto, F. (2003). Aspetti metapsicologici e clinici della regressione psicotica. In L. Rinaldi, (a cura di), *Stati caotici della mente.* Milano: Raffaello Cortina.

Debray, R., cit. in Bronzini G., *L'esplosione delle etnie senza diritto internazionale. I*n "Il manifesto"*,* 15 maggio 1999*.*

De Micco, V.(1999). *Psicoanalisi e cultura: le tracce di un impensato.* In Assoun P.L., *op. cit.* Roma*:* Borla.

De Micco, V.(2004). Identità, sintomo, cultura: appunti per una clinica interculturale. In *Koinos. Gruppo e funzione analitica*, genn.-giu. 2004, anno XXV, n.1.

De Micco, V.(2006). Corpi contesi, storie sospese. Percorsi dell'identità e della memoria in bambini immigrati: uno studio psicoantropologico. *Koinos. Gruppo e funzione analitica*, 2006, anno XXVII, n.1.

De Micco, V., Growing up on the border. Identity routes in immigrant children. *Journal of European Psychoanalysis*, 2006, II, n.23.

De Micco, V.(2008). Corpi Nomi Storie. Vicissitudini dell'identità in bambini migranti. *Rivista italiana di gruppoanalisi*, vol XXII – 2/2008. Milano: Franco Angeli.

Durkheim E., (1893), *De la division du travail social*

Durkheim E., (1897), *Le suicide*

Eliot, T.S. *Quattro quartetti.* I ed. ital. Milano: Garzanti, 1959.

Fabietti, U., Matera, V. (1999). *Memorie e identità. Simboli e strategie del ricordo.* Roma: Meltemi.

Freud, S. (1921). *Psicologia delle masse e analisi dell'Io*. OSF, vol 9.

Frigessi Castelnuovo, D., Risso, M.(1982). *A mezza parete. Emigrazione nostalgia malattia mentale.* Torino: Einaudi.

Glissant, E.(1998). *Poetica del diverso.* Roma: Meltemi.

Grinberg, L. e Grinberg R.(1990). *Psicoanalisi dell'emigrazione e dell'esilio.* Milano: Franco Angeli.

Laplanche, J.(2000). *Il primato dell'altro in psicoanalisi.* Roma-Bari*:* La biblioteca.

Le Breton, D.(2002). *Signes d'identitè. Tatouages, piercing et autres marques corporelles.* Paris: Metailié.

Mauss, M. (1950), *Le tecniche del corpo*, in *Teoria generale della magia e altri saggi.* Torino: Einaudi, 1965.

Nathan, T.(1990). *La follia degli altri.* Firenze: Ponte alle Grazie.

Raison, J.P.(1978). Migrazione. In *Enciclopedia,* 9, 258-311. Torino: Einaudi.

Remotti, F. (1990). *Noi primitivi. Lo specchio dell'antropologia.* Torino*:* Bollati Boringhieri.

Remotti, F. (1996). *Contro l'identità.* Bari: Laterza.

Risso, M., Boeker, W., (2000). *Sortilegio e delirio. Psicopatologia delle migrazioni in prospettiva transculturale,* a cura di V. Lanternari, V. De Micco e G. Cardamone, Liguori, Napoli (I ediz. 1992). (ed.orig. *Verhexungswahn,* Karger, Basel, 1964).

Rosoli, G. (1988). *La condizione sanitaria dell'emigrante.* In Atti del I convegno internazionale Medicina e migrazioni. Roma, 9-10 aprile 1988.

Signorelli, A.(2000). *Le molteplici singolarità di un processo di massa. Alcune riflessioni sullo studio antropologico delle migrazioni. Etnoantropologia.* N.8/9.

Sayad, A.(2002). *La doppia assenza.* Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2002.

Winnicott, D. (1958). *Dalla pediatria alla psicoanalisi.* Firenze: Martinelli, 1975.

Winnicott, D. (1971). La funzione di specchio della madre e della famiglia nello sviluppo infantile*.* In *Gioco e realtà.* Roma*:* Armando, 1974.

Virginia De Micco is psychoanalyst of the Società Psicoanalitica Italiana, has a medical-psychiatric training. In her work, she focused on the theme of migration, on ethnopsychiatry and on the relationships between anthropology and psychoanalysis. Besides as a number of articles published on national and international reviews, she edit the following books: *Passaggi di confine. Etnopsichiatria e migrazioni,* Liguori, Naples, 1993 and *Le culture della salute. Immigrazione e sanità in prospettiva transculturale,* Liguori, Naples, 2000. She also translated and edited the book by Paul-Laurent Assoun, *Freud e le scienze sociali. Psicoanalisi e teoria della cultura,* Borla, Rome, 1999.
Mail: vdm6396@virgilio.it

Translated by Lida Patrizia Cancrini Pini