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**Migrating borders, bordering lives:  
Everyday geographies of ontological security and insecurity in Malta**

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**Abstract**

In this article, we seek to challenge some of these ways in which the ‘2015 Mediterranean migration crisis’ has been scripted by elites. Situated within – and contributing to – a flourishing research agenda on everyday geographies and ontologies of personal (in)security, we aim to bring non-elite knowledge and experience to the foreground. We do so by examining the diverse grounded perspectives of those on the move who are arguably the key *dramatis personae* in the so-called ‘crisis’ and yet whose voices are often absent in dominant representations of it. Specifically, we take as our analytical focus the dynamic interplay between contemporary EU border security apparatuses and mobile subjects who encounter, negotiate, and challenge these apparatuses. Drawing upon 37 in-depth qualitative interviews with recent arrivals as part of a multi-sited research project across the Mediterranean region, we offer a historicised and geographically situated analysis of the contested politics of ‘irregularity’ on the island of Malta. A geopolitically significant site along the central Mediterranean route, the changes in migratory dynamics witnessed in Malta over the past two decades offers an instructive lens through which the ‘crisis’ narrative can be usefully problematized and disaggregated.

**Keywords:** Migration, borders, ontological (in)security, everyday, Europe, Malta

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## **Introduction: Problematizing and disaggregating the ‘2015 migration crisis’**

As images of lifeless bodies in the Mediterranean and columns of unauthorized arrivals crossing through central and eastern Europe made headlines around the world, policy-making and policy-debating communities have variously referred to 2015 as marking the onset of a ‘crisis situation in the Mediterranean’ (EU Commission, 2015), a ‘refugee crisis’ (Youngs, 2017), and a ‘pan-European crisis [...] Europe’s 9/11’ (Krastev, 2017). Certainly, the intensification of numbers of unauthorized arrivals and documented deaths in the Mediterranean contributed to this emerging sense and discourse of ‘crisis’ at that particular point in time (UNHCR, 2017). Yet other data provide a compelling counter-narrative to this limited and selective time-frame focused only on population displacements and their effects in 2015: between 2000 and 2014, for example, an estimated 22,400 unauthorized migrants and refugees also lost their lives trying to reach European shores pointing to a much lengthier set of persistent challenges in humanitarian terms (IOM, 2016).

The social and cultural construction of the ‘2015 Mediterranean migration crisis’ in mainstream public discourse is of course complex and controversial not least because the term ‘crisis’ has an analytical and normative ambivalence that can be used in different ways to support different political projects. For example, NGOs and volunteer groups have used the term strategically in order to highlight the urgency and gravity of the humanitarian need and to stimulate popular and policy responses. The dominant policy framing of ‘the 2015 crisis’, however, is one that presents the essence of the issue flatly in terms of excessive ‘irregular’ migration from ‘outside’ Europe, which in turn is presented an existential threat to the security of the EU and individual Member States and justified the introduction of tougher deterrent border security policies, the militarization of the Mediterranean region, and the crude reliance on fences and barbed wire particularly along the central Balkan route to Germany. This securitized narrative has been reinforced by a powerful visual repertoire of

racialized and gendered representations of the geopolitics of the ‘crisis’ that emphasize unprecedented mass movement and play on the common theme of unruliness, invasion, and besiegement.

Prominent policy and media representations have portrayed a continent in unparalleled turmoil and with little or no control over its borders. Yet, as other migration scholars have pointed out, arrivals in 2015 are not so momentous if placed in geographical and historical context: of 4.2M Syrian refugees displaced since 2011 1.5M refugees are located in Lebanon a country half the size of Wales, at the end of World War Two there were 50M refugees in Europe, and the Bosnian conflict gave rise to 1.2M refugees (Crawley, 2016). Furthermore, the exteriorization of the threat narrative perpetuates the problematic notion that the causes of the ‘crisis’ – and therefore responsibility for ‘it’ – are geographically and historically *separate from* Europe. The choking off of ‘regular’ channels for labour migration since the early 1990s – along with efforts to prevent primary immigration, increasingly restrictive legislation, a stricter visa regime, and the imposition of carriers’ sanctions – has contributed to the creation of conditions for the rise of a multi-million dollar smuggling industry (Perkowski & Squire, 2018). Moreover, EU Member States’ involvement in the perpetuation of inequality, conflict, and the absence of opportunity structures – and the legacies of colonialism more generally – mean that a geographical and historical division of cause and effect – as implied by the dominant ‘2015 crisis’ narrative – is analytically untenable. As highlighted by the IOM data above, this narrative draws an artificial temporal border around the year ‘2015’ – as if unauthorized migration into the EU or the violent effects of EU border security had no prior history – and also implies a homogeneity of experience among mobile populations across the Mediterranean region.

In this article, we seek to challenge some of the dominant ways in which the ‘2015 migration crisis’ has been scripted by EU policy-making and policy-debating elites and to

bring non-elite knowledge and experience to the foreground in order to offer a more nuanced perspective. We do so by examining the diverse grounded perspectives of those on the move who are arguably the key *dramatis personae* in the so-called ‘crisis’ and yet whose voices are often either entirely absent or remarkably difficult to discern in dominant representations of ‘it’. Specifically, we take as our analytical focus the dynamic interplay between contemporary EU border security apparatuses of control and mobile subjects who encounter, negotiate, and challenge these apparatuses. Drawing upon in-depth qualitative interviews with recent arrivals as part of a multi-sited research project across the Mediterranean region, we offer a historicised and geographically situated analysis of the contested politics of unauthorized entry to the island of Malta. A geopolitically significant site along the central Mediterranean route, we argue that the changes in migratory dynamics witnessed in Malta – not only since 2015, but also over the past two decades immediately beforehand – offers an instructive lens through which the dominant ‘crisis’ narrative as one characterized by hyper-agentic economic migrants posing an existential threat to European security can be usefully problematized and disaggregated.

In broad terms, we locate our study in extant critical analyses of the ‘2015 migration crisis’ across Human Geography, Politics and International Studies, and Border, Migration, and Security Studies (Collyer & King, 2016; Crawley, 2016; De Genova, 2017; Squire et al, 2017). More particularly, we are inspired by and seek to contribute to a small but flourishing literature coalescing in social and cultural geography that seeks to decentre the study of security away from its traditional elitist focus by harnessing the insights emerging from everyday ontologies, geographies, and experiences of personal security and insecurity, much of which has been published in the pages of this journal (Bondi, 2014; Botterill et al, 2017; Noxolo, 2014; Philo, 2014; Waite et al 2014; see also Kuusisto-Arponen & Gilmartin, 2015, and Skey, 2010). As such, our investigation foregrounds individuals’ narratives of the ‘crisis’

and concentrates upon their awareness, knowledge, and negotiation of diverse deterrent border security policies and practices designed to forestall their efforts to reach EU shores without prior authorization. Adopting a qualitative research design, we juxtapose a range of policies and practices at both national and EU levels with the messy and complex everyday narratives and experiences of our interviewees.

While divergent strands of research within critical border and migration studies have typically focused *either* on the ontological primacy of border control (Walters, 2002) *or* that of migrant agency (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Papadopoulos et al, 2008) we take a different approach that contributes to on-going efforts to displace that dichotomy (Mainwaring, 2016; McNevin, 2014; Squire, 2016): one that uses the nascent research agenda in social and cultural geography above to prioritise vernacular accounts of ontological (in)security in ways that complicate these distinctions. We structure in a broadly chronological way the presentation of our findings around three key elements of interviewees' journeys to Europe: 1) the capacity to decide and act on the decision to move initially from countries of origin; 2) the fragmented nature of the journey itself and how this points to fractured agentic capacity and non-linear experiences of enacting a course of action; and 3) experiences on arrival in Malta that prolong exposure to structural violence and continue to curtail if not eliminate notions of choice in how to live. In doing so, we trace ways in which individuals are exposed to an array of attempts – sometimes successful, sometimes unsuccessful – to control their mobility by bordering practices that are themselves partial and migratory. As such, we argue that any binary distinction between 'border control' on the one hand and 'migrant agency' on the other is highly problematic and that neither can straightforwardly be ascribed ontological primacy. Drawing upon interview data, we show how dominant binaries used to structure administrative concepts and categories – e.g. between 'economic migrant' and 'refugee' – are problematized by lived realities of encounters with diverse bordering practices. Lastly, we

demonstrate empirically that Europe's border security structures and deterrent control measures – the hallmark of the EU's response to 'the 2015 crisis', as codified in the 'European Agenda on Migration' – often miss their stated targets in the light of the complexities of the knowledge and experience of those on the move. Indeed, grounded perspectives reveal contemporary European border security and migration management to be limited and often contradictory on its own terms and thus imply that events in 2015 and its aftermath have more accurately rendered visible several long-standing 'crises' in Europe's border regime.

### **Everyday geographies of the border and ontologies of personal (in)security**

Since the end of the Cold War, a number of prominent scholars have argued *either* that borders between states are withering away under conditions of globalization (Scholte, 2000) *or* that, following the attacks of 9/11, borders between states are more important than ever (Brown, 2010). Another body of work suggests that we should think about how 'the border' is an historical, geopolitical and social construct undergoing processes of transformation (Johnson et al, 2011). Building on the latter, an instructive way of conceptualizing the border refers to a series of *attempts* to control the mobility of people, goods, services, and objects (Guild, 2009). Once this basic notion is adopted then not only is the concept of the border broadened and deepened beyond a thin 'line in sand' at the outer-edge of the state (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2009), but it is also put into closer contact with the issue of migration and the attempt by state authorities to produce different categories of mobile subjects as 'regular', 'irregular', 'asylum-seekers', 'refugees', each with important legal and political consequences (Squire, 2009). This sociological account has allowed for a series of 'turns' in border studies towards an analysis of 'micro-level bordering practices' (Andersen & Sandberg, 2012), a 'decentring of the border in everyday life' (Johnson & Jones 2014), the

‘globally structured and governed micro-politics of lived migration’ (Kuusisto-Arponen & Gilmartin, 2015), and a ‘vernacularisation of borders and borderwork’ (Cooper, Perkins, & Rumford, 2014), to name only a few. What these contributions all have in common is a mutual effort to supplement and juxtapose modern Westphalian geopolitical idealizations of the border – as found in the context of public policy and academic discourses alike – with the diversity of embodied, historically-situated, and contested border experiences at multiple sites.

Another body of scholarship has developed a research programme around everyday ontologies of personal security and insecurity. In the Introduction to a landmark special issue of *Social and Cultural Geography* Philo (2014: 313) develops a typology of scales of security from “‘big-S’ security issues’ pertaining to the environment, state, and society to the ‘closest-in’ human geographies of ‘everyday embodied experiences and emotions of (in)security’”. Philo draws on the work of Psychologist R. W Laing (2010) [1960] and his concept of ontological (in)security, which in recent years has gained considerable traction in critical security studies (see Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2016). Laing characterized the ontologically secure person as essentially whole and bordered: ‘as differentiated from the rest of the world [...] so clearly that his identity and autonomy are never in question’ (2010: 42). By contrast, the ontologically insecure individual experiences their subjectivity as radically un-bordered: ‘precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his identity and autonomy are always in question’ (2010: 42). More specifically, Laing outlines three forms of anxiety experienced by an ontologically insecure person: engulfment involving a fear of other relationships overwhelming them; implosion whereby the fear is of the world collapsing at any time; and petrification, which is the experience of terror and a sense of depersonalization (Laing, 2010, pp. 44-46). Laing’s account has not been taken up in the social and cultural geography literature without critique or modification; Bondi (2014: 334), for example, argues



that the distinction between security and insecurity is not one that can be sustained rigorously, but that it should be conceptualized as ‘a continuum along which we all necessarily move’. Nevertheless, several studies have applied Laing’s conceptual vocabulary to everyday understandings of self, identity, and (in)security among citizens in the context of societal and cultural changes associated with globalization: in this context the migrant Other is often perceived as a scapegoat and tougher deterrent border security one of several ‘comforting certainties’ in the face of such change (Bondi, 2014: 345; see also Botterill et al, 2017; Skey, 2010). On the other hand, a handful of studies have also worked productively with similar concepts to investigate the corollary of these dynamics in the context of precarity and belonging among migrants and asylum-seekers (Waite et al, 2014; see also Gilmartin, 2008) and in asylum-seekers’ experiences of ‘embodied securityscapes’ more generally (Noxolo, 2014).

In this article we seek to combine literatures on ‘everyday bordering’ with ‘ontologies of personal (in)security’ in order to provide a conceptual grounding to analyse the narratives and experiences of (im)mobile subjects targeted by EU border security apparatuses in the context of the ‘2015 migration crisis’. Extant work in critical border and migration studies have tended towards an ontology that *either* prioritises the perspective of borders and control (Salter, 2012) *or* the agency of ‘irregular’ migrants whom it is argued stimulate bordering practices *as a response* to their excessive mobility (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Papadopoulos et al, 2008). In adopting a perspective that refuses this choice to begin with and opts instead to begin by prioritizing the messier and sometimes conflicted everyday ontologies of those on the move it is possible to examine the co- constitution of border security and ‘irregular’ migration and the often ambivalent forms of contested politics that it gives rise to (Mainwaring, 2016; McNevin, 2014; Squire, 2011).

## **The Maltese case study and project methodology**

Located in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, just 290km north of the Libyan coast, Malta (and its sister island Gozo) is the smallest EU Member State, with a population of just over 430,000 and a land area of 316km<sup>2</sup>. A disembarkation point for thousands of unauthorised migrants crossing the Mediterranean on the central route since the late 1990s, Malta offers an instructive vantage point from which to examine, historicize, and disaggregate catchall notions of the ‘2015 migration crisis’.

Over the past decade the island was consistently one of the foremost countries in relation to asylum applications *per capita*. For these reasons successive Maltese governments have long used the narrative of ‘crisis’ and the notion of a state of exception in order to justify a series of exceptional responses (Mainwaring, 2016; Pisani, 2013). Policy responses at the national level have included the first intra-EU relocation programs, the United States Resettlement Program (USRP), and a mandatory detention policy for up to 12 months for asylum-seekers and 18 months for rejected asylum-seekers.<sup>1</sup>

Within the same timeframe, the central Mediterranean route has been the target of an increasingly militarized response to migration management in the region: in October 2013 Operation Mare Nostrum, a naval and air based search and rescue mission, was launched by the Italian government; this was superseded in November 2014 by FRONTEX Joint Operation Triton, which was designed to both ‘control borders and save lives’; and since June 2015 Operation *Sophia*, named after a baby who was born on-board the German frigate Schleswig-Holstein as part of the EUNAVFORMED task force, has aimed to ‘identify, capture, and dispose of vessels’ that are ‘used or suspected of being used by migrant smugglers or traffickers’ (see Perkowski & Squire, 2018).

In a somewhat surprising turn of events, however, and precisely at the moment when unauthorized boat arrivals intensified at the blue borders of Italy and Greece, 2015 marked

the sharpest decline in boat arrivals to Malta. This sudden drop in arrivals has largely been attributed to an ‘informal understanding’ between the Governments of Malta and Italy (Times of Malta, 2015). Thus, of 1,007,716 unauthorized arrivals in Europe, Malta received only 105, as compared to 844,176 in Greece, 152,700 in Italy, and 3,592 in Spain. As such, the Maltese case is somewhat anomalous in relation to other island entry points in the EU Mediterranean context during this particular period of population displacement and upheaval.

Our interview work in Malta was part of a broader programme of qualitative research entitled ‘Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat: Documenting Migratory Journeys and Experiences’. The project sought to understand how unauthorized migrants and refugees negotiate their journeys, how they narrate those journeys and experiences using their own terms, and to investigate what knowledge they have of policies designed to regulate their movement. It addressed these issues across a range of migratory routes and sites, including as part of the first stage of fieldwork during 2015 136 interviews with a total of 139 participants across the island entry points of Kos, Greece, and Malta.<sup>ii</sup> In this article we concentrate exclusively on the latter case in the context of two sets of central research questions: 1) How do people on the move negotiate their journeys? What understanding do they have of current policies? How do they narrate or express their expectations and experiences of movement and arrival? 2) How are routes and methods of travel affected by policy developments? What legal and social challenges arise in the context of current policies? In what ways might policy engage migration more effectively?

Between July 2015 and April 2016 we interviewed 37 adults including 32 males, 4 females, and 1 who identified as transgender. All participants had arrived without prior authorization in Malta by boat during the period 2002 to 2015, and were from 10 different countries of origin (Somalia, Ethiopia, Syria, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Kenya, Mali, Sudan,

Eritrea, and Comoros). The majority of interviewees had departed from Libya, with two exceptions who had travelled via Egypt and Italy.

Participants were recruited through local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) working in the field, and through informal snowballing techniques. The research team was selected on the basis of individuals' familiarity and credibility within the Maltese refugee and migrant community, thus working from a foundation of trust. Interviews were conducted in the location chosen by the participants, generally in coffee shops, private residences or in the office of one of the NGOs. The majority of interviews were conducted in English (occasionally also switching to Maltese), a small number used a translator. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Informed consent was given paramount importance.

Interviews typically lasted for an hour and we asked participants about a range of issues including their motivations to leave their country of origin, their prior knowledge of EU border security and migration management policies, their awareness of the asylum system, their experience en route in transit countries, their boat crossing, their arrival and reception in Malta, their expectations of Europe, and what they would tell policy-makers in the light of their experiences. Here we limit the analysis to elements of the interviews that pertain most directly to the issue of *attempts* by EU authorities at the national and supranational levels to control participants' mobility at various stages in the lifecycle of their journeys.

### **Fractured agency in 'deciding' to leave for Europe**

While for much of the period 2015-16 the eastern Mediterranean route via Turkey understandably attracted the attention of the world's media, policy-making communities, and academic analysis, the central route is the site of historic border-related violence. Referred to by one International Organization as 'the most dangerous in the world', the IOM estimates

that 3,771 migrants and refugees were killed or remain missing in the year 2015 alone (IOM, 2016). In a recent risk assessment of the central Mediterranean route, the EU Council asserted that ‘the majority’ of arrivals via this route are ‘economic migrants’ and therefore ‘not eligible for relocation’ (EU Council, 2016: 3).

This core assumption has underpinned EU-level policy responses, which, as reflected *inter alia* in the European Agenda on Migration, the Valletta Summit, the EU Global Strategy, and the Bratislava Roadmap, frame ‘irregular’ migrants’ journeys in a catchall manner as the result of a *choice* to leave countries of origin in search of a better livelihood as ‘economic migrants’. Thus, references to a ‘surge in human mobility’ (EU Commission, 2016), ‘uncontrolled flows’, and a need to ‘ensure full control of our external borders’ (EU Council, 2016) depict ‘irregular’ migrants as having excessive or ‘hyper’ agency (Mainwaring, 2016) and the ability to ‘decide’ to seek entry to the EU as if they have a ‘choice’ or are ‘ontologically secure’ in Laing’s formulation. For this reason, there is always a danger that in seeking to recover migrant agency for the purposes of challenging the ontological primacy of border control such a move may unwittingly bolster the assumption of dominant policy-making elites. By contrast, our findings highlight instead *both the fractured* nature of migrant agency *and the incomplete* agency of border control in a way that transcends the binaries often used to represent motivations for leaving countries of origin in the first place. In-depth interviews consistently reveal systematic exposure to diverse forms of violence and thus a subject-position more closely aligned with Laing’s notion of ‘ontological insecurity’. What the project found as whole is that those on the move are vulnerable to a complex set of ‘intersecting drivers and conditions of flight’: that is to say, ‘people on the move experience various dangers or harms from which they need to escape, not only in countries of origin but also throughout the migratory journey’ (Squire et al, 2017: 62). Thus, limited opportunities for access to labour markets were often cited as reasons for

wanting to leave countries of origin alongside factors including war, conflict, the threat of terrorism, state violence, domestic abuse, kidnapping, torture, discrimination on the grounds of personal characteristics, and other forms of exclusion (Squire et al, 2017). Certainly, the reasons given by interviewees for leaving were varied and complicate the notion that mobile subjects on the central Mediterranean route are straightforwardly ‘economic migrants’ and yet what united all of the participants was a sense of facing an existential threat to their ontological security.

While explanations given for seeking entry to the EU diverged particularly in relation to different national groups, all participants described similar circumstances within their respective countries of origin. Somali participants, for example, recounted personal stories related to violence and insecurity, and, particularly in the case of younger male participants, the need to avoid recruitment in to militant groups: ‘The situation was fucking bad [...] They [Al Shabaab] told us “come and unite with us to kill with enemy in the country, and be like bomb”. After they beat us, they cut, they put in the inside of the room and they closed it’ (MAL.02.04).

What is common to the stories we heard is a recurring set of fears about exposure to violence and the absence of personal safety akin to Laing’s concept of implosion whereby, even in countries generally regarded as safe, the threat of persecution become so severe that they feel compelled to leave: ‘I left Gambia because of corruption and dictatorship [...] People missing for no reason and no-one knows where they are, some lost their uncles because of the dictatorship’ (MALS.02.05). Regardless of country of origin, the search for ontological security and peace were consistently listed as the primary motivating factor for fleeing: the priority and immediate need simply being to escape danger, and *then* to search for a better life: ‘Actually I didn’t have any destination, I evacuate Somalia [...] for lack of

security and I didn't want to fight Al-Shabaab [...] Kenya was the nearest country and so I went there' (MALS.02.06).

The high incidence of violence and the need to flee from threats to personal security – coupled with the absence of adequate protection and access to rights in countries of origin – mean that interviewees did not speak straightforwardly of 'choosing' to leave, or to seek entry to Europe, or indeed to arrive in Malta. Indeed, the reference above to 'not having any destination' is a common refrain and far from 'deciding' to head for Malta none of our participants claimed that it was their intended destination with many revealing to us that they had never heard of the island: 'To be honest, I didn't know anything about Malta. We just came here by chance and we didn't intend to come here – we never imagined coming to Malta' (MALS.01.4a). Rather, participants' responses suggest that the 'choice' of destination is never final, that plans change along the way, often, it would appear, based on preconceived expectations and the hope of something 'better': 'Your country is your country, but you expect something different. Sudan was a little bit better than my country. And then the situation was changed in Sudan; you try to go to another country when you find something better – you expect better' (MALS.01.15).

These testimonies shatter the image of the central Mediterranean route portrayed simplistically in dominant EU policy narratives of 'the crisis' as being one pursued by ontologically secure 'economic' migrants who 'decide' freely to leave their countries of origin and head directly for the EU in a linear and hyper-agentic manner: journeys are often stimulated by fear of implosion, of violence or even death, are perilous and made as a last resort, and involve huge risk-taking in pursuit of an uncertain destination. Furthermore, interviews demonstrate that these dynamics are shaped at each and every turn by complex negotiations with bordering practices involving multiple actors not only on the shores of

Europe, but also *throughout* journeys. In this sense, borders also migrate and are encountered and negotiated far beyond the geographical outer-edges of EU Member States.

### ***En-route 1: Negotiating migrating borders***

The point that EU bordering practices understood as attempts to control mobility are increasingly out-sourced and off-shored is by now well-established within the field of border and migration studies (Bialasiewicz, 2012). But what is still arguably lacking in the critical border studies literature is a sustained effort to consider how those whose mobility is targeted by apparatuses of border security experience and negotiate that targeting personally. In this section we consider the everyday geographies and ontologies of personal (in)security of our interviewees and focus on how encounters with various forms of border authority contribute not only give rise to the fractured agency referred to above, but also point to *fragmented* decision-making processes and disrupted plans and routines. In turn, they also reveal the always already partial nature of border control.

A number of participants described their various failed attempts to travel in a legal manner in response to intersecting conditions and drivers of flight due to confrontations with diverse bordering practices en route. In the following passage, for example, a Syrian national demonstrates the complexity of the decision-making process as it relates to diverse obstacles to mobility. Plans to return are put on hold as the context at home deteriorates, basic survival demands shifting routes and expectations about destinations at each point, and employment and income security becomes the priority. Friends and networks are an important resource, but efforts to travel in a legal manner can be hijacked by unforeseen circumstances including visa restrictions, racism, and violence. The extract illustrates precisely the dynamic nature of encountering and negotiating borders of various kinds, as plans and obstacles are negotiated, avoided, conceded, and overcome to varying degrees:



The main problem for me was no job in Turkey [...] so I started searching for another place to work. [...] I start calling my friends, in all the Arab countries, it was closed completely, because of Syrians, I tried my friends in Europe, the United States, very, very difficult, to travel. [...] For me the first opportunity was to get a job in Libya, because one of my friends was in Libya [...] So I fled to Libya, from Syria to Libya, from Syria to Turkey by car, and I crossed legally, and I got a visa and a contract, because I got a job, in this moment there was no thinking of going to another place. [...] People there they act with foreigners as slaves [...] even your car, there is a plate on your car that identifies your nationality, so you are a target, a moving target, everywhere, and we heard stories everyday about [...] an Egyptian driver who was stolen and killed and beaten and they are laughing [...] We are safe in the short term but in the future no one knows what's happening, anybody can kill you... (MAL.MG.1).

This narrative reflects the experience of a number of the participants, and their multiple efforts to negotiate the borders of states – and other kinds of social, economic, and political bordering practices – with varying degrees of success. To suggest that this experience was common to all, however, provides but a partial understanding; the very concept of ‘the border’ means different things to different people, the historical and – ever shifting – spatial and temporal dynamics cannot be ignored.

Working off a map to explain his journey, in the following passage another participant provides some important insights into how unauthorized migrants are able to negotiate borders by employing different tactics, relationships, and vernacular knowledge:

So, here is Ivory Coast, this one is Cote D'Ivoire. Here is Burikna Faso, we have border with Burkina. [...] But there are barriers you know to control. [...] So it is like something you are hiding already we start hiding just to cross or to pass because you can't come from here, you have to go from here, from there, you know? There already is a system in place that is guiding these things [...] It is like a network yes (MALS01.22).

Here the references to ‘control’ and ‘networks’ are telling in that, to reiterate, borders are only ever an *attempt* to regulate and not absolute. Indeed, many participants’ narratives demonstrate the complex mobilisation of networks to negotiate and overcome borders, the different actors involved – including relatives, friends, and formal contacts within and across national groups – in making travel arrangements. The following excerpt, for example,

provides some illuminating insights as to how the journey can be experienced. The interviewee from Ivory Coast describes how he started the journey alone. As the journey panned out he became part of a network of migrants that he discovered were making the same journey. Despite the dangers encountered during the journey, the group appears to provide a source of support and sense of personal security and safety:

In these places it was really incredible because when I left my country I realised that there is a lot of people like me who are trying the same like I am trying because before I didn't know that I will meet that amount of people with different languages and different culture, yeah but then you feel more comfortable, you have people you know even if it is something that is risky or since you are certain of group it is not like you taking a risk alone, and it is not only of you. [...] (MAL01.22).

Instead of the portrait of a linear journey from countries of origin to Europe – as depicted in the policy discourses of the EU Commission and as paradigmatically illustrated by the large arrows featured in Frontex’s risk assessments of migratory routes threatening European security – journeys are more commonly planned one stage at a time, and are often tortuous and lengthy including years of work and often enforced labour, imprisonment, and kidnapping. An alternative, more nuanced picture therefore emerges from our research of a resilient, demand-driven system of border negotiation that is both loose and functional, paradoxically complex and yet sometimes seemingly flexible and simple to navigate and with subject positions fluctuating on the continuum of ontological (in)security referred to by Bondi (2014).

### ***En-route 2: ‘Smuggling’ as a contested site of control and evasion***

One of the central tenets of the EU Commission’s policy response to the ‘2015 migration crisis’ has been an intensification of efforts to target smuggling networks and disrupt the underlying business model. The 2015 European Agenda on Migration, for example, sought to reduce the incentives for ‘irregular’ migration and announced a new action plan on counter-

smuggling initiatives. This commitment was underscored at the Valletta Summit on Migration in November 2015 and the mandate of EU NAVFOR MED Operation Sophia was extended in June 2016 in order to train Libyan coastguards to intercept smuggling networks in Libya. But while it is claimed by the EU Council (2016) that Operation Sophia has ‘arrested 87 suspected smugglers and traffickers and neutralised more than 255 vessels’ many of our testimonies fundamentally challenge the efficacy of this response:

Listen, people who are saying that smuggling is going to be stopped are very foolish people, politicians, anybody who says it. Foolish. Because you cannot stop a billion dollar industry-empire, and in today’s world money runs the world. Seriously speaking. So when you say “We are going to stop smuggling” foolery that is what I say, wastage of time and resources (MAL.02.09).

There are of course a number of problems with the idea of ‘smuggling’ and the category of the ‘smuggler’ as it is portrayed in elite policy frameworks such as the European Agenda on Migration (Perkowski & Squire, 2018). First, this Agenda and associated policy documentation often refers to ‘smuggling’ and ‘trafficking’ interchangeably and yet distinctions are usually made between the two; the former is usually considered to involve a consensual relationship whereas the latter is typically associated with forced exploitation (Shelley, 2014). Second, the tendency for ‘smuggling’ nevertheless to be used as a catchall term has the effect of lumping together a series of disparate subject positions and experiences, which criminalises very different kinds of behaviour and systems of support that emerge in response to the intersecting drivers of flight. Third, as our interview materials demonstrate, those on the move speak frequently of the futility of attempting to dismantle the smuggling industry in Europe without tackling the underlying issues. Instead, interviews highlight that the service provided by smuggling networks is demand-driven and narratives consistently demonstrate how those demands are fuelled by war, conflict, persecution, and the will to survive:

It's illegal and it's bad, but the situation of Somalia it's like different the country of Africa, that is why the people of Somalia they are running, like they are running. So if today Malta it was like this you can find too much people to make a network. So if you catch today one tomorrow is coming another one. (MAL.02.02).

These testimonies underscore that in the absence of providing a legal alternative to reach safety and personal security any effort to destroy the smugglers' operations represents a poor and simplistic understanding of the basic context in which those on the move negotiate their journey. Furthermore, the EU's policy focus on disrupting smuggling networks comes at a time when the deterioration of the situation in Libya means that these networks have never been in such great demand. It is this precisely experience in Libya and its petrifying impact that the following section moves on to consider.

### ***En-route 3: Circular histories of violence***

Smuggling networks are stimulated by deterrent border security measures and interviews in Malta demonstrate how the deterioration in recent years of the situation in Libya has played an important role in shaping unauthorized entry to Europe via the central Mediterranean route. The Maltese context provides insight into how the context in Libya has shifted over time, and also how the Mediterranean 'migration crisis' cannot be delimited to 2015 and is at least a decade old and has evolved considerably over that timeframe.

Prior to the Arab Spring and violent unrest associated with it, Libya attracted people throughout sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. For some of the participants, their presence in Libya was never part of a grander plan to reach Europe, but rather a place that provided an element of stability, economic opportunity, and personal security:

Malta wasn't my destination. I didn't even know on the geography that there is the point called Malta. When I came here, I discovered a new land in the world called Malta. When I left my country [Sudan] to Libya, my destination wasn't to go to Europe. Then the situation got worse in Libya, and then I have to search

for a place where there is peace. Now I think there is peace – that is what I am looking for (MALS.01.10)

Prior to the uprising, thousands of people had already used smugglers to cross the Mediterranean. The following passage describes an open, non-threatening ‘service’ wherein information was provided through a network of contacts that was relatively open and easy to access. The interviewee was eager to challenge the notion – and dominant perception – that he was forced on to the boat. On the contrary, it was, in his own words, his choice:

And as I told you it was just between people who speaks, I know someone and I know someone and that's all. There is not like any agent that you will go there and take your ticket or something. They say ok we send you to Europe and you work to send us back. Like everyone is sent to concentrate on it that the smugglers, because people go to them by choice, they do not force people or propose people (MAL01.21).

However, narratives demonstrate a significant shift in this element of choice and relative control over the decision-making process prior to, and in the immediate aftermath of, the ousting of Gadaffi. As the conditions in Libya progressively worsened, what emerged as a consistent theme is that upon reaching Libya, there was no turning back. The following exchange provides some important insights in to how and why the decision to continue the journey across the Mediterranean was taken, and the varying degrees of control over the decision making process and the next stage of the journey:

SA: Why did you take this route and method of travel?

MALS 01.2: If I go back, I'm going to die anyway. If I die while crossing the sea, it doesn't matter. It's about my luck and I decided to go.

SA: Did you have a choice?

MALS 01.2: I did not have any other choice.

MALS.02.05: No and I had no choice and I could not go back, so I think that it's risky but it's easier but for you to go back and to come forward, I think to come forward is the best, because if you try to go back, if you pay your money ya if you try to go back, if you pay for the traffickants to go back, they will take you out to the desert in the middle of nowhere and come back again, so it's better you come forward not to go back.

What can these narratives of personal (in) security tell us? To varying degrees, and depending on the conditions in the country of origin, most participants indicated an element of agency understood as some capacity to take decisions and act upon them – albeit under circumstances not of their choosing – over the moment to leave, the route to take, and the manoeuvring required to navigate the journey and negotiate border controls. Upon reaching Libya, however, this element of agency appears to have been significantly diminished. The violent conditions of war in Libya meant that interviewees felt that to remain would almost certainly result in death. Whilst smugglers are prepared to facilitate travel to Libya, the option of being smuggled out of Libya through the Saharan route does not appear to be viable either – to do so will also result in death. Also, evidence suggests that in addition to the well-established – albeit constantly morphing – smuggling networks that remained in operation, would-be migrants were also being targeted and forced to take the journey by groups they described generally as ‘mercenaries’. The experience is described as a separate and very different operation to the pre-existing smuggling networks:

We were forced to get on the boat. We had no choice – to stay there? And to die? In a war zone? We were targeted by mercenaries working for Gaddafi, so there was no other way – it was coordinated by the government. You walk on the street and then city buses take you to the boat, to the sea port. [...] The regime was forcing people onto the boat (MAL01.26).

There is no guarantee of life in the decision to cross the Mediterranean – death remains a very possible outcome – but, as many of the participants emphasised, death is itself not a deterrent when conditions of ontological insecurity threaten to petrify:

But what I wanted to tell is what I was hearing when I was in Sudan, about Libya, about the Sahara, that it was very, very bad. And when I was in Libya what I was hearing about the sea that it was very, very bad. And that is what I was telling, when people were asking me about Sudan to give them information when I was in Libya. I was telling them that it was very bad, but nobody was listening. I never listened to them when they say, 'people are dying', 'the Sahara is hot' because I was already in fear, and then what am I going to fear? (MAL.01.26).

Despite the widely-known risks, the decision to make the crossing offers the prospect of moving forward, not backward. In turn, idealizations of life in Europe offer hope from the endemic violence witnessed and experienced by all of our interviewees in Libya. Moreover, this sense of hope was not plucked out of a void, but was justified on the basis of participants' perceptions of Europe – *once they had reached Libya*. Rather than the promise of some kind of economic El Dorado, the key motivation for reaching Europe appears to be the 'promise' that their basic human rights – or basic human dignity – would be respected, and as such, within such a context, other aspirations would also be met:

I didn't have a specific destination. Life is very difficult in Africa and the government is so repressive. Particularly after I left Sudan and arrived in Libya, the police and locals would beat you up. I was also jailed. After I was freed from jail, my main goal was to run away and arrive in Europe where my human rights could be respected (MALS.01.8).

Furthermore, while all of the participants described dire conditions in Libya, and references to corruption, racism, and discrimination are noted throughout, the findings also point to an unmistakable deterioration in conditions in recent years, in particular in relation to the level of violence. The following passages, for example, describe conditions in the years 2000 and 2005 respectively, illustrating the descent into total insecurity:

From Libya it's really risky because first of all the African migrants in Libya are sort of discriminated by the Libyan population and when the Libyan police catch you in those kind of situation it is really bad for you because they will put you in the jail and every morning they count the people with the whip. So it is very bad situation (MAL01.22).

The Libyans who live in the desert caught us and demanded money. I paid them \$4700 and asked to go to Tripoli. If you don't pay them they keep you in the desert, and you may die there. I stayed with them for 1 month and 25 days. While we were kept there 28 persons died – 27 males and 1 female. Early in the morning they give us a glass of water and then same with some rice at night (MALS.01.7).

The references to violence and racism are clear across both points in time periods, but there is a palpable shift in the level and intensity of violence that interviewees were exposed to following the removal of Gaddafi and the onset of violent civil unrest. Sexualised violence,

particularly though not exclusively against women, also emerges as a common and routine occurrence. One transcript after another speaks of a vicious cycle of witnessing or experiencing tortuous violence, and on-going, desperate attempts to escape:

In Benghazi they put us in prison. We had no documents and spent a year there. Then we escape through a window. We live in a house, but when the war came it got dangerous. They look for black people because they support Gaddafi. Then after 2 nights 10 guys stay with us. They put a knife to me and hung me and rape my auntie. Everyone want to rape my auntie. 5 went first, then the other 5 go. One he cut her neck when she tried to refuse. She was bleeding. My auntie she strong, she escape that place, but now she is dead (MAL.02.07).

In each of these cases the violence as narrated is experienced as structural. It results from the absence of either any safe escape routes out from Libya via the Sahara or any legal routes to Europe. This forces *some* to choose between either remaining in contexts whereby physical violence and immediate threats to their personal safety and security are habitual or to take to the sea with all of the risks that that ‘option’ entails. For those left behind – those not defined as ‘people’ worthy of protection and access to basic rights – the options for escape and reaching safety are thus crudely minimised and the possibilities for negotiation are few. The sea – albeit deadly – potentially offers a way out from both ‘psychological’ and ‘physical’ forms of ‘hurt’ characterising ontological insecurity (Waite et al, 2014).

### **Bordered lives: Continuums of border violence and contestation in Malta**

When everyday experiences of the border and bordering practices are viewed from a haptic rather than an optic perspective then suddenly the very concept is destabilised and efforts to fix its location in time and space are continually thwarted. At once everywhere and yet nowhere, an analysis of our interviews reveals that it is only via the border’s violent *effects* and the struggles incited by it – and that incite bordering practices – that as analysts we can come close to ‘make the invisible border appear’ (Andersen and Sandberg, 2012: 5). As we have seen in the testimonies above the border is encountered, experienced viscerally, and



negotiated thousands of miles away from the territorial edges of the EU. But in the same way that it is projected externally so too does its violence extend internally within Member States to form a continuum of control and contestation (cf. Walters, 2002). In this final section we turn our attention initially to interviewees' accounts of their experience of detention in Malta as a key border security mechanism and then to their reflections on life and dynamics of integration and segregation in Maltese society more generally.

### *Experience of detention in Malta*

For more than a decade, successive Maltese governments implemented a mandatory detention policy for all asylum-seekers, extending to 18 months for those refused protection. Despite on-going criticism – including three judgements by the European Court of Human Rights (AIDA, 2013) – the Government of Malta justified the policy on the grounds that the country was too small, too overcrowded, and too unprepared to deal with the 'crisis' (Pisani, 2013; Mainwaring, 2016) and defended the policy by arguing that it was 'not being imposed solely for the purpose of deterrence', but also to balance humanitarian concerns with 'adequate security measures' (Council of Europe, 2005).

The participants in our study were unanimous in their condemnation of the detention policy, described as a drawn-out period of waiting in a closed, confined, and overcrowded environment, with limited or no access to information. The conditions are described as brutal, reprimands were suffered as collective punishment, and violence was endemic, experienced from outside and within the walls, and against and between detainees. The testimonials also highlight detainees' thwarted efforts to cope in the face of such harsh circumstances:

The conditions of Lyster barracks was really, really, bad. Lyster barracks was a closed centre you know everywhere is closed, you cannot go outside at all. But the soldiers used to come every two days, three days to open for us. We play football [...] or we take the sun because inside there is not sun. But once there was an argument, a small fight between people, because when you have hundreds of people don't speak the same language, don't have the same culture

you know they will be something like you know? From that the soldiers they decide not to take us outside anymore. So it was like a punishment for everybody (MAL01.22).

Reflecting a series of concerns expressed in 2008 by the Council of Europe Commissioner of Human Rights on the criminalization of unauthorized entry, the participants also expressed their shock at being treated like criminals, as the following interactions highlight:

Interviewer: So when you got off the boat you found immigration police how did they behave with you?

MAL.02.01: They treat us like a murder at the beginning. They put us in Hal Safi detention and after that they took us to warehouse in Naxxar and no-one explained anything [...].

Interviewer: How was your interaction with the police? How would you describe your experience?

MAL.02.01: I always fight with them, because they didn't want to tell us any information, I think that's our right to know what's happened about us. They put us in detention without any court and judge, just they told us "we put you in detention because you entered Malta illegally."

Eventually all unauthorized migrants are released from detention in Malta. However, regardless of the asylum outcome, the feeling of entrapment and psychological hurt is seen to extend beyond the walls of the detention centre via the threat of deportation (Pisani, 2012). Surveillance and control is ensured through fingerprinting, as each unauthorized migrant is entered in to the EURODAC system:

We were taken to Floriana to police headquarters, immigration headquarters, we were fingerprinted, that was the worst decision of our lives because we would be stuck here with the Dublin, if we knew I would have resisted but I didn't know about the Dublin and stuff. I would have never allowed myself to be fingerprinted but then after that we were taken to detention in Safi. And I realised we had broken a law which we didn't know... (MAL.02.09)

Maximal border control, however, remains elusive and reflects only a fantasy of mastery on behalf of the Maltese state. In 2014 UNHCR estimated that fewer than 30% of boat arrivals remained in Malta; those who escape are largely untraceable; life for those who remain is characterised by uncertainty and a discontinuous existence.

### *Stranded on a rock*

While images of makeshift refugee camps in the heart of Europe may be associated with the dominant reporting of the ‘2015 migration crisis’, such realities have existed for more than a decade in Malta. Although tents were eventually replaced with containers, the conditions that unauthorized communities habitually experience following release from detention have largely remained the same. The larger centres are located in relatively remote parts of the island. The infrastructure is largely of a temporary nature – reflecting a focus on ‘crisis’ to the detriment of any long term planning based on integration. The following extract highlights the very rudimentary provisions, the overcrowding, lack of privacy, denial of access to basic amenities, and limited sanitation:

Because we live in containers, in the beginning we are 6/5 person in each container and the facility is very far from our container, and in the winter we don’t have hot water. But in the summer the opposite, you always have hot water, but it’s not a problem. But the food always is chicken, but I didn’t care because I cook by myself (MAL.02.01)

In 2015 the Government initiated a consultation process geared towards developing an integration strategy, however, the policy itself is yet to be produced (IOM, 2016). In the absence of any integration policy, arrivals are largely left to fend for themselves and muddle through the various obstacles in their transition from life in an open centre to living in the Maltese community. Interviews point to some improvements of the years, the presence of ‘black people’, for example, is perhaps no longer perceived as shocking, or quite so threatening to citizens on the island, but racism continues to be experienced on a daily basis throughout Maltese society experienced via different kinds of segregating practices at the level of the everyday (cf. Yuval-Davis et al, 2017):

But then when I got to the open centre I found the boys talking about racist experiences that they had experienced on the bus and one of the boys was like “Oh today I was on this bus and it was full to capacity but people did not want to sit next to me”. And then I was like really? Is that Happening in the 21st

century? [...] And then when I got out into the community I realised “Oh so we are not welcome here” so we are seen as invaders, so we are seen as this. And I actually had this naive experience, when we were taken for the health screening at Mater Dei hospital, we were taken like prisoners, we were handcuffed and taken, two at a time. People were looking at us and I was thinking “Oh my god these people must be feeling sorry for us” I didn’t know that they hate us like that. Ok 20% of them (MAL.02.09).

In this way, processes of racialization in Maltese society produce differential capacities to belong and thus are an extension of and continue to perpetuate the kinds of violent bordering practices and forms of ontological insecurity experienced in countries of origin and en route (Yuval-Davis et al, 2017). The effects of the Dublin regulation that prevents onward travel – together with perceptions of Malta as a ‘small’ country, not only in terms of physical space, but also in relation to opportunities – are associated with a sense of on-going incarceration and the capacity to be hurt spatially (Waite, 2014 p. 232). In turn, the very same spatial limitations are mobilised as a justification for the Maltese state to limit access to basic rights and integration in support of its own ontological security projects. For these reasons, despite their best efforts at ‘getting on with life’ in Malta, many of our participants’ sights remain set beyond the dividing blue sea: borders that they thought they had transgressed long ago reappear throughout Maltese society and manifest themselves as different forms of segregation.

## **Conclusions**

Recounting the stories of unauthorized arrivals and reproducing their narratives of ontological (in)security is one fraught with ethical and political dilemmas. The risks of reproducing violence and/or perpetuating a politics of pity, victimhood, and idle spectatorship are by now well-known and documented (Aradau, 2004; Chouliaraki, 2013). Yet, without making strenuous efforts to understand the ‘closest-in’ (Philo, 2014) geographical perspectives of those on the move, there is equally a risk that abstract, catchall, and

depoliticizing elite constructions of ‘migration crises’ as being caused by the excessive and unfettered agency of those on the move will perpetuate the violent conditions that we know many mobile populations are subject to. What this conceptual and methodological step to prioritize ‘closest-in’ perspectives opens up is an alternative ground from which to view and understand events associated with those population upheavals – one that privileges the everyday standpoints of diverse people on the move – which in turn allows for a series of problematizations of dominant policy constructions of ‘crisis’ and their associated agendas of displacing and deferring responsibilities for situations that they have had a role in shaping. In taking this step, we have argued that ultimately neither migrant agency nor border control can be ascribed ontological primacy; both are partial, incomplete, and engaged in a dynamic interplay with ambivalent effects.

Chief among the problematizations explored in this article has been an effort throughout to question the neat coherence of the administrative and supposedly value-free language, categories, and distinctions used to package the central Mediterranean route in particular as one pursued by ontologically secure hyper-agentic ‘economic’ migrants choosing a better life in the EU. Drawing on the vernacular terms used by our interviewees, we have sought to problematize, disrupt, and add complexity to this portrayal underpinning the dominant policy scripting of ‘the 2015 migration crisis’ by emphasizing the intersecting conditions and drivers of flight, which often include – but are rarely reducible to – economic motivations. This problematization not only challenges the administrative language used in elite representations of the ‘crisis’, but also straightforward binary distinctions that are frequently employed in policy-making and academic discourses between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ forms of agency. In so doing, we reveal that the grounds on which tougher pre-emptive and militarized deterrent EU border security policies are predicated are more complex and nuanced than those policies assume. Thus, not only are policy constructions of

the hyper-agentic migrant analytically problematic, but they also lead to outcomes that are illogical on their own terms; if mobile populations are not aware of deterrence policies and have little option but to risk their lives on boats that they may or may not know are bound for Malta then those policies designed to deter are wide of their own target. For this reason, it may be more apposite to think in terms of the ‘crisis’ as a manifestation of Europe’s own ‘border crisis’ rather than a ‘migration crisis’ or a ‘refugee crisis’ that threatens European security simply from the outside (Vaughan-Williams, 2015).

In addition to mapping and documenting cultures of ontological security and insecurity among recent arrivals in support of these problematizations, a final strand of our interview work sought to create opportunities for participants to explain, in their own language and concepts, what they would call upon EU policy-makers and academic researchers to do in response to their experiences of the so-called ‘crisis’. This yielded insightful commentary and a series of provocations about what is meant by ‘expertise’ in the field of EU border security and migration management and the grounds on which it is authorized. One common theme, for example, was a critique of the self-authorizing moves that often take place when distant elite observers feel qualified to represent the experiences of those travelling by sea: ‘You are in Brussels today and tomorrow you are in New York, the other day you are in Toronto the other day you are in Australia, how can you relate to a person crossing a sea on a boat. It’s all about relating to experiences (MAL.02.09).

Another related theme coalesced around calls issued to policy-makers for greater respect for human rights, for the opening-up of legal access to labour opportunities, and for sustained attention to the underlying socio-economic and political conditions in countries of origin. Beyond these practical policy suggestions, however, were more philosophical demands from those on the move to be treated *as* human beings. Critically, however, this does not mean merely as the *objects* of humanitarian aid – which falls back into the trap of

the politics of pity – but rather as active *political subjects* with equal status to others within the field of border security and migration management. This perspective – and the broader problematization of notions of expertise – is well captured in the following quotation, which derives from a Syrian doctor who had recently disembarked in Malta:

I would encourage [policy-makers] first that we are all human beings. And we should be treated as human. It doesn't necessarily mean giving humanitarian aid, that doesn't make me a human. It means they should acknowledge that I am human by not deciding things on my behalf. All refugees are not the same. Some are doctors, some are students. I would like to tell them that we are stakeholders and that we can contribute to stop this catastrophe and influence other people. Fences never work, deportations never work. While you are deporting 100, 10,000 people are coming. What they are doing is to say come and get it, if you are strong enough. That is it. I was strong, I came, I survived. But there are many vulnerable people who suffer. [...] There are many who went through worse than me. Consider us as humans, humans who can contribute to the economy and in policy-making. We can contribute, because we are experts. Nobody is more expert than us. I lived it for 9 years and somebody in Norwegian parliament says he knows better than me about migration, I don't think so. I don't think so (MAL01.26).

In this powerful extract we see a refusal to be petrified – in Laing's terms, to be depersonalized and to succumb to the 'magical act' of being turned into an 'it' – and demands for an ontologically secure life experienced as 'real, alive, whole, and continuous' (Laing, 2010: 39). What we also discern from this excerpt is *both* a potential opening *and* a closure, however: while everyday geographies of the border and ontologies of personal (in)security may offer new sites of knowledge production for the disruption of elite scripts of crisis so too can those very sites be appropriated by governmental apparatuses of security in the service of better informed deterrence techniques. To be clear, our argument based on fieldwork in Malta is *not* that EU border security might be improved and thus better able to hit its targets *if only* knowledge of measures designed to deter were *more effectively* disseminated among mobile populations; so long as the intersecting drivers of flight – namely, the need to escape a kaleidoscope of conflict, poverty, and violence in countries of origin and transit –

dominate the reasons for seeking unauthorized entry to Europe then better information campaigns are also unlikely to deter. Furthermore, while there is always an acute politics in the attempt to identify and understand everyday geographies and ontologies of personal (in)security – and the risk of appropriation and manipulation is ever-present – our wager is that it is insufficient to simply listen passively to the experiences and demands of interviewees; these need to be communicated by researchers back to policy-making and policy-debating communities if we are to take seriously the injunction from the Syrian doctor above that those on the move are fellow stakeholders, experts, and human beings.

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<sup>i</sup> Malta applied a form of mandatory detention up to 18 months if international protection is

<sup>ii</sup> For a fuller discussion of the project's methodology please see Squire (2018). On average, interviews lasted for 90 minutes across the project as a whole. In Malta, where translators were not typically used, interviews were often shorter in duration.

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