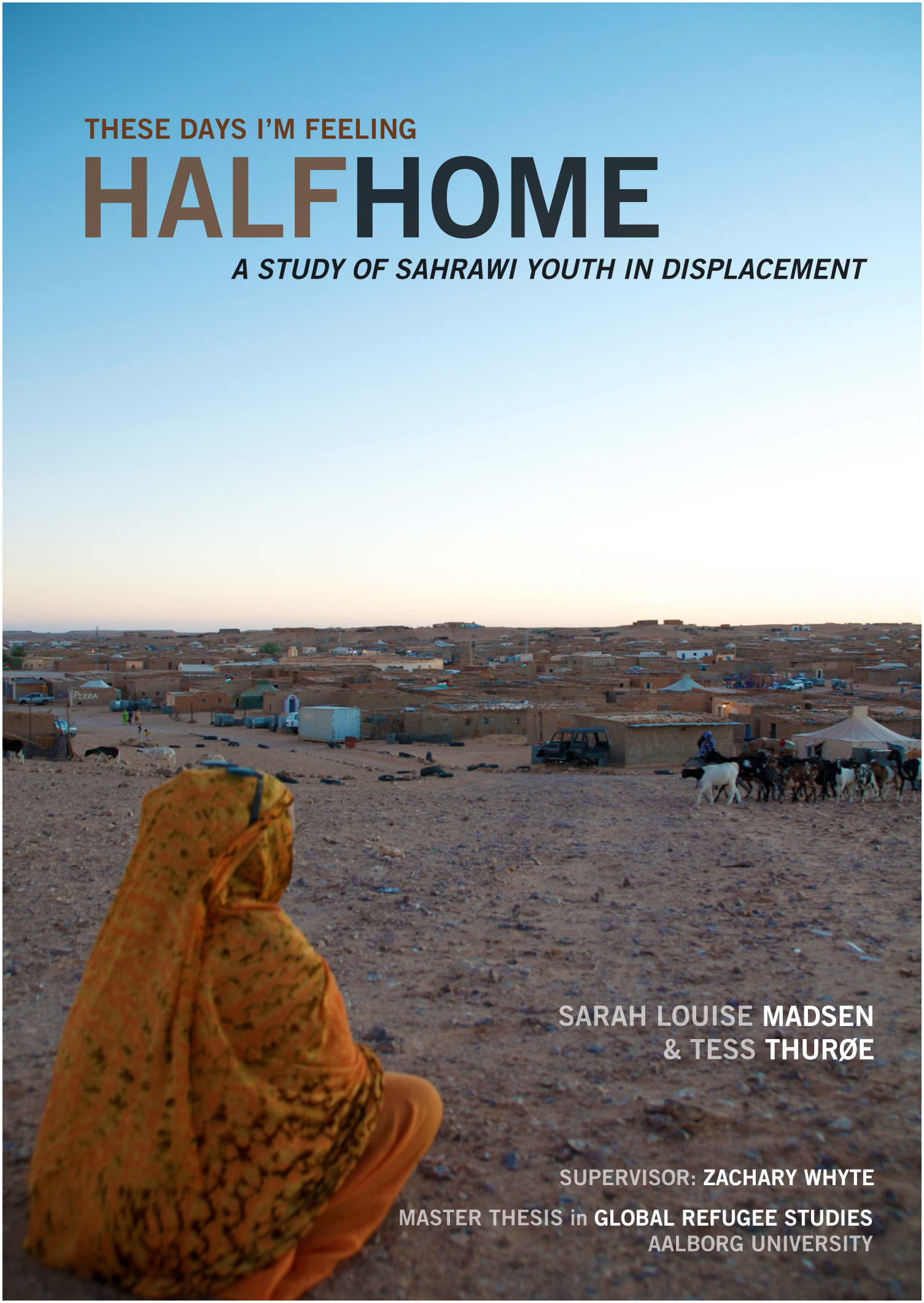
THESE DAYS I'M FEELING

HALFHOME

A STUDY OF SAHRAWI YOUTH IN DISPLACEMENT



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ABSTRACT

Entering its fifth decade of occupation by Morocco and referred to as "*Africa's last colony*" (Zunes & Mundy 2010:xxi), Western Sahara is one of the very few remaining non-self-governing territories in the world (Herz 2013:13, Chatty 2010:6). After more than 40 years in exile in Algeria, a new generation of Sahrawi refugees from Western Sahara have been born and raised in refugee camps, into a conflict that has largely been forgotten by the outside world. Highly educated and remarkably mobile, this new generation is now entering adulthood and facing a life put on hold while waiting for an uncertain return to the homeland.

Driven by a curiosity over what keeps these young, mobile refugees anchored in the camps in Algeria, we set out to explore how their experiences of displacement influence their life choices. Based on three weeks of intense fieldwork in the refugee camps in Algeria, interviews with young Sahrawi refugees, countless informal conversations and observations of the unfolding of life in the middle of the inhospitable desert, we explore the perspectives of Sahrawi youth from their own vantage points as young adults in a protracted displacement situation.

Drawing on Henrik Vigh's writings on *crisis and chronicity* (2008) and Victor Turner's take on the concept of *liminality* (1964), we propose a new term, *liminal flux*, in an attempt to more accurately grasp the rather unique situation of displacement in which our young informants find themselves. Drawing on Vigh's concept of *social navigation* (2006, 2009, 2010), we trace how our informants navigate a social terrain in liminal flux towards uncertain futures.

We found that displacement does not only constitute a context, but is just as much a process and a lived experience. To our informants, becoming displaced occurs through a process of becoming aware of 'not being in the right place'. In particular, our informants emphasized their childhood travels abroad as a primary catalyst into the awareness of not living "normal" lives in comparison to the reality they faced abroad. We found that this process not only served as a vector of separation for our informants, similar to the older generation's physical displacement through flight, it also connected the young Saharawis with their elders in a displacement that was no longer abstract, but had become experientially shared through a collective awareness of being displaced.

We suggest the analytical term *liminal flux* to understand how young Saharawi refugees inhabit a space characterised by conditions of *both* chronicity *and* liminality, where, in spite of the protracted nature of their displacement, the expectation of "returning home soon" plays a crucial role in

everyday-life decision-making. Thus, we found that a present emerges, which – while full of veiled potential and possibilities – oscillates between sometimes suffocatingly chronic, sometimes hopefully liminal configurations. This indeed proved to be a significant obstacle in the way for our informants to establish their lives, necessitating active strategies for making sense of lives put on hold while waiting for a promised, yet uncertain return to a future infused with imaginings of the past.

Keywords: Sahrawi, Western Sahara, refugee, youth, displacement, social navigation, liminality, liminal flux

Mimona's house

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1. Introduction

"I think we were born to fight, basically, until we die". Relaxing on the dusty ground of the mudbrick room, her arm propped up comfortably against a cushion, Najla fiddled idly with a corner of her *milahfa*, the bright yellow cloth draped around her like a soft-flowing, full-body dress.

> *"If I envision my future life, I don't see a period of my life when I'm free of this. I'm 26, and let's say we get independence in the next 10 years, or 5 years, we have a long way… So the answer I give myself is: You were born to fight. Because I see myself doing it for the rest of my life. And since I was a child I'm fighting, (…) when I was in Spain I had to sing, I had to carry the flag, I had to say something (…) even though I was not conscious about it or really understanding. But then I knew and I'm very passionate about it – I would never give it away, I would never change it for something else. When I'm upset, why I'm a refugee, why I'm not like other people, why does presenting myself always take two hours and not five minutes, why do I always have to prove to people where is Western Sahara, searching for it on the phone and showing them on Google Maps, and all that – this makes me upset, but then I answer myself and say: maybe that's why you're here.*"

Having grown up in a refugee camp under the blistering sun in the southwestern Algerian desert, one of the most inhospitable places on Earth, Najla is part of a generation of young Sahrawi refugees born into a conflict that has largely been forgotten by the outside world. She knows full well that, in a time when the global mediascape is flooded with images of refugees and migrants risking their lives in desperate attempts to reach the supposed safety of Europe, very little attention is spared those who choose to stay closer to home, or whose fight does not leave a trail of dead bodies or produce violent images of physical suffering. Najla is also part of a highly educated and remarkably mobile generation of young refugees, whose unique access to Spanish residence and work permits (Pérez & Fuentes 2014:162) allows for a relatively easy escape from the hardships of life in the desert.

But for Najla, as for most young Sahrawi refugees in Algeria, the idea of a 'better future' is not located in Europe, regardless of its supposed abundance in material wealth and life opportunities. Instead, her gaze is drawn westwards, across the desert, over rows of unexploded landmines and a 2500 km berm, all the way to the Atlantic Ocean shores of Western Sahara, the place from which her grandparents fled head over heels one night in 1975 when Moroccan troops invaded from the North, laying siege to the cities and forcing thousands of Sahrawis to seek (what they thought would be temporary) refuge in the desert (San Martín 2010:108).

Ever since a ceasefire agreement of 1991, the Sahrawi refugees have continued their fight against the Moroccan occupation, which has lasted for over four decades, through a peaceful resistance movement led by the Polisario, the refugees' political leadership (Stephan & Mundy 2006). Meanwhile, the

refugees have turned the camps into a "*pre-figurative lived model, of what an independent Western Sahara would, and still could, look like*" (Mundy 2007:275). Despite never having set foot in their homeland, many young Sahrawis stay in the camps and remain committed to obtaining what was promised to their elders by the UN and the International Court of Justice more than forty years ago: the right to self-determination for Western Sahara and it's people. This also makes Najla part of a generation whose lives – despite a seeming abundance of opportunities within their grasp – have been put on hold while waiting to return to Western Sahara.

1.1 Previous research

Despite the protracted nature of the Sahrawis' displacement, social scientific research is still a relatively new phenomenon in the Tindouf camps. In the past decade or so, research into the Western Sahara conflict and the Polisario-run refugee camps in Algeria has been heavily dominated by about half a dozen of scholars, most notably Stephen Zunes (2010), Jacob Mundy (2007), Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2013, 2014), Pablo San Martín (2010), Dawn Chatty (2010) and Randa Farah (2010). These scholars have predominantly focused on issues such as the nation-building project in the state-in-exile camps, the international politics of the conflict, Sahrawi nationalism and identity, transnational youthscapes and mobility for education. Manuel Herz and his team of architects' meticulously researched book "*From Camp to City: Refugee Camps of the Western Sahara*" (2013), further provides a detailed study into the structure of the camps and explores what happens when the temporary architectural structures of a refugee camp become seemingly "permanent".

Although the collective body of work by the abovementioned scholars is growing steadily, and will naturally feature throughout this thesis as secondary data, the availability of reliable ethnographic data is nevertheless still somewhat limited. While much research on Sahrawi children and youth has focused on the age group eight to 18, most notably research by Chatty (2010) and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2013), we find a gap in research among youth and young adults above the age of 18. We find this group to be particularly interesting, as most have finished their education and, as young adults who studied abroad now face the choices of returning to life in the camps or pursuing options elsewhere. Finding that there was much to be gained by experiencing the conditions in the camps first hand, we set out to conduct anthropological fieldwork with hopes of adding some insight into this 'next phase' in the lives of young Sahrawi refugees.

1.2 Research question

Driven by a curiosity over what keeps these young, highly educated and transnationally mobile refugees anchored in displacement, what shapes their life choices and how they make sense of a life seemingly put on hold while waiting to return to the homeland, we pose the following research question:

> *Born as refugees, how do young Sahrawis experience and navigate displacement, caught between uncertain futures and a present in liminal flux?*

Taking its point of departure in our fieldwork in the camps, this thesis explores the perspectives of Sahrawi youth who have chosen to remain in or return to the camps, from their own vantage points as young adults in a protracted displacement situation.

1.3 Thesis structure

For the convenience of the reader, we present a brief overview of the structure of this thesis:

In chapter two, in order to understand our informants' backgrounds, we give a brief contextual introduction to the history of the conflict, locating the Sahrawi refugees historically, geographically and politically. In chapter three on methodology, we provide a detailed account of our fieldwork and data collection: Tracing our ethnographic path from negotiating access, selecting informants, to methods employed in data collection, we reflect on challenges encountered and mitigating strategies, the validity of our findings, and ethical implications of conducting research in a highly politicised context.

In order to address the twofold nature of the research question, the analysis unfolds in two parts, in chapter four and five, respectively. We have decided not to make a separate chapter describing our choices of theory. Instead we will introduce our theories and apply them immediately as instruments in the analysis. In chapter four, we explore in what ways our young informants experience displacement, seeing as they were born into it and thus did not themselves experience a loss of the homeland. Drawing on Henrik Vigh's writings on *crisis and chronicity* (2008) and Victor Turner's take on the concept of *liminality* (1964), we propose a new term, *liminal flux*, in an attempt to more accurately grasp the rather unique situation of displacement in which our young informants find themselves.

In chapter five, we explore some of the strategies employed by the young Sahrawi refugees in order to make sense of a life trajectory characterised by liminal flux. Drawing on Vigh's concept of *social*

navigation (2006, 2009, 2010), we trace how our informants navigate a social terrain in liminal flux where 1) even simple, every-day acts can be invoked as part of the greater political cause, requiring a constant negotiation of personal dreams, ambitions and life decisions with the collective goals, and 2) displacement and its counterpart, emplacement, or "home", are continuously constructed and reconstructed in a constant negotiation of an immediate present vs. imagined/uncertain futures. Finally, in chapter 6, we provide an overview of the conclusions drawn from the analysis.

Map of Western Sahara
UN Department of Field Support, Cartographic Section, Nov 1995

2. Context

The purpose of the following in chapter is to provide the reader with a brief contextual introduction to the history of the conflict by locating the Sahrawi refugees historically, geographically and politically. This serves the purpose of placing our young informants in the socio-political environment shaping their lives.

2.1 Brief historical background

Entering its fifth decade of occupation by Morocco, Western Sahara is one of the very few remaining non-self-governing territories in the world (Herz 2013:13, Chatty 2010:6). Located on the Atlantic coast and sharing borders with Morocco, Mauritania, and a small crossing to Algeria, Western Sahara has historically been populated by *Hassaniye*-speaking nomadic tribes called the *Sahrawis*, meaning *Saharan* in Arabic (Herz 2013:13; Mundy 2007:277). The Sahrawis of Western Sahara have struggled for independence from foreign colonial occupation since the nineteenth century, when the territory was first colonised by Spain. Although the Spanish colonialists had previously shown little interest in the territory and its people, this changed in the 1940s with the discovery of phosphates in the territory, after which the colonialists increased their presence to the mounting enmity of the local population (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014:20-21).

Inspired by waves of other independence movements and the decolonization of neighbouring countries such as Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria in the 1950s, a small group of mainly Moroccan-educated, anti-colonial Sahrawi students began to mobilise around a wish for self-determination and non-involvement from foreign powers (Pazzanita 2006:149) and eventually founded the Sahrawi independence movement, the Polisario (*Frente Popular para Liberación de Saguia El-Hamra y Rio de Oro*). The Polisario launched a military campaign against the Spanish rulers, which combined with pressure from the UN Special Committee on Decolonization, numerous resolutions on decolonization during the 1960s, as well as the death of General Franco, led Spain to officially withdraw from the territory in 1976 (Herz 2013:73, Chatty 2010:6).

Rather than decolonising the territory, however, Spain ceded control of the Western Sahara territory to Morocco and Mauritania, in clear violation of UN demands and a 1975 ruling of the International Court of Justice, which rejected Moroccan and Mauritanian claims to the territory[1] and instead

[1] Morocco's interest in the territory was part of King Hassan II's expansionist project known as 'Greater Morocco', which, building on an idea dating back to the 12th Century Alomad Caliphate, was to encompass Mauritania, parts of Mali, parts of Algeria and the entire Western Sahara (Solana 2011:58). This move came at a time of severe internal civil unrest in Morocco, with the king having survived two attempted coups d'états (ibid.),

confirmed the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination (Abi-Mershed & Farrar 2014:16-17). In defiance of this ruling, Morocco sent approximately 350,000 Moroccan civilian settlers into the Western Sahara territory, an incident also known as the Green March (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014:26). This was followed by Moroccan troops laying siege to the major Western Saharan cities. The months between the end of October until late February 1976 saw fierce clashes between the RAF (Royal Armed Forces of Morocco) and the Sahrawi troops, as well as a frantic exodus of Sahrawi civilians seeking – what they thought would be temporary – refuge in the desert (San Martín 2010:108). Thousands of internally displaced headed inland, gathering in interim camps in the desert. Following airstrikes by the Moroccan Air Force on those camps, with several reports confirming the use of napalm bombs against the civilian population, the Sahrawi refugees were once more forced to flee further northeast towards Al Mahbes, eventually crossing into Algerian territory (Herz 2013:88).

While the Mauritanian invasion from the south became short-lived, the following 16 years saw heavy fighting between Morocco, backed by the U.S, France and Saudi Arabia (Zunes & Mundy 2007:xxix), and the Polisario, supported with funds and arms by Algeria (Abi-Mershed & Farrar 2014:18). Meanwhile, thanks to the relative safety of having crossed an international border, as well as the availability of a well and water pump, the otherwise desolate patch of desert some 20km from the Algerian town Tindouf became site for the first of the Sahrawi refugee camps[2] (San Martín 2010:109). This would also become the site where, in 1976, the Sahrawis established their state-in-exile, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) with Polisario as the governing mechanism. Internally, the Polisario sought to unite the refugees politically, attempting to dissolve tribal divides by separating the refugees across several campsites and banning the use of tribal affiliations. In an attempt to "*create allegiances to the Polisario/SADR's newly defined 'Sahrawi nation'*", the traditional authority figures were replaced with a national army, police force and a constitution (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013a:880). Externally, the creation of the SADR was only possible due to the Algerian government's strong support for the Sahrawi cause. This remarkable relation between Algeria and Polisario is another unique feature of the situation of the Sahrawi refugees. Besides being the first country to establish diplomatic relations with the SADR, the Algerian government has ceded de facto administration over the refugee camps and de facto control of the surrounding Algerian territory to the Polisario (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014:28; 2011:9).

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and was part of a strategy to strengthen his political influence domestically by fanning nationalist aspirations and reaffirming royal legitimacy (Zunes & Mundy 2010:38).

[2] As the number of refugees rose from around 9,000 in late 1975 to just over 100,000 refugees by the end of 1976 (available figures vary, some estimates placing the number closer to 40,000 refugees in late 1976), several more Sahrawi camps were established (San Martín 2010:109).

[3] See for example Resolution 34/37 of the UN General Assembly 21 November 1979, which "*deeply deplores the*

In protest over the Organization of African Unity's (OAU) recognition of the SADR, Morocco withdrew its membership in 1984, and later also from the African Union (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013a:880). By the late 1980s, the conflict between the two parties had reached a stalemate (Abi-Mershed & Farrar 2014:18); the territory was divided by a Moroccan built, 2500 km berm and vast land-mine field, separating the Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara (almost three quarters of the territory) from the Polisario-held "liberated territory" (Herz 2013:11,74). A ceasefire was finally brokered in 1988 by the UN and OAU, and in 1991 a UN mission to the Western Sahara conflict, MINURSO, was established with the mandate to organise a referendum to decide the future status of the Western Sahara territory (Herz 2013:75). In keeping with the right to self-determination, the referendum was to allow the native population to vote for either independence under the leadership of Polisario, or integration with Morocco (Zunes & Mundy 2010:xxx-xxxi).

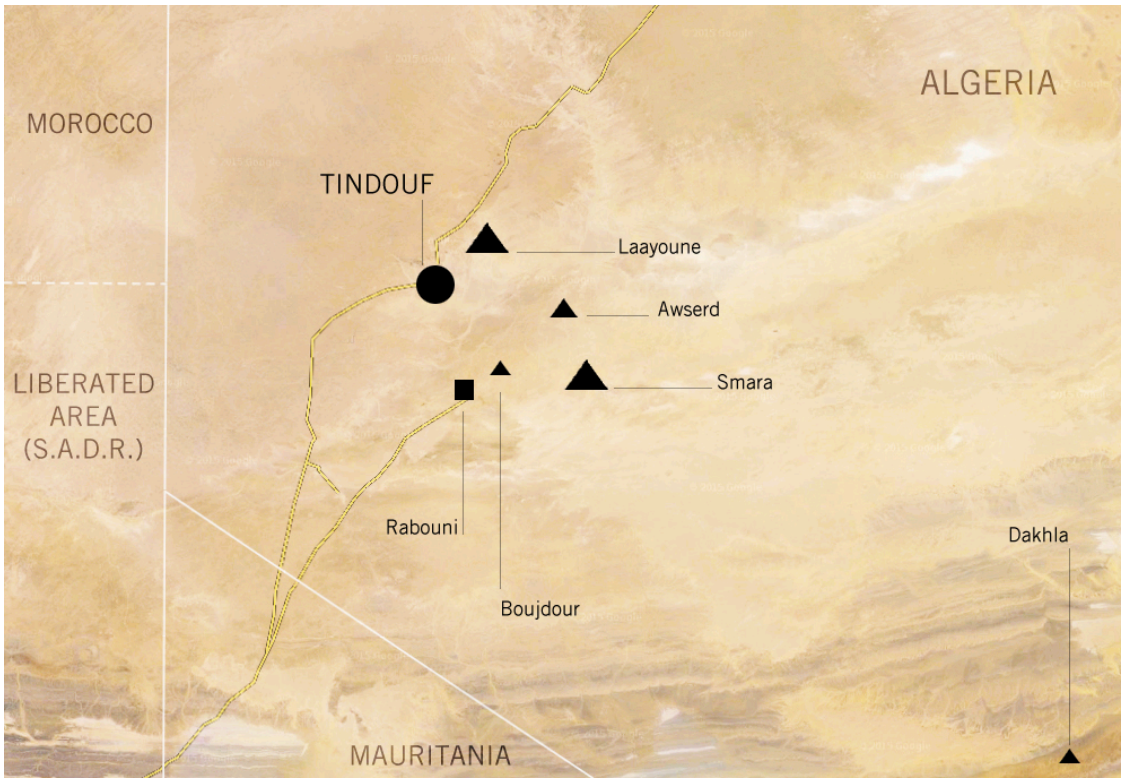
To this day, the referendum has continuously been obstructed by Morocco (Herz 2013:75; Farah 2010:60), under the insistence that Moroccan settlers who have moved into the Western Sahara territory, and now outnumber the native population, should be allowed to partake in the referendum (Zunes & Mundy 2010:xxi, xxx-xxxi; Abi-Mershed & Farrar 2014:19). A third option for a referendum, granting Western Sahara limited autonomy as part of Morocco, was introduced in the 2000s, but was repeatedly rejected by Polisario and Algeria (Abi-Mershed & Farrar 2014:20-21). Meanwhile, Morocco has continued to block any form of referendum where a likely result of the vote would favour an independent Sahrawi state (San Martín 2010:6-7). Citing a report by Human Rights Watch (1995), Randa Farah notes that Morocco, "*which is the stronger of the two parties both militarily and diplomatically, has regularly engaged in conduct that has obstructed and compromised the fairness of the referendum process*" (Farah 2010:60). The peace negotiations, which saw the former US Secretary of State James Baker resign from his post as Special Envoy to Western Sahara "*out of frustration with Morocco and the Security Council in 2004*" (Mundy 2007:277), have since stalled completely. Meanwhile, despite the fact that neither the EU, UN nor any of their member states recognise Morocco's claim over and de-facto rule of Western Sahara and have in fact denounced its occupation as illegal in numerous resolutions[3], Morocco has entered into lucrative trade deals exporting phosphates,

[3] See for example Resolution 34/37 of the UN General Assembly 21 November 1979, which "*deeply deplores the aggravation of the situation resulting from the continued occupation of Western Sahara by Morocco and the extension of that occupation to the territory recently evacuated by Mauritania*", urging Morocco to "*join the peace process and to terminate the occupation of the territory of Western Sahara*" (UNGA 1979); similarly, in Resolution 27 May 1993 (published in the official Journal of the UE C176. of 28 June 1993), the European Parliament stressed the need for "*international observers, humanitarian organizations and human rights organizations to* [visit] *the occupied territories in Western Sahara*" (European Parliament 1993).

fish and other natural resources from the occupied territory to trade partners all over the world (WSRW 2015).

25 years after the ceasefire, the Sahrawis remain a people divided: roughly half the Sahrawi population has remained in occupied Western Sahara (Zunes & Mundy 2010:xxi), facing systematic oppression and human rights violations such as arbitrary detention and torture at the hands of their occupiers (HRW 2015; Amnesty International 2015); the other half, who fled their homes in the belief that their exile would only be temporary, are still waiting for the promised referendum to bring a closure to their displacement. Meanwhile, a new generation of refugees have been born and raised in the camps in Algeria.

2.2 The Sahrawi Refugee Camps



Graphic rendition based on 2015 GoogleEarth satellite view; roads between camps not indicated.

Often referred to as a "*unique phenomenon*" (Herz 2013:156), the Sahrawi camps have fascinated researchers in their double nature as both entirely self-managed refugee camps (Mundy 2007:286)

and as the site of a fervent nation-building project (San Martín 2010:113; Mundy 2007:285). Initially little more than a "*sea of tents spread across a single location*", over the past four decades the Sahrawi refugee camps have grown in number and size, spread out in a 2.000 square mile area East and South of the Algerian town Tindouf (Mundy 2007:278). Today, some 200,000[4] Sahrawi refugees are settled in five camps: Laayoune[5], Smara, Awserd, Boujdour (formerly known as the 27 February school camp) and Dakhla in the South, close to the Mauritanian border.

Named after the main cities of Western Sahara, the camps are modelled on the social, cultural and political geography of the homeland. The Sahrawis refer to the refugee camps not as camps but as *wilayat* (sing. *wilaya*), meaning province in Arabic (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014:86). Each wilaya is headed by a *wali*, a governor appointed by the head of state, and is subdivided into a number of *dawa'ir* (sing. *daïra*), meaning districts. Each daïra is again subdivided into four *barrios*, or neighbourhoods (ibid.). A sixth camp, Rabouni, serves as the administrative centre of the Polisario and the seat of the SADR's Ministries and military headquarters (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014:83; Herz 2014:167). It hosts the National Hospital, the National Museum of the Resistance, a radio and TV broadcasting station, a mosque, as well as storage facilities for food and other aid donations. As the number of refugees rose over the years, most families have built houses and rooms made from mud-bricks in addition to the UNHCR-provided tents, over time creating neighbourhoods semblant of villages (Chatty 2010:6, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014:31). In 2008, Boujdour was the first (and to this day only) camp to be connected to the Algerian power grid, allowing for the instalment of fridges, air conditioning, WIFI etc. (Herz 2014:107). In contrast, the remaining camps – including hospitals, schools and government buildings – rely on solar panels and small generators for electricity (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014:86).

From their initial establishment until today, the camps have remained entirely self-organised (San Martín 2010:115), and have developed into a functioning state-in-exile, where aid distribution is administered not by donor organisations but by the Sahrawi Red Crescent and SADR ministries (Mundy 2007:285-286). To create a "'*modern society' (...) led by educated men and women who could ensure self-sufficiency of the 'Sahrawi nation'*", the Polisario also focused heavily on education, introducing a *"universal, obligatory, 'secular education system' in the camps*" already in the 1970s (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013a:880). While free primary (and later, also secondary) schooling has been secured in the refugee camps, the Polisario have carved out a unique mobility for education for the Sahrawi youth through a network for higher education established between the Polisario and states

[4] Numbers vary greatly according to sources: The government of Algeria estimates the number of Sahrawi refugees in their territory at 165,000 (UNHCR 2010), however, anthropologist Michael Bhatia estimated the population to have crossed 200,000 refugees already back in 2001(Bhatia 2001:291)
[5] Transliteration from Arabic means that spellings of place names may vary according to sources.

sympathetic to their cause[6]. Most young refugees thus leave their families and home camps at an early age in the pursuit of higher education (Mundy 2007:287; Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Crivello 2010:37).

Though mobility has always been an integral feature of the nomadic Sahrawi culture, a shift has occurred between the nomadic and largely pre-literate society of the first refugees to arrive in Algeria and the transnationally mobile younger generations of Sahrawi refugees today (Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Crivello 2010:49,70). As a result of the chaotic and less than by-the-book exit by Spain, many Sahrawi refugees still hold their Spanish ID papers, and are theoretically free to travel, work, and reside in any EU country on equal terms with Spanish nationals[7] (Pérez & Fuentes 2014). Despite the fact that Sahrawi youth have unique access to the European job market, many nevertheless opt to return to the camps after completing their education. Youths who return after having studied abroad for a prolonged period have few opportunities to employ their newly acquired skills, as there is no formal economy in the camps and paid jobs are rare (Mundy 2007:287; Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Crivello 2010:75). The refugees thus "*remain 'totally dependent' on humanitarian aid*" (Khoury 2011:5)[8], and the Sahrawi youth are seeing their options in life severely limited, leading many observers to notice an increasing frustration and "*desperat(ion) to take control of their own lives*" (Oxfam 2015:2).

[6] Attending high school or university abroad depends on scholarships offered by friendly states such as Spain, Algeria, Cuba and previously Libya and Syria. More recently, connection has been established with Mexico, Venezuela, and even Qatar (Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Crivello 2010:37,57)

[7] Despite some ambiguity regarding the interpretation, a 1998 ruling by the Spanish Supreme Court "acknowledged the right of Western Saharans to be recognized as Spanish citizens" (Pérez & Fuentes 2014:162). Although our informants told us of many economic and bureaucratic obstacles put in their way by the Spanish authorities to prevent them from claiming this right, a "*substantial number of Sahrawis*" do manage to move to and find work in Spain and elsewhere in Europe, allowing them to send home remittances (Herz 2013:190).

[8] The fact that theirs is a forgotten conflict in the eyes of the international community, is currently becoming especially visible as a progressive drop in food aid culminated in the World Food Programme reporting a USD 10 million shortfall in 2015 (WFP 2015a), worsening the already concerning levels of malnutrition in the camps (UNHCR 2002; 2007; WFP 2015b). A further € 1 million cut in aid by the European Commission's humanitarian aid agency ECHO, reportedly expected in 2016 (Nielsen & Eriksson 2016), comes at an especially vulnerable time, as 17,000 homes were destroyed by a flood in October 2015 (IFRC 2015) and many have faced the cold winter months in emergency tents. Most aid is provided by the Algerian government (Khoury 2011:5).

Boujdour camp

Shops in Boujdour

3. Methodology

Our empirical data were gathered through a range of interviews and participant-observation conducted during three weeks of intensive ethnographic fieldwork in the Sahrawi refugee camps in October 2015. In the following sections we take an in-depth look at a range of methodological and ethical considerations that arose before, during, and after our fieldwork.

3.1 Presentation of fieldwork

In the following we provide a detailed account of our ethnographic path into the field, what methods we used, and how we addressed the various challenges and roadblocks on the way.

3.1.2 Research design

Our ethnographic research followed an open-ended and exploratory approach. According to Spradley, doing ethnography means *learning from*, rather than merely *studying,* people, and thus involves participating in people's daily lives in everyday contexts, making observations and engaging in informal as well as formal conversations (Spradley 1979:3; Hammersley & Atkinson 2007:3). While our main interest group were "Sahrawi youth", we set out to engage with a broad range of informants in varied settings and social situations, in order to reach a deeper contextual understanding of the socio-political dynamics in the camps. This means that we did not enter the field settled on a specific path or following a fully formed research question. This is not to say that we were completely free of preconceived ideas and expectations as to what we would find; rather, in recognition of the fact that our previous readings on the subject had indeed generated some expectations, we sought to avoid simply reproducing knowledge by actively seeking out and following paths divergent to previous findings.

Using an open research design allowed for adapting as the research progressed, through the discovery of new and unexpected perspectives, and in accordance with the opening of new avenues of inquiry (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007:4). Burgess (1984) also stresses the importance of entering the field with a flexible research design. Citing Douglas (1976), he highlights three guiding principles to engaging meaningfully with the field: keeping all options open at the beginning, remaining methodologically flexible during, and finally, using "uncontrolled" – as in unplanned, unprepared for – situations as a contrast to data gathered under controlled circumstances (Burgess 1984:145). Given a humanitarian crisis that broke out during our stay, which we will return to shortly, this preparedness to adapt and improvise proved highly necessary: Not only would most of the pre-scheduled arrangements during this time be cancelled in light of the more pressing issue of the evolving

emergency, the crisis also proved to be an "uncontrolled" and important opportunity for observation of the community's reactions, and one that a more rigid research design would have been less suited to deal with.

3.1.3 Strategies for reliability

Not following a fixed research design, does not mean that we entered the field without a strategy for methodologically sound data collection. To ensure reliability, or internal validity, of the data gathered, we employed what Burgess terms the *multiple strategies approach* (Burgess 1984:144-6). As a re-conceptualisation of the triangulation methodology[9], the multiple strategies approach allows the fieldworker to draw on a variety of methods, theories, data and investigators as an *integrated* part of the course of the research. When employed rigorously, the strategic combination of a variety of methodologies strengthens data reliability while remaining flexible enough to reflect the realities of conducting research in potentially volatile socio-political fields. The following is an account of the triangulation methods we employed.

Person triangulation entails comparing findings at the individual level, the interactive level among groups, as well as the collective level, and was an explicit aim for our data collection. During our fieldwork we combined officially sanctioned, pre-arranged meetings with government officials, council members, teachers, doctors and youth organisation members with independently arranged in-depth interviews and informal conversations with private individuals. *Methodological triangulation* involves using the same method on different occasions, and different methods on the same object of study. While our semi-structured interviews all had their point of departure in the same interview guide, many of our interviews constituted the only interaction with that particular informant. We therefore made strategic efforts to engage with certain key informants in a combination of both informal conversations, formal interviews, and observations of said informants in ordinary-life situations (interacting with their families and friends, shopping at the local store, participating in a youth organisation meeting, tea preparation rituals etc.). Towards the end of the fieldwork we also conducted a focus group discussion, which allowed us to compare a few key informants' accounts previously obtained in their personal interviews to their opinions presented in front of and interaction

[9] The term *triangulation* refers to an approach where "*a hypothesis can survive the confrontation of a series of complementary methods of testing"*, and establishes validity by gathering accounts from three distinct viewpoints (e.g. a teacher, the pupils and the participant observer) (Burgess 1984:146). This can be done through data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation or methodological triangulation (Burgess 1984:145). We agree with Burgess in his concern that rigid adherence to triangulation fails to encompass the realities and practicalities of conducting field research when limiting the number of possible points of view to three (Burgess 1984:144-6), and found the flexibility of the *multiple strategies approach* to provide a sound remedy to these shortcomings.

with their peers. We will return to our use of interviews and observations later in this chapter. Using methodological triangulation, we were able to access a wide range of information not exclusive to what is only seen or heard: Through the interviews we were able to gain an understanding of processes and thoughts not easily observed directly, and through systematic observations we were able to "*access the meanings which participants assign to social situations"* (Burgess 1984:79) beyond the spoken word. In this way, the collected data from each method would help illuminate the other by adding different perspectives to the same situations (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007:102).

A further measure for securing reliability was *investigator triangulation*: The presence of more than one researcher in the field enables checking the reliability of observations through comparison (Burgess 1984:145). Being a team of two, we were able to compare our individual notes and impressions for overlaps, nuances and discrepancies, which helped identify possible biases and misunderstandings and thus strengthened our findings. It also enabled us to take on complementary roles as participant/observer: while one could delve into the social situation through active participation, e.g. the omnipresent Sahrawi tea-making ritual (an integral part of social life around which much social activity such as welcoming guests, exchanging of news etc. occurs), the other would focus on mapping out the scene through descriptive observations.

3.1.4 Scope and conditions of field research

Obtaining access

We had obtained an invitation by the Polisario's representative in Denmark, Mr. Abba Malainin (M.A.) to visit the camps and conduct research for our thesis. As our initial gatekeeper, M.A. proved to be an invaluable source for information of all kinds, from the bureaucracy of obtaining access to introducing us to basic Sahrawi cultural etiquette, such as the tea ceremony and greetings in *Hassaniye*. M.A. would help us coordinate with the Algerian authorities to obtain the permits needed, negotiate the length of our stay[10], arrange for a local driver and interpreter and he also put together an itinerary for the first few days to give us some points of entry to locating possible informants. Without a contact with his level of access and ability to negotiate on our behalf, the planning and execution of this fieldwork would have been next to impossible.

[10] Several Western Sahara scholars have voiced their concern over the generally brief periods that researchers have been allowed to spend in the camps in the past, as the typical research period granted by the Polisario to visiting scholars has only been one to two weeks (Chatty 2010:20). Zunes himself admits to having drawn premature conclusions in previous analyses that were based on a short 10-day visit (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014:81-82).

We were aware that relying on a single person as our gatekeeper was a potentially fragile set-up, as everything hinged upon one individual's goodwill and our relation being mutually beneficial. While being indebted to A.M. for time he was investing in us, we also realised that, as a diplomatic emissary of the Polisario, "helping us" (i.e. gaining exposure for the cause) was very much part of his job description. In light of the fact that we were at least as useful to him as he was to us, in turn presented us with a balancing act in which we had to position ourselves as genuinely interested in and empathetic to the Sahrawis' political cause, but without committing to becoming advocates on their behalf – an issue we will return to.

(Re)negotiating access

Burgess stresses that "access cannot be negotiated successfully with all participants" (as in members of the group under study), and acceptance hereof is part of the "research bargain" (1984:49). He also notes, however, that the modes of negotiation with the respective points of access is not only indicative of the socio-political structure, and therefore of analytical value, it is also fluid – as relationships develop and new connections are made along the way, access is a matter of continuous (re)negotiation, and different situations may require different points of access.

Upon our arrival in Boujdour, we were presented with a three-day introductory itinerary, which included meetings with government officials, organisations, visiting schools, the national museum, the national hospital etc. We soon found out that this programme was also used for e.g. visiting diplomats, and intended to give us an overview of the institutional life in, as well as the physical layout of the camps. Unfortunately, due to various and repeated cancellations, the programme dragged out from three to almost 10 days. While both interesting and useful for establishing an overview, the programme alone did not allow for the kind of access we ultimately needed and quickly proved to be restricting in terms of allowing time for observations and opportunities to conduct ethnographic interviews among "regular" Sahrawis in less formalised settings.

It soon became clear that the programme was not only for *our* benefit, but certainly also about what information the Polisario wished to convey. At one point, at which we had started setting up an interview with a potential informant independently, with the help of our translator Najla, a previously cancelled visit on the official programme was re-scheduled for the same time. When we voiced our preference to conduct the interview, our contact person's reaction was: "*No, you can do that in your free time. You have to respect the programme!*". Since we wished to remain on good terms with our gatekeeper, we accepted the meeting and cancelled the interview. Later, once more having to weigh the value of a re-scheduled visit to the Red Crescent distribution office against the opportunity to

conduct ethnographic interviews, we again expressed a preference towards the interview. However, our contact person, in a rare glimpse of transparency, declared that it was *necessary* for us to see certain aspects of the institutional set-up in the camps, such as the Red Crescent distribution office, in order to counter "widespread propaganda" e.g. about donations being misappropriated[11].

While frustrating at the time, our gatekeeper's reactions revealed several interesting challenges to finding a mutual understanding regarding our purpose in the field and of what constitutes ethnographic data. Over the course of those first couple of weeks, we had several informal conversations with M.A, (re)negotiating our opportunities for mobility, how to access informants as well as our need to conduct interviews independently from the other Danish student[12]. Approximately halfway into our fieldwork, possibly also due to the fact that the on-going disaster placed us in a category of lesser importance, some of the constraints we had faced in the beginning lessened and we were able to move forward with conducting ethnographic interviews as we had originally intended. Our interpreter, Najla, then became our primary point of access to informants, which we will explore further later on.

Protection vs control

As Chatty points out, there are several "*problems related to the potential for bias commonly found in tight state-control over research processes*" (Chatty 2010:20). Prior to our fieldwork, we had taken note of the conditions under which much of the available body of research had been conducted and we did expect some monitoring of our whereabouts and activities. However, we did not expect the *extent* that this monitoring would take. At no point in our stay were we allowed to move around unaccompanied. We were not allowed to use taxis or to hitchhike, the way that most Sahrawis get around, but were appointed a driver who would take us to pre-arranged meetings and visits in a dark blue, clearly government-issued Toyota pick-up truck. If we wanted to go for a short walk around the daïra, at least one of the host family members would have to accompany us. Upon enquiry, this was explained as security measures, following the kidnappings of three humanitarian aid workers in October 2011 by

[11] Allegations of Polisario using aid donations "*as a means of social and political control*" have been put forward by sources such as the *Moroccan American Center for Policy* (a lobby group commissioned by King Mohammed VI) who claim that "*the aid process has been politicized and corruption and abuse flourish*" in the camps (Holley et al. 2009:50-51). And while allegations of corruption have been made by internal sources too, such as in a report published by NOVA (2015), a Sahrawi youth organisation, and actors such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) have pointed out the lack of oversight and documentation regarding human rights violations committed under the Polisario's leadership within the camps (HRW 2008:116), it also bears mentioning that Moroccan media and research tends to focus on – not always factually substantiated – abuses committed by the Polisario, while ignoring the arguably more well-documented human rights violations committed by Morocco in the occupied territory (HRW 2008:115).

[12] We had concerns over implications of meeting informants alongside a journalism student who had an entirely different agenda and methodological approach.

the *Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa* (UNSC 2013), a militant splinter group of the North African chapter of AlQaeda.

While in the field, however, it was at times difficult for us to assess where concerns over protection ended and elements of control began. Wars today are fought on the information front too, as e.g. the aforementioned example on allegations of misappropriation of food donations shows, and thus the Polisario too have a natural interest in controlling the narrative. Later in the process, a further perspective on the issue of control was revealed. As Burgess points out, gatekeepers often inhabit a position of authority in a given social hierarchy, a position in which they feel entitled to grant the researcher permission on behalf of others (Burgess 1984:195). Those lower in the hierarchy may find themselves ordered to speak with the researcher, and may not be in a position where they may easily refuse. Of course, this can also go the opposite way, in that people may not dare speak with the researcher unless sanctioned by the leadership, or may abstain from revealing personal views tangential to the "official party line". On a number of occasions we encountered a strong fear among the refugees of being misrepresented, and heard several references to instances of "Moroccan spies" having infiltrated the camps, and of someone's name and image being misappropriated by Moroccan media outlets for propaganda purposes. We became aware that the vetting of informants we feared might be going on might not only be about screening for diverging views or prepping potential informants with the "right" things to say[13] – there also appeared to be a need to assure some of the potential informants that *we* did not pose a threat.

Implications of being named "Ambassadors to the cause"

Dawn Chatty notes that, prior to the 2000s, practically no research had been conducted in the camps/SADR that was not driven by humanitarian, development or advocacy purposes (Chatty 2010:12,20). The only foreign research activities approved by the Polisario tended to be carried out by NGOs or solidarity groups, while merely academic studies would not be granted access (Chatty 2010:20). This past trend was reflected in the often expressed expectation of our becoming "Ambassadors to the cause", which raised a set of ethical concerns. As Eastmond notes, in unresolved refugee situations "*perhaps more than in others, forced migrants depend on having their stories heard and believed"* (Eastmond 2007:259). Due to the embattled nature of the storytelling around the Western Sahara conflict, we were aware of the degree to which the Sahrawi refugees depend on sharing their stories for further dissemination.

[13] We are not stating for a fact that this happened, nevertheless, it was a recurring methodological and ethical concern during our time in the field.

It was thus particularly important for us to distinguish ourselves from the Danish journalism student who visited the camps simultaneously, who could offer articles and media coverage in exchange for being welcomed in the camps. We paid heed to being as open and transparent about the purpose and scope of our research as possible: While we would often show our empathy with their cause, we always made sure to present ourselves as *students*, to ensure that our presence as researchers did not become linked to expectations of output in terms of funding or advocacy beyond sharing stories with friends and family about our stay in the camps. As we ended each interview with thanking the individual for helping us out with our project, both as a gesture of genuine gratitude and as a way of transforming any residual expectations regarding our status, most informants seemed to accept this adjustment of positioning and wished us good luck with our final exam, often expressing that they were "*happy to have helped us out*".

Fieldwork in a time of crisis

We arrived in Tindouf a few hours after midnight on October 13th along with a journalism student student from Denmark and were taken to a host family consisting of three generations of women living together in a typical family unit of mudbrick houses and an adjoining *khayma* (the *Hassaniye* word for tent) in the wilaya of Boujdour. To this day, Boujdour is the only camp connected to the Algerian power grid, which promised working conditions with a reliable supply of electricity, light, even wifi if needed. For the next week or so, this was to be our base; the plan was to later relocate to another wilaya and host family, in order to spread out our sampling opportunities for interviews and participant-observation. However, things did not go quite as planned.

The timing of conducting our fieldwork in the final weeks of October had hinged on several considerations, most acutely, the weather conditions. With summer temperatures climbing well into the 50°Cs, social and institutional life in the camps grinds more or less to a halt for four to five months, providing only few opportunities for interviews and participant-observation. With the cooler fall temperatures, people are able to once again move about, schools reopen and social and political life once again flourishes. However, we soon realised that this also applies to the thick swarms of flies buzzing about, lighting happily on every conceivable surface from camel dung to shared food plates and back, spreading an array of diseases from diarrhoea to flu-like symptoms, which gives this time of year the less encouraging local nickname of "sickness season". But this would prove not to be the biggest challenge.

Only a few days into our stay, it started to rain. What began as a climatic curiosity and welcome respite from the heat, quickly turned into a full-blown humanitarian disaster. For more than a week, heavy

rainfall pelted down over a vast area of the south-Algerian desert, quickly turning the mud- and sand structures that make up the refugees' houses into potential death traps, as, one by one, walls were dissolved by the rain and collapsed in on themselves. As the dry desert underground could not absorb the downpour, large lakes began to form, flooding the low-lying areas and destroying or seriously damaging homes, tents, shops, hospitals, schools, and roads within and between the camps (UNHCR 2015a)[14]. In response, many families fled their now unsafe homes and low-lying tents were relocated to higher ground. A curious image emerged of new emergency camps popping up on the outskirts of the refugee camps. "*Tents seem to be the thing now"*, our young informant Mohamed S. remarked dryly, "*no one trusts in houses anymore*".

Putting up an emergency tent

Our host family was also affected, as their house took heavy damage and collapse seemed imminent. The family, which at this point counted us as well, moved into the grandmother's tent, which, apart from taking in water from below one night remained relatively dry and safe. We ended up staying with the family for the remainder of our stay, and spent the next 19 days and nights in the tent with the host family, two of their relatives on visit from Mauritania, and the other Danish student. With 12 people

[14] UNHCR estimates 60% of public buildings (UNHCR 2015a) and 17,000 homes were destroyed or damaged by the flood (IFRC 2015)

huddled together on the 20m^2 of the khayma, in which sleeping, eating, tea-making, diaper-changing and the occasional 'bathroom visit' all happened in the same space, we were left with absolutely no room for privacy, a luxury commodity of which you only realise the value once it's gone. All electric power was cut from the first day of the rain, and the pitch black darkness that fell in the tent already in the late afternoon made the rigorous keeping of notes after a long day of fieldwork a matter of both conscience and opportunism: As the battery-driven headlamps we had brought with us to use in case of power-cuts were quickly adopted as communal property by the family and made the rounds between family members trying to manage tasks related to both daily life and the crisis, our need for keeping a record of events could not really compete with the situation the family was in. Eventually, when the worst of the rain subsided but electricity had not yet returned, the family organised a generator to run for a few hours every other night or so; in theory, an opportunity to catch up on the many lost hours of note-writing, however in practice, this became an event that would instead draw a flurry of visitors from all over the barrio to the khayma, looking to charge their phones and hoping to find a few bars of wifi connection.

While this crisis brought a series of challenges in terms of working conditions, it also offered a unique insight into community life. As anthropologist Linda Jencson points out, scholars have long been interested in "*the spontaneous sense of communitas that arises in human societies in times of natural disaster*" (Jencson 2001:46). Disaster communitas, Jencson argues, bears "*similarities to ritual communitas specifically because people consciously ritualize and mythologize their actions during disaster*" (ibid). Interestingly, the flood was rarely spoken of as a state of exception, but rather as symbolic of how the Sahrawis were never meant to build homes or stay permanently in this desert in the first place; a point which we will elaborate on in the analysis. While the flood would naturally feature as a theme in all of our interviews, in particular due to conducting several interviews in emergency tents around the camps, our analysis focuses not so much on the flood itself, but rather on how this disaster was understood by the refugees as part of a greater narrative of fate and displacement.

Flooded khayma and mudbrick houses

3.2 Fieldwork methods

In the following sections we elaborate on our choice of fieldwork methods, in particular participant observations and different styles of interviewing. Furthermore, we elaborate on the process of selecting informants, the representativeness of our pool of informants as well as our experience with working with a translator.

3.2.1 Participant-observation

Burgess defines participant-observation as "*participating in daily life of the group (…) to see what situations they ordinarily meet and how they behave in them*" (Becker 1958 in Burgess 1984:79). The role of participant-as-observer involves a combination of observation, participation and developing relationships with informants (Burgess 1984:81). Although initially worried that our lacking freedom of movement prevented us from seeking out spaces or sites where unsolicited or 'naturally occurring accounts' would be likely to take place[15] (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007:99), our stay with a host family proved an excellent source for observation opportunities. It offered a window into daily life routines, allowing us to participate in daily chores, while still maintaining our role as researchers by asking questions, taking photos or writing field notes in the presence of the family. It also allowed us to observe first-hand the impact of the flood, the consequences of to the destruction of homes and, most importantly, the community's reactions to and handling of the crisis.

We tried our best to fit in and gain cultural knowledge (Burgess 1984:92). Despite struggling with a tight schedule and eagerness to get "out there", we had to adapt to the local pace of things. This meant spending a vast amount of time what to us felt like 'just sitting' in the khayma, having long hours of siesta and drinking lots of very sweet tea. We sought to engage with our host family as much as possible, feeding the goats and dressing up in the traditional milahfa dress to join a neighbourhood party one late evening, while also trying to carve out small pockets for quiet reflection and note-taking. Burgess further highlights the importance of learning languages in developing rapport (Burgess 1984:93). While we were able to draw on our (albeit rudimentary) knowledge of Spanish and Arabic, we were keen on trying to pick up words in the Sahrawi dialect *Hassaniya.* Being able to point towards one of the many tents and say khayma or refer to this word in interviews would prove to be a substantial part in developing rapport with our host family as well as our informants.

Our age proved to be quite beneficial in building relationships, both within our host family (we were the same age as the daughters) and as peers to many of our informants (Burgess 1984:89). Being two

[15] Being driven around the camps in government-issue pick-up truck does not exactly provide for the best opportunity for ethnographic observations.

female researchers proved advantageous to participating in the female-run household of our host family (Burgess 1984:90). We were thus naturally included in the female spheres of social life and could observe and participate in intimate settings with 'our sisters' and Najla, our translator, such as gossiping about men, boyfriends and relationships. While men and women seemed to be quite relaxed in their interactions with each other, both in private as well as in public, we are aware that there were distinctly gendered spheres and that, naturally, there were situations that we were not able to observe or partake in.

3.2.2 Interviews

Hammersley and Atkinson suggest using unstructured and explorative interviews in the initial phases of a study to help identify central themes and topics to explore more thoroughly later on (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007:4). After the first few days of settling in, we decided to sit down with Najla, our interpreter, for an unstructured interview. The benefits proved twofold; we got to know our interpreter better and we also got the chance to test some of our initial and not yet fully concretized questions. Spending an hour and a half sitting on top of a hill, surrounded by goats and watching the daïra stretch out peacefully below, we let Najla take us on a guided tour through her thoughts on life in and outside of the camps, only directing the interview by asking the occasional follow-up question. This became the basis on which we developed our interview guide for the remainder of our interviews, which would later allow us to compare findings from each interview for further analysis (Burgess 1985:102,107)[16].

Through the semi-structured interviews, our main method for gathering empirical data, we sought to explore the world from our informants' point of view by unfolding *"the meaning of their experiences"* and "*uncover their lived world"* (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015:3). The ethnographic interview is, according to Spradley, a special kind of *speech event,* which materializes in a *series* of friendly conversation into which the researcher slowly introduces new ethnographic elements, such as *explicit purpose*, *ethnographic explanations* and *ethnographic questions,* step by step (Spradley 1979:58-60). Based on the interview guide, we structured our interviews around themes of *past*, *present* and *future.* We asked questions which encouraged sharing stories about specific events, episodes or life stories. This kind of interview holds many similarities to that of a narrative interview, which, as introduced by Brinkmann and Kvale "*centers on the stories the subjects tell*" which may either appear spontaneously or as elicited by the researcher (2015:178). Thus, the interviews would often unfold in a combination of a *short story*, where the informant would focus on specific episodes such as going abroad or returning to the camps; a *life history,* where the informant described parts of his or her life story, e.g. their childhood;

[16] For the full interview guide, see Appendix 1.

or as an *oral history*, where the informant would go beyond their own story and try to cover the history of his or her community (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015:181). While our primary focus was on exploring the individual stories, the *oral history* allowed for gaining insights "*by juxtaposing collective and individual expressions"* (Eastmond 2007:251).

For the most part, we could only meet with our informants once. Consequently, we included as many ethnographic elements into each individual interview as possible, while taking care not to let the interviews feel like formal interrogations (Spradley 1979:59). We often found it useful to invite potential informants for 'conversations' rather than interviews[17], which by far seemed to reduce the fear of providing 'wrong' answers and thus reduced potential reluctance towards meeting with us. Spradley argues that, *"at any time during an interview it is possible to shift back to a friendly conversation. A few minutes of easygoing talk interspersed here and there throughout the interview will pay enormous dividends in rapport"* (ibid.). Shifting back to friendly conversations and small talk became an important element in our interviews, not only to avoid getting stuck in a more formal approach, but also due to the social settings in which most of our interviews took place.

Interview situations

We would always begin each interview with a brief introduction about ourselves as Master students from Denmark and that we were in the camps to collect data for our thesis. We would emphasize that the interviewee would be free to withdraw from the interview at any point and always made sure to get *informed consent* by asking for permission to use a tape recorder in order to obtain an accurate record (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015:93). We would then explain that we were particularly interested in hearing stories about young people and life in the camps from the young people themselves. This was always welcomed by our informants, who often expressed a wish to "give the real picture" in response to what they felt was misinformation spread by Moroccan media about life in the camps. Furthermore, many of our informants saw the interview as an opportunity to "contribute to the cause" by spreading the word about their situation, which brought up additional ethical considerations: While a subject's privacy should be protected by offering anonymity, some interviewees do not wish to be anonymous subjects and in some cases "*want to take responsibility for their statements"* by having their names used (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015:307). This proved to be the case in all of our interviews. At the end of each interview we would ask about the interviewees preference regarding anonymity, to which all informants granted permission us to use their names.

[17] For this purpose, Burgess suggests to call informal/ semi-structured interviews *conversations with a purpose* (Burgess 1985:102).

Hammersley and Atkinson note that the *location* (or *territory)* of an interview is highly relevant to consider as it may affect how the interview unfolds (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007:115). Most of our interviews took place in our informants' home; even when informants had lost their houses to the flood and received us in their emergency tents, it still had a positive effect, as one of our informants, Minetu, told us by the end of the interview: "*Since I'm among my family and comfortable, I'm talking freely and with more confidence*". This confirms the suggestion that many people prefer being interviewed on their own territory (e.g. in their home) thus "*allowing them to organize the context the way they wish*" and to "*relax much more than they would in less familiar surroundings*" (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007:116).

Typical interview situation

An interview would typically last one to two hours, a suitable amount of time to cover a wide range of topics without facing the risk of fatigue (Burgess 1984:120). However, the *interview situations* would often extend into several hours and sometimes last for more than half a day. Since it was often the first

and only time we would meet an informant, much time went into building rapport, making small talk, getting comfortable, conducting the tea ritual and meeting family members.

Privacy was a non-existent term in the camps, and most interviews faced multiple interruptions[18]. We were most often surrounded by family members listening in on the interview, on occasion offering their opinions; neighbours would stop by for tea and a chat, which in each case would involve the endless greeting ritual between each person present, involving a large variety of "how are you's" *("shkifak?"* - *"labass!"),* exchanged all at once in a sing-songy flutter of voices. Our recordings of interviews would often contain a blend of noises: Najla's phone's constant beeping and buzzing; the sound of tea being poured back and forth from glass to glass to create a sweet, white foam; the heavy rainfall on tin-roof plates; goats bleating their hearts out; children wailing or laughing; and the ever-present buzzing of flies. In many ways, our interview recordings turned out to be so much more than mere a collection of words, but just as much a record of social life in the desert.

Focus group

Towards the end of our time in the field, we decided to conduct a focus group interview as an opportunity to further test some of our preliminary findings and analyses based on our observations and interviews, as well as an opportunity to investigate a few still unexplored topics (Andersen & Bloksgaard 2012:33). The focus group interview also served as an opportunity to observe social interactions (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015:175), and allowed us to meet a few of our informants for a second time. We invited our English-speaking informants to avoid the need for translation, which also allowed our interpreter Najla to join as a participant. The group was well-balanced on a number of factors: two men and two women, two having recently lived abroad for several years and two having stayed in the camps; they also represented a good variation in affiliation with different organizations within the camps. The small size of the group allowed for generous speaking time for each participant.

We chose four main topics to explore: 1) *"What is home? Where is home?",* 2) *"Discuss: Becoming a refugee / Being born a refugee",* 3) *"Are you Polisario?"* and 4) *"Developing the camps: good or bad?".* We wanted to keep the interview as open and flexible as possible and by phrasing the topics as brief statements or questions, we intended to allow for their own interpretation or understanding of the topic. We decided on this approach as it was as interesting for us to see *if* and *how* they would understand the topics, as the discussions that were to follow (Burgess 1984:118).

[18] This is where interviews conducted in English proved advantageous, as most often the young informants were the only English-speakers in their respective households. Conducting interviews in English could thus achieve some semblance of privacy, relatively free of meddling by listening family members.

We had written each of the four questions/statements on a small piece of paper to have something physical to place at the centre between the participants. This would allow for our participants to pick it up, look at, point to, read again or pass it on to each other, adding a dynamic aspect to the conversations as well as an attempt from our side to make the somewhat abstract statements more tangible (Andersen & Bloksgaard 2012:41-42). During the interview, our participants not only used the small papers as we had hoped for, they also quickly expressed a willingness to read out loud the questions or statements themselves, resulting in what appeared to be a sense of ownership as well as an opportunity for us to observe their immediate reactions and examine the relationships between the participants and the perspectives that they used (Burgess 1984:119).

The focus group: Maryam, Najla, Sidahmed & Mohamed S.

3.2.3 Selecting informants

As we set out to gain insight into the lives of young Sahrawi refugees from their own vantage point as young adults in a protracted displacement situation, the pool that we consider our primary informants[19] consists of 17 youths aged 21–35[20]. As Burgess suggests "*using informants drawn from*

[19] For an overview of our informant pool see Appendix 2 and 3.

different status levels" (Burgess 1984:75), we also interviewed two men and two women in their 40s to 60s in order to gain a glimpse of the expectations members of the older generations have of the youths today. The following is a reflection on our process of locating and accessing our informants, the obstacles we faced and how this affects the validity of our data.

As first-time visitors who had yet to establish a network of contacts and build trust with members of the community, we knew we would be highly dependent on our Polisario contact mediating access to potential informants. Entering the field with a programme allowed us to speak with a wide variety of actors through officially sanctioned, pre-arranged visits and meetings. Our intention was to use these occasions to establish 'independent' contacts and carve out opportunities for informal conversations, ethnographic interviews, and observations of ordinary-life situations. In practice, however, there were several factors that limited our options regarding informant-selection.

Our limited freedom of movement and the constant monitoring of our whereabouts severely narrowed down our opportunities for meeting people (and potential informants) outside the auspices of the Polisario. The language barrier also made spontaneous conversations tricky, as our rudimentary knowledge of Spanish and Arabic allowed for little more than basic exchanges. Whenever we did manage to engage with young people in informal settings, we were thus still highly dependent on our Polisario-appointed interpreter (a point to which we shall return). With no feasible way of remedying any of these factors in the time available to us, we decided to cultivate the points of access already open to us to the best of our ability through opportunistic sampling and snowball sampling strategies (Burgess 1984:73). Besides the official programme, our main points of access to informants thus became our host family and our interpreter, Najla, who offered access to their personal network of family and friends, allowing us to catch glimpses of everyday-life and the opportunity to conduct ethnographic interviews with non-officials in informal settings.

3.2.4 Representativeness & validity

It is worth noting that our findings are shaped by the sampling strategies available to us. While many of the views we were met with resonated with empirical data collected by other researchers, it is worth considering that those researchers would have faced similar conditions and that the views expressed to them (and us) are reflective of the Polisario's efforts to ensure a specific kind of representation.

[20] We did not set out with a pre-defined notion of youth according to age; instead, we requested to meet with "youth" and let the field lead us to who falls into this category. According to one of the founding members of NOVA, a civil society organisation in the camps promoting non-violent struggle, the Polisario counts as "youth" anyone up to the age of 45; in their own surveys among Sahrawi youths, NOVA defines youth up to the age of 38.

It is also important to stress that our primary informant pool may not be representative of the entirety of Sahrawi society, but rather portrays what Burgess terms "*aspects of the social situation*" (Burgess 1984:75). Most of our informants are well educated, which indeed appears to be the norm among the young generation in the camps today (Chatty 2010:53). Compared to the overall population, however, our informant pool features a disproportionate number of English speakers, which reflects our specific avenue of access (in particular, Najla's social network from the Al Salaam English School in Smara). Despite our best efforts, it proved difficult to access less well-educated informants; our impression was that interviews were often understood almost as a kind of test or exam, and agreeing to be interviewed required a certain level of confidence on behalf of the informant regarding knowledgeability.

All informants expressed a preference for independence over any of the other solutions on the negotiating table (autonomy or integration), and they have all, for various reasons, either remained in or chosen to return to the camps. We know from our conversations with them that there are Sahrawis who "abandon the cause", either by leaving or by supporting a solution other than independence. Although we heard references to many such cases, we did not personally meet any of these "traitors to the cause", as they were called in the camps. At one point we almost had an interview set up with a young man who had once moved to the occupied Western Sahara for a brief stint, however he ended up backing out, reportedly because he felt he had a "black mark on his character" for having failed his people's cause.

As Burgess reminds us, *"the selection of individuals in field studies is (...) a different procedure than statistical sampling in survey research. For in field research informants are selected for their knowledge of a particular setting which may complement the researchers' observations (...)"* (Burgess 1984:75). What our primary informants represent is the relatively mobile young generation of Sahrawis who also, to varying degrees and in various forms, see themselves as part of the Sahrawi nationalist cause. Within these parameters, however, our informants still represent a rich diversity in experiences and views, which we will try to do justice in this thesis.

Najla (left) & Umetha chatting

3.2.5 Working with analytical informants

Spradley lists a number of characteristics that should be taken into account in informant-selection, among them that informants should be *nonanalytic*. Ideally, he reckons, informants should talk about their lives, actions and events "*with almost no analysis of their meaning or significance*" (Spradley 1979:52-53). Some informants may well offer their own insights and "*can assist in analyzing their own culture (...) provided it is always from the perspective of the insider"* or in accordance with "*native 'folk theory'*" (ibid.). In both cases, Spradley maintains, it is still up to the ethnographer "*to discover patterns of meaning in what the informant says*" (ibid.). The preference for *nonanalytic* informants in turn suggests a different type of informant, who according to Spradley, should preferably be avoided, namely those who "*mistakenly believe they can assist the ethnographer*" (Spradley 1979:53), e.g. by drawing on social scientific theories and attempting to present their lifeworld from the perspective of an outsider. As mentioned, our informants are highly educated young people, many of whom were well-versed in social and political science, and some did indeed offer their own analyses, at times even

referencing specific theories or concepts when describing their life situation. In Spradley's definition, this feature would make them less than ideal as informants, a stance to which we firmly object.

Firstly, what defines a proper "insider perspective"? What "native language" would we seek? Is the voice of the uneducated grandmother, who grew up as a "real nomad" in the "real desert", more *inside*, more *native* than the voice of the young Sahrawis who grew up in the camps, studied abroad and returned home with a new – *collectively* changed – perspective? Spending a good part of one's formative years abroad, away from the camps, is a basic condition in the life of a young Sahrawi who wishes to pursue any education beyond secondary school. Does this mean that our informants have lost their perspective as insiders? Rather, we argue, that a new kind of 'insiderhood' has developed, one that is shared among this generation of Sahrawis in particular.

Secondly, categorical scepticism towards informants' analyses of their own culture because they supposedly mimic an "outsider's perspective" rather than truthfully reflecting their own "native folk theory" or "native language" hinges on a perception that the two are mutually exclusive, that there is no state of being in-between "the inside" and "the outside", to continue in Spradley's terminology. The reality is that these young, highly mobile refugees inhabit several cultural scenes simultaneously, as born refugees, as descendants of nomads, *and* as young international students and academics. Yes, our informants are well-educated, they are analytical, and yes they might have gained an "outside perspective" on their lives when compared to members of the older generation who have never left the region, but the resulting rift is crucial to understanding the social reality which these young members of society inhabit. Further, we found that their newly gained knowledge and education is very much appropriated into the (oft-described and somewhat essentialised) "Sahrawi identity" as territorially and culturally rooted yet globally minded, thus blurring the line between "inside" and "outside" perspectives.

Recognising these young refugees as experts in their own lives is not to say that we simply and uncritically adopted their analyses. Rather, we found our informants' analytical offerings to hold considerable empirical value as they spoke volumes about the common cause of representation. Criticising Zunes and other Western Sahara researchers for "unquestioningly" accepting the Polisario's presentation of SADR as a participatory democracy, rather than recognising this as a strategic communication targeting a specific audience, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh points out that researchers who don't question but merely reproduce these facades "*(shift) from the role of the consumer [or audience] to that of producer*" (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014:82). By paying careful notice to which points would be consistently highlighted for our benefit, e.g. the constant pointing out of women's importance in

Sahrawi society, allowed us an insight into the kind of narrative this group of refugees is working to build around themselves and their cause.

3.2.6 Working with an interpreter

Upon our arrival, the Polisario assigned a young woman as our interpreter and guide. Most literature on social scientific field methodology offers, at best, a few lines on working with an interpreter – a shortcoming, we feel, as the interpreter can be a *crucial* element to the information-gathering process. In our case, 19 out of 26 formal interviews and countless casual conversations were filtered through our interpreter. Working in a field where most verbal communication takes place in *Hassaniye* and varying levels of "pidgin" Spanish, our interpreter Najla was an invaluable asset to our research: Not only did we find ourselves aided greatly by her linguistic skills, but also by her ability to recognise the need for and offer a further layer of "cultural translation" when deemed necessary, due to her remarkable cultural sensitivity, solid understanding of social scientific methods, and in-depth knowledge of the context and backgrounds of the informants we met with. However, as with any research involving human beings in social situations, the interpreter is by no means a neutral "instrument" – she is a person in her own right, embedded in the social structures of the camps, navigating both her own personal views and ambitions and the political cause of her people. To understand the impact of these factors on our empirical data, we need to take a moment to establish who "Najla the interpreter" is.

Najla

At barely 1.50m of height, this young woman may not be an imposing presence physically, yet she wields a remarkable charisma and clearly makes an impression on anyone who meets her. Her face has a calm, stern beauty, with serious eyes that – just below the surface – harbour a spark of mischievous humour, which would often erupt into a warm laughter. Dressed in a soft-flowing, colourful *milahfa*[21], a tight-fitting blazer and sunglasses branded with a rather familiar-looking *Riy Don* logo, she would traipse over the camps' uneven dirt roads and rocky underground in impossibly impractical, defiantly fashionable high heels. At 26, Najla already holds a great amount of respect within her community. Active in several youth organisations, she is well-known amongst her peers for her activism, quick wit, and commitment to the Sahrawi cause. She is also one of the still relatively few Sahrawi youths in command of excellent English, giving her a skillset, which puts her in high demand as a translator for locally operating INGOs and the Polisario alike.

[21] The traditional Sahrawi dress for women, consisting of one long piece of often brightly coloured of fabric.

Three years ago, when Najla left her family and the camps behind in order to move to Austria, she had already served the Polisario as a translator for five years, hosting countless foreign visitors, journalists, film crews, diplomats, and students from all over the world, taking them around the camps, translating conversations and offering her own voice in interviews as well. Since she first moved abroad, the demand for young people like her has not decreased in the camps, on the contrary: *"We always have problems with English,"* Najla explained, "*because we are not too many. So they always have a lack of translators".* For all the considerable time and effort she puts into her translation work, as with all public service jobs in the camps, the salary she can expect for jobs like this is usually symbolic at best[22].

Besides translating for us in the daytime, she also worked both late night and very early morning shifts, often back to back, as a website admin for *YouNow*, an online broadcasting platform with many Arabic speaking users. The upside to this job is that she can do it anywhere in the world, whether in downtown Vienna, or here, in the middle of the Algerian desert. Finding electricity and Internet connection in the refugee camps every night proved a challenge, especially since the on-going natural disaster had cut most of the sparse power lines, but somehow she seemed to manage. Despite the unforgiving work hours, being one of the main providers in her family, the job was an invaluable source of income. The reason Najla was currently back in the camps and able to spend three weeks working with us was that she had to renew her Algerian passport, her borrowed ticket to the world outside, since ID papers issued by the SADR are not recognised in most countries in the Northern hemisphere.

Najla grew up running around barefoot on the stoney patches of sand between the tents and low, tin-roofed mud-brick houses that make up the daïra of Tifariti in the Smara camp. It was a happy childhood, she told us, here in the camps, despite all the hardships of living in a refugee camp in the middle of the inhospitable desert: the children would play with empty cans, make picnics in the sand dunes, and ride on a bike which, having no wheels, was fastened between two rocks, thus freeing its pedals to go round and round and the children's imagination to ride the bike to anywhere. Not that the places she imagined going as a child differed vastly from what she was used to: *"I thought all the world is desert, I never expected another imagination of the world."*

[22] In recognition of her considerable time spent as our guide and interpreter, and in accordance with a previous agreement with A.M., we did pay her a small fee. *"Giving something back, in the way of services or payment"* is one recommendation to ethically mitigate the risk of exploitation in ethnographic research (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007:218)

Najla

Like many Sahrawi children, Najla was raised mainly by her grandparents, whom she would often lovingly refer to as her mother and father. When she was very young, her mother divorced her father, remarried, and had six children beside Najla and her two siblings. Besides managing a household consisting of nine children (a toddler, a 10-year old, an 11 year old, three teenagers and three now adult children), Najla's mother was now also taking care of her second husband who is 20 years her senior, her parents and a disabled sister, all while working full-time as a teacher. Najla, too, was taking a lot of responsibility for her family. When abroad, she would send home money as often as possible, and when at home, she would help out in the household, clean, make sure everyone is doing their chores, and look after the little ones "*like a second mother*" – besides, of course, maintaining both her online job and political activism, of which she considered her work as our translator and guide to be a crucial part: *"I want to be useful*," Najla said one day,

> "*in politics, in women's issues, education… And I want to make my people's fate clear. To contribute to that. If the least thing I could do is to speak to people as I have done, I will do it all the time. If the least thing I could do is to write on my wall on Facebook, I will do it. If there are other things I could do, I would*".

Despite the obvious economic need, her motivation for engaging with foreign visitors like us was not monetary compensation. Rather, she seemed to take satisfaction from contributing to spreading the word about her people's cause, which makes her engagement with us as guide and interpreter a deeply political activity.

Navigating interpreter bias

Najla considers herself fiercely feminist and is deeply inspired by Sahrawi women, who, in her view, are characterised by a special kind of strength, endurance and patience. *"Of course, women everywhere are extraordinary,"* she mused, *"but women here accept a lot of hard work but still live life like it's normal, without complaint".* The subject of Sahrawi women's rights is one she champions passionately, a fact that would occasionally seep through in our interviews, as, every so often, she would step out of her role as interpreter, challenge statements and begin her own line of questioning. As Brinkmann and Kvale rightly point out, the role of the interpreter is to "*assist, not take over the role of the interviewer or the interviewee*" (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015:169). However – though the focus of our research was not centred around women's rights, specifically – we often chose to let such situations play themselves out, in part because we lacked the concrete language skills to identify exactly when the line of inquiry went rogue, but also because these situations provided for interesting observations around the social dynamics in the camps, as well as the political project of (re)presentation.

For example, about halfway through a meeting with the recently established Sahrawi National Human Rights Council, Najla began questioning the director, an older gentleman, about what they intended to do regarding safeguarding women's right to divorce. While this slight "hijack" took the conversation in a different direction than we had intended, there were several interesting observations to be made: For one, the apparent liberty with which this young woman challenged the words of a male authority figure at least 30 years her senior, and the earnestness of his responses to her, could be seen as indicative of the inter-generational power relations in the room. Further, the interpreter's derailing of the conversation in this direction could also be a result of our presence, indicating a certain message that she found important to convey[23].

Indeed, the interactions and type of relationship between Najla and the respective informants, on several occasions bore considerable weight on the outcome of the interviews. Brinkmann and Kvale

[23] Eastmond argues that we need to distinguish analytically between life as lived, life as experienced and life as told. Considering *life as told* is in particular important, namely how "*experience is framed and articulated in a particular context and to a particular audience"* (Bruner 1986 in Eastmond 2007:249). Knowledge produced in an interview is highly inter-relational and contextual – and our presence as researchers was very much part of constituting that context.

note that there is a risk when using a relative or friend, rather than a detached professional, as interpreter (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015:169). Since Najla quickly became our primary (though not only) access point to informants through her network of relatives and friends, this was a risk we had to run. While her familiarity with our interviewees did sometimes prove itself a hindrance – for instance in one attempted, and failed, interview with her young male cousin who kept saying something to the effect of: "*Najla knows all this, she can just tell you*" – by far the majority of interviews benefitted from her ability to quickly establish an atmosphere of trust and intimacy.

Some mitigating strategies

Brinkmann and Kvale stress that, even though it may ease the process of establishing contact, interpreters who know the interviewees personally may harbour their own agenda and subtly insert themselves in both the role of interviewer and interviewee (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015:169). As for Najla taking on the role of interviewer, as the abovementioned example with the Human Rights Council illustrates, our observation was that this was not only a factor when interviewing family and friends, but indeed a *general* risk when conducting interviews in a context where the stakes of representation are high. We also noticed that our questions occasionally seemed to require Najla to rephrase, explain in more detail than we had given, or even prompt the informant with examples, in order for the question to generate a "useful" answer. Once we had realised this, as a mitigating strategy we asked her to always include us in the process, should a question be unclear or up for interpretation.

As for Najla taking on the role of interviewee, occasionally offering her own personal views during interviews, either agreeing or disagreeing with an informant's statements, we made sure to touch base with her after (and sometimes during) the interviews with the exact purpose of separating *her* take on reality from the informant's. Further, we decided to include Najla in our informant pool, not only by recording some of the unsolicited answers to interview questions, but also by giving her a formal occasion to offer her views by interviewing her in the same manner and after the same interview guide as the other informants. We also invited her to participate in the focus group discussion, which allowed to her to openly comment on and discuss views tangential to her own. Finally, we also conducted several interviews without interpreter, with informants whose level of and confidence in English was strong enough for them to be able to give their own, unfiltered responses. This pool of interviews thus serves as a control group to those that went through the process of interpretation.

3.3 Data processing: from field data to analysis

As Burgess points out, social scientific researchers rarely present the way that once collected their data is treated in the transformation from raw material to analysis (Burgess 1984:177). The following paragraphs seek to briefly clarify the steps we took in turning *life* into *text,* a process through which Eastmond argues, "*stories are filtered, interpreted and finally represented*" (Eastmond 2007:249).

Upon returning from the field, we read through all our field notes and listened carefully to all 39 audio recordings[24] (21 semi-structured interviews, one unstructured interview, one focus group discussion, as well as recordings from various formal meetings and informal conversations). We chose to transcribe in detail 20 of our recordings (18 interviews with our young informants, the focus group discussion, and a meeting with three board members of the students' union, UESARIO) based on the aforementioned pool of primary informants. For accuracy, we transcribed each interview word by word[25].

We then created a roster overview of our key informants and proceeded to code data from the interviews and field notes according to socio-demographic characteristics (family, level of education, current occupation etc.), amount of time (if any) spent abroad (and in what context), level and type of personal connection to Western Sahara, level and type of political engagement, as well as a few methodological factors such as the specific interview conditions (presence of other family members, interruptions, was the informant able to speak freely etc.), and mode of accessing the informant.

By repeatedly returning to the transcribed interviews, we identified certain themes that kept coming up in conversations. While some themes would appear based on our questions, others would arise spontaneously, reflecting themes of importance to our informants. We then engaged in what Woods terms "theoretical sampling" (Woods 1979 in Burgess 1984:178): searching through the source material and collating all the sections related to those identified themes. We chose to code *inclusively,* whereby the same extract could be assigned to several categories with a cross-reference (Becker 1986 in Hammersley & Atkinson 2007:153). In this way we were able to discover linkages and identify interesting patterns or discrepancies to be explored in the analysis. Among the themes identified were 'youth', 'Sahrawi identity', 'stories of Western Sahara', 'responsibility', 'individual vs. collective', 'space/place', to name but a few. These categories allowed us to let the empirical data drive the analysis and choices of theory.

[24] For an overview of interviews, see Appendix 4.
[25] Interview transcriptions can be found on the attached USB stick

During the writing of the analysis, we continued to revisit both field notes, transcripts and audio recordings to ensure that the quotes chosen for the analysis were kept in the spirit of their original context. For quotes, we have on occasion transformed the transcribed text into a slightly more formal, written style to present the informant's account in a more readable manner (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015:207-208), yet without significantly altering the informant's voice, wording and intent. Whenever such editing for clarity was necessary, e.g. by adding a few words, we have indicated this in the text by using *"[eds.]*".

Theory & Analysis

4. Sahrawi displacement: between chronicity and liminality

In this first chapter of analysis, we explore the nature of displacement as experienced by our young Sahrawi informants. We begin by introducing two theoretical perspectives, *crisis as context* by Henrik Vigh and Victor Turner's take on Arnold van Gennep's *liminality*, and in turn suggest a new analytical term, *liminal flux*, in order to adequately capture the context in which our informants find themselves. We explore how the young Sahrawis' displacement spans the spatial, the temporal, the liminal and the chronic by at first understanding in what way our young informants experience displacement and how this shapes their present.

4.1 Chronic displacement, chronic crisis?

After four decades of displacement, which places the Sahrawi refugee situation firmly in the category of prolonged displacement, it might be tempting to view their experiences through a lens of *crisis as context* (Vigh 2008). Crisis, Henrik Vigh argues, is an experience often understood as temporary, abnormal, a violent deviation from or disruption of life as it should be. However, Vigh points out, for many people – the poor, the marginalised, the structurally violated – the world does not return to a state of normalcy, peace and prosperity, but *continues* to be shaped by "*the presence and possibility of conflict, poverty and disorder*" (Vigh 2008:7). When crisis is "*endemic rather than episodic and cannot be delineated as an aberrant moment of chaos or a period of decisive change*", Vigh suggests that it should be considered "*as a 'condition' (...) rather than a 'turning point'*" (Vigh 2008:5,10). When analysing people or societies in chronic crisis, Vigh suggests, removing the "*temporal bracketing*", the assumption that this will end anytime soon, allows us to understand the phenomenon "*not just as a defined period of transition but as a state of affairs*" (Vigh 2008:10). Importantly, chronic crisis does not necessarily denote *constant* crisis, but rather a state of affairs where crisis is always a possibility and, even in its absence, a shaping factor in how people approach their everyday lives.

Vigh's observations are based on his fieldwork in Bissau, the capital of Guinea-Bissau which has seen "*five coups or coup attempts, numerous purges and several outbreaks of fighting*" since 1999 and is generally known by its constant 'noise' of warfare, conflict, political instability, economic hardship and uncertainty. In Bissau, everyday life acts merge with a constant alertness to escape-routes at the first

sign of trouble. Vigh argues that this is not to say that everything is "*adrift and afloat*" in Bissau, as both cultural and social institutions of relative stability and endurance exist, however the situation is one of existential uncertainty caused by political unrest (Vigh 2009:420-21). Vigh's informants, young men in Bissau, live between the immediate struggle of securing the next meal, finding a job and surviving the present and the "*unceasing attempt to figure out a way of gaining viable life chances, social worth and recognition*" (Vigh 2009:421).

Undeniably, crisis has very much been a shaping force in the lives of the Sahrawi refugees during their four decades of displacement. Our informants might be too young to remember the flight from the homeland the war themselves, but have grown up and are living with reminders – and a continuous potentiality – of war. Not only do the traumatic experiences of the past (memories of the 1975 invasion and heavy bombardments, the separation of families and the subsequent 16-year war against the invading Moroccan army) still play a vivid role in everyday conversations, there is a constant stream of physical manifestations of these traumatic events that seep into the present, e.g. in the shape of injuries sustained, or the absence of uncles, fathers and older brothers who died in the war. As one of our informants, Mohamed W., phrased it: "*We are in the 'non-war non-peace period*". Furthermore, the hard and somewhat unpredictable life in the inhospitable desert has meant facing several crises, outbreak of diseases, sand storms and flash floods alike[26]. Life in the camps is characterized by unemployment, aid dependency and an uncertain future (Mundy 2007:286,288). Just as "*uncertainty has gained an air of constancy*" in Bissau (Vigh 2009:421), uncertainty and crisis have also become expected elements of life in the Polisario-run refugee camps.

"Last time we had rain", Mohamed S. mused, *"was in 2006; and before that in 1994 or 1995… maybe we are seeing a pattern of disaster every decade or so"*. At 29, Mohamed S. has already experienced several natural disasters, with the current flooding being the most severe to hit the camps yet. He and his family knew that they were staying in a vulnerable location with regards to the flood, but had hoped the water masses would somehow bypass them. We were sitting cross-legged in his family's khayma, huddled closely together around one of the two supporting beams, the air inside the tent damp and heavy. Those of the family's belongings which they had managed to rescue from their house when the water broke through the walls – blankets and pillows mostly, a few suitcases – were stacked up around us, moist and a little worse for wear, but salvageable. Mohamed's parents were sitting a few meters away, just by the other beam, preparing the obligatory round of sweetened green tea over the

[26] The vast distance between and current layout of the camps, Hodges suggests, is a direct consequence of the constant fear of attack by air as well as protection against the spread of diseases (Hodges, 1983:342-343). Some of the camps have been moved several times due to destruction by floods, e.g. in 2005, when heavy rainfall left 50,000 Sahrawis practically homeless (Mundy 2007:278).

fire and chatting away with our driver Ahmed. As Mohamed S. spoke, we leaned in, straining to hear his soft voice through the cacophony of the family members' loud chatting and the sudden heavy rainfall beating down on the tent canvas. He told us about the house collapsing, about how the rain came in, gradually flooding the rooms, about how they had tried to save the rooms by making holes in the mud brick walls to let the water run off, but now, all the rooms, including the one Mohamed S. called his own, where he used to read, paint, and host friends, were completely destroyed. "*All is broken*", he sighed. He had managed to save his laptop and a few books from the water, but most of his books and artwork had suffered. "*It's a very frustrating situation. It was very costly to build, then in a matter of minutes you see everything falling down".* After we finished our interview with him, he and Najla, who are old friends, continued to discuss what it means to live under these circumstances:

> Mohamed S: *"(...) What can I do, I am part of this difficult situation. That, I personally cannot do anything about, that, I cannot change; but I do also have times when I celebrate, when I have fun, when I enjoy, and I should show that part as well."*
>
> Najla: *"It can't be a miserable life in all its aspects. I mean, nobody of us is guaranteed that she will enjoy the land* [returning to Western Sahara, eds.], *and you have only one life –"*
>
> Mohamed S: *"So you better enjoy what comes of it!"*
>
> Najla: "*Of course, the wise thing in life is to live the best of what you have, so if you are a refugee, live the best of being a refugee. You don't have to be a refugee and miserable, sad and depressed (...) Of all the places I have travelled, I have never seen people smiling like I have seen here. Like no matter what, even now, you see people like…* (imitating someone waving happily) *When I went to my family up on the hill* [in their emergency tent, eds.], *that night it was still raining but we were having fun and making tea and we know that our houses are destroyed and we know that there is a long journey waiting for us to rebuild and to make a lot of decisions. But we didn't think of that, we were having tea, recalling memories from our childhood and laughing so hard…* [You wouldn't, eds.] *think that there is even a disaster... and we were like 15 people in the small tent you saw... And it's not a plan, we don't plan for this, it's just something in our nature, I think it's something Sahrawi. Because people are living hard time, but still they are not crying and not shouting. I mean, of course there are times when you feel sad –"*
>
> Mohamed S: *"– overwhelmed!"*
>
> Najla: *"– but –"*
>
> Mohamed S: *"– Optimism is very very high, shockingly high. I mean, not to me. As a person who is connected to my people but also have connection with people from outside, I can see, for example, how is it sometimes when it was raining. I got calls from New York, London. People were asking 'what has happened' because they saw pictures on Facebook and (...) I got that impression that they were expecting me to be crying or shouting and stuff and I didn't do that... I know it's*

> *difficult sometimes. That there are moments where it is difficult for me to see this and sometimes fear... because it could have been worse! It* [the house, eds.] *could have crumbled with somebody inside… But, overall I said, I can build another one, I'll work another one, it's not the end of it... (...) I am not crying, I don't know how to explain it…"*

This exchange reveals an interesting aspect to how crisis is *experienced*. What to the outside observer appears like a crisis (within the greater crisis of prolonged displacement), did not elicit reactions of grief or despair, as might be expected of families who just lost most of their already sparse belongings, with little prospect of being able to rebuild anytime soon[27]. After Mohamed S. recounted how he himself had helped build the house, painstakingly forming thousands of bricks from sand, we again touched on how it feels to have lost the house. Mohamed S. explained:

> *"Well, it is very difficult... but... I don't know how to describe it, but partly because we know that the cycle of life is full of all sorts of things, anything can happen. We lose people, we lose things all the time, so one day it'll come down. We are going* [back to Western Sahara, eds.] *anyway, so... It could happen again any time... But personally there are some moments when you feel sorry for what you have built yourself and it was a good place for you and you have lots of good memories in this place, even though it's something temporary you build… and you have good memories, I have received good people and some great things happened there, I have done some amazing things, I have enjoyed my time, I have read lots of books there... it's gone there, it is not anymore."*

What becomes clear here is that the experience of loss is not necessarily framed as a crisis, but rather as (yet another) confirmation that they are not *meant* to be in Algeria. While acknowledging the sting of having just lost something of sentimental value, the events are thus transferred from the realm of chronicity ("we lose things all the time") to the transitional ("we are going anyway, so…").

This is but one of several examples that illustrate how, experientially as well as narratively, the Sahrawi refugees take great care to emphasize the temporariness of their situation. In fact, removing the "temporal bracketing" of crisis as Vigh suggests, makes little sense in the context of the Sahrawis' situation when considering how big a role the expectation of "returning home soon" plays in everyday-life decision-making. One of our informants, Umetha, a gentle, soft-spoken young woman, shared with us laughingly how an Algerian doctor had suggested a work plan for the next two years, for which he was met with a reaction of outrage by the local Sahrawi coordinator: *"*What! Why are you giving me this?! Do you want that we should stay here for all that time?!*"* he had exclaimed. Whether or not return to the homeland is a realistic vision of the near future, the displaced are mobilising an

[27] This is not to say that these emotions are not *felt* – while we did not see such emotions displayed explicitly, one of the daughters of our host family later confessed that she had wanted to cry when the house started to break, but chose not to because "Sahrawi women are strong" and that she "did not want to scare us" – an example of how crisis is *handled.*

enormous amount of energy and agency in order to keep alive the hope that this period of perceived injustice and suffering will come to an end. While chronic crisis undeniably does inform the context of our informants' lives, it appears that chronicity has not become the accepted status quo – rather, we are seeing an active insistence by the refugees for their displacement to continue to be seen as *liminal* by nature.

4.1.1 From chronic crisis to liminal flux

Originally conceptualised by Arnold van Gennep (1909) as an aspect of his theoretical framework for understanding rites of passage in small-scale societies, *liminality* describes one of three stages through which a person or group of people undergo a transformation from one type of social status to another, e.g. child to adult. These three stages are *separation*, i.e. detachment from the existing social structure; *margin (*or *limen)*, the transitional state during which the subject is ambiguous, separate from what was before but not yet arrived in its new state; and finally *aggregation*, when the subject re-emerges in its new state and the new structure is revealed and consolidated (Turner 1964:47). When Victor Turner revisited the concept and realised its potential to grasp the social processes at play during other kinds of rituals and transitions, he opened up for the terms' application on a wider scale, extending it even to study societies transitioning through a state of "war or peace or a state of famine or of plenty" (Turner 1964:46).

Liminality can be defined as a state of being "*betwixt and between*", neither in nor out (Turner 1964:46). During this phase, all previous structure is suspended, the person or group is detached from all previous markers of status, rank or kinship position, a state of being which Turner describes as a kind of "sacred poverty" (ibid.). "Ritual passengers" who undergo transition together, tend to develop a special liminal social relationship, or *communitas*, characterised by an intense sense of community, with social distinctions that separated them before the liminal phase – and which will separate them again following aggregation – briefly suspended (Turner 1974:232-233). Turner's rather broad definition of liminality, Bjørn Thomassen points out, allows for the term's application even "*beyond that which Turner himself had suggested*" (Thomassen 2009:16).

In short, liminality can be identified across three dimensions, and may characterise a subject, a space and/or a time: Liminal subjects can range from individuals, to groups, to whole societies; liminal places can range from specific thresholds, to zones or areas (e.g. borderlands, prisons), to entire countries or regions; further, liminality can characterise single moments in time, specific events, periods, or even entire epochs, affecting multiple generations (Thomassen 2009:16). Thomassen notes that analysis across these dimensions is meant to identify liminal *experiences* that are not necessarily

bound to a specific transition rite or ceremony, as originally laid out by van Gennep. Cross-dimensional liminality, Thomassen proposes, should be thought of as a continuum, and may also include variations in scale and intensity of the experience, e.g. for different sections of society at different times (Thomassen 2009:17). This means that liminality is often experienced within a certain frame, possibly with other aspects of life continuing more or less unaffectedly. And this point is important, for in the context of crises such as prolonged mass displacement, there is no clear-cut way to determine when exactly separation occurs, nor where or when liminality ends and aggregation begins.

For instance, one might think of the Sahrawi refugees as currently inhabiting a liminal space, both geographically and socio-politically, their current exile and refugee status a part of the rite of passage towards full nationhood or citizenship in an Independent State of Western Sahara – or whichever future awaits the territory currently known as Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. Following a violent and physical separation phase (the flight into the desert), the liminality of exile has indeed seen a breakdown of old structures, such as the abolition of tribal associations for the sake of a new unifying principle of nationalism (Zunes & Mundy 2010:118). At closer scrutiny, however, when applied at this level, the concept of liminality alone – just as the concept of chronicity alone – fails to fully grasp the multi-layered reality of the Sahrawis' displacement. For where does this model leave the young Sahrawis, those who were born in the camps, in exile, who did not flee nor experience the violent ruptures of the fabric of life as their parents did, but who nevertheless find themselves in the same situation? Were they then born into liminality? Is liminality without separation even possible?

For let us not forget that liminality also implies movement – if not past or current then soon-to-come – from one stage to another. What then happens when an entire society remains *in limen*? What we are seeing in the case of the Sahrawis, for all the signs of and emphasis on communitas, is not a case of anti-structure, but rather the emergence of a new structure: a model state-in-exile, complete with institutions and hierarchies that may differ from the hierarchies of old, but in their form already serve as a model of what the future nation-state of Western Sahara could be (Mundy 2007:275). The fact that the exiled Sahrawis insist on inhabiting the camps as both refugees and citizens of the Sahrawi state-in-exile (Farah 2010:59; Mundy 2007:278) – referring to themselves as "*refugee-citizens*" (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011:14) – also suggests that they may not necessarily only be trapped in a space where they are neither/nor, betwixt and between; they are also *both*, which suggests the emergence of a new category of identity and status which can be played out within/against the newly formed internal and persistent external structures.

The key to this lies in understanding that liminality, as experienced by our informants, does not necessarily function in the same way as it does when observed in the much simpler, more easily concluded rites of passage. In complex contexts like the one in which our informants live their lives, one person's separation may be another's liminality, one person's continued liminality may be another's acceptance of fate and thus, aggregation. One may observe processes of separation, liminality and aggregation even within the context of an already liminal period or setting. One may even observe pockets of liminality: times, places and situations when the experience of displacement is heightened, where displacement is felt more keenly. Hence, liminality does not occur at full intensity at all times, nor is it necessarily an all-encompassing state of being.

To capture this ambiguity, we suggest the term *liminal flux*: a recurring realisation or awareness that one's present state is transitory, or at least supposed to be, but without necessarily leading to fruition of the transition process. This may not lessen the experience of liminality, of being neither/nor, betwixt and between, but loosens the analytical term from the necessary movement towards/through change. Liminal flux also establishes liminality, much like crisis, as a recurring and potentially chronic condition. The concept allows us to understand how young Saharawi refugees inhabit a space characterised by conditions of *both* chronicity *and* liminality, though neither one fully: chronicity here does not equate aggregation, nor does liminality necessarily imply impending change. It is in this nexus between the liminal and the chronic that liminal flux becomes especially visible: The fact that the camps have grown from bare skeleton shelter to almost city-like structures with neighbourhoods and elaborate physical and socio-political infrastructure to manage daily lives (Herz 2013:17-18) does not imply that the refugees have become settled, nor does the loss of their houses necessarily lead to an experience of crisis. Rather, it serves as a reaffirmation of their liminality and of the temporariness of their stay in Algeria.

4.2 Understanding young Sahrawis' displacement

In the following sections, we explore the young Sahrawis' displacement along two lines of inquiry: First, we examine their understanding of geographical displacement, which has been a chronic condition in the young refugees' lives: born in the camps as refugees, these youths have not experienced the act of becoming displaced in the sense of undertaking physical movement or the actual *loss* of their homeland – how has this affected the construction of identities and connection to the homeland which they have never known themselves? Next, we explore how – despite their having been refugees all their lives – displacement becomes a reality not only through the fact of being physically displaced, but rather through a realisation of the self being "not in the right place". It is in this process of "becoming aware" that displacement is thus opened up as an experience of liminal flux,

where a young person's life situation may be interchangeably experienced as inescapably chronic or hopefully liminal (and vice versa).

4.2.1 "I am not in my homeland"

Almost unanimously in all of our interviews, replies to the question "what does being a refugee mean to you?" echoed notions of being 'outside of', 'not in' or 'away from the country or homeland'. As described by Leyla, one of the daughters in our host family: *"It means that we are not in our country, that we are adopted from a different place that is not ours*". Similarly, Leyla's cousin Fatma, replied: "*I am under occupation and I am not in my homeland*". These descriptions reflect the 1951 Refugee Convention's definition of refugees as "*any person who is owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted (...) outside the country of his nationality*" (UNGA 1951), in other words people who are forced to flee across the borders of their home country to seek safety abroad. While forced population movements may be triggered by numerous and diversified historical or political reasons, what connects any kind of refugee situation is the shared element of having *physically moved* from one place to another, in other words: displacement. Thus, embedded in the legal understanding of a refugee is a specific emphasis on the territorial aspect of displacement.

In what seemed to be a moment of sudden realization during our focus group interview a late Saturday afternoon, Mohamed S. daringly suggested to Najla, Maryam and Sidhamed: "*Is our generation refugees? Are we refugees?*" – to which he was met with instant reactions of "*yes we are!*" and "*of course!*" by the others. "*But, we didn't move*" he replied, arguing that the *active movement* of their parents' generation more accurately makes them (and not himself) fit the refugee definition[28]. "*But this is not our place!*" Najla exclaimed with a slight hint of indignation in her voice. Mohammed S. agreed, as he too expressed a feeling of being "*not in the right spot, you don't belong here, you belong somewhere else' (...) I know that I am not in my right place*".

Korac argues that the forced displacement of people is often equated to the development of strongly spatialized identities and attachment to places such as the homeland (Korac 2009:28). Similarly, in our many conversations with the young Sahrawis it became clear that it is to them beyond doubt that they belong in Western Sahara. However, what strikes as quite remarkable is this strong connection to the homeland, a homeland most of our informants have never seen nor set foot in. This proved to be something they were all very well aware of and which was stated in several of our interviews; such as when Maryam admitted, "*I have never seen my country";* or when Mohamed S. explained that he

[28] To clarify, legally speaking the Sahrawi refugees in the Tindouf camps have all been unequivocally granted refugee status and are seen as such by both UNHCR and the Algerian government (UNHCR 2015b).

actually "*never lived in Western Sahara*". Nevertheless, Western Sahara was unequivocally referred to not only as the Sahrawi homeland, but also referred to as 'my' and 'our' land. Going to Western Sahara was consistently described as 'returning' or 'going back', even by the youth who had never been there.

In many ways, our informants' accounts challenged the increasingly popular questioning of the essentialist approach to place and identity. Over the last two decades, a shift has occurred in anthropology in which displacement has come to be of paradigmatic importance for the way place is conceptualised. Also dubbed the spatial turn, this shift has taken a turn from a belief in stable, rooted and map-able identities to fluid and migratory forms of belonging in which refugees and migrants have come to be the symbolic figure (Lems 2014:1-4). According to Liisa Malkki, movement of refugees and migrants challenge the established notions of a "*national order of things*", a notion that cultures necessarily are deeply rooted in places that 'belong' to them. What Malkki, among others, argues for, is a reconceptualization of what she calls the sedentary bias which naturally constructs displacement as an anomaly, in the life of an otherwise "whole", stable and sedentary society (Malkki 1995). Gaim Kibreab (1999) is one of the lead voices in a counter reaction to this spatial turn, arguing that the tendency in postmodernist literature to assume that the increasingly globalized world has led to the de-territorialisation of identity and that national borders have lost their significance does not include those who are forced to flee. Even in the post-modernist world, Kibreab argues, place still remains a major point of access to rights, membership and a socially fulfilling life (Kibreab 1999:207).

Much like Kibreab, our informants challenged this theoretic detachment of identity from territory, expressing often the need for a place (more importantly, not just *any* place, but the *right* place) where they could be themselves and live their identity as Sahrawi. As such, the homeland would not only be considered a geographical spot on a map from which they have been displaced, but to a much greater extent a place connected to the Sahrawi identity:

> Najla: *"We are already a collective of people, we already have an identity, we already have a culture that we don't share with other countries, and this collective of people needs a place (...) So this collective group of people who already exist, who already have all the characteristics that make them a nation, they have to have a place to be their identity. For us, it's Western Sahara. We need to have a place, a homeland. (...) So, actually our fight is not a fight for land, it's a fight of identity.*

The above quote by Najla indicates the belief in and strong attachment to the specific territory of their homeland as the natural place for the Sahrawi culture and identity to unfold. To Najla, as a young Sahrawi, displacement is thus not only experienced as a matter of geographical displacement, but also experienced in terms of a displacement of identity.

In the focus group discussion, concepts of fluid versus fixed identities, borders and roots proved that displacement was far more complex than "not being in the homeland". The following is an abbreviated excerpt from their conversation, which shows how the multifaceted nature of these concepts affect the reality of their everyday lives and their lived experiences of displacement:

> Najla: *"I know a lot of people like you* (nodding towards us) *who live a normal... who don't live as a refugee case. If you ask them where is home, they tell you "Everywhere is my home!" because they don't have this document obstacle. For them, they can just travel everywhere and be everywhere. For us, we have not yet crossed this. So we are always stuck to this... I've asked so many people who are, like, originally from India, have an American father, they live in Vienna, they have an* [Austrian eds.] *passport and you ask them, "Where is home? How do you feel?", and they say "I'm Austrian, but I feel like every place could be my home also". I don't say that, because I don't have the first nationality or first document that the rest of the world recognises me with. So I'm still stuck on this 'where do I belong'. Of course you know where you belong but… legally you are still displaced and have no identity to the rest of the world."*
>
> Mohammed S: *"There is a term for that, they call it "Third Culture Displacement"*[29]*. Right? So, for example, if you live in a place but then you grew up in another place, you have travelled and studied in a different place, worked in a different place, so it's not your first culture, it's not your second one, but it's… It's a combination of these things. I see an aspect of this kind of idea in the camps here. As we all were born here, and we partly also grew up here, but we've spent a considerable time also in Algeria or other countries that we studied in. So we learn things from these other cultures, we were not totally isolated from exposure and exchange. So we got things, we gave them things, and that also became part of who we are. I'm not saying it's only the Sahrawi, it's a universal phenomenon of mobility and dynamic migration around the world, making people part of different cultures at the same time, genealogically, politically, geographically, so in a way, political borders are becoming… an illusion of something.*

(...)

> Najla: *"You said something about political borders? That they are an illusion? Of course I hope they are an illusion in some cases (…), like in Europe there are no borders, but sometimes people argue like: "Oooh! Why do you want separation from Morocco?" and "Why do you want to be…" - you know, some Arabic opinions on us, they say, "We don't need any more borders! We don't need any more separation!" That's not true! Of course we don't need it, but it is a reality that affects our day-to-day life. You know? I don't want to have a wall as the Moroccans built and divide the land, we don't aim for that. But there is a certain structure that the world is following now, and if you don't follow it you are in a dilemma on your life, like the one we are living. So how can you tell me - you already enjoy your nationality, you already enjoy all the things you need to travel to be an identified person to the rest of the world, and I'm still not able to do that and you tell me, "Why do you want borders"! You know, we did not create borders, they were created and that's the system of today's world. (...) So people cannot tell me that borders are illusions and borders are not anymore a fashion, because I am still living the consequences of not*

[29] This quote by Mohamed S. is a great example of our experience in working with analytical informants.

having the border of my land, or having the place where I want to be."

What becomes clear from this excerpt is how our young informants experience being caught between understanding their identity on the one hand to be largely de-territorialized, and on the other hand deeply rooted in the soil of their native land. As Kibreab argues, this reflects that in "*a time when spaces are more territorialized than ever before (...) there can be no deterritorialized identity*" (Kibreab 1999:387). While Mohamed S. argues that borders have become an illusion and that they as young Sahrawis too are part of the growing development of mobility and dynamic migration, Najla in turn argues that there are certain structures that the world is following and the fact of being set outside of these structures creates a dilemma in her life. As such, their situation may not be too far from what Malkki argues to be the consequences of a sedentary bias after all: how the firm belief in a national order of things makes those who are displaced or uprooted, such as refugees, an anomaly in the system or simply "*matter out of place*" (Douglas 1966; cited in Malkki 1992:34). However, contrary to Malkki's argument of de-essentialisation of place as the solution, Najla still argues for borders as necessary to not experience the feeling (and reality) of being "out of place". In this way, the de-essentialisation of place becomes predicated on the essentialisation of place, whereby, Najla argues, you cannot just skip straight to being a citizen of the world. The lived reality of these young people thus sheds light on a need to rethink the dichotomised theoretical approaches of an either essentialist or anti-essentialist understanding of the connection between people and places and instead leave more room for how questions of place and belonging in a situation of displacement are continuously experienced to be of importance in new and different ways (Lems 2014:5).

In the following, we explore how displacement becomes a reality not through the fact of having become physically displaced, but rather through a realisation of the self being "not in the right place".

4.2.2 Becoming aware, becoming displaced

Mohamed S.: *"(...) I'm not persecuted by the Moroccans, 'cause I was born here. I've never seen a Moroccan aiming a gun at me. I've never lived in Western Sahara. Well, normally I should be happy and thankful for these things, but at the same time, why am I not allowed to do other things? Like somebody who is separate. It is something political, a reminder of being a refugee, being not in the right place."*

As we have just established, being born as refugees, our young informants may not have experienced the abrupt separation and violent loss of home that their grandparents and parents did as they fled into the desert in an attempt to hide from the invading land troops and bombing planes (Zunes & Mundy 2010:113-114). This does not mean, however, that they did not undergo a separation process

themselves. In fact, several of our interviewees described their childhoods as fulfilled, happy and free. Rather, our conversations revealed distinct processes of becoming aware of being "not in the right place", which turned the young Sahrawi refugees' displacement into a lived, transformative experience rather than a mere context. We argue that these processes of becoming aware of their situation being "*not normal"* serve as vectors of separation similar to the older generation's physical displacement through flight. What places these separation processes in the realm of liminal flux is not only the fact they are multiple, but indeed continuous and recurring "*reminders of being a refugee*", as Mohamed S calls them, indicating that this label or identity may not be inhabited with equal intensity at all times. In the following, we explore in more detail how these reminders serve as vectors of separation.

Vectors of separation

The idea of "normality" as divergent from the lived context, Vigh suggests, can be constructed through and judged against both spatial and historical analogies (Vigh 2008:11). While all Sahrawi children grew up with historical analogies – stories told by grandparents of their lives as nomads, the beauty of the land, the horrors of the war and flight to Algeria or as lessons taught in school – perhaps the most crucial vector of separation that crystallised from our conversations with the young refugees were childhood travels abroad, either in pursuit of secondary-level school education, or on vacations in Europe through the summer programme *Vacaciones en Paz*.

As we sat in Nanaha's khayma on top of a hill in Boujdour, safe from the water masses eating their way through the daïra below, inhaling the sharp, sweetly smell emanating from the thin strips of raw camel meat that were hung up to dry on a string tied between the two supporting beams, the young woman's face lit up in a smile when recalling her childhood adventures in the camps. Bouncing her young niece in her lap, she recounted in English, raspy-voiced and with careful diction, memories of going abroad as a child and the experience of returning to the camps after a few months:

> *"I grew up like all children thinking that this* [the camps, ed.] *is the homeland, like this is our land and this is where we belong. It was all sand dunes and we'd find our own things to play with, like empty cans, we can fill them with sand and play. And as I grow up they have programs for school, where the kids go to Spain for the summer (...) So they go for two months, for the summer and they come back. And when I went there it was a whole different world – there was ocean and green, and I was like, why do they have this and we don't have it? So I came up with an idea of why we are different: their children are very clean, and we all the time in the sand, in the dust... So I was like, I had a big question about why we are in a place where it's difficult to live in, it's really really hot in the summer, and cold in the winter, and our houses are not strong as theirs. So I came and I started asking, and then my grandmother started telling me about the Sahara, that we are refugees in this land, and our land has been taken from us through many colonies like Spain, Portuguese and Moroccans. So then I started liking my own land and seeking* [information

> eds.] *about it, how it's like, if we have an ocean, if it's different from here. And I saw some pictures and I started liking it. And I just kept growing here, having the hope to one day go back there, and as we all know to keep standing for our land and fighting for our right and freedom, for our own land."*

Mohamed S. also described to us how becoming aware of being displaced happened gradually, and was compounded by his experience of travelling outside of the camps: "*You only get to really see it, when you are taken out of the situation and put somewhere else, you get to see the truth. So I think that was my first time to be aware of being a refugee*". Mohamed S., like Nanaha and many of our other informants, would return to the camps with an array of questions for their parents. Both Nanaha and Mohamed S's reflections on their childhood travels – from their vantage points as young adults today – echo what most informants described to us as their process of becoming aware of their status as displaced, as refugees, as "living a political situation". As Najla put it, describing the many obstacles she would face when going abroad, it would especially be in the situations when she was trying to "*use her nationality": "Then you realise, oh my god, I am really displaced".*

Interestingly, the subject of the younger generation's mobility through programmes like *Vacaciones en Paz* has been subject to much scrutiny, often from angles that focus on materiality: either in the form of economic support for Sahrawi families that such programmes generate (Zunes & Mundy 2010:136; Herz 2013:236), or focusing on the children's difficulties of re-adjusting to the material scarcity of life in the camps, once they have experienced life in Europe, including access to "better" food, "better" housing, material comforts etc.[30] (Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Crivello 2010:64). Basing their analysis on interviews with children (both during and after their visits abroad), their parents and host families, the challenges identified by Chatty et al. circle around perceived ruptures in the social fabric, causing inter-generational and cultural rifts between those who travel and those who stay behind: "*On some levels* (this mobility for education) *prompts comparisons between the present situation of the sedentarized adults, whose current possibilities for mobility are severely restricted, to the peripatetic character of their own childhoods*" (Chatty, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Crivello 2010:62). While acknowledging the value of the refugee youth achieving higher education, Chatty et al. present the educational exchange programmes as somewhat problematic, in the sense that they are seen to undermine the young Sahrawis' sense of belonging and connectedness with their people.

[30] Umetha also told us about this phenomenon: *"I hear the women saying that even children who only go for two months, they come back and they forget all the life here, and then they have to realise again what's going on. Sometimes they wake up and they say, 'Give me milk with chocolate!' or something that we don't have here (…) they see something and then they come back to the reality".*

While we found such fears were indeed echoed in some of our conversations[31], it is ironic that it appears to be precisely this process of separation that *connects* the young Sahrawis with their elders in a displacement that is then no longer abstract, but has become experientially shared. Nanaha's story reveals clearly the deconstruction of the world as she knew it, with new meanings assigned to things, places, people and routines: The camp that once served as a stage for happy childhood memories was thus transformed into a manifestation of exile, hardship and injustice, but also into a space for resistance and identity-making. This indicates how the young Sahrawis reconceptualise "normality" as a descriptor of everyday life in the camps to a "normative reality" existent elsewhere and how this serves as a possible induction into the collective awareness of being displaced. It furthermore shows how narratives position the self in relation to place – as either *em*- or *dis*placed, which we will explore more in depth in chapter five.

Reminders of being a refugee

"Every time when you ask in the interviews, 'do you define yourself as a refugee?', I think my second name is Refugee!", Najla declared emphatically one late afternoon as we sat on the floor in Maryam's house, our backs resting comfortably against the wall, sipping tea and swatting at the flies trying to make a meal of the cookies we had brought for the focus group participants gathered in the room. Laughter spread around the room. Najla too was laughing, though a genuine exasperation in her voice was clear:

> *"Because every time I introduce myself to new people, 'I am a refugee'. I tell them: 'I'm from Western Sahara' - 'What? Western Sahara?' - 'But I'm a refugee in Algeria'. This always happens, every time I meet someone new. So I'm definitely a refugee because I have to tell them that I am a refugee. And I was born a refugee. And that's… Sometimes, I'm soooo bored of it, I'm really bored! I want to be presented someway different!"*

While displacement may appear an inescapable fact with which the young Sahrawi's are confronted at all times in their everyday lives, Najla's outburst reveals that displacement is not simply a condition into which she was born, but rather an awareness that occurs regularly in relation to, in this case, the external world. Having to present herself as a refugee, but not only that, having to place herself within a certain historical narrative that tosses terms like belonging, territoriality and temporariness up into the air, is one of those pockets of liminality where her "being not in the right place" is felt most acutely.

[31] These concerns emerged not only regarding differences in standard of living, but also about a perceived rift between generations in terms of a transformation of lifestyle and global outlook: Maryam for instance shared with us how she felt a difference between herself and her uneducated, sedentary parents: "(…) *and every time when I stay with my family I watch them and they are normal and they are happy, because this is their life and they got used to this life (…) But for me, I went to Algeria (…) because I really love studying and it was very hard for me to see them be happy without doing anything".*

This also indicates a figurative separation process that occurs repeatedly in the inevitable linking of her identity as someone who is displaced.

> Najla: "*I think one of the saddest things is this question: Why me? Why me, a refugee? Really! It annoys me so much. I mean, this question has no end. You were just born a refugee, you have to deal with it* (Mohamed laughs)*. But sometimes this question, "Why me? Why not somebody else? Why do I have to deal with it?", you get this question a lot when you travel abroad and you see the privileged life people have, and I ask myself, why couldn't I just be one of them? Nothing special about me, just… because I'm not normal, I'm not living a normal life."*
>
> (…)
>
> Mohamed S: "*One of the things that really make me sad about being a refugee is when I see how much we could have done if we were in a normal situation.* (Najla nods) *Like, how many brilliant minds would have flourished and come up with all sorts of brilliant ideas and solved problems by just being creative? Some minds were really deprived of that right, to grow normally, in a normal situation, not being distracted with the limited things and not having things and… in a* [normal, ed.] *situation life, we could have done way much better, I just imagine – "*

Variations of "*I am not normal*" or "*I am not living a normal life*" were expressions that often came up in our conversations with informants. It quickly became clear that this "normality" was usually identified with a different time and place, and connected to a certain grief over what life could have – indeed *should* have – been like under different circumstances. As Vigh points out, in chronic crises the question as to what makes a "normal" life reveals several facets to "normality". On the one hand, one could describe as "normal" that which is most commonly practiced/experienced, the "*predominant state of affairs*" (Vigh 2008:11). At one point during the focus group discussion cited above, Najla reigned in her frustration and acknowledged that "*(…) you grew up as this, and you deal with it. You live it every day. And sometimes it's so real that it becomes normal. You know? So it's not something strange*". On the other hand, "normality" can equally relate to how one feels things were supposed to be (ibid.). As Vigh writes, "*crisis in this perspective is constantly judged against the way things could or ought to be. It is measured and defined in relation to ideas of other lives and societies: ideas that are constructed through spatial or historical analogy*[32]*; in relation to how life is presumed better elsewhere and how life was better or could be better in other times*" (ibid.).

The discussion above clearly shows that the question of what constitutes normality also plays an important role in a situation characterised by liminal flux. Just as any suggestion of chronicity is

[32] Interestingly, although a big part of realising that being born in and living in a refugee camps is not life as it should be and that life could be better elsewhere lies in these childhood visits to Europe, to our informants the idea of a better life was not located in Europe. The imagined normality or "normative reality" was instead continuously tied to imaginations of Western Sahara, located in a certain space, but at an uncertain time.

rejected in favour of a narrative based on impermanence/liminality[33], the discussion cited above shows how the lived normality of everyday life is reframed into its opposite, into something abnormal. Here, the process of negotiating what is and is not normal serves as an important path through this liminal flux, along which the subject may place him/herself in varying states of separation, liminality or aggregation. By rejecting "normality", or chronicity, from the realm of the lived context and instead placing it in the realm of an imagined 'if only', the present is actively constructed as a liminal space, characterised not by what it is, but by what it is *not* (yet).

4.3 A present in liminal flux

Using an empty milk carton as a makeshift fan, patiently trying to blow some life into the reluctant embers on the open stove – as it turns out, tea making is rather difficult when everything, including the coal, is wet – Najla's cousin Sumeya explained what being a refugee meant to her. Najla translated thusly:

> *"(...) You just realise that your past is missing and your future is missing. You start to realise – I mean, you don't have a lot to compare to – but somehow you start to realise that you are in a special situation (...)"*

> *"She was told* – (Najla adds: *We are all told!*) – *by our parents that we are not in our home, but we don't really get it. The only thing you know is that you left your home, or your parents left their home and you are waiting for something. So you are told and you start to realise that there is something, but you don't know the whole political picture at that time, and you don't know that you have to fight, that you have to be active. You just know that you are not on your home and are a refugee, and you are a child."*

For Sumeya, displacement did not only mean that the homeland is missing, but also that "*your past is missing and your future is missing*". Of course Sumeya, like all our interviewees, has memories from her childhood; a "missing past" therefore does not imply that her personal past is non-existent. However, it may imply a discrepancy between the collective past as narrated to her, from the past she herself actually experienced.

"In the ideological narratives of refugee movements and diasporas", Marita Eastmond suggests, *"the exile present may be collectively portrayed as a liminality, outside normal time and place, an insignificant passage between past and future. The past may be idealized, discursively frozen and the future envisioned as a return not only to the homeland but also to the past"* (Eastmond 2007:255). Indeed, the many

[33] In an interview with the mayor of Laayoune camp, Mohamed Lamine, Herz was met with a decisive rejection when he, in consideration of the physical layout and administrative structure of the wilayas likened the camps to cities. "The definition of 'city' cannot be used for the camps", the mayor responded, citing lacking infrastructure and, importantly, land ownership: "This is Algeria. Not the Western Sahara" (Herz 2013:185).

stories recounted about life in Western Sahara as it was in the past stood out as "*idealized, discursively frozen*". Many of our informants would recall growing up with stories about Western Sahara as a beautiful land full of resources, and how their parents and grandparents were living a peaceful, nomadic life with freedom, mobility and self-sufficiency. They would paint vivid pictures of a "*beautiful, green land*", abundant in natural resources, that was "*like the mother who fed them with her breast*", as Minetu told us. These recollections were often placed in contrast to the hardships experienced in the present:

> Maryam: "*When the weather is windy or hot they* [the older family members, eds.] *will say 'oh, if we were in your land we would have very beautiful weather, we used to have a very beautiful life' (...) Their life seems to me a very good life, because every time they have a bad situation over here, they think of the past. Just to help them. And I have never lived it, in my country, so... it made me feel sad about that... that I am not living there right now, that they are not living there right now".*

When asked what a free Western Sahara would then look like in the future, many would describe a modern state, with strong institutions and respected by the international community. However, references to the stories they had been told about the past also featured heavily in their visions of the future: As we sat huddled around the portable gas stove in a container serving as a makeshift kitchen after the family's house was damaged by the flood, Leyla mused:

> "*When I think of my country*", *"the first thing I think of is returning and independence, and being able to see this homeland that I've always been told about, from my grandparents… When I think of my country this is what I think of, freedom, independence, returning, and enjoying the place and the homeland that I have been told so much about".*

Jalihena shared with us his dream of returning to a nomadic life, of "*living in an open atmosphere. A desert*". When noticing our looks of bewilderment – after all, wasn't he living in a desert now? – he continued, laughing, "*I would like to go to Western Sahara desert, not Algerian desert, to live there and get some animals and camels and goats, to take care of them".*

By imagining their future in Western Sahara as an extension of the stories they had been told about the past, thereby carrying forward the past into the future, both Leyla and Jalihena, as so many of our informants, envisioned the future "*as a return not only to the homeland but also to the past"* (Tapp 1988 in Eastmond 2007:254). Establishing the future by linking it to the past can be a strategy for creating a sense of continuity (which is precisely what is missing in a present characterised by liminal flux), and for creating a coherent narrative of who they are, as individuals but also as a collective (Eastmond 2007:254). This can be understood as an attempt to reconnect with what their parents' or

grandparents' generations lost, while at the same time mitigating their own loss (the "past and future that is missing", as Sumeya described it). Inscribing the past into their future is thus also a way of inscribing themselves into the collective past – in itself a form of emplacement, however unattainable it may be in practice.

While imaginations of the homeland – and the "normal life" one is deprived of living now but would be able to live once/if there – were consistently located in Western Sahara, it became clear that a temporal dislocation[34] had occurred: Home was once in Western Sahara, home will be in Western Sahara, but home in the present is neither here nor there. When Sumeya describes her past as missing, it is testimony to the realisation that the collective narrative of "where we are from" does not necessarily fit the personal biography – *her* past was not in Western Sahara – nor is there any certainty that her future will be there, either. This realisation that the future is "missing", in the sense that it may not turn out as promised, was a theme that often crept up, especially when we asked informants to describe their present lives. Sumeya described it like this:

> *"For us, the worst challenge is that our homeland didn't take us but didn't let us go. You know? Our land, it didn't release us forever to decide – I mean, we are not in a position to leave the country and say, 'I decide to create my life in another place, from the beginning, and I'm never coming back' – but I'm also not able to establish a life in my own country. So you are just – you have this veil between you and your future; you are not in your country but you are not also away from your country (…) It's like, life has to continue anyway. With this or without it, it will continue. (…) it's a big obstacle on the way to establish a life."*

With the ruptures of the past manifest all around, as well as the vision of what life could be like, our informants are placed in a liminal state of being betwixt and between, neither in nor out (Turner 1964:46). When the vision of the potential future clashes with the knowledge that the fruition of that future is uncertain, however, when there is no clear aggregation in sight, it extends the liminality of the present into the potentially chronic. In this liminal flux emerges a present, which – while full of veiled potential and possibilities – oscillates between sometimes suffocatingly chronic, sometimes hopefully liminal configurations.

[34] This temporal shift in belonging is a commonly observed phenomenon in protracted refugee situations; in their study of home-making practices among Georgian IDPs from Abkhazia, for instance, Kabachnik et al. "*identify 'home as journey' as the dominant way they imagine home, as they situate home in the past and the future*" (Kabachnik, Regulska & Mitchneck 2010:315). They suggest that these IDPs' "*dwelling on their memories of Abkhazia and their hopes to return for good serves as a coping mechanism to try to come to terms with the hardships of prolonged displacement* (...)" (Kabachnik, Regulska & Mitchneck 2010:316).

We would often hear the present described as 'frustrating', 'sitting all the time doing nothing', feeling like 'you can't *be'* with 'no place to just enjoy'. When we invited Bakita to describe to us her everyday life, her eyes wandered around the damaged surroundings while speaking. Najla translated:

> *"Despite that she is happy, sometimes she is sad, sometimes she is angry. Her day-to-day life is someone who is struggling, waiting, like, you could be told to leave today or tomorrow. She is always waiting (…) she feels that she is not stable. She feels that she is not staying in one place. Any time she could leave, any time they will call the passengers – let's travel, let's go. That is how she feels in her day-to-day life. That is how she lives. Waiting for when to go."*

According to Vigh, people living in chronic crisis often turn to routines "*in order to be able to act and live*" in a "*state of 'disorder*" (Weber in Vigh 2008:18). Bakita would shrug her shoulders, as we had seen so many do when faced with this questions before, and start listing routinized daily chores like waking up, cleaning, cooking, being with the family; beyond listing chores, however, many of our informants often appeared to have a hard time describing their lives in the present moment, illustrating Eastmond's suggestion that the present may become an insignificant passage between past and future (Eastmond 2007:255). Maryam described how she felt when she had to interrupt her studies in Algeria and return to the camps:

> *"I feel that here, when you sit at home without studying or working you feel that time goes very slowly and you feel that you get full of tea. That's what I told them. Because every time, they make tea three or four times a day and you feel that you are... I say that I am the bottle, where they throw the waste or dirty tea, I am like that: I put tea in my stomach and go to the bathroom. That's what I learned these days, nothing, I am just a bucket. It kills my mind, just sitting over here, drinking tea and going to the bathroom. That's all, you get full of tea, you feel bored most of the time, not knowing anything. And you think 'what will I do tomorrow?', you think of tomorrow and your mind is busy towards tomorrow and the future, not just in the moment you are living"*

This quote by Maryam reveals what may look and feel like a stagnated life trajectory, an all-absorbing feeling of 'being stuck' echoing the consequences of the uncertainties of an unclear future. In this sense, we may be able to draw some similarities between Vigh's informants and ours in terms of living in constant crisis. However, while Vigh's informants experience *social death*[35] by the lack of inter-generational mobility, life chances and possibilities of social becoming (Vigh 2006:46), our informants' experience is rather one of putting life on hold while waiting for a promised, yet uncertain future. Importantly, when describing such pockets of liminality, we do not compare this to an inherently negative experience of the self or one's life situation – whatever frustration does shine through is a

[35] Drawing on Hage, Vigh defines *social death* as an *"absence of the possibility of a worthy life*" (Hage 2003 in Vigh 2006:45). Vigh argues, that while his young informants in Bissau are not dying of starvation and are still able to cover daily needs e.g. feed their families, their *"imminent death is not physical but social*" in terms of being *"unable to attend to his social needs and fulfil a process of social becoming"* (Vigh 2006:45).

result not of being in a transitory state, but rather of the realisation that their situation is in fact not moving anywhere – the moments when crisis is indeed glimpsed as a potentially chronic context rather than a transitory, transformatory state.

Returning to Sumeya, this proves to be 'a big obstacle in the way to establish your life – but life has to continue anyway'. This is a process which requires active engagement by those trying to make sense of the present, as the following musings by Jalineha, a young activist and board member of UESARIO, the Sahrawi students' union, show:

> *"All young people, what keeps them frustrated and wanting to go back to war is in thinking that they are going to live forever here... To die here. This is the thing that keeps them angry and wanting to go back to war. I don't imagine that I am going to live here forever. But, to choose between occupation and refugee, we will choose refugee until we get the right... we hope that we get it peacefully and that we get a solution without war. But if not, you might find me after years a rebel that take up arms."*
>
> *"We have many things there in Western Sahara that we don't enjoy right now, but our sons can get their chance to enjoy and live a normal life, especially as it is a rich country that has its natural resources and they can build their society perfectly then, more perfectly than us here in the refugee camps"*

In the first quote, Jalihena's frustration arises at the point at which his displacement is glimpsed as potentially chronic, when the narrative that shaped his upbringing and induction into the liminal communitas of exile – Western Sahara is where we are from, Western Sahara is where we will return to – clashes with the lived experience of having never seen the homeland nor seeing any indication that return will necessarily happen in his lifetime. In the second quote, that same experience of a potential chronicity of the situation is actively reconfigured – and thus made somewhat tolerable – as a liminal step on the way to a better future by renegotiating the timescale, thus inscribing both himself and "*our sons*" back into the collective narrative of return. Our conversations would reveal further such strategies for making sense of the present by imbuing a potentially stagnated life trajectory with meaning. Using the analytical lens of *social navigation* (Vigh 2006), we explore this further in the next chapter.

Najla visits her grandmother's grave on the outskirts of Smara

5. Waiting for uncertain futures

In this chapter, we explore how young Saharawi refugees navigate displacement while looking towards uncertain futures. Drawing on Vigh's concept of *social navigation* (2006) we trace how our informants navigate a social terrain in liminal flux where 1) even simple, every-day acts can be invoked as part of the greater political cause, requiring a constant negotiation of individual and collective interests, and 2) displacement and its counterpart, emplacement, or "home", are continuously constructed and reconstructed in a constant negotiation of an immediate present vs. imagined futures.

5.1 Social navigation

Henrik Vigh developed the concept of *social navigation* while researching how young men in Bissau seek to survive both socially and physically in an impoverished and conflict-stricken context (Vigh 2009:420). Building on the Guinean Creole term *dubriagem*, a term related to dynamism and movement, Vigh proposes the concept of social navigation as an analytical lens through which we can understand how people act and move within changing social environments (Vigh 2006:54; 2009:423).

At first glance, social navigation points to a certain way of surviving uncertain circumstances, however, at a closer look, it is equally directed at both making one's way through difficulties of the socially immediate as well as directing one's life positively into the future – the socially imagined (Vigh 2009:423-25). In our fieldwork, we found this interplay between "*the immediate and the imagined*" to be observable across several dimensions: the temporal, the spatial, and the social. Temporally, opportunities, plans and life choices in the present were often balanced against hopes, fears and expectations of what the future might hold; spatially, experiences of the physical environment of the camps were understood in contrast to life "in Europe" or life "in Western Sahara" and vice versa; and socially, personal experiences were often evaluated against or adapted to the collective narrative. Any distinction between these dimensions is primarily analytical, as, in practice, they are of course inextricably linked.

5.1.1 A moving environment: Social navigation in liminal flux

According to Vigh, navigation literally means 'to sail' and thus defines a special form of movement: to move within a moving environment (Vigh 2009:420). The fact that social environments are in movement is not unique to Bissau, nor for that matter to areas of conflict in general; it is rather the pace at which environments move and change that may vary, and while stability may dominate some aspects of life, uncertainty and change may dominate others. Hence, Vigh argues, we all navigate, but

the need to move in relation to the movement of the surrounding environment depends on the speed at which change occurs (Vigh 2009:430).

Listening to the many personal stories and reflections on being born into and living "*a refugee life",* as Mohamed W. called it, not knowing what the future holds, it soon became clear that, just like Vigh's informants in Bissau, our informants too "*invest a great deal of time in making sense of and predicting movement of their social environment, in clarifying how they are able to adapt to and move in relation to oncoming change"* (Vigh 2009:420). In contrast to Vigh's informants, however, for whom the periodic flare-up of conflict was an ever-present reality, the young Sahrawis have never experienced armed conflict themselves, as the ceasefire has been maintained since 1991, i.e. for as long as most of them can even remember. Nevertheless, they have lived with looming uncertainty over what the future holds – whether the road to Independence will be paved by war[36] or by diplomacy, whether return to Western Sahara will even occur within their lifetime, or whether they will join the rows of graves that now mark the outline of the Smara camp; not to mention what roles they will be expected to play in either event.

"*Social navigation*", Vigh reminds us, "*is to plot, to actualize plotted trajectories and to relate one's plots and actions to the constant possibility of change*" (Vigh 2009:426). In the case of the displaced Sahrawis, this change consists not so much of changes in the environment itself, but rather in how the environment (which may pertain to physical environment, social environment, political context, anything that plays into shaping their life circumstances) is understood as sometimes chronic, sometimes liminal. It is precisely the nature of moving in relation to these ever-changing perceptions that invites us to apply social navigation as an analytical lens for understanding how our young Sahrawi informants navigate through and make sense of a present in liminal flux.

As explored in chapter four, we found that our informants' physical movement between the camps and the world outside was a highly important factor in shaping their understanding of the immediate environment as being "not normal", in contrast to life observed elsewhere, and in the construction of Western Sahara as *the* place for future aggregation into life as it was supposed to be. Thus, the establishment of the Sahrawi refugees' "environment as moving" is less related to movement or

[36] The threat of war has been an ever-present reality for young Sahrawi's; as the late Michael Bhatia noted during his 2001 fieldwork in the camps, even then observers were predicting a possible resumption of war within "*two to six months*", in reaction to the Bush administration's foreign policy apparatus and the suggestion to include an "*autonomy option*" in the referendum (Bhatia 2001:293).

change undergone by the immediate environment itself, but is rather a product of people's *moving through* and their changing *relations to* the environment.

5.1.2 Social navigation at its limits

Throughout our fieldwork we became aware of the very strong emphasis on collective life in the Sahrawi camps. In most interviews, questions about personal experiences, opinions or choices, would often be answered with "*all Sahrawi's dream of…*" or "*all Sahrawi's think that…*". On several occasions, our informants would look to Najla, expecting her answer on their behalf because, as Najla would explain laughingly, " – *they say I already know the story*". "*We are a collective*" was a sentence that often came up as an explanation for, but also as an argument against, certain views or behaviours, indicating a certain subjection of the idea of *the individual* to that of *the collective*. So, does it make sense to talk about social navigation as an individual act in a society where collective action and purpose clearly takes priority? We argue yes – with some caveats.

Of course, social environments are never free from social relations, nor does the concept of social navigation assume so. As Vigh points out, while we all move along personal trajectories, we are simultaneously being moved involuntarily by the unfolding of events around us. In navigating social environments, we are all forced to "*act and react in relation to our current position within a social terrain, in response to current constraints, possibilities and configurations of power, as well as in relation to our perception of the future terrain and its unfolding*" (Vigh 2010:159). Social navigation is thus highly relational, influenced by both individual and collective acts, which in turn makes it possible for the individual to be both afloat and in control (Vigh 2010:158).

There is an important limitation here, however, as one must be careful not to overstate the level of control, or agency, that the individual has. Vigh argues that, while we normally look at *either* movement and change in societies *or* the way agents move within these social changes, navigation as an analytical optic (and not just another metaphor for agency) allows us to explore the intersection between the two: moving and being moved by the social terrain, thereby providing insight into the interplay between objective structures and subjective agency within social flux and change (Vigh 2006:55, 2009:420, 2010:157). This distinction between structure and agency is important, for while the young Sahrawis are *separate from* their context (as in, distinct beings who may make their own decisions and rationales), they are still inextricably *part of* the context. Although social navigation allows for the individual to "move the social terrain", this is not to be understood as an ability to *transcend* the social terrain – neither analytically, nor indeed empirically.

As this chapter will show, each personal life decision had to be weighed against the impact this would have on, and reactions it would garner from, the collective. Consequences of potential missteps can be quite severe, and while not leading to physical punishment, may lead to being brandished a "traitor", causing social ostracism and, ironically, social death. Our informants must navigate between opportunities of the present and responsibilities towards different configurations of possible futures, intertwined in individual and collective interests. Arguably, our informants' freedom to act, or ability to navigate freely, can be questioned in light of the social control and strong influence of the collective over the individual. That said, it is important to not understand or construct the "individual" and "collective" as inherently binary opposites: We should not exclude the possibility that our informants also share the visions of the future in line with that of the collective. Rather, negotiating and positioning themselves in relation to both individual and collective interests is in many ways just another facet of the changing environment within which they must navigate both the socially immediate and socially imagined.

5.2 Navigating political lives

> Umetha*: "You know when you live here, sometimes you feel obliged to live the political thing, even if I don't like politics. But I feel there is no choice. You are living it every day."*
>
> Sumeya*: "(...) we are a very political society, because we are talking about this morning and afternoon. It's not that we want to be political, we are living this"*

In a turn that puts Giorgio Agamben's (1998) bare life figure of *homo sacer* into an ontological corner, our informants often likened living as refugees to being obliged to "live political lives" and "having to fight". It became clear throughout our conversations that this was about more than the political project of building a nation in exile, nor indeed about the continued political irresolution of the conflict (Zunes & Mundy 2010). "Living a political life" was a simultaneous obligation to remain in, and opportunity for making sense of, a present in flux between stagnation and liminality. Essentially, a "political life" designates both an aspect of the social terrain that must be navigated, as well as its active form, "living politically", which becomes a way of navigating this social terrain. This is a prime example of how the concept of social navigation allows us to understand the interplay between objective structures and subjective agency, and how our informants simultaneously move in and are being moved by their social environment (Vigh 2006:55).

5.2.1 Political lives vs. living politically

"It's very important to fight in many different ways," Najla's cousin Minetu, an artist and volunteer teacher, told us,

> *"with many different guns. In education, with art, as a nurse, as a doctor, as a soldier, there are so many ways to fight, so many ways to resist. (...) All of us, drivers, truck drivers who bring the food, every one in charge of doing something is participating*".

Returning to the camps with an advanced university degree only to end up driving a taxi for very little income – a reality many returnees face[37] – could very well feel like a life course stopped dead in its tracks – unless the act of returning to and persevering in the camps becomes an act of resistance in itself, a way of contributing to the cause merely by virtue of one's physical presence in the camps, in defiance of hardship and suffering. For Abida, a young activist and co-founder of NOVA, even the act of walking every morning from her house to get to Rabouni is *"a way to change the reality*", thus extending the term of the "political" to cover even basic, everyday acts.

On the one hand, "living politically" thus served as a strategy for making sense of the present by imbuing what could look and feel like a stagnated life trajectory with meaning; on the other, it also demarcated a social landscape in which every personal decision and act was potentially politicised and weighed against a responsibility towards the collective and the cause. Mohamed S. described how he sometimes would try to find 'moments of non-political being', only to be brought back to reality:

> *"I think everything we do is political. Sometimes I try to get myself away from politics, I will try to find some time where I can just be myself and enjoy my time, my life, because there is no way you can go all the time just involved in politics, but it is also very difficult to escape because everything in your life is a reminder of that thing, of that truth, of that reality. Honestly, I also try to find myself that time, that bit of time where I can just live as a normal person. It's not refugee, it's not about anything (...) it's just go have fun, meet friends, just do what you enjoy. But it's a short lived dream, it doesn't last long."*

When we asked a UESARIO board member about the level of participation among Sahrawi students, and whether, for instance, there were students who weren't politically active, the response was: "*Our work is voluntary, so it depends on the person if you want to participate or not, nothing obligated. But it is part of the history that you participate*". This reveals a double nature of political participation: political participation can offer a means of inscribing oneself into the collective narrative of the struggle and resistance; at the same time, while "not obligated", the being "*part of the history that you*

[37] According to the UNHCR, the fact that most "*Sahrawis educated abroad rarely find jobs to use their skills*" is one of the major challenges in the camps (UNHCR 2014).

participate" does indicate a sense of duty or responsibility. For, by extension, does *not* participating then somehow place you outside of the history, outside of the collective narrative on how to be Sahrawi?

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh argues that the separation of Sahrawi children from their families from an early age has served not only to ensure opportunities for education abroad, it has also led to a structural shift in supervisory roles from the immediate social environment (the families) to "the state". This has, in turn,

> "*strengthened the Polisario/SADR's power over the younger generation(s), creating an ideal space from which to teach children about the significance of the war against Morocco, of the particularities of Sahrawi history and 'national identity', and of their role in the future of the state*" (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013a:880-881).

Indeed, some of our informants' earliest memories revolved around political activities, often connected to performing their Sahrawi identity. Najla, for instance, recalled spending time during her summer vacations in Spain participating in events, talking to TV crews about the Sahrawi cause, even before fully understanding the situation herself. Ironically, the young generation of Sahrawis' mobility for education is thus deeply connected to "*mechanisms designed to ensure that youth remain connected to the protracted refugee context and the Polisario/SADR's political aims*" (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013a:881).

When we touched upon his choice of returning to the camps upon finalizing his studies in economics in Algeria, Mohamed W. described a strong sentiment among Saharawi students of "*owing to give back*", because "*we studied in the name of the cause*". Mohamed L., a young medical doctor who now splits his time between working in Spain and volunteering in the camps, also considered it an obligation to come back, since he "*studied because of this struggle*". For Bakita, similar reflections appeared: "*Instead of being active in a different place, instead of giving the knowledge and the education you have to another society*", the young woman told us, she would instead prefer to apply herself in her own society. This reflects how most youth remain connected to the refugee context and political struggle, even after their stay abroad. Hamada argued that it is not *only* about giving back, but ultimately the responsibility of those who are educated to "*use the education to solve this problem (...) to lift up this society, to strengthen our people"* because, as he put it, they are the only ones who can.

The shift in supervisory roles from the immediate families to the state and the Sahrawi nationalist cause was further reflected in how the young Sahrawis laid out their responsibilities towards the socially immediate and the socially imagined. The responsibility to take care of their families was one

factor that could be invoked, interchangeably, as motivation for either emigrating or returning to/staying in the camps[38]; however, the responsibility towards "the cause" and "those who died before us" in many ways weighed just as heavily on them. During our meeting with UESARIO, Jalihena succinctly remarked that the opportunities currently enjoyed by Sahrawi youths were only possible because of sacrifices made by those who came before:

> *"I think that, if we had not had the martyrs who died for us, to keep us studying abroad, we would not be sitting and chatting with you now in English"*

Stories of martyrs, their sacrifice and the responsibility that such acts of the past placed on future generations to live up to played a recurring part in conversations around deciding where to go and what to do with their lives. Nanaha also, shared with us her thoughts on how this debt naturally provided a sense of direction to her life:

> *"(…) the only thing that we can do, the only gift that we can give to the ones that are still alive but very old now, and the ones who have died, is just to have the freedom for Sahara, or at least not to go back and live under the flag of Moroccans. (...) The ones who have died and suffered, the old people here would be really sad – they lost their children, they lost their self, they lost their youth for this, and then in the end if we don't fight for it, this is not fair."*

When we asked Jalihena if he considered this responsibility towards the collective good as something weighing especially heavily on his generation, he replied:

> *"They* [the elders, ed.] *used to lived their lives, for example when they used to be young. But when they got obliged to fight they fought. And we also live our lives, trying to live a normal life despite the situation, but, when we get obliged we have to do our responsibility… at that time it will be our responsibility to do the obligation… you cannot prioritize, but you can wish! For example, we wish to live a normal life, I wish to get my girlfriend and… live like other people living. But this is the obligation, I have to work politically. I hate politics. But I have to."*

Aware of the sacrifices made by the people in the past, the obligation they too had to face by giving up a normal life for their cause, Jalihena considers it only natural to take on the same sacrifices in the present in order to contribute to the collective goal of Return and Independence. Navigating the potential opportunities of the present and the responsibilities towards the future, our informants would choose to take on the responsibility, *do the obligation,* and continue the struggle to ultimately achieve the goal of return to the homeland.

[38] Some informants reported having had to return to the camps in order to take care of sick or lone family members; similarly, going abroad in order to find work and send home remittances was also cited as an acceptable means of taking care of the family.

Similarly, Najla would often find occasion to express her dedication to the cause. She would occasionally look at us with her strong gaze and a tiny frown between her eyebrows to let us know something serious was about to be said and then, while seeming to state the obvious, she would say: "*Of course I'm willing to give myself, if it's necessary for my people*". Minetu also told us about "*the promise that was made*" and *"the great people we have sacrificed",* and would explain to us with passion that she did not consider it an obligation imposed upon her, but as something which instead "*empowers (...) and makes us continue".* However, the obligation "to fight" was not necessarily meant as pressure to pick up arms and continue the guerrilla war previously fought by their fathers, brothers and uncles[39], but rather the obligation of weighing all decisions and acts against whether or not they contribute to the imagined future over the immediate present – in other words, the greater cause over personal gain.

Weighing personal life choices against their potential benefit to the cause was a balancing act, which our informants continuously had to navigate when pursuing personal dreams and ambitions *and* the deeply internalized national cause. While personal goals would often be expressed as interchangeable with that of the collective – "*my goal is to help, to contribute in whatever way is needed"* was a frequent expression – there appeared to be a rather narrow room for manoeuvre in which personal ambitions could unfold, if framed as serving a purpose in furthering the collective cause of the future Return. When Sidahmed told us about his many travels and years spent abroad learning languages as a personal interest of his, he also made sure to phrase it as an opportunity to *"go abroad to tell the story and to bring something new for the society*".

When Jalihena shared with us the motivation behind his political activism on the board of UESARIO, it too provided insight into how personal motivation was framed as part of the collective goal, the "*big ambition*" as he called it, which was different from *"personal ambition"*:

> "*For example, we got Internet now in the camps recently, but we don't know how to use it as much as possible in helping, advocating, raising awareness of this situation of the Sahrawi people. We still keep using it for personal issues, instead of using it for the cause or for the Sahrawi people*".

Jalihena appeared determined to prioritise the collective goal over personal interests. In this way, the strategies for navigating in the immediate succumb to those intended to make way for an imagined

[39] Although, if necessary, most informants told us they would be willing to do so. For example, while he preferred to fight politically, Hamada told us: "*It's our faith. If the war comes and I am still able, I would become a soldier*". We then asked how he would he be able to do this without training? "*Of course he would train*", Najla translated and was interrupted by Hamada's friend Dleimi who offered his take on the question too: "*the Sahrawis before, they became soldiers from one night to the other.*"

future – a fact of which Jalihena was very conscious, as he stated without hesitation: "*We are linked to each other. That is why I give up sometimes my personal ambition, to achieve this collective ambition. This is for all Sahrawi*".

5.2.2 "Don't be an enemy"

By the end of each interview, we would ask our informants to share with us their thoughts on the future; what did they hope for? The most commonly expressed hope was to at some point be living "*in a free Western Sahara".* Interestingly, the choice by individuals to move to Western Sahara in its current state appeared not to be an option, however, not because of physical barriers that would prevent them from leaving the camps and entering Western Sahara[40], but because of the potential social repercussions within the community this choice would entail. This brings up some interesting perspectives on the limits of the 'room for manoeuvre', and on potential 'dangers of social navigation'.

In interviews previously conducted in the camps by Crivello and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, the respective authors noticed how young children would sometimes "mistakenly" refer to Western Sahara as Morocco. In one specific interview, the confusion of terminology occurred among three 7-8 year old interviewees, who were then swiftly corrected by a 12 year old (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013b:638). To Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, this revealed that many younger children had not yet "*learned to remember*" the history of the conflict, like names of key places or certain characteristics of the homeland (ibid). From very early on in our fieldwork, we noticed a similar mixing of the terms among our adult informants, though the implications here were somewhat different. The following is a field note excerpt:

> *13/10/15 – That afternoon, during siesta time in Maryam's khayma, Mimona lays down next to me and strikes up a conversation in a mixture of Arabic/ pidginized Spanish. She asks me about my family, where they live, how many brothers and sisters, aunts, cousins etc. I have. We agree that my family is very small. She tells me her family is very big and proceeds to list all her siblings, uncles, aunts etc. (there are so many that I give up on the idea of writing them all down). She then mentions her husband, who is now her ex-husband, and that he is in Morocco ("Huwwe fee Marrueco"). "Where in Morocco?" I ask ("Wen fee Marrueco?"). "Laayoune", she replies. She notices my look of surprise and, anticipating my next question ("But isn't Laayoune in -"): "Western Sahara" ("Sahara el-Gharbiye"), she says with a small sideways nod, and then, with a shrug, opening the palms of her hands towards the ceiling, "Marrueco".*

[40] According to our own informants as well as respondents in MA student Yuka Heya's master thesis, it is possible to circumvent the berm and landmines by entering Morocco via Mauritania (Heya, 2013:69). Further, despite accusations by Moroccan sources that Sahrawis are prevented from leaving the camps (which, given the wide-open layout of the camps and surrounding landscape seems highly unlikely), Human Rights Watch found no evidence of the Polisario ever having denied anyone passage out of the camps (HRW 2008:123-124).

It turned out that Mimona, and most others, would quite consistently use the term "Marrueco" when speaking of persons who had gone back to Western Sahara. Najla's cousin Sumeya told us[41]:

> *"When she was a little girl she always said 'I want to go back! I want to see my family!', but she didn't know what that means, like, going back to Morocco. Her father always said 'I would never ever go back to Western Sahara when there is one Moroccan soldier or one Moroccan in Western Sahara. I would never do that' (...) He would never consider going back to Morocco when it's still occupied."*

It quickly became clear that, at least among our adult informants, this re-application of place names was not a matter of confusion[42], of not yet having "*learnt to remember*". Rather, this pattern of Western Sahara being referred to as Morocco proved to be a very deliberate means of actively delineating Western Sahara in its current state under Moroccan occupation from Western Sahara 'as it once was and is supposed to be'.

While leaving the camps to go abroad, even for a longer period of time, was generally deemed acceptable as long as it was framed as serving the cause, leaving the camps in order to go to the occupied Western Sahara could bring about serious consequences. We would hear recurring mention of two kinds of scenarios that could account for Sahrawis choosing to go back to Western Sahara: One could *move back* due to *special circumstances* or certain *obligations*, such as having to take care of elderly family members left behind during the war. While this duty to the family was considered understandable – as long as "*their hearts are over here*", as Maryam put it – the choice to go to the occupied territory was still generally frowned upon, again reflecting Fiddian-Qasmiyeh's observation of the shift in supervisory roles (and thus primary allegiance) from the immediate families to the state (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013a:880-881). In the other scenario, going back could also be considered *giving up, forgetting the cause,* or, worst-case scenario, *accepting Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara*[43]. All three versions denoted a different kind of return: the act of a traitor.

[41] The quote by Sumeya was translated by Najla. We can safely say, however, that this pattern of expression was not due to a preference by our interpreter, as the original interview recordings confirm that this particular choice of words was in fact the informants' own; the phenomenon also occurred in interviews conducted directly in English, as well as spontaneous, unmediated conversations, such as the one cited in the field note excerpt above.

[42] To clarify, this use of "Morocco" instead of "Western Sahara" as descriptor of the occupied territory does not amount to acceptance of Morocco's claim over the territory; nor is "*going back to Morocco when it's still occupied*" intended as suggesting that the Kingdom of Morocco should be rightfully part of Western Sahara.

[43] According to a respondent in MA student Yuka Heya's master thesis, Sahrawi's from the Tindouf camps are being offered monetary rewards and employment by Morocco as a reward for "defecting from the Polisario" (Heya 2013:70). We also heard several references to Sahrawi's having been "bought" by the Moroccans.

When discussing those who had left and gone back to Western Sahara, the subject of 'traitors to the cause' often loomed in the shadows. As we sat with Jalihena in the cool evening breeze on a hill overlooking Boujdour, discussing what his family thought about his involvement in student politics, he told us:

> *"The most important for them is to respect the Sahrawi wishes, the collective wish of the Sahrawi people. Don't be an enemy as they said – a traitor for the Sahrawi people, but we can do whatever else we want. So the most important for them – so the Sahrawi families will always be happy when they see their sons or daughters contributing to the struggle. (...) they just have some red lines that you are not allowed to cross…"*

"*Red lines*?" we asked, and Jalihena explained that, if you are working "with the Moroccans, against the Saharawi", it means that you "*become against"* both your family and the people. Intrigued and with care, we seized the opportunity to probe further:

Q: *"Do you know anyone who crossed that red line?"*

Jalihena: *"I don't know anyone close personally, but I know some people who have left… I am not saying... 'left' that they went to the occupied territories. By this I mean that they started forgetting, for example* [by supporting, eds.] *autonomy as a solution for the Sahrawi cause."*

Q: *"What happens if someone becomes a traitor?"*

Jalihena: *"The Sahrawi people are so tolerant. In the end it's your choice... even when you go back there and start working for the Moroccans. They can say and tell you directly that you are a traitor and they never try to harm you or something. But they will keep this image about you... even in the same family you can find someone working for the liberation and another one working for the Moroccans and for the Morocconization of Western Sahara... Yeah! But this is just rare cases… the majority of the Sahrawi people are obviously clear and they have this big and large struggle just for this thing, which is freedom.*

And it is not like a taboo in the society, but… they consider you as a dead person. They stop talking about you at all if you go back to the other side… they just decide to never talk about you, even when some members of a family, they forgot that he is a member of that family. I know for example a case of the Sahrawi people, two friends who used to live here in the camps and one of them was part of the political activism, and the other one is just a Sahrawi supporting the right of the Sahrawis to self-determination and their ambitions of freedom and independence, but never getting involved in the political issues. But the other one, who used to be a political activist, betrayed the cause and he, the other friend, wrote a letter announcing that 'from now on, he is not my friend'. For everybody! He is going to the streets and told: 'he used to be my friend, but from now on I am not his friend', he stopped talking to him when we went to Morocco (…) and when you talk to him and ask him about his… what is the situation of your friend… he may get angry because you told him that he is his friend… 'He is not my friend anymore'."

Jalihena here provides us with a unique glimpse into the structures of the social terrain, which our informants have to navigate. To Jalihena, and similarly many of our informants, the opportunities for navigation are presented as open-wide ("*we can do whatever else we want*"), within the limitations of "*some red lines".* Crossing these lines did not necessarily require moving to the occupied territory, as even considering a solution other than Independence (e.g. autonomy under Morocco) could be seen as "working with the Moroccans". And though crossing a red line may not lead to physical harm, it can lead to social ostracism to the extent where one is considered dead. The lived experiences of our informants thus illustrate the dangers of – and empirical limitations to – social navigation: Returning to Western Sahara in its current state of occupation as a way of "*directing one's life positively into the future*" (Vigh 2010:151), may at the same time hold severe social risks in terms of not only becoming an enemy of the collective, but also dying socially, seizing to exist. Ironically, and in stark contrast to the experiences of Vigh's informants, who use social navigation as a strategy to avoid social death, social navigation in this case may in fact cause just that. Instead, by choosing to "live politically", to respect the Sahrawi wishes by contributing to the struggle, the young refugees may avoid becoming an enemy and thereby remain part of the collective solution in an imagined future of return.

5.3 Negotiating em-placement/dis-placement

As discussed in chapter one, the experience of displacement was often described as emplacement in the negative[44], as in "not being in the homeland". Eastmond suggests, *"creating a sense of belonging and 'home' (...) is a matter of constructing a coherent narrative about oneself and one's experiences"* (Eastmond 2007:255). Like a mantra, questions around belonging and "home" would unequivocally invoke the almost knee-jerk response: "Western Sahara". As explored previously, this narrative was however only coherent within limitations; for when considering the *lived experience of home*, as Shelly Mallett (2004) puts it, just as displacement was experienced across several dimensions, "home" too would turn out to be more than just *one location* in space/time.

For refugees, migrants or people living in exile, Mallett suggests, home is integrally linked to ideas of staying, leaving and journeying. As such, the conditions under which people leave their homelands, their journeys beyond and away from home and their destinations alike, are all said to impact the understanding of home (Mallett 2004:77-78). As Vigh reminds us:

> "*when navigating we seek to act in and through immediate changeable circumstances as well as move toward positions in the yet to come – articulated in unison as hopes and dreams. As such,*

[44] Liisa Malkki has also argued that emplacement is the flipside of displacement (Malkki 1995:517).

> *social navigation is to plot, to actualize plotted trajectories and to relate one's plots and actions to the constant possibility of change*" (Vigh 2009:426).

When applying social navigation within the understanding of home as linked to ideas of staying, leaving and journeying (Mallett 2004), it opens up for an understanding of how our informants navigate according to both the temporal, spatial and social aspects of the immediate and the imagined. What emerges is a pattern where "home" is continuously made and remade, imagined and re-imagined, in an effort of navigating a social environment in liminal flux, where notions of being at times *dis*-placed, at times *em*-placed, are the product of intense and on-going negotiations of the immediate and imagined. In the following sections, we explore some of these negotiations that occur as part of the young Sahrawi's social navigation while waiting to return.

5.3.1 From refuge to refuge

Like most youths his age, 26 year-old Hamada's life has always been shaped by movement in and out of the camps. Hamada grew up in Boujdour with two brothers, a sister, his mother and three aunts – *"I am original. Original Boujdour!"* he joked, referring to the large inter-camp migration to Boujdour after the camp was connected to the Algerian power grid (Herz 2013:107). As we sat in his home one late afternoon, drinking mango juice from glasses imprinted with the logo of the Dutch beer brand Amstel, a gift for his father from some visitors, Hamada recalled how he didn't really grow up with his father, who was away working for the Polisario, "*for the people*". His older brother too left the camps in 1992 to go to school in Cuba and came back in 2008. Hamada himself went to primary school in the camps, visited Spain through the summer programmes as a child, attended secondary school in Algeria, high school in Qatar, then university in Algeria from which he graduated in the summer with a degree in electrical engineering. Now, Hamada was back in the camps with little chance of finding paid work or of applying his education. Najla translated: "*I don't think it exists here, the thing I studied"*, he said with a shrug when we asked if he was looking for work, either in the camps or abroad.

> Q: *"So was it always your plan after graduating to come back here, or did you consider going somewhere else?"*
>
> Hamada: *"Of course he tried, he thought of leaving, but he is still here... For sure when you end your education you will come back here."*
>
> Q: *"For sure?"*
>
> Najla: (shrugging) *"That's what he said"*
>
> Hamada: *"When you studied, where will you go? You will come back to your family... "*

The last remark is interesting, for as it turns out, much of his immediate family was in fact not in the camps, but spread out rather widely: His sister recently moved to Spain with her husband, to try to get the Spanish residence permit, and both his brothers had since left for Italy, where his father was currently working as Polisario's representative. When we asked if he had considered applying for Spanish residence permit himself, Hamada quickly shook his head no. He had an expired Sahrawi-Algerian passport but had no plans to renew it; now all he was carrying was his SADR passport and ID, which was enough for staying in the camps as he didn't even consider "*going out here*".

Twenty-two year old Abdilhay, a soldier in a special army unit and Najla's younger cousin, was studying in Libya when the war broke out, forcing him to interrupt his education and return to the camps. When we asked how he felt about returning to the camps, he shrugged:

> *"(...) but you always come back here. We say – you know when we make bricks? We make a hole in the ground to dig for the sand, you may have seen this, and then you leave a big space deeply in the ground, we call it haffra - and we call the camps haffra, like a hole in the ground (...) Since we don't have a homeland to go back to, we always come back to this haffra, which is the hole in the ground, which is this place. (...)*
> *There is something special about this place. Even people who left to go to Western Sahara and compromised on their principle, they went back here. They went, stayed there for some time and then came back here. So there is something here, something that always makes people return to this place. (...) There is – it's because of family, it's because of the loved ones, it's because of the promise."*

While Abdilhay was hoping to one day be able to go to Spain – *"to also be among the Sahrawis who are fighting in Spain, spreading the culture, spreading the cause, working there to bring something and do something for the cause"* – both his and Hamada's reflections show that their mobility always took the camps as its natural point of departure – and its destination: "*you always come back here"*. The notion that "people always come back" was one that was reiterated on many occasions; essentially amputating our inquiries into whether leaving the camps permanently was perhaps also considered a taboo (a not completely irrelevant assumption, since the subject of "traitors to the cause" and strategies to avoid becoming one were ever-present). What was interesting was how this circular view on migration in and out of the camps amounted to a complete re-negotiation of the concepts of permanence/temporariness: in our conversations, "coming back" could be anything from returning to live in the camps after completing one's education abroad, to simply visiting the camps for a few weeks after decades of living and working abroad, thus rendering the lives established abroad during those decades as the truly temporary. This is especially interesting given the refugees' otherwise vehement resistance to in any way attaching "permanence" as a descriptor to their stay in the Algerian desert.

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In Vigh's words, social navigation as a process "*combines map-making and way-finding, as we simultaneously navigate the immediate and the imagined"* (Vigh 2006:55). The above indicates a discrepancy between the immediate connection to the camps and the imagined connection to Western Sahara as point of departure for one's life choices. It also illustrates clearly that "map-making" is practiced not just in the geographical sense but also the temporal, and that this process is one of constant negotiation and repositioning of the self (or one's extended self in the form of the collective) vis-á-vis the permanent and the temporary, the chronic and the liminal, the immediate and the imagined future. And while the immediate geographies and borders that demarcate the Sahrawis' physical displacement remain unchanged, as the meaning of space and place is constructed in an intense negotiation of personal experience and collective narrative, the young Sahrawis' navigation of geography through transnational mobility takes on a deeply social dimension. This (re)drawing of the map/ readjusting the scales of when something is permanent or temporary, chronic or liminal, thus becomes a way of navigating the moving grounds of a social environment in liminal flux. It also illustrates that, in practice, navigation occurs not only towards the final destination (Western Sahara), but also in relation to an anchor in the immediate (the camps).

Locating "home" also turned out to be one of the central elements in our interview with Bakita, a young woman aged 30, who lived with her family in the middle of a daïra in Boujdour. Like most young Sahrawis, Bakita had spent a considerable part of her life outside of the camps while studying. During our interview, she recalled how, at the end of the school year the other students would ask her why she was going "back to Algeria" despite not being Algerian. When we asked her how that would make her feel, she explained that it made her "*feel like you are going to something that doesn't belong to you. It's not your place*". Experiences like those from her time studying in Algeria were part of what made her realize "*that everyone is going back home, but they* [she and the other Sahrawi students, eds.] *are not going home, but going to a refugee camp at the end of the year*". In a sense, Bakita rejects the refugee camp as a place of home, by placing it in contrast to the kind of places the other students are going back to. In this way, Bakita chooses to hold on to the fact that 'going home' in her case would mean returning to Western Sahara, thereby rendering the camps to be only that of a temporary refuge.

Often during our interview, it seemed important for Bakita to tell us how Algeria had always been a kind and welcoming place to live in, both when staying within and outside of the camps. However, that did not change the fact that she would feel "*like a guest in Algeria, she doesn't feel at home*". However, at one point during our conversation, Bakita also described how she found it "*difficult to be an immigrant, or like away from home*" while living and studying in Algeria. In the last two quotes, Bakita revealed two interesting aspects, which add a bit more nuance to the idea of home: One, that home is not only

connected to a *place* but also something that is created based on what it *feels* like, and second, that in certain ways the camps could also be considered a "home". As such, Bakita compares existence 'as an immigrant' elsewhere to a sense of belonging which is rooted in the camps. This allows for a glimpse of how Bakita, as many of our informants, also engages in constructing a coherent narrative about herself, which naturally has its point of departure in the camps as the place where she grew up and the place which she still returns to "when going home" from abroad (Eastmond 2007:255).

This ambivalence towards "home" came up often when discussing feelings of belonging, especially in relation to experiences of living abroad, both in Algeria and beyond. Feeling like *"an immigrant"*, *"a guest*", or "*a refugee"* elsewhere was a commonly used descriptor of what life "abroad" – as in outside of the camps – is like. In fact, Maryam felt her experiences abroad (in Algeria) had only exacerbated her feelings of being displaced:

> *"*[I decided that, eds.] *I don't want to travel any more, after I quit studying in Algeria. And the reason is to not feel that I'm a refugee, because people, when they look at the refugee, they usually look down on them (...) I have always been asked this question: 'Why don't you travel abroad and learn* [study, ed.] *English?' I met people from America, from Canada and from London, and the last ones I met asked me if I want to come with them to their land (…)*
>
> *(...)* [But what if, eds.] *suddenly they look at me and say, 'What about your land, have you been to your land?' – 'No' – 'Are you living as a refugee or as a...' – you know? – 'Why don't you go back to your land? – 'Because I am not able to'. Just answering these questions makes me feel very sad, and I may not feel very happy as I was expecting. So I prefer to sit just over here* [in the camps, eds.] *and if someone comes over, make them feel that this is your home, you are welcome, and ask me about whatever you want to ask. For me, it's better than going there, feeling this way, and the reason is not because I hate these people or don't want to see them. The reason is because of the feeling that I'm going to feel, as a refugee. So I prefer to be here and live in honour, as a refugee. Or as a Sahrawi. Here between the Sahrawis, I am not a refugee, I am a Sahrawi."*

Maryam's decision to remain in the refugee camps, living *"in honour, as a refugee"* in order to "*not feel like I'm a refugee"*, like someone who is looked down on, indicates a sense of belonging that is located not only "*here between the Sahrawis*" – it also positions the camps as a possible bastion against unsolicited reminders of her displacement, of her being "not normal". Choosing to remain in the camps thus becomes a way to take control of her own life in a world where she otherwise does not feel she has the option to do so.

When sharing with us her reflections on those of her friends who had gone to Spain and Italy after finishing their education, the young activist Abida echoed this notion that simply moving elsewhere does not free you from the burden of being a refugee: "*Those people, no matter where they go, they are always refugees. They will always be refugees. Because they are going from refugees, so they will stay*

refugees no matter what". The "inescapability"[45] of being refugees (and strategies on how to either avoid or find meaning in that label), was a central theme not only in relation to navigating choices on how – and whether – to use their transnational mobility; it was also intimately tied to how, when and where *emplacement* could occur. To Jalihena, for instance, moving anywhere other than a free Western Sahara amounted to little more than moving "*from refuge to another refuge*":

> *"No Sahrawi wants to stay here* [in the camps, eds.] *or live in Algeria or Mauritania or Spain as another option, because this is also not another option. The option is when you have something stable that you can come back to whenever you want and you have something to go to. For example, if I am living in my land, I can choose to go to live in another land. In Algeria or Spain… but if I am a refugee I have no option, because this is just from refuge to another refuge. But if I get my land free and independent, I can choose to live – even in Morocco. But at that time it will be my choice... Yeah, everything goes to its nature in the end. Sahrawis never belonged to this land, they know that this is not their land, they cannot live... They have stayed for more than 40 years now... you can see the difference between Tindouf and the refugee camps, but they are never attracted by Tindouf. They always keep this (pointing at the tents at the foot of the hill on which we were sitting) and go to Tindouf and see the daily life of Algerians and go back at night to the camps and live... you know, because they want to be here and live like refugees."*

In this context, Jalihena first positions the camps alongside Algeria, Mauritania and Spain as emblematic of his "being not in the right place", a condition which can only be overcome, it seems, once *"everything has gone to its nature*" and the return to an independent Western Sahara has been achieved. At the same time, he distinguishes the camps from the closest Algerian town of Tindouf and describes the continuous return to the camps – "*because they want to be here and live like refugees*" – as a reality *in the immediate*, a means of staying on course towards the imagined future, where liminality can finally give way to aggregation and a 'normal life'. As Vigh points out, social navigation occurs "*in relation to our perception of the future terrain and its unfolding",* which also implies that, *"in order to move towards where we wish to go, we sometimes take detours, sometimes refrain from acting, and sometimes engage in apparently illogical acts, shaped in anticipation of what is to come"* (Vigh 2010: 158-159). The "inevitable" return to the *haffra*, the hole in the ground that is the camps, was thus not only a result of navigating a political life imprinted with responsibilities to the family and the cause – it also shows a navigation of displacement where the course towards emplacement as its antithesis is

[45] It should be noted that one informant, 35-year-old Mohamed L, who was sent to Cuba at age 13 and now lives and works in Spain for six months of the year, had a different take on this. Being the only of our informants to describe life in Europe as a "better life", he told us that, when in Spain, he did not feel like a refugee *"because he is maintaining himself, he has a house, he has his car, he has insurance, he goes to work, so..."* – to which Najla, who was translating, exclaimed: *"But you are not in your country?"* This did not sway Mohamed L., who maintained that, in Spain *"he is just a resident, he is living, not as a refugee*". This exchange shows that, in contrast to what most of our informants believed, the refugee label (Zetter 1991) may not be seen as completely inescapable by everyone, which proves Eastmond's point that *"'home' and the loss of home may mean different things to individuals from different walks of life from the same country of origin*" (Eastmond 2007:253).

plotted along paths leading to both immediate and imagined future destinations – the camps in the immediate and Western Sahara in the imagined.

5.3.2 Locating "home": Between homeland and home-camp

To explore further this negotiation of the relation between the homeland and home-camps[46], we asked our informants in the focus group interview to reflect on the questions: "What is home? Where is home". The following is an excerpt of the conversation that followed between Maryam, Najla, Mohammed S. and Sidahmed:

> Mohamed S: *"Home for me is a situation where I feel I belong, I am safe, I am welcome, I am free to act – whether that situation is happening or not happening, but that is what I want home to be. That's what I would like home to be. But… I don't know, sometimes I feel like I'm experiencing some sort of second-hand feeling of this home that I just explained, because I have my mom, I have my dad, I have my family, I'm not persecuted on a daily basis, I'm not being limited, I feel welcome at home, but this is my small situation. But there are other things in my life that - as soon as you take yourself out of that small situation, you realise also that this is really not home. For example, I can't build for my family – you know, every family has lost part of their home* [in the flood, eds.] *But we're hesitant to build something as strong as a (…) conventional sort of house, because we know someday we're going to leave this place. So I'm not settled."*
>
> Maryam: *"I'd say that home is where the heart is, and where you feel happy. Where you could feel happiness, freedom to do and go wherever you want, and home is where your family is gathered, like, you're happiness is completed. You have your land and you have your family. So when you feel these things, then you feel home. So for example, these days I'm feeling half-home. Because I live with my family, I'm with my neighbours, with the Sahrawis, but I'm losing* [lacking, eds.] *my home. I'm not living in my land. So it seems like part of my heart...my heart is not complete. (...)"*
>
> Najla: *"You just brought up one of the most frequent questions on my mind, because.... since I started living out of here, this place, I started to have this question on my mind a lot. As you can I see I am very much believing in my cause and the right of my people and the right of returning, but when I really go deep within myself about home, I just ask myself what makes a place or something your home. Like, why do you believe your house in Denmark is home? What makes it your home? And then I give this question to myself, like what could make a place my home? My family, the place I grew up, the place I built memories, the place I experienced life (…) and all these things tell me that my home in Tifariti* [a daïra in the Smara camp, eds.*] is my home. (...) But at the same time, it's not my home. Because legally, it's not - or actually, it could legally be my home because I was born there. But still it's not my home because I'm a special case. Because I am not from here and I was forced to be here. So… in my heart, that's my home. But still, it's not my home! It's not my home because, if all the refugee camp decides to go back to Western Sahara*

[46] Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2013b) makes use of the same terminology when she explores "*the Sahrawi politics of 'traveling memories'*", assessing how memories of the "*Home-Land and Home-Camp*" travel between the older and younger generations. Our exploration of the terms takes on a different analytical perspective.

I cannot just tell Algeria I'm gonna build a house here, I'm gonna stay here. I can't, I'm not allowed to do that. (...) And also, home is the place that you most miss when you're not living in it. And when I'm away I don't miss Western Sahara. I don't know it! (...)"

(...)

Maryam: *"It's hard to say that home is only where you grew up, where you had your childhood, where you were feeling happy at that time. That's not, like, completely home. It's just one room of the home."*

(...)

Sidahmed: *"I think also that home is where you want to always go back to. Even if you've never seen it before. I always ask people, "where are you going?" They say, "I'm going home". And they always have the family with them, they have their father, their children, wife, the complete family, but they say, "I'm going home", meaning back to their country."*

(...)

Maryam: *"(...) The last thing that I want to say is that, my home is where my family and land... my home is my family and my land. If I lose my family and live in my land, I would still feel that I'm just half-home. But if I'm living with my family as now and not in my land, I'm still the same. If I put all these things together, I would be the most happy."*

When discussing what makes something home, all of our four young informants agree on a few basics: that home is connected to feelings of being safe, free, welcome and happy, and especially connected to being with family. Home is also where memories are created, e.g. as the place where you grow up and also where life is lived. All these elements combined allow for understanding home as something increasingly situational, moving beyond a one-dimensional conflation of home with homeland.

What is central to these reflections is the importance of the emotional ties that have been created between the young people and the camps. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh argues that, naturally "*even if refugee camps are themselves, almost by definition, not conceptualised as permanent spaces (Bauman 2002), refugees born into protracted encampment may nonetheless feel both a sense of belonging to and longing for 'their' home-camp"* (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2013b:633). However, Najla's conclusion "*that my home in Tifariti* [Smara camp, eds.] *is my home"*, comes with the caveat that this belonging is uncertain, legally unfounded, and that her future is still inextricably tied to a collective movement towards the homeland. Our informants recognized that, no matter the level of freedom, safety or emotional attachment to the camps as a place of home, they cannot ignore the reality that they are living a legal limbo in which they may *not* enjoy the same rights as normal citizens of a country.

Mohamed S. mentioned the effect of 'not being able to build' – and thereby not being able to secure a future for himself and his family – as something that challenges the feeling of having a real home in the camps. Thereby, while the camp in many ways constitutes what is home in the immediate in terms of both a spatial *here* and temporal *now*, it is by the insistence on liminality in the expectation of Return

that this experience fades. Najla also echoes how the lack of real ownership[47] prevents her from creating more rooted ties to the home-camp, since, in the event that the conflict is solved and all the Sahrawis decide to go back to Western Sahara, she cannot choose to stay. All in all, the camps continue to be a place of temporary residence aiming to uphold cultural traditions and the development of societal structures to be applied and lived in the future and rightful home(land) in Western Sahara.

Consequently, a feeling of homelessness emerges among our informants; *feeling* home in a place in which they know they do not and cannot choose to belong, an experience of at times having no place despite being linked to two places at once, but not truly belonging to neither (Korac 2009: 36). This is furthermore enhanced by statements such as "*feeling half-home"* and the experience of a "*second-hand feeling"* of home in the camps. As Maryam so clearly expresses, her idea of home is both family *and* land – neither one on their own sufficient to constitute "home". While her home in the camps is defined by the absence of Western Sahara and by the presence of family, Maryam considers it as only having access to "*one room of the home"*. However, if she were to return to the homeland without her family she would be back to square one.

Thus, the camps as a home continue to be a place of ambivalence to our informants upon negotiating the immediate and imagined. In this way, our informants in many ways reject the binary opposition between home being either here or there: instead, home is at times both, at times neither. This insistence on complexity becomes a way of navigating the moving environment of liminal flux.

Keeping "reminders of the refuge"

Sitting with Jalihena on a hill overlooking Boujdour, the setting sun briefly lighting up the many tent-tops and crumbling mud brick buildings that made up the structure of the wilaya below, Jalihena shared his dream of living in the open atmosphere in the countryside of a free Western Sahara. When we asked if he imagined himself living in a house or a khayma, he replied with eagerness: *"A khayma? Yes! Yes! Of course a khayma. This is part of this bedouin life".* Partly expecting him to go on to describe the traditional Saharawi khayma made from black goats' wool, an image featured heavily in paintings and street art all over the camps, we were surprised when his gaze wandered down towards the clusters of sand-coloured canvas tents below us:

> *"I would like to keep this! To keep it as a reminder of the refuge. Yeah – this is a symbol of the refuge. Sahrawi khayma didn't use to be like this, it was a black one, just one pillar, never like this.*

[47] According to Herz land in the refugee camps cannot be privately owned, due to the fact that "*living in Algeria on "borrowed" land, with a clear declaration that this is not the Sahrawis' homeland and their stay is only intended to be temporary makes the concept of land ownership contradictory*" (Herz 2013:140)

> *But, everything has changed in this desert. But I would like to keep this khayma (...) You cannot find khaymas like this in other refugee camps. Try to... This was a Sahrawi designed khayma (laughing). Sahrawi style… different… but it is practical also, creative."*

Interestingly, despite the fact that "*everything has changed in this desert",* including the design of the traditional Sahrawi khayma, it seems not to have lost its importance or symbolic meaning, and by the sound of it, may actually have developed in terms of more than just appearance. What strikes as remarkable is the strong connection to not only the khayma as a reminder of and attachment to the Bedouin life of past generations, but also a growing connection to this new version of khayma as a thing of the present, a "*symbol of the refuge*". Even though it has changed, it is still "Sahrawi style" and manages to meet the needs necessary to make a home worth remembering. The khayma thus seems to serve multiple purposes: as a strong attachment to the traditional home in the past; as a reminder of the temporariness of the present home; and as something to bring into the future as a reminder of the home in the camps, which will be part of the collective history on which the future generations of Sahrawis will be raised. Characteristic of an environment in liminal flux, the khayma thus becomes illustrative of a form of simultaneous dis- and emplacement.

5.3.3 Negotiating camp development

Another concrete illustration of social navigation occurred in the negotiation of how and whether the camps' physical infrastructure should be developed, a discussion which reflected the dividedness between the importance of directing one's life and efforts towards a home-camp in the immediate and a homeland in the imagined future. And while the recent wave of destruction brought this discussion to the forefront, it had been an on-going theme of contention in the ever-growing camps ever since the first refugees arrived on the then-bare plot of gravelly sand in 1975/1976 (Herz 2013:17).

"*You have come in, let's say the luxury of our time now, because you came after everything developed*", Minetu told us while reflecting on the difficulties and sufferings faced by the first refugees in the area compared to life in the camps now, which she does not consider a "*real"* refugee life. "*The refugee has been developing*", Sidahmed similarly pointed out to us more than once during our interview. Both were referring to the infrastructure that has been built in the state-in-exile, the many life-improvements that have taken place while they have been growing up, but also to the changes in culture and lifestyle as more resources became available to the refugees over time. This development was indeed visible all around, made evident by paved roads, electricity, refrigerators, air condition and even a few houses made of concrete, which had slowly begun to appear around the wilayas (Herz 2013:100,118,128). It was also visible in practices amongst especially the younger refugees, who would roam around the camps in search for WIFI, following the sound of intermittently running

generators and popping in at each other's homes in hopes of finding *connection*. We would hear past developments described with a mixture of pride and insecurity, at times even contempt.

"Living here is a fact" – "But I focus on hope"

The following section explores how our young informants seek to navigate "*the reality on the ground that often develops into a quasi-permanent condition*" (Herz 2013:18). We explore various reflections on the need for, wish for or resistance to developing the camps in the immediate and in turn how that affects their relation to the future and the hope for return: How should life be lived while preparing for another?

The question on whether or not to develop the camps proved to be one of the more contentious themes in our focus group interview, in which a few more heated moments of discussion and at times open disagreements occurred. The following excerpt serves to show how our informants prioritize different strategies in the immediate in order to actualize or move towards uncertain configurations of the future:

> Maryam: "*Developing the camps… I'd say that for some reasons it's good, but for other reasons it's not (…) We as refugees, we don't want to live here as someone who doesn't need anything to fight for. If you were going to offer everything that I need, everything that I could be happy with, which helps me forget my land, I might forget it very easily. Because then I will compare (…) I won't have anything over there. I need to work so hard, and that's too much - I might as well stay here. Even though I'm not in my land, even though I'm a refugee. The only reason that I think that developing the camps is something good, is to help people be alive, but not to offer everything which they need to help them forget their land. This is the bad reason. (…)"*
>
> Najla: "*There are two ways to answer this question. One: I agree on developing the camps, because if you see it from a* [perspective that, eds.] *I have only one life and I deserve to enjoy it, I deserve to have all the privileges to live and I don't know when I will die – will I ever live in Western Sahara, would I enjoy the things I want to enjoy? So why not just try to live my life the best way I could while waiting to go back to my country? I agree with this. But. I have to say that every single time I saw somebody building with cement, or building a new hospital, or building a new school, even when they started to do the electricity, my heart like – you know how you feel when something affects you sadly? My heart feels that, because that's another confirmation that we are still waiting long. You know? And I just… when I saw them putting the electricity here, I was like* (lowering voice to excited whisper) *'Ohhh, it's going to be nice to have electricity in the kitchen, the toilet, and all this…', but* (grimacing) *deeply in my heart, I was not happy – "*
>
> Maryam: "*– This kills off hope! It kills hope. Everything that you were looking for, suddenly you have it in the camps and you feel like…"*

Najla: "*No, I was not happy. And I'm not happy… I want to live a good life (…) If I could have good nutrition, good meals, good things in the kitchen to help me I would not say no. But every time I see like real developing structure in the camps, I feel sad. Because that's a confirmation that we are waiting longer. And it happened to me when I saw them doing the road, I was like, "Oh no!" Because if they make the road, it's so expensive! And if they make the road it means we are still waiting here for a longer time."*

Mohamed: "*I think I'm for developing the camps as something good. First, you mentioned that you don't know whether you live to see and liberate Western Sahara or not. But also, I would say developing the camps means that we can create, we could develop, we could do the things that we want to do, we wish to do. You may not all the time have the chance to do what you could in the right place at the right time. There is always an element missing. Yes, the land is missing. But: you are given a choice to do something good and to develop and to create something. And it's not preventing us from struggling and fighting for what we believe in, right? So we could benefit from it, we could, you know, have access to lots of things, we could facilitate things, there are lots of things that we could do and actually use the development and use the tools and use the things available to us or brought to us, in order to fight for our land."*

Sidahmed: "*I would say that developing the camps cannot affect anything. On the contrary, we will benefit from developing the camps while waiting for independence, then we will use the experience to do something –"*

(….)

Maryam: "(to Mohamed) *You need to understand something. It's very hard, when you have a hope about something, it's easy to break it. And it's also very difficult to resist in your hope. (…) I could live with simple things, which I can live comfortably with, happy with, they are beautiful, they are good, but they are also things that I can lose. They are not very important. They cannot stop my hope. But if I'm having very big things that I want to build later in my land, but now I'm having them, I would think, I'm not going to work on something that I'm having now. Why would I do that? Why don't I just relax my mind and live my life? (…)"*

Sidahmed: "*– But living here is a fact!"*

Maryam: "*But I focus on hope! What kills our hope and what raises our blood"*

Najla: "*There is a famous saying said by our leader, El Ouali, he said: "We are not a nation who seek food, who seek flour or who seek luxury, who seek money." That was not the reason why we are here. I mean, every family in this camp is able to leave if they want. They are able to go to Spain, they are able to test their ability in how they could reach life. But the majority are still here. Because the goal of this whole struggle is not the food, it's not the clothes (…) Of course there might be some people who forget easily and if they have a little decent life and a small house they might – I don't care, I mean, these people you find everywhere. But the majority have proved for 40 years that their goal is deeper and more precious and more honour than having a nice house or a nice car. And this doesn't change that you could develop your life. But just want to make sure that this is not the goal."*

According to Herz, "*in view of the stalemate in this conflict, the call for 'the provisional' gains a strategic and political dimension*" as a way to counter the (quasi-)permanent conditions that increased comfort and better living conditions bring about in the camps (Herz 2013:18,114). Mundy too has noted how "*the refugees appear less 'hungry' for a solution to the conflict because of the growing relative comfort (…) they find in the camps*" (Mundy 2007:293). However, to Maryam, the provisional or temporary nature of the present becomes not only a political strategy, but also a necessary part of nurturing the feelings that such provisional existence evokes. It may not be the act of development itself that Maryam so strongly rejects, but rather that people may get too comfortable and thereby potentially lose sight of the need to keep struggling.

Najla does not fear development inviting forgetfulness. She appears certain in the idea that a future in a free Western Sahara is *deeper* and *more precious* than any luxury provided while in the temporary refuge. However, she does emphasize the need to 'keep an eye on the prize' and make sure that development of the immediate in itself does not become the goal at the expense of the imagined future. Which could very well prove Maryam's point, how *need* may be necessary in order to keep alive the idea that something better is waiting.

Najla also expresses a feeling of being torn. While she on one hand welcomes elements that improve and make life in the camps easier, not knowing whether she will live to see her life in a free Western Sahara, she on the other hand becomes discouraged when confronted with *real* developing structures or, as she mentions later on in the focus group, hears "*talk about long-term projects*". Such projects confirm to her that they might not be going back anytime soon. Long-term investments such as paving roads and the like appear to hint at a premature aggregation from the liminal phase that was to be the temporary stay in the camps, an acceptance of living in the camps as a permanent situation, which Najla cannot accept. While planning for a future somewhere different, acting accordingly in the present does not entail developing the camps.

Neither Mohamed S. nor Sidahmed equate development with permanence, nor do they fear the consequences of improving the living standard in the camps. Much like Mohamed S. who insists that supporting development does not prevent anyone from struggling or fighting for what they believe in, Herz has noticed how many Saharawis nowadays see investments in the structure of the camps as independent of the issue of permanence (Herz 2013:150). Undeniably, "*living here is a fact*", as Sidahmed pointed out to the others, which very accurately describes the dilemma our informants are faced with everyday – coming to terms with the present, taking advantage of the current opportunities, while holding on to the idea of a future elsewhere. Prior to the focus group, Mohamed S.

explained during our individual interview with him how he tries to think of the "*camps as a laboratory"*, an opportunity to test ideas and think about creative solutions:

> *"We cannot get ourselves stuck in that idea of waiting to go back, not doing something for the recent situation (the flood, eds). We can fight for our rights to be back to our homeland, but we can also solve the problems we are facing here (...) Because if you were in a normal situation, you often miss the opportunity to solve a problem, because you just don't see it."*

"Need is the mother of invention" we would repeatedly be reminded during our fieldwork as one of the many proverbs the Sahrawis live by. Herz too points to how the camps in many ways act as a training phase "*during which the Sahrawi society can develop ideas and concepts (...) to later be transferred to their original homeland, if it becomes available in the future"* (Herz 2013:16), a point with which both Mohamed S and Sidahmed seem to agree. Even though they may not be able to take the roads with them when they leave, there are several benefits to gain from developing the camps while waiting for Independence. Sidahmed especially would focus on the benefits of preparing a "*stable place to think*" for the next generations, which he also considered "*a form of fighting for going back"*. Sidahmed also insists that investing in the development of infrastructure cannot be separated from "*developing thoughts and people*" and that this combination makes people *not* forget about the future:

> Sidahmed: *"Develop the infrastructure, and develop* thoughts (makes hand movement following two concave trajectories) *and then we meet, sometime in the future…"*

Don't burn all the kindles

Herz argues that "*the Sahrawis are willing to surrender their investment when the first opportunity arises of returning to the Western Sahara"* (Herz 2013:150), and while most of our conversations confirmed this idea, the focus group discussion revealed a further, unexpected layer to this. Interestingly, several of our informants expressed a desire to revisit the camps to show their future children the place where they grew up, but only by virtue of having obtained their future home in Western Sahara. Thus, in the future, once independence is achieved, the refugee camps could turn from being a place of temporary belonging and the emblem of the Sahrawi's displacement today, to a place to which one can return. In the hope-to-be-future, the camps thus become part of the collective past. While discussing the pros and cons of developing the camps from a perspective of their own future lying in Western Sahara rather than in the Algerian desert, our informants also spent a few moments considering what the future should hold for the land that has hosted them for so long:

> Najla: "*I love this place. It's hard, it's difficult, it's daunting, it's windy, it's hot, but it's special. It's special for us. It has adopted us for 40 years. It has experienced so many things of our living, you know? Our grandparents, our beloved ones are buried in this place. So I think, we have to honour*

> *this place somehow, as humans, away from politics or from leaving this place. I think we have to honour it. And I think there is nothing bad if we could do anything to this place, like greening, building things… maybe other Algerians, if we leave from here people could enjoy this place and say one day, "There were people here, but they left something, not only a mud house", you know? That's also something I like, if we could develop the camps in a good way, that if we leave we haven't just used the place and left an empty, useless place, but we did something to the land."*

Instead of focusing on whether or not to develop the camps in terms of their own temporary stay and future elsewhere, Najla would emphasize the value and importance of developing the camps in terms of *giving something back*, looking towards an imagined future beyond her/their own. Mohammed S. joined in:

> "*The Sahrawi proverb says, if you leave a place, don't burn all the kindles. As in, if you leave a place, you might make a fire but don't use all the kindles, somebody might come after you"*

* * *

After the flood: new bricks are laid to dry, rebuilding has begun

6. Conclusion

Based on three eventful weeks of fieldwork and numerous inspiring conversations and interviews with young Sahrawi refugees, we have explored how they, being born as refugees, experience and navigate displacement, caught between a present in liminal flux and uncertain futures. Nanaha sums it up quite beautifully:

> *"They* [the youth] *are standing. They still want to go back (...) they choose to be waiting for something to happen, they choose to learn languages, they choose to educate themselves, because this is what we believe can help us. Some of them have invented work that they can work, help their families, and they live life here like today is the last day, but they don't see the homeland. They build houses (...) and they live and they make it easy for themselves, you know, while waiting, but also they are working for themselves, enjoying life, and deeply they are also ready for anything that can be… that we can go one day to Sahara free."*

We found that, for our informants, becoming displaced occurred through a process where awareness of 'not being in the right place' became intimately tied to a realisation of 'not being normal'. In particular, childhood travels served as a vector of separation for our informants, an induction into a constructed liminality similar to the older generation's physical displacement through flight, it also connected the young Saharawis with their elders in a displacement that was no longer abstract, but had become experientially shared through a collective awareness of being displaced.

To adequately capture the experience of displacement by our young informants, we suggested the analytical term *liminal flux.* This allowed us to grasp how young Saharawi refugees inhabit a space characterised by conditions of *both* chronicity *and* liminality, where, in spite of the protracted nature of their displacement, the expectation of "returning home soon" plays a crucial role in everyday-life decision-making. When the vision of a potential future continuously clashes with the knowledge that the fruition of that future is uncertain, it extends the liminality of the present into the potentially chronic. Thus, we found that a present emerges which – while full of veiled potential and possibilities – oscillates between sometimes suffocatingly chronic, sometimes hopefully liminal configurations. This indeed proved to be a significant obstacle on the way for our informants to establish their lives, necessitating active strategies for making sense of lives put on hold while waiting for a promised, yet uncertain return to a future infused with imaginings of the past.

Tracing these strategies through the analytical lens of *social navigation*, we explored some of the ways in which our young informants navigate a present in liminal flux. Firstly, we found that choosing to "live politically" could give meaning to what, at times, could otherwise feel like a stagnated life

trajectory. At the same time, "living politically" was imbued with a sense of duty, or responsibility, towards the collective and to "those who came before", and entailed weighing all life decisions against whether or not they contributed to the national cause. While we did find what appeared to be an – albeit narrow – room for manoeuvre, in which personal ambitions could unfold as long as they were framed as contributing to the collective cause, any such manoeuvring had to take place within certain *red lines*, beyond which lay the risk of social death. Stories of those who had become traitors to the cause provided a glimpse not only of the structures of the social terrain our informants have to navigate, but also of the empirical as well as analytical limits to social navigation.

Secondly, we applied social navigation within the understanding of "home" as linked to ideas of staying, leaving and journeying (Mallett 2004), which allowed us to trace our informants' navigation according to both temporal, spatial and social aspects of the immediate and the imagined. What emerged was a pattern where "home" was continuously made and remade, imagined and re-imagined, in an effort of navigating a social environment in liminal flux, where notions of being at times *dis*-placed, at time *em*-placed, are the product of intense and on-going negotiations of uncertain futures. In practice, social navigation of displacement occurred not only towards emplacement in a final destination (Western Sahara), but also in relation to an anchor in the immediate (the camps). For young Saharawis, returning to and persevering in the camps was a way not only of contributing to, but also inscribing themselves into the collective narrative – in itself a form of emplacement. Upon negotiating the immediate and imagined, a sense of home and belonging emerged that was inextricably tied to the knowledge that their future would be determined either by continued displacement or, in the event of the conflict being solved, a collective movement towards the homeland.

Caught between these uncertain futures, the refugee camps emerged as a place of ambivalence. This was exemplified by our informants' debate over how and whether to develop the camps' physical infrastructure, and their dividedness on what meaning should be ascribed to such development. Thus, the question of *how* to live in the camps while essentially preparing for another life elsewhere was a matter of continuous negotiation.

* * *

"*If you have the option"*, we ask, "*of giving your children a life away from all this struggle and hardship in the camps – maybe it's a hard question to answer, but would you consider taking your children away from all this, giving them a different kind of childhood? Do they have to be born to fight as well?*"

Najla considers this for a while, tilting her head sidewise as if searching for the right words. Then she raises her gaze and smiles one of her serious smiles:

"They don't have to be born as fighters. If they grow up and they decide their fate, if they want to leave this place, they can leave it. But I want them to be part of this. And it's not that I'm unfair to my children to bring them into this, because I see a lot of happy children here, very happy. Even happier than children who have more access to things. I think they could be happy and have a good life, even here. (...) I know this place will teach them a lot and make them strong, patient... things they wouldn't learn if they were not here."

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Appendix 1: Interview guide

	Past	Present	Future
All	- Can you describe to us where you grew up? What was it like?	- Can you describe your life now? (e.g. describe what a normal day is like for you) - What motivates you? - Are you politically active? - What does 'being a refugee' mean to you? - Have you ever considered leaving? To look for easier life somewhere else? - What comes to mind when you think about Western Sahara? - Do you know anyone who has stayed abroad/wants to stay abroad? - Do you know anyone who has moved to Western Sahara?	- Where do you see yourself in the future? (or your children, your family) - Where do you *hope* to see yourself in the future? - How do you hope to get there, achieve this? - Going back to Western Sahara, what do you imagine?
Young	- Do you talk about the past/the war? With whom? - What kinds of stories did you grow up with? (e.g. about the war, the past in general, Western Sahara) - How do you feel about those stories? - Are there things you don't like to talk about with your parents?	- Have you been abroad? In what context? - Has it influenced you and how? - Did you consider staying? - Why did you go abroad?	
Old	- Can you tell us about the war? - Where you politically active? How? What motivated you? - Do you talk about the past (with your children)? What stories do you tell them? - Are there things you do not like to talk about?		- What advice would you give to the young people of today/your children?

Appendix 2: Presentation of primary informants

Jalihena is a 28-year-old man living in Smara. Jalihena speaks English fluently due to having studied translation as his BA in Algeria. He holds the position as elected International Officer in the Sahrawi students union, UESARIO. Jalihena actually "*hates politics*", but feels like he has to work politically and uses his position at UESARIO as a small window to contribute to the struggle. It was in his position as International Officer and translator for UESARIO that we had our first encounter with Jalihena, which became the stepping stone for an individual interview.

Mohamed S. is a 29-year-old man and a very well-articulated English-speaker. He was born in Dakhla but moved to Smara with his family in 2005 to be closer to his grandmother who had fallen ill. Mohamed describes himself as an artist, a tailor and a translator. We had first heard of Mohamed as being the co-author and illustrator of the book "*Settled Wanderers*", for which he had translated Sahrawi poems into English. Mohamed is a friend of our translator Najla and it was Najla who helped establish the contact.

Abdilhay is a 22-year-old man who was born in Smara where he still lives. Abdilhay went to military school in the camps and is now a soldier in a special army unit, walking in the footsteps of both his father and grandfather. Abdilhay hopes to travel to Spain in the future to take part in Sahrawi activism to spread knowledge about his culture and cause. Abdilhay is the cousin of our translator Najla.

Mohamed L. is a 35-year-old man born in Smara. He went to Cuba at 13 and spent 15 years there studying to become a doctor. Now he spends half the year volunteering as a doctor in the camps and the other half of the year working as a doctor in Spain. He is in Spain for "a better life", but feels an obligation to come back and work in the camps to be part of the struggle.

Sidahmed is a 33-year-old man born in Awserd, where he still lives whenever he is back in the camps. He has lived in Sweden and Germany as a language student and currently hopes to go back to Germany to study and learn more. Sidahmed has worked as a waiter in Ibiza to earn money for his studies. When back in the camps, he has also worked as a translator for the Polisario, as an English teacher at the American English school in Smara, and most recently he has been teaching English at the Foreign Ministry.

Hamada is a 26-year-old man who lives in Boujdour, where he was born – an "original Boujdour" as he describes himself. Hamada went to high school in Qatar and then studied electrical engineering at a university in Algeria from which he graduated this summer. Currently he is actively engaged in the students union UESARIO and is an elected member of the Sahrawi league of students in Algeria, where he is responsible for transport.

Mohamed W. is a 30-year-old man, or as he calls it "a little in between", feeling neither young nor old. He was born and still lives in Boujdour. Mohamed studied economics in Algeria, but also had an interest in studying law. After graduation and spending one year not doing anything he found a job as an outreach worker with the UNHCR. Mohamed currently works

with the Ministry of Supplies and Cooperation, a job “not too far from his field of studying”. Mohamed has lived in Italy twice as a child, once for two years.

Leyla is a 28-year-old woman and the oldest daughter in our host family. Leyla was born in Dakhla but moved to Boujdour with the family after spending one year in Mauritania when she was sixteen. In Mauritania she and her family met with relatives from the occupied territory. Leyla has a 16-month-old son, Faizal, and her husband has been away to find work since before Faizal was born. Leyla grew up with her mother and grandmother, since her mother divorced her father and he returned to “Morocco” as she calls the occupied territory.

Umetha is a 27-year-old woman, small in posture and a bit shy. Umetha was born in Smara but moved to Boujdour with her family after the flood of 2006 destroyed their house. She speaks English and works for an Italian NGO in the camps. She is also an active member of the organization of non-violence, NOVA, which is how Najla knows her and was able to introduce us to her.

Maryam is a 25-year-old woman, open, friendly and passionate. She was born and raised in Smara, where she still lives. She studied in Algeria for a brief period but had to break off her studies to pass on the opportunity to go abroad to her siblings. Maryam then studied English at the Salam American English School in Smara where she now teaches, which has been a dream of hers since she was a child. She is proud to be able to speak English and is very focused on contributing to the cause by being able to tell and share the story.

Minetu is a 32 year-old-women. She was born and still lives in Smara. Minetu is an artist and uses her arts as a contribution to the cause. She currently works as the Principle of a branch in the Ministry of Culture and as a volunteer art teacher. Minetu is Najla’s cousin.

Fatma is a 21-year-old woman and a relative of our host family on her father’s side. Her mother is from Mauritania, which is also where Fatma was born and where she currently lives, but she spent most of her childhood living in the camps, which is also where she received her primary education. Fatma has a son named Mohamed but is divorced from her husband. She has taken a course to become a welder and is now hoping to find a job in Mauritania.

Sumeya is a 28-year-old woman born and still living in Smara. She has a master's degree in International Relations, Diplomacy and International Cooperation from Algeria. Sumeya now works as an Arabic teacher, a job which she also considers to be political, and she used every opportunity to teach children about the cause. Sumeya is Najla’s cousin.

Nanaha is a 26-year-old woman born and still living in Boujdour. She had to quit her high school studies in Algeria because her grandmother was alone and needed taking care of, but then started studying English at the American Salam School in Smara. She later studied a six month diploma course in informatics and computers and now works at an internet café in the camps. Nanaha is married, and although she might become a mother soon, she does not consider this as an obstacle to achieving her dream of going to college some day.

Abida is a very well-reflected 27-year-old woman. She was born in Smara, but lives in Boujdour with her family, who have a reputation for being very intellectual and well-educated. Her dream was to study military engineering, which proved to be impossible "*for a woman in Algeria*". Instead, she studied biology and specialised in biochemical engineering in Algeria. She now works in the national hospital in Rabouni and is co-founder and head of the organization of non-violence NOVA.

Bakita is a 30-year-old woman, born in Awserd and now living with her family in Boujdour. Bakita originally studied Human Resources in Algeria, but then took an additional one year certificate as a teacher because she experienced a lack of teachers in the camps and wanted to contribute. She then worked as a teacher for two years, but currently she works in the office of the Women's Union. Bakita is also a volunteer in NOVA.

Appendix 3: Data on informants

Breakdown of total # informants by age

Age	Tally	%
21-25	3	14,3
26-30	11	52,4
31-35	3	14,3
40s	1	4,75
50s	1	4.75
60s	2	9,5
Total	**21**	**100%**

Breakdown of total # informants by gender

Gender	Tally	%
Male	9	43
Female	12	57
Total	**21**	**100%**

Breakdown of young informants by education level (highest completed/current degree)

Education	Tally	%
Primary	-	-
Secondary	-	-
Highschool	2	11,7
College/ University	9	53
Other*	6	35,3
Total	**17**	**100%**

** eg. vocational training, language school, diploma courses*

Appendix 4: Overview of interviews

	Date	Interviewee(s)	Translated	Transcribed
1	15/10/15	Minister of Coop (Brahim Mojtar)	No	
2	15/10/15	UESARIO	Yes	√
3	17/10/15	Nagla (unstructured)	No	√
4	18/10/15	National Human Rights Commission	Yes	
5	19/10/15	Ihlaisa	Yes	
6	19/10/15	Ihlaisa extra info	Yes	
7	19/10/15	Mahjub	Yes	
8	20/10/15	Head of Parliament	Yes	
9	20/10/15	Jalihena	No	√
10	22/10/15	Fatma	Yes	√
11	23/10/15	Sumeya	Yes	√
12	23/10/15	Informal w. Nagla and Sumeya	*Yes*	*summary*
13	23/10/15	Young soldier / unfinished	Yes	
14	23/10/15	Leyla	Yes	√
15	24/10/15	Umetha	No	√
16	24/10/15	Maryam	No	√
17	25/10/15	Minetu	Yes	√
18	25/10/15	Mohamed S.	No	√
19	25/10/15	Abdilhay	Yes	√
20	25/10/15	Sidahmed	No	√
21	26/10/15	Nanaha	No	√
22	27/10/15	Mohamed L.	Yes	√
23	27/10/15	Abida	Yes	√
24	28/10/15	Bakita	Yes	√
25	28/10/15	Hamada	Yes	√

26	29/10/15	Abida about Nova	Yes	
27	29/10/15	Mohamed W.	Yes	√
28	31/10/15	Focus group	No	√
29	1/11/15	Ahmed	Yes	
30	1/11/15	Mimona	Yes	
31	2/11/15	Nagla	No	√
32		Informal w. Family		
33		Informal w. Nagla		
34		Informal w. Nagla in Dakhla		
35		Informal w. Nagla in Dakhla		
36		Informal w. Nagla		
37		Informal w. Nagla		
38		Informal w. Nagla		
39		Informal w. Nagla (about tea, at Hamadas house)		