



**Asylum Imaginary:**  
*Smartphones as Tools for Imagination and Memory at a Network for  
Migrant Women in Athens, Greece*

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**Abstract**

The smartphone has become an invaluable tool for migration. Applications like Facebook, Viber and WhatsApp connect a significant portion of the 62,000 refugees suspended in the “limbo state” of Greece with loved ones back home and in Northern European asylum destinations as they navigate next steps. Inspired by the work of Benedict Anderson, I apply *Imagined Communities* to the digital age, investigating how smartphones influence the way members of the Melissa Network, a resource and advocacy center run by and for migrant women in Athens, relate to migration, home and their future host nations. In a climate of deep uncertainty, I explore how the traits of desired asylum states are imagined, portrayed and communicated on mobile devices, transforming senses of belonging as destinations are experienced digitally outside the boundaries of their geographical contexts. Mobility propels migration and smartphones, and my research addresses the intersection of these forces as neoliberal policies continue to redefine technology and citizenship.

**1 Introduction**

In an April 2017 address to the London School of Economics, the World Bank Group president Jim Yong Kim identified an emerging phenomenon: the “global convergence of aspirations.” Smartphones and the mobile internet are allowing billions of users around the world to know “exactly how everyone else lives, in their own countries and abroad,” creating a new “reference income” that directly impacts personal relative happiness. In Athens, Greece, my research investigates how this phenomenon of connectivity intersects with international migration, which has increased 200 percent from 1960 to 2015 (Pew Research 2016). If, as *The Economist* predicts, by 2020, 80 percent of the global adult population will have connected smartphones, how will mass instantaneous access to the digital circulation of state messaging, memory and aspiration affect notions of national belonging and decision making for the stateless?



Fig.1: Khyana, Julienne and Safa pose for a selfie at the Melissa Network.

Over one million people have migrated to Europe in 2015, and Greece now hosts a standing population of about 62,000 documented refugees, with 38,000 counted as asylum seekers (IRC 2016).

Thousands have arrived on the shores of Lesbos, Samos and Kios, illegally smuggled on rubber dinghies from Turkey, fleeing conflict in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, or economic hardship and political and/or religious persecution in Iran, Pakistan and sub-Saharan Africa. Greece is battling a two-fold economic and migrant “crisis;” a sensationalist term that often evokes emergency while distracting from decades of unjust policy making and already existing inequalities (Cabot 2015: 2). Greece has endured eight years of recession, with debt to external creditors currently standing at a staggering, insurmountable €330 billion, almost twice the size of its economy (Psaropoulos 2017:1). Taxes have risen to 70 percent of an individual’s gross income, with little public services in return. Several rounds of austerity measures reduced the public health care budget by 35%, and soaring unemployment rates leaves more than one in three Greeks at risk of poverty (ibid).

The sealing of the Macedonian border, the slow implementation of the EU-Turkey accord and the recent resumption of The Dublin Regulation, which will return asylum seekers to the first European country they touched, keeps thousands stranded in limbo in Greece, a country ill-equipped to host such a vulnerable population. Hundreds of thousands of properties lie vacant across the country, but 13,200 people wait for their asylum claims to be processed in “a refugee archipelago” of approximately 39 camps spread between Athens, the northern border and eastern islands, over the official camp capacity of 9,000 (News Deeply 2017). Those unable or willing to secure a NGO-sponsored apartment or camp bed must resort to slum hotels, anarchist squats and the streets. While seeking asylum, migrants are not allowed to work, and only as of fall 2016 are migrant minors over the age of six able to attend Greek public schools (Psaropoulos 2016:1). Without the freedom to move or work, refugees in Greece are suffering from what some local doctors call systemic “despair.” Enforced stagnation and uncertainty sparked a 2.5 fold increase in the number of refugees in the region suffering from anxiety and depression and a threefold increase in the number of people with post traumatic stress disorder, according to Mediciens Sans Frontiers (2017). Smartphone accessibility and adoption among the migrant population in Athens is visibly high, and prolonged engagement with these devices seems to be a natural response to the

boredom, isolation and inactivity that most face in spite of the predominately connected and digital world.

Anthropological perspectives remain vital to the growing body of knowledge on migration, highlighting the individuals directly impacted by the fluctuating policies of the European Union and the insufficiencies of the Greek state (Cabot 2015: 4). In 2014, anthropologist and Melissa Network cofounder Nadina Christopoulou helped merge 24 existing community groups of migrant women from the Balkans, Philippines, Ukraine and African continent, who were mobilized but not sharing resources and strategies. When debt and disorganization obstructed adequate response to the thousands of migrants arriving in Victoria Square during the summer of 2015, the Melissa Network organized to occupy an old mansion steps away, in the vibrant immigrant neighborhood of Omonoia. Since inception, the Melissa Network has served over 450 newly arriving women from 40 different countries. The space is open five days a week from 8:30 to 19:00, offering language education, psycho-social support and creativity and skills development to over 125 women daily of all ages from countries such as Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Kenya, Nepal, Cameroon, Rwanda and the Congo, in rotating sessions. Their aim is to strengthen the bonds among migrant women networks, to promote empowerment and active citizenship, and to build a bridge of communication with the host society.

Women comprise half of the Greek refugee population, and the percentage of refugee women and children arriving in Greece and seeking asylum in the EU increased from an estimated 27% in June 2015 to 55% in January 2016 (UNHCR 2016). Some hope to reunify with male family members in Europe, others are “sent first,” as smugglers advise that single, or better yet, single pregnant women, will engender more sympathy en route. These women carry the burden of gender, race and class discrimination structures that are deeply embedded in European society, in addition to the gender-based vulnerability they may experience at “home” (Dilger; Dorhn 2016: 26). Often living in unsafe conditions unfit for long-term habitation, women are subjected to an increased risk of gender-based exploitation, persecution and violence. Largely absent from refugee discussions and images in mainstream media, the situations of migrant women are significantly unique (ibid: 13). Because of their experiences, the Melissa Network founding committee recognized newly arriving women as agents of change, “for their own lives, their families, their societies, as well as for the society that hosts them. Despite the adversities that they have faced...migrant women are multipliers and integrators” (Melissa Network 2016). A feminine space of immutable warmth and light, the Melissa Network’s center is outfitted like a home, replete with comfortable couches, a prayer room, a verdant backyard and walls embellished with colorful art created in visual workshops. On my first visit to Melissa, Snobr, an older Yazidi woman from Mosul who lost her daughter to ISIS, told me the Melissa Network “is the only place I can find peace.”

## 2 Method

My curiosity about the Melissa Network coincided with their need to collect visual data and track the evolution of the space and community over time. Since December 2016, I have volunteered as an in-house researcher and videographer. For about 15 - 20 hours per week, I engaged in participation observation, attending and filming Greek classes and art workshops with other members, and spent a significant amount of time socializing in the common spaces over lunch and tea. On request, I would film interviews, special events, protests and speeches. Occasionally, members and their families would invite me to their homes for dinner. To ensure reciprocity and transparency, the Melissa Network can use my footage and research for their own purposes, including policy claims and opportunity assessments.

Although English is the most common language at the Melissa Network, my knowledge of Greek, Farsi and Arabic is extremely limited, so I relied on the nuanced translations of my key informants: Ameneh<sup>1</sup> for Farsi, Mahsa for Dari, Christina, Aziza and Maryam for Arabic. My camera elicited a range of reactions, provoking curiosity and at times, perpetuating discomfort. I often felt uneasy with my camera, clearly a tool of privilege and power, and soon found it necessary to state my intention and purpose to the room before taking it out. During an informal, exploratory research stage, this was sometimes difficult to articulate. I respected individual requests to remain off-camera, and would stop filming if the room felt tense, timid or uncomfortable.

In Greek lessons, I learned the language of the host society in tandem with Melissa's members, and my classmates took pride in training me. The Melissa Network worked extensively with linguists to develop visual "utilitarian Greek" language modules, prioritizing the essential vocabulary for the female refugee experience, so students can navigate the spaces of health care, labor, education, law and safety within months. Because of these topics, and their compassionate instructors, classroom discussions would often erupt into spirited debates and confrontations about the students' experiences in Athens, their domestic relationships and goals for moving on. For some Melissa members, who may be undocumented or are still awaiting their asylum interviews, the future is so uncertain that they are sometimes less motivated to learn Greek. Language is already such an isolating determinant in a new country, the stress of not knowing which one to commit to is severely felt by Melissa's members, especially mothers who worry for the integration and success of their children. On one of my first visits to Melissa, a young woman from Syria told me, "my daughter keeps asking me, 'what language will I speak?'"

Language limitations inspired a greater appreciation in non-verbal communication, and a sharper eye for embodied experiences, feelings and ideas. I became more keenly aware of wrinkles, gaits, expressions, gesticulations and postures. In his article "Reflections on Hope as a Category of Social and Psychological Analysis," Vincent Crapanzano (2003) explores the challenges that dramatic differences in language

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<sup>1</sup> Certain names have been changed to protect subjects' identities.

pose to the universalist claims of phenomenological description. He asks, “Can we assume that desire and hope...are translinguistic, transcultural and transhistorical?” (ibid: 11). In drama therapy sessions at The Melissa Network, I witnessed the power of non-verbal expressions of trauma, hope and desire. During a late January session, we constructed archetypal hero narratives from stories tucked away in our memories and imagination.



Fig. 2 : Elodie and Julienne during a drama therapy session.

Participants were instructed by their therapists, Thaleia and Katerina, to direct four friends to play their Hero, Destination, Obstacle and Helper. About half of the class chose to recreate their personal migration journeys, the Hero being themselves or a woman like them. Borders represented the Obstacles; asylum officers stood as the Helpers. The directors positioned their cast around the room. I later learned that this technique is an effective, structured experience of psychomotor therapy, in which “participants can safely project their inner reality into a space filled with real people, where they can explore the cacophony and confusion of the past” and “use the three dimensional nature of the situation to rescript their lives” (Van der Kolk 2015: 300).” Participants directed their friends to embody the Destination, which were Northern European states such as Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands. “What is Germany like?” Thaleia asked Jomana, a young Syrian woman, who assigned Ameneh, to play the role. “Germany is kind, Germany is open, Germany is sweetheart.” I watched Ameneh close her eyes and imagine Germany, a warm, rounded smile on her face, her body gently rocking left and right, arms open, palms facing the sky. When Jalila autobiographical protagonist reached Ameneh, or Germany, she was greeted with a warm embrace, Germany’s hands tenderly caressing her new arrival’s back. This precise moment inspired the core question of my research during this period. I wanted to understand how Melissa members like Jalila formed ideas about the characteristics, traits and anticipated experiences of their desired asylum states and future host societies, and how much social media, virtual spaces and mobile devices play a role in their imaginative constructions.



Fig. 3: Mahsa and friends documenting their manicures before Film Club.

After two months of establishing a comfortable rapport, I proposed hosting Digital Ethnography discussion groups at the Melissa Network, with the aim of producing knowledge on the specific situations of its members. I devised a loose participatory discussion guide, covering the focal subjects of mobile phone usage, expectations for asylum states, and communications about Athens and countries of origin. In February, I facilitated three 90 minute discussion groups with a total of thirty young women, using our personal smartphones as stimulus. I supplemented the data with continued participant observation and one-on-one narrative interviews with engaged members of the network. In February I also cofounded a weekly after-school film club at Melissa with my colleague, Dove Barbanel, further strengthening my relationship with this community and imbuing my presence with purpose. At Film Club, we analyze short films from France, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan and Greece, discussing key elements of filmmaking such as story, mood, framing, music, editing, point of view and representation. Through homework and in-class exercises, we challenge our talented teenage students to creatively and poetically frame their worlds through their smartphone cameras. These films illustrate their unique positions in Athens with intimacy and insight unattainable through traditional methods of research.

### 3 Considerations and Theoretical Backgrounds

Phenomenologists like Robert Desjarlais and Gaston Bachelard inspired me to use creative, participatory methodologies to understand imagination, memory and experience. *Imagined Communities* provide the foundation for the title and concept of this project and using constructivist grounded theory, I turned to Vincent Crapanzano's anthropology on hope and future horizons, Sherry Turkle's exploration of self presentation on social media and Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller's investigation of transnational families to elevate my data throughout the research process. To explore how these themes may specifically apply to the female refugee experience, I draw on the research of Hansjörg Dilger and Kristina Dohrn on the International Women's Space in Berlin, and Zoe Robertson, Raelene Wilding and

Sandra Gifford on the “family imaginary” of young Karen people resettled in Melbourne.

## 5 A Community (and Wifi) Center

My discussion groups invariably revealed that the Melissa Network is a precious source of wifi. *Melissa* is Greek for bee, a reference to the female capacity for action, integration and change. In a December speech, Nadina referred to the center’s ambient “buzz” of Greek, Farsi, Urdu, Arabic, laughter, music and video chats. Looking around the space, almost half of Melissa’s members’ eyes are tethered to the screens of Samsung G5s and Huaweis, faces illuminated by the glow of WhatsApp, Facebook and Viber, while others raise a single arm at nearly 45 degrees, the most flattering angle for selfies. Many Melissa instructors have begun confiscating phones at the beginning of classes, insisting that “disconnecting” will improve concentration, comprehension and retention of the skills necessary to actively engage in Athenian society. In my one-on-one interviews and focus groups, I learned that my respondents spend on average at least five hours per day on their phones, with many stating that they are “online” every waking hour of the day.

At the Pakistani market and corner kiosks, my participants, or the primary purchasers in their families, obtain Sim cards for €5, others upgrade digitally to supply data for the month. But at urban refugee camps like Elliniko or Eleonas, wifi is limited or absent, so Melissa offers a critical opportunity to connect on WhatsApp, Viber or Telegram, download on Vidmate and post on Facebook and Instagram. In Athens, the smartphone can offer migrants constant distractions from a physical environment that relentlessly signals isolation and rejection. Accessing the mobile internet means plugging into the global capitalist society that currently excludes them, and finding solace in a curated virtual world of familial love, belonging and internet friendships. This presents an interesting challenge for the Melissa Network, a space designed for safe, supportive community engagement and social cohesion. Wifi accessibility enhances daily respite, but may sometimes distract members from fully benefiting from the network’s services. In *Alone Together*, digital scholar Sherry Turkle (2011) describes this type of social crutch as a “buffering of independence” for adolescents and the same could be applied to new arrivals in an urban environment: smartphones may hinder the experience of feeling truly independent in Athens, creating an intermediate space to hold hands with virtual loved ones as migrants strive for autonomy and livelihood.

## 6 Constructing a More Agreeable World on Facebook

At Melissa, Facebook is primarily accessed for lighthearted exchanges and uplifting messages. Emma, from Kenya, sometimes hands me her six month old baby, Esther, so she “can take a break,” immediately opening Facebook on her phone and scrolling her feed. Almost every Facebook friend I’ve added from the Melissa Network uses a false avatar—profile photos of small animals, quotes, or women found on the internet—and a pseudonym for their digital personae. Raina from

Afghanistan tells me, “I use Facebook, with my name but not my photo because my face is not professional...it’s not beautiful, don’t like. I post to home, my friends, my family, Greece, Germany, Iran, the Island, everywhere. For everybody. I post some quotes and words that someone can look at, some photos of my daughter, some rap music. Stuff like this. Things that I like and my friends would like.”

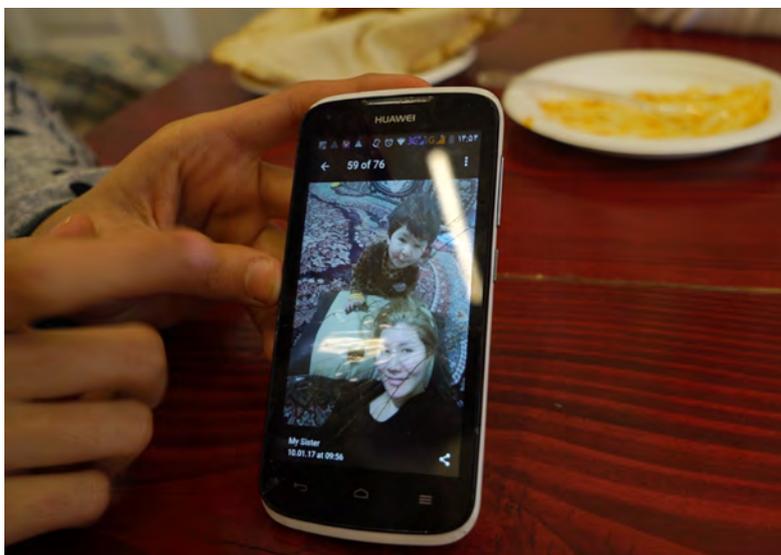


Fig. 4: Saman’s photo library of her family, including her sister in Tehran.

When Ayla, a 22-year-old economics major from Dasmascus, turns her phone off, “it feels weird, but good. Sometimes it just gets boring being on the phone for so long.” She’ll sometimes “take a break” from the web and just look at photos on her phone. She’s gone as long as month without Facebook because she felt like she was wasting her time aimlessly browsing photos and news. She describes her experience with Facebook as “kind of tuning out and turning off her mind,” She can’t handle heavy political news or long reads, she just wants to look at friends’ photos and “not think.” On Facebook, her attention is somewhere else.

Saman, 17, uses her phone every waking hour, and she only sleeps 6 hours per night. On Facebook she uses her real name and the photograph of a younger girl running across a grassy field in what appears to be England. She shares photographs and YouTube clips with her friends, positive quotes from famous figures like Joyce Carol Oates, and videos from *The Weekly Show*, debunking myths about Muslims. Nargis, who enjoys posting photos of animals she encounters around Athens, told me, “I don’t go anywhere for example, for picnic, I just use my phone. My phone is for fun.”

With fake passports, millionaire smugglers, illegal statuses and as little as 6% of births annually reported in Afghanistan, identities are vulnerable and thus manipulated, optimized or performed on social networks for protection. Larisa, 15, from Hamo, Syria, tells me she is “afraid of someone cutting my face and putting it on their body. Stealing my identity. Someone saying, ‘You do as I say or I put your face on the internet.’” Participants from Iran and Afghanistan are still reticent to

discuss the government on their phones. Shakiba tells me, “Information in Iran very sensitive. If we insult our president our phone shuts off, they kill us. Even here we are afraid to talk about our president.” Ameneh is still afraid, but Sanaz will talk about it. While several women cited BBC, BBC Persia, and Manitou as news sources, they avoid sharing political views on Facebook. “We don’t like this because it is fake,” Sanaz said. “It is dangerous, we can’t trust all the news.”

Turkle acknowledges that there is “performance and self presentation everywhere:” at school, in our families, at work and on social networks (2011: 272). For friends at the Melissa Network, Facebook identities and discourses navigate the parameters of multiple social contexts: Muslim modesty and privacy norms, intercontinental beauty standards, the precariousness of the refugee identity, state surveillance, and the desire, or perhaps, a survival strategy, to plug in and contribute to a positive, uplifting, virtual society that’s in contrast to or in tune with the real world.

## 7 Extending Home through Chat Platforms

In transnational families, we understand that mobile communications and polymedia can reinforce a subtle “sense of being together,” long after the physical family unit has been disrupted by war, forced separation or migration (Zhao 2003; Licoppe and Smoreda 2005). Mobile communication is a means of overcoming these “seemingly unbearable experiences” of silence and separation and thus creatively blurring the lines of presence and absence (Licoppe and Smoreda 2005: 321; Robertson, Wilding and Gifford 2016: 5). With staggered family migration and uncertain futures, mobile connection provides a sense of agency and control. Tanaz, from Afghanistan told me that her “heart beats faster” when her phone is unavailable because it is the visual and textual log of her virtual relationship with her family. This type of data provides a realism essential to the “family imaginary,” supplying “irrefutable evidence” that they exist, however far across the world (Robertson, Wilding and Gifford 2016: 13).

Naz, a 29 Iraqi women migrating solo from Iran, said that she feels “powerless” when her phone is off or missing. Like other unaccompanied women, she is spending more time on her phone in Athens than back home. She likened the smartphone to an indispensable ‘best friend,’ who connects her with her family. Most participants use WhatsApp, Viber and IMO to text, send photos and voice messages, and video chat with their loved ones as frequently as four times a day. Shirin from Afghanistan, who spends about 8 hours on her phone per day, told me “I don’t miss them [her family in Kabul] because we have a phone and we can sing together and talk together, share news all day. It’s like we’re still together.”



Fig. 5: Naz shares a photo of her boyfriend in the Melissa' Network's common area.

I heard a number of examples of weekly routines and rituals performed over video chats: innovative methods of sustaining normative roles of domestic family structures despite long distance separation (Miller 2009). Larisa goes grocery shopping with her siblings at the Lidl in Bonn, Germany. "I feel close to them," Larisa said. Mahsa, a 16 year old Hazara refugee from Tehran, is a brave and brilliant voice of the Melissa Network. Despite missing the last two years of formal education, Mahsa taught herself English on Google Translate and now speaks before the Greek Parliament and United Nations on the plight of Hazaras. Mahsa watched her brother, an unaccompanied minor who arrived in Stockholm two years ago, blow out candles for his 17th birthday. At their apartment in Athens, Mahsa's family ate cake in celebratory solidarity.

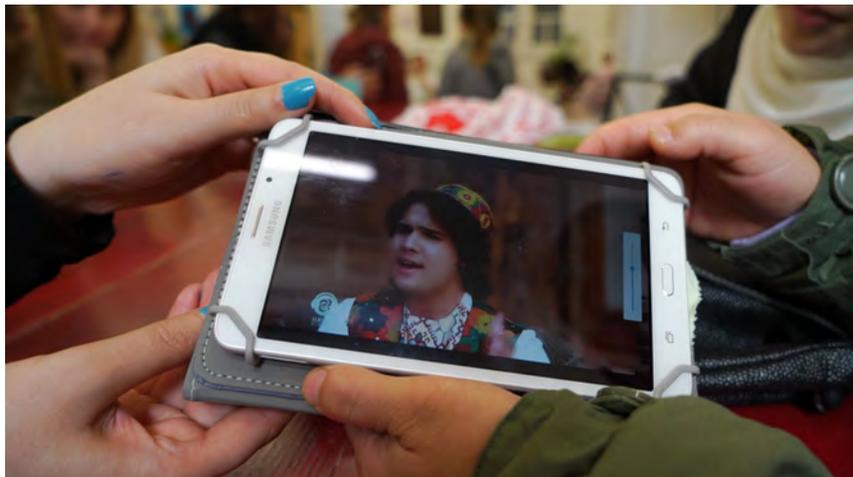


Fig. 6: Sanaz shares Afghan music videos during a discussion group.

For Naz, a woman with no established family connections in Europe or a concrete future domestic base to imagine, images of home can sometimes be too painful, opening vulnerable, modifiable memories of Iraq. "I cry to hear my mother's voice," Naz said. "When I am talking with my mother, she shows me videos and photos of my house in Iran,

it makes me sad and I miss my family.” But this evidence remains essential to the mediated feeling of co-presence.

Family networks with no internet connection due to conflict or cost barriers leave migrant women such as Raina from Kabul purely to her own imaginative devices. Raina tells me “I don’t like my country because my country every time fight, fight, fight. Very angry. But I just miss home, my mother, my father, my sister. She has a new daughter, but I can’t see her because she doesn’t have a phone. Sometimes in the night, I wonder about my new niece. Are her eyes big or small? I create a picture. We can’t communicate. It’s very difficult for me. I want to go to a rich country to work and then come back to my country and see my family.”

The seemingly infinite catalog of music and film for public consumption on YouTube and Vidmate extends the culture of home across respective diasporas. Many participants listen to the music of their countries of origin before bed. Jeanette unwinds to melodies from Rwanda at night “to feel relaxed.” In crowded camps and shared rooms, music is a strategy to silence the disruptions of uncomfortable sleeping environments and imagine a more familiar space. Elodie, always with one earbud in place, listens to Congolese music at Melissa. Sanaz watches *Afghan Voice* and Parvina prefers Afghan comedy shorts, which she downloads at Melissa to watch in bed. Larisa, like many other hardworking, studious members of Melissa, watches educational Greek and English videos on YouTube, but when she misses home, “I watch Syrian series and films from Syria, and I cry, but crying makes me feel better. Gets the feeling out.” Because Shirin has no television at home, she downloads videos at Melissa to keep her 3 year old entertained. This seems to be the case for most of the mothers of children below the age of six. Nargis listens to pleasant Iranian dance music for “happy dreams.”

## 8 Imagined Asylum States: Mediating the Future

“You can do all you can to realize your hopes,” Crapanzano writes (2003: 6). “But ultimately they depend on the fates—on someone else.” The palpable recession and crippled state of Greece isn’t exactly the Europe many Melissa members anticipated. If asylum interviews fail, some must choose between prolonged waiting, permanent residency in Greece, continued illegal movement or repatriation. Answers from UNCHR remain unclear, but rumors continue to circulate around Athens about EU efforts to reduce Greece’s total number of camps from 39 to 10, and relocate Afghans to “deportation camps,” where the waiting will become so unbearable, they will voluntarily resign to repatriation (News Deeply 2017). Hope, in Athens, can be seen “as a normal technique for solving a problem or finding a way out of a dilemma,” requiring a creative combination of imagination and real stimulus to actualize a future beyond the one that seems to be coming (Burridge 1995: 219).

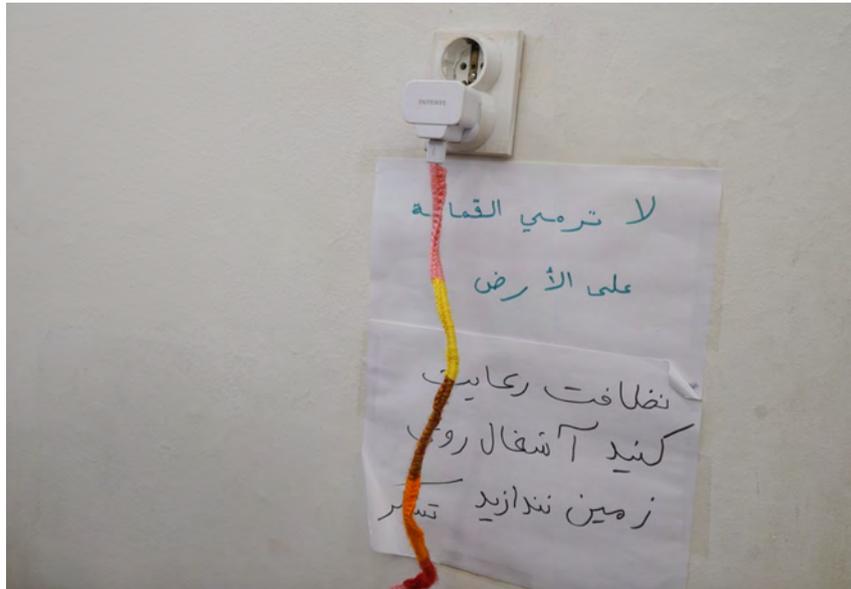


Fig. 7: A custom charger sleeve knit by Larisa's mother.

Imaginations of future asylum states are contextualized by stimulus transferred from transnational family networks on mobile devices. My participants consistently felt that family reunification is far more important than details about the asylum state. Family members act as critical mediators, sending images, accounts and descriptions that form a set of associations about nations like Germany and Sweden. The women in my discussion groups find the most comfort in knowing that the familiar domestic sphere they were forced to abandon will be recreated, albeit in the surrounding environment of a new European metropolis. Processed outside of their physical borders and geographical contexts, the descriptions that Melissa members receive from their familial counterparts a concretized “body of notions,” assembled to form participatory, communal, “myth-dreams” of “the total environment” of their future states (ibid: 27).

Larisa thinks “Germany will be the same as Greece, but with family.” On IMO, her brother tells her “that [Germans] are not so close to you. They don't talk to other people. If you make a little noise they will knock on your door and say, ‘be quiet.’ Even if it's only 18:00 p.m.” Mahin decided in Tehran that she would reunify with her uncle in Germany. “Germany will give us better houses, better benefits. It will be very different from Athens. I can only think of housing right now. And what's important is having family there.” Ayla awaits delayed reunification with her siblings in Gothenburg after forgetting to lie about her age in her asylum interview. For now, she sleeps at City Plaza, an anarchist-squatted seven-story hotel in Omonoia that provides housing and services for over 400 refugees. On a bench outside the Archaeological Museum, where she likes to read and practice English with her friend Mohammad, Ayla tells me that she receives information about Sweden on WhatsApp from her brother and video chats with her sister, and doesn't do much research beyond that. “I'll find out when I get there.” Ayla hears that “Sweden is nice. The streets are clean, but you don't really see people out in the evening. They are very organized.” She doesn't hear much about the opportunities, but knows it's a better place

for work. She will have to “deal with the Swedish,” she laughs, whose language and culture will be more difficult to adapt to. “Greeks are closer to Syrians.” She can see it in their physical features, their body language. “They’re out in the evenings, playing music and hanging out in parks. The weather is good. This is just like Damascus, the lifestyle is similar. The Greeks are easy this way.” Memories of home, the conditions of Athens and mobile connections with relatives map the framework for Larisa, Ayla and Mahin’s blueprints of the future, which are anchored in the nuclear family space and stretch outward, to the streets, neighborhood shops and cafes, schools and workplaces.

Nargis gathers information on her future-state from her brother in Germany, and internet friends on Instagram. She finds young Afghans like her on the platform, who have made it to Germany, and direct messages them. “I think Germany will be like here, but will have more rules and the people are more cold,” Nargis laughs. “My friend on Instagram tells me that.” A bright and resourceful student, Nargis thinks Germany “likes hard workers. I want to go to music school, but I think this job doesn’t have a good future, and now I want to be a doctor.” Nargis has grown to love Athens, and is reticent to begin again, but she knows she must join her brother. On her Instagram account, Nargis performs a future identity, pretending that she already lives in Germany with hopes that the borders will rise to the occasion.

Sanaz from Tehran will reunite with her sister in Hamburg in January 2018. An Athenian family hosts her and her younger brother at their apartment. Sanaz adores Greek people, and she’s not entirely convinced that Germany is paradise. On the phone, her sister reports that the education opportunities are strong, which is important to Sanaz because she dreams of pursuing dentistry. With a blinding smile, Sanaz tells me, “My sister said all the supermarkets and stores close very early. Not like Greece or Athens where things go late. Germans abide by the rules, whereas Athens is more loose”. When Sanaz wants to feel hopeful for Germany, she Googles her prospective university, where she plans to study for the next six years, free of tuition. Perhaps influenced by some Athenians, Shakiba hears rumors that people in Germany are “fascists,” she laughs. “But I don’t know, I must go and see.” Coming from Iran, Sanaz knows to draw distinctions between the people and the state. “Some people think all Iranians are fascist, but it’s not all like that. Same with America. I am not my country, I’m an individual. Some people are more critical than others and Germany is somewhere in between.”

Those who do not have family members waiting conjure more nebulous ideas of the future. Ayla tells me that her brother arbitrarily selected Sweden over Germany after making the journey to Turkey, which was so traumatizing, he said “it didn’t really matter after that.” He describes the arrival as “finding himself in Sweden.” Although Naz knows her chances of reaching England are unlikely, she visualizes her destination through Google Image searches of London and Big Ben. She researches Sweden and Poland as alternative destinations. Naz predicts that England “will be very nice. Respect is very important there. It’s a better economy and it will be beautiful, better than here.” Parvina, 23, from Afghanistan, echoes Naz’s sentiment: “I don’t know where I’m going, but somewhere better than here.” Without the possibility of

family reunification, or the receipt of direct stimulus from Northern Europe, women like Naz and Parvina must build on memories of home and the realities of Greece as the comparative foundations for another imagined host country. Instead of seeing the future through the eyes of family members, they gather impersonal, algorithmically determined data from the vast terrain of the internet to supply their expectations of the future.



Fig. 8: *Saman, Mahsa and friends for the Athens Metro at Victoria Square.*

## 9 The Performance Loop

An important pattern emerged when I asked my participants how they portray Athens on smartphones with their transnational families. Most of the solo female travelers I spoke with, who are the first to migrate in their families, are guarded and not completely honest in their representations of Athens, due to concerns about worrying their intimates. Jeanette sends photos of remarkable moments in Athens, like when it snowed on January 9th. But Jeanette refrains from sharing selfies with her sons in Rwanda because she doesn't want them to notice the burden of the last year on her face, and fret. To Elodie, people in Athens are more selfish and closed off than back home. Elodie sends textual reports to Congo, but skips photos for the same cautionary reason. Too much information could remind loved ones of her tribulations. Naz tells me, "I'm not honest. I lie. Why? Because I don't want to make my mother sad. They are very sensitive. I'm alone and I think nobody can understand me. So I take happy crazy selfies to send to them." When Naz admitted this, most of the room sheepishly agreed that they transmit a portrait of Athens that's rosier than reality to the people they have left behind.

Mobile technology enables us to communicate a composed digital presence, even to those closest to us. Perhaps this act of omitting difficult information and sharing idealized aesthetics of the European experience in online forums perpetuates the continental myth-dream. When the highly visual culture of the mobile internet pressures us to communicate

that “it’s better here” even when our host society falls dramatically short of our expectations, we may efficaciously help inspire our personal networks to take steps to move to a place where, evidently, “it’s better than here.” When we arrive, and face ghettoized reception, a jobless market, human rights abuses and xenophobia, it’s still important to maintain an optimistic, successful digital presence, as a strategy to retain hope for ourselves and for the networks we left behind. And so, the cycle continues.

## 10 Conclusion

When I left Athens last Christmas break, rumors spread around Elliniko that the holiday would be similar to Ramadan. Everything would relax, including the borders. A 26-year-old Melissa member, Fatima, illegally left Greece in a overcrowded van. She woke up in a hospital in Niš, Serbia, with no legs. A brutal car crash dismembered Fatima and killed her mother. Fatima still waits in a Serbian hospital with her two children, legally unable to reunify with her 50 extended family members in Ireland. “The tragedy that has befallen this girl is enormous, beyond belief, and it’s vital for her to be with her family, rather than in a camp or an institution,” her cousin Zekria, a Dublin-based doctor, told the Guardian. Such a future for my friends at Film Club and the Melissa Network is too brutal to imagine. Helene Cixous writes, “as subject for history, woman always occurs simultaneously in several places...In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history.” Each individual woman of the Melissa Network embodies the history of Europe’s treatment of migrants. The continent’s policies, promises and disappointments affect her daily physicality and consciousness.

Benedict Anderson (2004: 24) explains that a concept essential to understanding nationalism is Walter Benjamin’s “‘homogenous, empty time,’ an imagining of a sociological simultaneity supplied, in the eighteenth century, by the technical forms of the novel and the newspaper. In this new era of simultaneity, mediated by the world wide web, we can interact with our future fellow citizens in real time, confirm their existence instantaneously and access our future-state’s collective memory as it moves through history with the patten of a few fingertips. The mobile internet enables a familial omnipresence and a powerful simultaneity of the past, current and future societies that members of the Melissa Network carry with them, functioning as vital sources for support, care and hope—in their hands and at a distance. Stuck in a limbo state, refugees in Greece use their phones to construct an imaginative belonging to their future country, harbor a longing for their past and negotiate the daily realities of their temporary Athens environment in the face of deep uncertainty. The ad-supported algorithms of platforms like Google and Facebook streamline conversations, curate aesthetics, homogenize points of view, shrink geographies and answer inquiries about the universe, overlooking the diverse needs, identities and situations of their billions of users. Virtual simultaneity propels migration, but cannot remedy its consequences.

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