

Narration, Closeness and Distance: A Case-Study in an Italian High School (Liceo Artistico Buniva, Pinerolo)

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My research is structured around two areas. **The first area** deals with the biographies of artists who put issues such as migration, transit, passages of population from one continent to another at the center of their art-works. This perspective considers the artist as a memorial narrating figure and the art-work as traces of languages, codes, traditions and challenges towards new forms of citizenship.

The second area concerns the fallout of some aspects of biographical research in the school context. At this stage of the research, my task has been to monitor responses and reactions (emotional too) of female and male students (students' ages range from fourteen, fifteen to eighteen) after they have watched some artists' videos and listened to their speeches. In the future I will ask them to create moments of "performance", also taking into account a symbolic perspective for a subjective representation of their own history. They will also be encouraged to produce autobiographical individual and group texts.

Subjectivity

This work is done by two classes of the Liceo Arstitico of the Institute Michele Buniva of Pinerolo, a town thirty kilometers from Turin (a town which was impacted in a negative way by the transformations happening in Turin due to its transition from an industrial to a post-industrial model). This research is part of a tradition of field

studies that involved many European surveys in the last twenty years. This tradition was born in the school of the Seventies after the emergence of subjectivity in historiography and it is based on researches that give relevance to the existential itineraries of students. Itineraries thought as floating spaces, such as borders, liminal fluid and liquid zones. I am referring to the studies coordinated by Jerome Bruner for the United States and England, by Francoise - Alsaker and August- Flammer for Germany and Switzerland and by Alessandro Cavalli and Silvia Bonino for Italy (1).

The teachers

The work with the classes has required the active collaboration of three teachers who have supported the objectives of the research. I agreed with them on the methodology that should be developed in the future. This means the research is also opened to another subject: teachers, men and women, born around the Seventies and with a specific path of training and cultural transmission. We must give particular attention to this aspect, because it is the core of a relationships system that structures the video interviews.

The videos

The students have seen some movies. The animated film, **Felix in Exile**, by a South African author, William Kentridge. This is a film of 1994 that recalls the first free elections in South Africa.

The teachers have insisted particularly on the loneliness, on the exile interfaced with

the animation technique of Kentridge. A technique structured on effacement that Kentridge thinks as a metaphor for the loss of historical memory, a metaphor for the removal that cancels the injustices, racisms and acts of violence. Another animation video is **En Camino**, a work of two Argentine artists, Mirta Kupferminc and Mariana Sosnowski (they mix different approaches such as picture, poetry, painting, video and photography). Finally, we presented two videos (**Uranium mine** and **Iron train**) of **Sahara Chronicle** by Ursula Biemann. Videos that show the conditions of life and work and the exodus of people across Sub-Saharan areas, as Morocco, Mauritania, Libya toward Europe. A shift of human groups that marks the territory, and in some aspects transforms it (see references to the land art). Hence, the necessity to examine the idea of counter-geography sustained by Biemann in depth with the students.

After that the students were video-interviewed, and stimulated to write short texts and drawings. Their speeches were preceded by self-portraits where traces of important moments from their personal and family life appeared as well as traces of the local and national contexts. In this direction, particular attention was given to the sons and daughters of migrants.

The work

Considering the individual biographical experiences, all students were encouraged to talk about the subjects of the video. The sets of questions related to:

a) the historical knowledge of the videos' issues (apartheid, forms of European

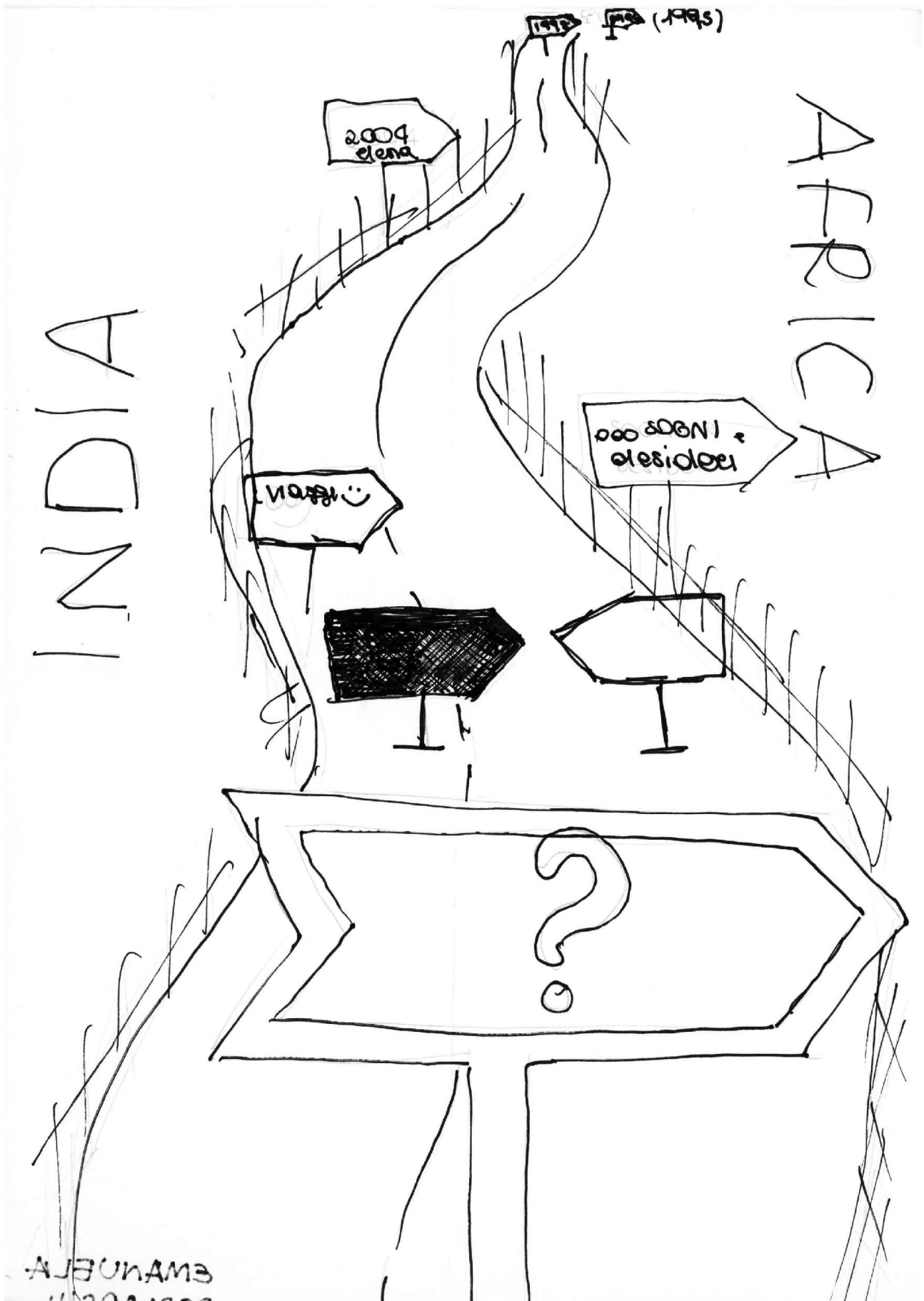
colonialism, political conditions of the countries involved. Some questions also focused on post-colonialism);

b) the description of the experience of migration. This set was aimed particularly to children of migrants.

c) the attention to the places, the ranges where the students talk about this experience (family, school, friendship-networks).

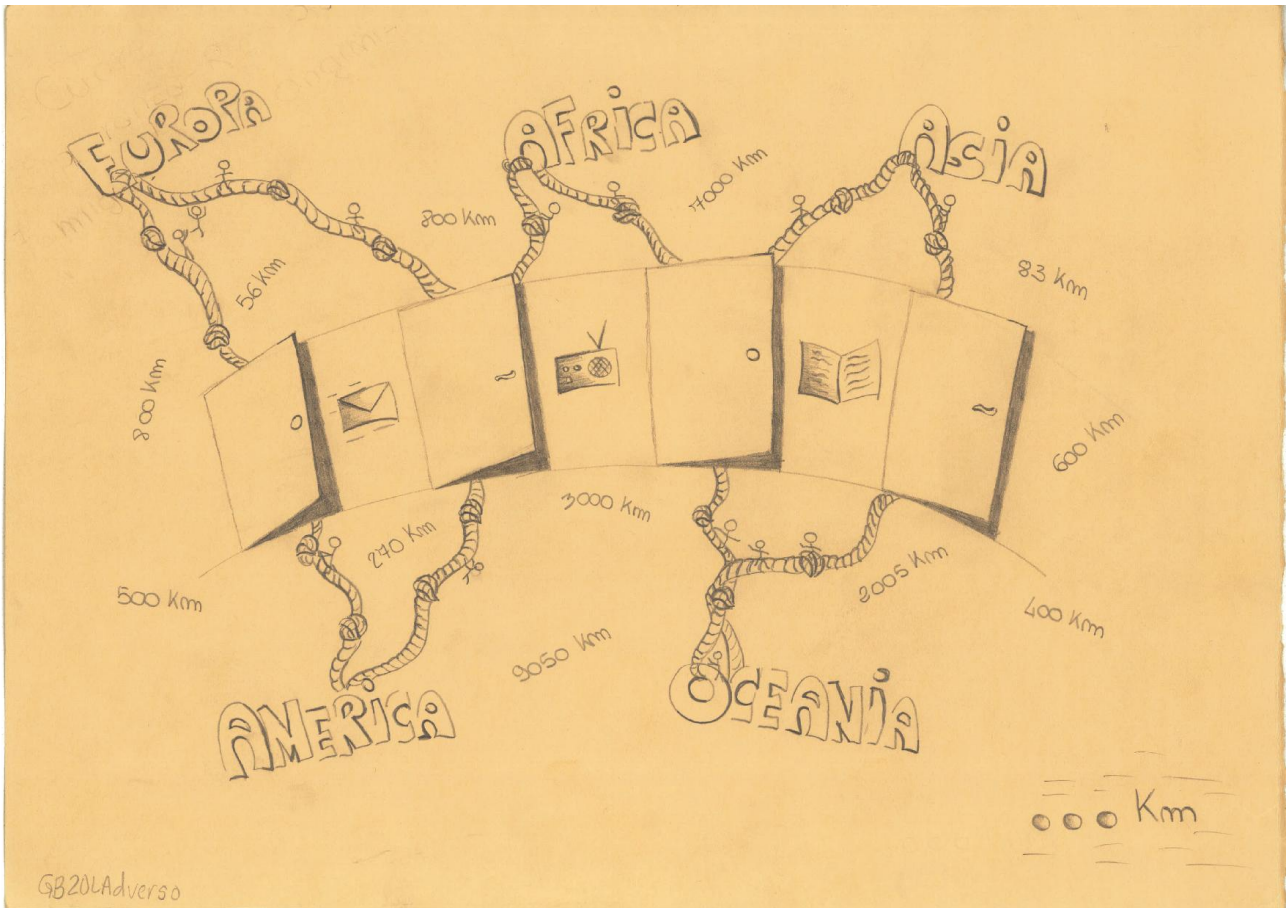
d) the feelings suggested in the situations described in the videos: nostalgia, sadness, but also, joy, cheerfulness.

e) the focus on the landscape. In some videos of “Sahara Chronicle” by Ursula Biemann the desert is the central element. The desert, but also the wind, which blows strongly. During the interviews, the teachers pointed out how the wind continually changes the landscape. Some girls said they wouldn’t live in a country where the landscape is never the same. This was a suggestion that was particularly developed with students of the first grade (students aged fourteen, fifteen). The space appeared to them as an element hard to dominate, almost unknown, also source of fears. In the presentation of her drawing, Emanuela Demarchi – fifteen years old– points out the presence of a black sign. *The black sign*, she writes in a short text, *indicates all the fears, the bad things*. Outside a road - that goes on endlessly - stand out the names, India and Africa. Two vague words surrounding an empty space. This sense of disorientation also characterizes the relationship with the future.



(Space, on one hand, and time, on the other). *The future is uncertain and the past is just memories*, says Shikeya Sue, a student of New Zealand origin – fifteen years old– presenting her drawing entitled “Infinity”. (Shikeya didn’t give her drawing). This phrase, *the future is uncertain*, appears as a narrative *cliché*. So the oral representations intertwine images, stereotypes, sometimes prejudices, but also irreducible forms of subjectivity. The recent debate about the youth stereotypes - I think the research of Aneta Křenková, Wieczorek – Hecker and of Tullio de Mauro - points out the codes, the young people’s linguistic registers as mirror of displacement, of unease, of disquiet. A scenario where the stereotypes are configured as narrative cages that imprison, that prevent from translating the complexity of thoughts (2).

About time, and sense of the future, many students insist on the difficulty they have placing themselves into it. Peraldo Anna, seventeen years old, puts at the center of her drawing a series of doors connected to the five continents through strings of different sizes (long and short).



The strings, she writes in a brief cover letter, *are the undefined future*. (The strings appear as wires). It is on this question of representation in the future that Lara Ennasri intervened (Lara, fifteen years old, her father comes from Casablanca). Lara doesn't want to live in Morocco in the future, although she loves everything about it: the food, the life of the people, the way of dressing, of staying together, even, she says, religion. Lara drew a veiled woman,

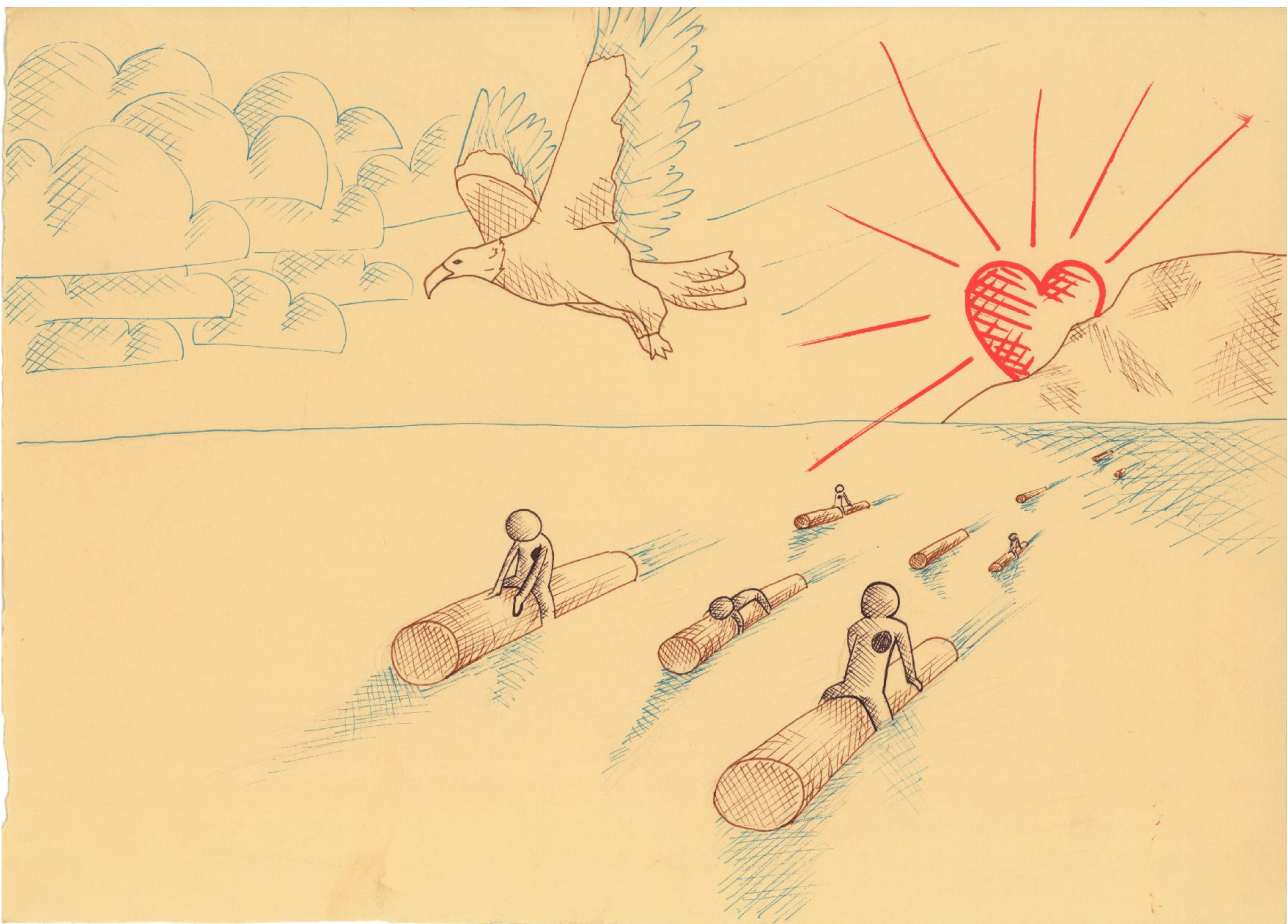


but the phrase that sums up the idea, the focus of the project made together is the motto: "Travelling to the world." Lara explains. The veiled woman is what lies behind, and this reality must be reckoned with, but the desire is to move forward. So, beyond the images and the stereotypes, we are witnessing a very interesting crossing between continuity and disruption. We can say that the figure that best reflects this situation is like hanging in the balance.

The images

Balance re-emerges also in the Italian students' portraits of migrants. Migrants are represented as an attached group inside their own. They have no name (the names are not easy to remember). They are bodies. Bodies among other bodies whose features

seem to be all the same. For the students video interviewed, migrants in Europe live a double loneliness. They've lost the strength of relationships in their countries and they cannot find a recognition in the countries where they seek refuge. They are immersed into solitude and nostalgic feelings. A student, Luca Arancio, eighteen years old, in his drawing shows a few men on water astride on big trunks. Everyone has a hole either in the back or in the chest. They are deprived of their hearts. They're automatons moving on an element that's not the ground.



So, following the intention of outlining both the imaginary and the stereotypes, it will be necessary to examine the bond between relationships and loneliness in depth, also including the point of view of the gender. A bond which produces a sense of displacement, of instability and a bond that for the students reaches out from their

family to the community, to the society, to the nation.

Biographical experience

Now, the meaningful element is the centrality of the individual biographical experience overlapping the idea of nation. Considering the personal biographical experiences, the same Europe/global village dichotomy would seem not to have its own autonomy. The relationship between Europe and the world, goes overlapping and shrinking to the historical division between the North and the South of Italy. Many students come from families migrated from South to North of Italy, where they establish themselves for many generations. Antonino Barbieri, eighteen years old, after seeing the video “*Felix in exile*”, compares the meaning of Felix’s exile in a hotel room of Paris, to his perception of distance and homesickness for his land, Calabria. A form of “*déracinement*” that also regards another student Angela d’Affuso, eighteen years old. Angela wants to go back to Naples, the native city where her relatives live, after she has finished the course in High School. *Here ... she says, I have no one except for my parents.*

So, the reconstruction of the family relationship networks becomes for many students the reason that moves the subjects from one place to another. The topic of transit itself is not separated from an idea of **geography of emotions, a geography of affection**. For the students this issue always goes back to a mental conception that

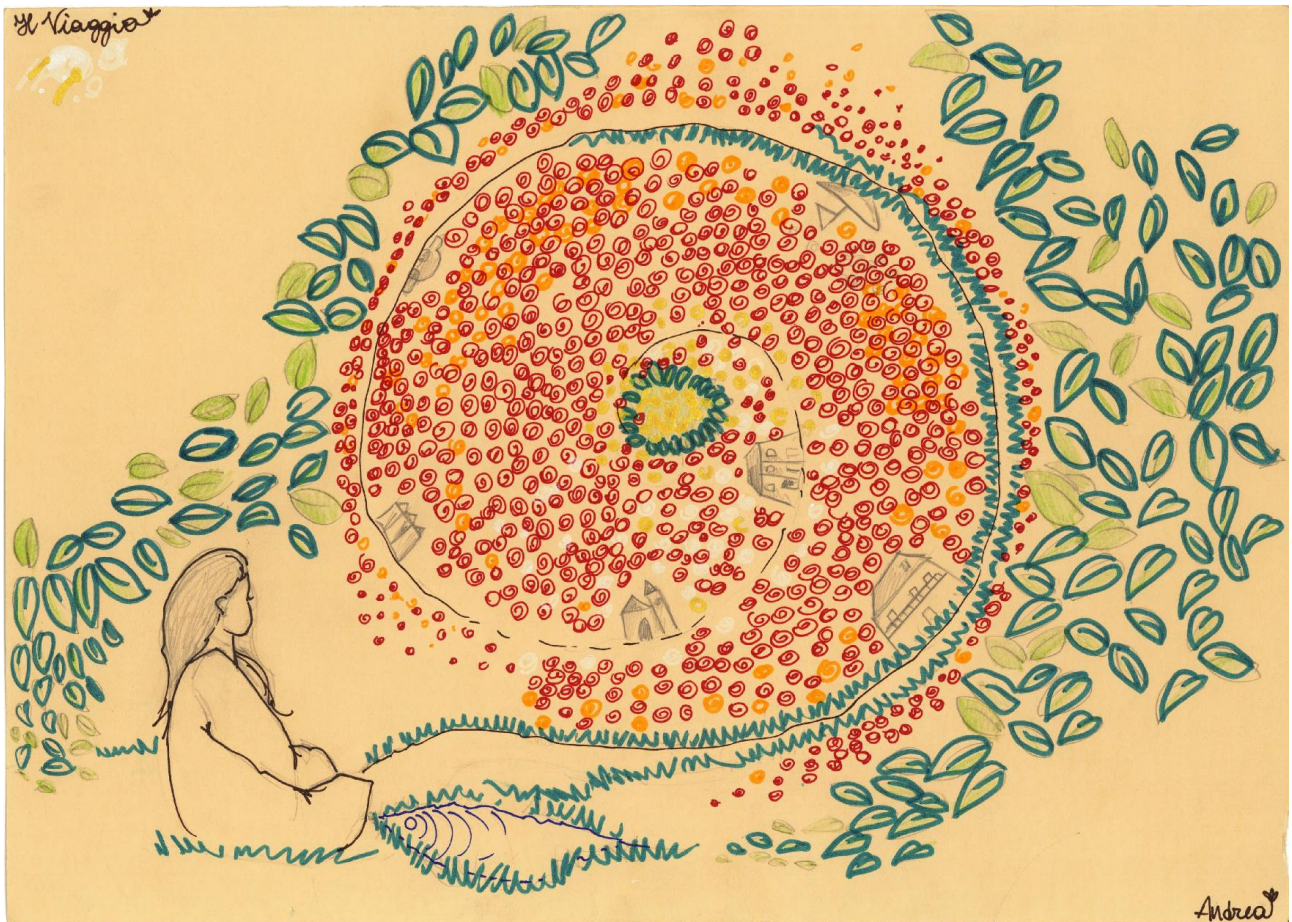
evokes the force of a group able to cope with critical situations. Andrea Perro eighteen years old, says that “*Our identity is where our emotional bonds are.*” But at the same time solitude re-emerges as a strong moment of self-awareness and personal growth.

Dreams

The last topic is that of dreams, a theme developed inside a discussion about image/prefiguration of places where students, male and female, would like to spend their time, to live love and friendship, to make future plans. But in the oral stories the dream is assigned to the migrants. “*In Africa, eight out of ten children, dream of Europe*”, writes Viviana Turino, eighteen years old, originally from Cuba, who repeats the word **dream** in her drawing several times.



Still about dreams, in Andrea Perro's opinion, *For migrants who have gone through death, Europe is the paradise*. The theme of the dream is also at the base of her design. A design that tells the steps and the places crossed in her life. At the center of it, there is a large spiral dotted with houses, flowers and plants. Now, the amazing thing is the extraordinary similarity between Andrea Perros's drawing and the map done by the artist Yelitza Altamirano Valle for our research.



A map that represents her passage from Peru to Europe.

So, here an interesting area of development for the research opens out, a way that examines the idealtypes, the archetypes, the dreams and the flows of images. In this perspective we need to understand if there are fields and semantic areas common among the artists' works and the representation of the younger generations. This will be defined better later, when I will ask the students to create moments of "performance", where they will "enter" actively in the art-work, transforming and proposing new forms of storytelling.

Removals

The last topic concerns the interface with the videos proposed: it is the cancellation, the removal. The videos and also lessons of the teachers insisted on the tragedy of the migrants' journeys, on departures, on the arrivals and on the living and working conditions. They have also paid attention to the emotional trauma of those people who leave behind a place for another. This aspect has found a small space in the stories of the students, just few symbolic connections (see the drawing of the men on the trunk with a hole in their hearts). There are few, perhaps none, concrete references. Everything is assigned to a figurative level. But this removal illuminates the social behavior where teenagers are immersed. This intersects vast aspects concerning the cultures of the political and the social visions. Here new research perspectives open up to the cancellation and removal focused on traumatic events. But it's a perspective, that I believe, will also involve artists' biographies and should also be followed from the point of view of a comparison among different European

countries.

1) Bruner, J., *La ricerca del significato*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1992; Bruner, J., *Alla ricerca della mente: autobiografia intellettuale*, Roma, Armando, 1997; *La cultura dell'educazione*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2000; *La fabbrica delle storie*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2002; Bonino, S., Cattelino, E., Ciairano, S., *Adolesenti a rischio*, Firenze, Giunti, 2007

2) Wieczorek-Hecker, J., *Come parlano i giovani italiani? - La rappresentazione pratica e teorica della lingua dei giovani*, Grin Verlag, 2007; Cavalli, A., Calabrò, A.R., *Il tempo dei giovani*, Milano, Ledizioni, 2008; Favaro, G., (a cura di) *Alfabeti interculturali*, Milano Guerini e Associati, 2000; De Mauro, T., *La fabbrica delle parole*, Utet, 2005; De Mauro, T., *La cultura degli italiani*, Bari Laterza, 2010; Edgar, R., *La lingua dei giovani*, Tübingen, Narr, 1993; Smorti, A., *Il sé come testo*, Firenze, Giunti, 1997