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“The EU gave us a new beginning”: liquid racism and affect in a curated migrant story

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Abstract

In this Chapter, we trace subtle forms of racism, known as *liquid racism* (Weaver 2010), in a personal experience story of a migrant’s journey, curated as part of a communication campaign about the European Union (EU). Our analysis of the story is based on the examination of its structure (*emergence*), its production and reception (*wholeness*) and its curation (*embedding*; De Fina 2020) in relation to tellers’ and audiences’ *affective positioning* (Giaxoglou 2021a), that is, the ways in which tellers position themselves and others affectively within the taleworld, the storyrealm, and broader master-discourses. We trace liquid racism in the way the migrant’s experience is commodified and in the way his experience is collectivized, promoting an exemplary image of a ‘good’ and ‘grateful’ migrant. The Chapter contributes a *critical approach to storytelling* that can prove useful in tracing liquid racism emerging from the production of ambiguous affective positions in antiracist narrative texts.

Keywords: affective positioning, antiracist discourse, chronotopic affect, liquid racism, narratives-as-practices, storytelling

Running head: Liquid racism and affect in a curated migrant story

1. Introduction

People have always been migrating for a plethora of reasons, such as natural disasters and climate change, political, economic, but also personal and professional reasons. Terms for referring to people on the move include *migrant*, *refugee* or *asylum seeker*,¹ each of which points to different legal rights for the individuals involved, despite them being commonly used interchangeably. In this Chapter, we will be using the term *migrant* as a

¹ According to Amnesty International (2022), a *refugee* is a person who has fled their own country, because they are at risk of serious human rights violations and persecution there; an *asylum-seeker* is a person who has not been legally recognized as a refugee and is waiting to receive a decision on their asylum claim; and *migrants* are people staying outside their country of origin, either for personal or work reasons or because they want to escape poverty, violence, natural disasters, political unrest or economic instability in their own countries.

neutral term to refer to people who are on the move, having had to leave their countries and cross borders.

Storytelling -understood as the social, cultural and mediatized practice of telling a personal or vicarious experience in context- is a polyvalent site for the (re)production of both negative and positive representations of people on the move. Existing research on migration storytelling has shown that it can be used as a form of (discursive) interaction and a site for the (re)production of prejudice and bias in public discourse. This is the case, for example, in the everyday stories told by members of majority groups about minority group members studied by van Dijk (1993). To counter such negative representations, migrant storytelling has been mobilized as a means of encouraging more positive representations of the Other in the public sphere. De Fina (2018) has shown how video narratives of migrant stories, posted on the “United We Dream” website, are used as strategies for promoting their positive representation as ‘acceptable citizens’. Aliai and Tsakona (2020) have pointed to similar findings in the case of migrant stories featured on the website of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). In online contexts the promotion of positive representations is often based on the production of emotional connections –even if at a distance- between networked audiences and migrants as humans deserving empathy and pity, as in the case of the affective reactions triggered by the viral image of the drowned body of three-year-old Alan Kurdi (Giaxoglou and Spilioti 2020; Giaxoglou 2021a). Finally, migrant storytelling can be a site for more

complex negotiations of identities, where it is used as a voice and identity resource by migrants themselves. This is illustrated in the case of autobiographical narratives, written by immigrant students in Greece, where they were found to serve as resources for the construction of the authors' hybrid resistance identities (Archakis 2020).

Even in positive representations of migrants, however, there are traces of liberal racist discourses and positions that reproduce distinctions between majority and minority groups and that are used to justify the marginalization of migrants, unless they are willing to fully assimilate themselves to the norms of the host community (Archakis 2020, 2022). Such assimilationist ideas ultimately become internalized by migrants themselves (Archakis and Tsakona 2022, Chapter 9 in this volume) constituting a form of covert assimilation closely linked to contemporary forms of racism. Forms of racism that emerge in the liquid social formations of contemporary society have been described as *liquid racism* in an attempt to capture those elusive, new forms of racism that can appear as a structural form reproducing either embodied or culturally racist sign-systems (Weaver 2010, 2011). Liquid racism can be traced in the contradictory or divergent meanings it generates and that emerge from incorporating covert racist positionings even in texts that appear to promote diversity and inclusivity (Archakis 2022).

This Chapter traces liquid racist stances in the case of a European Union communication campaign (*EU Protects*). The Chapter is structured as follows: it first sets the background for the study by discussing the questions

that arise from representations of migration and migrants in mediated storytelling. It then presents the campaign under focus, the research questions, and the *critical approach to storytelling* put forward for the purposes of this study. The analysis is, then, presented in three Sections, examining in turn the mediated story's structure (*emergence*), the conditions of its production and reception (*wholeness*), and its curation (*embedding*; De Fina 2020) in relation to its associated forms of *affective positioning* at different levels (Giaxoglou 2021a). As we will argue, the story is turned into a *public narrative* labeled "The journey of an asylum seeker" integrating stances and positions of liquid racism grounded in specific affective positions.

2. Mediated storytelling and migration

In an age characterized by a *storytelling boom* (Mäkelä et al. 2021; Mäkelä and Meretoja 2022), stories of personal experience are instrumentalized by individuals as well as by businesses and institutions across various spheres of everyday life, resulting in internal contradictions in the ethics and rhetorics of storytelling. The social media platforms' directive to share moments in pre-formatted 'stories' on social media for crafting 'authentic' personas and generating networked audiences' affective reactions has further intensified the mobilization of stories (Georgakopoulou 2022). The intensified mobilization of stories in a polyvocal, digital era has called for critical

approaches to storytelling or *post-stories* (Georgakopoulou et al. 2019), a term that foregrounds the complex conditions of story design, curation and uptake of contemporary storytelling. It has also invited the scrutinization of the over-celebration of stories as a straightforward voice resource for marginalized groups (Giaxoglou 2022).

The instrumentalization of storytelling is also attested in the case of migration, a topic that has gained center stage in wider public and political crisis discourses in recent years (Carastathis et al. 2018). The plight of refugees in the context of the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe in 2015, in particular, triggered renewed polarization around migrants in the media and social media. Public stories were further flared up by rampant populist politics and immigration media coverage that was predominantly negative and conflict-centered (Eberl et al. 2018). In response to this hostile context, various counter-attempts were initiated by some parts of media and advocacy groups looking to promote more positive representations of migrants and their experiences, via mobilizing migrant stories for increasing access to politicians and policymakers and hence for influencing public opinion and policy-making (Martínez García 2021).

For example, a United Nations (UN) roundtable stories of migrants featured the use of storytelling as one of the key recommendations for further building “empathy and confront[ing] prejudice and discrimination against migrants” (United Nations 2016), also including the stories of people who may have not migrated but are impacted by migration, such as families of

migrants in countries of origin, classmates of migrant children, migrants' employers, or neighbors. The UN's use of storytelling for reframing the toxic narrative on migration foregrounds the important role of stories for crafting and disseminating evidence-based messages around migration that promote a human-centered approach, which can resonate with the broader public.

Another example was the viral sharing on Twitter of the visual story of three-year old Alan Kurdi's lifeless body in a Turkish shore in September 2015. The story was initially celebrated as an emblematic moment in media coverage of the 'migrant crisis', arguably contributing to a shift to more positive and affect-based approaches to migrants (Blommaert 2018). Public affirmations of empathy and solidarity with Alan Kurdi and migrants, more broadly, however, were also critiqued in that context as prioritizing the production of cosmopolitan emotion and empathy for some migrants –namely vulnerable migrants– over the voicing of migrants' experience in their political contexts (Giaxoglou and Spilioti 2020). Alan Kurdi's case illustrated how contemporary migrant storytelling can ultimately reinforce the divide between Us as spectators of suffering and Them as the victimized Others (Chouliaraki 2006).

Such risks are recognized by some advocacy organizations that use storytelling to promote more positive and diverse representations of migrants, for example, "Migrant Voice" or "Stand Up for Migrants". In response, these organisations share stories that go beyond tropes of victim plots or migrants presented only as economic contributors.

Uses of stories as a vehicle for social change explain why mediated forms of storytelling mobilizing migrants' personal experience and affect are increasingly attested in a range of contexts, from documentaries and books to exhibitions and organizational websites. As Martínez García (2021) has pointed out, such acts of mediation put forward counter-narratives to prevailing othering discourses that require, however, recognition and witnessing from others, while raising ethical questions. More specifically, the mediation of life narratives raises questions of *entitlement* – “who has the right to tell a story? [...] is this representation a sufficient, adequate, accurate, or appropriate rendering of experience?”- and *allegory* – “the use of stories to represent not just individual, but collective experience” (Martínez García 2021:211; see also Shuman 2005). Questions of entitlement invite critical reflection on authority, voice, appropriation and commodification, while questions of allegory invite critical reflection on the ethics of collectivizing experience (Martínez García 2021:211). Mediated narratives can end up appropriating migrants' voice to construct an idealized migrant figure and collectivize individual experiences, detracting from the multiplicity and complexity of migrant stories and experiences and, as we will show in this Chapter, also indexing liquid racism.

Storytelling, therefore, is not a straightforward vehicle for social change, but a mediated and ideologically ridden cultural product and situated practice. In migrant discourse, including online narrative texts, for example, instances of liquid racism have been traced in underlying discourses of

assimilation, which position a particular group as the benchmark for other groups to measure themselves against and ultimately to reach (Kendi 2019, as cited in Archakis and Tsakona 2022:162). These assumptions form an integral part of discourses promoting national homogenization which naturalize linguistic and cultural assimilation and which, as Archakis and Tsakona have shown (2022:162), often infiltrate antiracist discourse.

In this Chapter, we present *a critical approach to storytelling* that can prove useful for the study of mediated migrant storytelling, combining a *narratives-as-practices* approach (De Fina 2020) and *affective positioning* analysis (Giaxoglou 2021a). Affective positioning refers to the ways in which tellers position themselves affectively to the events and the characters of the taleworld, their known and unknown audiences, and broader master-discourses and ideologies, thus forming the ground for triggering affective reactions and constructing identities. This combined approach pays attention to (1) the ways in which stories of individuals or groups are *curated*, i.e. embedded in specific conditions of production, circulation and consumption, getting leveraged toward a range of strategic goals (Fernandes 2017); and (2) the implications of the design, performance and curation of stories for the distribution of affective positions, stances, voice and visibility (cf. Giaxoglou 2022). The critical approach to storytelling adopted in this study and presented in more detail in Section 3 helps to trace forms of liquid racism in public storytelling by clarifying specific types of affect used to project

multiple and often ambiguous stances of alignment or disalignment to master discourses relating to migrants.

3. Narratives as practices

In our approach to the study of narrative, we start from De Fina's (2020:8) recognition that storytelling "not only may take place through different media (alone or combined) but also happens in conjunction and through the mediation of a variety of semiotic resources" that call attention to "how the story or stories are generated and by whom, with what objectives, who they are addressed to, what kinds of participation frameworks are enacted through them". De Fina (2020:8) identifies three main principles for the study of narratives as practices:

1. *Emergence*: this principle is posited as a structuring element which accounts for change and evolution, including, for example, the unexpected ways in which storytelling can emerge in the context of interaction or the changes in participation frameworks that may happen during a storytelling event (De Fina 2020:5);
2. *Wholeness*: this principle refers to the conditions of production and tellership and telling rights as well as the conditions of reception and uptake of the storytelling event;

3. *Embedding*: this principle draws attention to the bracketing mechanisms that signal transitions between narrating and surrounding activity, including participants' orientations and implicitly or explicitly indexed frames to the storytelling event as well as to the material aspects of embedding, for example, the way stories are inserted into other material formats and spaces together with other kinds of texts, e.g. news columns in news websites positioned next to advertizing texts. These different forms of embedding have an impact on the way meanings are constructed and negotiated with audiences.

The narratives-as-practices approach allows us to keep sight of “the multiple embedding of narrative within social processes, relations and of discourses at different levels and the ways in which storytelling practices impact on and are impacted by power relations” (De Fina 2020:3) and proves, thus, key in the study of liquid racism in storytelling practices. Section 4 contextualizes the campaign and the specific story under focus and presents the critical storytelling approach used in this study.

4. The *EU Protects* campaign, data, research questions and methods

Our study of liquid racism focuses on tracing the subtle forms in which it instantiates in the context of the European Union's website of the *European*

Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations - a department that leads global humanitarian aid and civil protection. Considering that the department operates in line with the International Humanitarian Law principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, its discourse and actions are aimed at promoting acceptance of difference, avoiding forms of discriminatory discourse and, thus, fall within the broader realm of antiracist discourse “that seeks to challenge, reduce, or eliminate manifestations of racism in society” (O’Brien 2009:501).

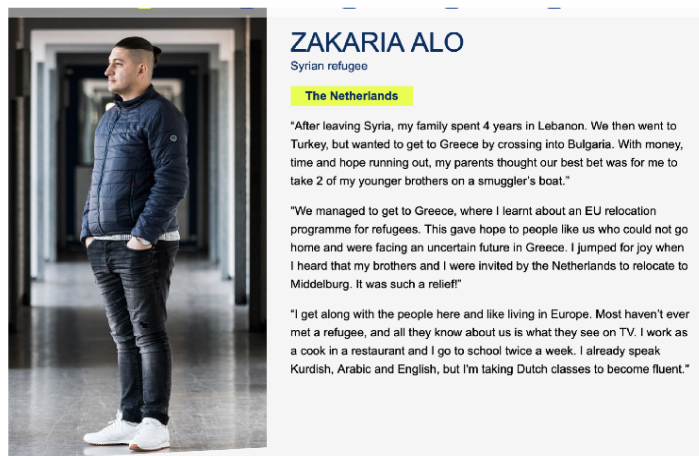
More specifically, we zoom in on a campaign called *EU Protects*. The campaign was led by Mediabrands and launched out of Brussels in all 27 EU member states in the course of four waves between 2018 and 2019. On the Mediabrands (n.d.) website the campaign is explicitly presented as a way

to inform citizens aged 35 to 55 of how the EU enables the cross-border collaboration of ‘ordinary heroes’ – firefighters, customs officials, conservationists and refugee asylum officials – in order to protect them, their families and their livelihoods.

The campaign targets a particular social group defined as “35-55-year old people who belong to the middle or lower classes, that are rather ambivalent about the EU” (Mediabrands n.d.). We focus on part of the campaign where an asylum seeker’s story is mobilized as part of a story about the European

Union's refugee support workers, framed by the logo "EU Together We Protect".

The story features on the campaign website as an infographic story (European Union n.d.), which provides easily accessible visual information. The infographic is headed as follows: "From war-stricken Syrian to safety: how the EU helped a refugee build a new life in the Netherlands". It is organized into (1) an introduction section, where a link to a video version of the story is included (3:02 minutes); (2) five main 'steps' or story panels, featuring, in turn, the stories of the Syrian refugee and four EU officials who have supported him and his brothers during the journey; and (3) a concluding section, which summarizes some key facts about the number of refugees who have relocated from Greece to other EU countries between 2015 and 2017 (21,847), the number of refugees relocated from Italy to other EU countries during the same period (11,999), and the funds the EU has provided as emergency assistance to Greek authorities, international organizations and NGOs operating in Greece in early 2015 (816.5 million euros). Each 'step' or story panel features the image of the teller next to a written summary version of their story as well as a quote at the end highlighting the main point of their story (see Figure 1).



"It took time, but we can finally live freely like everyone else in the world. The EU gave us a new beginning."

Figure 1. Infographic version of Zakaria Alo's story

Zakaria's infographic story appears as one story among others about *Our society* (e.g. "Combating poverty", "Protecting jobs") under the label of "Refugee integration". The campaign resonates with post-humanitarian forms of campaigning characterized by a clean aesthetic and positive representations of minority or migrant groups in an attempt to move away from earlier tropes of representing vulnerable Others as sufferers (Chouliaraki 2013). Nevertheless, as we will show, even these human-centered public discourses feature traces of liquid racism.

The specific part of the campaign is worthy of critical attention for our study of liquid racism, given that the curation of an asylum seeker's story in a story about European society may bring about tensions between majority

and minority migrant groups and ambivalent positions towards -as well as for- what may be considered as the Other.

Our analysis focuses on Zakaria Alo's curated story in both its infographic and video version and is organized around the following research questions:

1. How is the personal experience story of a migrant *curated* and *mediated* in the context of this EU campaign, for whom and with what implications for portrayals of migrants, more broadly?
2. What kinds of story templates are mobilized and what kinds of identity and *affective positioning* types are these associated with?
3. What forms of *liquid racism*, if any, can be traced in this case of curated storytelling and its related practices of identity and affective positioning?

Our analysis has unfolded in the following bottom-up stages addressing the different, though interrelated and in some cases overlapping, levels of story organization (*emergence*), story production and reception (*wholeness*) and story curation (*embedding*; De Fina 2020). At each stage relating to the analysis of the story, considerations relevant to the analysis of affective positioning practices have been added, as they capture particular affective tropes, stances and positions that form the ground for the construction of lines of alignment or disalignment to assimilationist discourses, which arguably evidence forms of liquid racism:

Stage 1 - Emergence: At this stage, we focus on the video version of the story and analyze the structuring elements of the curated story, using the six categories that Labov (2013) has posited for the organization of personal experience narrative and that have been found to be typical of elicited personal experience tellings (see also Labov and Waletzky 1967): the *abstract* (a brief summary of the story that draws in the listener), the *orientation* (the part of the story describing the setting and introducing the main characters), the *complicating action* (the main part of the story that answers the question ‘what happened?’), the *resolution* (the final key event of a story’s complicating action that brings the taleworld to a close), the *evaluation* (external or internal comments on why the story is worth telling) and the *coda* (the section of the story that bridges the time of the taleworld and the time of the telling, signaling the end of the telling). At this level, the analysis of the story’s evaluation points to the specific modes of affective positioning of the teller to key elements of the taleworld.

Stage 2 - Wholeness: At this stage, we examine the conditions of production, sharing, and uptake of the curated story as featured in the video in relation to the specific modes of *affective positioning* created for key characters and audiences. More specifically, we examine the distribution of tellership in the entire story and its *chronotopic organization*, i.e. the linguistic and discursive articulation of time and space in relation to the ways in which tellers position

themselves affectively to the events and the characters of the taleworld, their known and unknown audiences, and broader master-discourses and ideologies (Giaxoglou 2021a). Our examination, here, is particularly concerned with the way the identified types of affective positioning come to index types of affect “that acquire a certain recognizable value when deployed within a particular timespace configuration” (Blommaert and De Fina 2016:5). Building on Blommaert and De Fina’s (2016:5) conceptualization of chronotopic identities, we refer to instances of such affective indexicals as *chronotopic affect*, i.e. as specific timespace configurations enabling, allowing and sanctioning particular types of affective registers (Giaxoglou 2021b). In this case, such affective registers are taken as cues to liquid racist stances.

Stage 3 - Embedding: At this last stage, the analysis returns to the infographic to examine the bracketing mechanisms and the meta-semiotic commentaries and frames, which highlight key material aspects of Zakaria Alo’s curated story and signal more explicitly the affective positions projected for characters and audiences alike in relation to master discourses about migration and migrants.

The focus on the principles of narrative emergence, wholeness and embedding combined with the analysis of affective positioning allows us to capture the complex making of this curated story, foregrounding the positions

and stances made available to tellers and audiences and denoting specific forms of liquid racism. This framework encourages the analysis of both ‘the what’ and ‘the how’ of stories and draws attention to storytelling as *practice* rather than as text, thus overcoming the limitations of solely relying on the application of Labov’s categories (cf. De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012:35).

5. Analysis

5.1. Emergence of the story “The journey of an asylum seeker”

In the video headed “The journey of an asylum seeker”, Zakaria Alo’s trajectory from his home country to Europe is plotted as a temporally ordered and coherent personal experience narrative and it is communicated as an emotionally evocative telling. The video features Zakaria telling his story in two parts: the first part at the opening of the video (00:00-00:15) and the second -and more elaborated part- towards the end of the video (1:53-2:36). In-between these two parts, the video story is interspersed with the perspectives of EU officials who played a role in Zakaria’s successful relocation.

The heading of the video “The journey of an asylum seeker” draws on the trope of *journey* commonly used in migration narratives throughout history as the lens for approaching the complex experience of dislocation and

relocation. *Journeys* have been used with varying associations over the years, including a sense of adventure and heroism in 19th century nation-building projects, on the one hand, or illegality and criminality in perilous sea journeys of migrants, on the other; *journeys* also evoke the sense of transformation at a personal level that results from such experiences (Anand 2016). In this instance, the trope of the *journey* establishes an interpretative frame for the reception of the story as a transformative personal experience story about migration and asylum-seeking.

The story of Zakaria Alo emerges as a prototypical, elicited story of personal experience that can be described using the narrative categories posited by Labov (2013; see also Labov and Waletzky 1967). The first part is a short version of the journey story with an emphasis on presenting the protagonist's main motivation for leaving Syria (see Table 1). The story spoken by the teller himself in Arabic starts by locating himself as a professional in his country of origin (line 1: *orientation*), before the eruption of war (lines 2-3: *complicating action*), which forced him and his family to leave their country for an unknown destination. The final line of the complicating action (line 3: *non-resolution*) does not resolve the main event. For this reason, it is described here as an open-ended resolution -or *non-resolution*- which creates narrative suspense. Zakaria's telling closes with an open-ended evaluation foregrounding the hope of the teller and his family to find a better future (line 4: *evaluation*). The brief story placed at the opening

of the video serves as a preamble to the rest of the story, but also as an involvement device seeking to draw in viewers.

This first part of the story concludes with a caption in English in line 5: *This is the real story of a Syrian refugee who fled war and built a new life in Europe*, which serves as the abstract of the main story that follows in the second part. The abstract highlights why this story is worth telling through its evaluation as a *real story* of fleeing war and building a new life. It also signals that in this video the personal experience story is being curated as an ‘authentic’ and tellable refugee story.

Table 1. Video part I - Transcript and narrative categories

Video Part I - Opening of video (00:00- 00:19) (originally in Arabic with captions in English)	Narrative category
1 In Aleppo, I owned a bakery with my family 2 But the war changed that. 3 We had to leave and didn’t really know where to go. 4 We just hoped to find a better future.	Orientation Complicating action (Non-) resolution Evaluation
5 This is the real story of a Syrian refugee who fled war and built a new life in Europe	Abstract

In this preamble, antiracist discourse can be traced in the language choice of Arabic in which the story is told. The inclusion of the teller's first language can be said to promote the acceptance of difference. This is arguably also the case in the portrayal of the main character as an ordinary professional, a bakery owner, entangled in a life-changing journey; a persona the target audience of people aged between 35-55 and belonging to the middle or lower classes could relate to, despite apparent differences (e.g. country of origin, language and life experience).

The second part of the story, placed at the end of the video, presents a fuller version of the journey (see Table 2). In that part, the teller introduces himself and his country of origin in the orientation of the story (lines 1-2). In the complicating action part (lines 3-8), which starts with him and his family fleeing the war, the teller draws on internal evaluations to recount the challenges of the journey (see bold highlights in the transcript, Table 2). The extended and difficult duration of the journey are marked in the use of the past progressive tense (line 5: *trying to find a safe space*), in the counts of years and days (line 4: *we struggled for eight years*; line 7: *we walked through the mountains for days*), and in the multiple locations that the teller and his brothers passed through (line 8: *and lived in five different refugee camps*).

In the case of Zakaria, the journey has had a happy ending after he and his brothers were officially allowed to enter the Netherlands (line 9). In the coda of the story, Zakaria bridges the 'then' of the story and its associated experience of hardship and uncertainty to the 'now' of life in the Netherlands

in safety (lines 10-11). The emotions the teller expressed in the resolution and the coda are explicitly articulated as positive through distinct external evaluation statements (line 9: *was over the moon*), as well as through internal evaluations (line 11: *fresh start, with Falah's help*), foregrounding the 'happy ending' to a difficult journey.

Table 2. Story Part II: Transcript and narrative categories

Video Part II - closing of video (1:53-2:36, 2:53)	Narrative category
1 My name is Zakaria	Orientation
2 My family owned a bakery in Aleppo	
3 After we fled the war in 2011,	
4 We struggled for eight years ,	Complicating action
5 Trying to find a safe space in Europe	
6 With my two brothers, we were victims of smugglers	
7 We walked through the mountains for days	
8 And lived in five different refugee camps	
9 I was over the moon when I was officially allowed to come to the Netherlands	Evaluation and
10 For the past year and a half, the three of us have been living, studying and working here	Resolution
11 We have made a fresh start, with Falah's help [...]	Coda
12 That is what everyone is looking for, to be in a safe place	

The telling emerges as a summary account of Zakaria's journey from the vantage point of the present. The focus is placed on reporting key events, with more contained evaluations, excluding any harrowing details of the journey or negative emotions, in favor of a forward-looking, positive stance. This use of evaluation devices constructs Zakaria's affective positioning to his experience in a way that creates relative distance from his past life in war-ridden Syria, but also from the challenging journey, foregrounding, instead, his affective investment to his current life, study and work.

The story integrates elements of antiracist discourses and stances, including, for example, the language choice and the portrayal of migrants as ordinary human beings. It also tries to avoid over-simplifying the representation of the refugee experience by providing a cohesive account of a series of events and multiple journeys, challenging, thus, the idea of refugee journeys as a form of linear travel from one place to another. However, liquid racism is arguably traceable in the mobilization of the refugee's journey story as an allegory, through which Zakaria's individual experience is collectivized as an ideal or desirable version of the refugee's journey with a happy ending. Its organization is based on plots of *quest* (see Anand 2016) used to mold the migration journey into *an exemplary story*: the everyday life of Zakaria, the owner of a bakery from Aleppo, is disrupted by war leading to a departure and a journey of many hurdles, until the equilibrium is reset again and he can return to an ordinary pattern of life, study and work. By the end of this

journey, the protagonist is transformed and, more importantly, successfully *integrated* in the new ‘safe place’ in Europe: he’s made a new start, together with his brothers, and all this thanks to the EU officials, and in particular Falah, who made their relocation possible (line 11). Zakaria’s affective positioning of marking a relative distance from his struggles and any negative emotions possibly associated with the journey in favor of a positive commitment to his present life is an integral part of this quest plot.

The next Section turns to the consideration of how this exemplary story is curated in the video as part of a story about the European Union and its ‘ordinary heroes’.

5.2. Wholeness: Multi-perspectivizing the story

This Section turns to the examination of how this story becomes a coherent and multi-perspectivized story through the inclusion of different characters in the taleworld of Zakaria’s story of quest. It also relates these story elements to the specific types of *chronotopic affect* and affective positions that they index, revealing instances of liquid racism.

As mentioned in Section 3, the story of “The journey of an asylum seeker” is curated in the larger story of the EU, complemented by the perspectives of EU officials from different European countries who have played a role in Zakaria’s and his brothers’ relocation to the Netherlands. More specifically, the story is curated as a multi-perspectivized story of

parallel tales with different tellers developing the plot of Zakaria’s exemplary journey along two main narrative axes: (1) the first axis presents Zakaria Alo’s ‘real story’ of leaving Syria and resettling in the Netherlands, and (2) the second axis, which is over-laid upon that first one, interweaves the stories of the EU officials, explaining how each of them assisted Zakaria (and his brothers) at different points in the journey to ‘safety’.

The interweaving of distinct voices and perspectives is achieved through the narrative sequencing and connection of the tellers’ different *chronotopes* (i.e. the linguistic and discourse articulation of time and place) around the chronotope of Zakaria’s journey of asylum-seeking to Europe. The transitions from one section and voice to the next are marked off not only visually with the move to a new teller and their own setting, but also through the shift in language, namely the language of the teller (see Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of tellership in “The journey of an asylum seeker” story

Teller	Timing	Language	Chronotope
Zakaria	00:00-00:19	Arabic	Dislocation story (from Syria to the EU)
Esther	00:29-00:49	Spanish	Refugee integration coordination (Brussels)
Illaria	00:50-01:00	Italian	Asylum application advice (Rome, Asylum Support Office)

Panayiota	01:08-01:14	Greek	Processing asylum applications (Athens, Greek Asylum Service)
Falah	01:21-01:44	Dutch	Assisting refugees' integration (Middelburg, Dutch Council for Refugees)
Zakaria	01:53-02:56	Arabic	Dislocation and relocation story (from Syria to the Netherlands)

While these short interventions in the language spoken by each EU official contribute to representations of EU's diversity in action, they also lend credibility to Zakaria's personal experience story of migration, through the accounts of the officials who met Zakaria and 'witnessed' part of his journey. The over-laying of these accounts shifts the focus and tellability of the story from Zakaria's journey to a 'success story', thanks to the EU's refugee support mechanisms.

In that story, the exemplary character of the migrant is that of an ordinary person who is like everyone else. Such representations fall within the discursive repertoire of antiracist rhetoric, as they counter dominant and discriminatory portrayals of asylum seekers as 'illegal', 'criminal' or 'opportunists' posing a threat to host populations. This portrayal is also foregrounded in the final line of Zakaria's story: *That is what everyone is looking for, to be in a safe place* (line 12). However, it is worth remembering that this story is not presented for the sake of Zakaria, but for the benefit of

the European Union as an institution. The story is part of a campaign related to how the EU ensures the safety of its citizens, thus suggesting a different angle to the search for safety: it is European citizens, their families and their livelihoods whose safety needs to be secured by the EU through successful refugee integration. This implicit angle reinforces distinctions between Us and Them, even within a context where the Other is presented in relatable terms.

As a whole, the story projects specific types of *chronotopic affect*, i.e. specific timespace configurations enabling, allowing and sanctioning specific modes of affective registers that index forms of liquid racism. More specifically, in Zakaria's story the chronotope of displacement is associated with fear and uncertainty, even despair (line 3: *didn't really know where to go*, see Table 1), while the chronotope of relocation is associated with a sense of safety and hope for the future as well as with positive emotions and gratitude to the EU. The latter is foregrounded in Zakaria's quote included in the infographic version of the story *The EU gave us a new beginning*, as well as in Zakaria's distancing from the negative aspects of the journey and the emphasis on the present (line 9: *I was over the moon when I was officially allowed to come to the Netherlands*; see Table 2). The foregrounding of these specific types of chronotopic affect leaves little space for the voicing in the story of any other, negative types of affect that could have figured direct or indirect criticism to the EU border policies that contributed to his move from place to place and the difficulties in getting access to a European country.

It is through the projection of such fixed types of chronotopic affect that a shift in the affective positioning of story recipients is realized. At the start of the story, audiences are invited to connect affectively to the personal experience of Zakaria from positions of proximity to him (and his brothers) and other similar types of migrants. By the end of the story, audiences are gradually led to connect affectively to the European Union as a ‘collective’, a supportive network of ‘ordinary heroes’ who are leading migrants to safety, ultimately guaranteeing EU citizens’ safety. The mobilization of this story to promote EU values silences and excludes alternative and negative aspects of the asylum seeker journey, by solely foregrounding the positive and humane image for the European Union as an institution.

In summary, the strategic use of five different, though inter-related, chronotopes interweaves multiple perspectives and generates affective positions of proximity to ‘good’ and ‘grateful’ migrants like Zakaria, but also to the EU officials who supported his integration. Section 5.3 examines further the way “The journey of an asylum seeker” story is remediated and embedded in the broader narrative of this EU campaign and the EU as an institution, more broadly.

5.3. Embedding

The construction of the European Union’s role in the ‘refugee crisis’ and the types of chronotopic affect and affective positions identified in Section 5.2

are further affirmed in the infographic version of the story. In that format, text boxes, set apart from the main story, showcase selected excerpts from the story framed as direct, authentic quotes. These excerpts serve as evaluative comments that highlight the tellability of the whole story:

1. *It took time, but we can finally live freely like everyone else in the world. The EU gave us a **new beginning** (Zakaria).*
2. *The EU is a **collective**, and the relocation of refugees is a prime example of **solidarity** in the midst of global instability (Esther).*
3. *The EU came up with a solution to **help** people seeking asylum **restart** their lives, while making sure EU countries **receiving** refugees were supported (Illaria).*
4. *I firmly believe that EU-wide **cooperation** is the only way to deal with such a crisis (Panagiota)*
5. *Zakaria didn't come here to do nothing. He came to the Netherlands to make a **new start** and be part of our society (Falah).*

These quotes construct evaluative connections across the different tellings and contribute to the framing of Zakaria's story into a 'bigger' story, that is, the success story of the EU. What is recurrent in all story quotes is the role of the EU as an institution that gives people, like Zakaria, a new beginning through solidarity and cooperation, presupposing acceptance of difference and, thus, integrating an antiracist stance. Nevertheless, the particular

positions projected to refugees, like Zakaria, fit into the wider narrative of integration, which takes the form of (racist) assimilation, when the transformation process involves leaving behind old (inferior) habits and practices and adjusting to the dominant national culture and language (Archakis 2022:1265). In the above quotes, the integration narrative is presented as an alternative to the racist discourse that views refugees as coming to the EU ‘to do nothing’. Instead, in this exemplary story, migrants are portrayed to work, go to school, take language classes, and, more importantly, come to be an integral part of ‘our’ (i.e. the receiving and dominant) society, expressing gratitude for the support they receive and the freedom and safety they are offered. Ultimately, they are like everyone else who has a right to live freely. While such evaluative projections contribute to construing images of migrants as trustworthy and relatable through the focus on aspects of their experience and desires that can be said to be shared by ‘everyone’, liquid racism is evident in the overall narrative of integration or, rather, covert assimilation of the Other in ways that mitigate the threat that the Other is often thought to pose for host populations.

The ambiguity arising from the co-existence of antiracist positions and discourses of assimilation is covered in the multilayered design and curated embedding of the ‘real’ story of a single refugee in the bigger institutional story of the European Union. The embedding is achieved by strategically placing the exemplary story at the top and tail of the video story. As one follows the story, the journey of an asylum seeker is transformed into

a *public narrative*, i.e. a story that translates values into action (Ganz 2015). In this case, this is done by weaving together (1) *a story of self*, in this case Zakaria's story, the personal experience of his dislocation, which invites story recipients to connect affectively with it as an experience that is emblematic of refugee experience; (2) *a story of Us*, taking the form of the story of EU officials working hard together across Europe to illustrate the shared purposes, goals and visions of the EU as 'a collective', inviting people to be part of and relate to that community and reassuring them about their safety; and (iii) *a story of now*, i.e. the values celebrated in the personal experience story and in the story of Us, calling for greater solidarity organized around success stories of refugee integration.

The collectivization of Zakaria's personal experience story as a public narrative can be seen as another instance of liquid racism where the stories of the Other can be curated to fit the purposes of an institution like the EU. The public narrative foregrounds dominant ideas about the need for migrants to fully integrate and maintain a positive stance to their present life as a condition of them being accepted in the host countries.

6. Conclusion

This Chapter has traced instances of subtle racism in a personal experience story of a migrant's story curated as part of a communication campaign about

the European Union. We have used a critical storytelling approach to point to key aspects of the emergence, wholeness and embedding of the personal experience story associated with specific affective positions constructed through external and internal evaluations and types of chronotopic affect that index instances of liquid racist stances.

We have traced liquid racism (1) in the way in which Zakaria Alo's experience is *collectivized*, by mobilizing this individual story allegorically to promote an exemplary image of a migrant who is not a threat to EU citizens, as well as (2) in the way it is *commodified* as a public narrative of the EU, promoting audiences' affective identification with the EU's values.

As our analysis has shown, the story of Zakaria emerged as an exemplary story of the refugee journey that foregrounds the migrant's forward-looking angle, contributing to the crafting of relatable images of displaced people. In terms of the story's production and reception, the weaving of Zakaria's personal experience story of displacement and asylum-seeking into a public narrative about migration from the perspective of the EU put forward specific kinds of chronotopic affect that position refugees in 'acceptable citizen' roles who are not only willing to integrate to the host society, but also to express their gratitude for being accepted. Such positions naturalize discourses of (racist) assimilation that are couched in *narratives of integration* ('we accept you on the condition that you are like us'), a term that is also explicitly used on the campaign's website to tag this story (*refugee integration*). Narratives of integration index, here, forms of covert

assimilation, i.e. fully internalized discourses of integration by the migrants themselves, who affectively position themselves at a relative distance from their country of origin and their challenging journeys to Europe in order to foreground their proximity to the values of the European Union and their host country through their commitment to work, study and family life.

The stronger instance of liquid racism is traced at the level of the story's curation, where the refugee's personal experience is upstaged and subsumed to the public narrative of refugee integration, thus leaving little space for the voice of the refugee's possibly more complex affective positioning to his journey and his present life (see also Archakis 2022). Similarly to other cases of antiracist texts (Archakis and Tsakona 2022), this mediated story not only reproduces images of 'good migrants' and 'acceptable citizens' that do not pose a threat to the citizens of the host countries, but also images of 'grateful migrants'. Integration and acceptability, here, are articulated in the portrayal of an idealized refugee who displays willingness not only to learn the local language and contribute to the local economy through work in lower-paid jobs without any complaint about pay or conditions (e.g. Zakaria is shown working in a kitchen), but also to recognize the institutional support they have received along the way.

At the level of curation, the public narrative ends up reinforcing distinctions between Us and Them through the way of interweaving the five different chronotopes and the use of ambiguous story addressees. For example, in the logo of the campaign *EU protects you*, it is not clear who *you*

is -and from what one is to be protected from- although it can be assumed that it refers to European citizens. Similarly, in the heading of one of the parts of the campaign *Our society*, it is ambiguous who the pronoun *our* includes and who it excludes; on the other hand, Falah's reference to *our society* clearly includes the people who already live in Netherlands, i.e. the receiving, host, society that is distinguished from Zakaria and other refugees who are in the process of relocation. Such distinctions are sharpened even further by the use of existing tropes of affective positions that re-direct audiences' affective proximity to Zakaria and other refugees to positions of proximity and trust to the European Union as an institution offering evidence of their safeguarding role.

Ultimately, the specific mode of curating the story we analyzed detracts attention not only from the EU's but also from the individual nation-states' prioritization of border security over access to asylum (Kirişci et al. 2020). Despite the role these public narratives can play to counter dominant negative portrayals of refugees, their potential provision of voice to migrants is limited. In fact, attention is systematically detracted from the dominant assimilationist discourses within the EU and its member nation-states that reproduce racist positions, even in human-centered approaches to migrants and migration.

The complexity of representation of groups of people and social issues through storytelling is complicated even further by the increased mediatization of such practices and the polycentricity of their reception. This

makes it necessary to continue to examine practices of storytelling from a critical point of view, interrogating the effects of such stories, their design and situated conditions of their production and uptake. As we have suggested, a critical approach to storytelling that draws attention to practices of curating narratives in media contexts in relation to their associated practices of affective positioning can be a productive way of analyzing traces of liquid racism even in seemingly antiracist narratives.

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