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Porfolio

Connections. Collaborative Imaginaries of Territories in Change across Europe

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Territories of Multiple Stories

Hillside and mountain villages, green fields and endless plains with scattered settlements and post-industrial medium-sized towns constitute Europe as much as the big cities we all know. These places have long been considered peripheral to the large urban centres and have often been associated with a certain passivity, stagnation and resistance to change. Yet a closer look at their interstices, inlets and plains reveals that they also move, live and transform. And they are also continuously enriched with new voices and stories, becoming spaces of “multiple nationalities”.

In the last decades, some rural, mountainous, and peri-urban European regions started to welcoming both newcomers from other countries and returnees who went to live abroad in search of better work and living opportunities (Perlik *et al.*, 2019). Welcoming new inhabitants of different nationalities, as well as returnees, these territories are enriched by hybrid identities and intercultural dynamics. In other words, the territories themselves become territories of “multiple nationalities”; characterised by complex stories of immigration and emigration whose signs shape public and private spaces. At the same time, these places represent the dream for a better future for some, and the nostalgia for the past for others, slowly transforming into places of multiple conviviality and intercultural dialogue. However, given their local scale, their dispersion in space and a limited political sensitivity, such peripheral plural places remain under-investigated. Hence, looking beyond the interpretative mechanics working at the level of the imaginary (Castoriadis, 1997), the research project here presented contributed

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to visualise some local perspectives on the world, valorising the multiple voices that characterise these communities in change (Couldry, 2010). Starting from the need to listen to the voice of the people living in such intercultural communities, the research team adopted visual methods (Nikielska-Sekula and Desille, 2021), and especially photovoice and mapping, to co-construct new narratives with the local communities in the Netherlands (Groningen), Italy (Camini), Spain (Talayuela), Poland (Łomża) and Germany (Bedum). The idea of involving both long-term residents and newcomers was due to the willingness to amplify their voices while considering different backgrounds, nationalities, perspectives and life experiences, as well as to build up a temporary local space of sociability.

In this way, the stories of those who leave, those who arrive and those who return intertwine in a new rhythm of life that over time transforms and is transformed by the spaces in which these new communities settle. The visual research organised in the so-called peripheries of Europe, started from a simple question: what makes the place where you live welcoming and how would you capture this in a picture?

Figure 1: The Five Places where the Research Took Place, through the Eyes of an Artistic Collective which Collaborated in the Research Dissemination. The Map was Re-Designed in Order to Highlight the Peripheral Position of the Research Contexts, Especially in Relation to External Borders



Source: <https://reimaginingmobilities.org/connections-collaborative-imaginaries-of-territories-in-change-across-europe/>
Credits: MK26 (OM_Officina Marghera).

In the following sections, the five contexts where the research was carried out will be briefly presented through an introductory text written by each local research unit which had already been working on the topic of migration in rural areas. The text is accompanied by a picture that was taken by an older or new resident and their description of the photograph.

Camini, Italy

Camini is a small hillside village in the province of Reggio Calabria, in the southern part of Italy. The main road up to Camini meanders through ancient olive groves and abandoned fields, some adorned with the ruins of houses that once belonged to someone. On the other side of the road is the beautiful Ionian Sea. The municipality of Camini has for years been affected by a process of depopulation and abandonment. This trend was partially reversed thanks to the Eurocoop Camini – Jungi Mundu (“Unite the world”). The cooperative supports different activities for the whole community (e.g., workshops in cooking, ceramics, tailoring) that revive local traditions, making them key elements of a community oriented toward a future of inclusion and sharing. This process of rebirth has attracted many new residents, both returnees and newcomers, from different parts of Italy and the rest of the world, who are an active feature of the lively social, cultural and economic fabric of the place.

Photography 1: My Life in Camini



“This is the picture of Camini. There are very beautiful colours in the picture, and there is no war but the peace flag. And then there are houses for everybody. I also like the mountains in the background and the animals in the farm, I usually go there with my children. This is the image of the village that I saw when I arrived here for the first time.”

(Manal Mohamed Mofteh, female, forty-three years old, Libyan)

Source: fieldwork.

Credits: Manal Mohamed Mofteh, Libya (March 2022).

Talayuela, Spain

Talayuela is a town in the province of Cáceres, in the Autonomous Community of Extremadura, close to Portugal. Until the late 20th century, it was practically uninhabited, emerging under the promotion of colonisation settlements from national newcomers. In the 1990s, new inhabitants first from Portugal and Poland, and later from the other side of the straits of Gibraltar, from Senegal and especially Morocco, began to arrive and settle. These populations live distant lives, failing to encounter each other due to latent disengagement and the absence of shared spaces. For decades, the fertile land allowed the development of an economy based on the cultivation of tobacco, lately a sector in decline that has been slowly replaced by peppers, paprika, asparagus, tomatoes and corn, together with a solar energy project. People welcome people — a sibling, a friend, a co-worker. International newcomers keep arriving, young adults seek opportunities elsewhere, and the land keeps feeding its guests regardless of their nationalities.

Photography 2: Juventud/Youth



“The photo is taken on the move, it is on the outskirts of the village. I like the clear sky. In the picture, there are my friends, but it’s like they are leaving. Yes, it also represents the youth leaving the village.” (Hanan Khalloufi, female, twenty-one years old, Moroccan and Spanish)

Source: fieldwork.

Credits: Hanan Khalloufi, Morocco (March 2022).

Altenburg, Germany

Altenburg is the district town of the easternmost district of Thuringia, Altenburger Land (“State”). After the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, the population of the district shrank by about a third. Accordingly, there are many empty buildings in the town, each telling its own story. History pulsates in Altenburg, and the famous card

game “Skat” was invented there. What makes Altenburg most special, however, is that the town provides many new possibilities. In this town there is a new generation of Altenburgers who are shaping and changing the town according to their ideas. Some examples are the Skat Hub, which provides jobs and equipment, the Open Lab and its creative projects, and the Stadt Mensch project, where young urbanites support cultural and artistic projects in an old casino. Youth initiatives like FACK actively contribute to a new cityscape, just as initiatives like Futura have made an immense contribution to welcoming refugees.

Photography 3: Home is a Feeling, Not a Place



“I worked in the public order office for many years and I was increasingly confronted with people who had converted public spaces into living rooms or skate parks, or who had simply put up a couch. So I asked myself: who owns the city now? Who decides what it looks like? Why cannot you just put a couch where you like it? Just the way they did it!

This is in Poschitz Park, one of the most beautiful places in Altenburg!”

(Susann Seifert, female, forty-one years old, German)

Source: fieldwork.

Credits: Susann Seifert, Germany (May 2022).

Łomża, Poland

Łomża is a medium-sized city located in the Podlaskie voivodeship (province), in northeast Poland. Until 1999, it was the capital of the region but it lost its status following an administrative reform. This was the beginning of the economic and social decline of the city: since then, it has been depopulating and the community is ageing. Young people leave Łomża, looking for better education and job opportunities. The city hosted a reception centre until 2010 and today around sixty Chechen families and, since 2014, several men without their families live there. But the situation changed dramatically on February 2022: when the war in Ukraine started, many women and their children moved there. What is unique about Łomża is the presence of a local NGO that encourages intercultural dialogue and hospitality, ranging from education to housing, and from job opportunities to other forms of active support for diverse communities.

Photography 4: Morning in Łomża



“Morning. A favourite time for every mom, when you have the opportunity to be away from home worries. When you can spend time in the cold streets, you look around, and everyone takes care of their things, just like this old man does. Today I saw Łomża with new eyes. Loving eyes. I fall in love with every house and every café, avenue and park.

Everything is filled with peace and that is what inspires me.”
(Liudmyla Bilonozhko, female, twenty-nine years old, Ukrainian)

Source: fieldwork.

Credits: Liudmyla Bilonozhko, Ukraine (June 2022).

Bedum, the Netherlands

Bedum is a village in the northeast of the Netherlands. It was a municipality until 2019 when it was merged with others to form Het Hogeland (“The Highland”), the second largest municipality in the country. It stretches from the Wadden Sea wetlands and the industrial Eemshaven port to open grasslands and Romanesque churches in the south. The dark and red bricks of many local buildings are testimony to the region’s once-flourishing brick industry and its fertile sea-clay soil. In comparison to its neighbouring villages, Bedum has maintained basic services and it is well-connected to public transport networks. Community organisations like Colourful Het Hogeland often organise activities there. Such grassroots welcoming initiatives are what make Bedum special. Colourful Het Hogeland breaks down barriers between groups that are usually separated: its events are an important platform for intercultural encounters and migrant communities to self-organise.

Photography 5: A Home is not Home without Love



“Even if you have left your country, no matter the reason, you can feel at home elsewhere through love. If you receive enough love, you will feel safe. I chose this picture to show that people can feel at home in many places.” (Hanna Gebre, female, Eritrea)

Source: fieldwork.

Credits: Hanna Gebre, Eritrea (July 2022).

These are only some of the pictures and stories collected during the itinerant research. If you would like to discover more, visit the open-access book here: <https://reimaginingmobilities.org/connections-collaborative-imaginaries-of-territories-in-change-across-europe/>

Figure 2: The First Page of the Itinerant Book



Source: <https://reimaginingmobilities.org/connections-collaborative-imaginaries-of-territories-in-change-across-europe/>
Credits: Alvaro Minguito.

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