



Migrazioni, cittadinanze, inclusività

Narrazioni dell'Italia plurale,
tra immaginario e politiche per la diversità

a cura di **LEONARDO DE FRANCESCHI**

UNIVERSITÀ





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con la collaborazione di IVELISE PERNIOLA

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Overcoming the Dichotomy

Creative Methods, Culture, and Migration

Melissa Moralli

Introduction: the Rise of Creative Methods in Migration Research

In the last decades, the use of creative methodologies for studying migration has gradually grown (Kara 2015; Nikielska-Sekula, Desille 2021). Participatory audio-visual ethnographies and documentaries, graphic novels, bottom-up mappings, collective sound recordings and performances, are only some examples of how social sciences can explore empirical and theoretical issues linked to the complexity of migration. Labelled in different ways, from creative methods to art-based research (Leavy 2018), these research strategies and processes are capable of detecting the diversity, as well as the deep and changing character of social life, without methodological innovation lapsing into empiricism (Giorgi *et al.* 2021).

We will maintain that art is always in translation, because it is matter: it is materially realised ideas. It is these ideas, which in their specificity claim an interesting space for research: it could be argued that art's methods make transparent those obdurate binaries between word and deed; contemplation and action; theory and practice; feeling and cognition; intuition and reason; imagination and logic. (Macleod, Holdrige 2006, p. 8)

With these words, the authors well express the potentialities of creative and artistic methods for social research.

In the field of migration, for example, these kinds of methodologies can represent a useful approach both to deconstruct the imagery conveyed by stigmatizing media and political rhetoric, and to promote alternative spaces of collaboration and empowerment. These mechanisms are often reproduced by the imaginaries conveyed by traditional, social and new media (Musarò, Parmiggiani 2017). Together with political discourses, mediatic

rhetoric describes migrants as unwelcome “invaders” (Albahari 2015), crystallizing the imbalances of power in terms of social representations and promoting a rhetoric of passivity (Ahmed 2004). Moreover, these negative portraits of migration influence public opinion (Horsti 2019)¹. Such images and narratives dehumanize migrants, supporting further forms of social exclusion and stigmas. Within this context, creative methods allow not only the deconstruction of distorted images and stimulate critical reflections on these social inequalities; they also create unprecedented possibilities to develop collective experiments and new forms of social integration capable of enhancing diversity. This is also and above all because creative methods have a tendency to cross boundaries – disciplinary, conceptual, cognitive – facilitating discussions and stimulating collective reflection on complex issues.

Indeed, if creative methods are about self-reflection and emancipation, they also promote an alternative perspective on social practices, challenging oppressive mechanisms of representation and exclusion. Hence, these creative approaches reveal conflicting values, power relations, subjectivities, meaning-making practices that reflect contingency and multiplicity of mobile practices and experiences.

This means that we are in need of new and creative methodologies, in order to overcome disciplinary boundaries and create new possibilities of engaging with a «world on the move» (Elliot *et al.* 2017). Indeed, these methodologies show a major shift in both the reflection on knowledge production within and outside the academy (Hawkins 2018). They help to re-envisage the relations between research, action and social change, while trying to answer specific contemporary challenges such as forms of movement control – motility (Flamm, Kauffman 2006) – and the resulting exclusion, and the distorted representations of people on the move. These approaches open space for different speakers, and encourage experimental, interdisciplinary, and collaborative work. Hence, they can be conceived as collective processes where participants aim to understand and improve specific migration practices and processes, by expanding the community of inquiry and interpretation to include the subjects studied and intervening in contexts of social injustice and exclusion, enhancing social relations, and supporting a critical reflection by the participants (Moralli 2020). Creative research allows the production of new knowledge, enables the participation

1. This aspect is recognizable, for example, in the gap between perceptions of the number of migrants within a country and their actual presence. For further information see Anonimo (2018).

of stakeholders to the academic field and of academics to diverse social spaces, favours the cross-fertilisation between methods, competences, and disciplines, and redefines the scope of research's impacts.

Based on these premises, this paper offers a methodological and empirical reflection on the action research conducted within the "Atlas of Transitions" project. The empirical research will serve as a field of analysis to reflect on the role of creative methods in social investigation on arts and migration and, more generally, in the social sciences. In the first part of the paper, I will introduce the project "Atlas of Transitions" to talk about different modalities and tools adopted to explore the relation between arts, public space and migration. Second, I will critically reflect upon some crucial aspects of the creative methods adopted, focusing on the processes of empowerment, cultural de-construction, and the creation of new citizenship architectures.

Exploring Creative Methods: the Project "Atlas of Transition"

Thanks to the use of creative methods adopted in a transdisciplinary sense, the project "Atlas of Transitions. New Geographies for a Cross-Cultural Europe", co-financed by the European programme "Creative Europe" (17-2020), was aimed at investigating the relationship between migration and performing arts. Lasting from 2017 to 2021, the project was led by Emilia Romagna Teatro Fondazione (ERT), and engaged eleven partners in seven countries, mainly theatres and cultural organizations: Cantieri Meticci (Bologna, Italy), Le Channel Scène Nationale (Calais, France); Tjeter Vizion Ngo and A.T.K. – Albanian Theatre Association (Elbasan, Albania); Théâtre de Liège et DC&J Création (Liège, Belgium); Powszechny Theatre (Warsaw, Poland); Motus Terrae (Lavrio, Greece) and Backa Teater (Gothenburg, Sweden). At the same time, the University of Bologna, coordinated by Pierluigi Musarò, engaged a network of seven universities and research centers on migration in the same countries of the consortium (University of Lille, Centre of Migration Research – CMR at the Warsaw University, University of Elbasan, Centre for Ethnic and Migration Studies at the University of Liège, University of Gothenburg, National Technical University of Athens).

In the project, all the partners involved, as well as other stakeholders such as diaspora associations, artistic collectives, high schools, co-developed artistic initiatives capable to generate practices of mutual recognition and negotiation, but also spaces of encounter for people with different

backgrounds. Thus, it supported common physical and symbolic universes capable to valorise diversity as a basis for cultural production and engagement. Adopting different creative methods within the frame of the action research methodology, the project aimed both at sustaining an interdisciplinary reflection on how migration is framed and collectively imagined and supporting performative cultural practices able to enhance intercultural encounters and active participation. A participation capable to challenge general anxieties and security concerns supported by traditional and social media and certain kinds of political discourses. Political discourses capable to endorse emergency narratives, aggressive policing, and militarized border control (Smets *et al.* 2020). Unable to engage with citizens' concerns, they have helped to conflate migration with insecurity, creating a fertile breeding ground for xenophobic and populist reactions. Among the consequences of this «politics of fear», the increase of anti-immigrants and anti-Muslim parties in Europe (Wodak 2015) and a strong consensus on a hard line on migration, together with calls for even stricter policies.

Thus, the collaboration between artists, researchers and practitioners assured the variety of the approaches adopted by each partner. Moreover, the researchers and the artists collectively reflected on the needs of the specific context of intervention. France, for example, worked on the concept of “refuge”, particularly important in Calais (just think about the Jungle experience!), while the Polish team reflected on individual and collective identity, a relevant topic in contemporary Poland, as emerged from the 2021 conflicts and pushbacks at the border with Belarus. Thus, the added value of the project consisted not only in the variety of the topics chosen, but also in terms of approaches adopted by the partners, which gave the opportunity not only to blur the boundaries between different disciplines (sociology, anthropology, urban studies, architecture, psychology and economics among others), but also to review the preconceived opposition between theory and practice, between forms of direct intervention in the field and the mechanisms of knowledge construction. After a quick context analysis on migration and artistic experiences related to each country, every country team tried to answer the following research questions: how to investigate a complex topic such as migration through artistic languages? In which ways can arts become symbolic and physical spaces of encounter and intercultural dialogue in European cities? How cultural production can directly involve migrants and asylum seekers in active forms of participation while overcoming paternalistic forms of involvement?

In Bologna, ERT, University of Bologna and the theatre collective Can-

tieri Meticci worked together in order to use creative methods to co-create temporary spaces of intercultural relations, strengthening the relations between local associations, students, artists and the general audience. An important part of the activities developed by ERT Fondazione, Cantieri Meticci and University of Bologna converged into “Atlas of Transitions – Biennale”. These three international festivals, organised in 2018, 2019 and 2020, and curated by Piersandra Di Matteo, adopted an innovative approach to investigate the relations between arts and migration, involving both emerging and experienced artists from all over the world, often sharing the idea of arts as participatory and experimental spaces of collective expression. As the curator of the festivals advocates, they were: «conceived to deal with the issue of contemporary migration from an artistic perspective, looking into its potential and encouraging interchanging geographies based on reciprocity and interaction» (Di Matteo 2020, p. 26). The curator continues:

promoting corporeal posture and narratives against the forms of sovereignty upheld by necropolitics (Mbembe 2003) – the use of social, political and military power to dictate how some people may live and how others must die – that are fully operative within the contemporary phenomenon of migration, means working openly to demolish the barriers that keep subjects divided and exposed to the logic of subordination (racial, sexual, cultural, economic), and to overthrow the expressive, cognitive and affective schema that keep us distant from each other. (Di Matteo 2020, p. 26)

The first festival, “Right to the City”, took place in the city of Bologna from 15 to 24 June 2018, and, inspired by Lefebvre’s ideas (1968), developed the theme of the right to participate and re-appropriate of symbolic and physical urban spaces. The second festival, “Home”, animated the city from 1 to 10 March 2019 and dealt with the feeling to be at home or being away from home, starting from Ahmed’s reflection (2014), who suggests overcoming a representation of migrants as «ontological uprooted». Based on a feminist and post-colonial approach, this perspective tries to challenge the ethnocentric narratives that depicts migrants as an indefinite community that belongs nowhere, and primarily to a Europe with borders remodelled and fortified by the Schengen agreements. These two conceptual nodes – the right to the city and the concept of home – were primarily used as narrative and design expedients to reflect on issues such as identity, belonging, inclusion and citizenship. Although influenced by the effects of the Covid-19

pandemic, the third festival, entitled “We The people”, maintained the life-line of some of the directions that nourished the entire course of the Biennale: practices of sharing situated in the folds of urban life and artistic projects offering counter-hegemonic narrations, acting on the boundary between art and activism and discursive apparatuses that question marginalisation. The festival focused especially on the practices of listening, intended as the mutual encounter of bodies already headed towards new acts of listening. In this sense, the space of cultural production was intended as an agonistic space (Mouffe 2007), made of relational poetics that decentre whiteness, heterosexuality and affective inadequacies. Within the frame of action research, some of the performances and the workshops were developed conjunctly by researchers and practitioners, even though others were principally defined by the artists and the curator of the project. The primary objective of the project was to try to deconstruct the stigmatizing imagery on migration conveyed by media and political rhetoric. Secondly, these experiences also represented collective experiments of new forms of social integration capable of enhancing diversity through artistic participation.

Empowerment

In action research, the participation of subjects can lead to a different conception of their identity and subjectivity, as these last are connected to social relations and discursive practices (Kemmis 2009). Moreover, empowerment could lead to collective self-consciousness and community action. In this sense, it could support the development of interpersonal skills of individuals and their relational agency. Focusing on the functioning of this methodology, for example, Carr and Kemmis (1986) have distinguished between technical, practical, and emancipatory action research. The technical approach aims to improve effectiveness of social practices (e.g.: educational, managerial, organizational, etc.). In this kind of action research, the practitioners depend significantly on the researcher, who can be seen as a facilitator. In addition to effectiveness, practical action research is focused on practitioners' understanding and professional development. Here, the main role of researchers is to encourage practitioners to negotiate and self-reflect on their actual situation, finding efficient and shared solutions. The third type of action research is emancipatory in the sense that it is focused on the transformation of a certain system or organization, overcoming some of the limits encountered by the practitioners after a critical reflection on their

situation. Thus, this kind of research can be linked not only to self-confidence, but also to the participants' potential empowerment processes (Zuber-Skerritt 1996; Rowell *et al.* 2016).

In many of the creative methods developed within “Atlas of Transitions” action research, the aspect about participation and empowerment was determinant. This was particularly evident in the development of the performances by Cantieri Meticci, Italian partner of the project. Cantieri Meticci is a theatre company from Bologna. Since 2012, it involves professional and non-professional actors from different countries all over the world. Cantieri Meticci works at the intersection between aesthetics and activism, carrying out large-scale theatre projects involving asylum seekers, refugees, migrants, and Italian citizens, often culminating in major artistic events open to the local community. The collective uses artistic tools to stimulate a public debate on the ongoing relations between newcomers and host countries, stimulating the public on the issues of migration and intercultural dialogue. Adopting a participatory methodology, Cantieri Meticci aims at maintaining a constant interaction with the local community and the spectators who take part in the activities, favouring the encounter between foreigners and citizens, aimed at widening spaces of social and political inclusion. Secondly, the theatre collective intends to improve participants' artistic and cultural skills, supporting a company of professional actors/activists. Cantieri Meticci usually develop performances that shed light on issues such as exploitation, border control, human rights, intercultural relation, while keeping a direct involvement of the public in the performance. Being partner of the “Atlas of Transitions” project, Cantieri Meticci developed a series of performative laboratories and two performances for the two festivals. The first performance, *Autostrada del Sud*, was based on Julio Cortazar's novel and involved 36 actors and 144 spectators, transported in 36 cars in an itinerant spectacle. In each car an actor and the spectators were stuck together in an urban traffic jam slipping through a multiplicity of times. During the spectacle, the spectator – who could participate with his/her own car or be a passenger – was called to choose his/her own performative stream, experiencing the traffic jam as an infinite game of possibilities, in which each car became the passage to another world. The second spectacle, *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*, based on the famous Joseph Conrad's novel, tells the story of a ship where James Wait, a black man of Antillean origins, comes aboard and gets sick. Proposing a contemporary rewriting, Cantieri Meticci gave life to a work between show and installation, in which the “other”, the migrant, the African – often depicted as

the original and eternal enemy – was depicted both as a real and phantasmatic figure. During the spectacle, the spectators were free to move in a labyrinth-like space composed of cubes-cabins of the ship *Narcissus* and to meet the interpreters, while grappling with past and present stories on colonization, work exploitation, cultural encounters, and social stigmas. The action research was part of the development of the performance *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*. In particular, Pietro Florida, Cantieri Meticci's director, proposed three extracts of Conrad's novel to the research team. These extracts were given to Pierluigi Musaro's two classes of students. The students were then asked to read these extracts and re-interpret them using other images linked to their personal knowledge, past experiences, original ideas, etc. Finally, the director participated to the lessons and discussed with the students about these images and worked with them on their embodiment. Some of these images were used in the final performance that took place during the "Home" festival in March 2019.

Thus, thanks to this common working and learning dynamics, everybody could engage to reduce the sphere of power and control in everyday life practices, through both learning and self-reflection – here, again, the part of action and research should be balanced. By doing this, the project has also intervened at the level of social imaginaries, becoming an alternative form of political participation in the shape of an «aesthetics of subversion» (Mazzara 2019, p. 10), showing that arts can have a «deconstructing potentiality», through the re-signification process to propose alternative narratives on migration.

Creative Methods as Paths Towards New Narratives and Meanings

Another important collaboration within the project in Bologna engaged Zimmerfrei. Zimmerfrei is a group of artists working on public space through the combination of different languages, ranging from documentary films to video art, sound, and environmental installations. The collective was founded in Bologna in 2000 by three artists: Anna De Manincor (filmmaker), Massimo Carozzi (sound designer and musician) and Anna Rispoli, who now works as artist and director in Brussels. Within "Atlas of Transitions", they organized three cycles of workshops dedicated to Italian and foreign teenagers (15-22 years old). These workshops consisted in the creation of sound, image, and storytelling archive by intercultural groups of teenagers and youngsters.

During the workshops, the groups not only got in contact with the video-art projects and the documentaries made by Zimmerfrei; they also re-elaborated their own personal stories through an active involvement in the project. In particular, the three workshops – focused on storytelling, writing and image transposition practices – brought to the realization of a four-episode documentary, entitled *Saga*. The documentary gave an alternative vision of the city of Bologna, thanks to the contribution of the young participants, who used different languages: from individual storytelling to scripted images, from interview to open dialogues, from informal conversation to rewriting personal stories, passing through urban walks. Thus, the workshops have been able to promote forms of encounter and dialogue, supporting intercultural and intergenerational diversity as an inescapable source for the creative process. During the experience, we invited the collective to one lesson of sociology of culture (bachelor level) and started a shared reflection on the tools to use during the workshops in order to enhance the involvement of the young participants. Moreover, we collaborated directly with Zimmerfrei in occasion of some shootings of the documentary.

Thus, Zimmerfrei developed theoretically informed practices for all the participants involved. Since action research is guided by a shared concern and it supports a collective production of knowledge: «the distinction between academics and workers must not be taken to imply a distinction between ‘theoreticians’ and ‘practitioners’ as if theory resided in one place and its implementation in another» (McTaggart 1997, p. 30). This aspect was particularly important because the projects embodied both a theoretical reflection and a practical/performative dimension, combining them in order to challenge stereotyped depictions on public space and migration.

Also, the case of Zimmerfrei shows how creative methods can open new spaces for the participation of researchers. No more external and neutral experts who analyses data collected in the field, the researchers actively take part both to the process of knowledge co-construction and to concrete activities, questioning the way knowledge is constructed. Adopting these methods, in fact, participants subjectivity – researcher’s subjectivity included – and their values are important not only to a complete understanding of the problem in need to be solved (Benhabib 1992), but also to support a collective production of knowledge. This aspect impacts on two levels. First, it challenges the position of the social scientist as privileged observer, recognizing his/her unavoidable subjectivity and foreknowledge in defining, for example, the research questions, the methods adopted and the analysis of the empirical data. This perspective does not challenge the

concept of objectivity but defines subjectivity as part of it. In fact, as Ratner (2002, p. 3) reminds:

one of the advantages of recognizing subjectivity is to reflect on whether it facilitates or impedes objective comprehension. Distorting values can then be replaced by values that enhance objectivity. [...] Objectivism integrates subjectivity and objectivity because it argues that objective knowledge requires active, sophisticated subjective processes – such as perception, analytical reasoning, synthetic reasoning, logical deduction, and the distinction of essences from appearances. Conversely, subjective processes can enhance objective comprehension of the world.

Secondly, it considers the values and the experiences of the participants, supporting jointly planned actions. As a consequence, also the potential theoretical basis identified in the first part of the research can be reviewed, in a continuous mutual learning process. In the majority of the cases, thus, action research through creative methods is very similar to grounded theory (Charmaz 2014), at least in terms of the continuous inputs that go from the field to the process of analysis and theoretical reflection.

De-constructing Cultures

“Atlas of Transitions” managed to foster alternative forms of participation of migrants and asylum seekers, while deconstructing the conventional imaginaries shaped around the topic of migration, as well as creating new imaginaries on cultural diversity in urban contexts. An interesting experience in this sense was proposed by the Cuban arti(vi)st Tania Bruguera. Exploring the potentialities of performances in the public space, the activist proposed a project called “School of Integration” during the festival “Home” (2019). The “School of Integration” was conceived as a temporary school to experience other cultures along with their knowledge, history, skills, beliefs, and customs. Through music, oral poetry, culinary exchanges, artisan workshops, etc., during the ten days of the festival, “School of Integration” activated a two-way model for teaching, in which the “foreigners guests” introduced the “local hosts” to their traditions. The lessons were all very different from each other: the Eritrean poetess Ribka Sibhatu gave a lesson about contemporary Eritrea, Larysa taught the Ukrainian rite of drawing and painting the Easter eggs, while another association transformed the DAMSLab’s classroom – an

artistic space managed by University of Bologna – into an African tailoring shop, guiding the audience to experience the sewing machines and beautiful textiles with colourful designs. In so doing, the School encouraged a dialogue between ethnic minorities, diaspora associations and inhabitants who met daily for an hour, with the aim to share their stories and produce «practices of difference» (Semi *et al.* 2009). As Tania Bruguera explained: «School of Integration works on the intersection between art and pedagogy. Here, again, the project takes possession of a structure of power. Through my artistic work I always strive to activate processes from which local communities can benefit, so that they can become self-sustainable after passing the torch».

These projects show how arts and culture can become an alternative form of participation (Merli 2002). By proposing these “alternative” courses inside an institutional place, a building owned by University of Bologna, where usually university lessons and academic seminars take place, the project included and amplified the voice of those who usually are not heard. An experiment that showed how performing arts can have both an aesthetic and political value (Martiniello 2016, Paltrinieri *et al.* 2020). The primary objective of the project was to try to deconstruct the imagery conveyed by stigmatizing media and political rhetoric, which represents the migrant, as mentioned in the introduction, as a victim to be saved (fuelling imbalance of power and conveying pietism) or an invader to be rejected (fuelling a generalized criminalization of growing episodes of “everyday” racism). Indeed, one of the crucial elements adopted to activate the processes of deconstruction of the imaginary linked to the migratory phenomenon consists in the fact that “Atlas of Transitions” does not directly address the issue of migration or social inclusion. Rather, it seeks to enhance diversity in two main ways. The first one refers to the direct involvement of people from different backgrounds in the artistic workshops. The second one refers to the ability of most of the projects to address issues that are transversal to the migration phenomenon. Issues capable of stimulating connections, cognitive effervescences, direct or indirect references encouraging a reflection on the social inequalities linked to the right to move, but also collective experiments of new forms of social integration capable of enhancing diversity.

Conclusions

Thanks to the use of creative methods and the collaboration between artists and researchers, “Atlas of Transitions” challenged the social conventions

and power relationships that lie behind the ways in which different people are represented. Using the performers' body – a body with an aesthetic and performative value but also a strong political meaning – as a way of participating and re-appropriating urban space, the projects have acted both on an aesthetic and emotional level (Ahmed 2004), as forms of (inter) cultural political interventions. Moreover, they intervened on a relational level, modifying social practices. In other words, the projects have shown how art can become a «narrative of change» (Wittmayer *et al.* 2015), capable of fighting «against pre-existing cultural and institutional narratives and the structures of meaning and power that they transmit» (Davis 2002, p. 25). In fact, it is precisely through the creative and cognitive activation of new forms of urban coexistence and shared reflection that – as already suggested by the theorists of social movements at the end of the last century –, new models of action and negotiation processes can be activated. These alternative forms of identity and citizenship propose a new idea of justice as “mutual recognition”, which aims to integrate and overcome both the idea of justice as “non-domination” – which recalls the need to manage complex phenomena such as migration through international governance. Moreover, they support the idea of justice as “impartiality” – which emphasizes the role of institutions in guaranteeing fundamental rights (Eriksen 2016). These are important processes that aim to stimulate, beyond the normative codes of official politics, new “architectures of listening” (MacNamara 2016) and a renewed sense of solidarity and coexistence. These architectures are supported by a renovated understanding between art and thought, between the visual and the verbal, towards cognitive complexities that open unthinkable windows of opportunities for self-expression and mutual recognition (Macleod, Holdridge 2006; Moralli *et al.* 2019).

By doing this, the participatory approach of the “Atlas of Transitions” projects, combined with the use of creative methods, partially solved some limits that may concern these types of artistic interventions, such as the lack of involvement of specific social groups or the transitory temporariness of the performances. By selecting the stage venue outside the traditional places where culture is produced, involving the center as well as the periphery, institutional places but also streets and reception centers, and encouraging the participation of different people, the project has included and amplified the voice of those who usually are not heard. An experiment that showed how performing arts can have both an aesthetic and political value, promoting a broader idea of citizenship (Mouffe 2007, Martiniello 2016), while constructing hybrid narratives that deliberately put in question notions such as authority, inclusion, and identity.

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