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Wiebke Sievers *Editor*

# Cultural Change in Post-Migrant Societies

Re-Imagining Communities Through  
Arts and Cultural Activities

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Wiebke Sievers

Editor

# Cultural Change in Post-Migrant Societies

Re-Imagining Communities Through Arts  
and Cultural Activities



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*Editor*

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# Preface

Migration is, without a doubt, a total social fact, to use Marcel Mauss's vocabulary. It concerns the whole of society and has implications for all its institutions (economic, social, religious, political, etc.). Even though Mauss does not explicitly mention arts and culture among the spheres and institutions affected by total social facts, they generally are. In particular, migration has many diverse implications for arts, culture and cultural institutions that need to be thoroughly studied.

The present collective volume is doing precisely that under the guidance of the editor, Wiebke Sievers. The book is anchored in the work we have been encouraging together within the framework of the IMISCOE Standing Committee DIVCULT (Standing Committee on Superdiversity, Migration and Cultural Change) since the creation of IMISCOE.

I would like to mention three main characteristics which make this volume a valuable contribution to the study of the links between migration (and also the post-migration situation), arts and culture. First, the book moves away from the conventional *assimilationist* and *integrationist* paradigms in migration studies. Instead of examining how migrants and their descendants fit into the existing artistic and cultural spheres and institutions – how they assimilate or integrate into them – the book examines how they are active factors of cultural and artistic change and how they contribute to the transformation of arts and culture. This is clearly an approach that we have tried to promote within DIVCULT, recognizing that conventional paradigms fall short in making sense of the cultural dynamics associated with migration and post-migration.

Second, the book privileges both a multidisciplinary and a cross-artistic and cultural domains approach. The authors come from various academic disciplines (anthropology, cultural theory, human geography, literary studies, sociology, etc.) and are interested in different artistic and cultural disciplines and domains (literature, music, carnivals, museums, etc.). A multidisciplinary and even a transdisciplinary approach is, in my view, necessary to grasp the multifaceted dimensions of the links between migration, post-migration, arts and culture. Examining various artistic and cultural domains and disciplines also allows us to get away from specialized area studies (theatre studies, hi-hop studies, etc.) and to gain a better global

understanding of the connections between migration, post-migration and cultural change.

Third, the book stimulates the dialogue between academic and non-academic social actors interested in the same issues. This dialogue is cross-fertilizing. On the one hand, academics disconnected from the ‘field’ can rapidly be satisfied with conversation between academics – which runs the risk of perpetuating the same discourses away from the realities of the daily cultural dynamics. On the other hand, non-academic actors are often willing to take a moment away from their daily constraints to think about what they are doing in more theoretical terms. A dialogue with academics can be helpful here for them, too. In other words, the dialogue offers a win–win perspective for all the stakeholders concerned by the topic of the book.

To conclude, this book is a highly positive contribution to the work we have been promoting in our research committee, and I hope that it will encourage both our members to continue their efforts and non-members to join us in developing projects.

Brussels, 10 August 2023

Marco Martiniello

# Acknowledgements

This book has come into being thanks to the IMISCOE Standing Committee Superdiversity, Migration and Cultural Change (DIVCULT). Some of the chapters were first presented at the 17th IMISCOE Annual Conference in 2020, the first to be held online due to the Covid 19 pandemic. I would like to thank all colleagues and friends from the Standing Committee and beyond for their comments and suggestions that helped to develop both the framework for the book and the individual chapters.

Partly due to the pandemic, it has taken much longer than I hoped to finalise the book, and I would like to thank all the contributors both for their patience and for all the work they have invested in this project.

I am also very grateful to the anonymous peer reviewers whose comments helped us to further consolidate and clarify our arguments. Of course, the responsibility for the result of our work lies with the individual authors.

Without the funding of the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), we would not have been able to afford a thorough proofreading of all chapters and the open-access publication of this book.

Last but not least, many thanks go to Jenny Money for correcting and proofreading this book.



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biased field of knowledge production”, in *Geographical Review* (2022 with Carsten Felgentreff, Martin Franz, Marcel Paul, Andreas Pott, Charlotte Räuchle and Sebastian Schrader) and “Ethnizität”, in *Inventar der Migrationsbegriffe* (eds. Inken Bartels, Isabella Löhr, Christiane Reinecke, Philipp Schäfer and Laura Stielike).

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# Chapter 1

## Cultural Change in Post-Migrant Societies: Re-imagining Communities Through Arts and Cultural Activities



Wiebke Sievers

### 1.1 Introduction

“Understanding who we are”. These words are imprinted on the wall of the Vorarlberg Museum, located in Bregenz, the capital of the Austrian federal state of Vorarlberg, which borders with Switzerland. This motto implies that there is a clearly demarcated “we” whose identity and culture can be defined and that it is the task of the museum to contribute to such a definition. The artist, writer and activist Mohammed Ali Baş, born in Vorarlberg of Turkish parents, aims to change this motto by crossing out “who” and replacing it with “where” so that the sentence reads “Understanding where we are”. With this modification, the artist aims to highlight that culture is not an essence of a people but is constantly changing. Migration has been one of the most important factors of such changes over recent decades in Europe. However, this has not necessarily found recognition in large cultural institutions, cultural policies and the related official local, regional and national narratives. Mohammed Ali Baş’ motto defines museums as places that help individuals and communities to understand where they stand in this process of cultural change initiated by migration. Where do we stand between the exclusion of migrants as others from national narratives and traditions invented in the nineteenth century and the emergence of new narratives that include them and enable their social, political and cultural participation?

This vignette contains many of the ideas discussed in this volume. “Migration is, of course, change”, as Alejandro Portes once put it (2010, p. 1544). It increases the diversity of societies in terms of origins, languages, religions and cultural traditions. However, this does not automatically imply a change in how local, regional and

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national communities define, narrate and represent themselves and their cultures.<sup>1</sup> Rather, what we observe is a struggle between agents of change and those who oppose them. The agents of change adapt, transform or reinvent official narratives to reflect the fact that European societies have become migration societies – they have experienced immigration for decades and an increasing number of people, especially among the younger age groups, are the descendants of migrants. Those opposing these agents of change revert to the national cultural traditions invented in the nineteenth century. A third group is located, undecidedly, somewhere in between these two poles (Broadhead, 2018; Foroutan, 2019; see also the Chap. 10 by Erel in this volume). Such struggles are typical for post-migrant societies, i.e. migration societies where immigration is controversial and which are therefore still marked by discrimination against and the exclusion of migrants (Petersen et al., 2019). The above vignette documents that these struggles do not only take place in politics. Indeed, writers, singers, poetry slammers etc. have often countered the growing political mobilisation against migrants and have therefore come to be regarded as major agents of change. Cultural institutions, on the other hand, such as museums and theatres, which contributed to the invention and representation of national communities, cannot *not* take a stance in this struggle (Vlachou, 2019). Either they silently continue telling these invented traditions or they start changing them. What the outcome of these struggles will be remains to be seen. In fact, we do not even know where we currently stand. Researchers also seem to be split on how they assess what is going on. While some turn to migrants' artistic and cultural practices as agents of change or use arts-based research methods to engender change, others point out that these laudable efforts will never lead to true cultural change because they do not affect the exclusionary structures (see Chap. 8 by Delhayé in this volume).

The present publication moves beyond this impasse. We argue that both poles need to be kept in mind if we intend to assess where migration societies stand in the process of cultural change. It is not enough to identify artists and cultural producers as agents of change. We need to consider that they act in structures installed in the process of nation-building and that they are confronted with actors whose habitus has developed in these structures in cultural fields and beyond. Effective change means transforming these structures as well as their in-built understandings of culture so that they more aptly represent the realities of migration societies. What makes assessing change in these terms even more complex is that we, as migration researchers, are deeply involved in this process. We also cannot *not* take a stance. Statistical evidence clearly shows that European societies have become migration societies. We must, therefore, take this reality as a starting point for our analyses in

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<sup>1</sup>I use the term *culture* here in its widest sense as referring to values, cognitive frameworks and accumulated knowledge but my focus in this article is on cultural narrations, such as that of homogeneous national cultures and their implicit and explicit differentiations from those regarded as not belonging to the respective culture. When I refer to culture as creative practices, I use the terms *cultural activities*, *cultural producers* etc. For the differentiation between these various understandings of culture, see also Zapata-Barrero, Sievers and Martiniello (2017, 4–5).

order not to perpetuate the exclusive community narratives invented in the nineteenth century. We must move beyond naturalising the divide between migrants and non-migrants (Dahinden, 2016). However, those who take these narratives to reflect reality or, even worse, intend to again turn them into reality, denounce this new stance in migration studies as not being objective. This observation has led to researchers moving beyond simply observing towards engendering change in and with their research. In this context, arts-based methods and cooperation with artists and cultural institutions have become very popular among researchers. Yet again, if we know little about the lasting effects of migrants' cultural and artistic activities, we know even less about the effects of these new approaches in migration research.

In line with these introductory thoughts, the guiding questions of this volume are: Does migration lead to cultural change? If so, what is the role of arts and cultural activities in this process of change? Moreover, how far can migration research contribute to this process of cultural change? The contributions take the debates on cultural change further in three respects. First, they develop new theoretical and methodological approaches that can be used to analyse cultural change. Second, they assess how the activities of immigrants and their descendants in a concrete local context bring about change beyond the local level. Finally, they discuss joint ventures for change between research, arts and cultural production. The authors provide insights into processes of cultural change in eight national contexts in Europe (Austria, Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland and the United Kingdom). The book not only includes a wide range of artistic and cultural practices – ranging from literature, film and music via carnival and national-day celebrations to data visualisation and digital storytelling – but also discusses processes of change in large cultural institutions, such as museums and theatres, which historically contributed to the representation of nations as homogeneous.

In the rest of the introduction, I first locate the volume in the wider debate on migration and change in migration studies. Subsequently, I explain in more detail where and how this volume moves beyond the state of the art before, finally, discussing our results in the light of recent changes in migration studies.

## 1.2 Migration, Change and Artistic and Cultural Activities

Does migration bring social and cultural change in migration receiving societies? This question has not, thus far, been at the forefront of migration research. This is surprising since many of the researchers working in this field come from disciplines such as sociology and anthropology that focus on studying social and cultural change. However, migration researchers have generally not analysed how societies change through immigration but more how migrants change in their host societies (Bojadžijev & Römhild, 2014). The transnational turn did not entirely modify this perspective because it linked migrants to their places of origin and looked at how these changed through migration (Levitt, 1998; Ullah et al., 2022). In other words, the researchers upheld the national borders that no longer existed by studying

migrants and their descendants as distinct entities not belonging to the societies in which they lived (Dahinden, 2016). This has, to some extent, also been true for the humanities, as illustrated by the numerous literary studies that exclusively focus on the literary works of migrants and their descendants (Sievers & Vlasta, 2018). At the same time, the idea that migration may lead to more general cultural and social change in countries of destination first emerged in literary/cultural studies in the 1990s, with Homi Bhabha's *The location of culture*, first published in 1994, becoming the most important work of reference for this paradigm change (Bhabha, 2004). However, this did not result in more studies on how these literatures, cultures and societies change. Rather, there has been a tendency to supplant national with transnational or global histories, such as histories of migration (Bade, 2003; Chiellino, 1995). These make visible the history of migration which is usually ignored in national histories. In parallel to this new approach, the emergence of right-wing populism and extremism became a phenomenon of change through migration in receiving societies that received ample attention, as illustrated in a recently published handbook (Rydgren, 2018). The current challenge is how to integrate into our histories of transnationalism the fact that nationalism persists (Triandafyllidou, 2022). Today's reality in Europe is marked by both migration and the fact that European societies did not, for many years, tell their own histories in these terms. Instead, they perceived themselves as national communities which led to the exclusion and discrimination of all those turned into others by these narratives. There is no guarantee that these national narratives will be overcome. Telling histories as histories of change makes it possible to remember the violence of exclusion while moving towards a different future.

A revealing example of how little social change was at the forefront of migration studies is a special issue of the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* in 2010 focusing on "Theories of migration and social change". In his introduction to the volume, Nicholas Van Hear raises the questions: "Does migration change society? [...] And how does social change in turn influence migration?" (Van Hear, 2010, p. 1531). Interestingly, only one of the seven articles in the special issue really attended to the first question, whereas the others all dealt with the second.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, that one article, written by Alejandro Portes, argues that migration to Europe and the United States after World War II has not led to fundamental social change in host societies. Central pillars, such as the political, legal or educational systems and, "above all, the distribution of power arrangements and the class structure", remain intact (Portes, 2010, p. 1548). Rather, change becomes visible in two ways. Either the descendants of immigrants move up the social ladder and enter positions of power – not only in politics and the economy but also in arts and cultural production – or, alternatively, they face racism and other structural barriers and become marginalised communities. The latter developments lead to social tensions and bring to the fore nativist movements and right-wing populist parties mobilising

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<sup>2</sup>Thomas Faist's contribution lies in between these two poles. He considers how far the transnational activities of migrants entail the transformation of institutions (Faist, 2010).

against these marginalised groups. Clearly, this conclusion mirrors the state-of-the-art in migration research at the time. More-recent approaches, however, imply that it is not the lack of integration but growing integration that explains the emergence of nativism and right-wing populism. Aladin El-Mafaalani (2018) calls this phenomenon the *integration paradox*. He regards integration not as a teleological process of migrants adapting to their host societies but as a struggle that affects all members of a society and comes with backlashes. For instance, migrants who climb the social ladder and demand participation may come to be regarded as a threat by those who traditionally had the exclusive right to these higher positions in that particular society.

Portes (2010) points out that the cultural capital of the migrants decides whether they climb the social ladder or become marginalised. He ignores that this also depends on the culture of the receiving societies. There is clear evidence that migrants' opportunities to climb the social ladder and actively participate in their societies of residence differ between national contexts (Crul & Schneider, 2010). Researchers mainly explain these differences with institutional arrangements in legislation, education, the labour market, housing and religion (Crul & Schneider, 2010). Alba and Nee (2003) regard cultural change among the majority as equally important. They base this argument on the assimilation of the German, Italian, Irish and Eastern European immigrants who arrived in the United States from the middle of the nineteenth century. While many Americans regarded these groups as unassimilable in the early-twentieth century, attitudes changed during World War II when these immigrants and their descendants fought in the American army. There is little knowledge of how this change happened but the authors claim that cultural activities played a major role:

[W]hite ethnic groups were bathed in the cultivated warmth of a campaign for unity, which symbolically promoted the unification of Americans of different national backgrounds with festivals to celebrate the contributions of immigrant groups to America, an early form of multicultural ritual. (Alba & Nee, 2003, p. 115)

Ethnic diversity also played a role in popular wartime novels published at the time (Alba & Nee, 2003, p. 116). Alba and Nee (2003) assume that a similar process is underway regarding the post-1965 immigration to the United States. The mainstream will change again to include these immigrants mainly originating from Asia and Latin America. However, there is little evidence that this is what is happening. Drouhot and Nee still regard understanding the current remaking of American and European societies as "an important area for future work" in 2019 (p. 191).

One important area of change that needs more study is narrative change. This particularly concerns the boundaries drawn between self and other within the narratives underlying nation states and governing the daily actions of their members. It is in this respect that fundamental change *is* necessary because this concerns values instilled in Western societies in the processes of colonisation and nationalisation. The age-old image of "the immigrant threat" (Lucassen, 2005) can still be used to mobilise voters successfully today because this narrative draws on and conjures its alleged opposite, the grand narrative of the homogeneous national self. To



overcome racism and exclusion and deprive nativist and right-wing political movements of their basis, we need to move beyond such narratives. As Robert D. Putnam put it:

In the medium to long run [...] successful immigrant societies create new forms of social solidarity and dampen the negative effects of diversity by constructing new, more encompassing identities. Thus, the central challenge for modern, diversifying societies is to create a new, broader sense of “we”. (2007, pp. 138–139)

There is a strong belief that arts and cultural activities have the power to initiate such a change. It is this belief that explains the artistic turn in migration studies. Researchers in the humanities and also, more recently, in the social sciences have come to regard artists and cultural performers as agents and means of cultural change.

History shows that arts and cultural activities have the potential to effectuate such a change. After all, they were essential for the building of the imagined homogeneous national communities that are the root cause of the exclusion of immigrants and their descendants today. Benedict Anderson (1991) argues that, in the nineteenth century, novels were as important as newspapers in instilling in individuals the idea that they are part of a national community. They not only circulated in the whole national territory and thereby created a community of readers sharing the same knowledge and beliefs but also contain the notion that people who do not know each other personally are nevertheless part of the same community (Anderson, 1991, pp. 24–26). At the same time, these narratives laid the basis for the distinction between self and others in these imagined communities. As Edward Said (1993) has shown with his method of contrapuntal reading, nineteenth-century English and French novels are structured by colonial patterns and thinking. Jane Austen only mentions in passing that the bourgeois family in *Mansfield Park* lives off the work of slaves on their sugar plantation in the Caribbean but it is exactly this side remark that assigns Blacks the role of the others in the white British imagined community (Said, 1993). In his book *The location of culture*, first published in 1994, Homi Bhabha (2004) draws on these arguments when he claims that the artistic and cultural practices of immigrants and their descendants can initiate cultural change in these imagined communities. He argues: “Increasingly, “national” cultures are being produced from the perspective of disenfranchised minorities” (2004, p. 8) and cites a close reading of Salman Rushdie’s *The satanic verses* (1988) that interprets the novel as providing an alternative vision of the British past, present and future as central proof for this hypothesis. Bhabha’s ideas have become very influential in literary studies that focus on the writing of immigrants and their descendants, as documented in a recently published overview of research in this field (Sievers & Vlasta, 2018). Many of the chapter authors in Sievers and Vlasta (2018) already stress in their titles that these writers challenge the myth of Japanese homogeneity, change Italian national identity, transnationalise the German literary field, force the Greeks to learn new languages and provide insights into a new transnational Swiss nation and a new Austria.

Since the late 2000s, migrants’ artistic and cultural activities have also gained significance in migration studies. Researchers in sociology and political sciences

have come to understand these as forms of political mobilisation (Martiniello & Lafleur, 2008) or cultural citizenship (Zapata-Barrero, 2016) that may lead to wider cultural and social change. Scholars in media studies have come to regard artistic works as a means to move beyond the misrepresentation of migrants in the media (Leurs et al., 2020). Last but not least, there has been a trend in migration studies towards working with arts-based methods that enable research participants to raise their voices through art, storytelling and performance not only to increase awareness, challenge stereotypes and hegemonic practices but also to bring about real change (O'Neill, 2010; O'Neill et al., 2019). These latter approaches take up the democratisation attempts in the arts that emerged in many European countries in the 1970s to move beyond the elitist understanding of art and make available to everyone the use of artistic practices for expressing themselves. Arts-based approaches are therefore closely related to the turn to migrants' artistic and cultural activities in research. While the latter discuss these activities as expressions of change, the former use artistic and cultural practices to engender change. All these approaches have been important steps in moving beyond mere criticism of the existing hierarchies and the exclusion of immigrants and towards airing ideas of how these circumstances can be changed.

However, the fact that a growing number of artistic and cultural activities and arts-based research results challenge the myth of homogeneous national identities does not necessarily imply that we are witnessing a process of lasting cultural change. It is only when they alter structures and institutions that these new narratives of community will gain wider acceptance. Studies analysing the link between individual agency and structural change in this area are few and far between. Some researchers have found evidence of cultural change in post-migrant urban settings. A study on Philadelphia's cultural economy, for instance, observes that the presence of immigrant artists and cultural participants changes "the social organisation of the arts and culture in the United States" (Stern et al., 2010, p. 23). This says little about the issue of whether the content of these artistic and cultural activities influences the ways in which communities are imagined in Philadelphia and beyond. More-recent studies claim that there is a link between the growing visibility of migrants' artistic and cultural activities in Cologne and Vienna and the adoption by these cities of diversity policies that include migrants in their imagined communities (Çağlar, 2016; Salzbrunn, 2014). This leads Ayşe Çağlar to describe "these artists and cultural producers as active agents of city-making processes" (2016, p. 964).

On the other hand, studies measuring whether national artistic and cultural fields have become more open towards immigrants and their descendants find that, even within these fields, cultural change is a slow process and has a limited effect. This holds true for Pauwke Berkers' (2009) comparative analysis of ethnic boundaries in the US, Dutch and German literary fields between 1955 and 2005. He finds that the boundaries in these fields can, to some extent, be explained with the response to immigration in the respective context. Thus, there is almost no change in the German literary field. However, even in the Dutch and the US literary fields, change is a slow process. It took several decades before Moroccan immigration had any impact on Dutch literary policies and criticism and at least half a century for cultural change

to find its way into textbooks used in university education in the US. Koren and Delhaye (2017) further confirm these observations. Even in the Dutch literary field where Berkers found indications of more-inclusive narratives, mainstream publishers still consider ethnic-minority writing as having relevance only for the minority in question and as lacking in literary quality. In other words, they are unaware that what they regard as objective statements on the aesthetic quality of literary writing are rooted in exclusion and discrimination: “In short, literary values and gatekeepers’ practices are depoliticised, while diversity as a practice and policy is politicised, and thereby discredited” (Koren & Delhaye, 2017, p. 197).

### 1.3 Studying Cultural Change: Theoretical, Methodological and Empirical Approaches

The present volume offers ideas of how we can move beyond this impasse. Instead of focusing either on migrants or on the larger structural and narrative frameworks, we suggest always bearing in mind both dimensions by focusing on cultural change. The past has shown that narrative change *is* possible. So, there is no reason to believe that such major changes cannot happen again in the future. However, it is not enough to observe migrants’ individual artistic activities or to engender artistic activities among migrants. We need to understand whether and how these activities contribute to wider change among non-migrants too. This volume takes up these challenges. It proposes theoretical and methodological approaches that highlight how ideas of change expressed in artistic and cultural practices spread and lead to wider cultural change; it also looks at the slow processes of change in large cultural institutions that emerged at a time when culture was nationalised. It explains how individual and group activities can have an impact beyond their immediate surroundings. Finally, it discusses how migration researchers have co-operated with arts and cultural producers and used artistic means to inspire change with their research participants in a wider public. For this purpose, it combines two approaches usually not discussed together: (1) the analysis of artistic and cultural activities in cultural studies and migration studies and (2) the turn to arts-based research in migration studies. Together, these two approaches constitute what I describe as the artistic turn in migration studies. That they are usually not regarded as being linked goes back to the long-standing distinction between what is considered art and all other artistic and cultural activities. What is considered art has changed over recent decades, with popular cultural products, such as music and comics, having come to be considered worthy of being studied as arts (Sievers, 2014). However, this has merely implied an expansion of this distinctive boundary. There are still many artistic and cultural activities denigrated as mere pastimes, personality-building activities or social work. We believe that this distinction is irrelevant when we focus on processes of cultural change. All artistic and cultural activities as well as collaboration with the arts may contribute to such a change.

Part I of this volume provides theoretical and methodological input into how to conceive, measure, research and describe processes of cultural change, both within artistic fields and beyond. Clearly, we are only at the very beginning of understanding these processes and still in need of exploring not only how to observe cultural change but also how to explain the lack of such change. Bourdieu's (1996) field theory is an ideal point of departure for such an endeavour because it sets out to combine structure and agency in one single approach. However, as **Wiebke Sievers** shows here in Chap. 2, it is necessary to overcome the methodological nationalism of Bourdieu's thinking if we intend to apply field theory to migration. While Bourdieu long ignored migration in his social analyses, migrants are present in his studies on culture, albeit he regards them as being incapable of bringing about cultural change. What he ignores is that this is due to the exclusionary mechanisms that were installed in the process of the nationalisation of cultures. If this dimension is taken into account, then Bourdieu's field theoretical approach is an ideal tool with which to analyse diachronic processes of change initiated by migration because change is a central dimension of his approach. In Chap. 3, **Michael Parzer and Ana Mijić** develop a method that provides in-depth insights into the ambiguity of cultural change. Many studies on migrants' artistic and cultural activities unquestioningly assume that these aim for a more multicultural and multilingual understanding of communities. Parzer and Mijić argue, by contrast, that cultural change involves both opening and closure. They apply Wimmer's (2013) boundary-making approach to the field of music to make visible change as a contradictory process that involves both the blurring and the reinforcement – as well as the contraction and the expansion – of ethnic boundaries. Their focus on ethnic boundaries automatically implies that they move beyond discussing migrants as a separate entity. The drawing of ethnic boundaries is per se a process of negotiations between self-ascriptions and the perceptions and expectations of others. In other words, they overcome the divide between structure and agency by showing that each individual positioning is always already an indication of the wider structures in which it evolves.

The following two chapters put structural change centre stage by focusing on cultural institutions, such as museums, theatres and cultural administrations. Chapter 4 uses a reflexive approach to discuss the methodological difficulties of analysing change as researchers embedded in museums. **Rikke Gram, Lars Bädeker and Antonie Schmitz** show, in two contrastive case studies, that such researchers are never simply analysts but are part of the process of change. In one of their cases, the researcher was embedded in a museum and city administration that have an interest in opening up towards migration and a long-term relationship with the researcher's institution of origin. This led to the researcher being drawn into the process of change as an expert. The other researcher, by contrast, entered a museum that does not fully endorse cultural change as a necessary adaptation process and is located in an urban context where the debates on migration are highly polarised. Moreover, it has no relation of trust with the researcher's institution of origin. Consequently, the respective researcher met with distrust and was only granted very limited insights into the museum's structures. In such a context, observing structural change is made almost impossible. In fact, as **Joanna Jurkiewicz and Jens**

**Schneider** argue in Chap. 5, structural change is still rare in cultural institutions, at least in Germany. They trace this non-change back to the lack of narratives that help to grasp the reality of migration societies. Rather, the representatives of cultural institutions still revert to the idea of *internationality* when they try to figure out how to adapt to the fact that Germany has become a migration society. In other words, they continue to locate migrants outside rather than within German society. The two authors show this to be true for some very different cultural institutions, namely a long-standing and well-established theatre in Hamburg and the cultural administration as well as several festivals in a small Southern German town.

The chapters in Part II of the volume analyse concrete examples of how immigrants and their descendants bring about cultural change. Their joint interest is in the wider local, national and international implications of such individual and group activities. However, there are differences in how these actors achieve such wider effects. Artists may create alternative narratives in literature, film and music and spread these through events and the internet, as Chaps. 6 and 7 indicate. In Chap. 6, **Annalisa Frisina and Sandra Agyei Kyeremeh** discuss how Black and Muslim writers and filmmakers attempt to change the nationalist and colonialist Italian community narrative that racialises them. They analyse narratives and films that identify the colonial past in the Italian present and reimagine Italy in the stories of characters who transgress the existing narrative borders. Their case studies show that this narrative change goes hand in hand with structural change, as the artists themselves straddle the borders of the respective artistic fields by making use of social media and recently installed distribution and streaming platforms to spread their reimaginings of Italianness to a wide audience. While some authors, such as Igiaba Scego, have found national recognition, other artists point out how difficult it is to change the narrative and structural borders in these established arts. By contrast, the bottom-up process of changing narratives and structures seems to be far easier in popular culture, as **Monika Salzbrunn and Birgit Ellinghaus** illustrate in Chap. 7, in their case study of the carnival and music scene in Cologne. The process of change began in the early 1990s when local musicians openly criticised racism in Germany in response to racist attacks in several German cities. Since then, the carnival and music scene has massively changed: new musical platforms emerged to open the carnival to a wide variety of musical traditions; alternative carnival sessions featuring diverse artists were installed that have become more popular than the traditional events; and songs on immigration have become part of the standard carnival tradition. However, this has not led to an increase in public funding, which was always low compared to the amounts granted to classical music. In other words, popular culture has changed but the underlying structural division between popular culture and art has not, with only the latter being considered worthy of public funding.

The next two chapters differ from these first two examples in Part II in one respect: they discuss change that automatically affects national narratives. Their case studies show how individuals and groups address the national institutions relevant for the building of the imagined homogeneous communities – namely, museums and national-day celebrations – and thereby achieve change at the local and the national level at the same time. In Chap. 8, **Christine Delhaye** analyses the process

of change that led to the Amsterdam Museum finally abandoning the term Golden Age in 2019. The term is used in the Netherlands to refer to the seventeenth century. It contains a narrative of a time when the Dutch were a global power, extremely wealthy and excelled in the arts, sciences, literature and philosophy. However, this wealth and fame was based on the occupation and exploitation of foreign territories and people for whom this was most certainly *not* a golden age. While the museum finally decided to change the term when one of their posters advertising a Golden Age portrait exhibition was adusted by an activist, Delhaye shows that this was only the last step in a very long process of structural change in the Dutch museum scene. What is more, this process is part of a larger struggle about Dutchness currently taking place in the Netherlands. In Chap. 9, **Karolina Nikielska-Sekuła**, on the other hand, discusses how national-day celebrations in Norway are changing in the micro practices of their participants. These changes range from migrants and their descendants celebrating national day in the traditional Norwegian way via those who follow most of the traditions but adapt the Norwegian traditional dresses with hijabs or eat ethnic food – among whom, many non-migrants – to those who use the day to celebrate their nation of origin. The author stresses that all these practices change national-day celebrations. However, only a very limited range of these existing practices finds public recognition in the official narrative of the national-day celebrations as presented on TV and social media in pandemic times. So wider structural change is only just beginning to happen.

Part III of the volume focuses on joint ventures for change between research, arts and cultural production and assesses the effects of such approaches. All the chapters draw on participatory arts-based research methods that use artistic approaches to involve the research participants in producing knowledge. Such approaches not only consider migrants as experts on their own experiences but also aim to make the knowledge produced relevant to them. Additionally, in many cases, the researchers combine participatory arts-based approaches with specific formats of public engagement that aim to spread the knowledge produced to a wider public. In other words, such research projects involve cultural change and social transformation in their methodology. The chapters contain good practices and recommendations on how to use arts-based approaches in migration research. **Umut Erel's** Chap. 10 provides insights into how the co-operation of researchers with artists, artistic institutions and activists can contribute to overcoming the polarisation we see in public debates about migration. That joining forces can make a difference has been shown by the post-migrant movement in Germany. Erel presents similar initiatives in the British context, introducing formats such as pop-up profs or researcher-artist-activist symposia that aim to spread research results beyond academic fora. Such innovative interactive dialogues do not necessarily lead to a change of views. However, they move beyond making migrants the objects of public debate by bringing them into the debate. Moreover, they involve a respectful exchange of views between all participants and inspire non-migrants to critically reflect public migration debates. Such interactive dialogues also play a central role in Chap. 11. **Martina Kamm and Lhamo Meyer** present a complex methodological approach and the results of a long-term project that aimed to raise awareness of the traumatic consequences of

war, persecution and flight among the Swiss public and among professionals – such as teachers and social workers – who work with refugees. Dialogue was essential both in the phases of gathering the stories of the refugees and their children and in sharing these stories with the wider public. The project created a safe space in which refugees and their descendants could tell their stories and thereby intervene in the polarised debates on migration. Arts-based approaches, such as a photographic exhibition, a film and an interactive Video-Box facilitated the exchanges between the refugees and the wider public. Moreover, the Video-Box prompted the further storytelling of pupils watching the refugees telling their stories. The many testimonials gathered during the project show that this not only raised awareness of the problems of refugees and their descendants but also strengthened the self-confidence and self-esteem of the participating refugees, who gradually began to act as refugee ambassadors in national media. In other words, they overcame the role as outsiders projected on them and began to actively intervene in the debates on migration in their new home country, telling their own stories of migration.

In Chap. 12, **Melissa Moralli and Pierluigi Musarò** discuss the results of the action research project “Atlas of Transitions”. In the project, theatres and artists, together with migrants, refugees, researchers and activists, co-created artistic and cultural activities that contained new narratives on migration and included the audience in the performances in order to overcome the traditional division between migrants and non-migrants in artistic practice. The authors explain how these aims were translated into practice in Bologna in several artistic activities presented at three international festivals. For instance, an association of second-generation migrants, together with asylum-seekers, created a collective urban itinerary that links specific spaces in the city with emotions ranging from fear to happiness. This itinerary tells the story of how migrants and refugees experience the city – telling these stories is a means for them to claim the city space as their own. The itinerary ended in a theatre where the creators discussed their maps with experts and activists. Again, migrants were given the opportunity to reflect on how exclusionary hate speech affects them and to discuss a possible language of inclusion that may lead to changes in living together in the city. A similar city-mapping activity also features in the final chapter of this volume. **Matteo Dutto, Francesco Ricatti, Luca Simeone and Rita Wilson**, in Chap. 13, focus on how digital storytelling can be used to empower young people with multilingual and multicultural backgrounds to take over leadership roles in the superdiverse city of Prato in the future. The authors argue that these youths *have* the potential to bridge divisions between migrants and non-migrants, rich and poor etc. in their cities but that low self-esteem and discrimination often prevent them from becoming central actors in their communities. The project “Our Prato” provided 48 high-school students from Prato with the opportunity to learn digital storytelling methods and create their own digital narratives of the city and to present their results, in a pop-up exhibition, to policy-makers, teachers, families and friends as well as members of the wider public. The last step in the process was the creation of a website that tells the multicultural and multilingual history of Prato and presents the ideas of the 48 students on how to recreate the city in the future. The students themselves described the project as a means of learning

how not to be strangers in their city. Moreover, the way in which they presented their results to their audiences – not only at the exhibition but also on the radio and in the later online launch of a website – documents their increased self-esteem and interest in becoming actively involved in future processes of cultural and social change.

## 1.4 Migration Studies as Change

It should be noted that there always have been approaches in migration studies that were critical of rigid migration policies and social hierarchies that infringed upon the rights of migrants and their descendants. There are also many examples of researchers demanding change in receiving societies. Important impetuses for such approaches to emerge were the transnational turn and the overcoming of the “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002) in the field. The new perspectives led authors to demand that states adapt institutions, such as citizenship, to the new transnational reality (Bauböck, 1994) or that plural democracies, such as Germany, live up to their promises of equality (Foroutan, 2019). A central precondition for such political and social change is cultural change. Bauböck (2002, p. 2) observes: “How migration changes citizenship depends to a large extent on how states and their citizens *perceive* migrants”. In other words, social change is inextricably linked with cultural change that involves the re-imagination of communities in new narratives moving beyond the idea of homogeneous national identities invented in the nineteenth century. Such new narratives are not merely a means of providing a more apt description of the reality in many European states that have become countries of immigration since World War II. Rather, they are “ways of worldmaking”, as Nelson Goodman famously put it in 1978. They are not narratives of who we are but of who we want to be. They structure our understanding of reality and underlie our attempts to change it (Nünning, 2013, p. 32). They provide the basis for social and political change.

Arts and cultural activities are themselves “ways of worldmaking”: “They are particularly well suited for reimagining our communities in new narratives that move beyond the idea of homogeneous national identities and cultures” (Sievers, 2021). Such narratives do not strictly distinguish between European selves and foreign others who have to be kept at bay. Instead, they contain a vision of a plural Europe that is closely interlinked with the rest of the world and accepts its responsibilities in global crises. This worldmaking capability, which has found expression in many articles, is central to several chapters in this volume. Annalisa Frisina and Sandra Agyei Kyeremeh read Igiaba Scego’s (2020) novel *La linea del colore* (The colour line) as a utopian vision of a post-racial world in which there are no colour lines that prevent people from travelling. Monika Salzbrunn and Birgit Ellinghaus interpret the carnival and popular music scene in Cologne as a universe that no longer differentiates between migrants and non-migrants. Christine Delhaye highlights how activists use this worldmaking capability to induce change and how such



activism has eventually led to the Amsterdam Museum telling Dutch history in new narratives that take into account the violence of the Dutch colonial past. Karolina Nikielska-Sekuła analyses how migrants and non-migrants institute a more-inclusive version of the national in their practices of celebrating the Norwegian national day.

This worldmaking capability of artistic and cultural activities has been a central motivation for researchers to study novels, poems, music, films etc. They allow us to move beyond observing inequalities and towards imagining a world in which these can be overcome:

It's by integrating the images, sounds, words and lived experience that we can finally elucidate the idea of community that extends far beyond national borders, and links us to peoples, all peoples, in our collective quest to be our best selves, protected, rather than persecuted, harassed or incarcerated, by home and host countries. (Barsky & Martiniello, 2021, p. 3)

What is more, migrants and their descendants are the ones who air these ideas. They are no longer objects of study but subjects who intervene in the debates on migration. We, as researchers, take up their ideas and interpret and disseminate them throughout the research community and beyond (Sievers, 2021). The same holds true for researchers working with arts-based methods. They also aim to overcome the hegemonic relationship of researchers towards their objects of study. Arts-based methods stimulate the worldmaking capabilities of research participants, providing them with the means to air their views, tell their stories, imagine different futures and spread these to a wider public, as Umut Erel explains in detail in Chap. 10. The resulting interventions into public debates on migration take different forms. Migrants counter the idea that their high regard for family values and religion are signs of their alleged Oriental backwardness, as often assumed in the Occident, by telling how their families and faiths provided refuge and hope during persecution, flight and the traumatic consequences of these experiences (Kamm & Meyer, Chap. 11). They move from being on the receiving end of integration courses to developing a "school of integration" where they are teachers of their skills and knowledge, often not accepted as such in the respective receiving societies (Moralli & Musarò, Chap. 12). They develop visions of a future Prato as a sustainable city characterised by exchange and co-creation (see Chap. 13 by Dutto, Ricatti, Simeone & Wilson). They claim space in and thereby become part of the societies in which they live.

Migration research then, as presented in this volume, is cultural change. Cooperation with artists and activists can be a tool to augment this effect (Erel, Chap. 10). At the same time, all authors are aware that individual artistic and cultural activities as well as arts-based research projects are only small steps in a long and winding process of wider cultural change. This process is in progress, even in the artistic and cultural fields. Different fields have changed to different extents. Popular culture seems to have managed best to overcome the divide between migrants and non-migrants that characterises political and media discourses up to the present day, as Chap. 7 by Monika Salzbrunn and Birgit Ellinghaus illustrates. Carnival as a feast of change is open to change when it comes to migration and

globalisation. At the opposite end of the scale are cultural institutions, such as museums, theatres and cultural administrations, where “the traces of old ways of thinking and doing [...] are left in the bricks and mortar of today” (Levitt, 2015, p. 3). They may have taken up migration as an issue in individual exhibitions, plays or funding programmes but they take much longer to abandon the national perspective that places migrants outside the nation (Chaps. 5 and 8 by Jurkiewicz & Schneider and Delhaye in this volume). Literature and film are located somewhere between these two extremes (Chaps. 2 and 6 by Sievers and Frisina & Kyeremeh in this volume). In other words, whether fields change depends on two factors: (1) the closeness to the field of power and (2) the malleability of the structures. At the same time, change in popular culture only has a very limited effect compared to change in museums when it comes to the distribution of power in societies. Popular culture is important for spreading new ideas of community to wider publics but it has less of an impact on rewriting the histories and narratives of communities than literature, theatres and museums, with their much closer relations to the field of power. It is this closeness that explains why national-day celebrations that are closer to popular culture than to the arts may change in popular practice but not in the way in which they are publicly perceived.

That cultural change is a slow process, however, does not mean that it will never happen. Delhaye’s analysis of change in the Amsterdam Museum clearly demonstrates this. In fact, the invention of the nation was a process that started in the eighteenth century and only really led to a world divided into nation states in the second half of the twentieth (Osterhammel, 2014, pp. 404–407). This was also the time when this division was first officially questioned in documents such as the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Convention for Refugees. These constitute the beginning of what Will Kymlicka (2012, p. 5) has called a “human rights revolution” that involved a struggle for minority rights in the Global North. So we have another century to go if institutionalising new narratives of a global community takes as long as institutionalising the narratives of homogeneous national identities in nation states.

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**Part I**  
**How to Conceive Change: Theoretical and  
Methodological Considerations**

# Chapter 2

## How to Tell the History of Cultural Change Through Migration: A Post-migrant Field Theoretical Approach



Wiebke Sievers

### 2.1 Introduction

When you enter the permanent exhibition of the Austrian literary museum, which opened its doors to the public in 2015, you will be told the story that Austrian literature has always been multicultural and multilingual, from its very beginning in the Habsburg Empire to the present day. The Austrians are not the only ones who have rewritten their national literary history in this way. There has been a strong tendency in the twenty-first century to rewrite literary histories as having always been global (Richter, 2017; Suleiman & McDonald, 2010). Similar tendencies exist in art and musical history. While the individual approaches differ, their joint aim is to rewrite national histories from the margins and to open them to global links that remain invisible in a nationalised understanding of history. I share this general aim, although I do not agree with the methodology of replacing the long history of the national, invented in the nineteenth century, with the long history of the global, multicultural and multilingual. I argue that we need to tell this story as a narrative of constant change in order not to overlook exclusion, discrimination and racism. To come back to my example: Austrian literature was indeed multicultural and multilingual at the turn of the twentieth century. This tradition was taken up again after the end of the national socialist regime and had an impact at least up until the end of the 1950s. However, at this time, the literary actors began to establish an Austrian literary field that led to the exclusion of immigrants and their descendants between the 1960s and the 1980s. Immigrants have fought to overcome this exclusion since the 1990s. Selected literary actors who opened their literary journals and publishing houses to immigrants have supported them in this struggle.

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This contribution intends to present the theoretical and methodological approach I have developed to write what I call post-migrant literary history. I use the term post-migrant in the sense in which it has been used in sociological and ethnographic studies in Germany over the last decade (Bojadžijev & Römhild, 2014). This means that I am not interested in analysing migrants but in understanding societal change through migration. I discuss migrants as part of the society in which they live and consider their exclusion as well as their attempts to overcome it. Literary fields are an interesting case study through which to observe such a change, as immigrants and their descendants have found recognition in these fields since the 1980s (Sievers & Vlasta, 2018a), much earlier than in other fields, such as politics. This change had an impact far beyond the field itself since immigrants, through their recognition in this field, had the opportunity of raising their voice in the public debate about immigration. However, little is known about how these fields changed. My approach makes this change visible. As such it is not only of interest to literary studies but may also serve as a basis for similar historical analysis in other fields, including above and beyond the arts.

My theoretical and methodological approach draws on Bourdieu's literary field theory. Bourdieu locates authors and their works in the structures of their recognition, which he calls literary fields. This method enables him to explain a central process of change in French society and literary history in the nineteenth century. In his monograph, *The rules of art* (1996), he discusses how French authors from Baudelaire to Zola managed to free themselves from the strong economic and political pressures on literature. This process allowed them to establish themselves as intellectuals and thereby gain access to the discussion of the societal self-understanding which, until that time, was negotiated mainly between economic, political and religious actors (Bourdieu, 1996). Bourdieu's work thus allows us to understand authors and their works as part of a societal process of change. In this respect, it is an ideal point of departure enabling us to grasp how literary fields have changed in response to immigration. However, Bourdieu regards immigration as marginal for literary developments. He does not regard immigrants as being able to change the field. The same holds true for more-recent literary studies that draw on his approach. It is therefore necessary to develop a new approach that allows the application of Bourdieu's ideas to processes of change initiated by immigrants. This mainly implies questioning the "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002) of research on literary fields.<sup>1</sup>

After discussing the marginalisation of immigration in literary field research from Bourdieu to the present day, I focus on nationalisation in literary fields and on the boundaries that were drawn towards immigrants and their descendants in this process. Subsequently, I explain the determinants of a post-migrant literary history.

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<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu's model does not necessarily have to be understood in terms of a national literature. In his theory, fields have no boundaries. Rather, these boundaries can only be determined in empirical analysis and can change over time (Buchholz, 2008; Sapiro, 2013, pp. 71–72). Nevertheless, Anna Boschetti is right when she argues that "Bourdieu does not question many of the legacies of traditional literary history, such as the national perspective" (Boschetti, 2012, p. 19).



## 2.2 The Marginalisation of Immigration in Literary Field Research

Bourdieu did not explicitly comment on immigration until the 1990s but then named it as one of the pressing problems of the present (Horvath, 2017; Kastner, 2002). This becomes clear from his text “The abdication of the state”, in which he argues that “the opposition between ‘natives’ and ‘immigrants’ [...] has supplanted the once salient opposition between dominants and dominated” (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 187). Long before this observation, Bourdieu used the term “racism”, which authors such as Jean-Paul Sartre had introduced into the French debate to discuss the discrimination of immigrants. Bourdieu, however, uses the term to describe the attitude of the dominant towards the dominated. In his text, “The racism of ‘intelligence’” which goes back to a lecture held in 1978, he defines the “racism of intelligence” as “what causes the dominant class to feel justified in being dominant: they feel themselves to be *essentially* superior” (Bourdieu, 1995, p. 177). This feeling conceals inequality. Those who see themselves as superior beings no longer have to justify their own domination.

For the literary and artistic fields, however, Bourdieu explicitly indicated that racism – i.e. the exclusion of those regarded as ethnic others – can be considered negligible:

[R]acial discrimination is generally less strong in the intellectual and artistic field than in other fields; and in any case, because of the significance of style and lifestyle in the personage of the writer or artist, it is undoubtedly not as strong as purely social discrimination (against provincials especially) – witness the innumerable manifestations of class contempt in polemics. (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 227)

Bourdieu may be right that the explicit discrimination and exclusion of those regarded as ethnic others is rare in literary fields today. Yet it is often exercised unconsciously, because it is taken for granted in literary fields that are nationally organised. In other words, nationalisation has been central to the concealment of ethnic exclusion in literature.

Bourdieu overlooks this concealment process in his analyses, which is why he takes it for granted that immigrants and their descendants had only a supporting function in the transformation of the French literary field in the nineteenth century. He conceded them no potential to succeed as authors because of their foreign origin (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 57). In his opinion, they lack a sense of placement. They know too little about the history and circumstances of the field to recognise the possibilities for new aesthetic positions. For this reason, they usually join existing positions and often do so at a time when these are already on the decline (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 262). Bourdieu thus did not believe that immigrants could change literary fields and thereby increase their overall influence on societal debates.

That Bourdieu gave immigrants a marginal role in literary fields may be due to immigration being considered a twentieth-century topic in literary studies. Moreover, French literary research was particularly late in taking up this topic. While France has a long history of immigration and a long history of immigrating authors, it was

not until the 1990s that French literary studies began to perceive immigrants as part of French literature (Reeck, 2018). Research on this question had thus just begun when Bourdieu published *The rules of art* in the original French in 1992.

However, it is not only Bourdieu who is unaware of the discrimination against immigrants and their descendants in nationally organised literary fields. This blind spot in his works continues to shape literary field research today. This does not mean that this research has not dealt with globalisation. The works of Pascale Casanova (2004) and Gisèle Sapiro (2010) clearly illustrate a global turn in literary field research. However, they mainly view globalisation as a process that takes place between nations. Migration, on the other hand, as a type of globalisation that takes place not only between but also within nations and literatures, is largely ignored (Sievers, 2020). A recent example of this blind spot is a 2015 special issue of the journal *Cultural Sociology*, which seeks to rethink literature from the margins after the end of the nation-state but does so without any reference to the issue of migration (Franssen & Kuipers, 2015). Similarly, Heribert Tommek (2015) does not mention authors such as Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Yoko Tawada in his recent analysis of the German literary field from 1960 to 2000, while in literary research focusing on immigrants and their descendants, these authors' works have been read as the avant-garde of cultural change. It is therefore high time to analyse the processes that led to the exclusion of immigrants and their descendants in literary fields.

### 2.3 Nationalisation as a Process of Linguistic and Literary Boundary-Drawing

Since the 1980s, research has challenged the notion of the nation as a linguistic and cultural community that can refer to a common history and literature. However, the nation-state has been considered a desirable form of societal organisation at least since the nineteenth century and has become the dominant one in the twentieth century. Many processes of nationalisation took place in the latter century, not only in former colonies but also in the European centre, such as in Austria. Even today, the nation still forms the natural framework of many people's daily lives. This does not mean that they daily "express their desire to continue a common life", as Ernest Renan presented it in a lecture at the Sorbonne in 1882 (Renan, 1990, p. 19). Rather, they think and act nationally without being aware of this fact.

That the imagined community has structured our thinking up to the present is mainly related to the education system, which has been teaching individuals to become citizens of their nation-states since the nineteenth century. This education has been strongly national from the beginning, as Bourdieu noted:

By universally imposing and inculcating (within the limits of its authority) a dominant culture thus constituted as *legitimate national culture*, the school system, through the teaching of history (and especially the history of literature), inculcates the foundations of a true 'civic religion' and more precisely, the fundamental presuppositions of the national self-image. (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 8, italics in the original)

The internalisation of the national self-image involves drawing boundaries vis-à-vis those who are considered to not belong to the respective nation (Sapiro, 2013, p. 75). The teaching of language and literature had an important impact on this process, as Bourdieu points out in the quote above. For example, textbooks for teaching English in the United States around 1900 saw the task of language and literature instruction as counteracting the “social decay” that had ostensibly taken hold with immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. The teaching of English language and literature was seen as a means of instilling a national consciousness in these “uneducated” people (Brass, 2013).

Of course, the understanding of language and literature teaching has changed since then – and not only in the US. Among other things, the literature of immigrants and their descendants is now also given space. Nevertheless, its national structuring has been preserved insofar as language, literature and nation continue to be thought of as a unity. For this reason, language and literature classes in schools are still closely intertwined today. Literatures in languages that are not taught in the respective national context remain invisible in this system. Until the seventeenth century, this kind of national language categorisation of literature was completely unknown. It was not until the nineteenth century that this idea developed into the norm it constitutes today (Leerssen, 2008, pp. 14–15).

This new unity of language, literature and nation was not only the result of the nationalisation process. Instead, this idea was one of the driving forces of nation-building, as Benedict Anderson pointed out in his work *Imagined communities*. Language served to create the solidarities that allowed groups of individuals to become nations (Anderson, 1991, p. 133). With the printing of books, people became aware of these solidarities: “These fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed [...] the embryo of the nationally imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991, p. 44). Along with newspapers, novels were particularly important for creating in people a sense of connection beyond individual acquaintance. Novels circulated throughout the national space and connected readers in very different places.

Print also brought the fixation and standardisation of languages, which found expression in grammars and dictionaries. All this led to the conviction that the respective language was the property of the group of people who spoke and read it every day (Anderson, 1991, p. 84). The descendants of this group have since been considered native speakers and are strictly distinguished from those who cannot claim such ancestors – a distinction that was unimaginable until the seventeenth century:

Given a pre-modern Europe where orthography and grammatology were primarily scholastic practices, and not yet strategies of nationalization and naturalization, it would be less than tenable to speak of pre-seventeenth-century languages as having *de jure* ‘native speakers’ in contradistinction to ‘non-native speakers’ [...]. (Gramling, 2016, p. 9)

Gramling points out that, before the seventeenth century, languages were not understood as systems but as a kind of personal repertoire from which the respective individual picked the best option for the specific situation without thereby

expressing a sense of belonging (Gramling, 2016, p. 13). Only in the eighteenth century did language become an instrument through which an affective connection to the nation could be established: “Through that language, encountered at mother’s knee and parted with only at the grave, pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures are dreamed” (Anderson, 1991, p. 154).

Literary field researchers were not explicitly concerned with the nationalisation of literature. The focus of their interest was, rather, its autonomisation – i.e. the struggle of literary actors for a certain independence from church, economy and state. However, the autonomisation and the nationalisation of literature are intricately linked. The authors of literary works belonged to the group of people who gave the vernacular languages the meaning that enabled them to become national languages. For them, this came with a certain independence from church and state. Pascale Casanova (2004) has shown that these were international processes in which authors adopted models from other languages and literatures to invent their own. Nevertheless, they resulted in nationalised literatures that were inscribed with boundaries against all those who were not considered to belong to the nation.

In this context, borders were drawn against immigrants on four levels: linguistic, literary, thematic and legal. The authors were denied linguistic, literary and thematic competence, not because they did not have it but because it was *assumed* that they did not have it due to their origin. This ideological exclusion was cemented at the legal level with the introduction of state subsidies for writers who are citizens of the respective nation-state, a policy that remained relevant up to the end of the twentieth century in many European states.

## 2.4 Mechanisms of Exclusion of Immigrants and Their Descendants

When language became the property of a group in the process of nation-building, those not speaking this language as their mother tongue came to be regarded as incapable of becoming creative in it (Yildiz, 2012, pp. 6–11). Many texts published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries justify this exclusionary idea with the intimate connection between language and nation. The philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, who was among the first to argue for a unity of nation, language and literature, stated in a text first published in 1764: “If every language has its distinct national character, then nature imposes upon us an obligation only to our mother tongue, for it is perhaps better attuned to our character and coextensive with our way of thinking” (Herder, 1992, p. 30). Friedrich Schleiermacher built on this argument when he argued in a lecture on translation in 1813 that “each person produces originally only in his [sic!] mother tongue” (2012, p. 57). The philologist Heymann Steinthal explained this idea in more detail in his essay “On the love of the mother tongue”, which first appeared in 1866 (Steinthal, 1880). In his opinion, there is no

emotional link to the foreign language, as there is to the mother tongue: “For this reason, we are creatively active only in the mother tongue, while we merely absorb and use the given in the foreign language” (Steinthal, 1880, p. 104).<sup>2</sup> Steinthal emphasised that the mother tongue is naturally given. Another language can never take over this function, even if one is born into it and has grown up with it: “[W]ho can doubt that the N[...] in America, who suddenly finds himself with a compatriot from Africa, will glow with love for the mother tongue?” (Steinthal, 1880, p. 101). The quote illustrates that the author discarded any changes of national affiliation – and therefore of mother tongue – as unimaginable.

Linguistic research has shown that some of these exclusionary ideas continue to have an impact today, far beyond the German-speaking world. Clear boundaries are still drawn between native speakers and non-native speakers in a wide variety of languages. This is not necessarily related to whether the respective persons actually master the language but to whether they are accepted by those who see themselves as native speakers. Class, gender and ethnicity play a role in this process. In a study of French immigrants and their descendants in France, Maya Angela Smith demonstrates that they are categorically denied linguistic competence because of the colour of their skin, even if they were born and raised in France:

Linguistic competence, therefore, is often determined by more than just the ability to use a language; linguistic competence depends on the ability to prove cultural legitimacy, whether one is a well-known writer or the average immigrant from a former colony. This claim on legitimacy extends beyond language to include nationality, ethnicity, race, religion and the colour of one’s skin. (2015, p. 326)

To deny someone linguistic competence means to draw a cultural boundary against him or her. At the same time, it confirms one’s own belonging to the culture in question. Only those who can claim this belonging through their mother tongue may judge what is correct or incorrect in a language. The right to standardise or change the language is reserved for these people alone. The German writer Franco Biondi, who originates from Italy, observed this claim of linguistic superiority to all those who are not born into the language in many of his readers:

In this interaction [between the author and her/his readers], the German reader is defined as the one born into her/his German mother tongue and is considered as a person endowed with more power over the language. The foreign writer, on the other hand, is seen as one who has been planted in the German language, s/he is defined as a guest. Accordingly, s/he is seen as having less power – and authority – over the language. (Biondi, 1986, p. 29)

That this denial of linguistic authority is closely related to the nationalisation of literature becomes clear from studies that look at immigrants who became writers when the nationalisation of the respective literary field was still in process. This holds true for the Austrian literary field in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Elias Canetti, György Sebestyén and Milo Dor were not automatically denied linguistic and thus literary competence in this field, even though German was not their mother tongue

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<sup>2</sup>If not indicated otherwise, all translations into English are by the author of this chapter.

(Englerth, 2016; Schwaiger, 2016; Sievers, 2016). Moreover, our research demonstrated for Sebastyén that his transition from a Hungarian to a German-language writer was anything but easy (Schwaiger, 2016). Nevertheless, he was accepted as an Austrian author within fewer than ten years after his arrival.

However, it is not only this linguistic boundary that restricts literary recognition to a particular group. The recognition of immigrants and their descendants in literature is further complicated by literary boundaries which, just like linguistic boundaries, became inscribed in thinking about literature during nationalisation in the nineteenth century. Steinthal continued his thoughts on the mother tongue with the thesis that poetry in our mother tongue, because of our emotional connection to that language, must always have the greatest effect on us: “Therefore no foreign poet, not even the greatest, has so powerful an effect on us as our classics” (Steinthal, 1880, p. 103). The French philologists Gaston Paris and Ferdinand Brunetière argued similarly at the end of the nineteenth century. Although their ideas of French national literature differed significantly, they agreed that the understanding of this literature was reserved for the French (Bähler, 2011, pp. 153, 158). French literature would strike a secret and intimate chord in Frenchmen that would remain mute in strangers when they read it, Paris argued in a lecture in 1870 (Paris, 1885, pp. 99–100). Similarly, Brunetière claimed in 1897 that strangers could not understand or feel the characteristics of French literature (1897, pp. 192–193).

At the time when these authors denied immigrants and their descendants the ability to develop a feeling for the respective national literature, the explicit and implicit reference to this literature was becoming increasingly central to recognition in literary fields, as Bourdieu shows:

In effect, to the extent that the field closes in on itself, a practical mastery of the specific attainments of the whole history of the genre which are objectified in past works and recorded, codified and canonized by the whole corpus of professionals of conservation and celebration – historians of art and literature, exegetes, analysts – becomes part of the conditions of entry into the field of restricted production. (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 242)

Knowledge of literary traditions developed into a prerequisite for entry into the literary field as literature became nationalised. At the same time, the notion emerged that this knowledge could only be truly acquired by those who were born into the language and thus into literature. These two developments established a second mechanism by which immigrants were denied access to the field simply because of their origin.

Finally, the process of nationalisation was accompanied by the thematic exclusion of those not regarded as belonging to the nation. In 1808, Johann Gottlieb Fichte argued in his *Addresses to the German nation*, that: “The noblest privilege and the most sacred function of the man [sic!] of letters is this: to assemble his [sic!] nation and to take counsel with it about its most important affairs” (Fichte, 1922, p. 217). During this period, authors of literary works began to focus on the nation. This does not mean that they were necessarily in favour of the nation – in fact, many

writers adopted critical positions. Nonetheless, their texts contributed to an increasing focus on the nation in literature that has remained significant until the recent past (Schmitz, 2010).

This thematic focus on the nation had two effects for the recognition of immigrants and their descendants as writers. First, they had to gain acceptance for topics not regarded as part of the national, such as immigration and the lives of immigrants and their descendants in the respective national context. Second, their contribution to national debates often went unnoticed because they were not regarded as having a say on this topic, as Leslie Adelson notes for German-Turkish authors: “[D]espite the fact that ensuing migrations and births have made Turks the largest national minority residing in unified Germany, they are rarely seen as intervening meaningfully in the narrative of postwar German history” (Adelson, 2000, p. 96). If these authors are recognised at all, they are seen as authorities on migration but not on National Socialism, the Holocaust or reunification. At the same time, dealing with the national past and present is often cited as a prerequisite for full recognition as a writer. This is evidenced by the reception of Herta Müller in literary circles. Many critics felt that her true literary capability would only become obvious when she dared to move beyond Romania and dealt with German topics in her writing (Wichner, 2002, p. 3). Similarly, Terézia Mora was not considered by literary critics to have fully arrived in German literature until she placed a German character, Darius Kopp, at the centre of her second novel, *Der einzige Mann auf dem Kontinent* (The only man on the continent, 2009) (Case, 2015, p. 212).

The nationalisation of literary fields can thus result in the exclusion of immigrants and their descendants at various levels. How exactly this process took place in the respective literary fields, however, has not yet been researched in detail. This is precisely where post-migrant literary history comes in.

## 2.5 Determinants of a Post-migrant Literary History

Post-migrant literary history takes the exclusion of immigrants in nationalised literary fields as the starting point for a field analysis that seeks to explain whether, how and to what extent immigrants and their descendants have succeeded in overcoming this exclusion in the particular field. Such an analysis has to proceed in three steps: first, to explain when and how authors and institutions inscribed national boundaries in the field that led to the exclusion of immigrants and their descendants; second, to identify the developments in and beyond the field that led to the questioning of these boundaries; and, third, to describe how individual authors contributed to the shifting of these boundaries. In what follows, I explain how far we can work with Bourdieu’s approach in such a post-migrant field analysis and where we need to adapt his theory and methodology to the post-migrant context.

### 2.5.1 *Analysis of National Boundaries in Literary Fields*

Bourdieu has been presented in this text as a theorist who allows us to think processes of change in literary fields. However, he also showed in *The rules of art* that only a select group of people profited from the process of literary autonomisation. The literary field offers a structural advantage to those who have been surrounded by literature from childhood (cultural capital), know writers, publishers and critics (social capital) and whose financial situation implies that they do not have to make a living from writing (economic capital). This structural advantage is obscured in the field. The structures and actors give the impression that the path to literature is open to everyone, as long as their texts meet certain quality criteria. These rules of art are accepted not only by those who are denied access to the field due to a lack of cultural, social and economic capital – all those who hold positions in the field also act in the firm belief that they are concerned with promoting good literature. This *illusio*, Bourdieu argues, gives all those involved the sense that they are not acting in their own interests but in pursuit of a noble goal that legitimises selection as objectively justified (Bourdieu, 1996, pp. 227–228).

Bourdieu points out that this is not true. The criteria that are applied in this selection process are created in the field. A text becomes literature by gaining recognition, not the other way around:

The producer of the *value of the work of art* is not the artist but the field of production as a universe of belief which produces the value of the work of art as a *fetish* by producing the belief in the creative power of the artist. (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 229, italics in the original)

The publisher who decides to publish the text, the critics who review it, the juries who award it a prize, the scholars who interpret it, they all give the text the value that makes it literature in the first place. These mechanisms have not lost their importance, despite the increasing economisation of literature in recent decades, as John B. Thompson notes in his study of the American book market:

Big books do not exist in themselves: they have to be *created*. They are social constructions that emerge out of the talk, the chatter, the constant exchange of speech acts among players in the field whose utterances have effects and whose opinions are trusted and valued to varying degrees. (Thompson, 2010, p. 195, italics in the original)

The structure of the field thus leads to the reproduction of an elite and, at the same time, disguises this reproduction as natural. Bourdieu analysed in detail how this symbolic violence denied members of the lower classes access to the field. Post-migrant literary history, by analogy, seeks to understand when and how the exclusion of immigrants becomes natural in the field. This has to be described for each individual literary field because the nationalisation of literary fields not only occurred at different times but also took different forms depending on the context. It is therefore necessary to examine when, how and to what extent selected literary institutions normalise national thinking in the respective field. Of central interest is the question of how far boundaries are drawn against immigrants in this process. This allows us to make visible how their exclusion becomes a matter of course in the literary field.



### 2.5.2 *Social Crises as Triggers for Questioning National Norms*

Literary fields are constantly in flux. While all actors in the field are united by an interest in literature, there is no agreement on what literature means. Rather, the understanding of literature is determined by those actors who receive recognition in the field. Distinction is crucial to generate attention for one's text. Newcomers can only make a name for themselves by breaking "with current modes of thought" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 240). Hence, change is part of the logic of the field and, in principle, independent of external factors. However, these constant changes are to be distinguished from comprehensive processes of change, as Bourdieu describes them for the French literary field in the nineteenth century. In the course of such a process, fundamental norms and rules that are taken for granted in the field are called into question.

Such fundamental processes of change cannot be explained by the logic of the field. Rather, any questioning of social norms that are taken for granted results from a broader social crisis, as Bourdieu explains in his work *Outline of a theory of practice*. The crisis makes apparent that categories of perception and objective structures no longer coincide.

The critique which brings the undiscussed into discussion, the unformulated into formulation, has as the condition of its possibility objective crisis, which, in breaking the immediate fit between the subjective structures and the objective structures, destroys self-evidence practically. (Bourdieu, 2013, pp. 168–169)

The crisis that ultimately led to the recognition of immigrants and their descendants in literature is not triggered by increasing immigration per se but by the question of whether immigrants and their descendants have a right to equal participation in the respective society (Foroutan, 2019). Different actors in the various fields, including the economy, politics, religion and literature, take a position on this issue. In the process, antipoles develop not only within individual fields but also between fields. The respective positioning is thus always to be understood in relation to other positionings within a field. At the same time, positionings in dominant fields, such as politics and economics, exert an influence on positioning in less-important fields such as literature. In politics, for example, parties such as the Greens argue that immigrants have a right to participate while right-wing populist parties such as the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) or the Alternative for Germany (AfD) deny them this right. The dominant actors in the field of literature have long positioned themselves counter to political mobilisation against immigrants. However, especially in Germany, a counter-position has emerged in recent years in literature around writers such as Uwe Tellkamp and Monika Maron, who are critical of migration. The crisis is thus consciously conceived here as an "*encounter between the literary field and a particular political conjuncture of crisis*" (Gobille, 2004, p. 174, italics in the original).

At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the positionings are always related to developments in a particular context. The year 1968, for example, resulted

in an opening for immigrants in literature in Germany (Sievers & Vlasta, 2018b, p. 220). In France, change only began in the 1980s, when immigrants and their descendants demanded equal rights (Reeck, 2018, p. 178). In Austria, it was not until the debates surrounding the election of President Waldheim in 1986 that the corresponding changes in the literary field began. Moreover, factors internal to the field may also play a role in the crisis in the field. For example, the reaction to immigration can be closely related to the importance that immigrants have had in the past in the respective literary field. This history can take on new relevance in the process of recognising current immigrants. In addition, general processes of change in the field, such as the internationalisation, medialisation or even politicisation of literature, can influence whether and how the field opens up to immigrants. To take these processes into account means to illuminate the space of possibilities that is offered to this group at the time of their entry into the field. For, even if immigrants and their descendants are considered a novelty in the literary field, the positions they occupy must at least be framed as a possibility for them to gain visibility. Whether and how the authors perceive these possibilities depends on their habitus.

### ***2.5.3 The Interaction of Habitus and Field in the Gradual Process of Change***

Bourdieu considered Charles Baudelaire and Gustave Flaubert to be initiators of the process of change in the nineteenth-century French literary field. He explained their central role in this process in terms of their habitus. The habitus “is acquired and it is also a possession” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 179). It unites everything that a person learns from birth but does not perceive as learned but as natural. An important foundation of this knowledge is laid in the family, which constitutes the key to social reproduction. The family not only bequeaths to its offspring the economic capital that will decisively determine their place in the social hierarchy. Through the family, cultural capital such as education and social capital – that is, social networks – are also passed on to future generations (Bourdieu, 1986). However, habitus cannot be reduced to origins. It also includes experiences that question origins and thus enable boundary-crossing. These are central for those “hybrid and unclassifiable beings” to emerge who produce revolutions in literature because they unite positions that are considered incompatible (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 111).

Baudelaire and Flaubert are among these. They both came from the bourgeoisie. This background shaped their perception of possibilities in literature and allowed them to establish positions that would not even have been conceivable, let alone feasible or financially viable, for others who did not have the same capital. At the same time, however, the two authors were critical of this bourgeois background. Neither of them wanted to take the path that the bourgeoisie set out for them. Rather, they rejected the moral concepts that went hand in hand with their bourgeois origins. This habitus explains why they criticise the bourgeoisie but in a linguistic and literary style that is deeply bourgeois.

Despite these comparable positions, the specific aesthetic positionings of the two authors in the literary field differ. This is explained by the fact that the habitus must not be understood as deterministic:

Because the habitus is an endless capacity to engender products – thoughts, perceptions, expressions, actions – whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production, the conditioned and conditional freedom it secures is as remote from a creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from a simple mechanical reproduction of the initial conditionings. (Bourdieu, 2013, p. 95)

The habitus thus forms an unconscious framework within which writers operate, although this framework still grants them an infinite number of possibilities. They only ever realise a small selection of these in their writing. The decision for a specific literary positioning is also related to the possibilities that are available in the respective literary field at the time. Thus, no matter how similar two people may be in their habitus, their writing will always differ.

These individual positionings, in turn, bring about a gradual process of change in the field. Bourdieu describes Baudelaire as the legislator of the process that eventually brought French writers a certain autonomy from the political and the economic fields. He embodied “the most extreme position of the avant-garde, that of revolt against all authorities and all institutions, beginning with literary institutions” (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 65). He broke radically with the bourgeois works of his time not only in the linguistic and formal design of his works but also in his explicit questioning of the Académie française, in his choice of publishers and in his conception of criticism (Bourdieu, 1996, pp. 60–68). He thus initiated a debate that Flaubert continued, albeit in a far less radical form. This is explained precisely by Baudelaire’s radical break, with which “the heroism of these beginnings” became redundant (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 68). The first rupture was complete and Flaubert took it from there.

Post-migrant literary history builds on this earlier analysis of a process of change in literature. It regards the authors and their works as questioning the national boundaries in the literary field. In this process, the habitus of the authors plays a decisive role. This does not mean a relapse into a form of biographism that was rightly criticised in research on the literature of immigrants and their descendants, because it reduces the authors to migration biographies. Rather, it is precisely this reduction to a single biographical element that is to be overcome. We can only understand the habitus – and thus the positioning of the writers in the field – if we take a comprehensive view of their biographies, including, for example, their education or their relations in the literary field. Our analysis thus extends far beyond ethnic or biological origin and, following Pascale Casanova, establishes the author’s references to the intellectual world (Casanova, 2011, p. 21). Moreover, it is not only the immigrants and their descendants who are subjected to such a biographical analysis. The background of publishers and critics who have supported or opposed them in the process of recognition of their literature are just as relevant, because their positioning in this debate can also be explained by their habitus.

I use the example of Vladimir Vertlib, an Austrian writer born in Leningrad of Jewish parents, to explain what this means in practice. Vertlib fled with his parents from the Soviet Union when he was five years old. The family spent the next ten years in continuous migrations that took them, *inter alia*, to Israel, Italy, Austria, the Netherlands and the United States before they finally settled in Austria when he was sixteen. Many critics have argued that this eventful childhood and youth paved the way for Vertlib's writing career. The author's autobiographical essays, however, show that the opposite is true. These experiences silenced him: "We were foreigners in this country. Better be silent, wait, and smile. I was told that this was the most sensible and adequate behaviour in my position. The less you say, the less you attract attention" (Vertlib, 2000). Even when he talked about his migrations to friends, there was not much interest in what he had to say because they usually did not understand what he was talking about. His narratives did not coincide at all with their experiences of growing up. This further confirmed his feeling that what he had to say was irrelevant to the general public. This only changed when Vertlib met Konstantin Kaiser, an Austrian writer and publisher actively engaged in increasing the visibility of Austrian exile writers who had to flee from the Nazis. Kaiser read one of Vertlib's very early texts and immediately saw the links of his writing to the older generation of exile writers. Reading their works, Vertlib slowly became aware that his writing was part of a long history of exclusion and discrimination, a shadow image of official history as he called it in one of his essays. This new understanding of the world was the impetus for him to overcome his silence and write novels based on his migration experiences that focus in particular on silence in migration (Sievers, 2021).

Vertlib was one of the very first authors to write about migration in the Austrian literary field. He turned migration into a literary topic in this field. The authors who followed him could build on this achievement. In other words, Vertlib changed the field. He made it easier for the immigrants following his example to become writers. However, this does not mean that he abolished all boundaries. Authors face new boundaries as the process continues. These include, for example, the exoticising and thus limiting labels – such as "migration literature" in the German context or "Black writing" in the British context – that other actors in the field use to describe their literature. These terms signify an initial recognition as literature. However, they also imply a new demarcation from the respective national literature. This new mechanism of exclusion may then be taken up by emerging authors who develop innovative positions to counter it. Each author is thus confronted with specific boundaries and responds with an individual positioning.

When discussing the transgressions of boundaries at the author level, we always need to take into account the other actors in the literary field who support them in this process. As the example of Vertlib clearly shows, these "post-migrant alliances", as they are called in post-migrant studies today (Foroutan, 2019, pp. 198–202), are extremely important for the authors. The boundary in the literary field, then, does not separate natives from immigrants and their descendants but, rather, those who promote the inclusion of these newcomers in the field from those who fear for their own position and therefore reject their inclusion in the field.

The actors and institutions who support these authors also change in the process. Moreover, authors who never migrated adopt the new aesthetic and thematic positions that enter the field. This does not mean, however, that all boundaries are overcome. Any post-migrant literary history therefore has to conclude by examining which boundaries faced by immigrants and their descendants continue to be effective in the respective literary field.

## 2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented a theoretical and methodological approach for analysing how societies change through migration. The cornerstones of this approach are Bourdieu's field theory and the post-migrant perspective. The first enables me to think about social change, the second allows me to apply this model to post-migrant societies – i.e. societies that have long histories of immigration but are still characterised by discrimination and racism. The resulting approach makes visible the nationalist exclusion of immigrants and their descendants as well as their struggle to overcome these barriers in order to make their voices heard in public debates about immigration. As such, my approach moves beyond telling history as either national or transnational. Since the emergence of nations, the two have coexisted, with one or the other dominating in particular periods. This struggle is at the centre of the change I have tried to identify with my approach. This process of change is not necessarily linear – as Michael Parzer and Ana Mijić show in Chap. 3 – and it certainly does not happen in all fields at once, as Joanna Jurkiewicz and Jens Schneider highlight in Chap. 5 of this volume. However, my aim was to put centre stage first how exclusionary mechanisms were implemented and work in cultural fields and second how authors and their allies in the field have tried to overcome this exclusion.

My focus in this chapter was on literary fields but I hope the approach may also serve as an inspiration to identify similar dynamics in other fields. I have explained how we can analyse change through migration in literary fields. Unfortunately, the limits of the chapter did not allow me to describe how I translated this approach into practice in my empirical analysis of the Austrian literary field. In fact, it takes another chapter to analyse the emergence of this field as well as the concomitant nationalist exclusion of immigrants and their descendants and a further four chapters to explain how individual authors overcame these barriers. What I found the most astounding result of my empirical study is that there was a time when migration was not regarded as being a topic for literary writing. In fact, when Vertlib began to write, the ignorance about migration in the literary field was, for him, the most difficult hurdle to overcome. It took several years before the author found support beyond his allies, since the critics needed time to accept migration as a literary topic and to grasp that his individual story has a wider relevance not only with regard to understanding migration but also to understanding that societies have to change in response to migration. Several authors have followed Vertlib since but,

despite all of their efforts, they have not yet managed to abolish the borders drawn against immigrants and their descendants in the Austrian literary field and in Austrian society. However, this is not surprising if we consider that several Austrian political parties perpetuate these borders with a view to gaining votes. As we know from Bourdieu, cultural fields are subordinate to political fields.

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# Chapter 3

## Continuity or Change? How Migrants’ Musical Activities (Do not) Affect Ethnic Boundaries



Michael Parzer and Ana Mijić

### 3.1 Introduction

Research on whether and how migrants’ artistic practices *do* affect the cultural and social structures of their societies of residence is currently in its nascent stage, posing empirical and theoretical challenges to understanding the relation to migration, arts and cultural change. Most often, cultural change is considered as a rather linear process, automatically leading to openness, blurred boundaries and more inclusion. However, this is not necessarily the case. The outcomes of these processes are somewhat manifold and diverse, as can be shown with the help of boundary approaches. By focusing on the processes of classification and categorisation, these approaches provide an analytical lens through which to study whether and how migrants’ musical practices lead to the (re)production or the transformation of cultural and social structures.

In recent years, the social sciences have lent more weight to the concepts of symbolic and social boundaries. Currently, the most prominent names associated with the boundary concept are Michèle Lamont and Andreas Wimmer. While Lamont mostly focuses on class-specific boundaries, Wimmer’s work is dedicated specifically to the analysis of ethnic boundaries (Mijić & Parzer, 2017; Wimmer, 2008a, b, 2009, 2013). In reference to work by Max Weber and Fredrik Barth, Wimmer highlights the socially constructed character – and the contingency – of ethnicity and points out that boundaries should not be regarded as the sum of any “objective” cultural differences but, rather, as a process within which specific characteristics are considered to be relevant by various actors. In other words, ethnic boundaries

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emerge from acts of social classification (dividing the social world into ‘us’ and ‘them’). According to Wimmer, these classifications also offer scripts of action that show “how to relate to individuals classified as ‘us’ and ‘them’ under given circumstances” (Wimmer, 2013, p. 9).

Applying this perspective to examine the impact of migrants’ artistic activities on cultural change shows promise for several reasons. First, cultural change entails the *transformation of ethnic boundaries*: it emphasises the processes of how individuals and social groups deal with given boundaries and how these boundaries are contested, transformed or reinforced over time. In other words, this entails how (collective or individual) actors relate to these boundaries, “by trying to change them or de-emphasize them and enforce new modes of categorization altogether” (Wimmer, 2013, p. 49). Second, applying a boundary approach makes it apparent that cultural change is not a linear process. Instead, it can have completely different outcomes, ranging from weakening a given boundary to strengthening it or from moving towards more inclusive modes of representation to reinforcing existing patterns of exclusion. Third, Wimmer’s concept emphasises the role of power in processes of boundary transformation: social categorisation is based on multiple actors’ endowments with discursive and symbolic resources and their access to goods, positions and social networks (Wimmer, 2013, pp. 63–65). Finally, the boundary approach also allows us to reflect upon the dialectical relationship between self-attribution and attribution by others or, as Richard Jenkins (2008, 2014) puts it, between the internal and the external definition of the self. This distinction is vitally important to our analysis of migrant artists, since the way in which they self-present and self-market in an artistic field is also always shaped by the perception and the expectations of others within the arrival society (Parzer & Kwok, 2013).

To date, several empirical studies have drawn on concepts of symbolic boundaries and/or the role of social categorisation in processes of migrants’ inclusion/exclusion in different artistic fields (Delhaye, 2008; Gebesmair, 2009; Gebesmair et al., 2014; Kasinitz, 2019; Lena & Cornfield, 2008; Sievers, 2008, 2017, 2018; Vandenberg et al., 2021). However, there have been few attempts to systematically review the opportunities as well as the limitations of an ethnic boundary approach to analysing cultural change. Pauwke Berkers was one of the first scholars to employ a boundary concept within the sociology of arts, where he comprehensively examined ethnic boundaries in American, Dutch and German literary fields between 1955 and 2005 (Berkers, 2009a, b; Berkers et al., 2014). In one empirical study, Berkers compares the classification of ethnic-minority fiction writers in literary anthologies and histories from the three countries and concludes that “ethnic boundaries are much stronger in Dutch and German textbooks than in their American counterparts” (Berkers, 2009b, p. 419). Another study, which Berkers published in 2014 with Susanne Janssen and Marc Verboord, focuses on how ethnic-minority authors are classified in newspaper reviews. Here, too, it becomes apparent that ethnic boundaries are of less importance in the American literary field than in the Netherlands – and particularly in Germany. A number of other highly relevant insights about the role of boundary work in the field of artistic production can be

found in Ivana Rapošová's (2019) research on multicultural festivals. By drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Bratislava, she studied the festival organisers' work to change existing symbolic boundaries between the ethnic majority and those who are considered as "others": She identifies several different strategies for making symbolic boundaries more permeable but also points out that new boundaries can emerge simultaneously and unintentionally. Although these studies apply the concept of ethnic boundaries to analyse transformations in the artistic field, they do not systematically consider Andreas Wimmer's ethnic boundary approach (which Wimmer only started to publish in 2008).

We believe that Wimmer's approach provides theoretical tools that can help to analyse and understand processes of cultural change in different artistic fields. For our contribution, we focus on the field of music. Like other forms of art, music serves as an important arena for permanently negotiating central categories of social life and questions of belonging. However, it is important to point out that these struggles are played out in different contexts: on the one hand, practices of categorisation are manifest in the ways that a specific piece of music is described, presented, perceived and, most importantly, evaluated by various (individual and corporate) actors. On the other hand, negotiations of identity and belonging are also inscribed into the music itself, as various sounds and rhythms are culturally coded, thereby contributing to meaning-making processes in music (Gidal, 2014). Therefore, we propose a broad understanding of music that encompasses not only the music itself but also the contexts into which it is embedded. We follow the definition by Kurt Blaukopf, who was a founding figure in the sociology of music and who has examined musical action as social action by referring to the term *musical practice*:

Rather than starting from music as a work of art, a phenomenon that appeared later in history, it takes as its point of departure music as a social activity, something older than notated music that eventually brought forth the 'musical work of art' at a given stage of socio-technological development. [...] I would like to note again that the word practice should not be taken in the narrow sense of referring only to 'what is actually heard'. It should be extended to include all musical acts and omissions, as well as observable behavior patterns. Theoretical reflection on this musical practice – that is, thought about music based on each practice and capable of influencing it – will also be considered part of this practice [...] (Blaukopf, 1992, p. 21).

Our objective is to examine how Andreas Wimmer's boundary approach can benefit the analysis of cultural change. By drawing on his typology, which describes different modes of boundary (un)making, we aim to provide a toolkit for analysing ethnic boundaries in the field of music and to contribute to the discussion about the challenges of researching migrants' impact on the social and cultural transformation of contemporary societies.

Hence, we begin with an introduction to Andreas Wimmer's ethnic boundary approach. Next, we discuss three ways of negotiating ethnic boundaries – boundary changing, boundary shifting and boundary crossing – in reference to examples from the musical field. Finally, our conclusion addresses the potentials and limitations of the applied theoretical tool.

### 3.2 The Ethnic Boundary Approach

As a leading researcher on ethnicity, Andreas Wimmer has undertaken numerous empirical, mostly comparative, analyses about the relevance of ethnicity in different social contexts. Notably, he has also developed a comprehensive multilevel process theory to understand and explain “The making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries” (2008a) by accounting for interactions between economic, political and cultural processes.<sup>1</sup>

One of Wimmer’s theoretical starting points is Max Weber’s presumption that ethnicity is not an objectively given fact, but should rather be conceived as a “subjective belief in [...] common descent” (Weber, 1978, p. 389) and therewith a common culture. The notion of the factual decoupling of culture and ethnicity and their ‘de-essentialisation’ is thus already present in the work by one of the founding fathers of sociology. However, it was actually the Norwegian cultural anthropologist, Fredrik Barth (1969), who helped to advance this theoretical notion.

According to Barth, ethnicity is neither determined by birth nor is a product of territorial isolation or cultural commonalities. Rather, it is created and maintained in social processes or chosen anew depending on the situation; it is a product of social interactions, a result of social classifications and categorisations, of self-perception and the perception of others. Ethnic units exist only insofar as they stand in relation to other ethnic units and what is regarded as a common culture is ultimately the result of these ethnic boundaries (Barth, 1969, p. 15). As a consequence, ethnicity is thus no longer merely *explanans*, i.e., an independent variable. Instead, it becomes an *explanandum* or “a variable outcome of specific processes to be analytically uncovered and empirically specified” (Wimmer, 2009, p. 244).

While Barth primarily devoted himself to understanding how ethnic boundaries are reproduced despite their principle changeability, Wimmer aims to uncover the logic of their transformation (Wimmer, 2013, p. 4). To this end, he also places himself in the tradition of Bourdieu and appreciates “ethnicity as the outcome of a political and symbolic struggle over the categorical division of society” (Wimmer, 2008a, p. 985). His work attempts to comprehend the logic of these struggles, by examining how they are influenced by the structure of the social field within which they unfold. Likewise, it analyses how these interactions, in turn, affect those structures and lead to the transformation or reproduction of ethnic division (Wimmer, 2013, pp. 4–5). For this purpose, Wimmer develops a process-oriented multilevel

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<sup>1</sup>Wimmer proposes a model to explain how ethnic boundaries emerge, stabilise and transform, the complexity of which is not only attributed to how his approach “offers a ‘full circle’ explanation [...] leading from macro to micro and back to the macro level again” (Wimmer, 2008a, p. 1010). By placing himself in the tradition of methodological individualism, Wimmer aims for his model to, among other things, integrate “specific empirical propositions within an encompassing theoretical framework” (2008a, p. 1011) and intends to “foster the conversation between the disjointed and segregated fields of macro sociological, comparative historical approaches to ethnicity, race and nationalism, on the one hand, and the micro sociological and ethnographic traditions, on the other hand” (Wimmer, 2008a, p. 1011).

process theory to explain the emergence as well as the transformation of ethnic boundaries in various contexts (Wimmer, 2008a). Its comparative component lies at the heart of his theoretical approach and his concern with uncovering

...how and why ethnicity matters in certain societies and contexts but not in others, and why it is sometimes associated with inequality and exclusion, with political salience and public debate, and with enduring loyalty and thick identities, while, in other cases, ethnicity, race and nationhood do not structure the allocation of resources, invite little political passion, and represent only secondary aspects of individual identity. (Wimmer, 2013, p. 2)

In order to appropriately address this question, Wimmer conceives the boundary as a variable along the dimensions of political relevance, social closure, cultural differentiation and historical stability. In so doing, he also looks at the necessary conditions for interaction processes to achieve a common understanding of ethnic boundaries in spite of actors' different interests (Wimmer, 2008a, pp. 997–1001).

By referencing work by Lamont and Bail (2005), Zolberg and Woon (1999) and Horowitz (1975), Wimmer distinguishes five elementary strategies of ethnic boundary-making here: the first two strategies attempt to *shift the location* of existing boundaries, encompassing expansion and contraction. The remaining three strategies aim to change the boundary's

meaning and implication by challenging the hierarchical ordering of ethnic categories ('transvaluation'),<sup>2</sup> de-emphasising ethnicity and emphasising other social divisions ('blurring') or changing one's own position vis-à-vis the boundary ('positional moves'). (Wimmer, 2008b, p. 1031; 2013, p. 49)

Furthermore, actors' opportunities for action are limited by the structures of the social field (Wimmer, 2008a, p. 973). Specifically, he mentions the institutional environment, which makes certain boundaries seem more probable and interesting (e.g., qua ethnicity, class, gender, religion, tribe); the prevailing distribution of power, which determines individual interests and thus also which level of ethnic differentiation seems the most meaningful; and the network of political alliances, which influences the boundary location (Wimmer, 2008a, pp. 990–997).

Drawing on Wimmer's typology, we suggest distinguishing between three fundamental modes of how artistic and cultural activities in the musical field relate to boundaries: (1) Boundary changing, which includes boundary blurring and reinforcing; (2) boundary shifting, meaning the contraction and expansion of an ethnic boundary; and (3) boundary crossing, which corresponds to Wimmer's 'positional moves.' In the musical field, ethnic boundaries are notably affected – either intentionally or unintentionally – by several actors: the musicians themselves, but also the cultural intermediaries and promoters, distributors, marketers and the media, as well as the audiences and consumers (and non-consumers, i.e., people who intentionally avoid consuming a certain kind of music). As we have maintained above, symbolic boundaries always emerge in processes of interaction, which are

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<sup>2</sup>Here, Wimmer differentiates between "normative inversion, which reverses the existing rank order, and equalization, which aims at establishing equality in status and political power" (Wimmer, 2008b, p. 1037; 2013, p. 57).

characterised by an interplay between self-identification and categorisation by others. When a discrepancy arises between (personal) identification and (external) categorisation, whose reality prevails becomes a question of power. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the struggles over the legitimate means of categorisation and determine/question who has the power to implement, enforce and stabilise – or to contest and transform – certain categories.

The following sections elaborate upon the different modes theoretically and refer to findings from the interdisciplinary literature on music and migration. Some of these studies focus on the (migrant) musicians' self-identification and their modes of boundary making, whereas others concentrate on how the host society categorises the (migrant) artists and/or music and the majority's boundary work. In some studies, the power imbalance between musicians and the arrival society is explicitly reflected while, in others, it remains largely unexamined.

### 3.3 Boundary Changing: Blurring and Reinforcing

*Boundary changing* refers to processes that transform the characteristics and the meaning of boundaries. This can happen in two contrasting ways: boundary blurring and boundary reinforcing. Both strategies refer to transformations of the boundary itself (changing its characteristics like density, porousness or permeability), while the boundary's topography is not affected at all.

#### 3.3.1 *Boundary Blurring*

Following Wimmer, *boundary blurring* occurs when the importance of ethnicity as a principle of categorisation and social organisation is reduced by simultaneously emphasising non-ethnic dimensions of categorisation (Wimmer, 2013, p. 19). In the musical field, this happens when a certain musical activity is located in the realm of global, cosmopolitan, transcultural or transnational cultural production, where ethnic boundaries and references to any national culture are ostentatiously avoided – or are no longer of any significance.

An example of boundary blurring appears in Marco Martiniello's (2018) analysis of local communities of artistic practice in Belgium (a hip-hop dance crew, a rapper and two urban parades). He shows how transnational networks of artistic production have transcended ethnic and racial boundaries by promoting a post-ethnic and post-racial perspective. This is also a result of ethnically and racially mixed networks of artistic cooperation that do not highlight their members' ethnic origin but, rather, the cosmopolitan and multicultural character of their urban and artistic environment. Martiniello suggests considering these practices as an ongoing transformation in super-diverse cities, as a “[...] trend towards conviviality, everyday intercultural

interaction and the development of new post-ethnic and racial identities and ways of life in super-diverse cities” (Martiniello, 2018, p. 1159).

In a similar vein, Parzer and Kwok (2013) examine the role of ethnicity in marketing strategies by musicians and other artists. They investigate how transculturality has become a strategy by which to escape the ethnic niche into which many migrant cultural entrepreneurs are pushed. By drawing on the Turkish-Austrian music group Coup de Bam, the authors illustrate how the term *polyglot* has been used to replace the label of *ethno music*. While often categorised as *world music*, the group members identify their work as international and global pop music by simultaneously criticising how migrant musicians are often seen as exotic without receiving any recognition for the quality of their music:

You as a Turk, a Kurd, an Afghan, whatever, you can at the best only have an exotic value. Music shall go a bit beyond that. I want [to be judged by] simply the music I make. Yes, regardless from where I come, whether I am Kurd, Turk, African, or anything. (Musician quoted in Parzer & Kwok, 2013, p. 271)

The authors observe an increase in musical activities that are characterised by “their familiarity with the globalised cultural landscape arising from the encounter of diverse life forms and world-views” (Parzer & Kwok, 2013, pp. 271–272). By invoking transculturality, as suggested by Wolfgang Welsch (1999), they highlight the interconnectedness of diverse social and cultural groups and the erosion of symbolic boundaries along ethnic categories. Another example is provided by Parzer (2021) in his study on artists who fled from Syria to Austria. He shows how they deal with different pressures of external categorisation that highlight ethnic makers or refer to their refugee status. To escape this “double burden of representation,” some artists position their work in the realm of cosmopolitan cultural production. This enables them to refuse both ethnic labelling and categorisations that evoke refugeeeness. One of the central questions, however, is under which conditions the rejection of external labels is possible. Who holds the power to reject these labels based on ethnic (or refugee) criteria? It seems that those who possess cultural, economic and social capital are more likely to occupy a transcultural or cosmopolitan position (Parzer, 2021; Parzer & Kwok, 2013; Parzer, 2021).

A further strategy of blurring ethnic boundaries reflects the hybridity of a certain musical production. Several studies show how hybrid musical forms elude ethnic categorisation and can contest and problematise existing categorisations and boundaries (Nederveen Pieterse, 2015, p. 101). For example, Ray Allen’s (2019) account of Harlem calypso and Brooklyn soca shows that hybrid musical forms can provide a space for cross-cultural dialogue and the (re)negotiation of symbolic boundaries (Allen, 2019, p. 880). A similar pattern is presented by Els Vanderwaeren (2014) in her study on Murga, a kind of street fanfare that emerged in Flanders in 2006 that brings people from different social and cultural backgrounds together. Vanderwaeren is optimistic about the effects of Murga on social cohesion:

When a shared cultural identity appears in the production (and consumption) of Murga, the contact between people in society is promoted. This is revolutionary and is cohesive. Different existing networks connect the local and translocal levels. In this way, through meeting each other, influences emerge. (Vanderwaeren, 2014, p. 71)

However, hybrid forms or an emphasis on hybridity can also help to strengthen ethnic boundaries. As Martin Stokes and other scholars point out, the presentation, marketing or perception of a form of music as *hybrid* often goes along with the assumption that the mixed elements were somehow “pure” before being mixed: “Purity of musical expression is not possible [...], the building blocks of every mixed style are themselves hybrids” (Stokes, 2004, p. 60; see also Bodenheimer, 2010; Mendívil, 2012; Sutton, 2010).

A common characteristic of these different boundary-blurring strategies is that they refer to what Lamont and Bail (2005) have described as *universalizing*: instead of highlighting certain aspects of ethnic belonging, actors draw on the notion of universal categories that tend to include as many people as possible: “‘Universalizing’ means emphasizing general human morality as a basis for distinguishing between worthy and unworthy individuals” (Wimmer, 2013, p. 47). Conversely, *particularising* refers to a strategy by which ethnic boundaries are reinforced.

### 3.3.2 *Boundary Reinforcing*

Boundary reinforcing<sup>3</sup> takes place when ethnicity becomes the main principle of categorisation (and evaluation) in music. Ethnicity can become an essential marker when musicians and/or their music are categorised according to a geographical and cultural origin. This can happen, for instance, when migrant musicians highlight their ethnic belonging in their musical activities (internal definition) or are labelled as ‘ethnic’ by actors and institutions from the arrival society (external definition). The emphasis on ethnicity can be coded positively (as something specific/exotic or as means for creating belonging) or negatively (as something inferior or even threatening). As internal and external definitions are highly interdependent, even internal definitions can refer to notions of the ethnic majority’s cultural superiority. Reinforcing boundaries is an important strategy of creating a sense of belonging; however, it can also be considered as a reaction to marginalisation, discrimination and stigmatisation by individuals and institutions from the arrival society.

Dan Bendrups examines the role of ethnicity within Latin American music and musicians in Australia and New Zealand and argues that the portrayal of Latin music as “exotic entertainment” is perpetuated by the musicians themselves: “Their repertoire selection is a reflection of audience expectations in circumstances where ‘Latin’ is still considered a homogeneous entertainment music category” (Bendrups, 2011, p. 204).

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<sup>3</sup>Although Andreas Wimmer does not explicitly mention ‘reinforcing’ in his typology, this term fits into his conceptualisation of boundary work, which focuses on how actors (individual as well as corporate) ‘[...] may pursue to react to existing boundaries, to overcome or reinforce them, to shift them to exclude new groups of individuals or include others, or to promote other, nonethnic modes of classification and social practice’ (Wimmer, 2013, 46).



The strengthening of ethnic boundaries can, however, also reproduce stigmatisation – especially when ethnic markers are associated with negative stereotypes. Sendroiu and Mogosanu (2019) examine the use of manele songs in Romania, which are a contemporary version of traditional Romani music. They show how both the producers of manele music and their listeners are stigmatised – regardless of the listeners' ethnic belonging:

Manele audiences experience stigma spillover beyond the genre's original association with the devalued Roma minority. This means, we would argue, that manele not only reflects symbolic ethnic boundaries, but through the consumption of manele, ethnic-based stigma is reinforced and even expanded. (Sendroiu & Mogosanu, 2019, p. 2060)

The authors state that these processes extend to a wider 'moral panic' that is rooted in the perception of manele as a threat to mainstream Romanian culture. Boundary work, then, might be used to defend the ethnic majority's symbolic order. This shows once again how much boundary work is interwoven with the power structures of a society.

In a similar vein, Carstensen-Egwuom (2011) examines the performance of 'foreignness' as a means of integration by focusing on an intercultural festival in Chemnitz:

[...] integration does not happen in such a way that they are no more recognizable as foreigners. Rather, to integrate and to become a recognized part of the city's population, they celebrate and even increase their foreignness by making a performance to fit: In this case, they used an African music and dance performance, the *Ajegule* dance that celebrates unity in a situation of ethnic diversity in its context of origin. In the context of the intercultural festival, it changes to emphasize the otherness, the Africanness of the performers. [...] Cultural difference thus becomes an important aspect of incorporation. (Carstensen-Egwuom, 2011, p. 131)

Carstensen-Egwuom's example fittingly illustrates what Jenkins (2014) calls the internal and the external moments of the dialectic of identification: in this case, demonstrating how musicians position themselves as 'exotic' to live up to the arrival society's expectations. The power of external categorisation also becomes visible when musicians want to break out of the ethnic niche but continue to be referred to along ethnic lines by others. This occurs when musicians from the former Yugoslavia in Austria and Germany are expected to represent their home countries and perform 'Balkan music' regardless of the music they actually want to play (Brunner & Parzer, 2011).

The effectiveness of external categorisations is also the focus of Anja Brunner's (2022) study of musicians in Germany and Austria who have migrated from Syria. Based on her ethnomusicological research, she traces the extent to which the so-called "Welcome Culture" that emerged after 2015 caused a powerful fixation on the refugee label, from which the musicians could only escape by withdrawing from public appearances (at least for a while) and/or completely changing their musical strategies.

However, boundary reinforcing is not only a reaction to the arrival society's expectations but also a means of creating and reproducing belonging, strengthening identity and providing empowerment. In her study on music in the

Ethiopian-American diaspora, Kay Kaufman Shelemay (2009) shows that “[...] music fulfills important roles in the construction of community and delineation of social boundaries, both among Ethiopians and between Ethiopians and others” (Shelemay, 2009, p. 1153). Likewise, Ozan Aksoy highlights the importance of music in processes of Alevi identity formation in his ethnographic study on Alevi communities in Cologne. He argues that music provided in certain religious and secular spaces is a highly effective means to connect Alevis to their cultures and communities (Aksoy, 2019, p. 935). Negotiating belonging is the main issue in Hannah Lewis’ study on recently arrived refugees in Great Britain. She points out the significance of music and dance as strategies to cope with experiences of flight and marginalisation, as a tool to constitute “safe spaces” (Lewis, 2015, p. 52). Music might help to prevent “culture shock” among immigrants (Lena & Cornfield, 2008, pp. 158–159) and to provide shelter and feelings of security and “being at home” (Parzer & Kwok, 2013).

Furthermore, the reinforcement of ethnic boundaries can be considered to be a response to discriminatory and stigmatising experiences: music that highlights similar belongings can compensate for experiences of exclusion, as well as provide recognition that is denied in other areas of everyday life. This kind of boundary-strengthening may be accompanied by what Wimmer refers to as transvaluation, explaining “[t]ransvaluation strategies try to change the normative principles of stratified ethnic systems – the ‘revaluation of values’” (Wimmer, 2013, p. 57). Although they ultimately rely on the idea of equalisation, we can also observe what Wimmer calls “normative inversion” in the field of music, wherein “the symbolic hierarchy is put on its head so that the category of the excluded and despised comes to designate a chosen people, morally, intellectually, and culturally superior to the dominant group” (Wimmer, 2013, p. 57).

Normative inversion takes place when, for instance, a migrant rap group explicitly uses ethnicity as a tool of empowerment and anti-racist engagement. In his study on “the aesthetics of diaspora,” Ayhan Kaya (2002, p. 44) argues that “the celebration of ‘authenticity’ becomes a revolt against the hegemony of the prevailing nation-state.” EsRAP, an Austrian rap duo who emphasise their parents’ Turkish origin, further represent this normative inversion. By ostentatiously using and playing with the common stereotypes faced by Turkish migrants and their descendants, EsRAP go beyond contesting xenophobic resentments by also providing narratives of empowerment that can ultimately delegitimise the ethnic majority’s symbolic order. This becomes the most obvious in their track “Der Tschusch ist da” (The Tschusch is here), based on the reappropriation and satirical inversion of the swear word ‘Tschusch’, which is used to stigmatise migrants from Turkey and former Yugoslavia. Thus, music can serve as an effective tool to cope with the arrival society’s expectations and categorisations. By exaggerating ethnic markers and satirising dominant stereotypes, the music transvaluates the existing symbolic order and symbolic boundaries become contested by being strategically reinforced. Put differently, even if such performances strengthen ethnic boundaries and highlight

the relevance of ethnicity, their ability to re-evaluate dominant stereotypes, contest existing hierarchies and provide empowering tools to stigmatised individuals and groups shows their potential for providing narratives and discursive strategies that might have an impact on symbolic boundaries and cultural change.

Although both boundary blurring and reinforcement can take place at an individual level (e.g., when musicians refer to their country of origin), they may be restricted by the opportunities and expectations of the arrival society (e.g., when a musician wants to but is not able to escape external ethnic categorisation because of the dominance of prevalent ethnic boundaries/different power relations between migrants and the arrival society). The same holds true for processes of boundary shifting.

### 3.4 Boundary Shifting: Expansion vs Contraction

As clearly shown above, *boundary changing* transforms the qualities of a boundary, while the boundary's topography is not affected at all. In contrast, *boundary shifting* refers to a relocation of boundaries, while their characteristics remain unaffected. Wimmer (2013, p. 50) distinguishes between *expansion* ("shifting an existing boundary to a more inclusive level") and *contraction* ("shifting an existing boundary to a more exclusive level"). Expansion in the musical field refers to processes of broadening the ethnic category into which a certain musical genre or musician is placed. This can be either through fusion with an existing category (e.g., when migrant music in Austria is depicted as Austrian music) or by referring to a superordinate-level categorisation (e.g., when migrant music in Austria is referred to as European music).

Alternately, boundary contraction occurs through fission by adding a new category (e.g., when a genre previously labelled "Austrian" is re-classified as "Burgenland-Croatian") or by referring to a subordinate level of categorisation (e.g., by re-classifying "Balkan" music as "Serbian", "Croatian" or "Bosnian").

#### 3.4.1 Boundary Expansion

Various processes of fusion appear in the musical field; for example, when migrant music becomes so common or actively endorsed that it is seen, performed and perceived as part of the arrival country. It is then no longer considered a threatening or enriching element to/of the dominant culture but a part of it (Terkessidis, 2010). For example, Alex Rotas (2012) illustrates boundary expansion in his examination of how works by artists from refugee populations have been curated and labelled during the first decade of the twenty-first century. He shows

[...] that looking at work that previously might have been viewed as ‘exotic’ or ‘foreign’ but that is now classed as British forces viewers to reassess and renegotiate their understanding of the nature of ‘Britishness’ and indeed of place-Britain. [...] The work of artists from refugee populations, shown now as ‘British art’, becomes a dynamic part of this process and a means by which new elements are transferred and added to an ever-changing British cultural fabric. (Rotas, 2012, p. 211)

Rotas later emphasises the potential of boundary expansion for cultural change:

Taking the opportunity presented by new definitions of ‘British art’, my focus is on the cultural transfer that contemporary and recent refugees are making to Britain through their art and the ways that this art is coming to be positioned by curators for viewers – not as ‘foreign’ or as ‘exotic’ but as ‘British.’ (Rotas, 2012, p. 216)

Similar processes appear in the musical field, when certain previously marginalised or ethnicised music becomes included into the mainstream of national music production. For example, Brazilian music had long been considered exotic by the Austrian majority population through its promotion under the label of “world music.” In recent decades, many artists from this genre have ended up performing at Vienna’s Wiener Konzerthaus, which is considered the heart of Austria’s (classical) musical heritage. This shift from the ‘ethnic other’ to a ‘part of the national mainstream’ can also be interpreted as boundary expansion.

Hence, boundary expansion becomes the most visible at an institutional level, where migrants’ musical activities are located either at the centre or on the periphery of cultural production. In the case of the latter location, boundary contraction may also occur, which “means drawing narrower boundaries and thus disidentifying with the category one is assigned to by outsiders” (Wimmer, 2013, p. 55).

### 3.4.2 *Boundary Contraction*

Boundary contraction is characterised by shifting an existing boundary to a more exclusive level, either by referring to a subordinate level of categorisation or by adding a new category (Wimmer, 2013, p. 50). Regarding the first strategy, we find an illuminating example in Le Menestrel’s (2007) study “The color of music. Social boundaries and stereotypes in Southwest Louisiana French music”. She focuses on Southwest Louisianan musical traditions known as ‘Cajun’ and ‘zydeco’ and that are shaped by Acadians (descendants of French settlers who migrated to the USA from present-day Maritime Canada) and French Creoles. Interestingly, until the 1960s, these musical traditions were considered “*musique française*” or “French music” “without systematically assigning it to a specific ethnic group or music sub-genre. The French versus American musical distinction was the significant factor” (Le Menestrel, 2007, p. 88). However, this convention has changed in recent decades, when ethnic and racial distinctions in music became meaningful: Southwest Louisiana’s music was no longer considered French music and, instead, was referred to as either ‘Cajun’ or ‘zydeco’ along ethnic and racial categories. As Le Menestrel explains, “[t]he distinctions between these categories shape and are shaped by social

stereotypes, while discussions of musical hybridization, or creolization, tend to mask persistent tensions along social boundaries” (2007, p. 88).

In her study on boundary work among the Laz of Turkey, Ayşe Serdar (2019) shows how actors (who position themselves as being Laz) apply strategies of boundary contraction as a reaction to the Turkish state's top-down assimilationist policies. According to Serdar, many use Laz music as a tool with which to redraw the boundaries of Lazness:

Ethnic identity may be felt by many urban Laz, who cannot speak Lazuri, as something that enriches their personal life, something that is different from generic Turkish culture. It is not a thick, politicized ethnic boundary, so it can be combined with Turkishness without a boundary conflict. [...] The evidence indicates that, at present, Laz music, and other cultural repertoires such as food or some ethnic symbols [...] engender new repertoires for performing ethnicity without cost especially among younger generations (Serdar, 2019, p. 352).

Another example of boundary contraction is provided by Dave Wilson (2020) in his ethnography of Macedonian “ethno bands.” While it would seem obvious and strategically beneficial to subsume their music under the popular ‘Balkan’ label, these musicians avoid this term due to its associations with ‘backwardness’ (Mijić, 2020, pp. 1083–1084). Instead, their representation strategy is based on their Macedonian roots as well as their cosmopolitanism. By referring to Macedonian heritage and tradition, ethnic boundaries are contracted, while they simultaneously try to blur existing boundaries by drawing on additional dimensions of cosmopolitanism. This example is interesting for two reasons: first, it shows how refusing a (dominant) categorisation can have negative consequences in terms of visibility and economic success, since avoiding the ‘Balkan’ label prevents these Macedonian musicians from participating in world music markets and related festival networks. Second, this example illustrates how various strategies of boundary (un)making are intertwined: in the case of Macedonian ethno bands, we can observe a mix of boundary contraction and boundary blurring.

### 3.5 Boundary Crossing

*Boundary crossing* happens when an individual shifts sides and crosses a given boundary by changing his/her position – through either reclassification or assimilation (Wimmer, 2013, p. 59). With music, examples of this repositioning strategy appear when migrant musicians present themselves and/or their music as part of the arrival country or when they start performing what is considered to be that country's music. In these cases of individual boundary crossing, *the boundary itself might not be affected*. The musical field provides manifold examples of the strategy of repositioning; for instance, Japanese, Korean, Chinese and Taiwanese musicians in Austria (mainly students at music universities) who play in orchestras dedicated to the tradition of Austrian classical music (mainly First or Second Viennese School). Another example is Bill Ramsey, who was born in the USA and went to Germany in the

1950s, where he became famous performing German “Schlager”. While Bill Ramsey could easily conceal his origin, this is not the case for Taekeo Ischi, who was born and raised in Tokyo and moved to Switzerland – and later Germany – where he started a career as a Japanese singer specialising in Alpine yodelling, a vocal technique highly connotated with Austrian, Swiss and Bavarian folk culture.

Thus, boundary crossing does not change or shift an existing boundary but may reinforce “its empirical significance and normative legitimacy: It shows to those who move and those who stay that there is no ‘in-between’ and that the social world is indeed structured along hierarchical lines” (Wimmer, 2013, p. 59). The categorisation itself only becomes meaningless if frequent crossings take place and the boundary disappears. However, as Wimmer notes, “it may later be rediscovered and filled with new meaning” (Wimmer, 2013, p. 60).

A special case of boundary crossing with an impact on cultural repertoires is provided by Kasinitz (2019) in his study on the impact of migrants on American Broadway theatre. Looking at the period between 1920 and 1950, as well as contemporary creative activities, he shows how immigrant and second-generation artists who worked/work in Broadway theatres did/do not only contribute to revitalising the musical theatre but also reimagine and reinvent ‘American’ traditions. Ironically, this is not by promoting their own cultural traditions but by assimilating into the American mainstream, as Kasinitz illustrates: “The children of immigrants, with feet in both their immigrant parents’ communities and the larger society, occupy a liminal space that, whatever its discomforts, is often an advantage in fostering cultural creativity” (Kasinitz, 2019, p. 897).

### 3.6 Conclusion

Whether and how migration is transforming social as well as cultural elements of contemporary societies has become one of the most pressing questions in recent (and partly controversial) debates on the impact of migrants in their receiving countries (Castles, 2010; Jiménez, 2017; Portes, 2010). Regarding the role of artistic practices in these processes, we follow Wiebke Sievers, who points out in the introduction to this volume that there “is a strong belief that arts and cultural activities have the power to initiate such a change” (Chap. 1, p. 6). However, analysing art’s impact on cultural change faces several theoretical and methodological challenges.

Our article argues that Wimmer’s boundary approach provides several theoretical tools with which to grasp the heterogeneity as well as the dynamics of cultural change in migration societies. By referring to the field of music (and, in particular, research on migration and music), we explored various modes of boundary work in multiple geographical, social and cultural contexts. Building on Wimmer, we distinguished three main modes of how music broadly relates to existing ethnic boundaries: *boundary changing* refers to boundary work that attempts to transform their

characteristics and meaning. We speak of boundary blurring when ethnicity is de-emphasised and non-ethnic principles of categorisation dominate – e.g., when actors in the musical field draw on categories that focus on the global, cosmopolitan, transnational or transcultural dimension of cultural production. However, we can also observe its opposite direction: the reinforcement of ethnic boundaries. These latter become salient by emphasising ethnic markers as the principal component of categorisation – e.g., when musicians highlight their ethnic belonging in their musical activities or are labelled as ‘ethnic’ by actors and institutions from the arrival society. Reinforcing boundaries is an important strategy for creating a sense of belonging; however, it can also reflect reactions to marginalisation and stigmatisation. Wimmer’s notion of transvaluation – the transformation of normative principles and hierarchies in a given field – serves as a subtype of boundary reinforcing. While strategies of boundary changing aim to transform the characteristics of an existing boundary, strategies of *boundary shifting* try to modify the boundary’s topography. In reference to Wimmer, we can distinguish between boundary expansion (broadening an existing category) and boundary contraction (narrowing an existing category). Besides ‘boundary changing’ and ‘boundary shifting’, we also take into account what Wimmer calls *boundary crossing*, which occurs when individual musical actors switch sides and cross a given boundary by changing their position without affecting the boundary itself.

Wimmer’s typology serves as a fruitful heuristic with which to analyse cultural change from migration by shedding light on: a) cultural change as a transformation of ethnic boundaries, b) the manifold modes of boundary making and unmaking, c) the role of power in these processes, as well as d) the non-linear dynamics of cultural change. This reveals that migrants’ musical practices might affect boundaries in various ways – given boundaries can be weakened but also strengthened, leading to different outcomes regarding inclusion or exclusion.

As a next step, it would be highly promising to link the assorted actors’ strategies in the musical field to ongoing processes at the macro level. This raises the following questions: How do symbolic boundaries transform into social boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002)? Under what circumstances and in which contexts do processes of boundary changing, shifting and crossing lead to structural changes in the arrival society?

Following Wimmer’s approach, we examined the strategies employed by actors who use, apply, impose or reproduce categories, as well as those who challenge and contest them or create new ones. Whether these endeavours actually lead to change and whether these symbolic struggles over legitimate ways of classification have an impact on the status quo is not only a theoretically challenging question but also a methodologically and empirically demanding one: how can we measure the impact of symbolic shifts (that mainly take place on a local level or only in specific realms) on structural changes, given that such changes do not emerge from a single source but, rather, are the outcome of manifold different processes, with symbolic aspects being only one contributing factor. However, as our examples have shown,

categorisation in music shapes the cultural repertoires of society, challenges taken-for-granted assumptions and contributes to the creation of (new) narratives and discourses that, altogether, can have structural impacts in multiple ways.

However, one quality deserves attention in this regard. Wimmer asserts that

it is theoretically fruitful to see individuals [...] as strategically competent actors who aim to enhance their own moral recognition, prestige, power and command over resources [...]. To see individuals as unconscious inhabitants and reproducers of a categorical grid into which 'society' has squeezed them seems, in my eyes [...] to be rather too structuralist. (Wimmer, 2014, p. 840)

This assumption is rooted in how Wimmer's multilevel model conceptually stands in the tradition of methodologic individualism, where collective phenomena are attributed to the utility-maximising behaviour of individual actors. This paradigm has been criticised in particular by proponents of cultural sociology; Lamont (2014, pp. 816–817), for instance, argues that

individuals do not aim to consciously deploy one system of symbolic boundaries over another, as they are rarely conscious that they inhabit categorization systems. Instead, they tend to use schemas that are largely taken for granted and made available by the national cultural repertoires that surround them [...] [W]e move from a focus on discrete, instrumental actions aimed at monopolizing material and non-material resources, to a focus on a range of ongoing, routine relationships that enable and constrain social action [...].

In the musical field, this becomes the most visible when considering that actors are not necessarily aware of how their music-related practices shape boundaries – or that their practices do not affect them at all. Boundaries even change as an unintended consequence and, vice versa, probably do not change even when it is the actors' primary aim. This can be observed particularly clearly where artistic practices are intended to weaken or even shift ethnic boundaries but when, at the same time and unintentionally, new boundaries become salient (Rapošová, 2019).

For the purpose of our chapter, whether people act strategically or not is of subordinate importance. However, if the macro level is to be considered, a social-theoretical clarification is required to properly ask how the connection between agency and structure, between individual and society, can be imagined in processes of change (for a first attempt, see Chap. 2 in this volume based on Bourdieu's field theory). For this reason, it is necessary to address whether we assume that people are strategic and utility-maximising actors or actors who typically make use of established interpretive schemes that they internalise in the course of ongoing socialisation processes. This would then also have an impact on the choice of research method.

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# Chapter 4

## Doing Reflexive Migration Research in Cultural Institutions: Some Thoughts on Critical Knowledge Production



Rikke Gram, Lars Bädeker, and Antonie Schmiz

### 4.1 Introduction

When considering that the city *is* migration (Yildiz, 2011) and stating that migration is no longer a marginal issue but is accepted as a defining aspect of the future of urban societies (Terkessidis, 2019), a new field for doing migration studies opens up: it becomes necessary to look at local institutions and their agenda on migration as places that co-produce the migration society. Among the institutions now becoming the centre of attention when looking at the impact of migration are the spaces and places in charge of cultural offers. Institutionalised presentations of cultures, like those in museums and theatres and at festivals, are some of the most visible representations of urban societies. These institutions are central actors in the negotiations of the ideas and interests of a diverse population and are currently reacting to demographic changes and dealing with issues related to migration in their exhibitions and on their stages. Nevertheless, while many European societies have become migration societies, cultural institutions still find themselves in a long and cumbersome adaptation to this fact – not only in public presentations but in the whole institutional texture – from guiding narratives to staff composition (see Chaps. 5 and 8 in this volume). This chapter takes a closer look at this process of change in cultural institutions in the two German cities of Osnabrück and Dresden.

When approaching the arts and cultural institutions from the perspective of migration research, it is important to reflect on the knowledge that is generated on this relatively new subject of research. This challenges us to consider how we, as researchers, are situated within this production of knowledge and how we and the

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academic institutions in which we work are entangled with the cultural institutions being researched. In this contribution, we ask how we should research cultural institutions in societies that undergo considerable change due to migration. How to study cultural institutions is a question not only of methods but also of perspective. To examine this more closely, we apply a reflexive perspective on the knowledge that we produce. We argue for the importance of making the production of knowledge itself the object of study when we conduct critical migration research, following the reflexive turn in migration studies (Braun et al., 2018). With migration being an inherent and strongly influential part of German society, the responsibility of cultural institutions to take up this fact become obvious and their role as spaces for negotiating local identities and belonging is amplified (Kaschuba, 2011). That said, these institutions and local administrations become objects of investigation in the sense of “de-migranticised” migration research (Dahinden, 2016; see also Bojadžijev & Römhild, 2014) that de-centres the migrant subject and, instead, turns its focus on broader societal institutions. This brings with it new challenges. In attempting to understand the impact that migration has on institutions, we try to unravel how change is promoted or hindered within the latter’s structures. In so doing, we reflect on the possibilities which we have as researchers to observe issues related to the migration society in cultural institutions – or, in some cases, to influence the process of change ourselves.

Especially since the crisis of the European and German border regimes in 2015–2016, knowledge production on (forced) migration has been a focus of German public research funders (Braun et al., 2018). The Federal Ministry of Research and Education, which funded our project, explicitly emphasises migration-induced cultural and institutional change as an attempt to understand the mid- and long-term impacts of migration on German society as a whole (BMBF, 2020). With its focus on institutions – and not first and foremost on the migrant subject – this funding scheme connects to the perspective of the de-migranticisation of migration research (Nieswand, 2016). Within this funding scheme, cooperation with practice partners, such as city administrations and local institutions, was an important factor for applications. For both case studies and in reference to the de-migranticisation approach, we initiated collaborations early on with major public theatres, museums and municipal cultural administrations as practice partners.

To understand change within cultural institutions, it is necessary to look at the political context in which they have been operating since the 1970s, when the notion of “Culture for Everyone”<sup>1</sup> came up in local cultural politics in West Germany (Föhl & Pröbstle, 2020). This notion was accompanied by a movement towards cultural politics that emphasised more democratic and active participation of the local society. One long-term effect of this was the development of pedagogical departments and outreach programmes in these institutions, especially for youngsters and the working class. Much less common were strategies that involved foundational institutional change, nor did they systematically include the population that had

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<sup>1</sup>“Kultur für alle”. All translations are made by the authors themselves.

immigrated to Germany and their locally raised offspring. Until 1990, Dresden was part of the German Democratic Republic where the notion of “Culture for Everyone” was practiced in programmes and formats (Mandel, 2021). This included free entrance to cultural institutions and a broad notion of culture that included the reception of, for example, theatres and museums, as well as the support of individual and collective cultural activities. Long-term partnerships between cultural institutions and also kindergartens, schools and production sites sustained the idea of an equitable access to culture. However, cultural production was in favour of the socialist state ideology, programmatically enhanced by the “Bitterfelder Weg” in 1959, which enabled playwrights to participate in the production sites with direct contact with the working class (Mandel, 2021). At a federal level, it was only around the turn of the millennium, when the government introduced a paradigm shift towards the political acceptance of Germany as a “country of immigration”, that migration increasingly became a subject in local and national cultural politics at large (Bayer, 2018; Wonisch, 2012). This intensified in the mid-2010s when museums, theatres and, especially, their cultural education programmes became more concerned with migrant populations, notably refugees (Micossé-Aikins & Sharifi, 2016; Tinius, 2019).

The representation of migration in cultural institutions is becoming an instructive subject for migration research due to the roles and functions which these institutions fulfil in society. Cultural institutions are not solely buildings that people walk into for education or entertainment. As “stages” for discourses and performances of specific narratives, they shape the way we think about the past, the present and the future, about art and society, about ourselves and our fellow human beings (see, e.g., Baur, 2013; Bennett, 1995; Levitt, 2015; Macdonald, 2002). Museums and theatres are prisms wherein to observe societal transformation and changes in public representations of national identities long imagined as homogeneous. These institutions can make visible the transcultural and transnational lives not only of migrants but of all inhabitants of the cities around them (Macdonald, 2003). This also applies to other institutionalised cultural events in the form of festivals, crafts markets, parades or concerts which present national folklore. Although the essentialisation of culture in these spectacular representations is a matter of broad (academic) critique, they have become important events for performing a city’s cultural diversity and for observing the changes to an ever-more-diverse population (Knecht, 2010).

When analysing change in cultural institutions, we turn our research focus from the migrant subject to structural obstacles and conditions. In taking in Donna Haraway’s (1988) heuristic perspective of “situated knowledge”, we follow her call for a rejection of objectivity in the research process. For her, knowledge is situated in a certain time (historically) and in a certain place – and it changes with social change. Knowledge is situated in terms of values, belief systems and cultural differences. Haraway thus describes knowledge production as linked to individuals and their bodily experiences, a perspective that she borrows from the feminist research tradition (Haraway, 1988). As Gillian Rose (1997, p. 306) phrases it: “The need to situate knowledge is based on the argument that the sort of knowledge made depends on who its makers are”. This perspective demands a permanent reflection on one’s

position as a scholar and the deconstruction of objectified bodies of knowledge (Haraway, 1988). This relates to our embodied, racialised and engendered position as researchers. It also relates to the position of a critical observer, which ranges from a powerless view from the outside to a rather engaging and welcoming view from the inside. This positionality also resonates with the circumstances of being part of an institution and thereby restricted to a certain institutional loyalty. This said, a situated and embodied critical knowledge represents a counter-design to a knowledge that claims absolute validity for itself.

Starting from these methodological considerations, we unravel (some) of the relations in which both our research and we, as researchers, are situated. We do this with a focus on the process of gaining access to our fields to show how the partially contradictory processes of becoming embedded in and being excluded from the institutions have developed. In the next section, we describe the institutional and local contexts in which our research was set. Using examples from our fieldwork, we then analyse some characteristics of cultural institutions and administrations and describe how these affected our access to them. Finally, we interpret how the different entry points to the fields influenced the knowledge – on the representations of social change – which we were able to produce through our research.

## 4.2 Situating Our Research

In Osnabrück, the focus of the research has been on the municipal cultural administration and the city's cultural politics regarding migration. Osnabrück is the third-largest city in the northern federal state of Lower Saxony and has 165,000 inhabitants. The city constitutes an exception to the prolonged institutional change described above. In 1976, the above-mentioned new trends in cultural politics motivated the municipal council in Osnabrück to agree on the first local cultural development plan in West Germany (Sliwka, 2011). This plan defined the work of the public cultural institutions but also described how the city should support inhabitants who were considered as “Others” – meaning the so-called guest-workers as well as Roma and Sinti – in their “cultural self-expression” (*kulturelle Selbstdarstellung*) (Stadt Osnabrück, 1979, p. 27). In the cultural plan, this was further outlined by describing the possibility for the city to facilitate festivals presenting food, dance and other folklore to the broader population. The official partner in our research project was the municipal cultural office under whose jurisdiction we directly collaborated with the local Museum Quarter and the so-called Office for Peace Culture. These departments within the cultural administration are independently managed. The Office for Peace Culture coordinates projects including active citizens, civil society organisations and migrant self-organisations with a focus on memorial cultures, international and intercultural festivals and collaboration with religious communities. The notion of Osnabrück as the “City of Peace” is a dominant narrative in the work of the cultural administration, going back to when the city, together with neighbouring Münster, hosted the negotiations for the Peace of



Westphalia in 1648 which ended the Thirty Years' War. The Office is "acting as mediator between politics and the administration on one side and the civil society players on the other" (Stadt Osnabrück, n.d.). The second research focus was the local Museum Quarter which consists of the Museum of Cultural History and Felix-Nussbaum-House.

Dresden, with its more than 550,000 inhabitants, is the capital of the Free State of Saxony and prides itself on being a "City of Culture" (Stadt Dresden, n.d.). It is known for its several museums of national and international renown and, with nine institutions of tertiary education within the city, collaboration between public institutions and university researchers is not uncommon. Furthermore, what made the city of Dresden especially interesting for our research also posed a challenge. Briefly summarised, Saxony is one of the strongholds of the right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) and the city is home to the right-wing protest movement known as PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident – *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*) on the one hand and a vibrant alternative scene on the other, Dresden has been described as a "torn" (Vorländer, 2016) and a "polarised" city (Greschke et al., 2020). In this context, discourses on migration and cultural politics have become proxies for deeper-lying conflicts on belonging, politics and (urban) society that keep dividing Dresden along fault-lines that pop up in debates on various topics (Greschke et al., 2020). These conflicts are present in everyday life and also have an impact on the work of the city's cultural institutions, especially those of high profile, like the museum in which our research was conducted.

Concerning the research in both Osnabrück and Dresden, senior personnel from the institutions had agreed on the collaboration and signed a declaration of consent sealing the liaison; however, the local contexts led to different developments for our respective case studies and thus affected the various positionalities that are described below. In the following section, we describe the moments when we entered the institutions where we conducted our research; firstly, however, we consider what this positionality involves at a theoretical level.

### 4.3 Getting In

By shifting our focus to access to the institutions with which we have been working, we recognise the importance of the networks and histories in which we, as university scholars, are entangled and the previous work of colleagues in which our work is embedded. This is a twofold process. Focusing on how we accessed the field is insightful, as the obstacles arising tell us much about the actors in the field, their power relations and their local entanglements (see also Schwell, 2018). At the same time, this focus forces us to reflect upon our academic background as well as our positionality and pre-knowledge concerning both the local contexts and the institutions we wish to research, the possibility of engaging in deep and meaningful research cooperation with them and, eventually, the kinds of knowledge on

migration and social change which we can produce through such cooperation. Regarding universities, Sara Ahmed (2012) has shown how important it is to reflect on which bodies are anticipated in the institution and which are not considered the norm – we find her ideas on institutional inclusion and exclusion valuable for our own work.

In Germany, large and publicly funded cultural institutions, to a certain degree, function like government agencies: they are organised in hierarchical structures and depend on long-term budget planning – and their work is restricted by a lot of red tape. When dealing with them, it can therefore be helpful to make use of research on bureaucracies, political organisations and government agencies, as organisational sociology does. As Alexandra Schwell (2018) points out, ethnographies of bureaucracies and public institutions enable deep insights into everyday practices, discourses and assemblages of these places, whose idiosyncrasies cannot be fully captured by only looking at governmental structures, organisational charts or official documents. However, gaining ethnographic access to these bureaucratic organisations can be tricky – Schwell describes them as *inaccessible places* (2018, p. 126). In what follows, we argue that several of the characteristics which Schwell uses to describe bureaucracies as inaccessible places can also be attributed to cultural institutions and can help us to analyse how they influence the kinds of knowledge which we produce in our research. Inaccessible places are specific material places; places that are hard to enter, not only because of their material shape but because of the underlying ideology affecting them. Schwell’s categorisation fits with theatres, municipal buildings and museums, though not solely because they are often located in prestigious, architecturally dominant buildings that were constructed to materialise ideology into “bricks and mortar” (Levitt, 2015, p. 3). While these institutions are in part public buildings, the parts “behind the scenes” (Macdonald, 2002), where much of the actual work is taking place, are not accessible without a previous appointment and unrestricted access is usually only possible for those who work there. Previously made agreements are therefore necessary to conduct research, not only for ethical reasons but also to make it possible to physically access the field sites.

Our collaboration with the cultural administration in Osnabrück could build on a long-established trust with the university’s Institute for Migration and Intercultural Studies (IMIS), not least based on numerous personal connections and career continuities between the university and the local public service.<sup>2</sup> The IMIS serves as a relevant partner for the city’s cultural strategy, in which culture and the local creative industry are set as location factors for Osnabrück (Stadt Osnabrück, 2020). In Osnabrück, it was possible to swiftly obtain close contact with central and leading personnel from within the cultural administration, which made it possible to access the internal workings of the department as well as the department’s workings on representing migration diversity within the larger frame of the general city

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<sup>2</sup>In Osnabrück there was a change in researcher midway through the project. This chapter builds on the study of the second researcher but not without acknowledging the work of the former.

administration. The researcher's participation in meetings, her presence on site and her close collaboration with some city employees was based on a previously signed joint letter of intent and informal agreements between the researcher and the interlocutors – to a large extent, people in leading positions. The research would entail participant observation in the Office for Peace Culture and participation in several internal meetings – with the municipal administration or with partners from the civil society. However, the researcher was also invited to accompany the employees to informal events. One interlocutor invited the researcher to join her for a lunch workout for municipal employees because, as she argued, the researcher as a working mother probably did not have much time for sports. This friendly informality became symptomatic of the relationship of the researcher with the members of the administration in Osnabrück; the connections developed through the work began to determine the progression of the research. Since meetings within a city's administration are generally not public and all participants have clearly assigned roles in the organisation, the researcher was dependent on the gatekeepers to invite and bring her along but this often happened unsolicited. Even at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in the spring and autumn of 2020 and the subsequent lock-down, with its conversion of all meetings to online formats, the researcher was continuously invited to internal online meetings in the cultural administration. Being a white recent migrant and non-native German speaker positioned the researcher outside the usual workforce of the administration, allowing her to obtain the role of an active participant observer; thus asking basic informative questions about the institutions, their function and their history was not out of place.

In Dresden, the institutional and personal connections between the IMIS and the project partner, a large public museum, were less close: it was only built on an advisory council function of one of the IMIS project leaders for an exhibition on migration within the museum.<sup>3</sup> The research thus did not benefit from being conducted on institutional home turf and the researcher found himself in a less accentuated position at the partner institution. Being positioned as a male, white junior scholar with a non-migratory West German biography, accessing the museum meant not only studying-up but also being confronted with the institutional history of the German Democratic Republic and the specific local context of Dresden.

In the museum, access to the field proved to require more formalities. In a meeting that involved him, a senior researcher from the IMIS team and two high-level museum representatives, it was agreed that the researcher would join a team working on an upcoming exhibition at the museum as a part-time research assistant. This decision was presumably based on the researcher's previous practical experience as a junior curator, during which he had curated an exhibition on a similar topic. While at first sight facilitating his access to the inner structures and work of the museum, this decision revealed an early barrier with regards to access to the museum. For insurance reasons and to be allocated his office keys, the agreement needed to be

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<sup>3</sup> In order to protect the anonymity of the people involved, we have decided to not name the museum in Dresden in this chapter.

formalised and the researcher had to sign a contract with the museum that was legally similar to an internship contract. Setting this up took the personnel department some time, which delayed the starting date of the on-site research by several weeks. The researcher was then provided with a desk in a shared office in the museum's semi-basement, which turned out to be two floors away from the people in higher positions into whose work he had expected to gain insights. The keys to the office, again for insurance reasons, were to be picked up from and returned to the museum's reception desk at the beginning and end of each workday, underlining the physical inaccessibility to the site without a formal contract. This impression of physical inaccessibility was further reinforced by the museum's representative architecture – the “bricks and mortar” described by Peggy Levitt (2015, p. 3). In this specific museum in Dresden, this combines neo-classical and Bauhaus elements and deserves to be called ‘towering’ or even ‘overwhelming’, with grand open spaces in the public section but small and cramped corridors and offices behind the locked doors to the administrative complex. In combination, the physical inaccessibility of the site, his location in a shared semi-basement office and the impressive architecture constantly reminded the researcher that he was examining a prestigious institution – which played a part in his subjectively felt positionality as a junior scholar with still relatively limited experience in museum work.

Whereas the researcher in Osnabrück was able to informally access the Office for Peace Culture, the research in Dresden commanded formalisation. In signing a formal contract, the researcher was able to circumnavigate the physical layer of inaccessibility and, in turn, became situated within the organisation. However, this led to an asymmetry of power which is characteristic of inaccessible places and strongly influences our positionality. This asymmetry is related to the thematic focus of *cultural* institutions and administrations: they are fields that, at least in our case, are close to the researchers and their profession and careers. This is true both in museums, where art-historians, historians and ethnologists work, as well as in cultural administrations, where many employees hold academic degrees in the humanities or social sciences. The research conducted can be described as “studying sideways” (Hannerz, 2006) or even “studying up” (Gusterson, 1997; Nader, 1972): academics researching the work of other academics with similar backgrounds in equivalent or higher positions as themselves. In the specific case at the museum in Dresden, this asymmetrical power relation was reinforced by two factors: firstly, the fact that a young researcher with professional experience of working in a museum was studying one of the most prestigious German museums, with the potential informants in part coming from the same discipline but being his senior in both age and experience as well as in academic degree and title (namely holding doctorates and/or professorships). For the researcher, the subjective experience of asymmetry was further enhanced by the fact that the potential informants were influential people in professional networks who might become relevant to the researcher's future career. The second factor was that the researcher was positioned low within the internal structural hierarchy by taking on the role of a part-time research assistant with an internship-like contract in order to gain access to the field. In Osnabrück, although also studying up and sideways, this was not experienced as

a great obstacle due to the fact that the researcher had a strong institutional affiliation in the city through the university – especially through being an employee of the IMIS – and also because the researcher did not have to be placed within the hierarchy of the cultural administration but could work more independently than was the case in Dresden. In what follows, we show how these positions had an impact on the knowledge we could gain on changes within the institutions.

#### 4.4 Being There

Our various points of entry to the fields led to different experiences of “being there” and thus to different types of knowledge. However, our positionality in relation to the institutions with which we were working was not the only factor which had an impact on the insights we obtained. These were also influenced by the shape of the institutions themselves – and not least the fact that their reactions to the local societies in which they are embedded is different in the two cities. In Osnabrück, the Office for Peace Culture and the local museum are commissioned to work with the active civil society locally, especially including so-called migrant self-organisations and people promoting cultural and religious diversity in and around the city. Through the Museum Quarter and the Office for Peace Culture, the local cultural administration is approachable by the citizens and in dialogue with the latter’s communities. According to the self-description given on its website, the museum in Dresden also aims to engage with the local civil society and sees itself as a place in which cultural and social change can be observed and discussed – and, in many areas, this description fits. At the same time, however, its politics and actions are the results of negotiation processes between different actors (individual and institutional), both within and outside the museum, who have differing ideas of how far this engagement and openness to discussion should go.

The researcher in Osnabrück was accepted by the gatekeepers at an individual level, which meant that she was personally invited to internal meetings. Attending these meetings gave her access to information not available to the public and made it possible for her to obtain a deeper understanding of the negotiations within the organisational structures of the institution (Brown et al., 2017). It made it possible to understand how issues of migration are imagined and negotiated in the cultural administration. At the same time, the researcher still depends on the gatekeeper’s judgement on what she finds important which, in Osnabrück, also meant not being invited to meetings that the gatekeeper did not find representative of her work. This did not mean that important players in the local cultural scene were all supportive of the influence the IMIS has. A cultural politician was reflecting on this, arguing that

coming from parts of the conservatives, not only conservatives but also those who, so to speak, in the eighties built up this idea of the peace city and who then, so to speak, are against the detached university discourses of othering or something. Who see there rather a kind of demarcation line.

As is visible below, observing open disagreements within the institution can help us to understand which changes do take place and which changes are deemed needless.

Becoming an official part of the organisation, as was the case at the museum in Dresden, offers different kinds of opportunity: during his work at the museum, the researcher had his own internal museum email account. This allowed him to receive invitations to internal events and meetings that were sent to all employees and to attend these meetings without asking for permission. One such meeting dealt with a controversial topic – namely the public and internal debates about the fact that the museum decided to invite a group of activists and artists of colour to contribute to an (at the time already finished) exhibition on racism during its planning process. The museum had received both praise for including the group, as well as criticism for planning the exhibition with an all-white curatorial team and for not including people of colour from the beginning. The meeting developed into a discussion and revealed conflict between museum staff on how far museums should go when giving up their claim to professional expertise in favour of the subjective experiences of others and becoming a space for participation and discourse (for a general discussion on this, see Baur, 2020). Here, it was possible to observe an internal conflict that revealed structural frictions and conflicting positions in a way that would probably not have been revealed in or perceived via interviews alone. One of the higher-ranking museum officials, for instance, who would publicly support the idea that museums should become more open and develop into discursive spaces, strongly advocated at the meeting that museum workers are highly trained professionals whose hegemonic position in certain discourses and exhibition topics should not easily be dismissed in favour of “lay people”. Thus the meeting exposed the differences between internally and publicly expressed positions for at least a certain number of the museum staff, while others strongly opposed the view and spoke in favour of more “progressive” understandings of museum work.

When we reflect upon these differences and upon the kind of information on the everyday workings of the institutions which is normally willingly revealed to us, it is important to keep in mind the settings in which cultural institutions operate. Here, we can refer to the bureaucratic nature of them as part of the public sector and the discursive setting in which they are entangled. When conducting research in cultural institutions on sensitive topics like migration and diversity, we need to be aware of the pitfalls of political (or personal) interests that might (wittingly or unwittingly) play a part when decisions are made at the higher organisational levels. Cultural institutions nowadays more often tackle topics like the representation of migration, racism or sexuality in their programmes and many of their employees are sincerely interested in and knowledgeable on these topics. Nevertheless, because of the institutions’ bureaucratic nature, this does not automatically make them tolerate outsiders’ insights behind the scenes; in behaving thus, they risk public criticism or scrutiny. As described above, German cultural institutions are highly dependent on public funding, the allocation of which is a politically charged topic. As large public institutions, museums and theatres are also major actors in (and often the subject of) public debates on different social and political topics. At the same time, they strategically situate themselves in these discourses in a socially acceptable position, not

least in order to receive public funding. The institutions are therefore often closely monitored by the media and the public and can be prone to attempts to control the type and level of publicity which they create with regards to potentially “polarizing” topics like migration. Leading figures in cultural institutions are well aware of which expectations they need to meet and which positions they are expected to hold if they wish to be considered as “keeping up with the times”, no matter whether or not they share them. These (local) discursive surroundings need to be taken into consideration when discussing how museums increasingly open up and discuss the origins of their collections and the ways in which they produce and communicate knowledge (see also Gable, 2013).

This also leads us to reflect on which kind of knowledge we won from the work in the Office of Peace Culture and the museum in Dresden. Whereas, in Osnabrück, the knowledge we gained made it possible to understand how migrant citizens and people seen as representing the city’s cultural and religious diversity are included in the local cultural programme on a practical, daily basis, in Dresden we mainly won meta-level information on how knowledge of migration is debated in a major state museum, on who is part of this knowledge production process and whose position is challenged or excluded. The growing (partially public) engagement with their role in knowledge production described above, especially for museums with an ethnographic or cultural-historical focus, is partly rooted in the inward-looking nature of their respective disciplines but, more often than not, outside influences, such as activist critiques, debates about representation or new, ambitious leadership coming in have been the starting point of these processes of change (see Macdonald, 2010; see also Chap. 8 in this volume). This is also the case with the rising political debate about the colonial history of European museum collections and claims for restitution. However, a growing self-awareness does not mean that museums are inherently open to publicly discussing what is happening behind the scenes at a deeper level. This means that insider knowledge comprehends how decisions are taken rather than how an exhibition or collection came into being or what the museum’s stand is on certain topics. Decision-making structures reveal much about where power lies within an institution. At the same time, looking at how decisions are made can sometimes remind us that, despite the importance of structures, plans and resolutions, the final authority on important decisions is often still held by a single individual.

According to Schwell (2018), different layers of knowledge and secrecy are also the result of the bureaucratic nature of inaccessible places which further contributes to the asymmetry of power between the researcher and the field. In our case, this asymmetry of power is twofold and our situatedness concerning the institutions we research is thus ambiguous. Firstly, as external researchers, we can easily be perceived as “evaluators” and experts on the topic of migration who intend to identify and reveal deficiencies and shortcomings in the institutional work – especially when we research a topic like change. As Eric Gable (2013) points out, researchers need to remember that building a rapport and meaningful relationships is hard when you are perceived as (or understand yourself to be) a critic. We observed, especially in Dresden, that this positionality influenced the willingness of informants to open up

to the researcher about possible deficiencies within the institutions. This becomes more apparent when we think about the fact that we are gathering material about their jobs. As Hugh Gusterson observed, we conduct research “where ethnographic access is by permission of people with careers at stake” (1997, p. 116). At the same time, the informants’ positionality influences their ability to share their knowledge with us; who we choose or get the chance to speak to (see Hannerz, 2003) affects both the kind of knowledge we can produce from that conversation and also our future positionality within the institution and may thus enhance or limit our choice of possible future interviewees.

To give two examples from the fieldwork in Dresden: a mid-level museum employee had shown great interest in collaborating with the researcher in one-on-one conversations. Later, however, the employee had to backtrack on the jointly developed ideas for the cooperation after consulting with a superior and, instead, suggested a looser and shorter collaboration which would have also directly involved this senior colleague. The idea eventually fizzled out, partly due to scheduling problems but also because the researcher felt that the involvement of the superior was an attempt to monitor the conversations between him and the museum employee. As to illustrate common reports by ethnographers about their most easily accessible informants, the person the most willing to engage in a regular conversation and also openly talk about shortcomings within the museum was an “outsider” – i.e., someone whose position was not funded by the museum itself and who had been situated outside the museum’s strict organisational hierarchy, reporting directly only to the upper management level. The person was thus able to collaborate with the researcher more freely and without feeling the need to consult a superior. The less-constrained conversations with this person allowed the researcher access to inside knowledge about internal museum processes. However, this came at the risk of giving the impression that the researcher would deliberately bypass the hierarchy, thus putting the rapport with other possible informants at risk.

In Osnabrück, in contrast, the researcher could closely follow the employees of the Office for Peace Culture and thereby gained insights into how new initiatives were started, initiatives that would accommodate the diversity of the city’s residents. The overall access to the cultural administration in the city made two things possible in particular: to follow some employees’ work inside the cultural administration and to initiate a project with the local museum in transdisciplinary cooperation shortly after the research had begun. As further explained below, the latter became crucial when the pandemic and 2020 lockdown made it difficult to initiate new collaborative projects. The changes that the Office for Peace Culture was embroiled in can be exemplified by the following observations from the field: “This is an event for a true culture of peace”, an employee of the Office for Peace Culture exclaimed at a meeting with representatives of local mosque communities. The meeting took place in the community room of a mosque in an industrial area of Osnabrück. There, some members of the local Muslim communities met to organise a joint public *Iftar*, wishing to serve a Ramadan meal for around 1000 people at a central square in the city. The communities themselves had initiated the *Iftar* and, for the employees of the Office as well as for the mosque communities, it was



important that the latter took charge of the organisation, albeit with the support of the city administration. The planning of the *Iftar* was presented to the researcher by the employee as a potential way to understand how new projects develop and how collaborations between the Office and civil society took place. Being able to attend such meetings made it possible to understand how new initiatives are instigated in the city and how they are placed within the city's dominant narratives of a "peace culture". The collaboration with the mosque communities served to show the understanding which lies behind certain organisational structures. At the second meeting in a neighbouring mosque, one of the Muslim organisers emphasised that the public *Iftar* was particularly important for him as a native-born citizen of Osnabrück. The researcher's positioning at these meetings made it possible to gain knowledge of how the municipal cultural administration reacts to the surrounding society and how the locals interpret the events. It shows how the Office for Peace Culture includes Muslims in the city narrative based on the Peace of Westphalia – a peace treaty that ended religious conflicts – and how the native Muslims wish to use the event in the future to show their belonging to the city as non-migrants. Not only was this presented to the local Muslim communities as a seminal event in the city but the team from the Office for Peace Culture also highlighted the project positively at an internal meeting in the cultural administration.<sup>4</sup>

The second example from Osnabrück makes visible the impact of initial contacts between researchers and people active in the field of interest and how it affects the knowledge that can be gained once there. Even before taking up the position in the project, the local researcher was contacted by a new employee in the local cultural administration in Osnabrück, an employee who, while still a student at the IMIS, was hired by the administration on a temporary contract with a mandate to increase the diversity in the Museum Quarter's programme. This contact led to the joint initiation of a Master's seminar at the IMIS in which students were to become part of a greater participatory exhibition in the museum. Within this project, members of local activist groups and migrant self-organisations were making the lives of the diverse populations of Osnabrück more visible by telling stories of migration, diversity, "Othering" experiences and civil engagement. The collaboration was initiated in early 2020 but the lockdown, due to Covid-19, heavily interfered in the seminar and exhibition plans. With the pandemic, the already existing networks became even more important than before and, for both the museum employee and the researcher, it was clear that realising such a project was a now-or-never opportunity – both their positions were short-term, lasting 1.5–2 years. With both also being female early-stage professionals, the collaboration became a place of mutual support. The development of a close relationship between the researcher and her partner in the museum made this collaboration possible and was mutually beneficial for their work. For the museum employee, the collaboration was valuable because of the researcher's experience with practical and theoretical knowledge on museums

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<sup>4</sup>The public *Iftar*, unfortunately, was never realised due to the pandemic and lock-down, which also stretched through the 2020 Ramadan.

and her easy access to Master's students who could participate in the exhibition project. For the researcher, it created proximity to the field at a time when such relations had become extremely difficult and, through the transdisciplinary intervention, it became possible to examine representations of migration in a cultural institution on equal terms with those involved. Being part of this collaborative project made it possible to gain insights into how the reaction of institutions to migration is entangled with the direct participation of local organisations and private individuals and how deeply the execution of these projects depends on those involved in them.

## 4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, we looked at knowledge production in cultural institutions as an important field in migration studies. We adopted a “de-migranticised” perspective for researching cultural institutions and argue that the knowledge produced is situational, as it is influenced by our positionality not only within society but also within the institutions we are researching. This positionality determines who we can speak to and about what and from which societal position we are speaking – and, thus, the layers of knowledge which we can approach. It is shaped by the interrelations between ourselves, the people working in the institutions and the institutions themselves as collective bureaucratic entities. Our first encounters as researchers with these bureaucratic institutions are strongly affected by these interrelations and we therefore argue for the importance of careful initial preparation and an early start to the reflexive process.

The positionality obtained in Dresden made it possible to observe actors in the institution from a more-distant perspective than initially planned and to obtain a bodily understanding of the difficulties in gaining access to the monumental construction that is this museum. Despite the official agreement, access to the museum as a research site was not straightforward. A closer exchange with museum employees on the topic could not be realised as intended by the researchers and some museum employees, partly due to the strict internal hierarchical order. How access was (not) achieved in Dresden reminds us that granting access to researchers is an act of trust on the part of the object of research – here the employees of the museum. This requires a preparedness to suspend control – at least to some extent – and to open-up internal processes to external viewers, possibly affecting the public image of the institution as well as the self-image – something that is not exactly inherent in the bureaucratic nature of large cultural institutions.

The importance of locality when entering these institutions as research fields becomes visible in this chapter. When researching change in cultural institutions in the migration society, the local entanglement of the researcher – or the lack thereof – is of great importance. The closeness and distance to the fields existing outside the single researcher were felt bodily in both places, with the researcher being either physically included or excluded from the everyday work life in the institutions.

The history of institutional entanglement on which research builds is important for how researchers can position themselves and how they are positioned by the authorities in the field. We have shown how mutual trust at an institutional level creates the foundation for a confident collaboration and a smooth entry into an otherwise, in many ways, inaccessible field. A trust-based point of departure is especially important regarding the subject of institutional change in migration societies. Due to the sensitivity of the subject, institutions are very aware of every move concerning how they engage with the subject of migration and the presence of external social researchers can be perceived as an audit or as a person engaging with the institution in a joint project of change. These processes are challenging but, from our point of view, they are necessary and worth it, because research on cultural institutions can produce valuable knowledge of how migration is negotiated and represented both “on the stage” and “behind the scenes” of publicly funded, powerful actors who are influencing local and national discourses.

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# Chapter 5

## On Continuities. Migration and Institutional (Non-)Change



Joanna Jurkiewicz and Jens Schneider

### 5.1 Introduction

[W]ith the fact that more than 70% of all foreigners have been living in the Federal Republic for more than 5 years and 50% for more than 10 years, this country has de facto become a country of immigration. (Stadt Sindelfingen, 1979, p. 1)<sup>1</sup>

Although it took German politicians until 2001 to officially recognise the fact that Germany is a country of immigration (Espahangizi, 2018, p. 36), the quote from the first foreigners' report of the city of Sindelfingen, an industrial town in the south of Germany, shows that the debates on this issue go back decades. The “discovery of immigration” in West German politics – that is, the long-term settlement and de facto immigration of “guest workers” – has been a regular topic of expert discussions and press coverage since the mid-1960s (Berlinghoff, 2016, p. 937). In the 1970s, addressing migration and related social tasks became a municipal policy field (Carstensen et al., 2022, p. 26). Today, the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the people who immigrated back then make up a large part of Sindelfingen's and other West German cities' diverse societies.

Cultural institutions, however, have not necessarily adapted to this reality, as we show in this chapter for two festivals in Sindelfingen and for the Thalia Theater, one of the most prestigious theatres in Hamburg. This non-change is not due to a lack of good examples. The most prominent of these is Shermin Langhoff's post-migrant

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<sup>1</sup>If not indicated otherwise, all translations were undertaken by the authors.

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theatre which, in the early 2000s, set out to represent the stories and narratives of the descendants of immigrants who were not (accordingly) represented in the theatre scene (Langhoff, 2018, p. 305). The adjective *postmigrantisch* (postmigrant) has since been used to describe the reality of today's German society in both research and also public debates (Foroutan et al., 2018, p. 9). *Postmigrant* here refers to societies structured by migration in different ways and experiences. It implies a break with the established migration discourse and "its categorical separation between 'migrant' and 'non-migrant', 'migration' and 'settledness'" (Yildiz & Berner, 2021, p. 247).

Since the early 2000s, migration has also become part of the wider debates on diversity and institutional change, which has increasingly established itself as a policy field. The non-representation of society's diversity, not only in theatre plays and museum exhibitions but also within the institutional structures themselves (e.g. as regards the diversity of the staff and those in leadership positions; Liepsch et al., 2018) is subject of numerous debates and programmes: museums and theatres discuss how to diversify staff and audiences; a programme of the German Federal Cultural Foundation (n.d.) gave funding for so-called "Agents for Diversity" in almost 40 major cultural institutions all over the country; and a growing number of institutions, also funded by public money, offer programmes for diversity-oriented organisational development processes. Yet, despite numerous and long-lasting debates about exclusions on the one hand and several grants and model projects on the other, structural change is still a minor phenomenon (Micossé-Aikins & Sengezer, 2021). Paradoxically, this non-change is also reflected in the number and intensity of debates and funding programmes designed to promote diversity in cultural institutions.

The departure point of this chapter is the perceived discrepancy or tension between the profound demographic and cultural transformations of society through migration and the lack of structural institutional responses to this in the cultural sector or, more specifically, in the institutionalised public part of that sector. Surprisingly little attention in public debates as well as in research is given to the issue of why, in general, these processes of change have been or tend to be so slow. In order to analyse change, in our view, it is important to understand why the broadly demanded institutional change does *not* happen.

We argue that important aspects of what we call *institutional inertia* lies (1) in the discursive framing and the narrations of how diversity, migration and culture are understood and produced in these settings and (2) how these narratives are interwoven with institutional structures. Therefore, we turn to continuities of narratives and structures and their relationship to each other. We look at the role of this relationship in reproducing structural non-change in cultural institutions – as well as when institutional change processes, often referred to as "opening up", are being implemented. In what follows, we first explain this approach and then turn to our two very different case studies – two festivals in Sindelfingen and a prominent theatre in Hamburg – to highlight that the discursive framing and narratives used are very similar in these two contexts.

## 5.2 Understanding Institutions and Culture(s): Some Conceptual Notes

Central to our analytical approach is the desire to understand cultural institutions (e.g. museums, theatres, festivals) in their different meanings and functions. They are organisational and administrative entities with personnel, buildings, exhibitions spaces, stages, etc.

At the same time, they can be regarded as institutionalised discourses and narratives that are embedded in broader historical, academic and social contexts. These broader understandings can but do not have to be connected to those entities. See, for example, the idea of *Institution Kunst* (“art as an institution”) which Peter Bürger explains as follows: “The concept ‘art as an institution’ as used here refers to the productive and distributive apparatus and also to the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works” (1984, p. 22). *Institution Kunst* refers not only to art works but also to a system of canonisations, discourses and narratives around them. These narratives are also being reproduced in institutional contexts beyond museums and theatres – in the work of the cultural administration, within the theatre group working with non-professional performers or in the selection process of a stage school.

This broader perspective makes it possible, firstly, to understand, as institutions, not only organisational forms like museums or theatres but also cultural festivals and the cultural work of local administrations and, secondly, to analyse cultural institutions in their broader environment (as in a stage school being part of the institution theatre).

The institutions which we analyse in our two case studies, could not be more different – a large state-funded theatre with permanent staff and budget in a big city seems to have little in common at first sight with two festivals in a much smaller city, one of which is organised mainly by volunteers. Even these two festivals, which we analyse in the first case study, refer to two different traditions: one can be understood as a so-called multicultural festival (Welz, 2007, pp. 224–225), while the other, the Sindelfingen Biennale, refers in its name to the first and still most famous world exhibition of fine arts. However, the case studies show that the discursive foundations of how they perceive migration are similar.

This has historical reasons. Cultural institutions like museums or theatres are closely connected with nation-building processes (Anderson, 2006; Bennett, 2013; Macdonald, 2003, 2013 for museums; Sievers, 2017 for theatre). Moreover, they have a historical tradition of exhibiting and representing *other cultures*. As Tony Bennett states:

Museums invoked and exhibited others – and their art and artefacts – as signs of societies where the “logic of culture”, and the independent, critical and individualising orientation it required, had either failed to operate or had gone into decline. (Bennett, 2017, p. 187)

Gisela Welz points out that multicultural festivals have problematic antecedents in the performances of traveling ensembles or even imported and displaced people



from distant lands at princely courts, world expositions, etc. (Welz, 2007, p. 227). As we show in our example, the rise of multicultural festivals with their representation of *cultures* as distinct national entities is also closely connected to nation-state narratives and political measures. The understanding of *culture* has thus a direct impact on the ways in which cultural institutions act, since they reproduce certain canons, bodies of knowledge and artistic traditions (Ray, 2001, pp. 3–4). In particular, the understanding of culture as a stable entity interwoven with the nation-state still lies in the history and imagination of cultural institutions. The festivals and their structures are very different from a museum or a theatre. Nevertheless, they follow the same logic of culture and represent the same structures and narratives.

### 5.3 Sindelfingen<sup>2</sup>

Sindelfingen is home to around 65,000 inhabitants and belongs to the metropolitan region around Stuttgart in the south of Germany. It is mainly known for hosting the world's largest production plant of the automobile manufacturer Daimler, which opened its first factory (for aircraft engines) in the city in 1915. For this reason, Sindelfingen has a long history of labour migration – in the beginning mainly regional and, from 1955 onwards, international labour migration from, principally, Mediterranean countries. The period between the 1950s and the 1970s was very formative for the development of the city in two regards: Sindelfingen's population not only saw a strong increase due to labour immigration<sup>3</sup> but the high wages earned in the automobile industry also brought a lot of prosperity to the city. Today, the third- and fourth-generation offspring of these labour-migrant families represent an important share of the city's younger generations (Schneider & Pott, 2019, p. 27). The history of labour migration is an important part of the city narrative but not the only story on migration that can be told. In fact, some of them are more visible in the city, others are not even considered or framed as migration – such as the history of the Danube Swabians arriving after the end of World War II or the presence of the US-American army forces. With official statistics describing 50 per cent of Sindelfingen's population as rooted in some form of migration, the city is one of the forerunners of the long-term demographic effects of diverse migration processes today.

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<sup>2</sup>The case studies were conducted independently and thus the respective parts of the chapter were written individually. Joanna Jurkiewicz is the author of the Sindelfingen section while the Hamburg part was written by Jens Schneider.

<sup>3</sup>According to local statistics, the population increased from 15,114 in the year 1954 to almost 55,000 inhabitants in 1980 (Stadt Sindelfingen, 1970, 1975, 1980).

### 5.3.1 *International Street Festival Sindelfingen: Culture of Encounters*

The long history of migration and current figures imply that Sindelfingen can be described as a post-migrant society, although this reality has not found its way into the narratives used to describe the city. Sindelfingen is proud of its “internationality”: the immigrants and their descendants are valued as part of the city but primarily as representatives of *other nations* (i.e. not as Germans). In the welcome speech to a digital presentation of the new integration concept, which was adopted by the Municipal Council in December 2020, the mayor referred to the city’s diversity with the following words: “127 nations live together peacefully here and the flagship of this coexistence is our great Street Festival, which has been here since the seventies” (Stadt Sindelfingen, 2020).<sup>4</sup> Sindelfingen’s immigrants and their descendants are referred to as part of this “internationality” in terms of a “diversity of nations of origin”. In line with this, the city’s website calls the associations founded by migrants in Sindelfingen “international associations” (Stadt Sindelfingen, n.d.); the “International Committee” (originally founded as the “Foreigners Committee”) of the Municipal Council deals with issues that relate to the migrant population; and the above-mentioned International Street Festival (ISF) is considered a representation of the city’s migration-related diversity.

The ISF normally takes place during one weekend in June each year. The festival came into being in 1977 as part of the newly established municipal foreigners’ work. It was organised by the city together with the “Association for International Encounters”, which included different migrant organisations. The first municipal Commissioner for Foreigners (*Ausländerbeauftragter*), Friedrich Fausten, known as “the father of the street festival”, commemorated the establishment of the event on its tenth anniversary with the following words:

One of the aims of the Association for International Encounters was to bring together many people from different nations from the city and the surrounding area; these people were meant to get to know each other better by celebrating together. This was intended to reduce the prejudices that still exist between locals and foreigners. A wide range of food specialties were to make this easier. (Fausten, 1988, p. 65)

Following the idea of a “cultural encounter”, the stage programme of the festival in the first years included German folk songs along with Italian, Greek, Turkish and Yugoslavian folk groups. Over the years, the ISF programme always featured not only folklore performances or food stalls but also numerous other entertainment offers that are typical of a street festival – like a programme for children or a flea market. Nevertheless, the festival came into being as a response to a specific historical constellation: in the 1970s, local political decision-makers understood that the labour migrants, who were meant to stay temporarily, would not return to their

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<sup>4</sup>In addition, the term “international” appears in yet another context of the Sindelfingen administration: partner cities.

countries of origin.<sup>5</sup> Their presence in the city, representing almost one fifth of the population, could no longer be ignored.

Local politics recognised the need to take action. The politicians began to create conditions for the durable “integration of foreign families into the social and societal life of our country and our city”, as stated in the city’s first report on “foreigners”<sup>6</sup> from 1979 (Stadt Sindelfingen, 1979, p. 2). This resulted in the establishment of the “Contact Office for Foreigners’ Issues” in the Bureau for Social Services (Stadt Sindelfingen, 1979, p. 2). The integration measures were primarily directed at “the foreign workers with their family members from the typical recruiting countries, who make up 86% of the foreigners registered in Sindelfingen” (Stadt Sindelfingen, 1979, p. 2). They were the central target group of what the city later called “integration work” – i.e. the municipal structure of integration support measures. These structures also formed the starting point and basis of the local *narrative* on migration and diversity which is characterised above all by identifying migrant groups mainly according to nationalities. The first political representation of migrants living in the city, the “Foreigners’ Committee” (*Ausländerausschuss*), had a quota for different immigrant groups, according to their percentage within the city’s foreign population: “Turks (3 members), Yugoslavs (3), Italians (2), Greeks (2), Spaniards (1), Portuguese (1) and also one representative for the ‘other nations’” (Stadt Sindelfingen, 1985, p. 332).<sup>7</sup> The integration measures included cultural activities and the ISF was originally just one of a series of events that Friedrich Fausten initiated with the objective of using “culture as a means of international understanding” (*Kultur als Mittel der Völkerverständigung*). For more than 10 years, the ISF was organised by the Bureau for Social Services and considered as part of the municipal “integration work”. Thus, in addition to the establishment of a specific migration/integration narrative, cultural activities related to migration were defined as a *social*

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<sup>5</sup> Labour recruitment was halted after the “oil crisis” in 1973 which, however, did not mean that immigration automatically “stopped”: “ironically, the decision by all Western European governments to end recruitment and adopt a restrictive immigration policy during the oil crisis of 1973 had rather adverse effects: most (former) guest workers decided to stay on, because leaving meant that it would become very difficult for them to reenter [...] and were joined by their partners (mostly women) and children.” (Lucassen, 2005, p. 149). In 1977, Germany improved their residence status, granting many of them the unrestricted right to stay under certain circumstances (Alexopoulou, 2019, p. 54).

<sup>6</sup> It is important to emphasise here that the use of the term “foreigners” (*Ausländer*) in the context of immigration in Germany does not solely refer to the formal juridical status that derives from citizenship. Rather, as Maria Alexopoulou worked out, the discourses and practices around the binarity of “*Ausländer*” and “German” reproduce racial knowledge that has been transferred historically: “‘*Ausländer*’ and all of its substitutes are racialized concepts: they construct a distinct group with particular characteristics which are cast as Other to ‘the Germans.’ This process of Othering constitutes the binary and hierarchical relation” (Alexopoulou, 2019, p. 51).

<sup>7</sup> With this model, Sindelfingen was one of the first cities to enable the migrants themselves to participate in the municipal bodies that concern them, in contrast to most of the representative bodies for foreigners at that time in Germany (Alexopoulou, 2019; Hess & Leuhn, 2014). For more details on the history of the “Councils of Foreigners” see Müller (2011).

task under the responsibility of the Commissioner for Foreigners and the Bureau for Social Services within the administration.

In 2023, the festival was organised for the 45th time. However, in 1993 an economic crisis forced the city to externalise the organisation of the event to a non-profit association founded for this purpose. Thus, the festival officially is no longer part of the city's "integration work", although it still receives financial support from the administration. Moreover, the official speeches and words of greeting in the programme still revolve around the two ideas which were determined as the driving forces behind the festival in the 1970s: *promoting integration* and *facilitating the encounter of cultures and nationalities*, as illustrated in the following quote from the 2019 programme booklet's editorial:

Our vision is the peaceful togetherness of all nationalities; the entire ISF-team works for this vision, so that the idea of "experiencing together" can live on. We want to make it easier for new citizens to integrate and to promote and support a mutual cultural exchange. (Internationales Straßenfest Sindelfingen e.V., 2019, p. 6)

The ISF logo is a similarly telling symbol for this understanding of diversity (see Fig. 5.1): a globe – representing the "entire world" meeting during the festival – surrounded by four human figures holding hands. Each figure is presented in a different colour: yellow, black, white and red. This strict colour separation marks the principal difference between them – they are together but, at the same time, fundamentally different. The image not only reproduces the racist idea of the "human races" but also does not allow for any complexity in between the figures. While the imagery and conceptual framing of the festival emphasise the positive impact and value of different cultures and the interaction between them (Hage, 2000, pp. 138–139), they also consolidate these fundamental differences and thereby support "the idea that the world is divided into distinct, relatively autonomous 'cultures'" (Macdonald, 2013, p. 163). This understanding of cultures as ethno-national entities is often also supported by the migrant associations involved in the festival. A representative of an association with a decades-long tradition described the festival as "a flagship for the whole of Germany" in terms of "successful integration", meaning the peaceful coexistence of different immigrant groups in the city. A second interviewee, representative of another migrant association that has existed for more than 25 years and participated in the ISF every year, spoke of the festival as "the opportunity to introduce each other to different languages, cultures and traditions".

**Fig. 5.1** Logo of the International Street Festival Sindelfingen



At the same time, the history of the festival can – and should – be told as an example for the engagement and agency of immigrants and their self-organisations. The ISF's success is based on decades of commitment and their self-chosen form of representation. Performing folk dances has been an important activity for many migrant associations, over and above the 3 days of the festival. It is a means of expressing and celebrating the identification with their members' origins abroad, along with language courses, sports or political work. As early as 1981, the festival's cultural programme mainly consisted of numerous local migrant folklore groups linked to associations partly still active today, such as the Portuguese Parents' Association (*Portugiesischer Elternverein*) or the Greek Congregation (*Griechische Gemeinde*).

Moreover, the festival was never the only expression of the city's cultural diversity nor the only form of migrant self-representation and participation. Another initiative is the remarkable “newspaper for foreigners and Germans”, *Sindelfinger Palette*, which was published in seven languages and distributed free to all households in the city in the 1980s and early 1990s. The newspaper was an organ of ARGE (Working Group for Foreigners' Issues – *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Ausländerfragen*) and evolved, amongst others, from the engagement of immigrants. The ARGE and *Sindelfinger Palette* were actively involved in the trade-unions' fight for the 35-hour week (Riedner, 2022, pp. 203–204). Immigrants have also contributed to telling the history of immigration, as is visible in Sindelfingen through the work and commitment of Bernardino di Croce, who has written and edited several books on migration in the wider region (Di Croce, 2017; Di Croce & Verein Migration & Integration in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland e.V., 2017/18; Di Croce et al., 2009).

However, these initiatives have not entered the official municipal narrations of migration primarily symbolised by the International Street Festival. This creates the story of the migrant as apolitical and whose engagement is reduced to a staged performance of *one true origin and cultural heritage*. However, for many immigrants, political work and participation in the festival went hand in hand.

Furthermore, the city narrative negates the changes that the festival has seen in its decades-long history. To give an example, the “Campinos do Ribatejo”-dance is regularly performed by one of the oldest folklore groups in Sindelfingen, the “Juvenis de Portugal” of the Portuguese Parents' Association. It has its origin in the Ribatejo region of Portugal and came to Sindelfingen in the 1970s with a person from this region. Today, however, there is no longer any connection of the group to this region. The dance now originates in Sindelfingen. It represents the tradition of the association rather than that of the region of origin. According to Stuart Hall, this shows that

there can, therefore, be no simple “return” or “recovery” of the ancestral past which is not re-experienced through the categories of the present: no base for creative enunciation in a simple reproduction of traditional forms which are not transformed by the technologies and the identities of the present. (2021, p. 254)

What motivates most participants from migrant associations and the administration to keep the festival going is that it is considered an achievement of *integration* and a deeply rooted local tradition for almost everyone I spoke to – visitors, participants and people from the administration.

### 5.3.2 *Biennale Sindelfingen: Opening up to “Other Nationalities”*

Unlike the ISF, the Biennale Sindelfingen is a relatively new festival – it first took place in 2015. Moreover, it was not created as part of a social policy aiming to integrate migrants but merely as an arts festival. However, when migration became an issue, it was related to the same discourse of “internationality” used in the ISF context. The Biennale was initiated by the city in the wake of its 750th anniversary celebration in 2013 in order to “perpetuate the identity-forming spirit of [this event] and make it sustainably effective” (Biennale Sindelfingen, n.d.). As an official artistic event, the Biennale is part of Sindelfingen’s *cultural* policy. The programme involves events planned by municipal cultural institutions and independent local culture actors as well as performances by professional artists and presentations of school and kindergarten projects. Spread over the entire city, the festival aims to bundle the city’s cultural scene and create both a platform and additional funding structures for the many independent and voluntary cultural actors. The festival is centrally managed and coordinated by the city administration’s Bureau of Culture. The Biennale is thus inscribed in the city’s official decision-making structures, (in)transparencies, networks and narratives. The programme is not only coordinated by the Cultural Bureau – the office organises a major production for every Biennale and also intervenes in operational businesses.

The central narrative of the Biennale revolves around strengthening the identification of the citizens with the city and promoting the local cultural scene. Voluntary cultural activities are a central feature of the festival<sup>8</sup> – an aspect that the Biennale shares with the ISF. However, the Biennale only came to be linked to migration when the city adopted a new integration concept in 2020. In this context, the Cultural Bureau and the Bureau of Social Services developed ideas for joint projects, amongst others concerning the inclusion of migrant perspectives into the Biennale. When explaining how to put this into practice, our interviewee from the cultural administration used the same international frame for migration that we observed for the ISF:

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<sup>8</sup> “The unmistakable brand essence of the festival, which takes place every 2 years, is to develop individual formats with the predominantly voluntary local and regional cultural scene in interaction with professional forces and not simply to buy in ready-made events.” (Biennale Sindelfingen, n.d.)

We chose the theme “Fairytale Sindelfingen” for next year’s Biennale. That naturally lends itself well to do something on international fairy tales, for example. And I’m also pinning my hopes to some extent on this tent that we’ve been talking about. It’s conceived to be a meeting place. That means that, in my opinion, groups or people can simply book a timeslot and say, “Okay, I’ll do a reading in this tent on Tuesday afternoons at 3.00 p.m. of, I don’t know, Turkish fairy tales”. [...] The topic would actually lend itself to opening up a bit more to other nationalities.

The reflection on the integration concept inspired our interviewee to add “international fairy tales” to the Biennale programme. Again, the term “international” is used to refer to those of the city’s resident population who are of immigrant origin. The spontaneous example of the “Turkish fairy tales” indicates that the predominant imagination of this “international population” are people of Turkish descent who represent one of the most prominent imaginations of *Others* in the German discourse on immigration (Lucassen, 2005; Schneider, 2001, 2002). Also, the “encounter” (between cultures) comes up again in the idea and imagining of the festival tent as a meeting place. Opening up to the diversity of the city is interpreted as taking into account *other nationalities* with their *specific cultures*. Engaging with diversity means including those *others* in the regular programme of the Biennale. Those responsible in the cultural office seem to be widely unaware of the large share of, in particular, young inhabitants born and bred in Sindelfingen with some kind of migrant history in the family. Their realities cannot be described in terms of discrete cultures and nationalities.

The “opening up” of the programme can be understood as a moment of change, since it puts new ideas into the existing programme. At the same time, it represents here a moment of non-change, since the way in which migrant perspectives are included reproduces the essentialising differentiation between nations and cultures and continues to construct the migrant as *Other* to the national *Self*. As Ghassan Hage stated in his research on multiculturalism in Australia, “Diversity simply does not affect the nature of the White ‘we’” (2000, p. 139). Interestingly, the same holds true for the Thalia Theater in Hamburg.

## 5.4 The Thalia Theater

The Thalia Theater is one of two major municipal theatres (*Stadttheater*) in Hamburg, Germany’s second largest city with 1.8 million inhabitants. Although the city’s demography is less pronouncedly shaped by immigration than in Sindelfingen – the official statistical share of persons with a “migration background” is around 35 per cent – the dynamic of demographic change is similar. Moreover, the number “masks” a quite polarised picture of neighbourhoods with a highly diverse population on the one hand and a number of mainly upper-middle-class areas with quite low shares of migrant populations on the other (Körber-Stiftung, 2017, p. 5; Statistisches Amt für Hamburg und Schleswig-Holstein, 2021, p. 14).

The theatre itself is one of the most prestigious theatres in Germany. The total number of staff is almost 400, including a cast of 40 actors; its annual budget is

around 23 million euros, of which roughly 85 per cent are direct public funding (Deutscher Bühnenverein, 2020). Apart from its main building in the city centre, the Thalia Theater has a second venue in a former factory building. This venue offers several smaller stages (including a former truck garage) for more intimate and experimental productions and is also used for theatre workshops – particularly for young people and disabled persons as part of the pedagogical and outreach activities of the theatre. One of these activities is the “Embassy of Hope/Café International” that was started in 2015 to support refugees with language courses and legal advice and also to invite them to participate in artistic productions – such as, for example, the performance series “Voices from Exile” (Thalia Theater, n.d.).

The debate about how the Thalia Theater could and should respond to the changing demography in society and incorporate “more diversity” into its programme and personnel is not new. Over the past decade, the theatre has made various efforts to attract other than their usually predominantly white and middle-class audiences in the city population. This partly targeted the population of Turkish origin – imagined as the ultimate others in Germany, as explained above – by offering Turkish subtitles to plays – such as *Mutter Courage* by Berthold Brecht – and promoting it via Turkish community organisations. Another project, for several years, invited young people of migrant family background to become “Thalia Scouts”, i.e. to learn more about the performances and how they are produced during the “Lessing Days”, an annual international festival at the theatre. The “Thalia Scouts” were asked to write blogs about the plays and their experiences “from the perspective of their cultural roots” (Thalia Theater Blog, 2017) – a problematic term if we consider that most of them were born or at least grew up in Hamburg. Since 2018, the Thalia Theater has also participated in the “360°-programme” of the Federal Foundation for Culture (*Bundeskulturstiftung*) and has hosted so-called “Agents for Diversity” with the explicit aim of also giving impulses for more diversity within the institution itself (German Federal Cultural Foundation, n.d.). Finally, the theatre has a well-established educational department that, especially in their work with schools, deals with the high levels of diversity that characterise the city’s youth population. Their educational work aims to contribute to the cultural education of children and youth regardless of their social and/or “ethnic”/migrant background and to raise their interest in the performing arts.

Despite increasing debates about the “democratisation” of established cultural institutions that go back to the late 1970s (Hoffmann, 1979), it was only in the early 2000s that projects which also reach out to audiences from the lower social classes and immigrant neighbourhoods were gaining momentum (Dogramaci, 2018). In 2012, the “4<sup>th</sup> Federal Congress for Professionals in Interculture” (Kulturbehörde der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg, 2014)<sup>9</sup> that took place in Hamburg featured a conversation between the Thalia Theater’s general director, Joachim Lux, its leading dramaturg, Carl Hegemann and the German writer of Iranian background, Navid

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<sup>9</sup>The congress is organised approximately every 2 years in another city and brings together social institutions, diverse kinds of NGOs and migrant organisations, cultural administrations and researchers.



Kermani. In the documentation of the congress, Hegemann wrote a programmatic statement with the title “The internationalisation of the Thalia Theater” from which the following quote is taken:

We explicitly try to win an intercultural and internationally interested audience and inspire cosmopolitan exchange. [...]. However, more could be done: if more members of the ensemble have a migration background and theatre makers e.g. from Africa, America and the Middle and Far East are involved in international co-productions, our own productions will bring the multilingualism and interculturality of the society directly on stage. (Kulturbehörde der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg, 2014, p. 13)

Similar to what we saw in the discursive representations of migration-induced diversity around the two festivals in Sindelfingen, the statement continuously equates “intercultural” with “international”. Bringing the diversity of *the city* on stage is exemplified by “more actors with a migration background”, and with “theatre makers from Africa” and other continents. Native German cultural producers with a migrant family background – as perfectly represented by Navid Kermani, Hegemann’s interlocutor at the congress – thus appear as “foreign” and “non-German”, just like the invited international artists at the “Lessing Days”. The discursive element thus represents local and “native-born” diversity as “Other” to the theatre’s imagined mainstream “German Self”.

Nine years later, when I asked another member of Thalia’s artistic direction why there were almost no persons of colour or with a migrant background among their artistic staff, I received the following answer:

A lot has certainly happened in the last few years. For the past two years, we have also consciously had an authority, officers for diversity, who focus on three aspects in their work: a different orientation in programme planning, a different orientation towards the audience – audience work – and a different orientation towards staff. This is reflected indirectly, I would say – *very* indirectly in the staff (laughs), a bit self-critically seen – that is, at least in the artistic staff, I mean the actors and actresses. The directorial teams are of course much more international. Mrs [Ewelina] Marciniak works here regularly with her team, a Polish theatre-maker. There are also co-operations with artistic institutions or individual artists [...] where, in addition to our actors and actresses, there are also music and text performers (from other countries) on stage, so it is a mixed ensemble.

As in the previous quote, we find the same “discursive lapsus” of directly connecting again the “diverse” and the “international”, although in a more defensive way. While, indeed, international co-operations introduce a variety of perspectives and artistic languages to the stage – this is the purpose of the festival and, actually, the foreign-language productions also bring a more diverse audience into the theatre<sup>10</sup> – the interviewee has to admit that the permanent staff of the theatre are still quite homogeneously “white and German”.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup>As could be observed during the “Lessing Days”-festival in 2019, the performance of a Russian theatre group brought quite a number of Russian native-speakers into the theatre and a similar effect was seen in a French-Vietnamese production with first- and second-generation Vietnamese in the audience.

<sup>11</sup>This is a very common formulation in public and social discourse which – although rarely admittedly – uses “German” as an ethnic categorisation.

Regarding migration-related diversity, there is in particular – as in the case of Sindelfingen – the “generational sedimentation” of immigration in the form of the native-born second- and third-generation offspring from immigrant families who are not adequately addressed via their “ethnic” background (Schneider et al., 2015). In most of the bigger cities in Germany, these native-born generations, with some family background rooted in immigration, today represent more than 50 per cent of the younger age cohorts in the population (Schneider, 2018). The discursive equation of “diversity” or “interculturality” with “international” and “migration” effectively makes this profound change in the urban demography almost *invisible*. This is also the case in the following quote from another member of the artistic management at the Thalia Theater:

Interviewer: What is the share of staff members at Thalia with a migration background?  
Is that known?

Answer: No idea, to be honest. But I would say that we have more than 20 different languages/nationalities. (...) A lot of Serbian, Croatian, Greek... quite a motley crew. We even have one Ethiopian in the house. So, that's a good mix. And in the ensemble we have a Polish background, a Croatian-Serbian background, a Belgian background. (...) I have just appointed an assistant director of Turkish background and she is fluent in Arabic. I am really excited. (...) One Algerian actor we have: [actor's name].

Interviewer: Albanian, I think...

Answer: Oh, right, exactly, Albanian!

The actor mentioned is a native-born German and, as he assured me in an interview, would not consider himself even a native speaker of the Albanian language. The quote completely omits the German birth and identity of this actor behind the enumeration of *foreign languages and nationalities* which, moreover, mostly refers to the *technical* and not the artistic staff. What is more, the one person of migrant background recently recruited for the artistic direction is especially applauded for her ability to speak Arabic. The discursive framing in this quote goes barely beyond the 1970s' “integration discourse”, as described above for the case of Sindelfingen. In the case of the Thalia Theater, the element of “inertia” not only refers to the fact that the institution has not found ways and measures to achieve more diversity in its artistic staff but also to the lack of self-reflexivity of its institutional mechanisms (e.g. the recruitment strategies for new actors) and the wording or narratives used in addressing “diversity”. The Thalia Theater, in our view, is a good demonstration of how the momentum of “inertia” is strengthened when there is little determination to actively pursue change and there are hardly any connections to networks that could facilitate access in both directions. In this regard, the Thalia Theater is, rather, following the rule than the exception in the German *Stadttheater* system: the observation of little diversity in most artistic directions and the acting ensembles is almost a common-place in the public debate and still applies to the large majority of public theatres.

Public theatre directors and actors have to go through a specific education and training in public theatre academies whose admission procedures are extremely competitive. Being accepted there as a young actor or future director and dramaturg

is almost a guarantee of landing a job in a public theatre. Several of our interlocutors at theatres blamed the lack of diversity in the student body of these academies as part of the problem when attempting to diversify their staff (Sharifi & Micossé-Aikins, 2019). When I asked a leading staff member at the theatre academy in Hamburg whether this lack of people of colour and with a migration background in their student body has to do with the established selection criteria, she responded:

My problem is the access. On the one hand, this has to do with the fact that children and grandchildren [from immigrant families] [...] try to get into a respected profession and not a profession that is per se more prone to a precarious life situation. (...) So, there are not many who decide for acting or directing but there are always some who do. What I don't quite understand: there are so many of them in the private stage-schools! And that is strange, because they have to pay heaps of money for an education of inferior quality. So, I wonder: are there hurdles, is there some fear of entering? (...) That is a question of selection criteria: If a guy speaks German at B2 level and has an extremely heavy accent but has many other talents – charisma, movability, voice volume, scenic fantasy, a sense for space – in other words, he fulfills all the criteria. Do I have the courage to say, “Okay, let's try to work away this accent, what he is doing on stage is simply great!”? In that respect, we have to revise our selection criteria.

The interviewee rightly identifies the second and third generation as an important, yet largely overlooked target group for the acting profession but shifts at least part of the reasoning on to their being *children of immigrants*: most would prefer more respected professions to honour their parents' expectations. This interpretation is not wrong, sociologically speaking, although it is also, at least partly, contradicted by her own observation that, in private stage-schools, there are a lot of students from different backgrounds. This leads the interviewee to ask about the selection criteria of the public academies. However, instead of reflecting about (upper-)middle-class attitudes and habitus reproduction, the focus shifts without further ado to *foreign-born non-German native-speakers* among the applicants. In our interpretation this is, at least partly, connected to the new experience of the many cultural institutions which, in the context of the so-called “welcome culture” towards refugees from Syria in the summer 2015 (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018) made attempts to open their doors to artists, actors and theatre-makers among the refugees. In this context, stage-schools experimented with accepting students who obviously did not have a perfect and “accent-free” knowledge of German and this is mixed up in the quote above. Of course, native-born children and grandchildren from immigrant families do not speak German at B2 level (i.e. advanced beginners of German as a second language) and they also do not generally have “extremely heavy accents”. However, discussing the acceptance of an accent or not is, of course, a much easier task than tackling stereotypical and prejudiced perceptions of German students from immigrant backgrounds as part of the “bourgeois habitus” that is still widespread in selection committees (Sievers, 2017). So, like the references to “nationality”, another important element in the discursive construction of “diversity = foreignness” can be language.

The field of public theatres in Germany is particularly interesting for the study of “institutional inertia”, because it is probably the field within the established cultural institutions that claims the most to value open-mindedness and high sensitivity for

social processes and transformations. The system as such even involves a specific type of “intentional critical juncture” through the regular change of the directorate every 5–10 years – generally including the entire artistic direction and a large part of the ensemble. Potential successors are expected to present a concept that substantially differs from the previous period and, ideally, also reflects relevant societal and/or artistic transformations. However, this form of institutionalised change may be part of the problem, as the system may tend to be even more “self-centred” and resilient to influences from the outside (Boenisch, 2014). The case of the Thalia Theater shows that, within this discursive and political context, the different understandings of “culture” and “cultures” flow into each other and can be strategically applied to promote or avoid processes of change.

## 5.5 Conclusions

The starting point of this chapter is the discrepancy between demographic and cultural change in society on the one hand and the structural “armature” (Levitt, 2015) of cultural institutions on the other. As we discussed in the introduction, there is a broad reflection on societal change through migration. Recent debates and related funding programmes focus on *how* to change cultural institutions “towards” greater diversity, especially in the organisational structure. We argue that narratives and discourses also represent an important part of institutionalisation and through this, play a major role in understanding why the analysed institutional change through migration seems to be so difficult.

On the basis of our findings, we want to highlight two aspects which, in our view, can help to understand *non-change*:

*The afterlife of narratives: On encounters, nationalities, diversity and the “migrant Other”*

The constant confusion between “intercultural” and “international” in the theatre context, the invitation of the “other nations” to participate in the Biennale and the “internationality” of Sindelfingen, with its “plurality of nations of origin” – shows that the idea of migration being something external to German society continues to serve as an imagination of the diversity of an immigration society.

In Sindelfingen, the institutionalised *culture of encounter* became not only the dominant way of culturally representing migration; until today, it has also constituted the basis of the understanding of the cultural representation of immigrants and it is being “implemented”, when *cultural institutions* or representatives of the city’s *cultural administration* plan to either include migrant perspectives or/and target immigrant population. The case of Sindelfingen shows how closely today’s migration or opening narratives are linked to the discourses of early work with foreigners and thus institutionalised.

What both case studies have shown us is that, even while engaging with migration, the measures can also reinforce problematic identities and labels on the migrant actors and – while actually “opening up” – reproduce the existing structures and

established problematic discourses on migration. The opening thus means “including others”: languages, cultures, nationalities. This diversity, as Ghassan Hage analysed it for the multicultural discourse, is an add-on and not part of the “we” (Hage, 2000, p. 139).

*On narratives, structures and non-change*

Furthermore, this understanding of migration-related diversity is rooted in institutional structures which emerged in specific historical contexts. Both – narratives and structures – are connected and interwoven in such a way that they stabilise each other. Understanding this relationship also helps, in our view, to understand why – despite the many funding programmes and discussions – a more profound structural change is still the exception in cultural institutions.

This is particularly visible in the case of Sindelfingen – migration and diversity have already been consolidated within the framework of *integration work* and the “roles” and structures have been defined. These structures emerged from a specific historical constellation. The International Street Festival came into being in a power relationship that defined immigrants as those *in need of integration*. Today’s narrative on migration in the context of *cultural institutions* has roots in these structures.

In our view, implementing longer-term structural change in cultural institutions is difficult for many reasons, some of which are related to organisational aspects – the institutions often explain their difficulties in implementing these corresponding measures by the lack of staff or funding (since diversity measures are perceived as an additional task). However, this is also a question of establishing a new discursive framework that uses less static and more situationally contextualised notions of socially relevant lines of differentiation – especially reflecting upon the demographic importance yet, at the same time, the “invisibility” of the younger generations in all their diversity and hybridity of backgrounds and cultural preferences.

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**Part II**  
**Cultural Encounters: Locations of Change**  
**and Their Impact Beyond the Local**

# Chapter 6

## Transforming Italy Through Literature and Cinema? Voices and Gazes of Racialised Artists



Annalisa Frisina and Sandra Agyei Kyeremeh

### 6.1 Facing White Innocence to Transform Italy Through the Arts<sup>1</sup>

As Sievers and Vlasta (2018) showed, immigrant and ethnic-minority writers have fought for recognition in Europe (and beyond), have challenged the understanding of national literatures and have markedly changed these since 1945. Concerning Italy, the Italian literary canon has traditionally excluded authors “who did not conform to the ideal of Italian national identity”, however, more recently, migrant writers and their descendants have struggled to “inscribe themselves into the Italian cultural identity” (Orton, 2018, p. 289; p. 313). Following Sievers on post-migrant society (see Chap. 2 in this volume), we are interested not only in changes in the literary field but also in how racialised artists can struggle through the arts for social justice and against racism in Italian society.

The migratory phenomenon that took place in Italy around the 1980s and 1990s laid the foundations for the development of so-called “migrant writing” or “Italian literature of migration”. From the very beginning, the intention of writers of foreign origin to inhabit the Italian language in order to recount their daily life experiences was evident, even though this language often did not represent their mother tongue.

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<sup>1</sup>Annalisa Frisina wrote Sects. 6.1 and 6.2; Sandra Agyei Kyeremeh, Sect. 6.3; the conclusions were written by both authors.

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The generation of writers whom we included in our study, unlike their predecessors, were born and/or grew up in Italy and are therefore native speakers. What is at stake for the artists in our research is not only being recognised as “legitimate Italians” (Frisina & Kyeremeh, 2021) in their artistic field but also taking an active part in a process of a socio-cultural change in Italy.

Our research showed a deep desire to cope with a “dystopian present” – to use the expression of the writer Igiaba Scego – and a collective aspiration to transform Italy. It is collective because it includes not only the racialised artists mentioned in this study but also independent publishers and film producers, some literary and film critics, members of juries of prizes and festivals as well as members of the public who are searching for new narratives on Italian (and European) society.

Moreover, the artists included in our study can benefit from a new wave of anti-racist activism in Europe (Adam, 2020), which has an explicit focus on structural racism, the link with colonialism and the racialised minorities as leaders.

The cultural production of racialised artists has exposed the colonial archive and revealed the racialisation underlying Italy’s national identity. Thanks to postcolonial studies, we see colonialism “no longer as a historical event” but as “a phenomenon (economic, political and cultural) constitutive of our global present” (Mellino, 2021, p. 19). The material violence in and exploitation of the Global South would not have (been) possible without the racial ideology that makes them justifiable by representing the “others” as “inferior-uncivilised”. As decolonial scholars (such as Quijano, Mignolo and Grosfoguel) point out,

It is not simply a matter of acknowledging the horror of capitalism, racial-colonial rule, slavery and imperialism, but rather the way in which these governing devices have shaped modern global history and continue to manifest themselves in the present (Mellino, 2021, p. 21).<sup>2</sup>

Scholars such as Gaia Giuliani, Cristina Lombardi Diop, Caterina Romeo and Silvana Patriarca have approached Italian national history and the legitimacy of its dominant, white-centred auto-narratives from a critical perspective, to bring out the relevance of colonialism and racism in the genesis of Italy as a modern nation.

A central element in the construction of modern national identity is the representation of Italians as good people (Del Boca, 2005), a local version of white innocence (Wekker, 2016) which emerged during colonialism with the aim of concealing racist/sexist violence. Today, this representation is mobilised to invisibilise the racism/sexism of Italian society. This innocent idea of Italianness has been contested by the so-called second generations of migrants, who we prefer to call the “illegitimate children of Italy” (Frisina & Kyeremeh, 2021) to make explicit the underground relations between race and nationality/citizenship in Italy. The refusal to recognise the right of citizenship to more than one million people born or raised in Italy since childhood (because of “their blood”, see the relevance of “*ius sanguinis*” in the restrictive nationality law n. 91/1992) is connected to another historical,

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<sup>2</sup>All translations from Italian are ours unless otherwise indicated.

institutional misrecognition of citizenship concerning “*meticci*” (half-breeds), born from a “white-race” parent and a colonised one.<sup>3</sup>

Drawing on Critical Race Theory (CRT) to focus on the “role of voice” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) we recognise the importance of giving oppressed groups the opportunity to voice their everyday experiences of exclusion and marginalisation and of facilitating the creation of spaces in which they can be heard. Our broader research goal was to listen to the voices of those illegitimate Italians who experience racism in their everyday lives and use their art as a tool to affirm their political subjectivity, to contest the place assigned to children of immigrants in Italian society and to challenge the historical reproduction of racial hierarchies in Europe. Unfortunately, the length of the article is too limited to offer an exhaustive account of our research. We present the qualitative part that focuses on literary and film production.<sup>4</sup> Our sample was composed of 30 artists born or raised in Italy since childhood and racialised because of their appearance and/or origins. We were interested in those artists who consider racism (also) as an Italian issue and challenge the representation of Italians as good people, both through their artistic production and through their public statements. We started our research by exploring how online and off-line are interwoven into everyday experience, in line with Hine (2005), who suggests a “connective ethnography” to study contemporary connected lives. Following the artists’ activities through their Facebook and Instagram profiles was useful during the phase of selection of participants because we familiarised ourselves with their views and experiences in order to involve those who were interested in reflecting on racism in Italy in our research. Moreover, as Lisa Nakamura clearly stated about social media (2007), through visual practices, racialised people articulate their virtual communities and challenge hegemonic media representations. Therefore, we introduced into our interview guide some images, videos and texts posted by artists on their social media accounts in order to use multimodal elicitation. Between January 2019 and January 2020, we conducted 30 discursive interviews, opting for low directivity, asking questions mainly based on what they posted on their social media about their artistic productions and about racialisation as experienced by them, to understand and discuss their artistic experience and (anti)racism in their own terms. In order to reflect on the audiencing of their artistic work, we carried out observant participation at various cultural events, such as book presentations or debates in which the artists selected for the research were protagonists.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>In the words of Vittorio Longhi (2021), an Italian-Eritrean, half-breeds/“*meticci*” were considered “side effects of colonialism” and were trapped in a condition of “eternal inferiority” compared to Italians. Their mothers, considered to be “prostitutes or madams”, were sold “like spices, horses and guns” (Longhi, 2021, p. 69). His novel ends with a dedication to the love of these long-forgotten mothers.

<sup>4</sup>Regarding the musical production of young people born or raised in Italy by immigrant parents and their anti-racist practices, see Frisina and Kyeremeh (2022).

<sup>5</sup>From January 2019 to January 2020 we made on- and off-line ethnography while, from February 2020 until the end of the year, we went completely online due to Covid-19 health restrictions and followed artists in webinars and other online events.

In the following paragraphs, we reflect on how Black and Muslim women writers have committed themselves to naming the long-standing racism/sexism of Italian society through literature. Moreover, we show that, according to the racialised artists of our research, the time has come to “change the narrative” in Italian audio-visual productions. Finally, we offer some concluding remarks on how the struggle of racialised artists is hampered by structural conditions and what collective strategies they use to cope with these material difficulties.

## 6.2 Confronting Racism/Sexism Through Literature: Black and Muslim Italian Writers’ Voices

Drawing on Bourdieu’s literary field theory, Sievers (Chap. 2 in this volume) has shown how writers are part of a societal process of change, by questioning the national boundaries in the literary field. One of our interviewees, Igiaba Scego, was very clear on this point: for many years she has strived to be recognised as an Italian writer.

Italianistics is very conservative [...], that’s why when they interview me, I insist on saying that I am an Italian writer, not because I want to erase Somalia, no! I’m Somali, I’m Italian it’s the same, but I’m an Italian writer, because I write in Italian.

Finally, in 2021, the literary work of Igiaba Scego was included in *Le vie dorate* (The golden routes), an anthology of Italian literature published by Loescher, a very well-known publisher in the field of education. In the introduction, the editor, Johnny Bertolio (2021), writes that his goal is to tell “another Italian literature” and to make “the image of contemporary Italy” emerge. The last “golden route” of the book (n. 45, pp. 237–241) is dedicated to Igiaba Scego and particularly to her book *La linea del colore* (The colour line, 2020) by Bompiani, a major publisher for Italian literature.

As the writer herself has argued, this book concludes “a trilogy of colonial and patriarchal violence”, a journey that began with the novel *Oltre babilonia* (2008) and continued with *Adua* (2016). Her basic questions were: What happens to black women when violence is not only sexual but also systemic and goes through their bodies? How do they find escape routes?

The title of the book is a tribute to W.E.B. Du Bois, a pioneer in the sociology of racism (Frisina, 2020), who analysed in depth the system of racist domination in the USA and not only highlighted the struggles of African Americans but also helped to relaunch them through his cultural and political work, both inside and outside the university setting. Igiaba Scego reinvigorates aspirations for racial justice with Italy’s Afro-descendants in mind. At the centre of her novel *La linea del colore* is Lafanu Brown, a native and Afro-American woman, traveller and artist, who erodes borders and prejudices; someone who by her very existence advances the struggle

of her people. The colour line is the one that divides humanity but, for Lafanu, it also takes on another meaning – colour is her art, the painting through which she seeks emancipation. The character of Lafanu Brown is inspired by two black women, Edmonia Lewis and Sarah Parker Remond who, in the nineteenth century, chose Italy as the place of their liberation. Reinterpreting the “grand tour” in an original way, Igiaba Scego wondered how the subaltern could travel, not just whether she could talk. The novel’s second protagonist is Leila, born in Rome to Somali parents, who organises an exhibition at the Venice Biennale in homage to Lafanu Brown. In addition, Leila has two cousins: Binti – who flees Somalia to reach Europe but who, after multiple episodes of violence, is sent back to Somalia – and Shukri, who offers psychological support to illegalised travellers and, through forms of art therapy, allows Binti to process the heavy traumas she has suffered. This is a plural female novel, with Afro-descendants reconnecting seemingly distant places and histories and reactivating resistant memories. The writer digs into the past to offer the utopia of another possible Italy, where people can make a living from their art and become emancipated and where it is also possible for “non-whites” to travel freely.

In the numerous presentations of the book given online due to the pandemic, the writer discursively constructed “we Black Italians”, “we Afro-descendants”, “we descendants of the suffering of slaves”, “we children of colonialism” before “we children of migration”. On many occasions, Igiaba Scego strongly criticised the way in which Italian history is taught in Italian schools and she stated that Italy cannot be considered a country isolated from the world, because it is at the centre of the Mediterranean and its complexity.

In an online dialogue at Book City Milano,<sup>6</sup> Igiaba Scego said she wanted to reconnect the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, the slave trade and today’s Mediterranean migrations. She gave the example of a woman who, at that very time, had lost her child in the crossing, stressing that the country of origin, Guinea, was not accidental and that the instigator of that death and suffering was still the same: Europe. Scego added that, as the daughter of Somalis, she knows what it means for Africans to be deprived of their freedom and to see their country impoverished by colonialism and neo-colonialism, which has made Somalia a “dustbin” and a “land to be grabbed”.

In *La linea del colore*, she decried the white privilege of those with strong passports, talking about travel apartheid (Scego, 2020). She also clearly distinguished between real and fake allies in anti-racist struggles. The character who embodies the good ally is Ulisse Barbieri, whose name is taken from a real-life Italian anarchist, anti-colonialist, poet and playwright. Ulisse Barbieri recognises in the “Abyssinians, the true patriots” (Scego, 2020, Chap. 1) and, thanks to him, Lafanu learns about internal colonialism and the southern question. The fake allies are white women, wealthy ladies who want to be “protectors”, treating the black women/Lafanu like

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<sup>6</sup>The event was organised online on 14 November 2020 by Monica Massari. Annalisa Frisina took part in the dialogue with the writer.

“a puppet” (Scego, 2020, Chap. 7) or “a monkey” and speaking for them (Scego, 2020, Chap. 3). They are fake allies, because they racialise (i.e. dehumanise) those whom they claim to help. Again, the criticism is oblique – it is directed at white feminism that wants to save “the others”, even today.

For Igiaba Scego, art – in her case, literature – is in fact a part of a long-standing anti-racist struggle in which the critical re-reading of Italian and European history plays a key role.

Literature is a conversation, it allows me to scratch colonial denial, the denial of racism... Literature is the desire to build another type of society by digging [...]. For me it was essential to write about colonialism, I think as for all those who make art and come from the Horn of Africa [...]. I wrote a children’s book, *Clara la rinoceronte*, to explain racism and slavery [...]. We have schools that still have very white curricula and, in a multicultural society, it is absurd.

Her last book, *Figli dello stesso cielo. Razzismo e colonialismo raccontati ai ragazzi* (*Children of the same sky. Racism and colonialism told to teens*, 2021, Piemme) was born from her desire to “fill a gap in school textbooks”. It is dedicated to her father and to the historian Angelo Del Boca, the pioneer of the critical study of Italian colonialism. The latter’s work has tried to unpack the myth of Italians as good/innocent people, documenting the colonial crimes of Italy. In her book, Igiaba Scego imagines the meeting with her grandfather, Omar, who introduces her to everyday life in Somalia under Italian colonialism, making her reflect on the legacy of colonial racism in Italian culture and society. For instance, Omar describes the “human zoos” during the liberal period through the experience of a group of “*Assabesi*”, who were “exposed” in Turin at the end of the nineteenth century (mentioning the racist/sexist violence on the body of a woman called Khadija). Thanks to her grandfather’s words, she understands the colonial logic of the white gaze of Europeans, who felt superior when looking at racialised people in cages. According to Scego, the “toxic imagination” of colonialism is still alive (e.g. even today, “*Assabesi*” are chocolate biscuits in Italy) and she states, in the final pages of her book, that only the critical knowledge of the past can make us free from violence and social injustice at a global level.

That is why it is important to know the history of colonialism. Because it is not anchored in the past but has consequences in the present. Today’s migrations follow the colonial lines of the past. We (in the sense of migrants and children of migrants) are here because you (meaning not you, you, but Europe, the West) have been there, in Africa, sharing it out. And Europe’s being there has meant that many lands have been condemned to perennial poverty, caused by yesterday’s colonialism that plundered resources (and enslaved peoples) and by neo-colonialism that plunders resources in different ways today. The history of colonialism and the history of our contemporary world are intimately linked (Scego, 2021, pp. 188–189).

Another Somali-Italian writer engaged in telling hidden and complex stories of Italian colonialism is Ubah Cristina Ali Farah. Her last book, *Le stazioni della luna* (*The stations of the moon*, 2021) is set in Somalia under the UN Trusteeship (1950–1960), when the United Nations entrusted Italy (the ex-coloniser) with the (paradoxical) task of “accompanying” Somalia to independence. As emerges in several passages of the book, in reality, “the Italians are nothing more than the old

colonialists returning” who exploit Somali domestic workers (“boy and boyesse”), legitimizing themselves through civilising rhetoric (Scego, 2021, pp. 82–83), who use clans “to distribute privileges and punish opponents” (p. 123) and who “were fascists and remain fascists”, expropriating land and houses by force (p. 168). The protagonist is Ebla, a female pastoralist who runs away to Mogadishu in order to emancipate herself, taking with her the traditional knowledge of astronomy and divination. Through Ebla, her son and her daughter, the struggle of the Somali people for their freedom emerges, as does the choice of Clara who, born privileged as a white Italian but a “daughter of milk” of Ebla, decides to stand by the Somalis and fight with them.

The cultural production of these post-colonial writers (Romeo, 2018) has finally brought to light the colonial archive and come up with a strong critique of colonial relations of domination, opening up room for rethinking power relations between white women and racialised women and for building new intersectional alliances.

In the voices of these writers, the strength of what the scholar Françoise Vergès has called “decolonial feminism” (2020) resonates, a feminism of the women of the Global South that asks white women to question their historical privileges and join the anti-racist struggle, leaving behind white saviourism – that is, the presumption of wanting to save “the others”, without acknowledging their own complicity in the system of domination that oppresses them.

This is all the more relevant with the rise of “femo-nationalism” (Farris, 2019), i.e. the instrumentalisation of feminist issues by nationalists and neo-liberals in racist campaigns against Muslims and migrants. This goes hand in hand with the complicity of a large part of white feminism, which has contributed to the representation of Islam as an intrinsically misogynist religion/culture and Muslim women (migrants/refugees) as the victims *par excellence* to be saved. Clearly these representations have drawn on a racist and sexist imaginary of the colonial matrix.

In her last book *Quello che abbiamo in testa* (What we have in/on our heads, Abdel Qader, 2019), the Palestinian-Jordanian-Italian writer Sumaya Abdel Qader deeply questioned this political imaginary. She told us that her novel represents a plurality of voices of Muslim and non-Muslim women who, in today’s Milan, face each other vividly and know how to become good allies, starting from very different personal experiences and stories of activism. The main protagonist is Hourra (which means “free” in Arabic), a law graduate and mother of two daughters, who experiences various forms of discrimination on a daily basis at school, at home and at work. Together with her friends, she confronts the sexism and Islamophobia of Italian society, both inside and outside Islamic communities. It is a choral story that effectively challenges Islamophobia (Law et al., 2019) and nurtures a political imagination capable of holding those above and below the “line of the human” (Grosfoguel, 2017)<sup>7</sup> together and in solidarity.

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<sup>7</sup>Inspired by Frantz Fanon, Grosfoguel considers racism as a global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority along the line of the human. The people classified above the line of the human are recognised socially in their humanity and, thus, enjoy access to rights, material resources and social



Takoua Ben Mohamed, a Tunisian-Italian cartoonist and graphic journalist, has also found her own way to counter Islamophobia. Talking with her, it is clear that she has as primary goals to communicate with wider and more diverse audiences and to address the “white fragility” (DiAngelo, 2020)<sup>8</sup> of Italians.

I realized that recounting racism [...] in a dramatic way leads to absolutely nothing, because the way of thinking of the average Italian, or the average Western European, is: “These are the victims” [...]. I started telling these ironic stories precisely to change this way of thinking of the reader and it has changed! Because with [the comic strip] *Bomba al cioccolato*, for example, a veiled girl enters a bar and they tell her: “Terrorist” and she says: “I want a bomb!”, joking... she managed to turn the situation around. So slowly I started [...] to focus on the everyday, because I wanted to take the reader to another level of identification, that is [...] so that he would automatically think, without even doing it on purpose, “That thing happens to me too”.

Drawing on Philomena Essed’s (2020) essay on the processes of de-humanisation, humiliation and the search for dignity,<sup>9</sup> we argue that those processes of identification mentioned by Takoua Ben Mohamed become possible bridges across which to weave intersectional alliances, facilitating mutual recognition. Those who have experienced what Essed calls a *dignity quest* in response to systemic humiliation more easily feel solidarity with people who experience similar things within other systems of domination. Nevertheless, Essed tells us to take into account the emotions of those who belong to a dominant group – i.e. in the case of racism of those who are part of the white norm – because they will be defensive, they will struggle to come out of their blindness to colour/race (and to social hierarchies); when faced with collective responsibilities they will feel, for example, shame, impotence, resentment and expressions of a “white fragility”, the result of a long process of socialisation.

Having followed many of Takoua Ben Mohamed’s public presentations in recent years (including several meetings with young people from secondary schools), we have indeed been able to observe how her cultural work contributed to interrupting the racist automatisms of everyday life by making them visible.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, her comics encourage white audiences to change perspectives by adopting a “humorous methodology”, as Marianella Sclavi would say (2003).

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recognition. The people below the line of the human are considered sub- or non-human and the extension of rights, material resources and social recognition is denied to them.

<sup>8</sup>White fragility is a common defensive reaction which prevents the privileged from recognising and challenging racial inequalities.

<sup>9</sup>While de-humanisation is inextricably linked to racism, humiliation includes different systems of domination and aims at discouraging possible protests and sanctioning acts of rebellion.

<sup>10</sup>For example, in a high school in Padua, two (non-Muslims) girls, after reading Takoua, acknowledged that, until then, they had taken it for granted that Muslims were all “wretched”, without agency. Listening to her, however, they recognised themselves in her daily struggles and in her desire to choose who to be, without being conditioned by the expectations of others, especially of men.

The claims of human dignity (Essed, 2020) are therefore also advancing thanks to the comic which, as Takoua Ben Mohamed told us, “is a very powerful means of communication, but it is underestimated, it is not considered literature”.

These voices of racialised women writers have highlighted “ignored or alternative realities, allowing members of the dominant group to listen to counter-stories” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 8). Drawing on Critical Race Theory, we argue that the production of counter-narratives is a useful tool for deconstructing the hegemonic collective imaginary that the members of the dominant group use to narrate reality and relate to inferiorised subjects. The use of counter-narratives can trigger social and political practices through which power is reallocated (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 43).

Moreover, if we consider colonialism to be a “great wound still open in world history”, as Igiaba Scego has suggested on many occasions, the artists we met in our research are trying to create cultural spaces for healing and for dialogues. Some of them are making space for other (younger) racialised artists who become able to heal the sufferings of racism/sexism through arts (Kilomba, 2021). As Marie Moïse, descended from a Haitian family and one of the writers in the *Future* anthology (Scego, 2019) – a collection of stories of Italian women of African descent – told us:

The project of the book is what I really feel, a true political gesture of solidarity by Igiaba in taking a space that she occupies and making it available to a series of relationships that she had cultivated over time with women writers.

This anthology includes women writers such as Espérance Hakuzwimana Ripanti and Djarah Kan who, subsequently, published books in which their condition as black Italian women is at the centre of the story and the importance of freeing themselves from the white gaze that humiliates them on a daily basis is clearly affirmed. In her book *E ora basta. Manifesto di una donna nera italiana* (Enough, already! Manifesto of a Black Italian woman, 2019, pp. 95–96), Ripanti explains how it was only after meeting Afro-descendant writers that she came to realise the possibility for racialised subjects to speak for themselves in certain places without being seen and constructed as aliens (Puwar, 2004). Djarah Kan, author of *Ladri di denti* (Teeth thieves, 2020) in which she tells some of her life experiences as a Black working-class woman living in the south of Italy, challenges institutional racism and the ideology of “colour blindness”. The recent publication of a growing number of women writers – thanks to publishers such as People pub. Which published not only Ripanti and Kan but also Oiza QueensDay Obasuyi with *Corpi estranei* (Alien bodies, 2020) – multiplied public dialogues on racism in Italy.

The restrictions imposed by the health emergency caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and therefore the impossibility of organising cultural events in person, have stimulated the emergence, since 2020, of numerous virtual spaces for discussion created by the artists encountered in our research. One example is the podcast *Black Coffee*, created by the Italian-Eritrean director Ariam Tekle and Emmanuelle Maréchal, which is broadcast on the Spotify platform. *Black Coffee* talks about black identities and highlights the complexity of the life experiences of the sons and daughters of migration in Italy. A second podcast is *On Race* (Spotify), conceived

and hosted by the Italian-Srilankan writer Nadeesha Uyangoda (*The Only Black Person in the Room*, 2021), together with Nathasha Fernando and Maria Mancuso. A third podcast is *Il salotto dei nuovi italiani* (Radiobullets/Spreker), conceived and hosted by the Italian-Rwandan writer Marilena Umuhoza Delli (*Negretta. Baci razzisti*, 2020). Sumaya Abdel Qader also used social media in 2021 – in her case Instagram – creating *Scintille*, a series of dialogues with “Italians without citizenship” in search for new allies in antiracist and feminist struggles. In addition, the aforementioned Espérance Hakuzwimana Ripanti, Oiza QueensDay Obasuyi and Djarah Kan created the format *Non me nero accorta* on Facebook. The approach is a conversation between friends about structural racism and postcolonialism based on current events (Giuliani, 2021). Their critical dialogues were very successful and moved off-line in 2021, being hosted in one of the most authoritative Italian theatres, the Piccolo in Milan (Piccolo, 2021). Recognition of the cultural work of Igiaba Scego, Espérance Hakuzwimana Ripanti, Sumaya Abdel Qader and Takoua Ben Mohamed also came through their inclusion – as examples of ‘extraordinary Italian women’ – in the book *Bedtime stories for rebellious girls* (Favilli, 2021).

Social media has become more and more important for racialised artists in Italy, who seem to succeed in creating cultural productions that engage increasingly large and diverse audiences.

### 6.3 Time to Change the Narrative: Racialised Artists and Italian Audio-Visual Productions

In the introductory part of his book *La cittadinanza come luogo di lotta* (Citizenship as a place of struggle, 2018), Leonardo De Franceschi describes the Italian historical and political context in which the debate on *ius soli* and *ius culturae* in favour of sons and daughters of migrants in Italy has developed. De Franceschi, referring in particular to the year 2017, highlights the widespread political and cultural resistance to the recognition and inclusion in the body of the nation of individuals considered non-white and therefore foreign bodies to the nation. The exclusion from the so-called imagined white community (Anderson, 1983) of the children of migration also seems to emerge from the analysis of national audiovisual practices and products, which constantly reflect “the fantasy of a ‘white nation’” (De Franceschi, 2018, p. 18), as Tezeta Abraham, an Italian actress and director of Ethiopian origin, points out:

I’m changing channels, here they still tell us that the Italian girl is Mediterranean or at most she can be blonde. I look in the mirror, I’m black, why do I always have to look at African-American references? Because I grew up with it anyway, it’s not like I was watching Fantozzi with my mother, my mother would pick it up and change the channel of course, I don’t know all Italian comedy and I refuse to know it because it has never watched me, it has never considered me, so the references for many foreigners in Italy are American or foreign films.

What emerged from the interview with Abraham reflects the experiences of several sons and daughters of migrants who grew up in Italy in the 1980s and 1990s and who constantly have to deal with a “completely white narrative” that invisibilises their experiences and the complexity of their life stories. Even today, as Sievers (2014) points out, there are still processes of marginalisation of the foreign-born population and their offspring from the art scene (see also Jurkiewicz and Schneider in this volume). When artists born and/or raised in Italy are not marginalised, they struggle to be recognised as “real Italian artists” on a par with their native colleagues.

However, for several years now, audiovisual practices have become a space for the negotiation of citizenship and, in particular, of visual representation, which is claimed by the children of migration (De Franceschi, 2018). Through their plural voices and their presence in predominantly white contexts such as cinema and literature, for example, foreign-born Italian male and female artists “name their realities” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 13) and provide counter-stories about their own sense of belonging and Italianness.

One example is the original Italian series *Zero*, released in April 2021 and produced for Netflix by Fabula Pictures with the participation of Red Joint Film. The series, based on an idea by Antonio Dikele Distefano, an Italian writer and screenwriter of Angolan origin, constitutes for him “[...] an aspirational project, a project that I have always dreamed of since I was a little boy, when I was a child I used to watch Italy-France, the European Championship and I used to cheer for France, because there were black boys” (Netflix, 2021).

Through *Zero*, Dikele Distefano challenges the marginalisation processes to which the lives of black people are subjected in the Italian public space, trying to give visibility to Italian actors of foreign origin who are often not involved in national artistic productions. The creation of an Italian black superhero thus constitutes “[...] a first window towards a better representation” (Insolia, 2021a).

The visual representation given by the series to the vicissitudes of young Italians of foreign origin in Italy constitutes the common thread linking Dikele Distefano’s idea and the intentions of Netflix’s top management, as reported by the manager for the Italian original series in an interview with the *New York Times* (Povoledo, 2021). In fact, Ilaria Castiglioni reiterates Netflix’s intention to reflect the changes in Italian society, highlighting how, in the aforementioned distribution company, the questions of diversity and inclusion are very present. In fact, Netflix has made available a fund of 100 million dollars to broaden the base of those who realise and develop new projects (Insolia, 2021a). Castiglioni underlines how *Zero* is not a series like the others but “represents a show with a responsibility, whose intent is to normalize the lives of the protagonists by building a story with elements of fun and positivity, which proves to be highly entertaining” (Niola, 2021). The aim is to allow a large portion of the public – the children of foreign origin born and/or raised in Italy included – to be reflected in what they see on the screen.

The attempt to reach and involve the widest possible audience is evident, for example, in Netflix’s choice to promote the release of the series through the involvement of various testimonials by sportsmen and sportswomen, models, dancers and artists of foreign origin born and/or raised in Italy.

In the production of the soundtrack were also involved artists known on the Italian rap scene and the Italian of mixed Egyptian heritage, Mahmood, winner of two editions of the popular Festival Music Sanremo (2019 and 2022).

The faces of these subjects appeared both in a teaser aired on various channels of national public television and in video previews spread on Netflix accounts and social media (Insolia, 2021b). It is important to emphasise that, on several occasions, these materials have been shared on the personal social profiles of children of foreign origin and, more generally, of activists, researchers and/or people sensitive to the issues addressed in the series.

As De Franceschi (2018) points out, citing Köhn (2016, p. 17), visual representation is intertwined with political representation, which makes marginalised subjects visible and gives them legitimacy in public space. That this is a necessity becomes clear from the following statement by Alberto Malanchino, a Milanese actor born of a Burkinabè mother and an Italian father:

Even if we live in a world which is opening up, I do this [job] between school and work it must be 8–9 years I have done it professionally. I realise that there has also been a positive change in profiles, in the sense that stereotyped roles still exist, they do exist, I think this is a bit of a *conditio sine qua non* (something still necessary) for Italy but it is not only Italian – just go to America and listen to the interviews of Lucy Liu, a great American performer of Asian origin, who is still struggling with this kind of world.

This statement, made during a round-table discussion which took place in May 2021, highlights how cinema and audiovisual products in general constitute a space of constant challenge and negotiation of the dominant narrative, which often entrusts subjects of foreign origin only with inferior roles. The latter reinforce hegemonic and toxic representations that place Italian individuals of foreign descent outside the nation, painting them as foreign bodies, as Esther Elisha, an actress born to an Italian mother and a Beninese father, explained to us in an interview in April 2019:

For me it was very frustrating, because I said to myself, how is it possible that someone who looks like me is only seen as either a prostitute or someone who always speaks of some kind of discomfort, a non-integration, I don't know. I know so many people who have different stories and this made me very angry.

If, on the one hand, as Malanchino and Elisha point out, Italian cinema still creates stereotyped roles for actors and actresses of foreign origin, on the other hand, there has been a change of course and the *Zero* series is considered by many to be a watershed moment or “a revolution in the Italian scene” (Povoledo, 2021). In fact, the first novelty is represented by the presence of a cast composed mainly of Italian actors and actresses of foreign origin, whose bodies are not flattened to the dimensions related only to their origins but are located and intertwined with other issues such as, for example, the gentrification of the Barona district of Milan where they live, the issues of citizenship and of racism. Omar (known as Zero), Sara and the other protagonists of the series are not only non-white actors and actresses but their roles also speak of the complexity and the infinite nuances present in the lives of young people of foreign origin born and/or raised in Italy, as we can already see from the trailer. “If you ask yourself what Japanese manga have to do with a black

boy born in Milan, my answer is nothing... I never have anything to do with anything, the drug dealer, the *vu cumprà* [a derogatory term for street sellers of African origin], what's better? To be mistaken for what you are not or not to be seen at all?" (Netflix, 2021).

The *Zero* series is therefore an attempt to overturn the dominant narrative through which everyday marginalised and racialised subjects represent themselves and take the floor in public space (Boccatto, 2021), naming their realities and those of other Italian boys and girls of foreign origin. Omar (*Zero*) and his companions highlight one of the main issues addressed by the series, namely the condition of visibility and invisibility experienced by the children of migration in Italy. The invisibility given by *Zero*'s superpowers seem to reflect the life experiences of young people of foreign origin in Italy: on the one hand hypervisible and racialised because of the colour of their skin and/or their origins and, on the other, hand invisible in the rights and multiple affiliations that they constantly claim.

Martiniello (2019) recognises in the arts a means of expression that allows the children of migration to take the floor by positioning themselves in the public space and recounting their life experiences. Through the *Zero* series, the film authors attempt to put themselves in dialogue with as wide an audience as possible, trying to engage with members of the dominant group and nurturing the collective aspiration to transform Italy. Through their artistic productions, the illegitimate children of Italy create meeting places in which their voices can be heard. These spaces, often virtual, are precisely aimed, for example, at that part of the dominant population that tends to invisibilise their lives and the processes of racialisation experienced by non-white subjects in society. These spaces are still, today, places of negotiation and struggle in which the voices of marginalised subjects are not always heard or taken into consideration. The Italian public space is still a predominantly white place where the voices of subjects considered as Others and the issues raised by them are often silenced and not recognised as legitimate. For example, the mentioned process of invisibilisation is evident in the absence in the mainstream media of discussions – promoted by a large part of the dominant group – on issues that concern the children of migration, such as the reform of the law governing the acquisition of Italian citizenship.

Against this exclusion, Italian artists of foreign origin, through their artistic productions, promote dialogue with those who want to be allies in the anti-racist struggle but often seem not to have the appropriate tools. As the Italian director of Sri Lankan origin, Suganga D. Katugampala, points out during our interview, the arts can contribute to the fight against racism, changing the narrative; however, for the construction of a new imaginary, the involvement of different audiences is necessary:

In my opinion, making just one film today is not enough, because there are so many films, we all make films, I think there is too much production in the whole audiovisual world [...]. In my opinion, it is no longer enough just to tell a story and then to film it but, in my opinion, it is important to share it, that is, trying to understand how that story can then create a debate, so bringing people to the cinema or creating debates in some way to share it and this, in my opinion, is the interesting thing that can be done today, that is, to try to make works and deconstructing also an idea of cinema.

The director Katugampala recognises in the initiative “Come down, cinema it’s here!”, a collective attempt to build a “different” idea of cinema. This initiative, born in 2012 and the result of a cultural proposal by the Laboratorio di Quartiere Giambellino-Lorenteggio (a working-class neighbourhood in Milan), not only aims to bring together people from different social backgrounds who would probably struggle to meet but also aims to stimulate dialogue and open debates on the dominant representations present in society. In fact, the director describes this practice as an attempt to deconstruct the classic concept of cinema, making it more accessible and usable to audiences who, also for economic reasons, would have difficulty accessing it.

[I]n Milan there is the “*cinema di ringhiera*”, that is, films [screened] in the courtyards of the houses. If in a courtyard there is a Chinese film, a Chinese film is screened and then people join in, bring down food, watch from the balconies [...] to create small movements of small groups, associations, movements, circles that somehow create an interaction, create a contrasting thought to that dominant thought. [...] I am very friendly with the promoters, after all it was they who distributed *For a son* [the director’s work], so we are very much in tune with this type of approach – that is, every night we through a film, they, more than anything else through a film, for me they make politics, that is, they create another type of approach [...] that is, other perspectives, other looks, in my opinion it is an incredibly necessary work now.

Cinema is therefore conceived of as a collective act, a set of actions in which several subjects take part – among whom the audience, to whom Martiniello and Lafleur (2008, p. 1199) attribute an active role. The audience thus becomes an integral part of the collective social experience (Santoro & Gruning, 2018, pp. 22–23) born from the conception of a film product. This element in fact, in accordance with Katugampala, seems to constitute the ultimate goal of cinema, namely, to create exchange and debates with the audience. In this sense, it is crucial to analyse the audiences that artists address with their artistic productions (De Franceschi, 2018) and to investigate the real and imagined audiences. While, on the one hand, artists try to create productions that address everyone and, above all, try to involve as wide an audience as possible, on the other artists construct, often also thanks to social media, their imagined audiences (Costanzo & Zibouh, 2014).

Often, as emerged from our research, the construction of one’s audience coincides with the creation of spaces of resistance and political struggle (Clifford, 1994, p. 308) within which one not only intends to foster dialogue between often marginalised and racialised subjects but also wants to build places of citizenship, as in the case of the Brescian director of Moroccan origin, Elia Moutamid, whom we interviewed:

In two or three situations always at the cinema, *Talien* was seen by a massive component of the Moroccan community and it was a great test for me [...]. All three times the audience was Moroccan, moved, very tried and shaken, because they said to me, “You told my story basically!”, they all said the same thing to me, “You told my story!”.

The creation of such places of exchange, in person or on virtual platforms, constitutes a practice of resistance on the part of artists of foreign origin who not only attempt to oppose the numerous processes of invisibilisation to which their

communities of origin are subjected but also intend to construct public spaces for them where they can speak out. The production of such places allows the imagined public both to identify with the protagonists' life experiences and to recognise the importance and legitimacy of their own history in a predominantly white context which tends to obscure it.

In addition, such films try to create a space for themselves within the public arena shared with members of the dominant majority. The latter, in fact, tend to assume different roles: they not only constitute part of the audience that attends film screenings but also play a fundamental role in distributing the artistic productions. Practices of distribution are another means for foreign-born artists to speak out and position themselves within different Italian political and cultural contexts. Some artists, such as the directors Katugampala and Moutamid, have also chosen to distribute their documentaries and films through the digital platform ZaLab. This collective of six filmmakers and social workers, founded in 2006, has not only produced independent films – often with a social background – but also promoted, thanks to the work of associations, networks and/or individual citizens, a “civil distribution” of national and international film products. They show the film both in physical spaces and on their streaming platform “[partecipa.zalab.org](http://partecipa.zalab.org)”, which constitutes a large space for sharing. The cooperation with this platform highlights the clear will of the filmmakers to build and reach their desired audience and a broad section of the public in general, beyond mainstream and traditional channels. Moreover, it illustrates the alliances existing between the artists and the members of the dominant group. Indeed, the latter, through their platforms, enact various practices of resistance. These not only challenge the invisibilisation of artists considered non-white and their artistic productions but also, often more generally, prove to be useful tools in anti-racist struggles and in the production of counter-narratives.

## 6.4 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, we have discussed how racialised artists struggle through their arts to transform Italy. Their cultural work attempts to interrupt the reproduction of racial hierarchies in multiple ways: by searching for public recognition as “legitimate Italians” in their artistic field; by naming the racism and sexism of contemporary Italy and linking them to Italian colonial history; and by re-narrating Italian history from a transnational perspective and exposing a “non-standard” black and Muslim Italianness, in a society that has historically constructed itself as white and Catholic. Their struggle is hampered by structural conditions that make their work difficult. They are artists belonging to the working class and they experience severe job precarisation like the majority of young Italians. In any case, they are artists who do not operate in isolation but try to find collective strategies to deal with material difficulties. They resist in different ways – i.e. co-organising presentations in social spaces like independent bookshops that support transversal struggles or participating in meetings held in city neighbourhoods inhabited by people from



lower-middle-class backgrounds who are often excluded from places of circulation/distribution of culture.

The places in which the presentations and/or screenings of the works of Italian artists of foreign origin take place become spaces of solidarity where, for example, not only issues related to racism are discussed but where projects and networks are also created between subjects who are usually marginalised.

Finally, it would be interesting to understand how they manage the power relations in their respective fields. From our work it emerged a complex reality, where there are different dynamics and, depending on the social actors, there is more or less awareness about the risks of market co-optation (e.g., Netflix). Addressing this issue will require further research.

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# Chapter 7

## How Does “Migrant” and “World” Music Change Local and National Cultures? An Insight from the Cologne Carnival, Related Antiracist Networks and Recent Cultural Politics



Monika Salzbrunn in collaboration with Birgit Ellinghaus

### 7.1 Introduction: From National to Local Music Cultures and Back

In her book dedicated to the creation of national identities, Anne-Marie Thiesse (2022, pp. 223–224) underlines that music has become a “trans-European and trans-historical melting-pot” through the “interpenetration of national components”. On the other hand, she observes how “far-right nationalists too have seized the ancestral legacy”. How is it, then, that music reflects centuries-old processes of cultural change through migration whereas it has also been instrumentalised to artificially construct homogeneous pure origins? As Wiebke Sievers rightly mentions in the introduction to the present book, the migrants’ impact on cultural change depends also on the culture of the receiving societies. These societies need not only to be analysed from a (trans)national perspective but also at a regional and local level. Given that there is not one homogeneous nation but, rather, entities which are the result of a cultural and political construction process based on small (regional) home countries (Thiesse, 2022), the interaction between local and regional cultures with discourses and practices at the national level is extremely complex. The case of music and carnival cultures from Cologne and the Rhineland has its local and regional particularity – but this is, in turn, part of the broader national entity. The latter is, of course, more than the sum of its components.

Nina Glick Schiller and Ayse Çağlar have invited migration scholars to put constructively into question the transnational paradigm by “locating migration” (2011).

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Based on our work on the dynamics of the Cologne carnival (Ellinghaus & Salzbrunn, 2019; Salzbrunn, 2014, 2022a), this chapter assesses the impact of “migrant” and “world” music on local, regional and national cultures and cultural policies, starting from the concrete example of carnival music cultures in Cologne. Applying the “event-centred approach” (Salzbrunn, 2017, 2021) and focusing on a specific territory, we can show how these examples of conviviality have an impact on local, regional and national political discourses and institutions. Furthermore, this event-centred approach applied in a “location of change” (Kasinitz & Martiniello, 2019) is a constructive answer to the critique of “ethnic lenses” formulated by Brubaker (2006). Through “event lenses” (Salzbrunn, 2017, 2022b), we can “de-migranticise migration research” (Ryan & Dahinden, 2021) and analyse music performances as mirrors of changing cultures – an interactive change that leads into multiple directions. It is important to note that origin can be performed in specific social situations but also remain invisible. A lack of visibility can signify that diversity and multiculturalism have become so evident that they are no longer explicitly mentioned – e.g. the diverse origins of members of international dance ensembles, philharmonic orchestras or opera houses.

As a 2000-year-old city of immigration, Cologne and its festive life are marked by a wide variety of musical trends. The carnival, which claims, among other things, to be a legacy of the cult of Dionysus, is first mentioned in city documents dating from 1341 and is characterised by its mockery of the military authorities (who banned the festival during the Prussian occupation of the city) and blasphemy against the representatives of the Catholic authority (Fuchs et al., 1972; Salzbrunn, 2022a), often expressed in songs and parodies. As an emblematic institution of colonial multiculturalism, the carnival brings together a heterogeneous music scene and resonates with its history of encounters and passages. However, different origins are not always labelled as such in a city with residents of more than 100 nationalities: diversity has been considered as a fact for a long time in a place populated by numerous Germanic groups and colonised by the Romans 2000 years ago. The visibility of difference changes over time and power relations also evolve. The latter, at both a formal and an informal level, have always been crucial in a city that has long been considered as ungovernable and anarchic. Not only does carnival provide a subversive potential but civil society has, in general, also shown the power to chase away ruling figures, from Archbishop Anno II in 1074 to the present Archbishop Woelki, sanctioned by a record number of Catholics leaving the church (and no longer paying taxes) as a sign of protest.

Hence, we first put the carnival (and its music scenes) in a broader historical and societal context. Then, we show how the multicultural biotope is related to a high variety of musical expressions at a local, regional and national level. Finally, we analyse creative forms of affirming multiculturalism and valourising music from different parts of the world – as “communities” or event-based public laboratories in Cologne, with the broad demonstration for peace in Ukraine on carnival’s Rose Monday as the latest important expression. The latter indicates that changes in the Cologne carnival and music scene take place in a constant interactive bottom-up *and* top-down movement. Finally, we show how these local changes also have an impact on broader regional and national institutional discourses and cultural policy initiatives.

## 7.2 Cologne: Free City and Meeting Place

The name “Köln” (Eng./Fr. = “Cologne”, It. = “Colonia”) is revealing of the origins of this city, which, today, has more than a million inhabitants. Founded in the year 50 AD by Agrippina the Younger as a Roman colony in the North and situated on the banks of the Rhine, Cologne has been a gateway for 2000 years: it is a city of passage and encounters, first for legionaries, then for soldiers, merchants and – since the Middle Ages – pilgrims and, finally, for tourists who have sometimes left their mark here (such the Farina family who arrived as merchants in Cologne in the eighteenth century and created the “*Eau de Cologne*”). Most of the time it has been a free city run by its inhabitants. Since its foundation, it has only on rare occasions been under foreign rule – for example, during its occupation by Napoleon’s troops. The Catholic Church – although contested by a section of the population – has played a significant political, economic, cultural and moral role in the daily life of Cologne’s inhabitants as well as in social, cultural and political institutions. This can still be seen today in the cityscape, with the cathedral and 12 imposing Romanesque churches, as well as in the cultural landscape: the local Church, which was very critical of the Vatican, has practised a liberal “Rhineland Catholicism” and is active as an organiser and funder. When the former conservative Popes John-Paul II and Benedict XVI had successively imposed the extremely conservative Archbishops Meisner and Woelki to the Colonese diocese, a strong civic opposition movement grew from the base to counterbalance these leaders, perceived as being unable to adopt to the local liberal ideology. Whereas Archbishop Meisner saw a *Femen* jumping on the altar during a Christmas service in 2013 (Blis et al., 2013), the current conservative Archbishop Woelki and his policy have also been contested by large artistic actions, namely an *Extinction Rebellion* lead “Die-in” performance during the Epiphany Service in 2022 (Frank, 2022) and a display of “red cards” by Catholic women against the archbishop during the post-carnival Ash-Wednesday service for artists (Mesrian, 2022). The Catholic scene in Cologne is diverse and covers a broad range of ideological tendencies and sub-groups – from a small but powerful ultra-conservative *Opus Dei* to the large progressive *Publik-Forum* that strongly supports blessings for same-sex couples. The founder of the integrative carnival music singing event “*Loss m’r singe*” (Let’s sing), Georg Hinze, is in fact employed by the Catholic Church in the cultural institution Dom Forum – which hosts the association “*Loss m’r singe*”. Meanwhile, the *Freie Szene* (freelance artists’ scene), a broad “free” music scene with all kinds of styles and only scant public subsidies compared to the Opera and the Philharmonic, is the beating heart of a particularly dynamic musical creation. Cologne is also a recognised centre for ancient and contemporary music as well as dance, with numerous foreign artists, directors and professors at the Cologne University of Music and Dance. The interlinkages between the carnival scenes, the different music scenes and the diverse Catholic initiatives are important in order to understand the context of the present research. As Wiebe Sievers underlines in her introduction to the present volume, the culture (and, I would add, history) of the receiving societies and its narratives need to be taken into consideration in order to understand the way in which cultures change through the arts.

Yet, history has not spared this city, which proudly promotes its multicultural origins<sup>1</sup>: it has been flooded on several occasions, set alight during wars and almost completely destroyed by the bombings of the Second World War. The most recent disaster to date: in 2009, significant documents for the history of music were lost in the collapse of Cologne's municipal archives, following errors in the construction of an underground railway line, compounded by corruption. This illustrates another facet of Cologne's reputation, perceived due to its festive culture as the most Italian city north of the Alps: the "*Klüngel*", a culture of mutual assistance marked by conflicts of interest.

Based on this history, Cologne is a German city embodying a strong and ancient connection between musical traditions – from Roman times to the present day – and the local musical culture, marked by dialect. The city has always been home to thousands of amateur and professional musicians of various origins who, even today, actively refer to the diverse sources of Cologne's musical history.

### 7.3 Multiple Historical Sources and Political Statements: The Poetic Musical Genre "*Krätzcher*"

Musicians refer to the mythical images of musicians and instruments from the Roman period which are present in museums and churches as well as in the street – such as the famous mosaic dedicated to Dionysus in the Romano-Germanic Museum next to the cathedral.

There are also all the legendary stories of the "*Veedel*" people (working-class neighbourhoods, the first destinations of labour immigrants), who produced a particular kind of popular poetry, together with profound, critical and humorous songs. *Kölsch*, the traditional Cologne dialect and language of the people, plays an important role in this respect. It has incorporated many elements of the linguistic diversity that has enriched the city throughout the ages, firstly with the French language, passed on primarily by the elites in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, then through the 12,000 revolutionary soldiers and, later, the Napoleonic soldiers present in the city (1794–1814) (Cornelissen, 2019). *Kölsch* is characterised by a specific intonation, considered songful and Rhenish. It is employed as an eloquent rebellion against the authorities and as a form of resistance based on concise humour. The *Krätzche*<sup>2</sup> is its musical embodiment.

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<sup>1</sup>The city's official website concludes the summary of its Roman history with the statement "Already at that time Cologne was multicultural" (Stadt Köln, 2015). In addition, 20 years ago the tourist office launched a campaign entitled "The first people of Cologne were foreigners" (all translations from German and the Cologne dialect *Kölsch* are by Monika Salzbrunn if not otherwise indicated).

<sup>2</sup>As *Kölsch* is a spoken language, there are various transcriptions for this term: the database of the *Akademie für uns kölsche Sproch* (Academy for our *Kölsch* language) uses "*Krätzche*" whereas groups like Schängs Schmölzjer, performing in the *Singender Holunder*, use "*Krätzje*". In both cases, the final letter "r" signifies the plural.

Originally, *Krätzcher* (literally “to scratch”, metaphorically “to provoke”) was a form of satirical poetry in the *Kölsch* dialect. Rhineland minstrels turned these poems into songs at the end of the eighteenth century. Today, *Krätzcher* are one of the oldest forms of traditional oral music in the Rhineland. The instrumental accompaniment to the songs is simple but the lyrics, often polysemous, are philosophical in a laconic way and cause smile and reflection.

Contrary to many folk-music traditions, the *Krätzcher* was not instrumentalised by the Nazis: it was an expression of resistance. *Krätzcher* reached new heights as a critical and humorous format, expressing with limited means what the people did not dare to say openly. After the Second World War, *Krätzcher* almost completely disappeared. While these songs were not taboo in post-war Germany, they were considered old-fashioned, because they did not respond to the need for harmony during the years of the economic miracle (*Wirtschaftswunderjahre*).

It was not until the 1980s that *Krätzcher* experienced a renaissance, sparked by the leading *Kölsch* dialect rock band, Bläck Fööss, whose musicians included *Krätzcher* in their repertoire. Two of their most famous *Krätzcher*, “*Mir kläëve am Lääve*” and “*Unsere Stammbaum*” illustrate well the self-narrative of Cologne as an open-minded multicultural, ecological and peaceful city – that draws strengths out of its belief in God (whatever is his name and religion).

### *Mir kläëve am Lääve/We stick to life in Kölsch and English (excerpt)*

Music: traditional

Text: Bläck Fööss

Editor: De Bläck Fööss Musikverlag GmbH, 1984

<i>Kölsch</i>	English
(...)	(...)
Refrain: <i>Denn mir Kölsche, mir kläëve wie d'r Düvel am Lääve,</i>	Refrain: Because we Cologne people, we stick to life like the devil,
<i>uns Kölsche nimmp keiner – ejal wat och weed – dä Spaß für ze laache, dä Bock jet ze maache, Mir kläëve am Lääve, uns kritt keiner klein.</i>	no one can take away – no matter what – the fun of laughing, the desire to do something, we stick to life, no one can break us.
(...)	(...)
<i>Un wenn ihr meint, dat et sech'rer weed, wemmer jet rüsten deit,</i>	And if you think that it's safer to arm up,
<i>wenn ihr meint, wä am lauteste schreit, wör em Räch,</i>	if you think whoever shouts the loudest is in the right,
<i>dann haut üch de Köpp en, domet mer üch loss sin,</i>	then bash your heads in so we'll be rid of you,
<i>denn ohne üch kumme mer vill besser zeräch.</i>	because we'll get along much better without you.
Refrain: <i>Denn mir Kölsche ...</i>	Refrain: Because we Cologne people ...
<i>Un wenn irjendwer sät, für uns Äd wör et längs ze spät,</i>	And if anyone says it's long too late for our earth,
<i>un wenn irjendwer meint, et wör alles am Eng,</i>	and if anyone says it's all at an end,
<i>dann dot üch verschanze, doch gläüvt uns, mer pflanze</i>	then hide yourselves away, but believe us,
<i>noch hüek e jung Bäumche met Woozele en.</i>	we'll plant a young tree with roots today.



***Unsere Stammbaum/Our family tree in Kölsch and English***

Music: H. Knipp, Bläck Fööss

Text: H. Knipp, Bläck Fööss

Editor: Manuskript, 2000

<i>Kölsch</i>	English
<i>Ich wor ne stolze Römer, kom met Caesar's Legion, un ich ben ne Franzus, kom mem Napoleon. Ich ben Buur, Schreiner, Fescher, Bettler un Edelmann, Sänger un Gaukler, su fing alles aan. Refrain: Su simmer all he hinjekumme, mir sprechen hüeck all dieselve Sproch. Mir han dodurch su vill jewonne. Mir sin wie mer sin, mir Jecke am Rhing. Dat es jet, wo mer stolz drop sin. Ich ben us Palermo, braat Spaghettis für üch met. Un ich wor ne Pimock, hüeck laach ich met üch met. Ich ben Grieche, Türke, Jude, Moslem un Buddhist, mir all, mir sin nur Minsche, vür'm Herjott simmer glich Refrain: Su simmer all ... De janze Welt, su süht et us, es bei uns he zo Besök. Minsche us alle Länder truff m'r he aan jeder Eck. M'r gläuv, m'r es en Ankara, Tokio oder Madrid, doch se schwade all wie mir un söke he ihr Glöck. Refrain: Su simmer all ... Refrain: Su simmer all ...</i>	I was a proud Roman, came with Caesar's legion, and I am a Frenchman, came with Napoleon. I am a farmer, a carpenter, a fisherman, a beggar and a nobleman, singer and juggler, that's how it all began. Refrain: That's how we all got here, we all speak the same language today. We've gained so much through it. We are as we are, we fools on the Rhine. That's something we're proud of. I'm from Palermo, frying spaghetti for you, too. And I was a Pole, today I laugh with you.  I am Greek, Turk, Jew, Muslim and Buddhist,  we're all, we're only human, in front of God we're all the same Refrain: That's how we all... The whole world, it seems, is visiting us here.  You meet people from all countries on every corner. You think you're in Ankara, Tokyo or Madrid,  but they all speak like us and seek their happiness here. Refrain: That's how we all. Refrain: That's how we all...

While the first song, “We stick to life”, puts forward an optimistic and pacifistic attitude towards life, the song “Our family tree” is a plea for enriching the city’s culture through immigration and accepting different ways of life and faith: Romans, French, Turks, Poles, Greeks, Japanese, Spanish, Jews, Muslims and Buddhists are united through the same language, *Kölsch*, which is considered as a vector for community-building. This self-narrative can also be found in documents published by the tourism office as well as in official speeches from the latest mayors, be they from left- or right-wing parties (see Sect. 7.7.).

Not only was the public made aware of this old style of song but it also inspired many other artists. Today, *Krätzcher* again forms part of the repertoire of the local

music culture. Among the representatives of this tradition are Turkish, Brazilian and Nigerian rappers living in Cologne. Just consider the high number of multicultural music performances during the c/o pop, one of the biggest popular music events in Europe, which took place in Cologne from 20–24 April 2022. The rapper Albi X celebrated his multiple belongings to Congo, American Hip-Hop and Cologne through his songs “*Makélélé*” and “*Bibamba*”, switching from Lingala to French and German. After having asked the crowd in *Kölsch* “*Seid ihr jut drupp?!*” (Are you all right?), he ended his show with the popular carnival song “*Wenn et Trömmelche jeht*”. The widespread local newspaper *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger* (Holler, 2022) called him “*der kölsche Jung*” (the guy from Cologne), referring to the famous song by Willy Millowitsch (see Sect. 7.6.).

In the “*Immi-Sitzung*”, a carnival show devised “from the perspective of newcomers” in the form of a political cabaret “between cultures”, the new “*Krätzcher*” are accompanied by a wide variety of musical trends. The “*Immi-Sitzung*” is produced by an ensemble of artists with 12 nationalities (Brazil, Turkey, various Eastern European and Arabic countries etc.) and gives 26 sold-out shows. Thanks to their success, the show has moved from the alternative (student) district in Southern Cologne to the splendid official Gürzenich concert hall, where the ancient carnival corps held their traditional celebrations. The latter sell far fewer tickets now than the alternative “*Immi-Sitzung*”, which has even been broadcasted in the national programme. This commercial success, along with recognition at a national media level, is an indicator for changing power relations in favour of multicultural carnival groups. The artists’ motto is “*Jede Jeck is von woanders*” (“Every fool comes from somewhere else”), a variation on the well-known phrase “*Jede Jeck is anders*” (“Every fool is different”) (Krohn et al., 2019). Both mottos embody the open-mindedness of the city and an awareness that all of its residents are (the children of) immigrants. The same spirit pervades the *Stunksitzung*, an anti-carnival *variété*-like show which was initiated in 1984 by student actors and is now the most successful carnival show ever, as well as Humba e.V. carnival parties and CDs, of which the first album, “*Fasteloovend Roots Project*” was released in 1994. Each collection unites *Kölsch* sounds and lyrics with references from Brazil, Greece, Turkey etc. (see Sect. 7.5).

These sources, including the *Krätzcher*, are the basis of a musical biotope and urban sound specific to the city of Cologne which are expressed in a variety of musical forms and in the carnival, an emblematic and unifying institution. The music database of the Academy of *Kölsch* Language contains 109 songs about immigration and 86 about Turks, out of 495 (Akademie für Kölsche Sproch, 2022). Hence, the post-migration society (Foroutan, 2019) expresses itself through music, theatre and *variété*, mainly in the context of carnival but also all year round.

## 7.4 Carnival: A Political Declaration in Support of Openness Towards Others

The particular value of the Cologne carnival is that it is a cathartic festival, bringing together all social groups and musical genres in its musical biotope on an annual basis and attracting more than 1 million participants and visitors each year. It represents a time in the year when the rules of life are challenged, when people get together at parties, when new things are created. In 2015, UNESCO added the Cologne carnival to the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Deutsche UNESCO-Kommission, 2019).

During the carnival, other musical specialities from Cologne can be identified: the “*Schunkeln*”, brass bands, marching bands and drum ensembles. In the parades, during the nineteenth century, the festive music came mainly from (military) marches, played by brass bands and drum ensembles from the suburbs or villages around Cologne and also, in the last decades of the twentieth century, from samba and batucada bands. These groups move spontaneously from bar to bar and accompany the parades through the different neighbourhoods. In traditional balls held in halls and tents, you can hear a particular form of waltz. There is no dance floor and, since people cannot get out of their rows of seats, they have developed a dance that can be performed while sitting: the “*Schunkeln*”. The spectators are seated on benches around long tables and watch large orchestras perform a programme of joyful celebration. Spectators’ arms are linked to those of the people sitting to their right and left and they sway together while singing amusing songs. At these traditional balls, the origin of carnival-goers is of no importance. It is neither a matter of the assimilation nor of the active integration of migrants. The motto is “*Jede Jeck es anders*” (“Every Jeck is different”), which embodies the value of otherness, no matter where it comes from. The most prominent subject of jokes about foreigners are the neighbours from the (carnival) rival city of Düsseldorf. In 2008–2009, several of Cologne’s emblematic monuments were depicted as people engaged in “*Schunkeln*”, with interlocking arms, on the official medal of one of Cologne’s largest districts: the new Cologne Mosque, one of the biggest and most visible in Europe, was represented (10 years before its official opening!) next to the cathedral, the television tower and the local *Heliostrum* (industrial) monument.

In Cologne, carnival is thus a state of mind, a political declaration of openness to others, embodied by musical diversity and a form of anarchism and permanent transgression. Around this carnival, a variety of musical forms and numerous artistic statements for the value of multiculturalism, germinate and evolve, namely through the Humba e.V. parties and CD collection.

## 7.5 A Multicultural Biotope Inspiring a Variety of Musical Expressions: “World-Music”, “Humba & Family”

Cologne’s music scene, like those of other cities, includes a wide variety of musical genres, such as jazz and improvised music, rock and pop, ancient and baroque music, avant-garde contemporary music, electronics, classical music and traditional and world music. Yet, each musical genre uses the *Kölsch* dialect for contemporary creations. Freethinkers and rebels express themselves in dialect in their anthems against racism and xenophobia, reaching a recent peak with the “*Arsch huh*” movement. This movement – literally “ass up”, metaphorically “get moving” against racism and right-wing extremism – was born in 1992 after the deadly xenophobic attacks on refugees in Hoyerswerda and Solingen and has been drawing crowds for 25 years, thanks to the local and international heroes of the “*Arsch huh*” movement, BAP, Bläck Fööss, Brings and Höhner. United above and beyond their quarrels at a time when racism was emerging for the first time since the end of World War II in Germany, these carnival music groups and/or rock bands, singing in *Kölsch*, assembled 100,000 spectators on 9 November 1992 – the anniversary of the 1938 November pogrom against the Jewish population – in the city centre, to take a stand against racism. At this event, the anthem “*Arsch huh, Zäng ussenander*” promoting living together and civil courage, was sung for the first time. The song was written in just a few days, in reaction to the attacks, by Vassilios “Nick” Nikitakis, a guitarist-songwriter of Greek origin living in Cologne and by Wolfgang Niedecken, a singer in the world-famous band BAP. Jean Jülich, a resistance fighter and member of the “*Edelweisspiraten*” also took part in the event. This symbolic and personal link between carnival protagonists, World War II resistance fighters and musicians from migrant backgrounds is a recurring theme, as shown by the examples of “*Humba*” and the “*Zigeunerfestival*”. The “*Arsch huh*” birthday concert in 2022 was moderated by the Cologne artist Shery Reeves (of Kenyan and Tanzanian descent). After a speech by writer Navid Kermani (who lives in Cologne), Iranian singer Sogand and 18,000 guests in the Lanxess Arena concert hall sung “*Baraye*”, claiming liberty and showing numerous flags and slogans in various languages, mixing German and Persian references.

Since the early 1990s, the main idea of the “*Humba*” platform (Krauthäuser, n.d.) has been to assert the musical diversity at the heart of Cologne’s popular, collective, vibrant and sonorous tradition. This multiculturalism is expressed in the relationship between so-called “world music/*Weltmusik*” and the local musical traditions of the city of Cologne, of which the carnival tradition is the most powerful.

The initial impetus for “*Humba & Family*” activists came from a trip to Ivory Coast in 1992 for the purposes of musical research. The activists found that the locals showed little interest in their traditional music, which was – and still is – the key to many musicians’ activities in Cologne and West Africa. The *Humba* activists asked themselves: Is it acceptable to ask Africans to better nurture their musical traditions when, in Germany, a large part of the population is unaware of the local musical traditions in most regions?

Preliminary research was carried out on the music of the Cologne carnival and in particular the traditional music played in the city. The aim was to gain a better understanding of the roots of certain musical movements – exciting new trends beyond folklore and FakeFolk – as well as to grasp the effects of the diversity of music resulting from migration both on the transnational circulation of music and on local creation.

The research was supported by the public regional broadcast service WDR Radio. It led to a live presentation during the 1994 carnival, under the title “Humba Party”, and the first CD compilation. Since then, the “Humba & Family” movement has created a fertile environment for musical experimentation. Musicians of diverse origins are fully recognised as actors of urban musical expression and as interpreters of carnival music, enabling audiences to dance, sing or laugh. Certain musicians from abroad met their partner in Cologne and stayed – e.g. the Cuban musician Juan de Dios (y sus Muchachos) whose song “*Carnaval en Köln*” (meaning “Carnival in Cologne” or “At the Cologne carnival”) features on the CD Humba 3 “The power of jeckness” (1998). According to the lyrics, the group enjoys carnival through dancing, singing and “*Con mucha cerveza Kölsch*” (“With a lot of *Kölsch* beer”).<sup>3</sup>

How did this musical fusion in Cologne become a lively and well-established popular tradition? This was easy for artists coming from carnival cultures, such as Brazil, Cuba, etc.; other musicians transformed their traditional style, either musically or by working with the *Kölsch* dialect. They have produced and created rap, reggae, samba or oriental songs in *Kölsch* and *Krätzcher* in other languages. Instead of turning to genres such as rock or English-speaking pop, the Humba movement embodies the soul of Cologne. Its mission goes far beyond carnival, as it seeks to liberate German local musical traditions from the negative associations with the Nazi era that still existed in the 1990s and 2000s and to transgress class differences. Despite the large symbolic and rhetorical recognition of global music as an integral part of the local landscape, there is no permanent institutional support. Producers, organisers and musicians need to be constantly creative to get public funding (Gambino, 2020), which is small compared to the subsidies for classical music (see Sect. 7.8). Several actors of multiple origins from the global local music scene funded the association “*Globale Musik e.V.*” in 2020 to lobby for their cause (Sodemann et al., 2022). Although carnival generates about 5000 permanent jobs and has a turnover of 460 million euros (Boston Consulting Group, 2009), only a few music groups can live off their carnival concerts and CDs. Precarity is a general problem which classical musicians without a permanent position in philharmonic ensembles – as well as the majority of pop musicians – have to face, whatever their origins.

Today, large grassroots events such as “*Loss’ m’r singe*” (“Let’s sing”) fill Cologne’s biggest stadium, where 40,000 people gather to sing Christmas carols, played by carnival groups among others. These events follow the same principle as the “*Singender Holunder*” concerts, organised by one of the main actors of Globale Musik and Humba, Jan Ü. Krauthäuser: a leaflet with lyrics is distributed to all participants so that they can sing together with the artists. As language is a crucial integrative factor, the

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<sup>3</sup>I thank Sara Wiederkehr for having transcribed and translated the lyrics.

learning of German and the local language *Kölsch* through music contributes to the joint feeling of belonging to the city. Until 2019, more than 20,000 people participated every year in “*Loss m’r singe*” parties in local pubs (but also in “Rhinelanders exile spots” like Berlin, Munich and the Spanish island of Mallorca) and donated to local and international refugee support initiatives like Sea Watch (Loss mer singe e.V., 2015). Yet, not only does carnival last the whole year but it also represents a state of mind that allows people to break rules all year round. Following the initial success of the carnival festivities organised by Humba, fans of the music contributed their knowledge on other occasions, inspired by the carnival season. In 2001, fans and activists launched small grassroots summer festivals in suburban gardens, the “*Humba-Schrebergarten-Tour*”, each featuring at least one group in the local Cologne style and an ensemble of music from elsewhere – traditional African, Persian classical, Indonesian *gamelan*, etc. – all based in the city or the region.

Subsequently, activities were extended to other aspects of local urban life, such as the music of the *Edelweißpiraten*, a youth resistance movement under the Nazi dictatorship. A major musical movement in Cologne inspired Humba activists to organise a festival with former *Edelweißpiraten* and other music groups to pay tribute to the anti-Nazi struggle. Since then, the *Edelweißpiraten* Festival has become a major expression of Cologne’s intangible urban heritage and cultural diversity (Edelweißpiratenfestival e.V., 2022).

## 7.6 Valorising the Multiplicity of Sounds from (Trans) Local Communities

Another facet of this local urban life at the crossroads of local and migratory traditions that Humba has explored concerns the collaboration with the Sinti community in Cologne to preserve and promote the various aspects of their culture. Today, upending a long-standing stigma, they proudly call themselves “*Zigeuner*” (gypsies) and have given this name to the “*Rheinisches Zigeunerfestival*” (Zigeunerfestkomitee et al., 2017). The festival features concerts based on the historic horse-drawn carriages and chariots which the Nazis stole from the family of Markus Reinhardt, a gypsy family based in Cologne. The festival also brings together trans-local gypsy communities from many countries, showing both diversity and unity.

All these activities carried out by Humba & Family are forms of “public laboratories” experimenting with traditional and new sounds and interacting with local musicians and their friends from all over the world.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>A large number of translocal gypsy families have their base in Cologne, to the extent that they bury their dead in large family vaults. On some of the gravestones of the large Western cemetery, “*Westfriedhof*”, horse-drawn carriages or large sedans are engraved as a reminder of the nomadic past and present. This cemetery, which is adjacent to the Jewish cemetery, also has a Muslim section (Observations by Monika Salzbrunn, *Westfriedhof*, 23–24 December 2019 and 26 January 2022).

In 2021, AlbaKultur and Birgit Ellinghaus set up the Migrant Music Manifesto in Cologne. Dozens of workshop labs, concerts and experts brought together a huge international crowd of music practitioners, lovers and academics. Monika Salzbrunn followed the interactive workshop concert “*Krätzjer und Kölsche Leeder mit Schängs Schmölzje & Humba e.V.*”, co-organised by *Singender Holunder*. As was usual for *Singender Holunder* concerts, first, a leaflet with lyrics was distributed to the participants, so that everybody could sing along. The three musicians performed several “*Krätzjer*” in the Colonese dialect and the bassist Johannes Esser presented each song with an historical explanation of its origin and sense, namely the anti-nationalist message in certain lyrics written and performed with courage during the 1930s. After a while, the keyboard player Jan Weigelt took over with a surprise, presenting himself as an immigrant from North Germany and imitating self-ironically the Northern dialect. A couple of songs later, the guitarist Rudi Rumstajn outed himself as a “*Kölscher Zigeuner*” (a Colonese gypsy). He said that he had beseeched his friend Robert to write a non-politically correct song about gypsies but Robert was hesitant. Rudi insisted and kept refusing the lyrics as being too politically correct. The result is an excellent example of the playful, de-essentialising way of performing multiple belonging.

### ***Der kölsche Zijeunerjung/The Colonese gypsy boy in Kölsch and English***

Text and Music: Rudi & Robert

<i>Kölsch</i>	English
<i>Ich han jeklaut ich jev et zo, mer brote Jeld von irjendwo. Mir hatte nix ze fresse, han in de bösch jedresse. Mir hatten keine dixiklo, kei plätzje för uns irgendwo. Su sin zijeuner wed jesat, die han at immer Dris jemaat. Refrain: Ich ben ne kölsche Jung, han kölsche Tön em blot un die kölsche Sproch kann ich at janj jot. Av un zo mach ich enz dress halt bloß ding Breftäsch fess! Oder jläüvs du ich wör ihrlich, leeven Jung, ich ben jefährlich. Zijeuner sin nitt kleinzekrije, da muss wohl am Charakter lije. Wet widder op uns dropjeklopp, Stonn mir bal och widder op. Un singe danze musiziere, die Minsche künne von uns liere. Mir künne lache wie die Kölsche, echte Fründe, he fings de welche. Refrain: Ich ben ne kölsche Jung, ...</i>	I have stolen I admit it, we needed money from somewhere. we did not have anything to guzzle, have shit in the bushes. we did not have a dixi-closet, no room for us anywhere. Gypsies are like that they said, they have always screwed up. Refrain: I am a guy from Cologne, have Colonese sounds in my blood and the Colonese language I master quite good. From time to time I make shit hold on your paperwallet! Or do you think I was honest, dear guy, I am dangerous. You cannot break down gypsies, this must be due to the character. If we get beaten, we soon stand up again. And sing, dance, make music. People can learn from us. We can laugh like the Colonese, true friends, you find some here. Refrain: I am a guy from Cologne,...

In a global societal context where diversity can also be contested (Dilger & Warstat, 2021), this joyful and proud performative appropriation and *détournement* of stereotypes is a constructive answer to well-intentioned but downgrading and essentialising diversity politics. All negative images referring to education, delinquency or hygiene are presented in a crude and direct manner, until the joyful Colonese way of life is mentioned as a common point of both cultures. The artists reload the widely known popular historical local song “*Ich bin ne kölsche Jung*” written by the actor Willy Millowitsch about himself as a “good guy” with a self-ironic description of a “guy from Cologne” who speaks well the local language but “does shit” and is “dangerous”. This example shows a self-confident play with identities: instead of starting from his origins, Rudi Rumstajn first performed Cologne language and musical heritage, before demonstrating other biographical elements in a self-ironic way.

Besides the carnival itself, there are also soundscapes of the so-called “*Immis*”, migrant and refugee newcomers who make up almost 40 per cent of the population. In Cologne, rather than one majority migrant group, there are many communities – who do, however, not necessarily refer to their origins at first sight: the descendants of Germans who grew up in Poland, Russia or the Ukraine, exiles from Iran and Afghanistan since the 1990s and migrant workers from Italy and Greece since the 1960s. Armenians, Kurds and Turks represent other major cultural groups, as well as Asians, Latinos and, since 2015, Syrians, Yezidis from Iraq and migrants from West and North Africa. The city is one of the symbols of tolerant multiculturalism, both from a self-discourse and an electoral point of view.<sup>5</sup> Some of these new artists conserve their traditional music in their new place of residence on the Rhine and preserve the traditional and/or ritual dimension of their music, mainly (but not exclusively) played for their own communities. As the percentage of intellectuals and amateurs of classic music is very high among Iranian immigrants, concerts of Iranian music take place at the prestigious *Philharmonie* of Cologne (and can quickly be sold out). Others embark on the search for a new musical home and participate in intercultural groups and “*Brauchtum*” (“customs”) projects: a cultural practice that is locally rooted but is also cosmopolitan and progressive.

Thus, all these musical protagonists, with their own seeds of sound, contribute to turning the city of Cologne into a veritable Tower of Babel, in particular when social movements such as the *Edelweißpiraten* Festival, in memory of Cologne’s resistance during the Nazi dictatorship, the *Rheinisches Zigeunerfestival* of the local Sinti and Roma or the *Newroz* Festival, the “Spring of Cultures” of the Kurdish and Iranian-*Kölsch* scene, are set in motion. In each of these events, a multi-lingual communication can be observed, mixing references of the local dialect *Kölsch* with other languages.

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<sup>5</sup>For an analysis of actions in support of undocumented migrants during the Cologne carnival, see Salzbrunn (2014). For the past century, the vote for the extreme right has been lowest in the Rhineland, especially in Aachen and Cologne.



## 7.7 MAKE FasteLOVEnd, Not War

A recent event has shown the extent to which the self-narrative as an open-minded multicultural city transcends all political borders except the extreme right, the common enemy. When the Russian war against Ukraine broke out on *Weiberfastnacht* (Women's carnival) 2022, the opening day of the street carnival, officials, musicians and individual *Jecke* (fools) wondered if, despite their longing for feasting after 2 years without street carnival, it was appropriate to celebrate it. The official carnival committee, together with a broad range of associations (LGBTQIA+ groups, anti-fascist groups like the above mentioned "*Arsch huh, Zäng ussenander*", alternative multicultural carnival organisers like "*Deine Sitzung*", the Ukrainian group *Blaugelbes Kreuz* etc.), officials (the Green group in the local parliament, the Mayor Henriette Reker who had no political affiliation but was supported by the Greens, who had a majority in the city council and the Christian Democrats, the conservative Minister President of the region North-Rhine Westfalia, Henrik Wüst) and engaged left-wing musicians (namely Wolfgang Niedecken from BAP and Brings) decided to transform the usually huge *Rosenmontagszug* (Rose Monday parade) into a giant demonstration for peace.

Some 30,000 people were expected; a quarter of a million filled the streets of the city in blue and yellow, the colours of Ukraine, on this 28 February 2022. Once-alternative groups like Brings were in the forefront, whose singer, Peter Brings, said, "There are those who claimed that the carnival was not political – I never believed that, and I am so glad that you are all here. This is the most important *Rosenmontag* I have ever seen". The 70-year-old singer of the BAP rockers, Wolfgang Niedecken, said with emotion: "The people of Cologne know how to party but they also know how to take a stand". The Mayor of Cologne, Henriette Reker, addressed the population in an emotional speech, calling for peaceful resistance without arms (while the Social Democrat Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, decided, with the approval of the Greens, to send arms to the war zone for the first time in 77 years). To thunderous applause, Reker expressed her admiration for those Russians who risked going out to demonstrate their opposition to this war and reiterated her position in favour of welcoming all refugees in need of protection in this city open to the world. Reker was formerly responsible for the reception of refugees in the city administration and for this reason became a victim of an extreme right-wing attack. Hence, she is a credible speaker. The communion with the authorities knows no bounds on this sunny morning, as BAP rocker Wolfgang Niedecken says: "The good Lord is of course also a *Kölner*; he made the weather so that everything works". The chairman of the festival committee, Christoph Kuckelkorn, who is also the head of an undertaker's business, celebrates the communion of the festive community: "Wir zeigen uns hier als jecke Gemeinschaft; bunt wie der Lappenclown. Ein jeckes Mosaik, Junge un Mädchen, Alt und Jung" ("We show ourselves as a fool community; multicolour like the clown made of cloths. A fool mosaic, boys and girls, elderly and youngsters"). Many groups sing spontaneously composed songs, ridiculing Putin to the beat of drums. The *Singender Holunder* team has prepared a

booklet of peace songs, carnival classics celebrating life, love, cosmopolitanism and diversity in order to defy the fear of war through song. The booklet included “*Mer klääve am Lääve*”, “*Unsere Stammbaum*” (see Sect. 7.3.), “*Liebe gewinnt*” (Love wins – recently sung in churches to demand the blessing of homosexual couples) by Brings, “We shall overcome”, “*Hevenu Shalom alechem*” and classics of the German peace movement such as Wolf Biermann’s “*Ermutigung*” (encouragement) and Hannes Wader’s “*Es ist an der Zeit*” (It is time). The initiative “*Arsch huh, Zäng ussenander*” (Get your ass up, open your mouth) is reminiscent of the gigantic anti-racism demonstration of 1992, which brought together 100,000 people on this very square (see Sect. 7.5.).

Indeed, it was impossible to forbid this truly popular event, even though its form changed. Therefore, it was particularly interesting to observe which new forms of celebration, music and dance practices emerged under these conditions: a long-lasting pandemic and the spectre of a new war in Europe. This huge demonstration on carnival, uniting the traditional male carnival groups, conservative and green politicians, LGBTQIA+ groups, Ukrainian residents, ancient rocker and contemporary engaged carnival musicians, shows the extent to which the self-narrative of Cologne as a multicultural, welcoming, refugee-friendly city is the result of a renewal of carnival from its margins, as I have shown elsewhere (Salzbrunn, 2022a). Although Cologne has a long record of anti-fascist initiatives, the political claims for welcoming refugees have never been so clear and unanimous.

Nevertheless, this discourse in favour of diversity does not necessarily lead to financial support for a diverse music scene.

## 7.8 From Discourse to Action? The Challenges and Limits of Cultural Change

In the cultural scene of Cologne, diversification processes have been intended from top-down (Sievers, 2017) and bottom-up levels (grassroots initiatives), leading to durable changes concerning the use of musical references and the visibility of new cultural actors. An example for the top-down (institutional and political) perspective is the “*Kulturentwicklungsplan*” “cultural development plan” developed by the city government in a two-year process of round-table discussions with actors from the cultural scene in the town. The plan intends to include both independent artists and institutionalised organisations so they can “participate” under certain conditions in the broader cultural life. However, the process did not include “migrant” culture organisations. This may be due to the paradox of essentialising cultures, which is a risk if they are subject to specific funding programmes (see Chap. 5 in this volume). Actors with a migration background are present in many institutions – including on the city council – but are not necessarily labelled as migrants or chosen as such. They occupy other functions or represent a political party.

The “*Sofortprogramm – Auf geht’s*” (immediate programme – here we go) from the regional government of North-Rhine Westphalia, offering 15,000 grants in 2020 (and 15,000 more in 2021!) to balance the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on independent culture, was closer to a bottom-up perspective since the bureaucratic and artistic levels were extremely low and the success rate exceptionally high. This funding coincided with the legal cancellation of the carnival season 2020/2021 due to the pandemic and the temporary impossibility to practice the usual multicultural expressions and events. Both programmes are partly due to long-term political initiatives and lobby work that put pressure on local and regional governments. So what do these local initiatives tell us about the short- and long-term impacts of the cultural scene on local, regional and national politics? At a local and regional level, there are initiatives to support a broad range of cultural production – namely music – but not necessarily labelled as “world music” or music from a specific ethnic group. The advantage of these cultural politics is a non-essentialist view on cultural production. The disadvantage is that, except for the easily accessible *Sofortprogramm*, general access to funding is related to a very formalised view of cultural careers and a hierarchy of cultural modes of expression. Classical music receives tremendous institutional and financial support in Germany, so that talents can be promoted regardless of their origins. The “*Freie Szene*” however, only gets a small part of public funding and needs to survive on its own resources. Therefore, many musicians live under precarious conditions and associations like Humba e.V. and festivals like the *Zigeunerfestival* need to seek funding and support from various sources and to constantly develop new initiatives so that they can reply to calls for funding. The *Edelweißpiratenfestival*, the *Zigeunerfestival*, the *Humba Leichtmatrosentour* and the *Brasilonia* (Brasil + Colonia) music events have all been sponsored by the City of Cologne. The public regional cultural federation *Landesverband Rheinland* (LVR) has also sponsored the *Zigeunerfestival*. These are material indications of a continuous political support for multicultural music events, which is in line with the political discourse increasingly promoting a welcome culture, as analysed above. As part of the numerous home-countries (Thiesse, 2022) that make Germany, the City of Cologne and the Rhineland region contribute a great deal to promoting an open-minded discourse (which goes along with the lowest percentage of far-right voters in that region of Germany), but this cannot be generalised, since other regions suffer from a more xenophobic environment. To a certain extent, this aspect reflects the strong heterogeneity which has always existed in Germany regarding the attitude towards foreigners (with a quite low percentage of extreme-right voters in the Rhineland and a relatively high percentage in certain parts of Saxonia and Swabia).

What about perceptions of alterity, othering processes and multiple belonging? Starting from a local case study, we have given examples of regional dynamics and put these in a broader national and supranational context. The UNESCO-Charta for diversity intends to promote a broad range of culture but can lead to paradoxical effects, such as reducing actors to one dimension of their multiple belonging. The event approach (Salzbrunn, 2017, 2021), applied in the context of the history, contemporary cultural policy and culture of the receiving society, allowed us to analyse the way in which politics of (multiple) belonging (Yuval-Davis et al., 2006) are

situated in time and space. This is a constructive answer to the inherent paradox in migration studies and allows us to overcome an essentialist point of departure.

We have shown that Cologne’s (cultural) history has always been shaped by migration, even though the enrichment of the music and carnival scene, thanks to migrants, has been openly recognised and celebrated only for a couple of decades. However, this is already a long time, compared to other carnival capitals, which tend to essentialise musical heritage, costumes and masks, partly to get the UNESCO label of immaterial heritage. The way in which the Cologne carnival is performed and lyrics are written (and learned through numerous local singing events) indicates that multiculturalism has become the new mainstream norm. The “*Immi-Sitzung*” sells more tickets than the conservative carnival balls and the rapper Albi X melts references to carnival, hip-hop and various migration areas during the popular music event c/o pop. Nevertheless, that very open-minded discourse, recently underlined during the giant demonstration against the war in Ukraine on carnival’s Rose Monday, does not guarantee an absence of discrimination or an unconditional institutional support for all types of musical creation.

We can also observe a parallel tendency concerning the importance of the local language. On the one hand, there are increasing hybridisation processes in lyrics (e.g. Juan de Dios) and interaction with the public (Albi X). On the other, collective singing events in *Kölsch* attract an exponentially growing public. Both tendencies show that local references are important to the multicultural music scene in Cologne and have an inclusive effect.

Hence, one can ask: What are the short-term and long-lasting effects and impact of these cultural and institutional changes on the creation, performance and reception of music in general and on broader (carnival and other) celebration habits? We can definitely hear the plurality of music (Bachir-Loopuyt & Damon-Guillot, 2019) during festivals, carnival and regular cultural events like the *Zigeunerfestival* and the different Humba parties. The very latest events related to the war in Ukraine have proven that the creativity and openness of the cultural scene have an impact on political decision-making – at least, the broad support for 30,000 musicians during the pandemic at a regional level and the continuous welcoming of refugees at a local, regional and national level – in particular, in Cologne. Does it widen the political consciousness for a need to re-think broader institutional logics at each level? This question can only be answered in the next decade.

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# Chapter 8

## What About Words? Activism and Cultural Change in the Amsterdam Museum



Christine Delhaye

### 8.1 Introduction

On 12 September 2019, the Amsterdam Museum announced that it would change the title of its (semi-)permanent exhibition Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age to Portrait Gallery of the seventeenth Century. The Amsterdam Museum is a city museum that chronicles the history, examines the present and imagines the future of the city. The museum has decided to dispose of the term Golden Age (in Dutch: *Gouden Eeuw*) because it frames Dutch history from a celebratory nationalist perspective. It also invokes a history seen from the standpoint of the rich and powerful and erases abuses such as forced labour, poverty, war and the slave trade (Van der Molen, 2019).

The term Golden Age has several dimensions to it which are all intrinsically intertwined. It refers to a historical period ('the long seventeenth century') within which the Dutch Republic became extremely wealthy and geopolitically powerful. It also refers to an art historical period and style; some of the painters who were part of this Golden Age, such as Rembrandt van Rijn, Johannes Vermeer and Frans Hals, are considered among the greatest artists of all times – not to forget the outstanding achievements of writers, philosophers and scientists. This dominant socio-economic and cultural position was the result of the success of the Dutch in world trade, which also involved the economic, political and military occupation of foreign territories. According to Tom van der Molen, curator at Amsterdam Museum, the glorification of art and science was – and still is – used to reframe the image of an aggressively mercantile nation state into an affluent one that produced great achievements. In reality, art and science were part and parcel of that mercantile

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world, all its colonial implications included (van der Molen, 2021, p. 185). The decision to no longer use the term Golden Age was based on the stated aim of the museum to become an inclusive and multivocal museum where all citizens of Amsterdam can identify with the stories told (Amsterdam Museum, 2019).

This decision of the Amsterdam Museum was not a one-time event. It was the follow-up of a longer process of enacting change in the hegemonic 'regimes of representation' (Hall, 1997a) which has been going on already for some years in the Amsterdam Museum but also in the wider Dutch museum world. In the run-up to its reopening in 2013, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam started an investigation into the terms used in the labels and descriptions of the artefacts and began to remove the offensive ones. The museum had received complaints from visitors who experienced some texts as hurtful. Thanks to a critical intervention, in 2017, by the collective Decolonize the Museum, the National Museum for World Cultures (a merger of four ethnographic museums, one of which is the Amsterdam Tropenmuseum) also thoroughly scrutinised the language used in its institutions. The process resulted in the publication in 2018 of *Words matter: An unfinished guide to word choices in the cultural sector* (Modest & Lelijveld, 2018). With this publication, the museum aimed to contribute to the ongoing dialogue in the museological field, as well as in society at large, about the use of offensive and controversial words. In 2017, a group of artists, writers, activists and scientists campaigned for changing the name of the Rotterdam arts centre Witte de With because the eponymous person was involved in colonial exploitation. In April 2019, the Maurits House in The Hague opened an exhibition in which the museum approached, through various perspectives, the role which their eponym, Johan Maurits, Count of Nassau-Siegen, played in the transatlantic slave trade.

This process of change in the regime(s) of representation in some museums in the Netherlands did and does not occur in isolation. Also, the use of words in the realm of journalism and in everyday life has become subject to discussion (Nzume, 2017). The annual feast of *Sinterklaas* with Black Pete (*Zwarte Piet*) has been a controversial event for many years already. The debates that surround the event have become increasingly grim. Since 2020, as people across the globe were rallying against racial inequality, discrimination and police brutality after the murder of Georg Floyd, debates about removing statues as well as changing street names flared up again in the Netherlands. It also looked as though cultural institutions had finally understood the urgency of making their organisations more inclusive and critically questioning the authority and legitimacy of their expertise. These transformations do not only take place in the Netherlands but have become globally connected thanks to the easy and rapid spread of images, discourses and knowledge through the media (van Huis, 2019, p. 242). Western nation states share similar struggles in that they have been part of colonial history. However, they differ in the ways in which their respective colonial endeavours unfolded and have impacted on their past and current societies (van Huis, 2019, p. 220).

It may come as no surprise that these critical interventions provoked heated debate within the Dutch public sphere. In recent years, almost all political parties, including one on the left, contributed to the construction of an explicit nativist



discourse by introducing a division between the ‘real Dutch people’ and those who will not be able to reach this position (Duyvendak & Kesic, 2017; van Huis, 2019). Interventions such as that against Black Pete and, for that matter, against the label Golden Age, according to the producers of this ethno-national discourse, led to an ever further erosion of Dutch culture and identity. The overwhelming Black Lives Matter demonstrations in 2020 in the Netherlands have resulted in a dialogue between the prime minister and an anti-racist delegation to discuss the issue of racism in the Netherlands. Coincidentally, soon afterwards, the Dutch government fell. After a long formation period, a new government was installed on 10 January 2022. Up to now, not many efforts have been made to create an anti-racist policy, although there is a lot of work to do (Wekker, 2016). The UN human rights rapporteur Tendayi Achime, who visited the Netherlands in 2019, calls, in her report of July 2020, “for swift action to address persisting structures of racial discrimination” (United Nations General Assembly, 2020, p. 1).

In this chapter, I analyse the process that led to the Amsterdam Museum abandoning the term Golden Age. The event that led to the change was an intervention of cultural activism enacted by an activist with a migration background. I seek to understand how the strategy of the activist was able to mobilise the museum into taking action in such a way that it began to openly contest a deeply ingrained representation of Dutch history and culture.

## 8.2 Approach: An Eclectic Theoretical Toolkit

The concept of culture in this analysis is conceived in its broadest use, namely as ‘shared meaning’. In the process of producing, distributing and sharing meaning, language is, without any doubt, the privileged instrument (Hall, 1997b, p. 1). More specifically, I focus on the use of language in the de/construction of – what once was – a crucial element of the Dutch hegemonic ‘regime of representation’ (Hall, 1997a, p. 232), namely the term Golden Age.

The processes of cultural change will be studied with the help of an eclectic theoretical ‘toolkit’. In order to analyse how this activist intervention impacted on the Amsterdam Museum in its functioning, I draw on recent theory within organisation theory – and more specifically on ‘institutional work’ (Howard-Grenville et al., 2011; Lawrence et al., 2009). The theory of cultural change by the sociologist Ann Swidler is a helpful addition as it focuses on the tools and resources through which culture is produced and reproduced. Social actors (individuals and groups) are approached as mobilisers who use tools and resources to execute their chosen strategies of action (Swidler, 1986, 2008). I integrate work on cultural activism as it allows me to understand the meanings and effects of the activist tool that has been mobilised.

Museums are not just organisations. They are endowed with special authority and the power to imagine and represent both the respective national culture and the cultures of those regarded as others. They are authoritative actors in (re)producing,

sustaining or challenging hegemonic regimes of representation. The theory of Bourdieu on the symbolic power of language is important, too, as it centres around games played between actors who ‘speak with different degrees of authority’ (Thompson, 1991/2000, p. 1). Since Bourdieu’s early theory of colonialism has not entered the Western canon of sociology, his work has often been wrongly accused of ignoring the subject. Yet his fieldwork in Algeria resulted in a systematic theory of colonialism that analysed the effects and logics of a racialised system of domination within the colonised society during colonisation and the ensuing decolonial struggles (Go, 2013). Contemporary decolonial theory instead highlights the imperial distribution of power and authority at a transnational or global scale. It also focuses on the way in which imperial power dynamics impact on societies even today (Pratt, 1991; Quijano, 2000; Vázquez, 2010, 2011). Therefore, contemporary decolonial theory is also a crucial component of my toolkit.

Before starting my analysis, I bring the global power dynamics into the discussion via Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of the contact zone and its re-articulations. In her article ‘Arts of the contact zone’ (1991), she analyses an early-seventeenth-century “letter” entitled *The first new chronicle and good government*. This 800-page document, written by an Andean author named Guaman Poma, was addressed to the Spanish King some 40 years after the decisive Spanish conquest of the Inca empire. With the help of this specific case, Pratt develops her thoughts on writing and literacy in *contact zones* (Pratt, 1991, p. 34; italics Pratt’s). Pratt’s contact zone refers to “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in a context of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt, 1991, p. 34). The concept, as well as the further elaborations on it in Pratt’s book *Imperial eyes: Travel writing and transculturation* (1992) have been applied by James Clifford in the seventh chapter of his book *Routes* (1997/2007). In this chapter, “Museums as contact zones”, Clifford rearticulates the concept with regard to museums in a descriptive as well as a normative sense (1997/2007, p. 213). He paints a picture of museums as contact zones in which the crossing of objects, makers, narratives, etc. occurs in a context of historically structured dominance. “Such crossings are never ‘free’ and indeed routinely blocked by budgets and curatorial control, by restrictive definitions of art and culture, by community hostility and miscomprehension” (Clifford, 1997/2007, p. 204). Yet he also accounts for museums as contact zones in a utopian sense. Utopian museums are “public spaces of collaboration, shared control, complex translation, and honest disagreement” (Clifford, 1997/2007, p. 208). In order to become such public spaces, museums should pursue a radically democratic politics that challenges the hierarchical conditions of crossing and should thoroughly rethink museum practices in a decentred way (Clifford, 1997/2007, p. 124).

In the wake of Clifford’s utopian imagining of museums, the concept has, according to Robin Boast, unjustly been appropriated by museum scholars in an overly optimistic way, redefining the contact zone as “a space of collaboration, discussion, and conflict resolution” (Boast, 2011, p. 60). Yet, according to him, no matter the efforts which museums put into collaborating with communities, encouraging

participation and dialogue, no matter the sincere intentions of museum staff, museums remain neo-colonial institutions, inherently asymmetric, keeping control over objects, displays and narratives. They do so because the museum as a contact zone is still “a site in and for the center” (Boast, 2011, p. 67). I appreciate Boast’s cautiousness in looking critically behind the surface of window-dressing practices and good intentions. What worries me about his analysis, however, is that Boast talks about “the museums” as if they were a large monolithic field of similar institutions that are also internally homogeneous environments. Moreover, museums are seen as institutions which, no matter what they do, are in no way able to de-centre their practices. Instead of choosing sides between “overly optimists” or “pessimists”, I focus on the particular actions taken by a specific museum, the Amsterdam Museum. Considering seriously the highly visible interruptive actions as well as the mundane practices, day-to-day transformations and compromises as performers of institutional change, I more specifically look at the actions taken in the Amsterdam Museum in their capacity to contribute to a long and complex process of de-centring.

In order to be able to conduct the analysis, I interviewed two curators of the Amsterdam Museum: Tom van de Molen – who was the curator of the exhibition Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age – and I.L., who wished to be identified only by initials and who has developed some important decolonising projects in the museum. In addition, I had some written communication with the two of them. I also read quite a good amount of published material on the topic written by the curators. I have been in contact with the person widely believed to be “the activist” several times. Although he seemed prepared to discuss the event, in the end it never came to a meeting. I have attended online lectures (as there were pandemic-related restrictions in place at the time) given by him where he spoke – in general terms – about the act of activism. Finally, I have read several interviews with him.

### 8.3 De-colonising Museums

Many public museums in the Western world were established in the mid-nineteenth century (Bennett, 1988; Hooper-Greenhill, 1989). This was equally so in the Netherlands and in Amsterdam more specifically. The City of Amsterdam had experienced an explosive growth in the seventeenth century, *inter alia* because of its involvement in various colonial projects (Ariese, 2020; Hondius et al., 2018). Nineteenth-century industrialisation gave the city another boost, which led to wealthy citizens as well as governments founding new cultural institutions or investing in existing ones. The Rijksmuseum (national museum) was founded in 1800 in The Hague and moved to its current building in Amsterdam in 1885; the Stedelijk Museum (municipal museum) opened its doors in 1874; the Koloniaal Museum (ethnographic museum) was founded in 1826 and was renamed the Tropenmuseum in 1950. The Amsterdam Historic Museum (city museum), the history of which goes back to the sixteenth century, became an independent museum in 1926. It was

renamed in 2010 as Amsterdam Museum (Ariese, 2020). It may come as no surprise that various early-modern museums in Amsterdam and their collections were connected in one way or another to the colonial project (Ariese, 2020, p. 120).

Over the course of the nineteenth century, museums were deeply involved in the project of nation building, a process that went hand in hand with imperialism (Bennett, 1988; Gorman, 2011; Kratz & Karp, 2006). Although public museums may have been quite diverse, they did share the main tasks of collecting, exhibiting and preserving. Curatorial practice consisted mainly of selecting and linking (art) works in order to construct an art/cultural historical narrative and transmit it to the visitors (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Serota, 1996). These practices established a reality in which the world of some was presented as real and the world of others became erased (Vázquez, 2010, p. 3). According to Bennett, the upcoming discipline of anthropology has had a specific involvement in this process of erasure:

For it played the crucial role of connecting the histories of Western nations and civilizations to those of other peoples, but only by separating the two in providing for an interrupted continuity in the order of peoples and race – one in which “primitive peoples” dropped out of history altogether in order to occupy a twilight zone between nature and culture. (1988, p. 90)

In its capacity of naming and erasing, the term Golden Age contributed to the construction of such a bifurcated world. As museums were granted the authority to speak, the worlds they invoked were at once designated as the ‘legitimate’ worlds. As such, these authorised institutions were simultaneously a reflection of and a contributor to ‘the modern/colonial regime of representation’ (Vázquez, 2010, p. 3) which, in its turn, legitimised and naturalised the modern/colonial order (Vázquez, 2010, 2011).

The 1960s saw the end of the modern museum as a repository of objects that were steeped in knowledge produced by museum professionals and presented to (passive) audiences. In the decades that followed, museums were confronted with a number of social and economic developments that could not be ignored, such as the increasing impact of transnational mass culture, consumerism and mass tourism, the rise of democratisation movements, identity politics and multiculturalism as well as the overall penetration of neo-liberal governance (Stallabras, 2014, p. 159). These developments came in tandem with the theoretical perspectives and the practices of the ‘new museology’ (Ross, 2004). As a result, museums engaged in a process of re-inventing themselves and tried to open up to various issues addressed in society. It seems that city museums and historical museums have reacted differently to these changed social surroundings – and the policies that tried to capture them – than did (contemporary) art museums. While the latter remained fairly inward-looking for a long time, the former, in contrast, engendered a sensibility to the needs of the outside world relatively early on (Delhay & Bergvelt, 2012).

Following some years of *ad hoc* arrangements, a comprehensive diversity cultural policy was put in place for the first time in the Netherlands in 1999. This policy and subsequent diversity schemes were met with anger and distrust, as they were perceived as a kind of political intrusion in a field that is ‘neutral’ and ‘autonomous’ in nature (Delhay, 2008; Koren & Delhay, 2019).

Simultaneously, in the course of the 1990s, grassroots movements organised by postcolonial immigrants in the Netherlands were fighting for visibility and recognition. More specifically, they were demanding the acknowledgment of slavery and the slave trade as an inherent part of Dutch history. The commemoration and remembrance of slavery in the public domain was another aspect of their efforts (Jones, 2012, p. 59). In 2002, a slavery monument was unveiled as the result of the successful interventions of a group of Afro-Surinamese Dutch activists. In the same year, the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy (NiNsee) was founded. Ever since various artists and groups, who strove for emancipation for citizens with a migrant background, remained active in the public domain and were keeping the discussion alive by means of various interventions. In 2013, the Foundation to Commemorate Slavery was established and, in the same year, the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Suriname and the Dutch Antilles was celebrated. Several museums, including the Amsterdam Museum, were involved in this celebration. In 2014, the first edition of the Amsterdam Slavery Heritage Guide was published. Many other events followed suit (for a more comprehensive overview of decolonising activities in Amsterdam over the last decade, see Ariese, 2020).<sup>1</sup> Museums, too, were explicitly addressed to confront their colonial legacy. Consequently, they began to critically scrutinise their own stories, collections and even their names. As mentioned before, in 2015, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam changed any nameplates that contained hurtful and offensive words. The National Museum of World Cultures published, in 2018, a list of alternative words to those that were felt to be offensive. Also, within the Amsterdam Museum, projects were going on that aimed to de-colonise it. Education programmes, such as Mapping Slavery (2014) and the research project New Narratives (2017–2022) in particular, were projects that were set up to make the museum a multi-vocal space (Schavemaker, 2020). Several museums have explored practices of participation and consultation of diverse audiences along the process of becoming multi-vocal. Yet the key question is whether they have been able to fundamentally “invert power relations and share the voice of authority” (Kreps, 2011, p. 75). In her analysis of the impact of postcolonial critique on museums, the anthropologist Kreps rightly remarked:

It is also important to keep in mind that what, to some, is a progressive development, to others is old wine in a new bottle. Collaboration and “partnering” for some source communities are just alternative words for cultural appropriation and forms of neo-colonialism. As in all ‘contact zone’ situations, we have to consider what the terms of collaboration and partnership are and who is setting, defining and managing them. (2011, p. 81)

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<sup>1</sup>Ever since, many more decolonising events have taken place in Amsterdam. Maybe the most visible one took place on 1 July 2021, when the Amsterdam Mayor, Femke Halsema, on behalf of the city council, apologised for the involvement of the city in slavery. In her overview of de-colonising projects in Amsterdam in the decade 2010–2020, Ariese (2020) rightfully remarks that these decolonising activities have mainly focused on slavery in the Americas and on the trans-Atlantic slave trade. There has been comparatively less involvement with other aspects of colonialism, such as slavery and forced labour in Asia, as well as the “independence wars” in Indonesia and other places colonised by the Dutch (Ariese, 2020, pp. 123, 125, 130). I would like to add that there is also a relative silence about the history of labour migration and the contribution of the labour migrants and their offspring, at the economic, social and cultural levels, to Dutch society.

## 8.4 The Act of Adbusting as the Motivator for Change

On 7 May 2019, the Amsterdam Museum discovered on the Twitter account of Mitchell Esajas that one of its posters of the exhibition Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age had been defaced. A tweet also appeared on the Twitter account of the New Urban Collective (2019). The tweet showed the two images in Fig. 8.1: on the right is the original poster of the Amsterdam Museum hanging at the entrance to the Black Archives and, on the left, the poster as ‘vandalised’ by the activist. In this picture, we can see how the heads of the figures were covered over with white paint and the word BLOODY was applied in some of the white areas. Then the title Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age was replaced by Portrait of the STOLEN Age. The pictures were accompanied by the following text:

Someone has “modified” the “Hollanders of the #GoldenAge” poster from @AmsterdamMuseum that hung on #TheBlackArchives. Shout out to this anonymous artist (translation C.D.). #WhitewashingHistory No #GoldenAge but #StolenAge.

A more elaborate version of this message drawn in Dutch and in English could be read on the Facebook page of the Black Archives (2019).

The semi-permanent exhibition Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age opened its doors in the Amsterdam Wing of the Hermitage Amsterdam in November 2014. This exhibition comprised 30 large seventeenth-century group portraits featuring rich members of the Dutch bourgeoisie governing cities and the country, trading, taking on the city’s defence, etc. These large portraits belong to the collections of the Amsterdam Museum and Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. The first week of May 2019, before the start of the tourist season, fresh posters announcing the exhibition



**Fig. 8.1** Pictures used to denounce the term “Golden Age” by an anonymous activist. Shared on Twitter by the New Urban Collective on 7 May 2019

were disseminated all over the city. According to the curator of the exhibition, the poster was drawn up in English because it was specifically aimed at international tourists (T. van der Molen, personal communication, 25 May 2021). One of these posters hung near to the entrance of the Black Archives. The Black Archives is a recently founded (2015) historical archive that consists of various collections of books which mainly “focus on racism and race issues, slavery and (the) colonization, [ ...]”. The archive, located in Amsterdam in a building of the Surinamese Association, is managed by the New Urban Collective, an association of students and young professionals aiming to empower young people with ethnic-minority backgrounds (The Black Archives, n.d.). Mitchell Esajas, born in the Netherlands to Surinamese parents who went there in the 1970s, is one of the co-founders of the Black Archives/ New Urban Collective. He has also been actively involved in the Kick Out Zwarte Piet action group and has, meanwhile, become an important spokesperson in the public domain on issues related to racism in the Netherlands. He is also very much involved in the Dutch cultural field. Although the intervention has not been officially claimed, he is also believed to be the activist behind the adusting under scrutiny in this article.<sup>2</sup> Pictures of this ‘act of adusting’ (altering advertisements in order to criticise the targeted companies or institutions), were shared on Twitter and Facebook.

The Amsterdam Museum, as an institute, felt the need to respond to this intervention and the dissemination of the images via Twitter. The museum wanted to explain that the exhibition had been composed in a complex and multi-layered way (T. van der Molen, personal communication, 1 July 2021). The exhibition, focusing as it did on seventeenth-century urban culture, displayed a series of large group portraits featuring self-glorifying images of regents, regentesses and merchants. The exhibition also tried, however, to counterbalance these exalted representations by devoting attention, on the first floor of the exhibition, to the topics of poverty, disease, crime and slavery (van der Molen, 2016). The marketing department asked van der Molen, curator of the exhibition, to release a statement. The curator was rather reluctant to do so, as he, in fact, agreed with the message of the intervention (T. van der Molen, personal communication, 25 May 2021). Apparently, over the course of a short interval of time, the Amsterdam Museum had shifted from a focus on damage control to considering the subject and decided to no longer use the phrase. This decision was the culmination of a long process of development and dialogue with various communities in the city (T. van der Molen, 1 July 2021). On 12 September, the museum issued a press release and the directors and three curators posted an opinion article on the website of the museum and in one of the Dutch quality newspapers.

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<sup>2</sup> It is widely believed that the activist was Mitchell Esajas himself. He has repeatedly spoken about it in his lectures, without, however, naming himself as the activist.

## 8.5 The Term Golden Age: Creating and Decentering a Dutch National Narrative

The term Golden Age seemed an obvious title for the exhibition as it aimed at attracting international tourists. The concept of the Golden Age, referring to the exquisite Dutch heritage of the seventeenth century, has reached global resonance. The publication of Simon Schama's book *The embarrassment of riches* (1987) has contributed to the term's international fame (Van der Molen, 2019). Within the Netherlands itself, the term figured prominently in the narratives about Dutch identity and national culture. In the nineteenth century, in the process of nation building, the phrase was coined by academic historians – endowed with the authority to do so – to “nationalise” history and create social and cultural unity out of the historically and culturally diverse regions. It was meant to evoke a sense of pride in the periods of great prosperity, wealth and the outstanding accomplishments of artists, scientists and managers. The Golden Age became a key metaphor for “cultivated Dutchness” (van der Molen, 2019). Having played a pivotal role in the construction of the nation state, Dutch museums incorporated this metaphor as a key element of their museum narratives.

Pierre Bourdieu has incessantly pointed out that speaking and naming is not a neutral and pure linguistic act. Relations of communication are linguistic exchanges but they are also relations of “symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are mobilized” (Bourdieu, 1991/2000, p. 38). This means that the words which individuals, groups or institutions speak or utter are loaded with unequal weight depending on the degree of authority with which they are endowed (Thompson, 1991/2000, p. 1). Representations, constructed by naming and speaking, have, according to Bourdieu, a specific symbolic efficacy in the construction of social reality: “By structuring the perception which social agents have of the social world, the act of naming helps to establish the structure of the world, and does so all the more significantly the more widely it is recognised, i.e. authorised” (Bourdieu, 1991/2000, p. 105). Yet, as words play a key part in constructing the social world, they then are also objects of struggle between the authorized users and the various groups, which are constituted by the classifications these words install (Bourdieu, 1991/2000, p. 105).

The social operation of naming the Golden Age as a metaphor for a complex historical period of the Netherlands has not only constructed, through various “rites of institution” (Bourdieu, 1991/2000, p. 117) a potent representation of Dutch national culture and identity. In the process of imagining a glorified and homogenised community, these two words have also constructed a social reality in which groups and people were ranked according to the extent to which they could claim – or were denied access to – this very identity and culture. Some groups were made visible; others were rendered invisible, unnamed.

More than a century after its introduction in Dutch nationalist narratives, the term was still used in an obvious way by many politicians, historians, art historians and other academics as well as by Dutch citizens. However, several groups of



citizens had gradually grown critical of the words “Golden Age” and the world they bring into being. Many postcolonial migrants in the Netherlands and their children are the offspring of those who did not profit from the gathered wealth but were exploited and repressed in order to create this wealth for the Dutch. So, the way in which the perception of the social world was steered by this classification was very much inconsistent with theirs.

According to curator I.L., the concept of the Golden Age was no longer used in the educational narratives, yet as a global recognised “brand” attracting international visitors, the concept was retained in 2014 (I.L., personal communication, 20 May 2021). Curator van der Molen confirmed that he had also stopped using the term (T. van der Molen, personal communication, 25 May 2021). In 2019, discussions were ongoing about whether the design of the poster was still in line with the mission which the Amsterdam Museum wanted to communicate. The museum realised that, over the last 5 years, society had changed quite considerably. Even before the Black Lives Matter movement spread throughout Europe in 2020, discussions were already going on about removing statues honouring contentious figures from public spaces, changing controversial street names, repatriating contested heritage and decolonising museums (I.L., personal communication, 20 May 2021). This all added up to the annually recurring but increasingly harsh discussions about Black Pete festivities in the Netherlands. Within this social context, staff members of the Amsterdam Museum were discussing whether the representations which the poster features were still adequately structuring the perception of the social world which the museum envisaged. The discussion, curiously, mainly concerned the visual representation, not the words (I.L., personal communication, 20 May 2021). The act of adjusting provided a final incentive to change the images and words altogether (T. van der Molen, personal communication, 25 May 2021). From then onwards, the exhibition was titled Portrait Gallery of the Seventeenth Century. The exhibition itself was also re-conceptualised. From October 2019 onwards, a new exhibition, Dutch Masters Revisited, curated by Jörgen Tjong a Fon, was added to the original one. This new exhibition encompassed a series of photographic portraits of famous Dutch people of colour dressed and positioned in the style of the Old Masters and representing people of colour who also lived in the city in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Tjong a Fon, in Schavemaker, 2020, pp. 17–22). Merging the two exhibitions together had as its aim, according to Schavemaker – the artistic director of the museum, “to promote inclusion and social equity” (Schavemaker, in Siegal, 2019).

## 8.6 Claiming and Sharing Authority

Many descendants of migrants, born and raised in the Netherlands, still do not feel included in contemporary cultural institutes (Prins, 2019). As a result, they have gradually come to establish their own institutions and cultural spaces, create their own artistic projects and/or keep resorting to the tool of cultural activism in order to

temporarily shake up the status quo. Over the last decade, various overlapping groups of activists, artists, curators, writers and actors have been asserting the right to be heard and claiming authority for themselves to speak and name on their own terms. By setting up exhibitions, creating artworks and podcasts and writing books, these young professionals with ethnic-minority backgrounds are taking the floor instead of being the object under discussion (Nzume et al., 2020, p. 12). Provided with cultural capital and relevant social networks in and outside the Netherlands and with practical knowledge about how to play the game, these young professionals gradually succeed in changing and amplifying public culture.

The Black Archives activist, who is highly educated, well versed in postcolonial theory, competent in using new media tools and familiar with contemporary practices in the cultural field, was able to mobilise all the necessary resources and tools to execute his strategy in such a way as to effectively shake up the Amsterdam Museum. The following fragment from an interview which Mitchell Esajas gave on 6 September 2021 on the subject of diversity in the cultural sector, reveals the cultural repertoire from which he constructs strategies of action. Esajas was asked what role activism has played in the stories about colonialism now being told in the cultural sector and how activism differs from the way it functioned before. He replied as follows:

I think various things are different from before. Firstly, the mechanisms of social inequality in society and the sector [the cultural sector, C.D.] have been criticised for some time but, 20 years ago, we didn't have social media, for example. I think that has enabled our generation to be much more visible and to mobilise people. Take the protests [Black Lives Matter, 01 June 2020, C.D.] on the Dam Square, for example: that was set up within a day. More than 10,000 people showed up at the square. Another point – and which is extremely relevant for the sector: social media ensures that institutions or individuals are more easily called to account. It is nice that [...] the term the Golden Age has been adjusted. I think that's partly because of activists who have sent Tweets criticising old-fashioned terminology. And yes, institutions are certainly sensitive to such criticism and their image. (D. Comijs, interview with Mitchell Esajas, 2021, translation C.D.)

In order to understand more thoroughly the significance of and the impact generated by the act of 'adjusting' the poster of the Amsterdam Museum, the work of Emrah Irzik (2010) on cultural activism is illuminating. Although his work mainly concerns anti-corporate activism, it is certainly useful in the context of the cultural field, not least because cultural institutions have begun to act in a more "business-like" way (Stallabras, 2014 p. 149). Cultural activism, according to Emrah Irzik, "is a struggle to convey dissident viewpoints, truth claims, and alternative significations to the public by making use of the means to which activists are able to gain access" (Irizik, 2010, p. 137). The tool used by the Black Archives activist can be defined as "culture jamming" or, more specifically, as a technique of "adbusting". Culture jamming, according to Irzik, is a "tactic of political subversion and cultural protest" that tries to "capitalize on the ubiquity of corporate messages, ads and media by finding a way to use them against themselves [...]" (Irizik, 2010, p. 138). To this end, culture jammers focus on activities such as altering billboards, parodying advertisements and spoofing websites. The specific technique of adbusting used by the Black

Archives activist “involves modifying a commercial advertisement or creating a fake one that mimics the look and feel of the original to proclaim a message that criticizes or mocks the targeted company” (Irzik, 2010, p. 138). By effacing the faces of the characters and changing the words of the poster, the activist appropriates (“hijacks”) the meaning disseminated by the Amsterdam Museum and turns it into a dissident (subversive) message. The message materialised through this technique of adbusting made the world, as experienced by the activist and the broader community whose history was silenced, visible. This message was certainly not an act of mockery but, rather, an expression of criticism of the museums’ act of erasure for which the activist called the museum to account. However, there is more to it than that. While Irzik focuses primarily on how adbusting affects the content of the messages, a Bourdieusian perspective also directs attention to the struggle about the distribution between social groups of the authority to speak and name (Bourdieu, 1991/2000, p. 113). The act of adbusting by the Black Archives activist was a struggle about words and classifications that simultaneously made visible and invisible. At the same time, this act can be read as a struggle to claim the authority to speak for oneself.

A cultural intervention is, according to Irzik (2010, p. 146), all the more effective as it is grounded in an actual and focused struggle that is taking place and which also offers some perspective on change. One of the pitfalls of cultural activism is that activists see their “tool” as a social struggle in itself and fail to establish a dialogue with concrete unfolding struggles for equality (Irzik, 2010, p. 138). As mentioned before, movements striving for the visibility of colonial history, as for combating discrimination in the Netherlands, have evolved since the 1990s. Various museums and, more specifically, the Amsterdam Museum, have also carried out decolonising projects that resonated well with the act of adbusting.

Yet, in order to compete in the global marketplace of cultural consumption, museums try to connect with their target groups by selecting eye-catching and easily recognisable slogans. In the case of the Amsterdam Museum, the phrase Golden Age seemed an obvious option as it was an internationally recognised term. Simultaneously, multi-vocality has also become a key aspect of the brand ‘Amsterdam Museum’. These tensions testify to the fact that museums are not monolithic institutes, as the various departments and staff members may have different focuses.

Curators in the Amsterdam Museum have been engaged in making it a more inclusive and multi-vocal institute for quite some time. Curator I.L., in particular, has been a driving force in not only critically challenging the museum’s words and classifications but also in sharing the authority to represent. I.L., with a background in contemporary art, museology and cultural analysis and born and raised in the Netherlands to Surinamese parents, entered the Amsterdam Museum as a guest curator in 2016 during the first Black Achievement Month. This latter is an annual festival which takes place in the month of October. The festival aims to put the spotlight on talented people with African roots. After the festival ended, I.L. stayed on at the museum and very soon launched a research project entitled *New Narratives* (2017–2022). She sees herself as, at once, an activist and a staff member who

represents an “authoritative” institute (I.L., personal communication, 20 May 2021). She invited other activists/academics to comment on the representations which the museum constructed. She also collaborated in projects of the Black Archives and did so on their terms – even when she had to break with some of the rules and practices of the Amsterdam Museum (I.L., personal communication, 20 May 2021). In addition, she has the authority to bridge; as a professional curator she has the authority to speak within and for the museum as well as between museums. Curator van der Molen agreed that he has learned a lot from her, not least to listen sincerely to others (van der Molen, personal communication, 25 May 2021). Sincerely listening to others is, indeed, an essential attitude in the process of sharing the voice of authority. Yet because of I.L.’s migrant and activist background, her authority is also acknowledged by various activists and communities who do not feel sufficiently included in mainstream museums.

The protests and changes unfolding within and outside the museum intersected in such a way as to form a breeding ground for the intervention of the activist to achieve an effect. The museum decided to no longer use the term in their narratives. Not surprisingly, the decision of the museum touched off a wave of criticism, not least by the Dutch Prime Minister, who called this decision ‘nonsense’ (Jager, 2019). It may well be the case that, in the short term, this heated debate amplified the already harshly polarised attitudes towards migrants in Dutch society. In the long run, however, the decision of the museum will contribute to a wider questioning of the term Golden Age as an important element of the (once) hegemonic representation of Dutch identity and culture.

## 8.7 Conclusion

The Black Archives activist, being highly educated, well versed in postcolonial theory, competent in using new media tools and familiar with contemporary practices in the museum world, was able to mobilise all the necessary resources and tools to execute his strategy in such a way as to effectively shake up the Amsterdam Museum. His cultural intervention delivered the final blow to the use of a representation that has contributed to the construction of a bifurcated world. This intervention was effective because it coincided with de-colonising practices that had been going on in the Dutch cultural field and, more specifically, in the Amsterdam Museum, for quite some time. Yet, the contemporary complex balancing act of fulfilling multiple roles, meeting different requirements of stakeholders, funders and government officials, reaching out to various audiences and incorporating the local and the global makes the institution prone to ‘museum frictions’ (Kratz & Karp, 2006, p. 22). The museum no longer used the term Golden Age in its educational narratives and curators had also stopped using the term. Simultaneously, the museum was reaching out to international tourists with the help of that same term – which it seemed obvious to use because of its wide recognition. In the end, the adusting intervention made the museum fully aware of the meaning of these words in all occasions.

According to Boast: “[...] the contact zone [is always] an asymmetric space where the periphery comes to win some small, momentary, and strategic advantage, but where the center ultimately gains” (2011, p. 66). In my opinion, however, every small and strategic gain has the capacity to alter the centre in its ongoing and complex process of de-centring. Yet, certainly, activists will still be needed to urge museums to accelerate and strengthen this process of de-centring.

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# Chapter 9

## Can Micro Practices Change National Heritage? Norwegian National Day Celebrations in a Multicultural Setting



Karolina Nikielska-Sekula

### 9.1 Introduction

Against dominant narrations produced around national cultural heritages, *cultures*<sup>1</sup> of nations, like any culture, undergo a constant process of change, adapting themselves to the ever-changing circumstances of the world. This change, even if opposed or denied in the name of essentialist ideas of national substance, is unequivocal. Migration and mobility processes have always taken part in this change – the customs of incomers influenced local cuisines, traditions, clothing, material culture and intangible cultural heritage. Sometimes the change was introduced forcibly through colonising, at other times in a mode of a mutual exchange of commodities, practices and values. In the present day, the perpetual change of cultures continues, with immigrants' role in the process still being relevant, if not strengthened by globalisation. This chapter, responding to the core topic of this book, aims to problematise how the inhabitants of the multicultural municipality of Drammen and its surroundings change national culture. Locating the discussion within a Norwegian context, it examines how both immigrant minorities and native Norwegians de facto change the elements of Norwegian Constitution Day celebrations through their micro practices performed in the multicultural setting of the city of Drammen. The chapter asks which elements are changed and which are not, how the change is reflected in a landscape of public celebrations, whether this change is acknowledged in official

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<sup>1</sup>In this chapter, I use the term *culture* with the acknowledgement of its contested nature, of the problems with using it as an analytical concept and of recognising its processual rather than essentialised character. I then continue without italics.

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narrations of the dominant culture, who the agents of non-change are and how they may limit the ongoing cultural transformation.

Bhabha, in the opening to his prominent book *The location of culture* (2004), states that: “It is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the *beyond*” (p. 1). In this chapter, I focus on the cultural practices of the actors in the spaces *beyond* the mainstream but regarding *the very core* of mainstream culture – which is the national-day celebrations. I show how the various practices of people around Norwegian Constitution Day constitute third spaces, thus questioning the traditionally essentialised character of national heritage. Moreover, I problematise the reductionism of individual identities to their ethno-national dimensions and the reification of ethnic groups present in multicultural societies, arguing that the performances of the actors within the third space may serve as means of resistance against what Brubaker (2004) called “groupism”.

The chapter opens with a section presenting the core theoretical concepts utilised in the analysis: third space and heritage in becoming. I then critically discuss multiculturalism as a system of immigrants’ incorporation into society in international and Norwegian contexts. The third section features the methodology and context of the research, followed by a presentation of the findings. The chapter closes with a joint discussion and conclusion section, where the issues of national-culture change, third-space emergence and resistance against the reductionism of cultural practices are discussed.

## 9.2 Theoretical Framework

### 9.2.1 *Heritage in Becoming*

To analyse the practices of minorities around Norwegian national-day celebrations as a way of engaging with the heritage of the dominant population, this chapter employs a theoretical perspective originating from heritage studies – and, more specifically, the concept of heritage in becoming (Nikielska-Sekula, 2019). It refers to engaging with the environment by improvising and imitating ancestors’ practices, thus representing a practical implementation of inherited practices in adjustment to the local circumstances within which the individuals and groups find themselves.

Heritage in becoming is inspired by Ingold and Kurttila’s (2000) concept of *local traditional knowledge*. The authors, analysing the cultural practices of Sami in Lapland, distinguish between “MTK (traditional knowledge enframed in the discourse of modernity) and LTK (traditional knowledge as generated in the practices of locality)” (p. 184). They associate MTK with the genealogical model of cultural heritage represented by the state apparatus and

based on the idea that the rudiments of make-up and identity that go together to constitute a person are received, along one or several lines of descent, from that person’s ancestors, and will in turn be passed on to his descendants. [...] This assumption [...] isolates the intergenerational transmission of knowledge from environmentally situated experience. (p. 185)

In turn, *local traditional knowledge* (LTK) is the knowledge of local people, encompassing their skills obtained through engaging with the environment by improvising and imitating their ancestors' practices. In so doing, they constantly adapt traditional practices to the changing environment, redefining their heritage. *Local traditional knowledge* is therefore processual. "This process is none other than that of people's practical engagement with the environment" (Ingold & Kurttila, 2000, pp. 192–193). As the concept of LTK relates to the rural circumstances in which the small communities described by the authors operate, inspired by their work and driven by the necessity of my urban fieldwork, I developed the concept of heritage in becoming, adjusting the LTK concept to the urban setting (Nikielska-Sekula, 2019). Heritage in becoming refers therefore to the recreation of "inherited" practices by people in both rural and urban contexts. I am interested in how individuals respond to the rural and urban settings surrounding them through the technical, structural, cultural and ideological opportunities and limitations inscribed in spaces and places. As such, the concept allows the analysis of heritage practices in a dynamic way and with an acknowledgement of their non-essentialist character and the changing circumstances of the respective environment. Heritage in becoming is an ideal point of departure from which to look upon the individual practices of minorities regarding their engagement in the national heritage of Norway – beyond the official historicised narrations – and is further supported by the concept of a third space.

### 9.2.2 *The Third Space as a Space of Resistance*

The concept of a third space, developed by various scholars under different names, was popularised in social sciences upon a spatial turn, which spoke for the acknowledgement of a spatial dimension of social life. The origins of the third-space concept, as it is understood in this chapter, lie in Lefebvre's (1991) trialectic of space. Lefebvre distinguished between perceived space – things in space, conceived space – thoughts about space and lived space – space as experienced through individual biographies. The concept of third space resembles the last realm, which Lefebvre also called a representational space: "directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'" (p. 39).

Such defined third space complies with the Foucauldian idea of heterotopias (Borch, 2011, p. 113), which represent spatial alternatives to the dominant reality and are characterised by the otherness inscribed in them. Heterotopias constitute a parallel to the dominant society, are real and existing but, at the same time, are not ordinary in a given socio-cultural environment (Cenzatti, 2008, p. 82).

Inspired by Lefebvre's and Foucault's conceptualisations of a third space, Soja (1996) defined it:

as an-Other way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness that is appropriate to the new scope and significance being brought about in the rebalanced trialectics of spatiality–historicality–sociality. (p. 57)

For Soja, the third space relates to going beyond the binary opposition established in modernity: instead of promoting “an either/or choice” (Soja, 2009, p. 50), the third space opens up for “a both/and also logic”.

Bhabha (2004, p. ix) employed the concept of a third space to problematise the process of cultural-meaning creation at the intersection of various cultural discourses. For him, the third space is closely attached to the locality of cultural translation, where the negotiation of meaning is performed between the sender and the receiver of a cultural message. Within this third space, a new quality is created that can be classified as “neither one nor the other” (p. 180). Bhabha tends to present the third space as lying “in-between”. Nevertheless, this in-betweenness does not imply the reification of the categories of “origin”. Rather, it confirms that all cultures are always under constant negotiation and therefore in flux.

The similarities between Bhabha’s and Soja’s understanding of a third space were well summed up by the latter:

Bhabha’s approach, [...] is an excellent example for the understanding of “third space” as a mutual political strategy against all forms of oppression, e.g. in a broader sense to engage with the aforementioned new cultural politics of difference as well as with what I called critical thirding-as-Othering. (Soja, 2009, p. 57)

The problem of oppression inscribed into the third-space conceptualisations is crucial for the analysis presented in this chapter. In her problematisation of space, bell hooks (1989, 2009) presented various alternative spaces that bear the characteristics of what Bhabha (2004) and Soja (2009) called, respectively, third space and third-space, Foucault (1986) called heterotopias and Lefebvre (1991) representational spaces. In her account of American porches, Hooks (2009) presented them as places of shelter for females on the margins of patriarchal domestic violence as well as as a liminal space between the racialised world and the safety of home. She came up with a concept of spaces of radical openness, by which she understands the alternative space hosting people from underprivileged communities who, while entering the space of the dominant population, are not willing to melt into the mainstream nor do they want to be trapped in the image of an “exotic other” (2009, p. 19). Spaces of radical openness help them to avoid this fate, allowing the preservation of the signs relating to their background. These alternative spaces are marginal to the culture of domination but the marginality, while being clearly oppressive, nourishes resistance. As hooks puts it: “these margins have been both sites of repression and sites of resistance” (2009, p. 21). Resistance is exercised there by an active representation of otherness for it to be acknowledged as a different but equally legitimate way of being within the dominant culture.

This chapter employs the concept of the third space, defining it as an arena of new meaning creation that goes beyond an either/or categorisation popularised through a dominant culture. Instead, the third space features a unique cultural understanding created by people acting within it. Moreover, it is a space of both oppression and resistance. Its creation is fuelled by the oppression which people

with certain positionalities experience in mainstream society. Simultaneously, acting within this space allows resistance.

In what follows, I explore the emergence of such a third space through the alternative cultural practices around the Norwegian national-day celebrations. Oppression here refers to the reductionism of identity and ethnicity reification in multicultural societies.

### 9.3 Multiculturalism and the Norwegian Context

Multiculturalism, understood in this chapter as a policy of immigrants' inclusion (rather than viewed from the perspective of political philosophy), has been surrounded by heated public and academic debates in Europe and beyond, gaining a significant number of both critics and defenders. In this chapter, I do not present these debates in their complexity (but see Martiniello, 2018; Meer & Modood, 2012; Stokke & Lybæk, 2018; Zapata-Barrero, 2017). Instead, acknowledging the ambivalence of multiculturalism, including both the opportunities the system creates and its problems, I discuss some of the limitations of multiculturalism that were identified by scholars in the national contexts of the settler societies of Australia, Canada and the US (Ahmed, 2000; Bissoondath, 1994; Hollinger, 1995). I then relate them to the context of Norway, which implemented an integration policy labelled as *de facto* multicultural (Akkerman & Hagelund, 2007, pp. 197–198).

Scholars argue that multicultural policies have contributed to facilitating the voice-making of immigrants within the cultural industry. For instance, Sievers (2018), concerning literary studies, points out that multiculturalism has encouraged inclusive cultural policies in the US, Canada, Australia, the UK and Sweden, resulting in immigrant literature's recognition within national literary discourses. Without undermining the undoubtedly positive impact of multiculturalism on immigrants' inclusion into national cultural discourses, along with its positive outcomes regarding access to civic and socio-economic rights (Meer & Modood, 2012, p. 176), this chapter takes a closer look at some of the drawbacks of multiculturalism recognised, amongst others, by Ahmed (2000) in the context of Australia, Bissoondath (1994) in Canada and Hollinger (1995) in the US. Ahmed (2000, p. 96) claimed that multicultural nations tend to incorporate immigrants into their societies to use their difference to legitimate diversity, yet without acknowledging their alternative ways of being as a norm. Immigrants fit the nation by being different and therefore contribute to the produced discourse on multiculturalism. Bissoondath (1994) described Canadian multiculturalism as favouring minority over a common Canadian identity, hence creating an obstacle in recognising immigrants as Canadians, rather than ensuring equality (see also Martiniello, 1997, p. 639; Ley, 2010, p. 195). Both Bissoondath (1994) and Ahmed (2000) reached the similar conclusion that multiculturalism welcomes minority folklore over more complex cultural practices and systems of values. Immigrants are supposed to fit an image of an "exotic other"

(Hooks, 2009). Ahmed (2000, p. 110) states that “multiculturalism can only allow those differences that can be neutralized and accommodated within ‘one’ culture”. Differences that cannot be assimilated are considered a betrayal of the nation (Ahmed, 2000). Hollinger (1995), whose work is based in the US, points out that multiculturalism, conceptualised to facilitate the inclusion of immigrants, may counter this aim, because it favours the existence of primordial ethnic groups and strengthens the boundaries between them. In other words, multiculturalism may enforce groupism (Brubaker, 2004; Meer & Modood, 2012, p. 177).

The analyses above come from countries where multiculturalism has a broader meaning than it does in Europe, where the term is limited to “a post-immigration urban *mélange* and the politics it gives rise to” (Meer & Modood, 2012, p. 179). Nevertheless, the issues described above are relevant in a Norwegian context, too. While acknowledging that multicultural policies can effectively support minority rights, as shown in the extant literature (Meer & Modood, 2012, p. 176; Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010, pp. 3–4), I focus on the described drawback of multiculturalism by presenting three claims and relating them to the Norwegian context.

Firstly, while given rights and opportunities to participate in society, immigrants are still seen through the prism of ethnicity and are not accepted as fully fledged members of a dominant group, which negatively influences their integration outcomes. In Norway, this problem was described by so-called second-generation members of immigrant communities, who have been constantly asked where they *really* come from (Nikielska-Sekuła, 2018) despite being born and raised in Norway. Secondly, the folkloristic aspects of cultural expression are favoured over more-complex cultural customs. This claim goes even further in a Norwegian context. As Brochmann and Djuve (2013, p. 239) pointed out, the idea of granting immigrants the right to be different included in the first formulations of the Norwegian integration policy was borrowed from Sweden and was foreign to the Norwegian population, who have traditionally favoured sameness over individuality. The very idea of freedom of choice was interpreted in Norway as an inability to adjust to the dominant norm in the way that many Norwegians do, proving a profound difference between the newcomers and the Norwegians (Brochmann & Djuve, 2013, p. 239). Of course, this somewhat essentialist understanding of both Norwegian and immigrant culture has changed over time in favour of a more open approach to cultural difference but its residuum is still present in Norwegian society today. Finally, dominant and minority cultures are often regarded as homogeneous rather than processual. As a consequence, hybrid practices that emerge in a third space as an interplay between minority and dominant cultural expressions are often overlooked (see Sect. 9.6).

There is an ongoing discussion about whether the presented shortcomings can be assigned to multiculturalism itself or are, instead, the result of other structural, cultural and political processes (see Ley, 2010; Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010), targeting multiculturalism as “the only target that is visible” (Ley, 2010, p. 201). This chapter cannot solve this debate. Instead, it acknowledges the presented shortcomings as part of immigrants’ everyday experiences in so-called multicultural societies and uses them as a background for analysing migrants’ practices around Norwegian national-day celebrations.

## 9.4 Methodology and Context

The findings presented in this chapter are based on the following types of data: (1) visual ethnography of the children's parades held on Constitution Day in Drammen over 3 years (2014, 2015 and 2016); (2) 10 unstructured interviews with the users of Norwegian-Turkish facilities conducted during 2015 Constitution Day in Drammen; (3) 12 in-depth interviews with second- and third-generation Norwegian Turks conducted between 2013 and 2014 in Drammen; and (4) 18 interviews using a photo-elicitation technique conducted in 2020 with Poles settled in Drammen, Norway and its surroundings. Additionally, (5) I analysed an 8-hour-long live-streaming of 2020 Constitution Day celebrations in Drammen which, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, were held mostly online and without a city-wide parade and (6) I examined the content published on a public Facebook page promoted by Drammen Municipality as a place where people could share pictures from their private celebrations of 2020 Constitution Day as a substitute for a city-wide parade. The data detailed above come from several research projects and are not comprehensively presented here. Instead, I selected and analysed the content regarding Norwegian Constitution Day celebrations by minorities. The rest of the data serve as context. The respective research projects obtained the relevant ethical approvals from Telemark University College Ethical Committee and the Norwegian Center for Data Research and the participants gave informed consent to participate. The collected interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic coding (Bryman, 2012) along with the pictures garnered (both researcher- and respondent-generated), ethnographic data (field notes) and online materials. The methodological approach relied on qualitative methods employing ethnography, interviewing and visual sociology techniques. The composition of the interviewees was as follows: Norwegian Turks represented the so-called second and third generation, aged 18–45, of Sunni and Alevi religious background, whose members were from the working and lower-middle classes. The Poles were all first-generation immigrants, aged 27–49 – mostly highly educated professionals, some were skilled workers and one worked as an unskilled worker despite having a higher-education diploma from Poland.

In the data collection process, I mixed two methodological stances common in urban studies focusing on migration (Wessendorf, 2014, p. 14). I combined data collected in the studies – where respondents were recruited with regard to the community of belonging, based on self-categorisation (Norwegian Turks and Poles in Norway) – with data obtained through the focus on particular spaces: the city of Drammen, its Strømsø neighbourhood and the city-wide event of the Constitution Day children's parade in Drammen. In naming respondents' origins, I followed an inductive approach recreating their identification as Polish and Turkish. Concerning Turks, I referred to them as Norwegian Turks as my extensive research on this group (Nikielska-Sekula, 2018) proved their strong belonging to Norway, which I wanted to acknowledge.

A qualitative approach requires a researcher to disclose her positionality. I am of Polish origin, had been settled in Norway for 9 years at the time of writing and

belong to the Norwegian-Polish community. I have extended experience of studying, working and living in Turkey and a good command of the Turkish language and culture. My positionality can therefore be described as an insider (concerning the Polish respondents) and an insider by proxy (for Norwegian Turks) (Carling et al., 2014). This positionality helped me to prompt more-critical and honest attitudes towards Norwegian society, facilitated the recruitment of Poles and gave me a deep insight into the cultural patterns of the Poles and, to a lesser extent, the Norwegian Turks. It may have limited, however, my understanding of the way of being typical in Norway, which I attempted to fill in through desk research on the topic, conversations with native Norwegians, receiving academic supervision at a Norwegian university and following the relevant academic courses.

Norwegian Constitution Day is widely celebrated on 17 May throughout the entire country and beyond. The celebrations involve public parades of schoolchildren, music corps and other associations and are streamed live in local and national media. The attention given to the celebrations by both the minority and the majority population is significant and the celebrations have a symbolic meaning for the dominant society. It is common to celebrate wearing traditional Norwegian folk dresses and waving Norwegian national flags.

Drammen is a mid-sized city located near Oslo, the capital of Norway. It is one of the most diverse municipalities in Norway with 28.5% of its population made up of immigrants and Norwegians born to immigrant parents (SSB Statistics Norway, 2021). The area of Stromsø is a business district with many immigrant-owned shopping facilities. Over the years, Drammen municipality has enforced a narration of diversity as a resource (conversation with an expert from Drammen municipality). It has patronised and financed several initiatives aimed at giving visibility to minority culture, including the Globus Food Festival and Interkultur, a national competence centre for multicultural communication.

## 9.5 An Emerging Third Space in Private Settings

The findings from my research conjure up an image of a wide range of private celebrations of Constitution Day that involve the multicultural character of Drammen. In these celebrations, minorities prevail but native Norwegians are also present and contributing to the cultural change. I classified performed practices into five categories, placing them on a scale from full engagement in official narrations of Constitution Day to the celebration of minority culture. The categories are as follows: (1) celebrations with explicit reference to Norwegian heritage and following celebration patterns traditionally associated with Norwegian Constitution Day, (2) celebrations with explicit reference to Norway and following alternative celebration patterns, (3) practices following minority celebration patterns and with limited reference to Norwegian heritage, (4) instrumental practices lacking engagement in

Norwegian heritage and, (5), reactionary practices. The categories are ideal types and the actual celebrations of the respondents often combined practices from different categories.

### **Celebrations with Explicit Reference to Norwegian Heritage and Following Celebration Patterns Traditionally Associated with Norwegian Constitution Day**

A Polish couple, Anna and Grzegorz, were eagerly engaging with Constitution Day celebrations. They admitted decorating their house with Norwegian flags, preparing food for the day – including a cake in the colours of the Norwegian flag – and participating in a local parade with their child. They also showed me a picture of their daughter wearing a *bunad*, the Norwegian folk costume popular among adults (especially women) and children. Another Polish couple with children also reported celebrating in a customary way together with Norwegian families, including breakfast with champagne:

Usually, we are invited to join a Norwegian family. And we are celebrating as it should be – with a parade and so on (...) We do not hang a Norwegian flag though. We haven't got soaked in here that much yet but our children have flags. (Katarzyna, female, 37; Wojtek, male, 39)<sup>2</sup>

Cansu, a Turkish respondent who usually celebrates Constitution Day in a Turkish ethnic association, revealed a deeper attachment to and meaning of the event at an individual level:

17 May is very important to me because I live in Norway and I feel that I have to respect the country that gives me bread. I have to be a part of them. (Cansu, female, 24)

Additionally, the members of the Turkish association which organises the yearly celebrations of Constitution Day admitted that the gathering takes place after a city-wide parade, which most of the participants attend.

The celebrations presented here are performed by minorities in a way that attempts to recreate practices traditionally associated with Constitution Day. The change of national culture is therefore limited here to the overall change which cultural practices undergo along temporal lines. They feature the negotiation of Norwegian heritage by minorities and hence constitute a third space. Interestingly, many respondents adopted these new practices as part of their heritage, enriching the sets of their cultural practices originating from their background cultures.

### **Celebrations with Explicit Reference to Norway and Following Alternative Celebration Patterns**

Kemal, a Norwegian-Turkish respondent, stated that his private celebrations involve wide reference to Norwegian nationalism, even though the food he eats is ethnic: “We hang up flags and celebrate, even though we do not eat 100% Norwegian food.” (Kemal, male, 27)

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<sup>2</sup>All translations from Polish and Norwegian are the author's.





**Fig. 9.1** A woman in Norwegian traditional costume entering a Turkish Restaurant in Drammen on Norwegian Constitution Day. (Photo: Karolina Nikielska-Sekula)

Interestingly, some native Norwegians follow similar celebration patterns (Fig. 9.1). The landscape of Drammen is filled with ethnic restaurants and many native Norwegians reserve tables for a Constitution Day dinner in local ethnic restaurants, de facto celebrating Norway over ethnic meals (and often wearing *bunads*). Most probably these actions are not meant to transform the Norwegian heritage but, rather, represent the mere act of adjusting inherited practices to present circumstances – i.e. heritage in becoming (Ingold & Kurttila, 2000; Nikielska-Sekula, 2019). Nevertheless, they de facto change culture. These negotiations of heritage by both minorities and natives, with their unique, hybrid outcome, definitely constitute a third space.

### **Practices Following Minority Celebration Patterns and with Limited Reference to Norwegian Heritage**

Respondents of Turkish background often described Constitution Day gatherings as involving an extended family meeting accompanied by Turkish food. Several respondents stated that these meetings resemble the gatherings organised on other occasions, including *Ramazan* and *Kurban Bayramı* – Islamic holidays widely celebrated in Turkey. Some Turkish associations organise common celebrations at their premises. They order food from a local Turkish restaurant and spend time dining together. The celebrations are accompanied by customary occasional

congratulations; however, more elaborate references to Norwegian nationalism such as flags are not purposely involved. Moreover, Turkish ethnic clubs open early in the morning on Constitution Day, waiting for their members to go and spend time together in a way which is common in these places – drinking tea, chatting and playing board games. These ethnic clubs, which welcome mostly Sunni males of Turkish origin, are set up to recreate a culture of *çayhane* (teahouse) popular in Turkey (see Nikielska-Sekula, 2016). Since these are, however, private places rather than teahouse businesses, they remain closed on weekdays during working hours. Norwegian Constitution Day is an occasion to gather there after (or during) the city parade, even if Norwegian nationalism is not explicitly celebrated during these gatherings.

A practice of organising alternative celebrations was also observed among Poles in Norway. Some respondents reported organising a yearly “traditional 17 May barbecue” – where the adjective “traditional” relates to the repetitive character of the event, rather than to the tradition of Constitution Day itself. I had the occasion to participate in one such event. It featured a barbecue, regarded by Polish respondents as traditionally Polish, even if the food served – grilled pork neck and beer – resembled similar barbecue practices in Europe generally. There were no explicit references to Norwegian nationalism other than the napkins in the colours of the Norwegian flag and the customary (in Norway) congratulations on the day at the beginning. However, the conversations did not focus on Constitution Day and the event was reported as a mere social gathering. However, the invitation referenced the national day of Norway. During the meeting, I asked whether this event is organised on the occasion of Constitution Day: – “No... but actually yes. We are not celebrating Norway here but we meet exactly on the occasion of 17 May” (Jola, female, 33, field notes) was the answer. Wanting to push further, I asked why this meeting is not organised on Polish Constitution Day, celebrated on 3 May. Another person replied, “We don’t have a day off on 3 May.” (Jan, male, 37, field notes). Another one added, “But even if we had, we wouldn’t celebrate Poland with flags and red and white cakes anyway. There would be the same meeting as this one, with sausages and Polish people around.” (Jola, field notes). The event that I experienced was like those reported by other Polish respondents, who stated that they “are just trying to eat something good. We’re grilling and [eating] some dessert.” (Anna, female, 38; Grzegorz, male, 41).

Marking Norwegian Constitution Day through a gathering within an ethnic group, even if lacking elaborated reference to Norwegian nationalism, has become part of a tradition shared by the respondents, gaining a repetitive character over the years and allowing the performance of customary festivities common among Poles in Norway and beyond. These celebratory practices, different in character from ethnic Norwegian 17 May celebrations but containing reference to the day and performed on its occasion, create a third space within which alternative meanings of Norwegian heritage are performed. Additionally, the tradition of Constitution Day celebrations is adjusted to the circumstances of where it is celebrated (within ethnic communities), gaining characteristics of heritage in becoming (Nikielska-Sekula, 2019).

### Instrumental Practices

Less-engaged attitudes towards Constitution Day were also present among the respondents. Some declared a more instrumental attitude, participating in public celebrations regularly but from the standpoint of an “external observer” (Can, male, 23) and out of necessity imposed by their children’s schools. Others fully refrained from public celebrations, benefiting actively from a day off:

I do not run with a Norwegian flag, I do not wear Norwegian national costume because I am not a Norwegian. [...] I am more of an observer. [...] I’m glad it’s a day off. [...] [I’m] more like an observer. (Artur, male, 42)

Here, engagement with the celebrations is either absent or is limited to an observer stance. This adds to the variety of attitudes which people, both minorities and native Norwegians, take towards the Constitution Day celebrations but does not imply an active change of national culture. I labelled these practices as instrumental, as they serve as a way of not standing out against the mainstream population in Norway and of fulfilling what is expected from the inhabitants of Norway and especially from school children’s parents on this day – to participate in the parade or at least to show respect for the celebrations.

### Reactionist Practices

For some respondents, Constitution Day celebrations tend to activate their own patriotic feelings towards the ancestral homeland, feelings which translate into actions either on Constitution Day or on other occasions. Interestingly, these were mostly Poles – perhaps due to the fact that they settled in Norway only recently. While exposing foreign national flags on Constitution Day is uncommon, there were a few cases of people doing so during private celebrations or on the facades of their houses. What is more, some respondents were organising small celebrations of Polish traditions privately and at their workplaces – not only on national days (Fig. 9.2a) but also on Fat Thursday (Fig. 9.2b) and Women’s Day. Others were committed to presenting positive aspects of ancestral culture through wearing

**Fig. 9.2a** Decoration for a celebration of Polish Independence Day in the colours of the Polish flag. (Photo: Anna – research participant)





**Fig. 9.2b** Food for a Polish Fat Thursday celebration decorated with Polish flags. (Photo: Anna – research participant)

**Fig. 9.3** Everyday outfit inspired by Polish folklore. (Photo: Justyna – research participant)



clothing that referenced Polish folklore (Fig. 9.3). Some of the Polish respondents openly stated that they very much enjoy seeing how Norwegians are proud of their nation and they would like to see this kind of pride free from political battles in their ancestral homeland too. Their attitudes towards national-day celebrations in Poland were complex. These celebrations were imposed by the government in the

communist era and their disgust with this compulsion restrained many from participating after 1989. Today, in turn, national-day celebrations are claimed by right-wing policy supporters. Simultaneously, representatives of other political options, including leftists, are making constant attempts to reclaim them, which altogether entangles Polish national days in political disputes.

These practices reflect Foucauldian heterotopias, constituting yet another third space in Norwegian society. They are parallel to the dominant society – real and existing but not ordinary in a Norwegian socio-cultural environment, yet created in close association with it. They are triggered by both a feeling of foreignness in Norway and admiration for the Norwegian nationalism that the actors attempt to recreate. In contrast to the respondents who, out of sympathy for the Norwegian celebrations of Constitution Day, joined the mainstream replicating Norwegian heritage, here the positive reception of Norwegian nationalism was channeled into a mild reactionist nationalism of origin. Sometimes these acts are met with criticism from both fellow immigrants and, less often, from mainstream society, as reported by my respondents.

### **The Private Celebration of Constitution Day: Summary**

No matter whether it is celebrated with elaborate or limited reference to Norway, Constitution Day is marked by the inhabitants of Drammen municipality and the surrounding area, often through a mix of joining in with mainstream events and combining them with private ones, shared within the ethnic group. They make use of Norwegian heritage, adjusting it to the surrounding circumstances: be they mainstream celebrations with native Norwegians and/or members of ethnic minorities, minority festivity patterns or the diverse setting of Drammen. These negotiations of heritage reflect how the genealogical idea of Norwegian national heritage is adjusted to the cultural, structural and spatial circumstances which individuals have created and/or within which they act. They represent heritage in becoming (Nikielska-Sekula, 2019). The alternative festivity practices performed on that day contribute to the emergence of third spaces on the backstage of Norwegian society and with alternative meanings surrounding the Constitution Day celebrations. These practices have taken on a repetitive nature over the years and are part of an ongoing change of the national heritage of Norway.

## **9.6 Third-Space Recreation in the Public Sphere**

### **Children's Parades in the City of Drammen in Pre-pandemic Times**

While the emergence of various third spaces in private settings is evident, the question I attempt to answer in this section is whether these third spaces are visible in the public, city-wide celebrations. My data from the yearly observation of the parades over 3 years in the city of Drammen show that signs of minority identity were featured during the parades, reflecting the ethnic diversity of the city's inhabitants. These signs included visibly and sensually observable elements of clothing,

hairstyles and languages spoken. The impression was that the initiatives taken by some participants in the parade were freely recreating the third spaces of alternative meanings and practices in private spaces. Some highlights from the parades included a group of Indian dancers in traditional Indian clothing (Fig. 9.4), school children wearing ethnic or religious elements of clothing (Figs. 9.5 and 9.6), variations on traditional Norwegian folk dresses, including combining the *bunad* with Islamic *hijabs* (Fig. 9.7) – the latter representing a telling visual example of heritage in becoming. These public performances of alternative engagement with Norwegian heritage pave the way for a wider acknowledgment of the practices, currently happening in the third space on the backstage of Norwegian society, within the national heritage of Norway. These practices are both unbarred and unobtrusive – giving a visible voice to minority identities but also generally refraining from involving foreign national symbols in the celebrations of Norwegian heritage, with a few exceptions. A lack of foreign flags in celebrations intensifies the impression that these not-obvious interpretations of Norwegian heritage belong nowhere else but to Norway. This strong statement, however, does have a few doubts associated with it, one being: To what extent are alternative practices acknowledged and accepted in official narrations of the event? The answer remained blurred until the 2020 celebrations, which were conducted according to a strict sanitary regime and hence with little space for the free public initiatives of individuals.



**Fig. 9.4** Indian dancers at the parade for the Norwegian Constitution Day. (Photo: Karolina Nikielska-Sekuła)



**Fig. 9.5** Schoolchildren at the parade wearing ethnic elements of clothing. (Photo: Karolina Nikielska-Sekuła)



**Fig. 9.6** Schoolchildren at the parade wearing religious elements of clothing. (Photo: Karolina Nikielska-Sekuła)



**Fig. 9.7** Variations on traditional Norwegian folk dresses, including combining the *bunad* with Islamic *hijabs*. (Photo: Karolina Nikielska-Sekuła)

### 2020 “Corona” Celebrations of a National Day in Drammen

Employing sensitising concepts to steer my attention towards visual, sensory and verbal references to diversity, I analysed an 8-hour-long live streaming of the 2020 Constitution Day celebrations in Drammen produced by the Drammen municipality (Drammen municipality, 2020a). The streaming was meant as a substitute for public celebrations, featuring some typical activities traditionally held in the city with a wide audience: remembrance ceremonies at heritage sites, music performances and – the highlight of the day – the children’s parade. The latter took the form of short videos prepared by each school in Drammen municipality featuring children waving Norwegian flags, singing and performing other activities typical of Constitution Day celebrations. The analysis of this live streaming showed that the references to diversity were limited in the 2020 celebrations compared to what I observed during the city-wide parades. There were a few oral mentions of diversity. One was made by Drammen’s Mayor, who acknowledged Drammen as one of the most diverse municipalities in the country, stating that diversity “gives us strength”. The selection of guests invited to the studio, as well as people featured during transmissions from outside it, did not reflect the composition of the diverse population of Drammen, giving voice mostly to white Norwegians. The streaming lacked expressive (Jakobson, 1972) – that is, intentional – reference to ethnic identities besides the Norwegian one; people wore either traditional Norwegian folk dresses or globalised elegant festive outfits such as suits and dresses. An important exception here was a second TV host: a person of colour who admitted having a



minority background (half Somali, half Norwegian). The host wore Norwegian folk dress and had no expressive signs of Somali identity inscribed in her appearance but her presence helped to break the dominance of whiteness on the screen. The most visibly presented diversity were the videos from schools replacing the children's parades. In these videos, signs of diversity were common and visible, with many children of colour present, reflecting the actual diversity of Drammen but only in a phatic (Jakobson, 1972) or unintentional way, and with some signs of religious belonging – the most commonly, Islamic veils. Expressive ethnic references like flags and folk costumes were not visible at all and diversity was displayed literally against the background of a Norwegian flag. Additionally, some of the performers invited to the studio were of minority background. They also followed a mainstream pattern of wearing common festivity clothes with no ethnic reference. They performed work from a classical international canon of music. An image of the difference accommodated within Norwegian culture was observed during the physical children's parades in previous years. The difference between the physical parades from pre-pandemic years and the 2020 streaming, however, was that the reflection of the rich and diverse practices around Constitution Day celebrations performed in third spaces of private celebrations during physical parades in previous years disappeared from the live streaming. Nor did the members of minorities take the opportunity to share their alternative modes of celebration on a Facebook page promoted by the municipality of Drammen on the occasion (Drammen municipality, 2020b). The Facebook feed featured mostly white, native Norwegians' celebrations, with just a small number of pictures representing people of other ethnic backgrounds but still within a setting of a mainstream-style celebration, e.g. waving Norwegian flags.

Altogether, diversity during the live streaming of the 2020 celebrations was used to legitimate Drammen as an open, multicultural municipality, within the course of its official narration of multiculturalism as a resource. This worked especially through the presence of a person of colour in the main role of a TV host, which broke with the assumption that whiteness is inscribed in the definition of Norwegianness.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, further diverse cultural content was neglected. Interestingly, individuals acting within the described third spaces have themselves not used this opportunity to mark their presence either. A question that arises here is whether they did not want to share the alternative cultural practices or were trying to protect themselves from hate speech on social media, as experienced by Sahfana M. Ali in 2016, when she posted a picture of herself posing in a Norwegian folk costume and wearing a *hijab* (Nettavisen, 2016). My data are too limited to answer this question but the actors from the municipality responsible for the 2020 celebrations, along with the commenters against Sahfana M. Ali, may have acted as the agents of non-change safeguarding the national heritage of Norway from the

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<sup>3</sup>Some researchers argued that the concept of whiteness is fundamental to the construction of Norwegianness (Jacobsen & Andersson, 2012, p. 14), imposing a binary opposition between the definition of Norwegians and immigrants (Gullestad, 2006, pp. 72–74) and closing the options for newcomers of colour to acquire Norwegianness by customising Norwegian practices (Vassenden, 2010).

ongoing de facto transformation described earlier. The possibility of accepting ethnic and racial minorities as Norwegians has been discussed and acknowledged in many circles in Norway.

The current challenge for the Norwegian approach to diversity is to accommodate a minority heritage within the national heritage of Norway and this seems to be something which not many people are ready to do quite yet.<sup>4</sup> In that sense, the municipal actors acted as the agents of non-change in relation to the content of Norwegian national culture, which was kept within national frames. In other words, while the construction of Norwegianness opens up for people of colour and ethnic minorities, the national cultural heritage in its official, institutionalised version has not acknowledged the change of culture that is happening in the described third spaces.

## 9.7 Discussion and Conclusions

### 9.7.1 *Spaces of Radical Openness vs Identity Reduction in Multicultural Societies*

There is an inconsistency between a wide range of alternative practices around Norwegian Constitution Day celebrations – which constitute heritage in becoming and are exercised within the described third spaces – and the extent to which they are acknowledged in official narrations of the event. What Ahmed (2000), and Bissoondath (1994) criticised about Australian and Canadian multiculturalism seems to be true for the municipality of Drammen’s idea of accommodating diversity within the national-day celebrations. They both pointed out a paradox present in the respective countries, where cultural difference is accommodated within a common discourse to legitimise the multicultural character of the nation. However, this is done in a superficial way and with no recognition of alternative cultural practices. My data show that the municipality of Drammen, in its design of the 2020 celebrations, prioritised sameness in relation to cultural practices throughout the streaming, omitting alternative celebration practices popular among the ethnically diverse population of Drammen. Featuring the diversity focused mostly on a (somewhat limited) inclusion of minorities in the live streaming: a presenter of colour, performers of minority background and a few oral references to the diversity as a source of Drammen’s strength. Omitting the alternative cultural practices of minorities and yet using their image to reference Drammen as a municipality proud of its multicultural character may be interpreted as an example of using minorities to legitimise the open and multicultural character of Drammen without, however,

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<sup>4</sup>However, there are institutional attempts to do so, e.g. through various exhibitions and events hosted by the Norwegian Folk Museum in Oslo.

making space for alternative cultural practices exercised by these people in official narrations of Constitution Day celebrations.

In turn, the findings from the physical children's parades held in pre-pandemic times exemplified that ethnic references, as well as individual hybrid interpretations of Norwegian national heritage, were common and visible there. Inspired by hooks (2009), I interpret these expressions of alternative understandings and patterns of Constitution Day celebrations as a formation of spaces of radical openness, even if the need for resistance is not equally conscious among the respondents. Hooks (1989, p. 19) states:

this place of radical openness is a margin – a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a 'safe' place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance.

Alternative practices around Constitution Day celebrations are indeed located at the margins of the dominant culture. Bringing them into the city's streets requires courage and self-confidence. Not all these practices are approved by the dominant discourse. Changing the meaning of Norwegian folk dress by adding Islamic veils (Kvam, 2020; Nettavisen, 2016; Rossing, 2016), using foreign flags in national-day celebrations (Bai, 2018; Brakstad & Ripegut, 2018) and – perhaps the least controversial – involving minority folk dresses in the celebrations sparked some public discussions. Since these activities, held in a public space, openly refer to alternative identities, a conclusion may be drawn that the actors seek recognition of their difference within the framework of Norwegian heritage celebrations. They resist through occupying the marginal spaces on the edges of a dominant cultural norm and with a difference incorporated into their ways of being, talking and physical appearance. The critical voices towards these manifestations prove that this margin is, indeed, not a safe place, as per hooks (2009). The resistance, whether conscious or not, opposes the reductionist approaches of accommodating cultural difference superficially, an approach demonstrated in the 2020 Constitution Day celebrations when the power over what was displayed in public was centralised.

### ***9.7.2 Towards Cultural Change***

The alternative practices described here, along with the attempts at their manifestation in a public space of dominant cultural discourse, initiate the de facto change of the Norwegian national heritage. This change happens through the everyday negotiations of cultural difference (Neal et al., 2013, p. 310; see also Vertovec, 2015) by the actors. Individuals, of both minority and native background, engage with the national heritage of Norway, adapting it to the multicultural setting of the localities which they inhabit. Through their practices, the third space emerges, featuring what I call a "heritage in becoming" (Nikielska-Sekula, 2019): individual interpretations of the genealogical model of national heritage adjusted to the current circumstances of the present, whether spatial, cultural, structural or other. Along with the agents of

change, those of non-change are active in the form of powerful actors shaping official narrations of Norwegian heritage, as well as bottom-up commentators and the media opposing or criticising the change.

Both Bhabha (2004) and Soja (2009, p. 58) indicate that the third space resembles the space of cultural difference beyond the universalist frameworks of liberal democracies. The third space, therefore, goes beyond the generalised oppositions in a given social setting, revealing the alternative social and cultural formations that can be classified neither as a majority nor as an “opposition”. The alternative practices presented in this chapter can be assumed to be neither mainstream nor entirely relating to the minority culture – going, therefore, beyond the either/or discourse on Norwegianness and otherness. As the streaming from the 2020 Constitution Day celebrations shows, these alternative ways are not fully recognised within the official Constitution Day narratives. The process of culture change finds, therefore, a place on the backstage of Norwegian society – beyond, if not against, the institutionalised heritage. The 2020 live streaming of Constitution Day in Drammen presents an incorrect, reductionist picture of diversity, limiting it to the presence of some representatives of racial and ethnic minorities but profoundly omitting any diverse cultural content. This coincides with the problems the regimes of cultural difference accommodation in multicultural societies may produce (Ahmed, 2000; Bissoondath, 1994; Hollinger, 1995). The conclusion one can draw is that a non-settler multicultural country such as Norway is not free from the problem of reductionism identified in multicultural settler societies such as Australia, Canada and the USA. This further calls for both academics and practitioners to continue their efforts to target the downplaying of minorities’ complex cultural customs and values in favour of mere folklore at both a normative and an empirical level.

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**Part III**  
**Research, the Arts and Cultural**  
**Production: Joint Ventures for Change**

# Chapter 10

## Collaborations Between Academics, Artists and Activists: Transforming Public Understandings and Representations of Migration Issues



Umut Erel

### 10.1 Introduction

This chapter reflects on collaborations between academics, artists and activists to explore the complexity of issues of migration when seeking to engage with diverse audiences. Universities and funders increasingly urge researchers to generate ‘impact’ with their work. Yet, often such official notions of impact can be instrumental and reduce any idea of societal change to the arena of policy change, narrowly conceived as governmental policy only. Such limiting ideas of what constitutes impact are often driven by governmental policy agendas, rather than by the needs, insights and wishes of the people affected.

In contrast, the collaborations discussed in this chapter are embedded in a different ethical framework drawing on participatory action research values. While, in recent years, migration has been a constant topic of public debate, the terms of this debate often ignore the voices and viewpoints of migrants themselves. As much as researchers may wish to bring these voices and viewpoints into public debates, it can be challenging to overcome the simplifications and entrenched polarisations of public debates on migration. One avenue that I have found fruitful in bringing research findings not only to academic but also to wider public debates was to undertake these efforts in collaboration with artists and activists. As I argue in this chapter, such collaborations can help to side-step dominant discourses that draw strict boundaries between “society” and “migrants” and can enable dialogic exchanges.

The chapter begins by exploring the ethos and values of participatory action research approaches, to draw out what migration researchers can learn about engaging with research participants as well as artists, activists and non-academic

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audiences. It argues that the currently dominant public debates on migration provide problematic, often polarised representations and understandings of migration issues. Intervening in these public understandings of migration can usefully be seen as a form of socially transformative action in which migration researchers should engage together with research participants and other stakeholders. The chapter then argues that arts-based methods offer the possibility to constitute a transformative sphere for understanding issues around migration outside of established polarised discourses. It argues that these arts-based approaches are useful both for generating research and for public engagement around it. The chapter then discusses a public engagement project and presents concrete examples and reflections on how alternative spaces and formats can allow more nuanced and complex engagements with the public.

## 10.2 Participatory Action Research Ethos and Values

While there are many different reasons to engage with diverse publics on issues of migration research, my own trajectory is informed by participatory action research approaches, which I outline in this section. Participatory action research or PAR has a commitment to research which is not simply about academic debate but which also aims to engage with the people whose lives the research project addresses. PAR does not simply view research participants as providing raw data – which can then be transformed into knowledge by researchers – but, instead, values research participants’ knowledge and aims to actively involve them in the process of co-constructing knowledge. PAR emphasises that researchers and participants both create knowledge together, focusing on creating knowledge that makes a positive difference to the lives of the people with whom it works. The three terms “participatory”, “action” and “research” are all valued as important elements. This chapter focuses on how migration researchers can engage with arts and activism to enable more nuanced and productive public engagement on issues of migration.

PAR aims to create a more equal relationship between researchers and participants and often works closely with stakeholders outside academia. PAR

requires researchers to work with practitioners. Unlike conventional social science, its purpose is not primarily or solely to understand social arrangements, but also to effect desired change as a path to generating knowledge and empowering stakeholders. (Bradbury-Huang, 2010, p. 93)

This collaborative element is a value in itself but, also importantly, it can ensure that research leads to action for social transformation. While PAR researchers acknowledge that these aims cannot always be fully met, a commitment to the key values that underpin PAR research is an orientation that is likely to lead to more equitable relationships between researchers, practitioners and people involved in the process, as well as ensuring that research outcomes can encourage action and provide tools for social transformation. O’Neill and Harindranath (2006, p. 46) define the following as core values of PAR:

PAR is rooted in principles of inclusion (engaging people in the research design, process and outcomes); participation; valuing all local voices; and community driven sustainable outcomes. PAR is a process and a practice directed towards social change with the participants; it is interventionist, action-oriented and interpretive. It involves a commitment to research that develops partnership responses to developing purposeful knowledge (praxis); includes all those involved where possible, thus facilitating shared ownership of the development and outcomes of the research; uses innovative ways of consulting and working with people and facilitates change with communities and groups.

Both Bradbury-Huang (2010) and O'Neill and Harindranath (2006) emphasise the active role of practitioners as well as communities involved in the research process. As this chapter looks particularly at the ways in which researchers engage with the wider public on issues of migration, my focus is specifically on action to transform the representations of migrants and migration issues, as well as the transformation of public understandings and debates on migration.

Some of the key principles of PAR are particularly relevant for research and engagement on migration. An important aspect of PAR approaches is the way in which the relationship between researchers and participants is conceptualised. Conventional research often sees the researchers' role as accessing, systematising and interpreting data. This view presumes a clear division between the research participant – who can contribute data – and the work of turning these raw data into knowledge itself, which is done by the researcher. PAR challenges this idea of the researcher as expert in collecting and making sense of data and, instead, sees research participants, practitioners and institutions as partners in creating knowledge. PAR challenges the hierarchy between researcher and research participants, aiming for a more “symmetrical” relationship between the two (Borda, 1999). PAR sees the inclusion of participants' knowledge as an important way of improving researchers' understanding of the issue under study; however, alongside the idea of improving knowledge, PAR also acknowledges participation itself as an important value. For PAR it is important to assess the quality of participation and of collaboration between researchers and participants. In particular for migration research, often initiated by policy requirements, rather than migrants' own needs, the importance of engaging migrants as experts on their own experiences is increasingly being voiced (e.g. Flynn, 2020). PAR also has a commitment to producing knowledge that supports socially transformative action. While conventional social research often relies on a somewhat strict distinction between the researcher's knowledge and capability for social scientific thinking on the one hand and the research participants' knowledge on the other, which is seen as mainly used for practice and action and not so much for reflection and analysis. PAR, instead, insists that knowledge and action are closely interrelated. PAR researchers see their participants as already having relevant knowledge and aim to co-produce more knowledge together with their participants. This means valuing the experiences, views and practices of migrants and considering how this knowledge is useful for social action. Social action and knowledge are not strictly delimited from each other and together can construct new knowledge which values migrants' experiences and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of migration as a form of social action. In this

sense, then, the PAR research ethos is one that puts as much emphasis on action for social change as it does on knowledge. This is particularly relevant when thinking about the audiences with whom researchers engage. Bradbury-Huang (2010) notes that PAR researchers have at least two main audiences: firstly, one composed of participants and practitioners, which tends to be interested in practical outcomes and social change. Multi-media outputs are often best suited to engaging this audience via websites, short video clips or visually engaging reports and toolkits. The second audience that PAR researchers address are fellow academics, who might be interested in the theoretical, methodological and other findings of the research, addressed in academic writing such as books and journal articles.

The PAR approaches from which I am taking inspiration follow in the footsteps of the liberatory PAR developed in the Global South, such as Paulo Freire's notions of the Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1996), in which he emphasises the importance of involving students in both posing the questions and in finding solutions for a pedagogy which moves away from a hierarchical system whereby teachers simply transmit knowledge to their students. Orlando Fals Borda (1999) underlines that PAR ethics seek to develop a relationship based on a "symmetric reciprocity" between them. This is based on the understanding that both are "real 'thinking, feeling persons' (*sentipensantes*), whose views on the research experience could jointly be taken into account" (1999, p. 13). If we understand researchers and participants as 'thinking, feeling persons', this has consequences for the ways in which PAR researchers can communicate knowledge in a format that does not produce or reproduce hierarchies among academics and research participants. This is because academic texts and conference formats are often deeply imbued with power relations and institutional practices that militate against such an ethos of symmetric reciprocity and, instead, aim to create and reproduce academic hierarchies (Bell & Pahl, 2018). Borda (1999, p. 15) terms this a "*systematic restitution*" or "*devolution*" to develop creative and diverse ways of communicating research findings to make them "understandable to the people who had produced the data". This is an acknowledgement of the key role that research participants play in producing data and creating knowledge; it reflects a commitment to making these findings accessible and usable. Borda found that creative and artistic expressions alongside what he termed "'hardcore' data", are a fruitful way of sharing this knowledge. The next section looks at how artistic and creative expressions can contribute to our understanding of the complexities of migration issues and debates.

### **10.3 Arts-Based Methods for a More Nuanced Understanding of Migration**

Migration is an issue with high visibility in public debates. While the weight it is given in public opinion as a major political issue fluctuates, it has been a key issue of public concern and debate in the UK in recent decades. Public debates on

migration tend to be highly polarised (Broadhead, 2018), with opinions either supportive of migration, often viewing migration as enriching society economically, culturally and socially or viewing migration as a social burden. Yet researchers have also identified that there is an “anxious middle” element whose views are not fixed and whose opinions may waiver. One way in which migration researchers can engage with non-academic audiences is by challenging public debates on migration and changing the narrative on migration (for a discussion of changing narratives of inclusion see Broadhead, 2018, 2020).

Drawing on the PAR ethos and values outlined in the previous section, an important aspect of changing public narratives of migration is to challenge the ways in which much of this debate is *about* migrants. Migrants are often cast as the topic, rather than as active participants in the debate. This reinforces the idea that migrants are outsiders to society and need to prove their value, based on the assumption that their presence can be tolerated or accepted, conditional on proving their deservingness (Erel, 2016). Instead, a productive conversation on migration may start from the point of view that migrants’ experiences and views are critically important. It also needs to start from an understanding that boundaries between migrants and citizens can shift and are permeable, rather than reproducing and reifying such boundaries. Yet this is not the only challenge for a more-nuanced conversation on migration. It is also important to avoid staging such conversations as spectacles of migrants’ suffering (De Genova, 2013), while reinstating those cast as citizens as potentially policing the borders and boundaries of acceptable belonging (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019).

As Martiniello (2015) points out, the arts can be an important aspect for forming collective identities and can play a role in social and political mobilisation on issues of migration. Yet we need more evidence and research on the possibilities of the arts as part of such a socio-political mobilisation (see the chapters in the first and second part of this book). Jeffery et al. (2019) argue that arts-based research – in particular, participatory arts-based research – has the potential to address some of these challenges. These methods offer a more agentic role for migrants to shape research, debates and conversations, while also providing an opportunity for engaging with these complex issues beyond language, through “aesthetic, emotional, sensory and tacit experiences that cannot easily be expressed in words” (Jeffery et al., 2019, p. 5). Arts-based methods can also provide an opportunity for migrants to meet with others, make connections and “make themselves ‘present’ in urban landscapes, and challenge the instrumental terms that categorize” (2019, p. 5) migrants and refugees as social burdens or victims. These arts-based methods should not necessarily be seen as in opposition with other methods but can be fruitfully combined; indeed, co-production between artists and researchers can be critical to constructing new narratives on migration, which have a “transformative potential, challenging the separation of and hierarchical relationships between migrants and citizens” (2019, p. 8). Indeed, participatory arts-based research can be an opportunity for researchers and participants to try out new forms of social action which challenge racist exclusions and the subjugation of migrants (Erel et al., 2017). Collaboration between researchers, participants, artists and activists thus has the potential to open up a

space where other ways of being together can be imagined and rehearsed in the relative safety of the arts and research workshop spaces. Nunn argues that these spaces can be exceptional “in providing space and support for people to make their own claims of belonging (or non-belonging), and to amplify them through artistic presentation” (2020, p. 262). Indeed, artistic representations have a powerful role to play in reaching non-academic audiences and encouraging affective engagement – and which may be able to sidestep the polarised, well-rehearsed narratives of migration (Erel et al., 2022a; Nunn, 2020; O’Neill, 2010). Participatory arts-based research and engagement projects can thus provide “exceptional spheres of transformative belonging”, where conventional social rules and power relations are placed on hold to allow those involved (researchers, participants, artists and activists) to reflect, explore and learn together. This space provides opportunities to “develop networks, competencies, ideas and experiences” (Nunn, 2020, p. 255). that can sow seeds for transformative social action within the workshop spaces and beyond.

#### **10.4 Exceptional Spheres of Engagement: Arts-Activist-Academic Conversations on Migration**

One example of collaboration between the arts, academia and activism is the project “Migration Making Places, Making People”, which aimed to look at the ways in which migrants contribute to creating a sense of belonging to a neighbourhood, community, city and beyond. It also looked at how migration creates new forms of community, especially through the example of migrant mothers creating a sense of belonging across ethnic boundaries, for both themselves and their children. The project aimed to explore how collaboration with artists, arts institutions, activists and the voluntary sector can help to engage with diverse audiences beyond academia and to reflect on issues of migration. Such a task – reflecting on the issues raised by migration in a nuanced way that acknowledges the complex political, social, ethical and cultural issues raised by migration – has been made more challenging by longstanding negative representations of issues of migration in the media and wider public debates. These latter have often contributed to a polarisation of views around migration by portraying it either as enriching or as causing social problems. Such polarised discourses are problematic in many ways. One of the problematic aspects is that they tend to reproduce a clear division and distinction between migrants and citizens, taking an instrumentalist view of migration so that migrants are expected to be useful to the societies to which they move. One problem with this view is that it imagines a society that is not already constituted by migrations. Another problematic aspect is that it reinforces bordering practices between migrants and citizens.

This project sought to break down these boundaries, exploring how places and communities are co-constructed in processes and through histories of migration.

The project was a collaboration between the Open University and Oxford University and was led by Jacqui Broadhead, Giles Mohan and myself. The aim of the project was to explore, through arts-based methods, how we might challenge dominant narratives on migration and engage in more-nuanced debates with a wider, non-academic public. While migration research is strong in producing reflexive accounts of the complexities of migration, these accounts are not always successfully translated into public debates on migration. We collaborated with the Migration Museum, a project that organised exhibitions around topics of migration, to explore “how the movement of people to and from Britain across the ages has shaped who we are – as individuals, as communities and as a nation” and aiming to build a visitor attraction that “shines a light on who we are, where we come from and where we are going” (Migration Museum, 2020). At the time of the project, 2018–2019, the Migration Museum was located in an old firestation in south London where it welcomed visitors, many of them walk-ins attracted by the current exhibition; sometimes visitors came to attend a particular event (such as a talk, film screening, etc.) and sometimes as part of group events such as symposia, workshops or educational workshops for school and college students.

We also collaborated with Counterpoints Arts, an organisation that works with migrant artists and with artists whose work is about issues of migration. The organisation is particularly committed to participatory arts and sees them as part of a wider project of social transformation, promoting the work of artists with a lived experience of migration. Yet they emphasise that migrants.

do not only have “heart-breaking” tales to tell. With this in mind we support the development and performance of a spectrum of comic, parodic, surreal and moving stories about the migration process, reflecting the full complexities of modern life. (Counterpoints Arts, 2021)

Collaborations beyond academia are often time- and labour-intensive and, in this case, required us to work across the boundaries between the arts sector, community groups and activists. Each of these groups and sectors has its own language, approaches to work, different time lines and different ways of conceptualising a positive or successful outcome; each works towards different measures set by funders or other institutions. This is challenging, as much of what we take for granted in one sector may be very different in other settings. As academics, for example, we found that our timelines for planning, publicising events and finally producing the website or other outputs were often much slower than our partners in other sectors were used to. Another tension that can arise is when these differences in the tempo of work also coincide with different working conditions. Collaboration between academics and artists is often characterised by an asymmetry in power due to the fact that artists’ working conditions are often extremely precarious. Even though academic working conditions – in particular, for those on temporary and insecure contracts – are increasingly becoming more insecure themselves, such asymmetry can make collaboration more challenging. Pfoser and de Jong (2020), for example, point out that artists may feel instrumentalised when their time is not properly accounted and paid for and that such collaboration can end up being

exploitative rather than transformative. Recognising and naming such asymmetries is important in order to avoid idealising and romanticising participatory and collaborative work. Likewise, it is also important to recognise that collaborators can have different political positions and views. In this project, such differences were expected and our dialogic framing of the events and activities was one way in which we made such differences productive, rather than obstructive.

Working closely with both organisations, the academic team devised a programme of events consisting of a symposium with local government representatives, think-tanks and NGOs in order to discuss how to shape local and national narratives of migration at the Migration Museum. We also held several “pop-up prof” sessions (further details in Sect. 10.5.2) during the exhibition at the Migration Museum Project. This was complemented by a number of activities curated with Counterpoints Arts, which took place during a week-long series of multi-platform events named the “Who Are We? Project” at the Tate Exchange, the participatory arm of the Tate Modern Gallery in London. These events consisted of a workshop with researchers, artists, research participants/co-researchers about the meaning of participation across the arts and academia. This event built on a participatory arts-based research project for which the team had explored the uses of participatory theatre and walking methods for social research (Erel et al., 2022a), the researchers and the research participants worked together to introduce Gallery visitors to some theatre exercises and, together, they worked on constructing theatrical images of issues such as exclusion, community and family. The workshop then moved on to a reflection on these exercises and a Q&A session with a theatre maker about the uses and challenges of participatory theatre. This was complemented by a symposium with artists, academics and activists about the hostile environment against migrants. We documented these activities through film. However, rather than filming the full range of activities, we decided to conduct brief dialogues with participants of these activities which were then used for a multimedia learning resource, hosted on the Open University’s open access platform Openlearn (Erel & Broadhead, 2018). I reflect on some aspects of these activities in more detail in the next section.

## 10.5 Engaging with the Public Beyond Academia

In this section I reflect on some key aspects of public engagement which I found made a particular difference to the quality of engagement. While public engagement is often a requirement of contemporary research, it is important to question the established formats of academic dissemination that are reproduced in public engagement beyond academia. Often, academics take for granted the formats of seminars or public lectures for which academic training has prepared us. Yet these formats can be alienating and may also work to establish and reinforce boundaries between academics as experts and others such as artists or activists – seeing them as merely contributing to academic efforts in order to more widely disseminate the knowledge that they have produced. Furthermore, these formats may not be welcoming for a

non-academic public, in particular for community groups or those who are marginalised, as their social and cultural capital are devalued and their knowledge often discounted (Bell & Pahl, 2018). While academics might be committed to sharing knowledge and open to reflection, the formats we use to share this knowledge can shape a hierarchical setting in which academics are re-instated as experts while others' knowledges are not given the space to unfold and dialogically engage. Institutional spaces such as universities are shaped by the histories and current power relations in which they can operate and reproduce them. As Ahmed (2007) has pointed out, such spaces are constructed as white and only extend the offer of participation as subjects of knowledge to people of colour and to migrants on an exceptional or conditional basis.

### 10.5.1 Spaces

“Infrastructural issues” (Bell & Pahl, 2018, p. 7), such as the spaces, places, times and resources in which we share our research findings, are important in ensuring that academic research does justice to the idea of sharing knowledge widely, including with the migrant communities and others who have an interest in it. Yet, such issues often do not receive the attention they deserve, even though they are key in making research processes and engagement accessible (2018). Our collaboration with the Migration Museum and Counterpoint Arts used the arts spaces in and with which they worked for the engagement activities. This was a conscious choice, as university spaces are often not seen as accessible or welcoming by marginalised communities. Choosing to hold our events at the Migration Museum and the Tate Exchange signalled our commitment to bringing the research findings into dialogue with others.

Bell and Pahl (2018, p. 7) emphasise that “accessible and comfortable space” is key to encouraging open collaboration. We found that these arts spaces attracted different audiences to the events than those we used to see at events in university spaces, including school groups or young people. Likewise, the institutions, such as Tate Exchange, where some of the events were held, also reported that our events produced a more ethnically and age-diverse audience (Wilmott, 2018). Feedback from visitors at events also indicated that these arts spaces were seen as open and encouraging dialogue and conversations about art displays, both within a formal workshop and informally with artists or other visitors. This was an important aspect of the space, which encouraged visitors to linger, to look at displays and to engage with arts objects or in participatory activities. This lingering provided opportunities for making contact with artists but also with other visitors and researchers. At the Tate Exchange project, for example, it was important for us to provide some comfortable seating areas where visitors could just stop and reflect; we provided some reading materials – including academic writings – and invited visitors to rest, reflect and perhaps engage in conversation.



While we found that these arts spaces could be more interesting and provide occasions to linger and enter into conversation, they are, of course, also imbued by power relations and exclusions. As Sara Ahmed characterises about university spaces, these arts spaces have long been – and continue to be – white institutional spaces in which whiteness is invisible and unmarked and becomes the norm against which difference is measured and “others appear as deviants” (Ahmed, 2007, p. 157). Yet whiteness is only invisible for those who conform to its norm or those who have become so used to it that they unthinkingly accept it as the norm in these institutional spaces.

Spaces are orientated “around” whiteness, insofar as whiteness is not seen. [...] The effect of this “around whiteness” is the institutionalization of a certain “likeness”, which makes non-white bodies feel uncomfortable, exposed, visible, different, when they take up this space. (Ahmed, 2007, p. 157)

Thus, it is important to acknowledge that not everyone felt equally at ease in entering and claiming space for themselves in these institutionally white spaces. Participants had ambivalent reactions upon entering these spaces to seek engagement and dialogue about issues of migration. At one workshop which we held at Tate Exchange, a black female artist described the concept of institutional whiteness as follows:

When I stepped into the lift, I immediately knew that this event was going to take place on the fifth floor. In the lift there are different images of art work but only the fifth floor has images of people of colour and young people. When you see an image of people of colour and young people, it sends a signal that this is a space of learning. Images of black people are not used to advertise art work. But black people are seen in need of education, so they will always use images of black people to signal the diversity of an educational offer (author’s notes from the event).

What this artist describes is how people of colour are seen as conditionally admissible to such institutionally white spaces. The poignant observation that people of colour are only visible when their image advertises educational or participatory activities, highlights that – even though people of colour and migrants may be invited and given access – their visibility does not reach into all aspects of the institution. Indeed, artists of colour may be delimited in such pockets of educational or community engagement activity, which can make it difficult for artists to build and sustain their careers (DiMaggio & Fernández-Kelly, 2015).

Taking this critique on board is important if we are to recognise the limitations of our collaboration with arts spaces which continue to be imbued by racialised, classed, gendered and other power relations. It shows that engaging with issues of migration through the arts cannot simply compensate for exclusions and power relations within academia but, instead, comes with its own challenging exclusionary practices that need to be addressed.

Yet these arts spaces also generated feelings of recognition for some visitors and artists with whom we worked. One refugee woman who visited the Tate Exchange project shared that she found it empowering to see experiences of the refugee journey, similar to her own, displayed in artwork by refugee artists. For her, it was the

first visit to Tate Modern and she enjoyed spending time in the exhibition space, taking in the artwork. She also felt strongly that the fact that this artwork was exhibited in central London, in a well-regarded, well-established arts institution, was an important recognition that her own experiences as a refugee were valued in and by a central UK cultural institution.

Another example of how participants felt validated by the opportunity to show their skills and their work in an established arts space was a workshop we held with participants, researchers and arts practitioners from the PASAR (Participation Arts and Social Action in Research) project, which explored the uses of participatory theatre and walking methods for social research (Erel et al., 2022b; Reynolds et al., 2017). This workshop explored the meaning of participation across the arts and research (Who Are We?, 2019a). The workshop had two parts. In the first part, we offered a practical introduction to participatory theatre methods. This was conceptualised and led by the research fellow and theatre practitioner, Erene Kaptani. While she introduced the theatre games and exercises, a group of participants in the research project contributed and helped to encourage visitors to participate in these exercises. The second part of the workshop consisted of a reflection about the meaning of participation with the researchers, arts practitioner, participants and artist, theatre director and lecturer Karen Tomlin, as well as visitors to the event. One of the remarkable aspects of this workshop was that research participants acted as co-facilitators of the practical theatre games and exercises. As they had been familiarised with these exercises throughout the research project, they were able to aid visitors in engaging with them. Their feedback on the workshop was that they enjoyed participating and realised how familiar they had become with the practice, to the extent that they were able to co-facilitate.

In a similar vein, an artist and activist from Europe shared with me that she really appreciated the opportunity to be part of the events we organised, especially because they took place in a centrally validated arts space, such as Tate Exchange. When I asked her, she said that this was important for her to be able to take this back to the migrants she worked with in her artistic and activist work, as she felt that this recognition provided an important sense of validation. She also mentioned that she was planning to highlight her participation in the events when applying for funding, as she expected that this would strengthen her case.

So these arts spaces engendered ambivalent responses – on the one hand, the artist who critiqued the arts institution for delimiting artwork by and about migrants and refugees as an educational issue and, on the other, the visitor and artist who appreciated the opportunity to access these spaces in order to gain recognition and validation of their experiences and their work. This ambivalence points to how arts spaces can function as ‘consecrating’ the work of artists – that is, conveying symbolic capital to their work – and, at the same time, excluding those not deemed worthy of this consecration (Bourdieu, 1993). So while these arts spaces may be able to provide more affective, sensual and participatory modes of engagement than, perhaps, academic spaces can, it is important to keep in mind that, despite their participatory intentions, they remain central institutions which can convey symbolic recognition and, in that sense, whether intentionally or not, reproduce the ideas and

positionalities of both insider and outsider. Yet this might be felt the most acutely not so much by academics or visitors but by artists who aspire to find recognition and whose careers depend on their symbolic capital within the field of arts. For those whose careers are not dependent on this recognition, claiming space in such culturally central arts spaces can perhaps be experienced as more unproblematic.

For researchers, taking our work and research findings to an arts, rather than an academic space encouraged a range of dialogic engagements with visitors, including the invitation to linger, reflect and hold conversations. These were encouraged by mixing the forms of engagement, including talks, visual performances and other arts as well as the participatory ethos. The next section explores how these various formats aided engagements with the complexity of issues of migration.

### **10.5.2 *Formats***

In order to engage with the public beyond academia, we developed formats that encourage dialogue and avoid reproducing established hierarchies which instate academic researchers as merely disseminating knowledge. Instead, we looked to develop formats to invite and facilitate genuine dialogue between academics, artists and activists, as well as with visitors to the events. Such a dialogic ethos is inspired by a commitment to building ‘symmetric reciprocity’ where different types of knowledge are valued and all participants in a conversation are recognised as “thinking, feeling persons” (Borda, 1999, p. 13), capable of reflection, analysis and sharing their situated knowledge with each other. This was particularly guided by a commitment to learning together dialogically.

Borda’s (1999, p. 13) notion of symmetric reciprocity echoes a dialogic understanding of how knowledge is produced and shared. Bakhtin’s work (Bakhtin, 2010; Hynes, 2014) on dialogism is particularly helpful here, as it emphasises the interconnections between self and other and argues that meaning is always generated dialogically in relation to an other. Bakhtin’s work draws attention to how speakers’ utterances are always responsive to other speakers, containing the traces of others’ utterances and anticipating the understandings of addressees. In this dialogic manner, it is not only utterances but also the conceptual horizons of speakers which interact, shaping each other. Valuing such a dialogic approach to knowledge is particularly helpful for bringing together the different ways of working, thinking and speaking of academics, artists and activists.

#### ***Pop-up profs***

One successful format that we developed together with the Migration Museum, was the “Pop-up Prof” sessions. These took place during exhibitions that were held at the migration museum. A comfortable seating area was set out, with an academic present, additional seating and a sign reading “Pop-up Prof” and “Discuss any questions you have always wanted to ask around migration”. This invitation was taken

up by visitors to the exhibition, sometimes individually, sometimes in small groups who would approach an academic. Visitors would often start by asking factual questions, which sometimes opened up opportunities for academics to share wider issues, including highlighting the contested nature of much knowledge and data on migration, as well as holding conversations about the parameters of public debate on migration. These Pop-up Prof sessions were characterised by intimate and reflexive conversations, allowing interlocuters to sidestep well-rehearsed narratives on migration. Visitors gave positive feedback on these sessions – perhaps the most significant change in their views was the recognition of the problematic and contested nature of what are often presented as clear-cut facts and figures about migration. These Pop-up Prof sessions, then, were useful in initiating conversations that allowed visitors and the pop-up profs to question how much public discourse has established a limited commonsense understanding of issues of migration. The format of the Pop-up Prof sessions meant that visitors were able to engage in in-depth, small group discussions. This format was conducive to longer and deeper engagements which allowed the questioning and challenging of the very terms of the migration debate. In contrast to Q&A sessions following public talks, which are usually limited to bringing up a single issue and only allow for one short exchange, these conversations were sustained, two-way dialogues, allowing visitors and pop-up profs to explore their understandings, agreements and disagreements and perhaps to open up to challenging views.

### **Academic-Artist-Activist Symposium**

Another format which we developed was a symposium of artists, academics and activists. An example is the symposium on the hostile environment which we held in 2018 (Who Are We?, 2019b). This artist-academic-activist symposium was aimed explicitly at bringing knowledge and experience from all these sectors into dialogue with each other.<sup>1</sup> In each segment of the symposium we invited contributions from artists, academics and activists. We stressed that these contributions should be no more than 10 min long. This was accompanied by a discussion which invited reflections from the audience but which also made explicit links between each contribution.

This programme of conversations was carefully curated together with our partners, Counterpoints Arts, whose networks enabled us to identify and invite artists whose work addressed relevant issues. We also built on researchers' own networks as they had collaborated with artists and activists, sometimes developing longstanding relationships. Here it is also important to acknowledge the impossibility of drawing firm boundaries between academics, artists and activists, as many of the

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<sup>1</sup>Speakers included Gabi Kent (The Open University), Leila Sibai (SOAS), members of the Migration and Asylum Justice Forum, Monish Bhatia (Birkbeck University), Sandhya Sharma (Safety 4 Sisters), Rachel Humphris (IRIS, Birmingham University), Victoria Canning (The Open University), Umut Erel (The Open University), Abi Brunswick (Project 17), Nira Yuval Davis (Centre on Migration, Refugees and Belonging, University of East London), Migrant Artists Mutual Aid (UK), Cihan Arıkan (RFSL, LGBTQ support, Sweden), Marina Vilhelmsson (photographer, "Queering Refugee Resistance", Sweden) and John Speyer (Music in Detention).

speakers occupied more than one of these categories. What worked well in these symposia was a commitment to brief contributions. This was often complemented by discussants actively bringing speakers' work into dialogue with each other. Alongside the symposium, we also encouraged visitors to engage with a visual representation of the hostile environment against migration policies, a trail consisting of several stations, designed by Justin O'Shaughnessy, that explained the effects of these policies on everyday areas of life, such as work, housing and education.

Finally, many of the contributors were interviewed and video-recorded. We edited these brief interviews to highlight themes of the harmful impact of hostile environment policies, activism and resistance against internal borders, together with the possibilities and limits of solidarity. These were used to develop a free online learning resource, containing written and audio-visual material (Erel & Broadhead, 2018). This resource was important in broadening the reach of these engagements beyond the immediate, face-to-face audiences. Between 1 June 2019 and 6 July 2021, the resource was visited by 3516 people; these visitors were international, with the top three countries being the Philippines (29.8%), the UK (28.9%) and the United States (9.5%). This shows that such an event can draw interest and engagement beyond the day-to-day events in one location and country. We have no further in-depth data on how audiences have used these online resources, unfortunately. For future work, it would be interesting and important to design ways in which visitors to the website can leave feedback and interact with the material. In this project we did not have the resources to do so.

These formats were chosen because they build on affective, sensual and intellectual modes of understanding. As such they draw on and validate a range of knowledge that academics, artists, activists and visitors can engage with to challenge existing, often reified, polarised public debates on migration.

These formats, furthermore, encourage dialogic engagements between artists, activists and academics, where no one mode of understanding is prioritised but, instead, the engagements highlight the unfinished and partial nature of all situated knowledge (Collins, 2002). Taken together, these dialogic engagements, alongside the artwork, encourage lingering, reflection and learning together with visitors.

## 10.6 Conclusion

This chapter has looked at how migration researchers can work with artists and activists to share knowledge beyond academic audiences. I argued that the ethos and values of participatory action research are helpful in thinking about how to use research to challenge polarised well-rehearsed public debates on migration which often reify boundaries between migrants and citizens, researchers and research participants and also between researchers and artists or activists. Instead, a PAR ethos can help to think about how migration researchers can collaborate with others – research participants and practitioners – in order to transform public understandings

and representations of migration and helping to generate more complex and nuanced insights and share them with non-academic publics. The chapter argued that arts-based approaches offer one powerful path to doing so. In particular, participatory arts-based approaches view knowledge as co-created between researchers and participants; they offer research participants ways of engaging with complex issues beyond verbal discourse, enabling more reflexive and dialogic approaches to learning together. Drawing on the example of a collaboration with arts organisations, artists and activists in the “Migration Making Places, Making People” project, the chapter discussed the opportunities such approaches offer, as well as the challenges and limitations.

It is always difficult to measure the transformative effects of PAR. While the notion of research impact that is often applied by funders and higher-education institutions implies that research could lead to social change in a linear fashion, it is clear that complex issues such as views and attitudes towards migration are the product of multiple factors – which range from situational to wider political issues. I would argue, however, that what is important to note is not simply whether visitors to the events changed their views but, instead, how the quality of conversations, the length of engagement and the respectful way in which participants exchanged views and came to learn from each other provided a transformatory space. Indeed, I would argue that the idea of measuring impact to some extent runs counter to the ethos of participatory action research. While we might measure the impact of a particular event by asking participants a series of questions before and then again after the event to see whether or how their views have changed, such a research design reinstates the researcher as the source of legitimate knowledge, while positioning the visitors or participants as those whose knowledge needs to be changed and transformed. This tension between the imperatives of universities and funders to measure impact on the one hand and a participatory ethos on the other is a challenge for researchers, which needs to be addressed on a case-by-case basis.

Arts-based approaches can offer collaboration with non-academic publics that engage affective, sensual and dialogic forms of knowing and learning. This can be experienced as empowering and generating new forms of skills, knowledge and networks among researchers, participants, artists, activists and visitors. Using a range of formats which break with established conventions of academic presentations can encourage such dialogic forms of generating and sharing knowledge. Yet the chapter also highlighted that these arts-based approaches are not, of course, a panacea and can also come up against the limitations of institutional spaces and practices, which can reproduce exclusions and marginalisations. Nevertheless, academics have much to learn and benefit from exploring opportunities for generating and sharing knowledge on migration through collaborative efforts.

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# Chapter 11

## Refugees in a Multimedia Dialogue: A Methodology that Inspires the Creation of New Narratives on Migration in an Evolving Process of Change



Martina Kamm and Lhamo Meyer

### 11.1 Introduction

In Switzerland, up until the 1990s, scant data and knowledge existed on the traumatic consequences of war, flight and persecution in the daily lives of refugees. The topic was practically unexplored in academic research and unknown amongst the public and professionals working with traumatised refugees – such as therapists, doctors, social workers, teachers or the administration. This unsatisfactory situation first began to change with the Swiss Red Cross commissioning a broad study on the topic at the time of the Yugoslavian war in 1991: *Die Sprache der extremen Gewalt* (*The language of extreme violence*) conducted by former Professor of Ethnology at the University of Berne, Hans-Rudolf Wicker (2001). The results of the study clearly demonstrated how many refugees living in Switzerland were suffering from the consequences of violence. Based on the study's results, the first national therapy centre for victims of torture, today known as the Ambulatorium für Folter- und Kriegsoffer (AFK, Ambulatory for victims of torture and war), was set up in Berne in 1995. Its inauguration has been followed by an ever-increasing number of clients asking for support or on-site assistance. Since then, four further ambulatories have opened their doors in the cities of Zurich, Geneva, Lausanne and St Gallen. Together, they form the national network "Support for Torture Victims".

Despite these changes, however, it took a long time for knowledge on trauma to spread. As late as 2010, Thomas Maier and Mirjam Straub stated in an article that "the needs and expectations of traumatized migrants requesting treatment are often unknown to health care professionals; even more unknown are those of patients not requesting treatment, and communication ends up being complicated" (Maier & Straub, 2010, p. 1). This lack of knowledge on trauma was all the more true for the

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wider public, including all those working with refugees, such as civil servants and teachers, to name but a few. This lack of knowledge may lead to behaviour that prolongs the trauma of refugees whereas raising the awareness of trauma may facilitate healing (Jörg-Zougli & Holzer, 2015), as has particularly been shown for schools (Fazel & Stein, 2002, p. 368). This was the point of departure at which we began to work on the project *No child's play* in 2007. The project aimed to gather narratives on the consequences of persecution, war and flight on refugees and their families and to present these to a wider public. This meant inventing a whole new set of methods for both gathering the data and presenting them. These methods aim to give refugees control over the process, strengthen their mental health and personal resources under difficult life circumstances, inspire an atmosphere of trust between the interlocutors in the research process and provide a safe space for the public exhibition and discussion of the results. The project combined social science research methods – such as guided interviews to gather personal narratives – with participatory arts-based methods, such as photography, storytelling, video and film. The results were presented at exhibitions which, again, included participatory arts-based elements meant to inspire our audiences to become involved. This not only provided new input for the further development of the project but also led to the creation of further narratives that allowed us to observe cultural change in narratives over the years.

This chapter first describes the four parts of our project. We then elaborate on our methodology by referring to participatory action research (PAR), highlighting the artistic methods we used as a good practice to actively include participants in projects and reflecting on ethical questions and concerns. In the last section, we examine the processes of change of narratives inspired by our project by taking a closer look at the participants' reflection of their own past and by looking at the roles of family, religion and faith.

## 11.2 The Long-Term Project *no child's Play* (2007–2021)

### *Part I Photo-exhibition “Living with difficult memories in a safe country” (2007–2011)*

In the first part of the project, we wanted to find out how refugees affected by post-traumatic stress disorder are coping with their tormenting memories in daily life and how difficult living circumstances, such as an uncertain asylum status, affect their health. Our interdisciplinary team aimed to gain research insights and gave 16 refugees and their families the opportunity to express their experiences, fears and hopes. We met the portrayed refugees together with their families several times over a period of 3 years and this close collaboration formed the basis for the second part of our long-term project *No child's play*. Eventually, 16 portraits (texts and photos) were presented in a publication (Kamm & Schade, 2008) and at an itinerant photo-exhibition (Figs. 11.1, 11.2, and 11.3) which formed the kick-off for a research and arts project – lasting more than 10 years – which has since been evolving continuously. The itinerant photo-exhibition was set up in close collaboration with the medical Ambulatories in Zurich and Berne and co-financed by the Swiss Red Cross.



Fig. 11.1 Photo-exhibition Berne. (Photo: Jérémie Dubois)



Fig. 11.2 Photo-exhibition Chur. (Photo: Meinrad Schade)



**Fig. 11.3** Photo-exhibition Berne. (Photo: Meinrad Schade)

### *Part II Film and publication No child's play (2012–2015)*

Throughout the first part of the project, the role and experiences of the children of the refugee families drew increasing attention from specialists, young participants and researchers; after the photo-exhibition, the necessity of providing the children with the space to express themselves became ever more evident. We therefore decided to produce a portrait film in German, French and English accompanied by a bilingual publication, under the title *No child's play*, that follows the story of four young adults, three of whom belong to families which had already participated in the preceding project (Kamm et al., 2015a, b). The four protagonists – named Deniz, Lindita, Haron and Khûe – originally come from Turkey, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Vietnam and live, with their families, in the German- and French-speaking parts of Switzerland. We started to collect their personal stories through guided interviews and video clips – interviewing their parents, sisters and brothers together with them – and documented these discussions.<sup>1</sup>

Subsequently, we presented the film to a wider public followed by various roundtables (Fig. 11.4). These were the first public presentations about the (traumatic) impact of war and persecution on the second generation of refugees in Switzerland

<sup>1</sup>We accompanied our four protagonists and their families through their daily life for a couple of days and conducted semi-directive interviews, both in the family setting and with the protagonists alone. For the interviews we developed an extensive questionnaire, which was structured around different themes, with the overall aim to gain a multifaceted portrait of our four protagonists and to identify their strategies and resources for coping with their traumatic experiences.

**Fig. 11.4** Film and publication *No child's play*, Berne. (Photo: Meinrad Schade)



(for a detailed evaluation, see Kamm, [n.d.](#)). Again, this second part of the project was realised in cooperation with the by-now-five Ambulatories of the Swiss Red Cross in Berne, Zurich, St Gallen, Lausanne and Geneva. Some of their medical experts answered questions from our protagonists in the publication and provided background information for young adults with traumatic experiences as well as guidelines for an interested public (Kamm et al., [2018](#)).

### *Part III Interactive Video-Box and interventions in professional schools (2015–2017)*

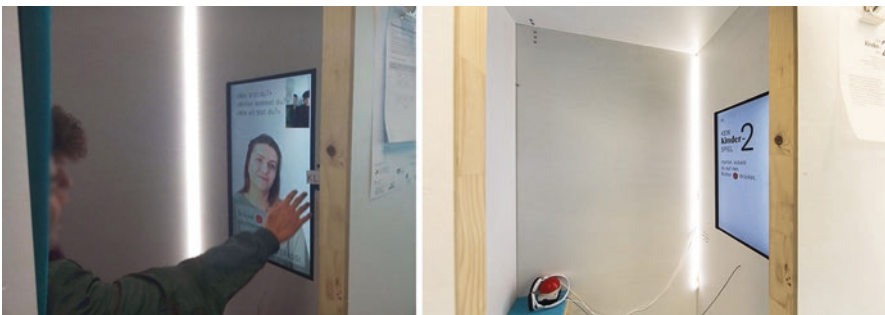
Aiming to involve more young adults in the dialogue with refugees, we decided to build an interactive Video-Box and place it in several professional schools across Switzerland. The Video-Box offered a virtual space in which students were stimulated to respond to the collected narratives of three of our four protagonists – Deniz, Lindita and Haron. These latter tell their personal stories and ask the visitor sitting in the Video-Box several questions about war, refuge, the meaning of family, memories, freedom, trauma, their sense of home and about their hopes for the future. Students then had the opportunity to answer each of these questions or to skip them by pressing a red button. Throughout the sessions, students were either filmed or

only recorded and stayed anonymous by putting a sticker in front of the camera; they were informed that the data could be used for scientific purposes. Between 2017 and 2019, the interactive Video-Box was placed in several professional schools across Switzerland (Vocational School Basel, Technical College Zurich (TBZ), Vocational School Berne (GIBB) and Cantonal School Schaffhausen) with the aim of integrating the element into the school curriculum for a couple of weeks (Fig. 11.5). In advance we handed the teachers an information set and several exercises to help them in preparing and discussing the relevant issues with their students. More than 30 classes visited the Video-Box and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, of which the more than 300 registered statements were proof.

*Part IV Interactive video installation and itinerant exhibition No child's play (2017–2021)*

We collected the video clips recorded in the Video-Box, made a selection and cut the clips together into three video installations before projecting them on three different screens. These video installations formed the last section of a final itinerant exhibition which presented all refugee and student narratives from the beginning of the project until its end, displaying all four parts of our project in chronological order.

The opening of the exhibition in Berne on 18 October 2018 formed the highlight of the project and was a great success, counting a total of 1109 visitors and eight accompanying round-tables with more than 500 visitors (Fig. 11.6). The exhibition lasted for 2 months and was set up in collaboration with the museum Polit-Forum in Berne, the Swiss Red Cross, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Swiss Federation of Protestant Churches. Younger public and school classes came to visit the exhibition in groups, whereas experts, stake-holders and artists visited the accompanying round-tables and conferences. In the city of Chur, the cantonal office for integration invited the exhibition and organised more than 30 guided tours for school classes from all over the canton. After Chur – and due to the Covid-19 pandemic – there was a break of 2 years before the exhibition was presented in Zurich from November 2021 to February 2022 (Fig. 11.7).



**Fig. 11.5** Interactive Video-Box at professional schools (Photo: Face Migration)



Fig. 11.6 Itinerant exhibition *No child's play*, Berne. (Photos: Susanne Goldschmid)



Fig. 11.7 Itinerant exhibition *No child's play*, Zurich. (Photos: Niklaus Spoerri)

### 11.3 Applying Visual Methods as a Journey to Oneself and Each Other

The long-term project *No child's play* used artistic elements such as photography, text, video and film, combined with social science research methods such as guided interviews. This resulted in an itinerant exhibition which has been travelling throughout Switzerland up until today. These different artistic elements were continuously adapted to the next step of the project and were always discussed with the audience involved. We collected narratives in a sort of “feedback loop”, directing the participants to switch between the roles of audience and of active participants. This mirroring process was particularly appropriate for observing the cultural change in narratives over the years. The fact that we combined virtual with live dialogues motivated young participants to tell each other their life stories in a relaxed and also humorous way. An important result of the use of arts-based methods – and storytelling in particular – was that it created a transformative sphere for understanding issues around migration outside of established and polarised discourses. As Umut Erel points out in this volume (Chap. 10), these methods are useful both for generating research and for public engagement around this research.

The fact that we never knew in advance what our next step would be became the signature and main characteristic of the project. Its processual character, with a duration of more than 13 years, allowed us to strengthen the relationships between the families and ourselves as authors. It turned out that this was a successful element in the process of identification between *the audience* (the public receiving and listening to the stories) and *the participants* (the refugees and/or young students, creating and telling their stories in the different project phases). The strong and year-long relationships created trust, mutual understanding, familiarity and emotionality in the highly sensitive field of traumatic life experiences – which are extremely difficult to capture and share. Two students who visited the interactive Video-Box and final exhibition in Berne experienced it as follows:

The different elements of the exhibition are put together in such a way that, in the end, the visitors feel a certain familiarity with the single portrayed humans and their stories. This might be due to the fact that you could always feel the work in progress and the processual character of the project (Baumann et al., 2019, p. 2).<sup>2</sup>

Visual methods, especially film, were of particular importance in our project design (Kamm et al., 2016). This has to do with the specific advantages which these methods have, as they were aptly described by Desille and Nikielska-Sekula in their introduction to their recent publication on visual methodologies:

*Visuals enable to ground research in places, and focus on the embodied experiences of persons who have experienced migration; secondly, visuals tell stories and hold the potential of multiplying and complexifying accounts of migration; third, visual methodologies increase the possibilities for cooperation, and therefore the need to recognise the competency of participants in knowledge production* (2021, p. 3, italics in the original; see also Barsky & Martiniello, 2021).

These points also turned out to be very important for the outcome of our project. We fully agree with the authors that there is significant epistemological value in visuals, which allow us to go beyond boundaries and to link research with practice, as illustrated below. This particularly concerns the dimensions of place and body that have become more important in academic literature, migration research and visual methodology (Becker, 2019; Casey, 1996; Löw, 2019). As Casey (1996) writes, places and human beings are not only constituting each other but are also very elastic and characterised by a process of change and interaction. Places can be seen in terms of social interactions that tie together and define categories such as time and space, so that the latter “remain, first and last, dimensions of place, and they are experienced and expressed in place by the event of place” (Casey, 1996, p. 38).

The creation of artificial places such as the interactive Video-Box, where you can sit down alone or in pairs and chat, intensified the identification with the portrayed refugees. With its filmed story-telling as well as questions and answers, the Video-Box stimulated visitors to engage in interaction, discussion and dialogue around migration-related issues. Once one entered the Video-Box, refugees virtually addressed questions and students gave live answers, creating a sphere of intimacy

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<sup>2</sup>This and all further citations were translated from German into English by the authors.



and familiarity between the audience and the refugees. After having visited the interactive Video-Box, two students described it as follows: “In the end, we have got a very good impression of the protagonists [i.e. refugees] and you have the impression of having shared their personal stories ‘alive’” (Neelakumaran & Thirunavukkarasu, 2017, p. 20).

In order to give these encounters enough space, we always tried to put exchange or the in-between and unforeseen at the centre of the long-term project and to let things happen. Our intention was to step back from the scene and give the floor to young adults, specialists and/or refugees. They should interact, ask and answer personal questions that we had framed beforehand in a complex process. With the Video-Box, we built a sort of *Black Box* to challenge the audience and to prevent us methodologically from stigmatising refugees as the “colonial other”. Leitgeb and Mokre (2021, p. 2) write about this possible trap:

The frequent aim of projects involving refugees is to give those refugees a voice and make them visible. But visibility can be a double-edged sword, especially if it involves displaying differences that are already a focal point in mainstream discourse and in which that discourse is heavily invested.

While being attentive to what the two authors say, we would nevertheless strongly emphasise the advantage of participatory projects as an important form of empowerment and sensibilisation.

### ***11.3.1 Actively Involving Participants in the Process of Co-constructing Knowledge***

Our long-term project was genuinely participatory from its beginning. This was due to the arts-based method of storytelling that we had chosen – and, as just introduced before, the visual storytelling in particular, where participation is a central element. Our project is a typical example of so-called participatory action research (PAR). Following Umut Erel in her contribution to this volume (Chap. 10), PAR not simply considers research participants as providing raw data that can be transformed into knowledge by researchers but values research participants’ knowledge itself. Erel underlines that PAR aims to actively involve participants in the process of co-constructing knowledge. This was the case in the first part of our project, when traumatised refugees and their families decided about situations and places by choosing where to take their pictures and where to be interviewed over the 3 years. They also collaborated with us during the editing process of the written stories.

Co-constructing knowledge was an equally strong element during the second part of the project. Participants’ knowledge and aims were the core and heart of the film *No child’s play*, in which the whole set up and dramaturgy were based on the extensive interviews. The participants helped to choose the settings, organised the family get-togethers for the filming and were involved in the discussion of the next step of our project, the Video-Box. We collected their answers to the filmed

interviews and put them together, formulating several questions and stories for a virtual dialogue in the Video-Box. After we launched the film, we regularly asked the young refugees and their families to participate in public debates about the consequences of flight, trauma and asylum on the second generation.

The four young adults played a particularly important role in the publication *No child's play* in the form of written interviews between medical experts and themselves. In the end, we edited these interviews in the form of questions and answers and handed them out to teachers, students, experts and the public.

Active participation was also crucial in the third part of the project, letting young students participate in the virtual dialogue with refugees in the Video-Box. They could decide for themselves whether they wanted to answer the questions of the four young refugees and whether they wanted to be filmed or not – and to thereby agree or disagree to become part of the exhibition planned at the end.

PAR acknowledges participation itself as an important value and underlines the importance of engaging migrants as experts on their experience that is increasingly being voiced (Flynn, 2020). In our case, the huge echo that the project generated in a large audience proved that there is a great interest in hearing stories and seeing the faces behind the stories in the context of flight and migration. The same echo was achieved in conferences and debates, where experts discussed relevant topics linked to the project.

Bradbury-Huang (2010) notes that participatory action researchers have at least two main audiences: firstly, an audience of participants and practitioners, who tend to be interested in practical outcomes and social change. Multi-media outputs such as websites, short video-clips or visually engaging reports and toolkits are often appropriate to engage this audience (see also Erel's Chap. 10 in this volume). The second audience is made up of academics who might be interested in the theoretical, methodological and other research findings which are addressed in academic publications such as books and journal articles. As our project proved, we reached both audiences: practitioners/participants and academics – the former in a surprisingly large number, as the whole project primarily aimed to reach them.

### ***11.3.2 Dealing with Ethical Questions and Concerns***

The active participation of refugees in the delicate field of the traumatic consequences of flight and asylum required a sensitive ethical handling, be it with guided interviews, written or filmed narratives or visual stories. In the first part of the project, we embedded the interviews on refugees' traumatic experiences and post-traumatic stress disorder in a clearly defined medical context. To this purpose we signed a contract on ethical guidelines with the medical director of the Ambulatories, defining how we should deal with the interviews and their output (all participants were patients of the medical centres at that time and were being treated for their severe symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder). During the production process we regularly handed over all texts and photos to the involved patients and they had the

right to withdraw from the project at any time (which happened with only one of the 17 patients). This procedure was demanding and asked for tact and sensitivity as well as constant interchange over the period of 3 years. It helped to build up a relation of mutual trust.

Desille and Nikielska-Sekula (2021, p. 15) speak about the “right to disappear”, allowing participants to withdraw from public attention during an ongoing project. We gave that right to our participants – which proved to be reassuring for both sides – and decided to also build the second part of the project on trust and free will. So our young adults who participated in film and publication signed an agreement which gave them the right to withdraw from the whole project at any time. This remained quite a risk for us as producers. Eventually, all the participants agreed that the film (DVD) and publications could be used for debates, conferences or professional development courses and itinerant exhibitions. As with the first project, every use of material on social media or in the media as such was excluded from the agreement and had to be negotiated separately. In the third part of the project, we agreed with the teachers and school directors on using video material (more than 300 video-clips) only for the itinerant exhibition or anonymously for research purposes. All students and scholars had the choice of entering the Video-Box and answering either anonymously or while being filmed.

Looking back, we are convinced that, due to excluding the publication of the stories on social media, we managed to gain the trust of the participants and professional institutions such as clinics and/or schools. This allowed us to also publish politically delicate stories. Some of the participants nevertheless took active roles as ambassadors and gave interviews on national radio stations and in national newspapers. However, when an interview with one of the young adults had erroneously been posted on social media by a journalist, we knew we had made the right decision about excluding the use of social media as, only hours after the publication, the young woman and her family received threatening reactions and were verbally attacked for what she had said.

The fact that we are working as independent researchers or artists and not for established institutions probably played a positive role in gaining the trust of the participants – the lack of an institutional hierarchy created a certain intimacy in our collaboration with them, which allowed us to build relationships that sometimes went beyond the purely professional interaction. Especially during the first part of the project, there was a certain danger of losing our healthy distance from the participants and their stories. We thought that we needed to shield them from the “outer” threatening world or audience.

## 11.4 Narratives in a Process of Change

The project, with its duration of almost 15 years, formed an ideal field of observation of a possible process of creation and change in narratives. We were indeed able to observe creation and change of narratives through the active participation of the

protagonists, as well as through the reception of the audience. Senders and receivers of messages and narratives changed their roles in the sense that former receivers could become senders of messages in the consecutive part of the project. This happened, for example, when the four young protagonists in the film changed their role from being initially passive listeners to their parent's stories to a more active role as senders and ambassadors during the film and, finally, when they took part in the Video-Box or in conferences.

This process of going public not only created a dialogue with the audience but also changed the personal narratives of the participants – depending, for example, on whether they were told in a private, half private or public sphere. Through the process of publishing, you could see that narratives became independent and were transformed and reframed into a (semi-)public discourse among practitioners, refugees, schoolteachers etc. An impressive example of this transformation took place during the series of conferences and debates that accompanied the final exhibition *No child's play*. Very often topics such as the legalisation of undocumented migrants lead to emotional and polarised debates which somewhat hinder a constructive discussion. In our project this polarisation did not happen: the fact that we started the debates with personal testimonials and stories of the participating refugees seemed to change the narratives and discussions into a less-polarised and more far-reaching dialogue. This observation confirms that arts-based methods can create a transformative sphere for understanding migration issues outside of polarised discourses (also see Chap. 10).

The following three sections illustrate the process of going public and its influence on some domains of personal narratives and their change, be they autobiographic, family related or concerning religion and faith.

### ***11.4.1 Getting Conscious and Going Public***

During the project, some of the most memorable moments occurred when participants admitted that they had never spoken to anyone about what they were just telling us. This courage to speak out and to create awareness about their own past was touchingly emotional and turned out to be a recurrent element of the project. The process of finding words for one's own, sometimes traumatic, experiences in the context of flight and persecution not only helped to create narratives but these narratives also changed through interaction with others and the audience, as the following examples illustrate. When we met traumatised refugees who belonged to the first generation, they would start telling us hesitantly about their sometimes terrible experiences of years in jail, persecution and loss of family and children during war or in their home country – things that we cannot imagine and even less put into words. However, the more we met and as time passed, they sometimes could not stop talking about what had happened to them. Voicing past experiences in a way that they can be heard and find the way to an audience seemed to be essential for recovering:

Victims shall become survivors who are not only living memorials for their family and people, but fulfil their roles as fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters and examples. That they agreed to be portrayed is linked to their wish not to remain in speech- and namelessness. In this exhibition, they bear witness to their lives and to the fact that they did not perish but returned from the 'circle of hell' to the living (Thomas Maier, in the introduction to Kamm & Schade, 2008).

Sometimes these narratives changed when the refugees spoke publicly about their difficult living experiences here in Switzerland – a sort of liminal status in a provisional waiting zone, which made it difficult for them to get in touch with daily life again. The fact that some of them had become ambassadors and key persons during debates, at exhibition openings, in media interviews or during discussions, helped them to strengthen their self-confidence and build their self-esteem (also see Chap. 13 in this volume). It also helped to lighten the burden of an insecure present and future. Narratives, with time, changed their focus on the very personal living circumstances and the feeling of being at the mercy of one's narrow accommodation, into an active handling of everyday tasks and a higher degree of abstraction and objectification. Furthermore, the personal stories created a deeper sense of understanding and empathy for the refugees in the audience and also an awareness for the extremely difficult or even inhuman living conditions of asylum-seekers in Switzerland.

This process of change worked the other way around when it came to the children of refugees. To these adolescents it was not the immediate past but the actual living circumstances which were predominant. Children often accompanied their parents to social services or doctors' appointments and translated for them. Some of them had not spoken to anyone outside the family about what they had gone through. Deniz, the daughter of a Turkish refugee family, heard about her father's experiences during his 11 years of imprisonment for the very first time during an interview we had conducted with her father. The daughter had been silently listening when she shouted: "Why didn't you tell me that before?" and, turning to us, the interviewer and photographer, said: "And who asked us, how we are dealing with all this?" Actually, this turned out to be the momentum which later motivated us to realise the project on the second generation. Since then, Deniz has changed her role and the narratives have become different. Initially, a rather passive listener, she now took on the role of an active participant, trying to find words for her own past and her own perception of the difficult living circumstances in Switzerland as well as mental health issues. With growing public attention, Deniz went through the process of first being an advocate for her parents and then seeking for independence and the development of her own personality. She even rebelled in public against the dominance of her politically very active father. She openly asked questions about traumatic consequences on the second generation and was eager to discuss the answers with experts on stage and with her father. The exchange with professional audiences and communities seemed to help her to achieve a certain distance from the burden of the past and to find a way to connect with the present. On the audience side – practitioners and therapists – it was interesting to notice the growing awareness and

discussion of the possibly traumatising effects of flight, war and persecution on young adults. It seemed that this age group had been forgotten and that nobody felt responsible for the professional and health situation of younger refugees – who were not yet adults but were no longer children.

Adolescents are in search of life and of their own personality, continuously comparing themselves to others. The question “Who am I?” is essentially linked to that of “Where do I come from?” and “How have I become who I am?”. Emigration and flight are putting those narratives in the foreground. This became evident in the third part of the project, where young students, both with and without a refugee background, met in the Video-Box with the overall aim of a) answering these essential questions or reflecting about them very individually and b) discussing their own past with their peers or classmates. The Video-Box enabled an autobiographical narration and offered students a physical and virtual space for dealing with personal experiences. The intimacy of the box created an internal self as well as an external perception enabling direct consternation.

The vocational schoolteacher Karolin Linker from Zurich explained to us, in a personal interview, that the interactive Video-Box – with its simple construction – and the videos in which protagonists asked personal and direct questions, helped to create interaction with a certain depth. It struck her how much impact the stories in the Video-Box had on her students. These latter actively engaged in discussions about migration and the asylum system – realising, for example, how arbitrary a legal system can be for asylum-seekers struggling to obtain a residence permit or trying to prove (often in vain) that they had been exposed to severe human-rights violations. The students would also start reflecting on their own and others’ family backgrounds, realising for the first time how many people around them actually have a refugee and/or migration experience. Karolin Linker articulated this as follows: “It was impressive to get to know the sensitive, thoughtful and personal side of my students.” It seems that some of the students told their story for the first time in the intimate atmosphere of the Video-Box or, as Linker observed, “The box encouraged them to talk about their own history in the collective or to question certain things such as their family background. That does not happen very often.”

Almost half of the students visiting the Video-Box had a migration experience and talked about their own life history. Some of them told their story for the very first time while speaking either directly to the protagonists on the screen or to their peers sitting next to them. Most students related their situations to one of the protagonists in the box and, in this way, linked with them, as some of the collected statements demonstrate:

We also had many problems, like you. Political problems, military and police. Every day they came to our house and made problems. My father spent 8 years in prison [...]. I was in a war and lived on a mountain and now I am in Switzerland. (Zurich).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>“Wir auch, wir haben zu viele Probleme gehabt, wie ihr Probleme. Politische Probleme, Militär und Polizei, jeden Tag kamen sie nach Hause und haben Probleme gemacht. Mein Vater war 8 Jahre im Gefängnis [...]. Ich war im Krieg, habe auf dem Berg gelebt und jetzt bin ich in der Schweiz” (Technische Berufsschule Zürich).

With me it was the same, I was around ten or nine years old when I fled from Eritrea. It was not a nice time. We had to flee because of the dictatorship, it was never good. (Basel)<sup>4</sup>

### 11.4.2 *The Family as a Place of Protection, Exchange and (Over)Burden?*

The important role of the family in this project shaped the narratives from the beginning. In the first part, severely traumatised refugees from the first generation spoke about their family as the place where they would seek refuge and emotional security, especially when it came to hostile and threatening situations. In the second part, it surprised us to discover the family as a unique place of debate, where members of the second generation started talking about their experiences in front of their parents, sisters and brothers.

When it came to flight, war and persecution, *mothers* were at the centre of the storytelling. One adolescent remembered that their mother did everything to protect the children and made them believe that war was a game and bombs were fireworks in front of their buildings. It was this recurrent narrative of protection which, in the end, gave the whole project its title *No child's play*, stating that, contrary to what the children had been told by their mothers, war was no play. The focus in the filmed narratives on the family as a safe haven was echoed by the audience, as two students wrote after having visited the exhibition:

In the filmed portraits we could see that the family ties were remarkably strong and that they formed the strongest pillar of support during flight and during the first years in the new surroundings. (Baumann et al., 2019, p. 2)

The narrative of the parents – and the mother as a quasi-supernatural hero – changed over time and also during the active participation of the second generation in the project. Through their exchanges with the audience during debates or interviews, children started to reflect critically on their role within their family. On the one hand, they felt responsible for protecting their parents and to give back what they had received during hard times and, on the other, they felt pressure to succeed in school and to get a higher education, thus exceeding the expectations of their parents. This overperforming attitude is quite typical for many families in similar situations. Lindita, the young daughter of the Kosovar refugee family, says in the film that her mother had sacrificed everything for them and that now it was the children's turn. Similarly, Haron, the eldest son of an Afghan family, underlines the fact that he and his sisters would do anything to offer their mother peace, relief and a good life now. However, through the exchange with the public, the protagonists also

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<sup>4</sup>“Bei mir war es auch so, ich war zehn oder neun Jahre alt als ich aus Eritrea flüchten musste. Es war keine gute Zeit. Wir mussten flüchten wegen der Diktatur, es war nie gut” (Allgemeine Berufsschule, Basel).

started to realise that they had to find their own and independent way into Swiss society and that they needed to look after themselves instead of living the life of their parents.

Again, through interaction and live exchange with the audience, it became clear to the protagonists that their self-imposed role as family mediators could be an overburden and that they would need to find their own roles and positions in life. Thus, the opening of the narrative setting also changed its content, away from family-centred cocooning and towards a strive for autonomy. The feedback which we received from the audience showed us how the narratives in film and discussions surprised or impressed many visitors – who were unaware of the challenges which young adults with refugee experiences face in daily life – and, therefore, altered certain prejudices in perceptions. The narratives revealed the daily lives of young adults who are highly ambitious, reflective and sensitive and who struggle, over the years, to find their place in Swiss society.

Also in the third part, students indicated that family is the most important value as you can always rely on them. The importance of family became apparent when the students answered questions about what gives them strength – for the majority of them, family seemed to be a safe and protecting place that gave one a feeling of support. Or, as one of them described it: “It means home to me and you know that they take care of you” (Basel).<sup>5</sup> Another student said: “My family gives me strength; even if I don’t want to say anything, they always know what is happening” (Schaffhausen).<sup>6</sup> Another student proudly mentioned the following:

I am proud of my family, that they got so far. From a hard, dangerous and horrible country. Iraq is now not so good and they made it from such a country to here. That is very nice. (Basel)<sup>7</sup>

Hence, in the third part of the project, the questions in the Video-Box invited young students to reflect on their family situation and revealed how important the role of family is to most of them.

It would be interesting to see whether the crucial role of the family in narratives might lose its importance or might change with the duration of the stay, the coming of age and integration into society. Or, as a young student asked one of the protagonists while sitting in the Video-Box: “How do you look at your life after your flight? Maybe you first focused more on family and now you focus more on your work? This is what I wonder” (Berne).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup>“Es bedeutet für mich Heimat und du weisst, dass sie sich um dich kümmern” (Allgemeine Berufsschule Basel).

<sup>6</sup>“Meine Familie gibt mir Kraft, auch wenn ich nichts sagen will, sie wissen immer, was vor sich geht” (Kantonsschule Schaffhausen).

<sup>7</sup>“Ich bin stolz auf meine Familie, dass sie es so weit gebracht hat. Von einem harten und schlimmen Land, gefährlich. Irak ist jetzt voll nicht easy und sie haben es von so einem Land bis hier geschafft. Das ist sehr schön” (Allgemeine Berufsschule Basel).

<sup>8</sup>“Wie schaust du auf dein Leben nach deiner Flucht? Vielleicht hattest du erst mehr einen Fokus auf die Familie und jetzt auf die Arbeit? Das frage ich mich” (GIBB Gewerbeschule Basel).



### 11.4.3 *Religion and Faith as a Coping Strategy and Cultural Tie for Refugee Families*

Religion and faith run like a common thread through the narratives and play a crucial role, especially during flight and after arrival. This contrasts with a usually somewhat critical stance and the shrinking importance of religion in many secularised societies, observable also in Switzerland (in the context of migration, religion is instead seen as a danger for fundamentalism and the conservation of traditional role models in the family, a fact that might result in political ignorance of its importance for certain groups). Nevertheless, our project showed that, for the participants, religion and faith are coping strategies and contribute to personal strength and resilience. The presence of God as a “higher instance” on whom one can rely in difficult situations and during flight has been considered existential by almost all the refugees participating in the project. It is in line with the important historical and cultural role that the Abrahamic religions traditionally played in the context of persecution, flight and exile (Metzger et al., 2020; von Däniken & Kamm, 2018). From the audience, two students wrote, in a short report after having visited the final exhibition:

The question of whether you can trust in God or in a “higher instance” plays a crucial role in the film *No child's play*. Several statements prove that faith and religion offer a certain safety to the life of refugee families marked by trauma and flight. Faith offers an outlet to breathe deeply and take the burden off your shoulders. The trust and conviction that you have to carry on only as far as you can is being seen as a motivation to persevere. Here, the religious orientation of the families can vary a lot [...] but mostly the religious ties seem to help in maintaining the cultural ties to the country of origin. (Baumann et al., 2019, p. 2).

Religion as a cultural tie to the country of origin is indeed very present in narratives and has been underlined in family discussions and interviews with participants, such as Lindita from Kosovo, Haron from Afghanistan and Khûe from Vietnam. Similar to the role of the family, the existential importance of religion or faith might later change and vary with the duration of stay; it also seems to decrease, the safer the residence and life situation get. The importance of faith and religion could be also observed in narratives of students who visited the Video-Box, as the following examples show: “Faith and my family give me strength to overcome difficult times” (Schaffhausen).<sup>9</sup> Another student said: “If I have a difficult situation, I try to deal with it on my own. If I cannot make it, I go to my family and otherwise I go further – I believe in God” (Basel).<sup>10</sup> For students without refugee experience, religion and faith seemed to be less important in their daily lives; instead, friends and family were usually mentioned as playing an essential role when dealing with difficult issues.

<sup>9</sup>“Religion und meine Familie geben mir Kraft um schwierige Zeiten zu überstehen“(Schaffhausen).

<sup>10</sup>“Also wenn ich ganz schwierige Situationen habe, versuche ich es allein zu klären, wenn ich es nicht alleine schaffe, dann gehe ich zur Familie und wenn ich es da nicht schaffe, dann gehe ich weiter – ich glaube zu Gott” (Allgemeine Berufsschule Basel).

At least for the first and directly concerned generation of traumatised refugees, religion and faith play a crucial role in helping them to cope with their traumatic past. In her dissertation on the role of religion in the lives of the portrayed first-generation victims of war and torture, the author Cristiana Nicolet concluded:

My analysis shows that religion is existential for the elected and portrayed refugees. They are severely traumatised victims of torture and war – human beings who survived miraculously [...]. Their hopes remain, increasingly nurtured by a very intense belief. Religion is their primary source of power, their lighthouse in the storm (Nicolet, 2016, p. 62).

## 11.5 Conclusion

Dialogue and the active participation of a younger population were the core and heart of the project. The artistic methods we used created an emotional access and served as a “teaser” to encourage reflection and talk about personal experiences or attitudes regarding the consequences of war, persecution and torture on the first and second generations of refugees. The central aim was to make public what usually remains a hidden reality – the personal narratives of refugee families and their children living in Switzerland and how they cope with their traumatic past.

When asked whether the chosen methods contributed to a process of change, we would clearly answer “yes”. The use of methods such as story-telling through writing, multimedia, feedback loop and interviews over a period of more than 13 years, allowed participants and the audience to tell their very personal and often tabooed stories, first to an inner circle (and to themselves) and then to a broader public. Thus, we managed, finally, to uncover hidden realities and to expound on these to society through active participation from different sides. Participants gained more self-determination, autonomy, respect and independence from their families and their past. For the audience, the film presentations, dialogue, conferences and exhibitions led to a deeper knowledge and understanding of refugees’ realities in the mirror of one’s own biography. We achieved an understanding of sensitive topics through a process of visualisation and identification with protagonists in a field in which opinions are usually too quickly polarised and prejudiced.

In a nutshell, we could say that, with the long-term project *No child’s play* we were able to make the following contribution to a change in narratives. We helped to avoid the polarisation present in an often highly politicised discourse on asylum and migration and, instead, pointed out the consequences for individual human beings and their surroundings. We achieved a wide distribution of publications on the topic, organised sold-out film events and debates and distributed recommendations addressed to stakeholders and politicians in German and French. We reached out to a younger audience that is usually less attuned to political topics and motivated them to reflect and speak differently about themselves in a migration context. We launched a process of acknowledgment of what it means for all of us to have possible hidden migration experiences in our own biography and how to deal with them – the link to one’s own experience created understanding and tolerance towards

others. Finally, we made a contribution to the identification, clarification, treatment or access to treatment for traumatised refugees – as well as the greater acceptance of this necessity in society.

A clear limitation of the project lays in its strength: whereas arts-based methods allowed us to go deeper into life stories over the years, we collected only few comparable and quantified data. To obtain this kind of data, we would have needed much more personal and financial resources. We therefore strongly suggest that more research efforts be made and academic research be conducted on the consequences of traumatic experiences of persecution, war and flight on the second (and possibly third) generation of refugees in Switzerland – especially considering the fact that more and more refugees and families with traumatic experiences continue to live among us.

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# Chapter 12

## Culture as Deconstruction and Participation? Reflections from a field...in Transition



Melissa Moralli and Pierluigi Musarò

### 12.1 Introduction

In a European Union characterised by institutional timidity and economic polarisation, the flows of asylum-seekers are often described in terms of crisis (Musarò & Parmiggiani, 2017). Media communication and political actors have mirrored public anxieties and security concerns, endorsing emergency narratives, aggressive policing and militarised 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' are the increase of anti-immigrant 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.

In this context, the project "Atlas of Transitions. New Geographies for a Cross-Cultural Europe", (Creative Europe 2017–2020) included theatres and cultural organisations, as well as a network of university stakeholders in seven countries – Italy, Albania, Belgium, Poland, France, Greece and Sweden – to investigate the relationship between migration and the performing arts. Adopting the methodology of action research, 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.

This chapter explores how the different artistic activities realised during the project "Atlas of Transitions" in Bologna (Italy) promoted cultural and social change, in terms of both narratives built around migration and diversity and of practices of resistance and social inclusion facilitating intercultural dialogue among migrants and host communities. Our reflection focuses on a double level of analysis. From a

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methodological point of view, it investigates how, in the artistic projects developed in Bologna, the approach of action research sustained the conditions under which groups of people could organise and learn from their own experience while making it accessible to others (McTaggart, 1997). Indeed, this methodology shows a major shift in both reflections on knowledge production within and outside the academy and in the relations between research, action and social change. Secondly, our analysis focuses on the processes of audience development entailed by the project “Atlas of Transitions”, moving from the four different types of audience development in the cultural field identified by Kawashima (2006).

The method of action research and this particular approach to audience development will serve to investigate, *inter alia*, how a phenomenon such as migration can be de- and re-constructed using varied communicative codes, thus following a process of knowledge co-construction between artists, migrants, asylum-seekers and students. Hence, action research can be conceived as a collective process whereby participants aim to understand and improve specific social practices (Musarò & Moralli, 2019). Moreover, the audience-development approach can engage the audience of an artistic practice in intervening directly in the performance, contributing to the co-construction of new representations on migration. In so doing, both action research and audience development intervened in supporting a critical reflection by the participants, nurturing change and awareness about migration, linking the artistic, civic and political spheres (Mouffe, 2007). Finally, reflecting on how the Atlas project’s communication strategies and performative practices were planned to encourage mutual interaction between Bologna’s inhabitants, including locals and newcomers, while empowering their participation in cultural activities, we shed light on the capacity of participatory arts to disrupt the lines between possible and ‘impossible citizens’ (Vora, 2013)<sup>1</sup> and promote new forms of sociability (Glick Schiller & Caglar, 2016).

## 12.2 A Project in Multiple Transitions

Promoting cross-cultural dialogue in local communities through culture and the performing arts, the project “Atlas of Transitions” developed artistic initiatives capable of generating practices of mutual recognition and negotiation as well as spaces of encounter for people with different backgrounds. Thus, it supported common physical and symbolic universes capable of valorising diversity as a basis for cultural production and engagement. The project, coordinated by Emilia Romagna Teatro Fondazione (ERT), included 11 partners in seven countries – mainly theatres and cultural organisations: Cantieri Meticci (Bologna, Italy), Le Channel Scène

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<sup>1</sup>In the book *Impossible Citizens*, Vora explains the state of permanent temporariness of Indian communities living in Dubai. Similarly, asylum-seekers and international protection-holders in Italy often find themselves in this situation of temporariness, with little possibility of obtaining citizenship.

Nationale (Calais, France); Tjeter Vizion Ngo and A.T.K. – Albanian Theatre Association (Elbasan, Albania); Théâtre de Liège and 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 a network of seven universities and research centres on migration in the same countries (the University of Lille, the Centre of Migration Research – CMR, at Warsaw University, the University of Elbasan, the Centre for Ethnic and Migration Studies at the University of Liège, the University of Gothenburg and the National Technical University of Athens).

For the duration of the project, the collaboration between artists, researchers and practitioners assured the variety of the approaches adopted by each partner. The added value of the project consisted, indeed, in the variety of approaches adopted by the partners, which provided an 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. Therefore, since its very beginning, “Atlas of Transitions” implied various codes of expression, artistic expedients and flexible performative structures. It developed several interventions in different spaces and contexts, engaging local communities, migrants and refugees in different ways.

The multiple voices, disciplines and languages used by the project were directly reflected in the methodological frame adopted by artists and researchers: after a quick context analysis on migration and artistic experiences related to each country, every research group undertook an explorative qualitative analysis to examine the specific cultural activities developed in the first year by the artists involved in the project. This explorative phase provided an opportunity to understand communicative languages different from the codes usually adopted by academic research, opening challenging spaces of dialogue with the partners thanks to participant observations during the first months of the project (November 2017–May 2018) and 47 in-depth interviews with the artists and curators of and participants in the artistic workshops. Thus, it sought to answer the following research questions: How can we 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 can cultural production directly involve migrants and asylum-seekers in active forms of participation while overcoming paternalistic forms of involvement?

After this explorative phase, the researchers and the artists together engaged in some experiments of action research. A fundamental point was to develop artistic practices intrinsically embedded in the specific context of intervention, capable of answering the emerging needs of that specific *milieu*. As a result, a mosaic of projects in transitions emerged, developed around different topics: from the concept of “refuge” – particularly important in Calais – to individual and collective identity – a relevant topic for the Polish context – and to the transformation of public space and revitalisation dynamics, as in the case of the city of Lavrio in Greece.

Although this contribution specifically explores the activities we developed in Bologna, in order to symbolically visualise the overall frame of action of the partners we decided to cite some of the artistic and cultural interventions developed in the other countries involved in the project. In Poland, for example, the performance “Lawrence of Arabia”, developed by Teatr Powszechny in 2018, proposed – through a theatrical telephone game – a unique reflection about identity, thanks to the cooperation of several groups: the team of artists and actors, foreigners living in Poland and researchers from the CMR. Furthermore, Strefa Wolnościowa organised visual art and theatre activities for young artists of different cultural backgrounds willing to work with migrant communities living in Warsaw, as well as for all those interested in participatory and community arts. The workshops took place in various neighbourhoods of the city and resulted in a huge community of non-professional actors, musicians and young artists, leading to a second cycle of workshops and a final interactive performance. Similarly, in France, Le Channel Scène Nationale conducted, together with the artist Momette, two experimental creative workshops involving children and adults, locals and refugees, academics and artists in the city of Calais. The workshop implemented “The Great Hands Collection”, an evolving giant atlas of hands based on the handprints of all the people participating in the workshop, which generated travel stories and inner landscapes through drawings, paintings, soundtracks, images, photographic hand portraits and storytelling. Moreover, in 2019, during the multidisciplinary festival “A Taste of the Other”, Le Channel Scène Nationale invited people in Calais on a journey with an unusual itinerary, along which they could meet four people who had a certain amount of knowledge on the much-debated topic of migration: some were researchers (sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, etc.), some were artists living in exile (poets, actors, writers) and yet others involved residents or active members of various non-profit organisations. These “Incredible Paths”, directed by the artist Didier Ruiz, were an opportunity to create a space where short testimonials and concise reflections could shed light on questions raised by intercontinental migrations. In Sweden, Backa Teater and Twisted Feet realised a dance show with young people and amateurs. This project was dedicated to mirroring and celebrating encounters, courage and hope in the wake of policy measures on migration and displacement and harsh asylum laws. The following year, always combining professional actors with young non-professionals and based on the text written by the Syrian playwright, Adel Darwish, they promoted the performance “Hierarchy of Needs”, which focused on human relations, power and war. In Albania, instead, the performance “Sunflower”, organised by the A.T.K. Albanian Theatre Association and the NGO Tjeter Vizion, evoked migrants’ and asylum-seekers’ difficult journeys in search for a better life through a multidisciplinary artistic approach. Also in this case, the performance engaged non-professional and young artists and a cast including actors with diverse cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the team from Elbasan worked through different projects on return migration, an extreme actual topic for contemporary Albania. The important topic of displacement was also a reflection lens for the performance “Sortir du noir” (“Out of Darkness”) made by filmmakers Mary Jimenez and Bénédicte Liénard and supported by the Théâtre de Liège. This work focused on the



reality of the migratory flow, mainly through the fundamental issue of the duty of burial, dehumanising those who lost their lives in the Mediterranean and bounding them to an endless exile. The performance was preceded by a series of workshops that involved students in dialogue with migrants, reporting their stories and life experiences and transforming them into narratives to be performed in the theatre. Finally, *Motus Terrae*, in partnership with the School of Architecture – NTUA and the local community, organised in Lavrion (Greece) a collaborative research workshop entitled “Monuments of Conflict & Convergence”. Combining an academic approach and tools of the young students at NTUA with the artists’ inspirational methods and gaze and the stories of the inhabitants of Lavrion, the team developed alternative and participatory urban maps, capable of connecting the past, the present and the future of the city.

### 12.3 The Project in Bologna

The project in Bologna developed around dual parallel lines of intervention. The first core of activities consisted of what, in the project, was called “The Art of Meeting”, a 3-year involvement of two artistic collectives from Bologna: *Cantieri Meticci* and *ZimmerFrei*. The first, *Cantieri Meticci*, is a theatre company from Bologna directed by Pietro Floridia. Since 2012, it has involved 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 promote 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 and aimed at widening spaces of social and political inclusion. Secondly, the theatre collective intends to improve participants’ artistic and cultural skills by supporting a company of professional actors/activists. *Cantieri Meticci* usually develops performances that shed light on issues such as exploitation, border control, human rights and intercultural relations, while maintaining a direct involvement of the public in the performance. As a partner in the “Atlas of Transitions” project, *Cantieri Meticci* developed a series of urban workshops included in the activities “The Art of Meeting”, as well as two performances for the two festivals (see Figs. 12.1 and 12.2).

The second collective which worked on “The Art of Meeting” activities was *ZimmerFrei*. *ZimmerFrei* is a group of artists working on public space through a 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



**Fig. 12.1** “Autostrada del Sud”, organised by Cantieri Meticci during the festival “Right to the City”, 2018. (Photo: Paolo Piscolla)



**Fig. 12.2** “The Nigger of the Narcissum”, organised by Cantieri Meticci during the festival “Home”, 2019. (Photo: Margherita Caprilli)

designer and musician) and Anna Rispoli, who now works as an artist and director in Brussels. Within Atlas of Transitions, they organised 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 archives by intercultural groups of teenagers and youngsters (see Fig. 12.3).



**Fig. 12.3** Scene from the “Saga” documentary, ZimmerFrei. (Photo: ZimmerFrei)

During the workshops, the groups not only made contact with the video-art projects and the documentaries made by ZimmerFrei but 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 – resulted in the realisation 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 interviews to open dialogues, from informal conversations to rewriting personal stories, all while passing through urban walks.

Another important part of the activities developed by ERT Fondazione, Cantieri Meticci and University of Bologna converged into the “Atlas of Transitions – Biennale”. These three international festivals (organised in 2018, 2019 and 2020) adopted an innovative approach to investigating 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 (2020, p. 26).

The first festival, “Right to the City”, took place in the city of Bologna from 15–24 June 2018 and, inspired by Lefebvre’s ideas (1968), developed the theme of the right to participate and re-appropriate symbolic and physical urban spaces. The second festival, “Home”, animated the city from 1–10 March 2019 and dealt with the feeling of being at home or being away from home, starting with the reflection of Ahmed et al. (2003), who suggests the need to overcome a representation of

migrants as ontologically uprooted. Based on a feminist and post-colonial approach, this perspective tries to challenge the ethnocentric narratives that depict migrants as an indefinite community that belongs nowhere and primarily to a Europe with borders remodeled 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 lifeline 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.

On the basis of these premises, in the next sections we show how specific cultural activities developed within the “Atlas of Transitions” project in Bologna managed to foster alternative forms of participation of migrants and asylum-seekers, while deconstructing the conventional imaginaries built around the topic of migration. To do so, we propose an analysis of some of these artistic interventions through the dual lens of action research and audience development.

## 12.4 Culture as Deconstruction: The Potentialities of Action Research

Since the earliest stages of our investigation, action research seemed to be the most appropriate methodology not only to better understand the relationships between migration and the arts but also to develop other narratives on the migration phenomenon through the voice, ideas, creativity and skills of migrants themselves. Therefore, the action research was not limited to trying to blur disciplinary boundaries, enriching the perspectives on the phenomenon but also aimed to promote, in different ways, a mutual collaboration between artists, researchers and participants of the workshops proposed throughout the duration of the project. Hence, many of the projects mentioned are to be considered as the result of a process of cooperation that has alternated moments of theoretical reflection with performative interventions, research in the field with opportunities for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary dialogue, developing results in which the theoretical, practical and analytical dimensions are strictly interdependent. To do so, the projects developed within the “Atlas of Transitions” project included different tools, such as meetings between all stakeholders involved, interdisciplinary conferences and seminars on project issues, public debates open to citizens, art workshops, training in high schools and university courses and debates with the communities of migrants living in Bologna and its surroundings.

The rise of action research shows a major shift in both the reflection on knowledge production within and outside the academy and in the relations between research, action and social change. The term was introduced for the first time by Lewin (1946) to deal with critical social problems characterising the post-war period. His studies gave birth to a long research tradition about how this methodology can be used in organisations and can improve human relations in the search for resolutions of a common perceived problem/objective “by expanding the community of inquiry and interpretation to include the subjects studied” (Eikeland, 2006, p. 39). Although, over time, many other approaches emerged and action research was applied to different fields of studies and intervention (from development to technology and culture), a central aspect of this methodology is a learning experience and a collective process where participants aim to understand and improve specific social practices (McTaggart, 1997, also see Chaps. 10, 11, and 13 in this volume). This methodology is based on the idea that there is a link between knowledge and action. In this sense, participation intends to guarantee a democratic approach to the research, while action refers to the necessity for the research to be aimed at contributing directly to the change of a specific situation. Overcoming the dichotomy that usually divides action and research (Whyte et al., 1991), action research connects the concept of knowledge to everyday life practices.

In so doing, it tries to intervene in contexts of social injustice and exclusion, enhancing social relations and supporting a critical reflection by the participants. In the field of migration, for example, action research can represent a useful approach with which to both deconstruct the narratives conveyed by stigmatising media and political rhetoric and promote alternative imaginaries on this complex social phenomenon, challenging the oppressive mechanisms of representation and exclusion often reproduced by the media and the imaginaries they convey (Musarò & Parmiggiani, 2017). This means both addressing immediate needs and supporting a process of collective reflection on dominant structures in order to develop viable alternatives (Selner, 1997).

In the project “Atlas of Transitions”, the use of action research in performative practices (Leavy, 2019) thus aimed to challenge the stereotypical depictions conveyed by the distorted spectacularisation of contemporary migratory phenomena which crystallises the rhetoric of passivity of migrants and refugees (Ahmed, 2004) and influences public opinion (Horsti, 2019). Action research should also be effective in the practical everyday world through common working and learning dynamics. Within these processes, everyone should collectively work to reduce the sphere of power and control in everyday life practices, through both learning and self-reflection, due to a balance between action and research. This leads to the development of theoretically informed practices for all the participants involved, supporting 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). Furthermore, it is exactly through this process that stereotyped depictions of migration can be deconstructed and new imaginaries can emerge. Overcoming the positivist approach, action research thus involves people as “subjects” of the research, supporting “their capacity for self-reflection and their

ability to collaborate in the diagnosis of their own problems and in the generation of knowledge” (Susman & Evered, 1978, p. 586).

The project “Maps of Transitions” proposed during the first Atlas Biennale “Right to the City” (2018) clearly showed this collective process of knowledge construction and its consequences at the level of change of social representations. This event was organised by Next Generation Italy, an association of second-generation migrants, which proposed a series of workshops addressed to asylum-seekers living in a reception centre in Bologna (Emilia Romagna Teatro Fondazione, 2018). The aim of the workshop was to develop an urban itinerary based on the asylum-seekers’ daily life experiences of the city and the emotions (fear, happiness, doubts, etc.) they experienced in relation to such places. As a final outcome, the group realised a collective urban itinerary which ended in the internal cloister of the theatre Arena del Sole. Here, the participants in the workshops discussed their maps together with academics, experts and activists who were commenting on the “Hate barometer”, a tool used by Amnesty International Italy that served to monitor the language of political leaders on social media during the political campaign held in 2018 in Italy.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, “Maps of Transitions” – conceived as a mini-tour between geographical and linguistic maps – provided a platform for asylum-seekers, scholars, activists, immigrants and communication professionals to reflect on the relationship between fear and prejudice, while identifying the words for a more inclusive and welcoming society. Hence, in “Maps of Transitions”, the asylum-seekers were involved both in the development of an urban itinerary in the city of Bologna and in a mutual dialogue with researchers and experts in the field of migration. The result was an open discussion where different topics and concepts were disrupted and reframed: from hate speech to racism, from the accessibility of urban spaces to the reception system. The project “Maps of Transitions” unveiled the reflexivity in terms of the embedded subjectivities (Longhurst, 2009) of the participants taking part in action research, with a specific focus on knowledge construction. Drawing upon the post-structuralist approach, action research thus questions the participants’ principle of objectivity to valorise the existence of a plurality of standpoints. According to this vision,

any reality can only be decoded through partial and subjective narratives, whether those of the participants or those of the researchers (...), emphasising the influence of social relations and power hierarchies that exist in determining the coordinates of such narratives (Giorgi et al., 2021 p. 31).

The co-construction of knowledge was, therefore, guaranteed by a process of collaboration between all the participants. Here, two concepts become central. The first refers to “reflexive critique”,<sup>3</sup> defined as “the process of becoming aware of our own perceptual biases”. The second is “dialectic critique”, “which is a way of

<sup>2</sup>This project was part of a larger campaign project entitled “Count up to 10”, promoted by Amnesty International Italy to focus attention on the use of divisive, violent and discriminatory language against migrants, foreigners, Roma and LGBTIQ people.

<sup>3</sup>As Hall (1996) suggests, reflexivity is an integral element of emancipatory action research and refers to all the participants included in the process. This also includes the researchers, who should

understanding the relationships between the elements that make up various phenomena in our context” (Winter, 1996, p. 19). These aspects refer to dynamic, interpersonally negotiated, processes of interpretation and their interdependence. In other words, the collaboration between participants was highly determined by their individual and social cognitive and interpretative frames which, consequently, influence the relations with others. It is important to highlight that action research does not refer only to the construction of scientific knowledge but also to practical knowledge (Shani & Coghlan, 2014). In this sense, “successful participatory knowledge production requires not only useful knowledge, but also knowledge produced through continuous negotiation within a specific context” (Caister et al., 2011, p. 25). In other words, knowledge production becomes a learning process.

A final important aspect was the conflictual dimension capable of subverting the dominant hegemony, namely what Mouffe (2007) defines as an ‘agonistic’ approach to cultural/artistic production. According to the political scientist, the negation of the controversial dimension typical of the liberal approach implies an idea of consensus based on reason, determining a political hegemony that creates, at the same time, the exclusion of certain groups. From this perspective, “critical art is art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by manifold artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony” (2007, p. 5). Hence, the arts can represent an important physical and symbolic space in which to start critical reflection and analysis (Leavy, 2019). In the particular case of the “Atlas of Transitions”, this agonistic approach was adopted to challenge specific images and narratives which dehumanise migrants and helped to deconstruct the pietistic imagination of migrants as “silent victims” (Chouliaraki, 2021). On the contrary, performing arts became “an authentic revolutionary alternative to the dominant language” (Fazio, 2001, p. 34), generating new and unexpected imaginaries and forms of mutual recognition. Within this context, action research allows not only the deconstruction of distorted images and the stimulation of critical reflections on these social inequalities; it also creates the possibility to develop collective experiments and new forms of dialogue and engagement of migrant communities, as we show in the next section.

## 12.5 Culture as Participation: Disentangling Audience Development

Recognising that there is variety in the activities generally known as “audience development”, Kawashima (2006) identifies four types of audience development in the arts. These include Extended Marketing, Taste Cultivation, Audience Education and Outreach (previously called Cultural Inclusion), each of which is different in terms of target, form and purpose.

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be reflexive in relation to the methods adopted, their influence on the setting and the system of knowledge applied during the process.

Briefly, the author describes Extended Marketing as the skills and techniques – largely borrowed from conventional arts marketing – “targeted to tap into the pool of potential or ‘lapsed’ audiences who are basically interested in the arts but have just not had a chance to attend for a variety of reasons” (Kawashima, 2006, p. 57). It is thus mainly about identifying those non-attenders with a high potential for “conversion” and understanding the specific reasons for their failure to attend in the first place. In order to do this, it is fundamental to remove any tangible and intangible barriers to attendance or to give some specific incentives.

Taste Cultivation and Audience Education are mostly to enable existing audiences either to broaden their cultural scope (the former) or to enrich their arts experience (the latter). These activities start from understanding what else the existing audience might be interested in other than the current offers and giving them some additional or enhanced benefits. For example – as Kawashima reports – a Taste Cultivation project may take concert audiences to an art exhibition before the performance, whereas an Audience Education project would provide an opportunity for in-depth study into a specific aspect of the arts.

Finally, Kawashima describes Outreach as various projects to take the arts from their usual venues to places where those with little or no access to the arts live. They thus contribute to social policy in a broad sense through their artistic resources – for example, theatre companies taking participatory arts projects to a hospital and working with patients. Other targets may include the homeless, people in prison, those on low incomes or living in deprived areas and asylum seekers and refugees. Thus, we can see Outreach as a political category that leads us to deal with the concept of social inclusion and with the contribution of the arts to concern for excluded people and the creation of inclusive communities.

Following the different meanings described by Kawashima, the “Atlas of Transitions” project in Bologna was perceived and managed in terms of audience development; one of its main objectives was the inclusion of migrants and refugees through creative practices (also) in public spaces and peripheral urban areas. At the same time, this objective was, in parallel, included in communication strategies thanks to the launch of the web platform, pre-festival activities, the three editions of the Biennale Festival and the summer school held in June 2020. Considering communication more as a social interactive process, rather than a transmission of information, since the beginning the project focused on challenging the stereotypical narratives conveyed by the mediatisation of contemporary migratory phenomena, actively encouraging new ways of living public spaces and social coexistence between local citizens, migrants and refugees. Therefore, prior to analysing the various tools and actions experimented during the 3 years, it is essential to take into account the two main objectives that were identified when the communication plan for the “Atlas of Transitions” was defined. The first objective aimed to diminish the barriers that hinder “non-attenders” from being involved in cultural initiatives. To encourage a more welcoming environment, the project attempted to create conditions for them to participate, diversifying forms of dialogue (physical and non-physical), as well as using unconventional venues and public spaces, especially in suburban locations in the city of Bologna. This result also emerged from the surveys



undertaken during the two international festivals organised in Bologna, where the majority of respondents answered that they were not used to going to the theatre regularly (for the “Right to the City”, 47.54% of the audience used to go to the theatre between one and four times a year and for the festival “Home” the figure is similar at 45.05%).<sup>4</sup>

Since the first press conference of the project, the organisers highlighted the common objective of enlarging the range of the public while intercepting different types of non-attender, without forgetting their current audiences. On this basis, while ERT usually intends the press events of its annual cultural programme as institutional meetings, the press conference of the Atlas launch, as well as the subsequent festival launches, were public and widely advertised. To reduce the barrier between an institutional environment such as the Arena del Sole – a national theatre located in the centre of Bologna – and groups of audiences who usually do not attend this venue, invitations and press releases were sent not only to the press and media but also to a variety of non-profit associations, cultural workers, activists, socially engaged artists, high schools and universities. In particular, the collaboration with schools and universities in different cultural productions and projects led to the engagement of many students – participating also in terms of an audience: the category of “students” reached the highest percentage of participation during both the festival “Right to the City”, with a frequency of 49.18 and the festival “Home”, at 39.64%.

Furthermore, the three partners organised several meetings with local NGOs, social cooperatives and associations that work with migrants and asylum-seekers, managing reception centres or promoting activities of social integration, in order to better understand their daily commitment and to create meaningful, long-term connections between them and the project leaders. These meetings were considered as part of a fundamental approach, exploring the territory before the actual planning of the two festivals; they were instrumental in defining a long-term cultural strategy that goes beyond increasing visitor numbers. Finally, the programmes of the festivals were enriched by the presence of different artists coming from all over the world – from the “artist” Tania Bruguera (Cuba), to performer Nadia Beugré (Côte d’Ivoire) and the Palestinian choreographer Farah Saleh. These artists collaborated together with Italian curators and artists on the main issues relating to the two festivals, namely the concepts of the right to the city and the concept of (not) feeling at home. The strategy at the basis of this choice was not to connect migrants with their country of origin or a spectacularisation of different cultural backgrounds

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<sup>4</sup>Although the research was based mostly on an explorative qualitative analysis and the methodology of action research, we also undertook a survey among the audiences of the two international festivals (“Right to the City” and “Home”). In total, 121 questionnaires were collected. After a first pilot test aimed at revising or changing the questionnaire for the sample, the survey focused on the perceptions and evaluations of the participants, as well as their attitudes towards the performing arts in general. Although in this contribution we mainly present the results of action research, we have integrated some of the insights deriving from the survey in order to better explain the audience development strategies and impacts.

but to work together on the temporary reappropriation of public spaces and critically reflect on artistic production from different perspectives, as shown in the two following examples. Moreover, cultural polarisation was also avoided thanks to the fact that most of the artistic projects were not directly and explicitly talking about migration but addressed interconnected topics such as borders, identity or the collective use of public space.

An experiment of audience development which particularly worked in terms of “extended marketing” and “outreach” was the performance “*100 Pas Presque*” (Almost 100 steps), which invited a hundred people of different origins, ages, genres, educational and professional backgrounds to participate in a series of dance and theatre workshops in order to create two collective performances during the festival “Right to the City” (2018). More specifically, during their encounters, the participants worked on the meaning of community, identity, diversity and body presence, in connection with different spaces and with the common aim to open new perspectives in innovative ways. The project was developed by the famous Moroccan choreographers and dancers Taoufiq Izeddiou and Said Ait El Moumen, who wanted to explore how performing arts can become a tool for the re-appropriation of space and intercultural dialogue without necessarily explicitly addressing these topics. The performances were realised in two different areas of Bologna: one in the city centre, the other in Piazza dei Colori/Croce del Biacco, a suburb characterised by social conflicts due to the coexistence of migrants hosted in the regional hub (hot spot) and the inhabitants of the neighbourhood – many of them retired, or unemployed – or families with low and middle incomes. The performance which initially consisted in a dance for 100 metres in a public space by the workshop participants, subsequently opened to the audience, making participants and spectators plunge into a rhythmic spiral capable of creating a discontinuity in the perception of the rhythms of the city. According to the choreographer, “dancing across 100 metres very slowly is likely to provide another way to occupy a place together, to ask questions about listening, about the other, as well as to revisit their relationship with time and space”. Thus, if the dimensions of integration, dialogue and interaction in urban space were not directly discussed by the choreographer or with the participants of the workshops – nor with the audience itself – they were conveyed through forms of communication that were not verbal but visual, making the performance more accessible to different kinds of audience.

Another interesting project was proposed by the Cuban arti(vi)st Tania Bruguera. The “School of Integration”, realised during the festival “Home” (2019), was conceived as a temporary school to experience other types of knowledge, history, skills, beliefs and customs, as well as unexpected connections between them and those of the hosting country. Through music, oral poetry, culinary exchanges, artisan workshops, etc., during the 10 days of the festival, the “School of Integration” activated a two-way model for teaching, in which the “foreigner guests” introduced the ‘local hosts’ to their traditions. Therefore, the role reversal between those who usually have to adapt to the host culture and those who are part of the host society was among the most interesting and innovative aspects of this project, challenging the usual political understandings – those of unidirectional “integration”. 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 Easter eggs, while another association transformed the DAMSLab's classroom – an artistic space managed by the 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 and inhabitants who met daily for an hour, with the aim of sharing their stories and producing “practices of difference” (Semi et al., 2009), suggesting that cultures are not coherent systems but are fluid and influence each other. Therefore, the “School” attempted to deconstruct “all social assertions of difference, highlighting its fortuitous, open-ended, unstable nature as it appears” (2009, p. 67). As a consequence, this project intervened in terms of audience development at a dual level. The first refers to “Extended Marketing”, as it involved those audiences who are usually excluded from cultural activities. The second refers to “Outreach” by bringing participatory artistic experiences within an academic space, thus contributing to its temporary re-signification. 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 two projects showed, therefore, how arts and culture can become an alternative form of participation (Merli, 2002). By selecting the stage venue outside the traditional places where culture is produced, involving the centre as well as the periphery, institutional places but also streets and reception centres – and encouraging the participation of different people – the project included and amplified the voice of those who are usually not heard. This was an experiment which showed how the performing arts can have both an aesthetic and a political value (Martiniello, 2016; Paltrinieri et al., 2020).

## 12.6 Conclusions

The project “Atlas of Transitions” displayed the transformative power of cultural production. It aimed to deconstruct Eurocentric narratives, promoting mutual recognition (Camozzi, 2016) and spaces of collective participation. Hence, the artistic interventions represented physical spaces and processes of knowledge that developed plural and various forms of conviviality.

First, the methodology of action research adopted in the project sustained continuous forms of social relations that gradually transform into learning relationships (Eikeland, 2006). Thus, the artistic workshops and events were able to promote forms of encounter and dialogue, supporting intercultural and intergenerational diversity as an inescapable source for the creative process. By creating plural and flexible structures, they involved various accounts and critiques, rather than a single

authoritative interpretation (Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017). From this perspective, the knowledge of both the inquirer and the inquired was not excluded from an understanding of how knowledge was generated (Susman & Evered, 1978, p. 586).

In this sense, action research was concerned with change, not only at an individual but also at a collective level (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003). As the examples presented in this contribution have shown, a collective reflection on the modalities of deconstructing distorted imaginaries of migration through unconventional language and practices was the primary means to promote a change in these imaginaries (Foster, 1972; Moralli et al., 2020). In so doing, the project “Atlas of Transitions” has challenged the social conventions and power relationships that lay behind the ways in which different people were represented. Hence, the cultural activities were not only characterised by an aesthetic value but also by a strong political meaning. In this sense, they promoted a “narrative of change” (Wittmayer et al., 2019) capable of fighting “against pre-existing cultural and institutional narratives and the structures of meaning and power that they transmit” (Davis, 2002, p. 25).

Secondly, thanks to a collective effort in audience development, regarded not only as a possibility to broaden the audience of cultural productions but also as a form of direct participation of migrants, the project amplified their voices as individual subjects (Papastergiadis, 2012). As a result, the project became a space of dialogue, resistance and activism.

Drawing on these results, new research paths emerge. First, further studies are needed in order to understand the access to cultural production and consumption by migrant communities in the Italian context. While the number of artistic and cultural projects developed by migrants is increasing, artists encounter various difficulties in putting into action processes of counter-racialisation in contemporary Italian society (see Chap. 6 in this volume). Moreover, it would be useful to further investigate the transformative power of culture in terms of political participation and citizenship.

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# Chapter 13

## Youth in the City: Fostering Transcultural Leadership for Social Change



Matteo Dutto, Francesco Ricatti, Luca Simeone, and Rita Wilson

### 13.1 Introduction

*Youth in the City* (YITC) is an international, multidisciplinary research initiative that promotes digital participatory action research (PAR) with multicultural and migrant youth as an effective response to the xenophobic content that readily spreads on social media and in public discourse. We work with young people across the world to reclaim urban space and imagine shared transcultural futures through participatory mapping, co-designed creative interventions and digital storytelling. In 2019, we conducted the first project in Prato, Italy. Home to over 120 different nationalities (Ufficio di Statistica, Comune di Prato, 2020), the city is one of the most studied cases of multiculturalism in Italy and has become, over the years, “a European ‘hotspot’ for migration and integration issues” (Baldassar et al., 2015, p. 8). It is also a place where we witness first-hand how migration flows generate “transcultural edges” – that is, new and innovative spaces – “where unevenly

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distributed different cultural systems, representations, imaginaries converge and give rise to new transcultural practices” (Vanni, 2016, p. 7). Against this background, we collaborated with local high schools to conduct a participatory action project with 48 high-school students, many of whom had migrant backgrounds. Entitled *La Nostra Prato* (Youth in the City, 2021), the project applied the YITC methodology to develop creative processes that could foster leadership skills and an enthusiasm for social change among this culturally diverse group of young people, who have the potential to play a vital role in bringing together their communities, fostering social cohesion and building socio-economic resilience. Their lived experiences across different cultures, languages and social contexts provide the potential for great leadership within increasingly complex, transcultural and multilingual societies. Recognising that such potential is often hindered by a combination of factors, including a lack of confidence and different forms of discrimination at the intersection of class, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientations and physical abilities, we sought to redress this imbalance by providing an opportunity for multiethnic youth to engage in a range of digital creative interventions that would enable them to have a say on issues that matter to them.

Using the *La Nostra Prato* pilot project as an example, we suggest an alternative model for understanding and engendering social and cultural change; one that focuses on the transdisciplinary and transcultural creative practices and processes through which young people in superdiverse urban contexts develop leadership skills. In empowering youth through participatory-action workshops and digital creative interventions and in giving their perspectives enhanced visibility at the local, national and global levels, YITC fosters an understanding of leadership as a purposeful, collaborative, values-based process that results in positive social change. Our approach is founded on three pillars: it is transcultural, transdisciplinary and participatory. *Transcultural*, as we focus on the creative potential of different languages and cultures coming together and influencing each other, in turn fostering social cohesion within superdiverse communities. The term transcultural emphasises the productive nature of cultural encounters and exchanges in developing new cultural formations (see Franzenburg, 2020; Welsch, 1999). *Transdisciplinary*, as we aim to bridge the gaps between research, creative practices, entrepreneurship, education and civic engagement. *Participatory*, as transcultural processes need to be led by local communities and to nurture local leadership, especially amongst young people.

In this chapter, we first explore how digital storytelling (DST) and participatory-action research (PAR) can be used to engage with students across all levels of education to challenge mainstream narratives of national cultural homogeneity. We then discuss the model of participatory storytelling that we developed alongside participants over the course of the workshops we ran for the *La Nostra Prato* project. We analyse in detail how participatory mapping, DST and photovoice activities, co-designing an exhibition and processes of divergent and convergent thinking were all deployed to help students to reclaim a creative and productive space for self-representation and to gain confidence in their own voices. Finally, we conclude by reflecting on the interactive storytelling experience and set of educational guidelines that we produced as part of the project, discussing the critical role that replicability,



accessibility and open-access all play for cultural and research activities that aim to promote the active participation of transcultural youth in research and policy development.

## **13.2 Transcultural Leadership, Participatory Action Research and Digital Storytelling Methodologies**

Scientists almost unanimously point out that our societies operate way beyond the regenerative capacity of our planet (Friedman, 2018; Rockström et al., 2009). The world, in the coming decades, will be one of huge regional and class differences, increased polarisation and social strife (Randers, 2012). At the same time, globalisation will continue to produce both challenges and opportunities at the local, national and international levels. More than ever before, younger generations will need leaders able to operate within superdiverse societies and their ever-changing constellations of objects, spaces, people, ideas and information. Such leaders will have the difficult task of bridging social and cultural differences, bringing people together and directing their joint efforts towards leverage points that can make our society more sustainable and equitable (Meadows, 2008). When operating in an environment that is volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, leaders need an approach that differs from the traditional top-down hierarchical chains of command, in which a single person has a clear idea of how to tackle the problems at hand (Chia & Holt, 2009; Mintzberg, 2000; Simeone, 2020). Nowadays, successful and innovative organisations function through more agile and horizontally structured networks. Their leaders strive to bring together individuals and groups of people, especially those who think and behave in ways that nurture relationships of respect and trust and foster a sense of community (Simeone et al., 2020). Leaders realise that it is precisely from the standpoint of this rich assemblage of divergent perspectives that complex problems can be better understood and elaborated on.

When reflecting on how transcultural leadership for social change may develop effectively within specific local contexts, a few key considerations may help to frame the issue. The spaces and places within which we live, work, meet, and perform our identities and ideologies contribute significantly to our sense of social responsibility, civic engagement, social inclusion and psychological well-being or, conversely, our sense of isolation and exclusion (Casinader et al., 2020). Thus, a process that encourages transcultural leadership must facilitate a creative engagement with complex social geographies – that is, a transcultural understanding of space and place and of how we can explore, experience, understand and transform specific localities. In facilitating such a process, we must, on the one hand, recognise the centrality of language – for instance, through multilingual and translanguaging processes that value and employ linguistic and cultural differences (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2014). On the other hand, we should also employ multisensorial approaches that facilitate a complex experience and understanding of transcultural locations, while developing forms of visual and aural communication that

overcome the limitations of language (see, for instance, Schratz, 2009). This becomes particularly apparent when looking at the creative practices developed by young people of migrant background in large multiethnic urban contexts, from innovative everyday language practices to highly successful hip-hop performances (see Angelucci, 2021; Tetreault, 2015).

Our approach to the development of transcultural leadership skills is specifically structured around participatory action research (PAR) and collaboratively designed participatory events (see Bjögvinsson et al., 2012; Chevalier & Buckles, 2019; Delgado, 2015 and Chaps. 10, 11 and 12 in this volume). We understand participatory action as an activist intervention driven by research practices that attempt to involve migrants as co-creators of creative and research outputs that generate public impact. Our methodology is thus based on two fundamental pillars. First, traditional models of interaction between communities and scholars must be challenged, in order to develop more authentic and productive modes of non-linear co-creation between community members and academics. Second, open-source, engaging and interactive access to the data should be provided through digital visualisations and storytelling, to the benefit of policymakers, administrators, community organisations and the broader society (see De Götzen et al., 2018). The importance of the involvement of young people in decision-making processes is often acknowledged when discussing human rights; however, their active participation in research and policy development remains limited (Gal, 2017). The effective promotion of social inclusion and cohesion requires the development of close collaboration and co-production with young migrants, their classmates and other stakeholders (Matras & Robertson, 2017). PAR is thus particularly indicated to gather the perspective of young people (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017).

In order to develop a multifaceted analysis that can better capture, represent and engage with the “heterogeneity, complexity and fluidity” of superdiverse environments (Goodson & Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2017), transcultural methodologies need to be informed by participatory and digital research practices. This requires the development of models of participatory storytelling and visualisation that challenge the divide between the university and the community (Glick Schiller, 2011). It further requires a new focus on migrants’ urban emplacement, understood as the relationship between the constant changes that affect an urban context, the complex transcultural and intersectional networks that develop within that context, and migrants’ ability to acquire and accumulate social, cultural and financial capital within the constraints of that specific locality as well as through complex transnational, translocal and global networks (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2013).

The use of storytelling practices that weave personal stories with digital media, including videos, images, sounds, texts, geolocalized data and other elements, is particularly effective when engaging with multiethnic youth, since it provides participants with engaging and interactive ways of expressing themselves and reclaiming their presence in the city. DST approaches are increasingly common in research that seeks to engage with marginalised and disadvantaged communities, “with the recognition that process can be as important as product” (Gifford & Wilding, 2013, p. 562). DST has, indeed, emerged as an effective research method for researchers

with an interest in democratising research practices (Ansley & Gaventa, 1997; Gaventa, 1993), challenging power relations between participants and researchers (Flicker, 2008) and recognising participants as co-constructors of knowledge, empowering them with a greater sense of agency (Alexandra, 2008; Lenette, 2017). In the field of migration studies, DST approaches have become increasingly popular in projects that seek to work alongside migrant, refugee and multicultural youth (Chan, 2019; Collie et al., 2010; Lenette et al., 2019; Pienimäki, 2020; Rubesin, 2016; Vecchio et al., 2017). These methods can enable young adults to play a more important role in the research and creative process thanks to their focus on imagery and digital technologies (Johnson, 2009). As Hull (2003) notes, DST methodologies allow young participants to imagine alternative modes of belonging and possible futures, beyond racialised and material contexts. These projects can also increase young people's participation in civic life by giving voice to their concerns and hopes (Mirra et al., 2013; Morrell et al., 2015). DST methodologies have been successfully used to foster leadership skills, building opportunities for young adults to engage with local communities and policymakers and reclaiming space for self-expression and empowerment (Derr et al., 2013).

### 13.3 *La Nostra Prato: One Place, Many Cultures*

Since the mid-1980s, research on the impact of transnational migration flows on Prato has concentrated mostly on the economic and social impact of the large influx of Chinese migrants (Baldassar et al., 2015; Bracci, 2015; Ceccagno, 2017; Dei Ottati, 2013). The public conceptualisation of Prato as a city shaped mostly by industrial and business practices also contributed to the lack of attention to the city's rich history of creative processes of transculturation and exchange (Dutto & Del Bono, 2020). Engaging with the complexity of such a diverse city thus requires the adoption of transcultural frameworks that move beyond binary and essentialised understandings of ethnicity to engage, instead, with the permeability between different linguistic and cultural groups (Ricatti et al., 2019) and the importance of informal processes of transculturation (Ricatti et al., 2021).

This is of particular importance when considering how young migrants and children of migrants, whose own sense of belonging is “not easily captured by either immigrant identity approaches or frameworks of hybridity” (Raffaetà et al., 2016, p. 435), can lead creative processes of transculturation and shape new and more complex understandings of superdiverse urban ecosystems. The city of Prato is also a key case study in this aspect if we consider that the number of students who do not hold Italian citizenship enrolled across all levels of education is almost three times that of the national average across Italy, which was 9.7% in the school year 2017/2018 (MIUR – Ufficio Statistica e Studi, 2019, p. 8). Like the main focus of research on Prato, studies on migrant youth and the children of migrants in Prato have, thus far, focused mostly on students of Chinese heritage (Baldassar & Raffaetà, 2018; Ceccagno, 2004; Paciocco, 2018), stressing how, despite the acts of racism,

xenophobia and classism displayed by Italians in Prato, forms of transculturation have still developed among the youth and new generations, leading to the emergence of hybrid and hyphenated senses of belonging (Paciocco & Baldassar, 2017). What these studies have *not* addressed is how acts of transculturation led by migrant youth may have affected peers without migrant backgrounds and the social fabric of the city itself.

*La Nostra Prato* was designed to address this gap by working with multicultural youth of both migrant and non-migrant heritage, their teachers and migrant and local community organisations. Our aim was to develop a new approach that could empower youth to reimagine, remap and reclaim urban space as their own. Our intention was thus that of challenging traditional models of interaction between scholars and communities in order to develop nonlinear, more authentic and productive modes of cooperation and co-creation between academics and community members (Glick Schiller, 2011). To achieve these objectives, we designed a DST process that consisted of three basic steps:

- create a personal narrative;
- explore the city and take pictures, videos and audio recordings that reflect your narrative; and
- discuss the outputs and collate them into multiple stories that can be widely shared and experienced by accessing a digital platform and attending the exhibition.

To select participants for the workshops, we liaised with the Intercultural Working Group of the Network of Secondary Schools of the Province of Prato (*Tavolo Interculturale della Rete degli Istituti Secondari di Secondo Grado della Provincia di Prato*), a local network of highly involved and motivated high-school teachers who, in recent years, have run several successful initiatives with the multicultural youth of Prato (Rete Scuola Integrale Culture, n.d.). The 48 students – aged between 16 and 18 – who took part in the workshops were thus selected by teachers from eight public high schools. Our criteria for the selection was to be inclusive and transformative. Among the participants, 30 were female and 18 male. Nine different lingua-cultural groups were represented, with participants speaking Italian, Mandarin, Arabic, Albanian, Romanian, Urdu, Panjabi, English and Spanish. Participation in the workshops was entirely voluntary and participants were free to opt-in and out, without undue pressure from teachers, parents or adults. Aside from the new skills and experiences gained, participation in the YITC workshops also awarded students with credits for the work-integrated learning programmes in the Italian education system (*Percorsi trasversali per l'orientamento*). This allowed us to work with participants every day for a full week and to ensure that they were rewarded for their work.

### ***13.3.1 Participatory Mapping and Digital Storytelling with Multicultural Youth***

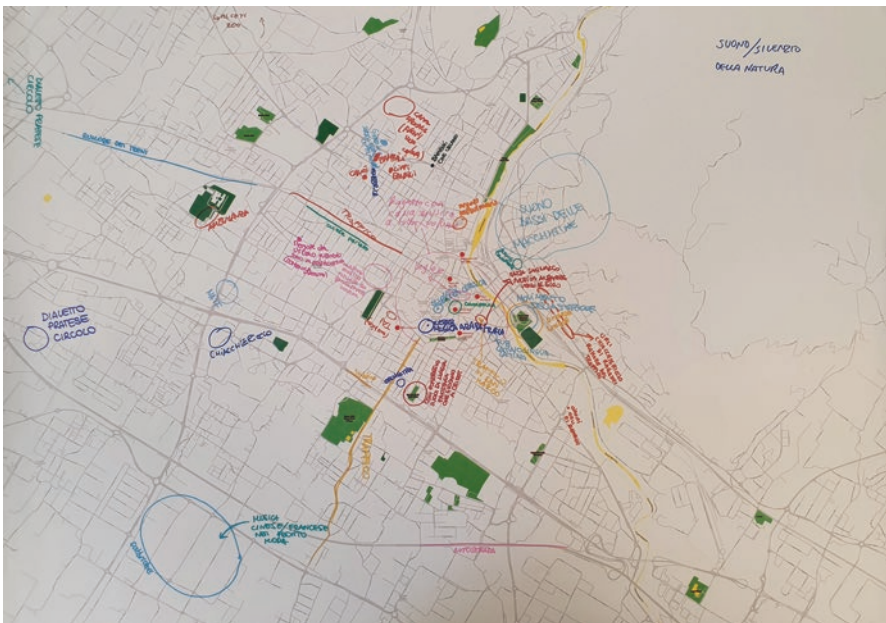
The activities of the creative workshops revolved around the collaborative creation of digital storytelling in the form of participatory maps, digital storytelling, photo-voice, interactive installations and a pop-up exhibition. This approach engages with the diverse skills that each co-creator brought to the workshops, with the aim of mapping, highlighting and appreciating diversity in the daily life and encounters of young people. Our focus on diversity was also reflected in the transdisciplinary and transnational composition of the research team, which brought together researchers, artists, graphic designers and professional consultants to expose participants to different perspectives, different ways of seeing things, different ways of saying things and different ways of facilitating. The young co-creators who joined us thus had to learn how to adapt and react to this diversity and how to tune their way of expressing themselves in relation to it. During the workshops, participants were systematically exposed to cycles that alternatively fuel convergent and divergent thinking (Frich et al., 2021). Techniques for divergent thinking pushed participants to produce multiple ideas and to explore different directions. Techniques for convergent thinking invited them, instead, to come back together on the same creative trajectory. Going through multiple cycles of divergent and convergent thinking over the 5 days of the workshops made the participants realise that they can welcome different ideas and creative outputs, working with them to produce rich and satisfactory outcomes. This co-creative process emerged by combining the contributions of all the participants into a final pop-up exhibition and a digital storytelling experience.

A week before the start of the workshop we conducted introductory sessions with smaller groups of participants in their own high schools. Spending time with the students before the start of the intensive workshops was a crucial component of our methodology, allowing us to better understand each participant's skills, aims and hopes and to incorporate them into the final experience. In order to do so, we organised a participatory mapping exercise with each group, to learn more about their stories and how they experience the city at a day-to-day level. This was followed by a media training session, where students were introduced to the technical aspects of DST. Questionnaires prepared by the research team were then distributed to collect initial data on the languages spoken by each participant, on their skills and on their own aims for the workshops.

Day 1 of the workshops was dedicated to participatory mapping activities, with the objective of working with students to learn more about how they experience the city through their senses, how they relate to its multicultural landscape and what they would like to see changed. For this exercise, participants were divided into five groups of around 10 members each. Using printed maps of Prato, we first worked together to identify patterns of movement across the city, exploring personal relations to specific areas of it and discussing how participants move across transcultural areas and whether or not they perceive differences between various parts of Prato. The second part of the exercise was conducted collaboratively on larger maps

of the city and focused on building sensorial maps of Prato's multilingual and multicultural landscape (see Fig. 13.1). The discussion unfolded in free form and was driven by questions such as “Where do you hear music in other languages?” or “Where do you hear/see different languages?”. Finally, we focused on the connections that participants might feel with places outside their own city, their desires to add to or remove elements from it and the fascination that they might have for other countries, regions and cities. In doing so we explored dimensions of belonging, transculturality and the reclamation of space that are linked to aspects like memories, aspirations, desires and cultural influences through various media forms.

The next 2 days were dedicated to the creative missions of the workshops and saw participants working in smaller groups – designed to ensure a good range of diversity of heritage, language and gender – to explore the city and to capture images, stories and short videos. The first mission was dedicated to a sensorial exploration of Prato's multicultural landscape and encouraged participants to experiment with new ways of moving, feeling, reading and interpreting Prato. Different parts of the city were assigned to each group and they were asked to focus on aspects such as signs and billboards in different languages, food that they never eat, sounds that make them happy and smells which take them elsewhere or which, instead, bring them back home. The mobile app developed for the project allowed them to quickly record images, videos and sound clips in each location of their choosing. Through this sensorial exploration of the city, the students discovered unexpected



**Fig. 13.1** One of the maps produced by participants during the workshops in which they discussed and mapped the sounds of their city

places such as a Buddhist temple or an Arabic cultural centre. At times they were welcomed, other times looked upon with suspicion. They tasted new food and drinks, became excited about traditional wedding dresses and reflected on the rise of a global culture within their own town. An interesting aspect that emerged from this mission is how, within each group, participants led their peers to the discovery of places that were familiar to them but not to others, fostering a process of transcultural leadership and exchange that greatly increased their confidence (see Fig. 13.2).

The second mission was dedicated to the creation of an emotional map of the city (see Fig. 13.3). We asked students to work on rage, disgust, sadness, joy, surprise and fear and to reflect on which places in Prato made them feel this way, whether they felt like they belonged to each place selected and if they felt that they could transform them through their own intervention. Each group was asked to create a brief story for each emotion, based on a personal memory. Creating a storyboard, they started to visualise their emotions. They then set out to capture pictures or videos to represent the place and the emotion they associate with it. The personal memories were recorded as separate audio files, transcribed as a text file and geo-localised using the software we developed for the workshops. What emerged from this mission was a complex, rich and, at times contradictory, representation of Prato. Locations like the Serraglio train station and its adjoining basketball pitch elicited contrasting emotions of disgust – for its state of decay – and surprise. As one participant put it: “The playground of the Serraglio train station surprised me because kids



**Fig. 13.2** Participants explore the city through their senses during the first mission



**Fig. 13.3** Surprise, joy and fear in three digital stories produced by participants

and adults, all different from each other, meet, play and chat together. All different, all welcome”.<sup>1</sup>

By exploring the city together, students were able to share personal memories and emotions, reflecting on their relationship with the city, their own role as part of the community and their ability to bring about social change. In one instance, a group of young girls chose to take a group picture in a location that elicited fear for one of them, accompanying it with the tag “The strength of women removes fear”. In another, participants approached the city’s most famous landmark – the Emperor’s castle– but focused their attention on the long queue in front of Caritas, a local relief organisation located behind it. As one of the participants wrote:

At the back of the castle, one finds Caritas – a relief organisation – and needy people of all ages, religions and ethnicities queue up for a hot meal and clothes. Some people sleep on dank grass, covered only by a threadbare blanket. For all things there’s two sides of the coin and it’s disgusting to choose to see only one.<sup>2</sup>

All their contributions manifested a profound desire to be part of the community, to embrace its cultural and linguistic complexity, and to have an impact on the future of their city.

<sup>1</sup>In Italian: “Il playground del Serraglio mi suscita sorpresa. Perché grandi e piccini, tutti diversi tra loro, si incontrano, giocano e parlano. Tutti diversi, tutti benvenuti”. All translations into English are ours.

<sup>2</sup>Sul retro è presente la Caritas e si vedono persone di tutte le età, religioni ed. etnie, in fila per un pasto caldo e un vestito. Persone che si mettono a dormire sull’erba bagnata, coperti da una misera coperta logorata. Per ogni cosa ci sono due facce della medaglia ed. è disgustoso decidere di vederne una sola.



### ***13.3.2 Reclaiming Transcultural Space Through a Temporary Exhibition***

The final 2 days of the workshop were dedicated to the organisation of a one-night pop-up exhibition, featuring a selection of the works which the students had produced in the previous days. Public exhibitions of creative work produced during participatory-action research are a critical component in reclaiming a public space of self-expression, allowing participants to engage with policymakers, families, friends, teachers and the general public (Halsall & Forneris, 2016). The event was entirely organised and run by the workshop participants, who divided themselves into different groups according to their interests and skills. The communication team worked with one member of the research group to set up the social media communication strategy, write and disseminate the official media release and reach out to local media and radio stations to advertise the exhibition. The press release which they produced highlights how they framed the organisation of the exhibition as an activist reclamation of space, staking an ownership claim on the transcultural urban environment they live in and on its futures:

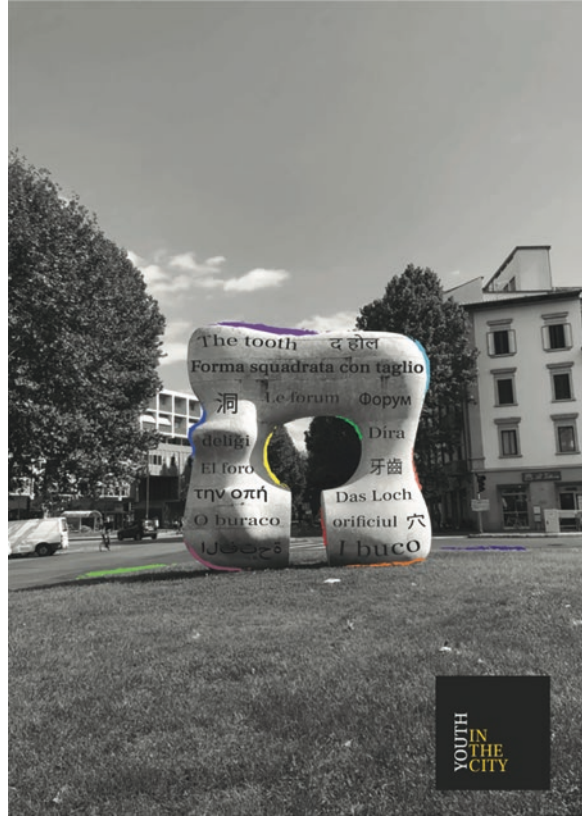
The reasons why we decided to join the project are numerous. With this work, we wanted to take back Prato, not just in a physical sense but also in a moral sense, through our own perspectives and imagination. We are the youth and Prato will be ours in the future, so we have a right to express ourselves because we exist. Often no one asks for our opinions, except in instances like the “Fridays for Future” rallies. This is why we worked together and on equal ground, learning not to be strangers in our own city.<sup>3</sup>

The design team led the visual creation of postcards, flyers, promotional materials and multilingual information plaques in Italian, English and Mandarin for the exhibition (see Fig. 13.4). Teams of curators were then put in charge of selecting the creative outputs for the exhibition. One was tasked with selecting images and stories and decided to showcase them in sections by topics, creating titles and descriptions for each. It was in this instance that participants decided to add self-portraits into the exhibition space, including them in a section which they named “Us”. Another was in charge of transforming the videos and audio recordings into a multi-screen video installation, for which they selected materials, edited them alongside one member of the research team and took care of the technical installation. The mapping team decided to exhibit the participatory maps produced during the workshops, accompanying them with data visualisations that could guide visitors through each of the questions explored. Another team focused on producing interactive installations where the public could actively engage in a process of participatory mapping using

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<sup>3</sup>I motivi per cui abbiamo deciso – spiegano i ragazzi – di prendere parte a questo progetto sono molti, tra cui cercare di riprenderci la città di Prato, non fisicamente ma moralmente: attraverso il nostro sguardo e la nostra immaginazione. Noi siamo i giovani e Prato sarà nostra in futuro, quindi il diritto di esprimerci ce lo abbiamo perché esistiamo. Spesso nessuno ci chiede il nostro parere, tranne in alcuni casi come le manifestazioni di “Friday For Future”. Per questo abbiamo lavorato insieme e alla pari imparando a non essere estranei nella nostra città.

**Fig. 13.4** Postcard produced by participants to represent the many languages of Prato and advertise the exhibition



a selection of the topics explored in the workshops. Visitors were invited to define what Prato is for them by adding words to a multilingual word-cloud that was posted on a wall and to share what they wish to add to and remove from their city on two large-scale printed maps. Finally, a group of participants organised a performance in multiple languages that opened the exhibition and welcomed everyone into the space that they set up together.

The exhibition launched on 5 October 2019, with a group of young creators filling the exhibition space with voices in different languages, all speaking at the same time and over each other, as three of them took centre stage to welcome visitors to their reclaimed space. This polylingual performance dramatically attracted the audience's attention and, at the same time, served to demonstrate that individuals can and do "inhabit" more than one linguistic home. Perhaps more importantly and in line with Welsch's (1999) understanding of transculturality, this opening performance showcased how the choice of the linguistic home people wish to inhabit at any given moment supports individual decisions regarding multiple forms of belonging. In this instance, the plurality and choice of languages represent constitutive elements in the narrative practices of these youths, acting as markers of the composite and complex nature of both individual and cultural identities.



**Fig. 13.5** Students involved in the *La Nostra Prato* project launch of the pop-up exhibition at Officina Giovani, Prato, Italy, 5 October 2019

As a creative intervention where the private reimagining of Prato performed by each participant was made public, the exhibition itself created a space where the daily transcultural exchange across the different cultures and languages that characterise Prato was made visible and tangible (see Fig. 13.5). For a few hours, 200 people, including families and friends, teachers, city councillors, the mayor and members of the general public became part of a city re-imagined by its transcultural youth. It was in this instance that we first noticed the impact of the work conducted over the course of a week, as the workshop participants spontaneously organised guided tours of the exhibition, leading groups of people across the different sections and explaining their own work. As we observed, the attendees were quick to engage with the new space of transculturation created by the students. The evaluation board that people were invited to fill in at the end of the exhibition indicated a very high level of appreciation for all works exhibited – and the interactive creative works, in particular, were the most appreciated. “Prato is...” – the interactive installation where the public was invited to add a single word on a wall to express what the city represents for them – saw a total of over 70 interactions in nine different languages. Many people used words that connect with the transcultural space of interaction created by the workshop participants. Prato was described in the words of the public as a space of “entanglement”, “contamination”, “voices”, “entropy” and “hospitality”. Many people also chose to contrast negative connotations such as “dirt”, “fear”

and “bad smell” by overlaying them with words such as “future”, “home”, and “hope”. Besides the interaction with the work exhibited, we also noticed how the exhibition space was quickly transformed into a space for transcultural socialisation thanks to the active role played by workshop participants in bringing friends, families and the general public together and in introducing people from different societal groups to each other.

The feedback gathered from students confirms that *La Nostra Prato* was, for many, a transformative experience: allowing them not only to discover new parts of their city and form friendships with peers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds but also to reclaim a creative and productive space for self-representation and to gain confidence in their own voices and transcultural leadership skills. As they put it:

I have learned that, even if you are young, you can have your voice heard if you believe in it.

This experience enriched me because I encountered many other cultures. I have learned to observe my city from other points of view and I discovered new places in areas that I cross daily.

I have learned that we take many things for granted. We often stop at the surface and do not truly engage with what surrounds us.

Thanks to this project, I worked with other young people and shared my emotions with them. I am proud of the work we did. It was worth it.

I have learned to observe more carefully the places that surround me and to pay attention to details that I often miss in my daily life. I have also learned that unity is strength.<sup>4</sup>

The organisation of the exhibition and the creative missions were the most valued components of the whole experience for most of the participants involved. The leadership skills that students developed over the course of the workshop facilitated the dissemination of project results in the weeks and months following the end of the project. A group of participants was invited to discuss the project and its outcomes on a local radio programme and three of them joined the research team for the online public launch of the project’s website in March 2021.

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<sup>4</sup>Ho imparato che se vuoi farti sentire anche se sei piccola, devi crederci.

Questa esperienza mi ha arricchita perché sono entrata a contatto con diverse culture, ho imparato ad osservare la mia città da diversi punti di vista e ho scoperto luoghi che non conoscevo anche se facevano parte di zone in cui passavo quotidianamente.

Ho imparato che spesso diamo per scontato certe cose, che spesso ci fermiamo all’apparenza e che in realtà non conosciamo a fondo ciò che ci circonda.

Grazie a questo progetto ho lavorato con ragazzi con i quali ho condiviso le mie emozioni e sono contento del lavoro che abbiamo creato, ne è valsa la pena.

Ho imparato a guardare più attentamente i luoghi di Prato e a fare attenzione ai dettagli ai quali nella vita di tutti i giorni non faccio caso. Inoltre ho imparato che l’unione fa la forza.

### 13.4 Transcultural Futures: Transforming a Participatory-Action Workshop into an Interactive Storytelling Experience

One of the cornerstones of our methodology is the combination of digital and interaction design, informed by the disciplines of the humanities, to produce striking digital outputs that are highly original and potentially impactful. To achieve broader visibility for the participants' creative work at a national and international level, we transformed the geo-localised stories, photographs, videos and testimonies produced during the workshops into an interactive digital storytelling experience that provides an original interpretation of Prato from the many perspectives of its multicultural youth. The *La Nostra Prato* online experience is available in English and in Italian and was designed to allow users to step through the multicultural history of Prato across the years, to experience the city through the senses, emotions and hopes of the 48 young creators who joined us during the workshops and to engage with the urban reality they live in, learning how they imagine a different and better future for their city (see Fig. 13.6).

*La Nostra Prato* is structured in three modules: Past, 2019 and Futures. The first section of the experience takes users on a journey from the Middle Ages to the present, showcasing how the city of Prato has become what it is today through seven centuries of exchange of ideas, goods, entrepreneurs and workers. It combines historical, quantitative, demographic and qualitative data collected in preparation for the workshops using interactive maps that visualise the complex transnational network that connects Prato to the rest of the world, showcasing how encounters between different peoples, cultures and languages increase people's ability to create, produce, communicate and share. The second module is meant to introduce users to Prato through the senses and emotions of its multicultural youth, showcasing how their stories, perspectives and creativity can provide an even richer portrait



Fig. 13.6 The landing page of the digital storytelling experience

of the city. A selection of the videos produced by participants is used to introduce the process and methodology that guided their urban exploration. The experience then moves to an interactive media grid that features a selection of the stories and images produced during the workshops, delving deeper into the sensorial and emotional landscapes of Prato’s multicultural youth and celebrating the agency and leadership of participants in reclaiming urban space as their own (see Fig. 13.7).

The last section of *La Nostra Prato* is dedicated to how multicultural youth can have an impact on their city, working together to have their voices heard and to imagine new futures. It presents the vision for the future of Prato of participants across four postcards (for an example, see Fig. 13.8). Each one introduces different aspects of their plans for the city, outlining the different futures of ‘their Prato’. Through their work, Prato was re-imagined as an international creative hub, with participants advocating – amongst other things – for a new public library near the

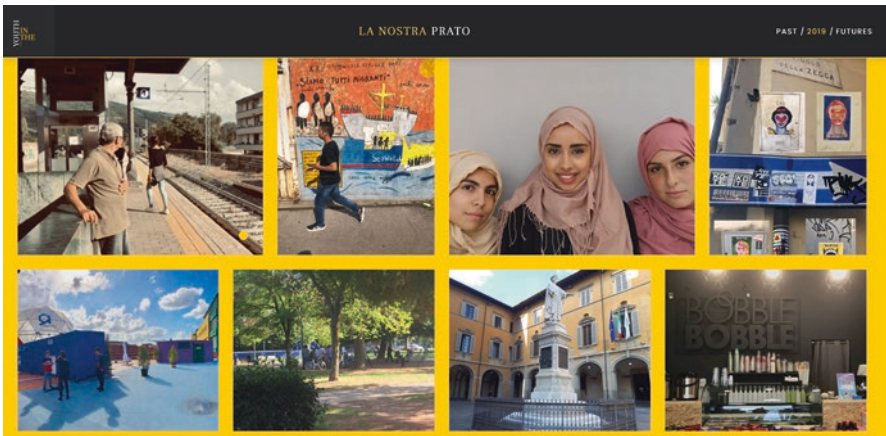


Fig. 13.7 The Media Grid featuring the images and stories created by workshop participants

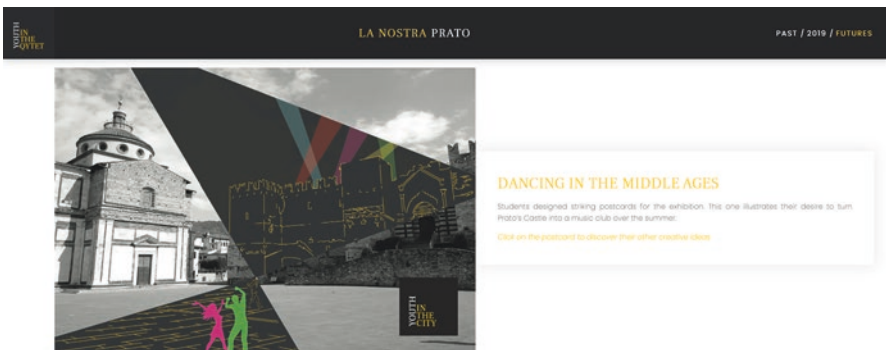


Fig. 13.8 Prato’s castle is reimagined as a summer club in one of the postcards designed by the students

Buddhist temple, an International House of Comics in the Macrolotto Zero district and a polyfunctional centre where they could share knowledge about nature, culture, the arts and sport. Sustainability and connectedness were also of pivotal importance for participants, with requests for a conservation area for flora and fauna accompanying demands for a high-speed tram line connecting Prato to nearby airports. Access to new countries was accompanied by requests for more exchange between the different cultures and languages that call Prato home. Participants would love to create *tajine* restaurants where they could share the food they eat at home with the rest of the city, karaoke bars in the city centre and gyms where they can learn to become cheerleaders. Interestingly enough, these requests for further processes of transculturation went hand in hand with others that advocated for a more globalised city, where international fast-food chains and shopping centres co-exist with local businesses. Finally, their city was re-imagined as a space that fosters co-creative processes of exchange and growth, with numerous requests for more spaces and cultural centres where newcomers to Prato can get together and know each other, music clubs, discotheques, queer bars, a stadium for live music, theatres and a museum of cinema, as well as empty public spaces to be re-invented together. This last point is perhaps one of the most interesting ones, showcasing how the transcultural leadership skills that participants fostered over the course of the week are geared towards a future in which they see themselves working alongside others to change the space they live in.

We believe that bridging the gaps between research, creative practices, entrepreneurship, education and civic engagement requires producing results that can be used for educational purposes and a methodology that can freely and easily be adopted and adapted by different stakeholders. For this reason, we produced a short documentary that follows us during the week of workshops and two different sets of educational guidelines that accompany the interactive storytelling experience. The first is a teacher's guide that presents guidelines on how to use the digital storytelling experience through a series of in-class activities tailored for students from the age of 14 onwards (Dutto et al., 2020a). In order to facilitate the replication of the workshops across schools, other educational contexts and other cities, we have also developed a set of guidelines that reconstruct the 5 days of workshops, reflecting on what we learned as a research team and on the co-creative exploration of Prato that we experienced together with the participants (Dutto et al., 2020b).

## 13.5 Conclusions

We invited three of the participants from the *La Nostra Prato* project to the website launch event in March 2021 to discuss their passion for social change and share how participating in the project was, for them, a transformative experience. Maria, who is of Albanian heritage, noted how she felt an increased sense of self-confidence, fostered by the processes of transcultural exchange with other participants and by a recognition of her own sense of agency in reclaiming what she identifies as 'new

spaces of respect', where difference and diversity can be experienced together. Bilal, whose family is originally from Pakistan, stressed how experiencing the city through the eyes and emotions of fellow young people from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds has allowed him to notice new details and recognise the richness and complexity of his hometown. The biggest satisfaction for Elisa, who is of Egyptian heritage, was getting out of her comfort zone, challenging herself, interacting freely with the research team and with her peers and working together to reclaim a space of her own through the exhibition. Beyond their individual experiences, they all noted that there were many lessons to be learnt from this kind of participatory action project that would benefit other young people seeking to make a positive impact in their communities. Not least that the process of creating their own multilayered narratives enhanced their respect for and valuing of diversity.

Active participation, dialogue and openness to change were all critical components of our approach. The methodology discussed in this chapter was fine-tuned and adjusted as the intensive workshop progressed, thanks to the contributions of the 48 co-creators who joined us. An adaptability to different settings and an interest in developing localised creative interventions based on each co-creator's skill set and interests are critical components of the strategy that we are aiming to pursue with *Youth in the City* in the future. Our objective is to continue testing, adapting and fine-tuning the model of participatory creative interventions for social change by developing new projects in superdiverse cities across the world. Some key questions may only be answered once a few more projects have been developed, including the extent to which this kind of project can effectively influence dominant narratives around migration and social cohesion and how the different local and national contexts in which the projects take place might influence actual outcomes. Nevertheless, this particular experience has shown that there is value in the process itself and that the impact of such a project may be difficult to quantify without considering it as just one iteration of the broader research initiative – and, perhaps more importantly, as just one expression of a constellation of cultural and educational projects which, over time and across different geographical and social spaces, may encourage young people to become leaders for social change. They will be the real and impactful agents of any meaningful social and cultural transformation.

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