

Introduction: Immigration, Cultural Participation, and New Forms of Solidarity

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This issue of *AmeriQuests* features a selection of papers that were presented at *Immigration, Cultural Participation and New Forms of Political Solidarity: Global Perspectives*, held at l'Université de Liège (Belgium) in September of 2019, a few months before the outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic. It was the first event organized by the newly renamed Standing Committee POPADIVCIT (Popular Art, Diversity and Cultural Policies in Post-Migration Urban settings) of the European research Network IMISCOE¹. The board of directors of the network decided in the previous spring to reorganize and rename the standing committees. POPADIVCIT became DIVCULT (Superdiversity, Migration and Cultural Change)².

The objectives of the new Standing Committee are to pursue and expand the work of the POPADIVCIT. It was founded in 2010 to better understand the relevance of the arts in the theoretical and policy debates about immigrant incorporation and diversity in immigration and post-migration cities. This was a relatively neglected research field in migration studies at the time. POPADIVCIT focussed on four domains: local artistic actors, activities and institutions; local cultural and incorporation policies; social relations and interactions between all of the stakeholders in the field as well as with the respective audiences; and artistic activities as forms of political participation and mobilisation (including identity formation and negotiation). These domains constituted the general framework in which the researchers involved developed theoretically grounded empirical research, organised workshops and conferences and prepared joint publications.

Over the last years, artistic activities have found increasing interest among migration researchers because they prove to be a means of moving beyond ethnic differences towards narratives of identity and belonging that are more apt to capture the current post-migrant reality in many cities and countries. The Standing Committee DIVCULT has therefore decided to continue its work with a view to answering the following two questions: how are artistic and cultural activities and institutions changing in migration and post-migration superdiverse societies, and how do these activities contribute to spreading narratives that more aptly describe these new realities. It also planned to expand and enlarge its focus in three ways:

- While POPADIVCIT mainly worked on arts and more specifically on music, literature, cinema and theatre. DIVCULT has enlarged its scope to include other artistic forms as well as culture defined in a broader sense such as sports, fashion, clothing, design, food, leisure, etc.
- The multidisciplinary character of POPADIVCIT covered sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, policy studies and political science. One of the objectives of DIVCULT is to include economists and lawyers in the debates on superdiversity, migration, and cultural change.
- DIVCULT aims at engaging more actively in methodological development by continuing previous initiatives in visual studies and participatory arts-based research.

The first concrete activity of the new Standing Committee was this conference, the main objective of which was to focus on the cultural and artistic participation of migrants and descendants of migrants

¹ www.imiscoe.org.

² <https://www.imiscoe.org/research/standing-committees/930-superdiversity-migration-and-cultural-change>.

in a transatlantic perspective, and also on the spaces and the moments when this participation intersects with, and binds to, public forms of intercultural collective engagement, whether artistic, political, or both. Empirical and theoretical papers addressed some overriding questions, such as: what role do culture and the arts play in the lives of newcomers and descendants of migrants? Which cultural and artistic practices and forms of participation do newcomers and descendants of immigrants develop? How do cultural institutions take into account those publics often considered to be disengaged at the cultural and artistic level? Do these cultural practices contribute to creating bonds of solidarity between migrants and natives? And if so, what forms of political representation and collective engagement do they inspire? The 5 papers included in the special issue were selected from the 12 papers presented at the conference, and they present diverse but connected approaches to the broad themes of art and border crossings.

The paper by Clelia Clini, Jasmine Hornabrook and Emily Keightley analyzes the engagement in cultural and creative practices of people of South Asian heritage in the borough of Tower Hamlets in London and in Loughborough, East Midlands. They argue that the arts play a key role in maintaining and claiming South Asian heritage/s and in negotiating diasporic identities in Britain. Félicien de Heusch examines how the “Street Vendors Popular Syndicate of Barcelona”, a bottom-up organization composed mainly of undocumented Senegalese migrants, develops political narratives and repertoires of action through rap music and clothing design. He studies in particular two artistic projects developed by the collective: a rap and a clothing brand they have created. The paper provides a better understanding of how arts and design are used to build solidarity between undocumented migrants and to respond to stigmatisation as well as to make a living despite their precarious legal status. The third article by Francesco Delle Puppa and Giulia Storato focuses on a musical project aimed at encouraging the social inclusion of migrants and asylum seekers on Northern Italy. This case-study shows the potential of such projects for the creation of social bonds and networks across ethnic and national lines, and for deconstructing the stereotyped image of refugees and asylum seekers and the exoticization of their musical productions. Following up from a different perspective on the debate concerning exoticization of immigrants and refugees, Monika Mokre and Christoph Leitgeb discuss the ambivalences of staging participation in selected Viennese cultural productions. They ask: Under which conditions do productions of this type become an excuse for aesthetical exoticism by exploiting the participation of refugees, rather than taking participants engagement seriously? They also discuss under which conditions the staging of participation can result in an increased autonomy of the refugees. Finally, with Lionel Arnaud, we venture outside migratory and post-migratory situations. Arnaud studies the role of physical space in the political mobilization of cultural minorities in the French overseas territory Martinique. He shows how the inhabitants of a poor working-class district of Fort-de-France have managed to make their neighborhood a place of conservation of their dances and music.

A Border Crossing Collaboration

This issue grows out of a growing interest in the overlap between artistic efforts to depict borders and their crossings, and efforts aimed at reaching a broader segment of the population with messages of tolerance, hospitality and generosity in an era of regressive populism. In 2019, Barsky was elaborating upon a longstanding effort to create a new journal, called *Contours Collaborations* (<https://contours.pubpub.org>), that would work with artists who had experienced and/or attempted to represent borders, and the crossing thereof, in visual arts, photography, performance art, dance, or film. At the very moment of discussion between parties to this effort, an important new book appeared on the list of possible book review titles for *AmeriQuests*, which treated the precise subject

at hand. This new *Handbook of Art and Global Migration: Theories, Practices, and Challenges*, edited by Burcu Dogramaci and Birgit Mersmann (De Gruyter 2019), began with one of the questions that *Contours Collaborations* was focused on asking: “How can we think of art history as a discipline that moves process-based, performative, and cultural migratory movement to the center of its theoretical and methodical analyses?”

The question was addressed in diverse and provocative ways by leading scholars from around the world, and one piece in particular spoke to the broad questions that Barsky was discussing with a principal partner to the new initiative, MIT-based Knowledge Futures Group: Marco Martiniello’s “Immigrants, Refugees and the Arts: A Complex and Multidimensional Relationship”. In the wake of this new collaboration, Barsky joined Martiniello for the Festival Atlas of Transitions at the Théâtre de Liège, and Martiniello was named to the board of *Contours Collaborations*. Their continuing collaboration can be found in this collection of works, as they look for ways to move beyond the imbroglios of policy debates, and into the hearts and minds of citizens seeking new ways to grasp what it means to erect obstacles to the free movement of peoples across borders.

The value of artworks, descriptive anthropological and sociological studies, and interdisciplinary engagement with communities of people in search of a home, in the broadest sense, is that they refuse the simplistic Us v. Them, Native v. Foreign, Legal v. Illegal labels that are affixed onto communities of people deemed outsiders to a particular space. We have endured the injurious and often murderous consequences of cynical agreements signed by European officials with Turkish and Libyan groups and authorities designed only to keep individuals seeking protection or asylum from accessing their rights under the 1951 refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, and creating a pattern of border death and arbitrary detention of refugees in horrifying conditions. We have also endured the rabid violations of human rights and basic tenets of international refugee law, by arbitrary and capricious decisions on the part of Trump administration officials, who have with stunning speed undermined decades of litigation in favor of barbarous acts of violence against vulnerable migrants including mistreatment of children, the near eradication of a longstanding tradition of resettlement, and unconscionable attacks against the system of refugee determination.

One of the most marked characteristics of all of these sickening actions, taken against people seeking to exercise their rights under international treaties signed by almost every nation in the world, is the complacency of voters as border crimes become the new normal. The adage that “we are all immigrants”, the touting of exotic foods and cheap labor, the half-hearted efforts to tell “their” stories, have been remarkably ineffective against the wanton disregard for human life that passes for such platitudes as ‘homeland security’ or ‘tough on crime’. This issue represents an approach that goes beyond the numbers, the homilies, and even the reciting of state obligations under international law, and brings us into the performance of day-to-day actions, the creation of aesthetic responses to the dehumanization of the “foreigner”, and the recognition that border studies by its very nature escapes the confines of single disciplines. 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.

References

- Dogramaci, B. and Mersmann, B. (Eds.) (2019) *Handbook of Art and Global Migration: Theories, Practices, and Challenges, Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter*
- Marco Martiniello (2019) “Immigrants, Refugees and the Arts: A Complex and Multidimensional Relationship”, in Dogramaci, B. and Mersmann, B. (Eds.)