

Chapter Title: Introduction to Section I: Creative Practices

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Book Title: Doing Digital Migration Studies

Book Subtitle: Theories and Practices of the Everyday

Book Editor(s): Koen Leurs, Sandra Ponzanesi

Published by: Amsterdam University Press. (2024)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.11895524.6>

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Section I

Creative practices

Introduction to Section I: Creative Practices

Karina Horsti

Digital mediation of everyday life enables unexpected possibilities for migrants' connectivity, visibility and voice (e.g., Nikunen, 2018; Smets, 2018; Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2018; Horsti, 2019). Particularly mobile technologies have facilitated creative practices for self-expression, also in vulnerable situations such as during journeys across violent borders. Intensification of visual communication, specifically, facilitates mediation across linguistic and other boundaries. Thus, there is a strong argument for democratization and horizontalization of mediation of migration. Mainstream media, state institutions, bordering agents and international organizations no longer control narratives of migration as they did in the broadcast era. Civil society organizations, artists, independent filmmakers and journalists, and migrants themselves produce alternative framings of migration through multiple modalities and creative practices.

They produce alternative visualities and visibilities that challenge hegemonic communication of migration. Two chapters in this section demonstrate through different case studies how individuals and collectives have circumvented bordering agents and humanitarian actors as framing agents and interrupted the dual dominant representation of migrants either as threats or as passive victims. In Chapter 1, Nadica Denić conceptualizes migrant auto-ethnographic films through the notion of an oppositional gaze on migration journeys. Irene Gutiérrez, in Chapter 2, examines participatory filmmaking as a way of countering stereotypical media representations of migration. These films interrogate the "European" gaze by reversing the perspective. Instead of Europe looking at "them", "they" look at Europe and in doing so, make visible the violence Europe produces in its practices of bordering.

In addition to films, alternative visualities of migration originate from mobile phone images and footage taken during perilous border crossings.

Leurs, K, and S. Ponzanesi (eds.), *Doing Digital Migration Studies: Theories and Practices of the Everyday*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024

DOI 10.5117/9789463725774_SEC01_INTRO

These visualities circulate not only among diasporic groups but also often through activist and civil society networks, and through mainstream media reach wider global publics. Digitization affords a particular plasticity of images, audio and audio-visual expressions: it increases the degree to which individuals and organizations can produce new meanings. However, digitization also creates new vulnerabilities. Surveillance technologies are not neutral but often produce or reproduce racial inequality, as Chapter 3 by Rosa Wevers argues. Wevers examines the politics and logics of artificial intelligence (AI) used in predictive policing systems and interviews Ahnjili Zhuparris on the critical potential of art in shifting the focus from (racialized) possible future crime offenders to police violence. The chapters in this section also interrogate complexities inherent in critical engagement. Arts can risk replicating those same structures of power that they aim to criticize. Self-narrations can be embedded into multiple framings, also into those contexts where one would not expect them, such as in public communication by bordering agents. Narratives of violence and suffering at borders are also utilized to prevent migration.

While creative practices and mobile media technologies have opened spaces for new agency and potential for alternative representations, there are substantial concerns. The chapters in Section I also pay attention to these critical aspects of creative practices. Self-narratives can be reframed and circulated in contexts that might not be in the interests of those who originally created them. Ethics of participation and co-creation are complex. Participation is not only limited to the phase of production but should also extend to that of dissemination. Gutierrez stresses that participatory filmmaking requires a multi-layered and multi-staged consent. There are always multiple expectations and power dynamics in the production or dissemination phases. Denić emphasizes that participants can be aware of those expectations, and they can be made visible. But sometimes they might be internalized. For example, there can be the temptation to perform a certain “refugeeness.” However, as she continues, auto-ethnographic filmmaking can open a space for rethinking and negotiating such expectations. Film-making is film-thinking. Rosa Wevers’s chapter also emphasizes how artistic interventions can direct attention to what is otherwise hidden from the public view in the context of AI, algorithms and datafication. Zhuparris’s art elicits an emotional response from the participating audience, and in doing so, an artwork reveals how AI systems are not made of neutral numbers without consequences but entangled with human action and perception. Art can critically encourage publics to interrogate their own role in the production of social inequality.

Finally, what happens to the abundance of self-narration and alternative visualities circulating in multiple media platforms? What kinds of cultural infrastructures allow such stories and images to be found in media flows and accessed in archives? These questions are not a call for an archive in a traditional sense. The accumulation of creative media productions should not be treated as an archive—a metaphor which suggests a static, organized and hierarchical form of memory. Particularly, in contemporary complex media environment, photographs and audio-visual stories circulate in digital networks where they mix and become re-articulated in new contexts (Horsti, 2019). Thus, as a continuation of critical thinking around potentialities and pitfalls of creative participatory practices, I propose paying attention to temporality. The multiplicity of images and narratives creates a potential for the democratization of collective memory of migration in Europe. However, they are often shared within communities of social networking sites, which means that the kinds of narratives and images one comes across also depend on one's social network contacts. Connections are created both by human and automated processes (van Dijck, 2013, pp. 13, 26). Connectivity afforded by algorithms determines accessibility to the vast amount of material on the Internet and social media. Thus, communicative memory in the present media context is significantly shaped by digital circulation and participatory culture (Horsti, 2022). A digital archive is volatile, subject to governance and control. It can be used by technologies of surveillance, as the chapter by Rosa Wevers with Ahnjili Zhuparris reminds us, and put people on the move at risk. It is therefore necessary to think the ways in which creative productions, such as auto-ethnographies and participatory films of migration, become part of Europe's collective memory in the decades to come. How do these oppositional gazes shape Europe and the lives of people involved in the future?

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