



## **Landscape and sense of belonging to place: the relationship with everyday places in the experience of some migrants living in Montebelluna (Northeastern Italy)**

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### **Abstract**

The research here presented involved a group of Italian and migrant people living in the town of Montebelluna (Northeastern Italy), with the objective of exploring their relationship with everyday places and the meanings attributed to the surrounding landscape. This paper focuses in particular on the data concerning migrants, aiming at illustrating their experiences: through a qualitative and visual approach, we highlighted that their relationship with the place of living is based both on practical actions and emotional responses. The “emotional dimension” is considered the main source of sense of belonging to place: it is especially determined by the landscape’s symbolic meanings, mainly through important memories, social relationships and quality of life. The effects of difficult intercultural relations on migrants’ sense of belonging to place are also discussed. In conclusion, we underlined the potentialities of landscape as an “intercultural mediator”, which can effectively be used in creating educational and recreational activities aimed at fostering intercultural dialogue and interactions.

**Keywords:** Autophotography, Landscape, Migrants, Sense of Belonging to Place, Veneto Region

### **1. Introduction**

In the last two decades Italy has faced rising immigration flows, turning from an emigration country into an immigration one (Giordano, 2015): at the beginning of 2016, migrants constituted about 8% of the total Italian population. The celerity of the phenomenon, the spread of foreign population to diverse areas (both big cities and small ones, including rural areas) and the variety of migrants’ home countries—Romanians (22% of the total foreign population), Albanians (9%) and Moroccans

(8%) are the nationalities most present, followed by the Chinese, Ukrainian and Filipino ones – make Italy an interesting context for the study of migrants’ integration process. Taking into account this framework, a group of geographers of the University of Padua has developed a research line aiming at exploring the relationship between people and everyday places, through the exploration of the inhabitants’ landscape perceptions. This research involved both native and migrant subjects, living in some localities of the Veneto region (Northeastern Italy)

characterized by “everyday landscapes”, i.e. lacking particular natural/cultural features which can easily be recognized by people as “landmarks” (Castiglioni et al., 2015; De Nardi, 2013a).

The project here presented is the most recent one, was concluded in 2015 and carried out in the area of Montebelluna, a town in the Venetian province of Treviso. The sample included both Italian and migrant inhabitants: adopting qualitative and visual methodologies, we explored people’s relationship with their place of living and the meanings attributed to the surrounding landscape. This contribution does not set out to present the results of the entire project, but draws on the data concerning the group of migrants, aiming at exploring their experience in-depth.

In our approach, landscape is considered the concrete manifestation of the interactions between a population and its place of living: as such, it holds an intrinsic cultural value and can constitute a reference for people’s identity and sense of belonging to place (Zerbi, 2007; Turri, 1998). However, currently the relationship between a landscape and its population’s culture and identity cannot be taken for granted: at a social level, most of the populations of contemporary societies can hardly be considered a homogeneous whole from a cultural point of view, due to people’s growing mobility and international migrations (Aime and Papotti, 2012; Massey and Jess, 2001). At a territorial level, landscapes have undergone several fast changes too (Raffestin, 2005; Papotti, 2002), especially in those “everyday” areas which the European Landscape Convention “promoted” to “landscape”.

Moreover, we refer to landscape not only as an “object” to study, but also as a tool of “*médiation paysagère*” (Joliveau et al., 2008): as landscape is – at the same time, a material reality and an immaterial set of images (Egoz et al., 2011; Farinelli, 1991) – is particularly useful for studying the relationships between a local population and its surroundings, since it allows for an exploration of both physical places deemed important by people and their meanings and values. In this sense, landscape is conceived as a “third element, transitional space, which

includes me and not-me, a continuous dialogue between rationality and affection, an encounter between individual and collective spheres” (Lettini, 1999, p. 80).

## **2. Landscape experience and sense of belonging to place in migrants’ paths**

The encounter between landscape studies and immigration studies has given rise to different branches of research: scholars have often concentrated on migrants’ access to and use of parks and other urban green spaces (Byrne and Wolch, 2009; Höglhammer et al., 2015) and on how different ethnic groups prefer diverse landscape types and hold diverse “images of nature” (Kloek et al., 2013; Buijs et al., 2009). However, the ways in which migrants develop feelings of place attachment through landscape have been less explored (Rishbeth and Finney, 2006). Concerning this topic, interesting observations have been developed by those scholars who have focused on an “experiential approach” to landscape, highlighting that migrants build their relationship with the place of living mainly on their daily habits and actions, as well as on significant experiences and memories. According to this research, it is the migrants’ concrete engagement with landscape and the possibility of making it “their own” through symbolic meanings that constitute the basis of their attachment to places (Raffaetà and Duff, 2013; Darling et al., 2012; Buffel and Phillipson, 2011; O’Neill and Hubbard, 2010; Tolia-Kelly, 2010; Sampson and Gifford, 2010; Cattel et al., 2008; Ehrkamp, 2005; Armstrong, 2004). Rishbeth and Powell (2013) reflected for example on the central role of memory in these dynamics, affirming that memory can arouse nostalgia, but also foster attachment to the new place; in this regard, the time of residence is surely a central factor, but responses to landscape and feelings of belonging are highly influenced also by personal meanings, as well as to actual daily experiences providing continuity. The same Authors also highlighted that memory works as a sort of bridge connecting different countries and prompting memories and comparisons between places and phases of life. Similarly, Tolia-Kelly (2010) underlined that the immigrant women that she met build their

identities in a dynamic way, through a network of landscape elements referring to the different countries in which they have lived. Richter, studying the attachment to places of Spanish migrants in Switzerland, identified this to the kind of places in which migrants build their relation with the place they live in: place of “identification” – “symbolic and emblematic sites that link migrants to specific emotional moments” and that are deeply connected to their past – and places “of daily actions”, which are “imbued with a meaning derived from concrete practices performed daily” (2011, p. 225).

Also focusing on studies on place attachment – and on other similar concepts, e.g. sense of place and place identity – can help to identify other factors contributing to migrants-place relationship. In particular, both environmental psychologists and human geographers underlined the subjective, emotional, experiential and affective nature of the human ties to places and landscapes, also highlighting their links with social relationships and with one’s personal and social identity (Manzo, 2005; Hidalgo and Hernández, 2001; Twigger - Ross and Uzzell, 1996; Altman and Low, 1992; Tuan, 1977, 1980, 1990; Relph, 1976). Recently Antonsich, drawing on interdisciplinary studies on this topic, proposed the notion of “place-belongingness”: it is intended as the condition of “feeling at home” in a place – where “home” represents “a symbolic space of familiarity, comfort, security, and emotional attachment” (2010, p. 646). According to this Author, such a feeling is determined by five factors: auto-biographical factors, which are connected to one’s personal history (e.g. memories and personal experiences); relational factors, which refer to “personal and social ties that enrich the life of an individual in a given place” (p. 647); cultural factors, as for example language; economic factors, e.g. experiencing job stability, but also the idea of having a future in that place; legal factors, such as citizenship and residence permission, which produce a sense of security<sup>1</sup>. Significantly – while auto-

biographical and relational factors confirm the emotional and social nature of sense of belonging and possibly concern any individual-cultural, economic and legal factors add complexity to this feeling and appear to be truly relevant in the case of migrants. Indeed, migrants are by definition those who have to learn to live in new and often completely unknown places, facing cultural diversity, as well as economic and legal uncertainty. They lose their territorial references, but at the same time are also able to build new ones, possibly experiencing “multiple attachments” and feeling at home in more than one unique place (in the homeland, as well as in the transition and host countries). As Ahmed states, “the journeys of migration involve a splitting of home as place of origin and home as the sensory world of everyday experience” (1999, p. 341): in this view, exploring how migrants develop place attachment firstly allows to better understand the role of place in migrants’ search for a psychological and emotional equilibrium after immigration; secondly, it makes possible to overcome a rigid and fixed vision of both “home” and “belonging”, enriching these concepts with new and original meanings (Liu, 2014; Koefoed and Simonsen, 2012; Christou, 2011; Ralph and Staeheli, 2011; Waite and Cook, 2011; Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Ahmed et al., 2003; Giuliani et al., 2003; Dwyer, 2000).

### 3. Case study, sample, methods

The research was carried out in the town of Montebelluna and in some of the surrounding municipalities. This area is an ideal context for the research, both because it presents everyday landscapes and for the significant presence of immigrants who reside here; foreigners make up for about 13% of the total 31,300 inhabitants of Montebelluna, of which the most numerous are Chinese (24% of the total foreign population), Moroccans (14%) and Romanians (14%), followed by Albanians, Kosovars, Macedonians and Ukrainians.

Given the exploratory character of the research, a relatively small number of people

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the feeling which most frequently and noticeably emerged during fieldwork.

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<sup>1</sup> The Author also talked about the social and collective dimension of belonging, i.e. practices of socio-spatial in/exclusion experienced by migrants in the host country. Even though being aware of such dimension, the present contribution is mainly focused on the individual and personal one, since the latter is

participated in it: the sample consisted of 49 people, aged between 17 and 44, including 18 natives and 31 migrants<sup>2</sup>.

As previously mentioned, this paper does not report the general results of the project, but concerns only the migrants involved in it, and illustrates their relationship with everyday places through some examples that are considered particularly meaningful.

With regard to methodology, we employed a qualitative and multi-method approach, combining the technique of auto-photography – according to which the subjects take pictures following the researchers’ instructions – with semi-structured interviews. Visual methods are considered particularly useful when exploring the meanings attributed by people to places (e.g. Stedman et al., 2014; Lombard, 2013; Simkins and Thwaites, 2008; Dakin, 2003), also representing quite an innovative way to explore “the relevance of ‘place’ for migration processes” (Mendoza and Morén-Alegret, 2013, p. 764). Moreover, auto-photography makes it possible to reduce the distance between the researchers and the researched subjects (Dodman, 2003); this aspect is definitely relevant when working with migrants, since the intercultural context of the research poses significant cultural and ethical challenges (Fitzgerald, 2004).

During the fieldwork, a camera was given to each individual, asking him/her to “tell us about the place you live in through 8 pictures”. After the photos were collected and printed by the researcher, face-to-face interviews were carried out with each single participant, using photo-elicitation, i.e. inviting the subject to comment and discuss their pictures, expressing their point

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<sup>2</sup> Different groups were involved: two classes attending a course to achieve a secondary school certification (10 people of immigrant origin); two classes of an Italian language course for foreign women (16 people of immigrant origin) and two classes of a secondary technical institute (23 people, including 18 Italians and 5 of immigrant origin). Migrants came from a variety of different countries: 13 were from Morocco, 3 from China, 3 from Ghana, 2 from Romania, 2 from Brazil, 2 from Kosovo, 2 from Macedonia, 1 from the Dominican Republic, 1 from Nigeria, 1 from Cuba and 1 from Mauritius.

of view and the meanings connected to every photographed landscape element<sup>3</sup>. The analysis of the pictures and the interview transcript reading then allowed us to identify the most relevant themes for our research objectives.

Even in territorial and social contexts considerably different from the one here presented, autophotography and interviews with photo-elicitation showed their effectiveness in helping people describe their perception of phenomena and the associated meanings (Bignante, 2010). However, it is for the very reason that these methods make it possible to deeply explore people’s points of view on reality that it is difficult to apply them on a wide number of subjects. Even being aware of this issue, we nevertheless intentionally decided to adopt this technique and consequently selected an adequate sample, which is not representative of the entire foreign population living in Montebelluna. This choice was coherent with our objectives: indeed, they were neither to provide statistically relevant data nor to produce observations that could be generalized; rather, we aimed at identifying some of the factors which play a role in the development of sense of belonging to place by people who experienced migration to “everyday landscapes”, and thus at highlighting some relevant issues on this topic that can be further studied.

#### 4. Stories from the fieldwork

The collected data allow us to confirm the importance of both habitual practices and emotional responses in building the relationship with the place of living.

The places which became the first references for our interviewees were the most frequented ones, when carrying out daily commitments or in their free time. For example, D. – who attended school in Montebelluna, but lived in the near village of Villorba – took a picture of a square where he spent most of his free time and “where are often organized festivals and other

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<sup>3</sup> The interviews were carried out in different languages – English, Italian and interviewees’ mother tongue – according to the subjects’ knowledge of Italian language, and also employing intercultural mediators.

initiatives” (Figure 1). T., instead a Moroccan woman photographed downtown Montebelluna, saying: “I go shopping here, and near here there is also the supermarket where I always go” (Figure 2). These examples show how territorial ties are developed through habits and daily movements, as well as through services and places deemed “useful” – e.g. shops, streets, banks, and public offices – which are similar to Richter’s “places of daily actions” (2011). In Montebelluna most of these places are concentrated in the centre of the town and this makes it “convenient”, particularly to those living in the surroundings, as they can reach shops and offices easily and autonomously, also on foot.



Figure 1. “Aldo Moro” square – Villorba. (D., he was born in Marocco, 19 years old. He has lived in Italy for 7 years, in different municipalities of Veneto region; he has lived in Villorba for 2 years).

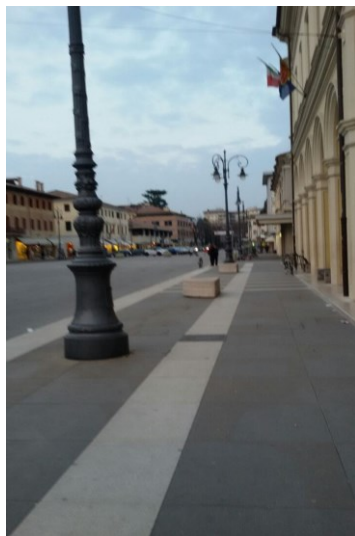


Figure 2. Downtown – Montebelluna. (T., she was born in Mauritius, 40 years old. She has lived in Montebelluna for 4 years).

Also B., who has lived in Montebelluna for only three months, took a photo of a place where she often goes: “almost every day I come here for a walk with my sister in law (...). It is all beautiful. You smell fresh air, the flowing water gives you a sense of peace, there is plenty of green” (Figure 3). She thus described a place she liked and a practice that seems quickly consolidated, but especially that made her feel good.



Figure 3. “Where we make our daily walk” – Montebelluna. (B., she born in Kosovo, 24 years old. She has lived in Montebelluna for 3 months).

Sensations of wellbeing tend to increase over time, as emotional involvement does too, fostering a sense of belonging to place. Our data show that the latter is mainly determined by three factors: memory, social relationships and quality of life.

As highlighted by Rishbeth and Powell (2013) too, memory is an active agent in building the relationship with the current place of living, as well as in keeping alive the one with the country of origin and in creating associations between the two worlds; particular memories, experiences, events, situations and phases of life connected to places and landscape elements are relevant in this regard. For example, M., a 17 year-old Chinese girl living in the village of Caerano, photographed the primary school she had attended, saying: “this is my primary school, I went there immediately after my arrival to Italy and I knew my first friends and teachers there” (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Primary school – Caerano.  
(M., she was born in China, 17 years old. She has lived in Caerano for 9 years).

Through most of her photos, M. instead built a link between her current everyday places and her homeland, Ghana. She took a picture of a square in a locality near to Montebelluna, where there is a black enchained statue, which really affected her: “I don’t like this picture because it reminds me of the slave trade. (...). It reminds me of ‘Cape Coast Castle’, in Ghana, from where slaves were taken away with their arms and legs bound in chains” (Figure 5).



Figure 5. “Internati” square – Santa Maria in Colle.  
(M., born in Ghana, 44 years old. She has lived in Montebelluna for 10 years).

Indeed, in many cases, the emotional bond with the homeland can remain very strong, even after much time spent away. In this regard, also the case of F. is relevant: she took a picture of

what she saw from a window of her house (Figure 6) and said that she liked this view, as well as the freedom she experienced in Montebelluna: “here it is peaceful, you do as you wish, go out when you want, come back when you want, not like in Morocco, eh! Here you dress as you want, because in Morocco, my country, no, you must not wear tight jeans...”. However, she also said that she felt at home only when she was inside her house, or when a place reminded her of her country of origin: “inside my house I feel at home, and when I come here to the school and see Moroccans, I feel as if I were there, in Morocco. (...) When I go to the market I think of Morocco, I see the stalls selling fish, fruit, and I think it is like there in Morocco”.



Figure 6. Window view – Montebelluna.  
(F., born in Morocco, 36 years old. She has lived in Italy for 6 years, in Montebelluna for 3 years; previously, she lived in nearby localities).

This woman felt good in Montebelluna, where she was building her life; however, her emotional reference was still her country of origin and she felt “at home” only when she was inside her house, and when someone/something made her think about Morocco.

The importance of social relationships with compatriots, but especially with one’s own relatives is clear: Montebelluna became home because it is the place where migrants were able to reunite their family and live together. G. took a picture of the library and said: “I bring my child there and I borrow books for him”; and then significantly added: “I like living in Montebelluna because since my arrival from Morocco I have ever lived here and I got used

to this place. (...) I feel at home here, because it is here that I live with my little family” (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Library – Montebelluna.  
(G., she was born in Morocco, 26 years old. She has lived in Montebelluna for 7 years).

Also M., by taking a photo of the hospital where her second son was born, made the importance of social relationships very clear, and especially of the children born in Italy, as determinants of sense of belonging to the current place of living (Figure 8). Commenting this picture, she also expressed the opinion that in Montebelluna her family and herself can enjoy better opportunities in life than in the place she comes from, in Macedonia: “My husband has a job here... and when you have a job you have everything, you can take the kids to school, pay the rent...”; on the other hand, she showed an emotional tie to her homeland, where she left her family of origin: “no place is as valuable as a parent, as a family”; “half of my heart is here, the other half is there, there for my family, here to live better”.



Figure 8. Hospital – Montebelluna.  
(M., born in Macedonia, 29 years old. She has lived in Montebelluna for 2 and half years).

In this last example, the social nature of belonging meets another important factor for the development of territorial ties: quality of life, intended as the opportunities offered by the place in terms of safety, job and “hope for the future” (Raffaetà and Duff, 2013, p. 339). M. desired to stay in Montebelluna, since she felt as if she had a future there; at the same time, she missed her relatives in Macedonia, making this country still a fundamental identity reference.

Another Macedonian interviewee allows us to highlight a further relevant aspect for the establishment of sense of belonging to place and integration: relationships with autochthonous inhabitants. Commenting on a photo of the cathedral of Montebelluna, A. said: “I am a Muslim. I took a picture of the cathedral because some people go to the church, others go to the mosque; (...) it is not a problem, we can make friendship with each other...” (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Cathedral – Montebelluna.  
(A., she was born in Macedonia, 33 years old; She has lived in Montebelluna for 4 years and 3 months).

The main church of the town thus becomes the symbol of a wish that unfortunately remains often unfulfilled. Some of our interviewees talked, more or less explicitly, about their relationships with the autochthonous population, often reporting negative experiences. For

example, F. took a picture of her children's kindergarten, which was her unique "emotional" reference after nine years in the town, and said: "[If I left Montebelluna I would miss] the kindergarten, it is the school that my children have attended, all three of them" (Figure 10). She also said that she would not live elsewhere, because "a foreign person suffers when arriving in a new place, so I don't want to suffer again", adding: "the negative thing in Montebelluna is the lack of welcome... they look at different people... especially the women wearing a headscarf are looked at in a different way...". It is thus evident that the "social climate" of the town and the natives' attitude toward migrants can generate suffering, also renewing the pain experienced when leaving the homeland.

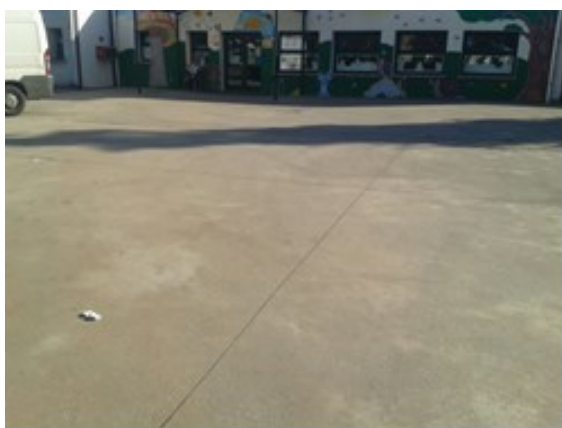


Figure 10. Kindergarten – Montebelluna. (F., she was born in Morocco, 30 years old. She has lived in Montebelluna for 9 years).

## 5. Conclusions

Our data confirm the findings in literature and highlight the fact that migrants' relationship with everyday places is characterized by two dimensions: a "practical" dimension and an "emotional" one. The former is based on routines and habitual movements; the latter implies an affective involvement toward the place, and is therefore considered the core of a sense of belonging. Such feeling is linked more to the symbolic meanings of landscape than to its "physical" characteristics, being mainly determined by three factors: memory, social relationships, and quality of life.

The establishment of sense of belonging to places requires time: length of residence is relevant in order to both become used to the new place and have experiences enabling people to create a bond with it. It is also true that in some cases territorial ties are developed quite quickly, while in others the sensation of "feeling at home" is confined within the domestic walls, even after years.

From most interviews, it emerges that in Montebelluna "you can live well": it is a safe and clean town, where services and offices are efficient and, in spite of the current economic crisis, work opportunities are still available. However, quality of life is not enough to generate a sense of belonging to Montebelluna. Emotional and affective involvement is often hindered by the migrants' relationship with their homeland: indeed, such place tends to remain their only identity reference, since they were born and had spent most of their life there, and many of their relatives and friends live still there. Also the natives' lack of hospitality, or even hostility, seriously affect migrants' experiences, especially in the case of Muslim people coming from Africa. Indeed, when our interviewees mentioned social relationships, they referred to almost exclusive interactions with their relatives, compatriots or other migrants, while the ones with natives are difficult and scarce (confirming what emerged in research on inter-ethnic relations in urban public parks, see for example Peters et al., 2010).

Taking into account these findings, we argue that improving quality of life, safety and also the aesthetic quality of everyday landscapes is an important action in order to improve the relationship with the place of living: walking around the town and spending time in places which are appreciated and make migrants feel good undoubtedly help them in creating territorial ties. Furthermore, and most importantly, migrants need the possibility to freely build their life and future, and cultivate relationships with relatives and friends, thus fostering their connections with both the current place of living and the homeland. According to our data, each of these aspects is relevant to the development of migrants' sense of belonging and integration, and they all contribute to such processes, together and interdependently.



However, the hostile social climate surrounding migrants – which is often “implicit”, as made up of gazes rather than actions or open conflicts – can endanger, or even delete, the positive influence of the above-mentioned factors. In our opinion, there cannot be “integration” without the establishment of a culture of acceptance and inclusion; it is not enough to guarantee migrants “the right to a future”, in a pleasant place which “works efficiently”, but it is fundamental to enhance the coexistence between natives and migrants, helping both groups to overcome reciprocal fears and stereotypes, especially in areas – like Veneto region and northeastern Italy in general – where they are particularly strong. This situation can be changed also through landscape, properly exploiting its potential as “intercultural mediator”: as our previous research among second generation migrants showed (De Nardi, 2013b), landscape facilitates the emergence of sensations, emotions and memories, also providing people with the opportunity to share experiences, opinions and feelings, as well as to deconstruct stereotypes.

These findings were confirmed during the fieldwork for this project: migrants acquired a deeper awareness of the characteristics of their place of living, also relating it to their country of origin; had the opportunity to think about their experience, taking into account a multiplicity of factors; finally, they realized that their lives and experiences are interesting to somebody and that it is important to talk about them and share them with other people. However, the intercultural exchange remained almost limited to the relationship between the researcher (me, as a white Italian woman) and the researched migrants (coming from a variety of different countries and mostly women). This highlights the importance of increasing and fostering positive intercultural interactions, both through academic research projects and outside universities. In particular, public initiatives are needed to help autochthonous and migrant people meet, especially if they are adults who do not attend school. Those places where natives and migrants have access and share a space – e.g. parks, squares, streets, gardens of kindergartens and schools – seem to be favored settings for taking on this challenge. The organization of activities focusing on local

landscape and involving both Italian and migrant populations – such as excursions, laboratories for children and parents, community gardens – is a relevant tool for fostering the integration process, educating people to the value of their common landscape, but especially supporting the construction of open and dynamic identities.

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