Building up a life in Malta: An analysis of migrants' experiences in the process of negotiating a sense of belonging in their new home country of Malta

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An analysis of migrants' experiences in the process of negotiating a sense of belonging in their new home country of Malta.

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Photo 1 – Photograph taken as part of the photography project by Isah.

All photographs in this article are either taken as part of the collaborative photography project or taken by the author herself.

Table of Contents

Abstract

This research explores how migrants on the Mediterranean island of Malta carve out a space of belonging in building up their lives in Malta. Belonging is seen as something that is fluid and dynamic and that relates to being comfortable in a certain place, situation, or group. With the use of ethnographic and audiovisual methods, it is explored how migrants negotiate belonging through temporal, spatial and relational processes. Belonging then, is not merely a means to or outcome of integration processes. Rather, striving for a sense belonging for migrants is a differentiated process in which uncertainty regarding legal decisions, racist policy and discriminatory treatment obstruct migrants in deploying their agency and carving out a space of belonging. Migrants can regain their agency by reaching out to and connecting with migrant communities, support organizations and positive minded individuals, who can offer a safe space of belonging out of which migrants by can collectively strive for belonging within society at large. This research aims to add to the academic discourse by combining the concepts of integration, belonging and agency and studying them in the light of migrants actively deploying their agency in carving out a space of belonging in the process of building up their lives on Malta.

Introduction

"Integration is still a far way to go. There is not much activity helping to bring migrant communities and Maltese communities together. Personally, I really try my best to you know, try to make friends and do things to improve my life. And yes, I feel safe, I'm in a better place in terms of freedom, but I'm still not feeling accepted. I don't see myself fully integrated in the community and I don't feel fully accepted by the government. I have a document yes, but it's a temporary document. In your mind you still think you are on a journey. You're always thinking what is going to happen tomorrow to me." Dursa, like many other migrants I spoke to, describes how for them building up a life in Malta feels rather ambiguous. Whereas Malta offers safety, freedom and opportunities to improve one's life, there are also a lot of barriers migrants encounter that impact the way they connect to Malta. When I asked Dursa whether he would call Malta his home, he replied: "No not yet, because it's still a process. I feel home, I feel safe, but generally, for many people it's very hard. You have to live with the reality and choose positivity to make the best of the situation."[1]

As the number of people migrating across borders continues to increase in current times of globalization, over the last decades scholars have started to analyze migrants' experiences of integration, belonging and agency. Belonging, is often seen as a vital part of integration processes by scholars and policy makers, (Ager & Strang 2008; Wille 2011), which is demonstrated by the fact that Malta's integration policy is titled 'I belong'. This research argues it is essential to get a better understanding of what developing a sense of belonging means for migrants themselves (Pearlman 2022). Belonging as the feeling of being comfortable in a certain place, situation, or group, is something fluid and dynamic (Ryan 2018; Webb& Lahiri-Roy 2019) and can be understood with the help of the dimensions of time, people and place. The dimension of time refers to the temporality of belonging since as one's life develops meanings attached to places and people change (Fallov et al. 2013, 469). The dimension of people refers to how a sense of belonging is negotiated within and through relationships to different people whether in migrants' new home countries or in their countries of origin (Staeheli and Nagel 2005; Bivand & Oeppen 2013, 857). The dimension of place can

[1] Dursa 06-03-2022

refer both to a local place of residence as well as to a space that crosses borders for example through diasporic attachments (Raffaetà & Duff 2013; Wright 2015, 391; Webb & Lahiri-Roy 2019). When exploring what negotiating a sense of belonging means for migrants themselves it is essential to acknowledge migrants' agency in this process (Maiwaring 2016). In interaction with and despite of precarious situations that obstruct belonging migrants deploy their agency in carving out a space of belonging for themselves. In this research I aim to add to the academic debate by exploring how a sense of belonging is not something that happens incidentally. I argue it is important to acknowledge that developing a sense of belonging is not merely a means to or an outcome of integration process. Rather, carving out a space of belonging is something migrants actively engage in and that is shaped by agency deployed against a backdrop of often precarious life situations. Agency then, can become something transformative, both in individual lives of migrants and in the migrant community in a specific place, as well as in a collective sense emphasizing how migrants are sociohistorical actors that have the potential to, through micropolitics, foster social change in the world (Chun 2011; Bailey 2012; Paret & Gleeson 2016).

This research took place in Malta in the winter of 2022. The research was conducted with ethnographic methods, like participant observation and semi-structured interviewing. Next to these traditional methods, the research made use of collaborative audiovisual methods, like drawing, participatory photography and filming as a means to gather insights. The output exists of three different modalities. There is a short documentary film, titled "Making Malta Home", which follows three people who have experienced migration to Malta. It uncovers parts of their life story and especially focusses on how they fight for place to belong in Malta. There is a photography project, "id-Dar", which has been carried out in collaboration with other people who have experienced migration in Malta. Five participants documented their daily lives with the camera and the photographs speak to how they form attachments to their social environment in Malta. The project will be exhibited in the summer of 2022 in Malta and a website will be built later in the year as well. Lastly, there is this article, which aims to dive more in depth into the experience of negotiating a sense of belonging. In this text I aim to explore how belonging is not merely a means to or outcome of integration processes, rather I hope to acknowledge that developing a sense of belonging to a new home requires active work and investment of time and social skills, especially when facing precarious situations. Throughout this project I would like to acknowledge my participants' strength and resilience in their constant fight for belonging in Malta. With the different projects we hope to shed a light on what it is like to live in Malta as a migrant and by

sharing the outcomes (especially the film and photography project) with a broader public we hope to eventually be able to create better mutual understanding within society. The research question that guided this research is as following:

How do migrants negotiate a sense of belonging through temporal, relational and spatial dimensions, in the process of building up a life in the island of Malta?

[2] Photo 2 - Jalyn: I like that you see the Maltese flags on this picture. I pass here with the bus every day. I felt like a tourist taking this picture.[3]

[2] Photograph taken as part of the photography project
[3] Jalyn, 20-05-2022

Theoretical Framework

The section below offers an overview of the main academic theories on which this research builds. First, belonging is situated in the integration debate, as a means to or ideal outcome of integration processes. Next, belonging is discussed as a sense that is dynamic and that is negotiated by migrants in temporal, spatial and relational dimensions. Lastly, in order to better understand how migrants themselves negotiate a sense of belonging migrants' agency is explored in relation to precarity.

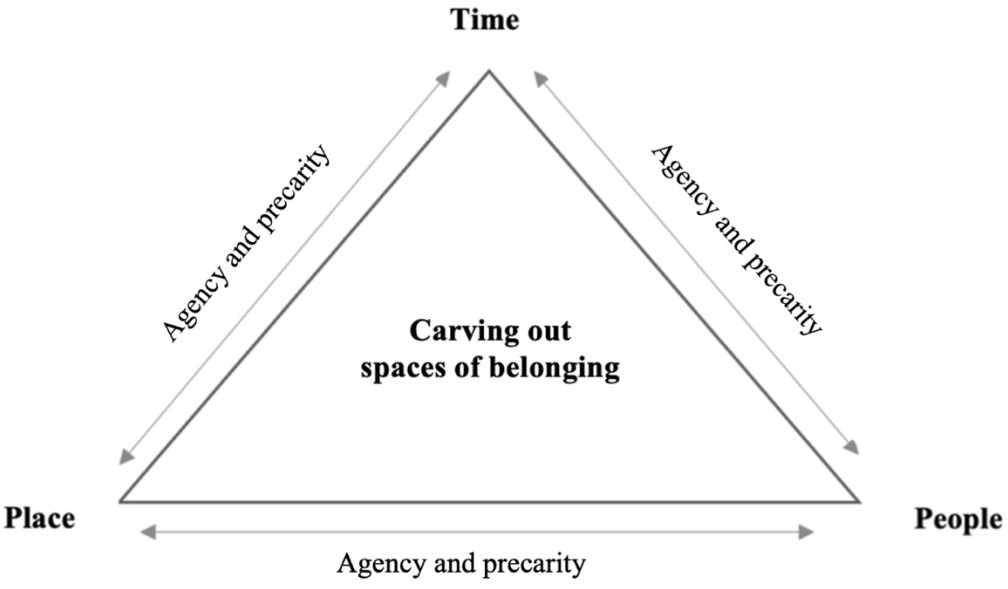
Integration and belonging

Over the last decade, in response to the growing number of displaced persons across the globe, scholars have started to analyze migrants' experiences in developing a sense of belonging in a new home country. For different scholars belonging is an important part of the academic debate on integration (Ager & Strang 2008; Wille 2011; Huizinga & van Hooven 2018; Pearlman 2022). Huizinga & van Hooven (2018), argue that it is important to get a better understanding of how migrants develop new spaces for belonging in the process of integration. Whereas some scholars have argued the effectiveness of integration policies (Abizadeh 2002), this research assumes at least a certain level of integration, as a social process, is often sought for by the host country as well as actively strived for by migrants themselves, as this enables migrants to build up an life with certain levels of economic, political and social stability (Erdal & Oeppen 2013). Berry et al. (2002, 354) define integration as a process in which taking over part of an identity in the host country interacts with maintaining own identities related to social and cultural practices of one's country of origin. Integration does not presume that migrants leave behind their own cultural identities, however it does presume that both migrants and local citizens are open to interaction that enhances social cohesion (Paunova & Blasco 2021). Integration is thus mutual or reciprocal, initiated by both migrants and local citizens (Ager & Strang 2008). A sense of belonging, then is developed within these reciprocal processes of integration (Huizinga & van Hooven 2018). Moreover, for scholars and policy makers belonging is often a vital aspect or desired outcome of these processes (Ager & Strang 2008; Wille 2011). Malta's official integration program is a case in point as it is titled 'I belong'. If belonging is indeed so important integration, it is more than apt to study variation in migrants' lived experience of belonging (Pearlman 2022).

Migrant experiences of belonging

Belonging, as a sense of being comfortable in a certain place, situation or group, is indeed variated, or fluid and dynamic, rather than static and uniform (Ryan 2018; Webb & Lahiri-Roy 2019). Ryan (2018) uses the term "differentiated embedding" to investigate different ways in which migrants "negotiate attachment and belonging as interconnected, temporal, spatial and relational processes" (2018, 235). The term "differentiated embedding" helps better grasp the dynamics and contextuality at play in processes of negotiating belonging, as well as acknowledge that there can be "varying degrees of attachment" (2018, 237). Ryan then, asks attention for the fact that negotiating belonging is "neither unidirectional nor irreversible" (2018, 248). Instead, like Huizinga and van Hooven (2018, 309) state "achieving feelings of belonging is a multifaceted, nuanced and relational process". Keeping this in mind, the spatial, relational and temporal dimensions of belonging are explored in the next section. These dimensions are interwoven and interconnected and are further conditioned by precarity and migrants' agency as will be described in the last section (see figure 1).

Figure 1 – feelings of belonging are conditioned by people, place and time and by the sub-dimensions of precarity and migrant agency. [4]



[4] [1] A similar figure of different dimensions of belonging can be found in Fallov et al. 2013, however they use different dimensions and sub-dimensions. The figure used here is made by the author of this text and adapted to the specific focus of this research.

Time, people and place

When discussing belonging one often first thinks of the spatial and relational dimensions as the notion of belonging pre-eminently refers to connections and attachments between places and people. However, the temporal dimension should not be neglected either. By stating that the notion of belonging is dynamic, this does not only refer to place, but to the dimension of time as well. Feelings of belonging are to a large extent influenced by temporality (Ryan 2018, 235). After all, the journey of migration itself does not happen overnight, building up a life in a new place takes time, and attachments are likely to change over time as one's life develops. The way one identifies with certain social worlds might change and meanings attached to people and places can vary over time (Fallov et al. 2013, 469). In addition, as will be described below, for many migrants Malta might not necessarily be the country they aimed to end up in, which means that the temporality of attachments to local, Maltese social worlds, often influence the ways migrants negotiate a sense of belonging.

Webb & Lahiri-Roy (2019,193) argue that belonging is best analyzed through "a lens of hybridity and settlement". Such a lens of "hybridity and settlement" suggests that belonging is inherently interwoven with the dynamic movements across borders, but at the same time is also locally rooted. Belonging can thus both refer to a local place and can exist in the absence of any specific site (Wright 2015, 391). Migrants can develop feelings of belonging to their country of residence, through building connections with the local social world within reciprocal processes of integration. However, through forms of diasporic attachments, they can simultaneously maintain feelings of belonging to spatially dispersed people and places (Ryan 2018, 237), that transcend national borders. Migrants often continue the relations to people and places they had before migrating (Bivand & Oeppen 2013, 857), which means that they maintain a sense of belonging to these people and places. This sense can exist in memories of migrants, through material attachment and can also be maintained through ties to co-nationals either in the home country or in the diaspora (Faist 1999, 10). Staeheli and Nagel (2005) conclude that their research population, Arab-Americans, develop a sense of belonging that cuts across places and nations, but at the same time remains rooted in both. Indeed, as Raffaetà & Duff (2013) argue, although belonging for many migrants is often not tied to one specific locality, it does emerge in interaction with particular practices and material attachments. Similarly, Fallov et al. (2013) argue that in the modern globalized world territorial belonging is still of importance and that mobility does not rule out feelings of belonging.

A sense of belonging is thus influenced by interconnected dimensions of places, people and time. The temporal dimension influences the relational and spatial dimensions as attachments and opportunities for developing a sense of belonging change over time when migrants' lives develop (Fallov et al. 2013; Huizinga & van Hoven 2018; Ryan 2018). Similarly, the relational dimension determines how over time one fosters feelings of belonging to different places where one has memories with certain people or currently shares space with (Faist 1999; Bivand & Oeppen 2013). The spatial dimension again influences the temporal and relational dimensions, as places in which migrants find themselves, whether physical or not tied to a specific locality (Wright 2015, 391), determine the way one relates to people and time. Together these dimensions shape the ways in which migrants carve out a space of belonging. Researching belonging as the feeling of being comfortable in a certain place, situation or group, requires awareness and sensitivity to the intricate and contested ways belonging can be experienced, as temporal, relational and both local and transcending locality.

Agency and precarity

When researching how migrants themselves negotiate a sense of belonging it is important to recognize that "the development of a sense of belonging is not achievable without focusing on and recognizing people's agency in the integration process" (Wille 2011, 80). Agency, according to Mainwaring (2016), needs to be understand as something that is not merely about choices migrants make, but rather refers to decision making processes in which numerous challenges, structural constraints, barriers to mobility, rights and equality might obstruct migrants in their agency. Precarity as life without the promise of stability (Tsing 2015, 2) often characterizes and shapes different part of migrants lives (Paret & Gleeson 2016). Migrants encounter plentiful obstacles that form barriers towards developing a sense of belonging, ranging from language and mobility barriers and not knowing where to go for help to hostile treatment, vulnerability to violence and a lack of (access to) legal rights and often reinforce each other (Khosravi 2007; Joppke 2014, 27; Mainwaring 2016; Paret & Gleeson 2016). Migrant agency thus needs to be studied in the light of the room they have for manoeuvre and structures of opportunity they find, that cause vulnerability and belonging to be simultaneous realities in migrants' lives (Anderson & Ruhs 2010, 178 Gonzales et al. 2020)

As Bailey (2012) writes through deploying agency in everyday life migrants can offer resistance to social and financial inequality and to a lack of cultural recognition within society. The migrant women Bailey (2012) researched established a NGO through which they

found a collective space of home and belonging, from where they could encourage themselves to strive for a space of belonging within the broader society, empower both individual women as well as the women migrants community (2012, 851). As Gonzales et al. (2020) write carving out spaces of belonging is an active process in which migrants can find shelter from their vulnerability caused by exclusionary laws and a hostile social climate.

Such a space of home becomes the place where migrants can be human and out of which they can resist (hook 1990). This resonates with Foucault's (1979) ideas of place as spaces of dominance and resistance. Space reflects the desires of groups of people to maintain the social order in which they dominate others. However, at the same time and in this same space there are attempts of other people, those without such power, to resist power and survive in a way that gives their lives meaning and dignity. Recognizing migrants' agency is to recognize migrants' capacity to act and to resist to the power others have over them which causes precarious situations in their lives (Frank 2006). Such resistance can take different forms and has actual effects, whether for the individual migrant, a specific migrant community or on a collective global scale. As Bailey (2012) writes, recognizing migrants' agency is not just about a story of individual resistance or sensemaking, rather "it points to what might be an important phenomenon on how local grassroots movements are challenging the invisibility of asylum seekers' and refugees' lives and expanding the notion of politics to embrace a wider notion of community politics with solidarity." (2012, 864). Recognizing migrants' agency helps to better understand how migrants actively carve out a space of belonging for themselves in processes of integration into their new country and enables to see migrants as social actors resisting oppression aiming to improve their life situations.

As described above, belonging is often seen as a means to or outcome of reciprocal integration processes (Wille 2011; Huizinga & van Hooven 2018). The framework with the three dimension indicates that belonging is differentiated, varying over time and between place and people. In order to explore the actual relevance of a sense of belonging in integration processes this research studies how migrants actively negotiate a sense of belonging by deploying their agency in overcoming precarious life situations. The section below explains what methods were used to gain better understanding of these processes and of migrants' lived experience of belonging.

Methodology

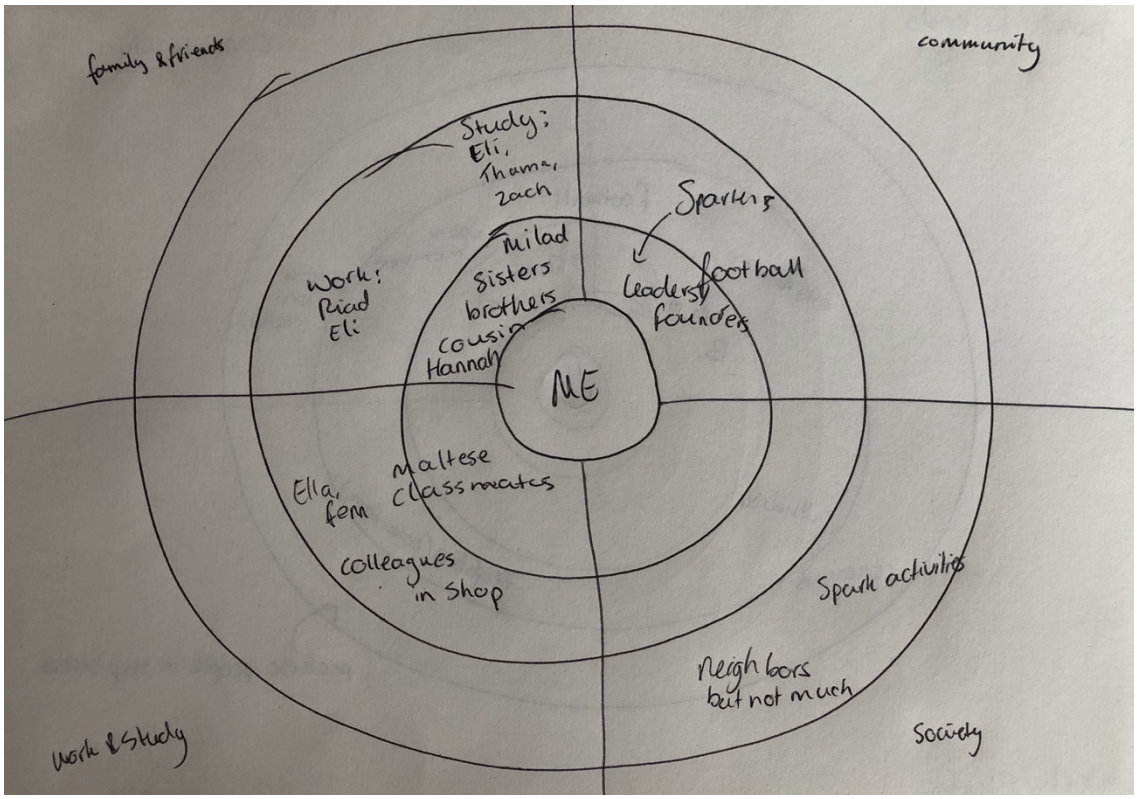
For this research project I used various audiovisual ethnographic research methods. As this research took place in the winter of 2022, covid-19 measurements in Malta brough several limitations. Migrants support organizations, with whom I had been in contact before arrival, had to cancel most of their social events, and as such I had to find other ways of meeting migrants who would be open to participating in this research. The first few weeks I managed to come into contact with a few people via social media, online platforms and meetings. Fortunately, as January passed, Covid-19 restrictions started to be lifted and I was able to start practicing participant observation at the Blue Door English language school, as well as in other social settings with individual migrants and their friends and families. Participant observation helped gather insights on how the migrants with whom I was able to do research, built up their lives in Malta. Furthermore, participant observation offered the opportunity to meet people in a casual way, making small talk and hanging out at first. It helped getting to know people and build rapport. Especially, in this field of research, where migrants are often already interviewed extensively by official institutions, in order to apply for protection, I found it important to try to build up rapport in informal settings instead of or before deploying more formal research methods like interviews.

After getting to know people better, I held in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twelve participants. With the photography project we held in-depth elicitation interviews with six participants (see below)[5]. With nine participants I was able to do one or more follow up interviews. In-depth interviewing offered the opportunity to discuss housing, work, friends, family, language and the Maltese society. Towards the end of the interview, I would ask whether they feel a sense of belonging towards their social environment on the island of Malta, whether they felt home in Malta and whether they would have specific plans for the future. Discussing these topics allowed to gain insights regarding how migrants themselves view their daily lives and how over time they created a home for themselves on the island of Malta within certain communities. For the structure of the interviews, I borrowed from a biographical or life history interviewing approach. This approach helped us to focus on narrative accounts of participants' life history and allowed for talking through everyday life

[5] Most participants, except for the three protagonists of the film, have been assigned pseudonyms in this research, as to protect their identity.

experiences (Harding 2006). In addition, I used the method of ordinary language interviewing (Schaffer 2006) as this allows to explore the meanings participants themselves attach to certain discussed topics. For example, I would ask participants open questions about 'feeling at home' or 'belonging', and their answers would indicate what meanings they attach to such topics or how they understand it in the context of their lives. With ordinary language interviewing I aimed to discover how participants themselves relate to certain topics, rather than impose my own view as a researcher. As such it helped to uncover different uses of words and prevent misunderstandings.

During the interviews I made use of social mapping. This helped to understand the social infrastructures that migrants are a part of. Sociograms are useful visual aids for discovering together how migrants' social worlds are structured and interconnected and help to gather more sensory knowledge of migrants' environments as experienced by them in everyday life (Sandu 2013, 500). Through drawing lines and writing down names of people and places during the interviews, sociograms helped gain oral and visual insights into how participants negotiate attachment to individuals, migrant communities and Maltese communities in building up a life in Malta (Ryan 2018).



Example of a sociogram

Film and photography

In most settings where I practiced participant observation, I was not able to and did not wish to film, as this would have breached migrants' privacy or comfort in social situations where they are supposed to feel safe. Consequently, I focused on using audiovisual methods when meeting with individual participants. After a few weeks I had met three individual participants, Agnes, Dursa and Thomas, who were open to being filmed, sometimes together with friends or family. All of them were living in Malta for at least several years, are comfortable speaking about their own experiences and speak the English language well. I found this important as I wanted to collaborate as much as possible on the film and wanted to be sure that they correctly understood the agreements we made concerning the filming and the output. We aimed to create an audiovisual portrait describing parts of their stories and the way they built up their life in Malta over the years. I followed the participants around the island, going about their daily life. Similar to the way Oyéjidé & Saner (2021) in "After Migration: Calabria" tell the stories of their protagonists, we filmed certain aspects of the daily life of the participants and used interviews to explain more about their experience of migration to Malta. This way the camera functioned as a medium for my participants to share their stories. The structure of the film is informed by the expository mode, meaning it aims to depict fragments of the protagonist's life histories, through a narrative structure (Nichols 2010). Throughout the film the spoken word shapes and continues the argument of what it is like to build up a life in Malta and the strength and resilience that the three participants show regarding this in different ways. The continuity of spoken word is interchanged with observational shots of Malta, which combined with the recording of environmental sounds aim to thicken the ethnographic description and enhance the viewers understanding of life in Malta (Henley 2007).

The participatory photography project, conducted in collaboration with Habtom Tsigehans, offers a different kind of insight into migrants' lives. Photography engages with and brings to the fore aspects of life that might not be as easily verbally articulated (Pink 2020). By asking the six participants to make a visual diary by taking photographs of events, things, places and people in their daily lives, we were able to uncover spaces of belonging created within migrant communities. The participatory photography project draws upon the photovoice method, in which participants, who are entrusted with a camera and act as recorders, can identify and represent their community through photography. Photovoice "uses the immediacy of the visual image and accompanying stories to furnish evidence and promote an effective, participatory means of sharing expertise" (Wang 2006). The participants

themselves actively took part in imagining their own situation and translating their own perception regarding belonging into visual material (Kakebeke & Versluis n.d.). Similar to how Kakebeke & Versluis conducted their research "Van wie is de Heemraadsingel?" (Picturebridgefoundation.nl n.d.) having people take photographs of their environment, whether physical or social, enables them to share their personal and unique visions and experiences of belonging. Together these photographs speak to migrant experiences and when the outcomes are shared with a broader public it has the potential to initiate social change (Wang 2006). In our project we worked with analogue cameras. This relates to and emphasizes the sense of physicality of photographs and allows to think more consciously about what one captures with the camera. After all, there is only a limited number of pictures on one film roll in contrast to digital or phone cameras. In addition, there is a certain spontaneity or 'unstaged-ness', as until the photograph is developed it would not be exactly clear what it would look like. Participatory photography helped the research in two separate ways. It helped the participants to observe their own daily live with a fresh look (Pink 2021) and when talking about the photographs during interviews it helped forge new connections in the research (Harper 2002). Trough employing photovoice it came to the fore how migrants especially have a sense of belonging within migrant communities, as will be explained further in the result section.

[6]*Photo 3 - James: This is my church. It's in Valletta I go here every Sunday but also on other days. I love to go here and I know the people well.*[7]

Knowledge and collaboration

I this research during and after fieldwork, I aimed to take a collaborative approach. After all, the stories are my participants' stories, so they should have a say in how they think it should be portrayed and shared. With collaboration I do not mean simply two people working together or ethnographic rapport, although that certainly is included (White 2012, 87). Rather, we practiced collaboration in the sense of creating knowledge together, practicing a form of collective sensemaking (Yanow & Schwartz-shea 2013; Pink 2021), in search of what it means to negotiate a sense of belonging in a new home country (Geertz 1973, 5). The collaboration comes to the fore in the social mapping method, where we would create sociograms together and afterwards analyze them together as well. Audiovisual methods perfectly lend themselves for more collaboration between different parties as the process and outcomes can more easily be shared, discussed and analyzed together. In the participatory photography project as well as in the process of filming I either let the participants decide how to depict their lives or we would discuss this and make decisions on this together. After

[6] Photograph taken as part of the photography project
[7] James, 20-05-2022

the filming and taking of the photographs I asked participants to review footage and pictures with me, trying to make sense of what we produced together, also keeping the participants involved in the process of selecting which parts of the materials to use and how to edit these. That way it would not only be my view on their lives and histories that shapes the story. Rather, the outputs would be produced as part of a collective sensemaking project on belonging and agency, through collaborative efforts by my participants and myself, as the researcher (Pink 2021, 148).

However, collaborating on creating knowledge comes with its own obstacles. There needs to be space for different and potentially contrasting experiences and interpretations to be shared. A space where participants feel comfortable, accepted and respected needs to be facilitated. In practice this meant that I met with most participants individually for filming or for interviewing them about the photographs. Furthermore, not all participants were initially familiar or at ease with the different research methods described above. With the photography project and the social mapping with some participants there was some confusion about how these activities would help to tell their stories. Good explanation and an open environment where participants could experiment without feeling pressured were thus necessary. Still, collaboration is an essential part of this research, first of all because the stories and experiences on which the data is based, are my participants', hence it is fit to give them more control over and have a say in the ways the knowledge and outputs are created, analyzed and selected. Secondly, it helped gather more complete information, since multiple people work together on creating data and making sense of the data. This way there is a sort of multi-vocality, in allowing more space for different experiences and interpretations. After all, a sense of belonging itself is differentiated and dynamic (Ryan 2018). This research required collaboration, so that together we could create a better understanding of what it means to be a migrant nowadays in Malta or in Europe.

Positionality

Another sidenote regarding collaboration is that after working intensively with several participants for a few months during and after fieldwork, and making the research a mutual project, I felt a certain uneasiness when I started writing this article. It felt uncomfortable to describe the lives of people who I interacted with daily and became friends with, as knowledge created in research. On the other hand, all participants had agreed to participating explicitly and as such I also felt a certain responsibility to do justice to their investment in this project. In this research I also aim to be reflexive in the sense that I find it important to take

into account the way I, as a researcher, shape the research (Mosley 2013; Yanow & Schwartz-shea 2013, 103). Using ethnographic methods, the personal relations build with the participants influence the entire process of the research. The fact that I am a European citizen, who never was forced to leave my country distances me from the participants in this research. Awareness of my privileged position was important in order to ethically engage with participants. I wanted to prevent migrants feeling pressured to participate or uncomfortable due to my presence as a researcher. As such, took several measures. As described above, I made sure to only interview people when I got to know them better and I made sure only to film with individual participants who explicitly agreed with this. The fact that I am not Maltese worked to my advantage in this research. It allowed me to make clear that the participants are the experts regarding life in Malta, as all of them had lived in Malta longer than me. It allowed me to ask obvious questions about building up a life in Malta, the answers to which would give in depth insight into their experiences and opinions. Moreover, we could connect over certain aspects of living in Malta as a non-Maltese person and participants would often tell me they felt they could be more honest about their negative experiences in Malta to me as I myself am not Maltese either. By triangulating different methods, working collaboratively and by using photography and filmic recording to document and engage with the sensory experiences and physical attachments, I gained better insights in the new spaces of belonging that the migrants, with whom I conducted this research, create for themselves on the island of Malta.

Context: Malta

As this research is conducted in Malta it is important to have a general understanding of the situation in Malta regarding migration. This section describes the recent history of migration to Malta, the general demographics of the migrants arriving at Malta's borders and official regulations and social environments that migrants encounter in Malta.

History & numbers

Only in the last two decades Malta has started to receive an increasing number of migrants, as Mediterranean Sea became an often-used migration route (Lutterbeck 2009, 119-120). Even though the number of migrants arriving at Malta's borders has increased, Malta is often not the country migrants consciously aim to end up on. Most have departed from the north coast of Tunisia or from Libya and aim to reach one of the Italian islands by boat. These islands are associated with the European mainland more than Malta is, and most migrants aim to travel further to Europe. However, as many travel in small dinghies and often no one aboard has real maritime experience they might end up on Malta's shores by chance or might need to be rescued by Maltese maritime authorities. Thus, the fact that Malta receives a relatively large number of migrants is in all probability mainly due to Malta's geographical location (Spiteri 2015).

Malta is one of the smallest European member states. The population of Malta is around 500.000, which makes it also one of the most densely populated countries in the world (Malta.iom.int 2015). In 2019 3406 person disembarked in Malta or were rescued at sea by Maltese authorities. In 2020 this number dropped slightly to 2281 (see figure 2). These numbers might not seem so large at first if compared to other Mediterranean countries receiving migrants (see figure 3). However, considering Malta's country and population size, this is a relatively high number. In relation to the number of migrants arriving at Malta's shores, the country is often seen as and has positioned itself as a transit country (Norman 2019). Whereas many migrants might first arrive in Malta, a large number aims to travel further to other European countries in a few years, even though this can be difficult due to the Dublin Convention, which does not allow migrants to apply for asylum in a second country within Europe (Lutterbeck 2009; Skov 2016).

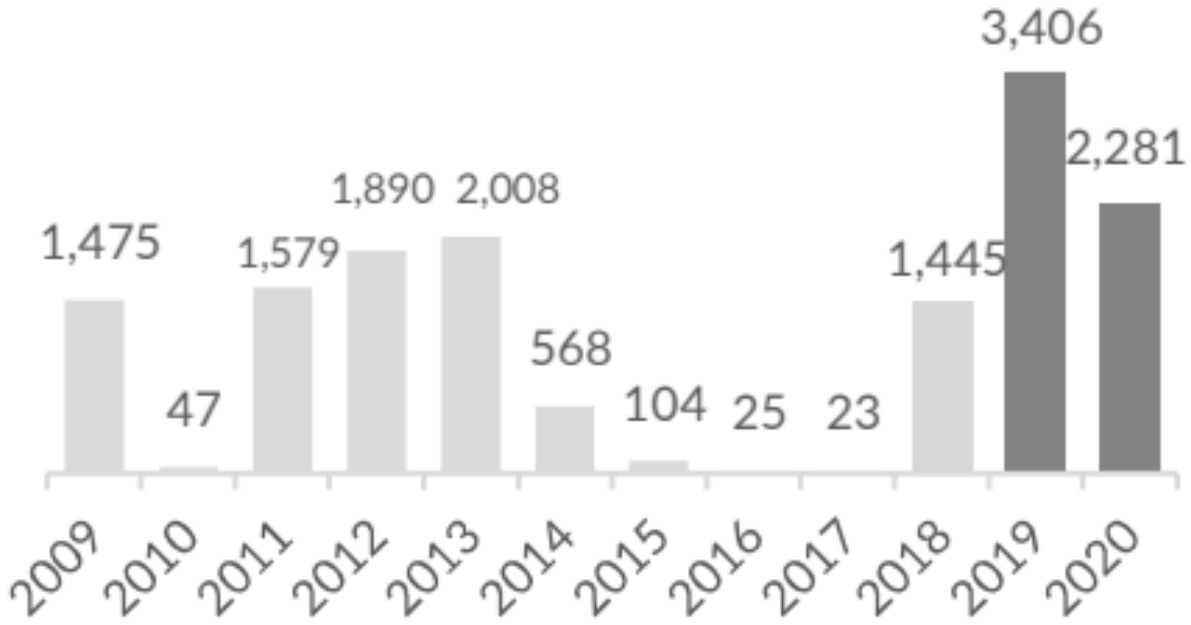


Figure 2– Sea arrivals in Malta between 2009 to 2020 (UNHCR.org 2020)

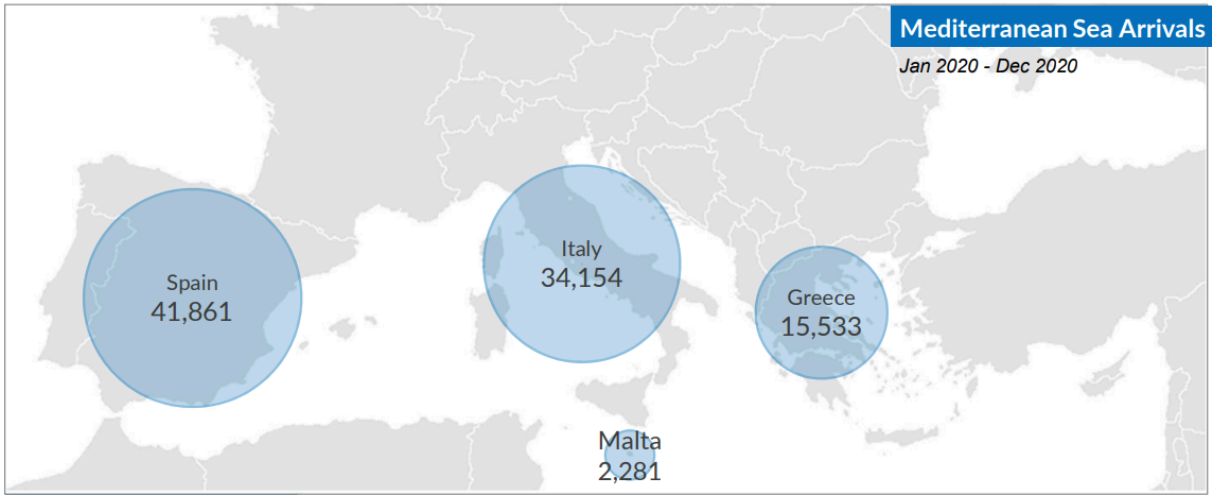


Figure 3 – Mediterranean Sea Arrivals in European Countries (UNHCR.org 2020)

Arriving in Malta

As soon as migrants without a visa arrive in Malta, whether by boat or by plane they are taken into police custody. Some might only be detained a few hours, whereas for other this might last several months, depending on their age, personal situation and asylum application (Spiteri 2015). After the time in detention, in the so-called closed centers, migrants who receive a form of temporary protection are transferred to open centers. These open centers are found across Malta. Some are operated by the government whereas others are led by churches or

NGOs. Essentially, the name open center is a paradox as migrants living in these centers are indeed not in detention, hence the term open, but are also constantly reminded by their place or residence that they are not like the rest of the Maltese population (Spiteri 2015). Migrants are free to move away from these centers, but many find themselves constrained in financial and social means, making it difficult to find accommodation on the island. There are different forms of legal statuses that migrants might receive in Malta. Some receive asylum, others receive subsidiary protection, which are both renewable documents that are valid for three years, with people who receive refugee status enjoying slightly more legal rights. Other migrants receive one-year documents and others even have to renew their documents every few months, of which Thomas [see film 5.44 – 5.53] is an example (Aditus.org.mt. N.D.).

Migrants in Malta are entitled to freedom of movement, are allowed to enter the labor market, get education, and can make claims to health services (JRS Malta et al. 2016). To what extent they are allowed to make such claims depend on their legal status. In practice many migrants in Malta struggle to find full access to the labor market and other aspects of social life in Malta. Often, migrants state they are subject to racism, xenophobia and a general negative sentiment from within the Maltese society towards migrants (JRS Malta et al. 2016, 9). In the last decade many NGOs in Malta have called for the need of an official migrant integration system, to which the Maltese government responded in a publication titled: "Integration = Belonging" (Meae.gov.mt 2017). An official integration program was developed, titled 'I belong'. The local council association has been tasked by the Head of Integration Unit with implementing the official integration policy of 'I belong' in practice. However, when talking to the local council association it came to the fore that in practice not much has been done yet, as such migrants and support organizations often still encounter uncoordinated action concerning the integration policy. NGOs and migrant organizations or communities aim to support migrants in overcoming obstacles and striving towards more integration. There are numerous NGOs and support organizations in Malta that help with access to legal support, education, housing etc. For this research I came into contact with many of those organizations. The two that I worked with most intensively are Blue Door English and Spark15. Blue Door English, is an example of an organization that aims to support migrants specifically with learning the English language, but also offer support with other practical issues. Spark15 is an example of a migrant organization with aims to support young migrants with accessing education and hopes to further integration with Maltese communities [see film 18.34 – 19.40].

Results

We are walking through the small old streets of Valletta. Dursa knows his way around as he comes to Valletta often for work. The winter sun is strong enough to make the temperatures comfortable outside. We sit down on some stairs in one of the streets leading down to the water. After discussing how we want to film Dursa's part in the documentary film, we talk about his experiences building up a life in Malta. "You have to go for it, ask for it multiple times so that's how you can feel like you can… I don't know how I can say. It's like you feel belonging basically (…) Belonging like I don't mean I'm taking the place, because I don't want people thinking in the wrong way. I mean like for example I've been living here. I feel home. I feel safe and there is a lot of good people I know."[8]

In Dursa's quote a lot of the factors and controversy around migrant's lived experience of belonging are addressed. It addresses how belonging is associated with feeling safe in Malta and with having positive social relations. However, when he says *"I don't mean I'm taking the place, because I don't want people thinking in the wrong way"*[9], this speaks to the more troublesome relation between migrants and the Maltese society. Migrants often are subject to discriminatory or hostile treatment from the Maltese society. Most importantly, Dursa also explains that he had *"to go for it, ask for it multiple times",* indicating that belonging is not something that just happens, rather it is a sense that migrants can achieve by actively striving for it. In the following section I explore how in the lives of my participants in Malta temporal, relational and spatial processes interact when carving out a space of belonging. In each section it is analyzed how precarity and individual agency impact the way migrants are able to strive for a sense of belonging to different social worlds on the island of Malta.

[8] Dursa, 25-02-2022
[9] Idem

Time: Waiting and Uncertainty

Agnes and I met for the first time in Valletta on a sunny Monday morning. Agnes had just finished an early shift at the pharmacy in Valletta. Together with a friend she was waiting for me outside in front of the pharmacy, still wearing her blue work scrubs. When I arrived she said goodbye to her friend and we walked through the small streets of Valletta, all the while discussing her job and studies as well as my research project and film. We went inside a small coffee shop in one of the sides streets leading down to the shimmering blue sea in the Grand Harbour of Valletta. Agnes told me how for now she is trying to combine studying with working irregular hours at the pharmacy, cleaning houses and working at an NGO to make a living and to be able to provide for her three children [also see film 5.07 – 5.32]. When the bartender serves us our coffees, I ask Agnes about her children. "You know, it wasn't easy getting to where I am today", she says. "I was here on my own, but I am a mother. I didn't think going back to Zimbabwe was an option, so I needed to arrange my family to come over. I knocked on so many doors, before finally someone was able to help me." She explains how she was trying to figure out whether there was a lawyer in Malta who could help her to get her younger children to Malta through the process of family reunification. After submitting the request for family reunification, it took months to hear from the Maltese service again. Finally, after almost one-and-a-half years of waiting her youngest two children were allowed to join her in Malta. Together with their older sister who obtained a work visa they arrived in Malta in November 2021. "Finally, I feel I can relax a bit more now. You know, before I was always worrying, I did not feel at ease in Malta. Now I'm happy I'm with my kids. I want to explore the island with them and make sure that they get good education here."[10]

Waiting on decisions

When talking to Agnes and other migrants, it comes to the fore that it often takes a long time before there is any clarity regarding the decision whether they get to stay in Malta legally or not, whether they will receive asylum or a form of subsidiary protection and whether they will be able to bring over their immediate family. Such processes taking up a lot of time is not unique to Malta and in many other European countries this happens as well. Scholars have

[10] Agnes, 24-01-2022

called this a deterring tactic employed by states to discourage migrants from staying in the country (Anderson 2014). Waiting to hear a decision in Malta can take up to months, but there never is a clear date given that they can count on. This leaves migrants in an insecure situation. Waiting every day for months or even years to hear whether an application for asylum or for family reunification has been accepted, *"can affect your mind"*[11] as one participant described it. Similarly, Thomas, a Cameroonian migrant, recounted how he visited other migrants in Mount Carmel, a psychiatric hospital in Malta recently:

"Like last December I was in Mount Carmel, where the people with the mental health situation have been kept. And I realized that it was because they've been traumatized that they are here. I met some of them, being here for years without having any clue on when they are going to leave and when they can even move. And these people, they have families, they are married, they have kids. And just imagine being without your family, without your children, for years. Your kids asking you every day on phone: daddy when are you coming, or mommy when are you coming? And you don't have something because whatever thing you going to tell them you are going to lie to them."[12]

The uncertainty leaves migrants in a state of limbo, where they are hoping for one outcome but remain unsure whether this outcome will be reached. During this period many focus on just surviving day to day. Agnes recounted how the time she spent waiting and fighting for her children to be able to join her, she felt she could not really enjoy life on Malta. However, she did not give up and she ended up working and studying continuously while waiting on the family reunification decision in an attempt to regain control over her life. The precarious situations in which migrants find themselves due the long waiting times obstruct migrants in developing feelings of belonging to social worlds on the island of Malta. After all, they are not sure whether they will be allowed to stay or whether they can bring their family over, which shapes the way migrants form attachments to Malta (Fallov et al. 2013, 469).

[11]Ayla, 02-02-2022
[12]Thomas, 10-02-2022

Photo 4 - Agnes and her daughters

Uncertainty regarding the future

Spending time on the island of Malta is often characterized by uncertainty in the first few months and years, but even after one gets asylum or protection their situation remains insecure. Whereas they often are working and building up a life on the Island they always keep in the back of their minds that their legal status in Malta will need to be renewed after one to three years depending on the kind of protection they received. As Dursa, who has lived in Malta for over eight years, told me in an interview:

"...I learned living with the different people. But on the other hand I don't see my future in Malta. Which is basically because I don't have a sustained documented. (...) I still live with a three years document, which doesn't make sense to me. I have been contributing to the country, I have been fully integrated in the community. I do pay all necessary pay, as a Maltese citizen. It doesn't really make me feel attached."[13]

[13] Dursa, 25-01-2022

The temporality of many migrants' statuses in itself forms a barrier towards developing feelings of belonging towards social worlds in Malta. It shows how it are essentially policy makers and case workers who determine migrants' time on the island of Malta. The contextuality of (potentially) having limited time, obstructs migrants in their agency in carving out a sense of belonging. Dursa continued:

"…because the thing is that I don't have the power to change the system of migration, the system of refugees living in Malta. (…) And I'm ready to accept tomorrow, which is basically to move on or whether I find a way to stay attached to Malta. So either way I'm ready for it."[14]

Like Dursa, several other participants stated to have embraced the insecurity of not-knowing what their lives will look like a few years from now. Still, the waiting on and uncertainty regarding legal decisions have an immense impact on migrants' lives. It illustrates how they live their lives without the promise of stability (Tsing 2015). The temporal dimension of belonging is certainly relevant, as indeed building up a life in a new place takes time and attachments formed to people and place are likely to change over time (Fallov et al. 2013; Ryan 2018). However, to truly understand the role time plays in negotiating a sense of belonging in migrants lives in Malta, the dimension of temporality also needs to be understood as including the temporality of migrant's legal statuses and the way policy makers essential govern or even waist (Anderson 2014) migrants' time. It then comes to the fore that migrants essentially live on policy makers time instead of being in control themselves over the length of their stay, which participants stated, seriously obstructs their ability to form enduring attachments and carve out a space of belonging in Malta. The next section discusses how despite this barrier of having limited time, participants deploy their agency in overcoming precarious situations and can carve out a space of belonging with the help of relationships, organizations and communities.

[14] Dursa, 25-01-2022

People: Relations and Community Building

Thomas and I met at the so-called CommemorAction event in the Senglea Gardens on a Sunday morning. This event was organized by different migrant support organizations in Malta, amongst others Blue Door language school, African Media Association Malta and Spark15. The aim of this event was to remember the many migrants who lost their lives at borders across the world. In the middle of the garden, where the event was held, a long list with names of people who lost their lives at European borders was lied down. From the gardens, we had a view on the Mediterranean sea, which made the realization that this is the same sea where many of these people on the list had lost their lives even more chilling. After the organizer made an introductory speech, she invited Thomas on the stage. He had prepared a poem, which he recited calmly. His words visibly touched the audience and after he finished a long silence fell before the audience applauded his work. A group of young men arrived by bus from one of Malta's open centers. As the Maltese busses rarely drive on time, they missed the opening of the event. When they saw the list with migrants' names they went through the list pointing at names and discussing where these people came from. It was evident that this was a very emotional event for many. There were migrants sharing their experiences at Europe's border as well as Maltese or European people apologizing for their countries' policy at the borders. After a while Thomas and I got to talking about the event and his poem. I was impressed by his knowledge of history and migration, and we decided to exchange numbers, so we could continue talking about this at a later moment.

Photo 5 - CommemorAction

Many migrants, like the men at the CommemorAction, form initial relationships with other migrants when living together in detention or in one of the open centers. Officially, migrants can only be kept in the closed detention centers for a few weeks, but in practice, and especially since the Covid-19 pandemic has slowed processing applications down, many are in the detention centers for a much longer time. They do not know when they can get out of detention and several reports have called out the inhumane living conditions (Council of Europe 2021; Politico.eu 2022). This adds to the situation of precarity as described in the previous section. The open centers are set up by the government as place where migrants who have subsidiary protection or asylum can live until they find another place. The living conditions in these centers are often criticized mainly because of overpopulation and a lack of privacy. However, as Dursa stated: *"At least you have freedom to move and look for something, whether your job or maybe you can study."*[15] [see film 7.32 – 7.37] Informally, these centers become information hubs for finding work in Malta as a migrant, meeting organizations that can offer help and importantly, as places where migrants meet people who are in the same situation as they are. At the Blue Door language school, for example, people sign up for classes together with friends they know from the centers. They check on each other and come together to classes. They go to social activities organized by NGOs together and give each other tips on how to find work and support from organizations. Even if the living conditions in the open centers are not great, different participants stated that the opportunities they found while living in these centers helped them to establish their lives in Malta. In these centers migrants can regain their agency and start carving out a space of belonging by sharing information, socializing and networking with each other.

Maltese population

When confronted with the question whether they also built relationships with the Maltese community, many participants would refer to work. As Thomas told me: *"I know Maltese people at my place of work but it's not like they are friends or family. I don't go to hang out with them and I only speak to them at work.*"[16] One of the reasons they find it hard to make friends with their colleagues or with other Maltese citizen is the unfair treatment they are often exposed to in places of work. Many migrants recounted how white colleagues would be paid more even if they work less. In addition, they experience racism in many different forms,

[15] Dursa, 02-03-2022
[16] Thomas, 08-03-2022

ranging from racist policy and hostile treatment to microaggression, for example through jokes, like Thomas' friend explained how his boss would make condescending jokes about Africa [see film 15.18 – 16.27]. Similarly, when I asked Dursa whether he thinks it's a good thing to speak the Maltese language he answered the following:

"...I do speak Maltese and I find it hard. Not with the communication, but because I feel discriminated just sitting next to them and I understand [ed. What they are saying], so that is the hardest thing for me. Like if I don't understand, I don't care what they're saying. But if I understand and know exactly what they are saying, it kind of makes me hurt. So that is a big point, but on the other hand, like I was saying when I put things on the positive side. I move on with the bad thing and the bad people and I surround myself with the good people."[17]

This causes a severe gap between migrants and the Maltese and points to how a situation of precarity caused by these discriminatory and racists treatment, can also negatively influence whether migrants feel a sense of belonging towards the Maltese society. However, like Dursa, many participants are quick to emphasize that there are many Maltese people who mean good and it can be an active choice to surround oneself with positive people. Jemal, an Eritrean migrant who has lived in Malta for about three years and who like many other young migrants works in a restaurant, explained he has a similar mindset.

"If I work in a kitchen and they don't treat me fairly, they don't give me enough salary or don't allow me free time, I move on to a better place. I'm not your slave. I will find another place where they treat me better. It happened to me in the past, but now I work in a place and my colleagues some are like family to me."[18]

[17] Dursa, 18-01-2022
[18] Jemal, 08-03-2022

Like Jemal and Dursa other participants describe how they actively choose which people to connect with, associate with and invest in. Such choices point to migrant's agency where surrounding oneself with positive minded people in the Maltese society can help migrants to find a place for themselves where they can be themselves and where they can feel respected and accepted. Precarious situations, caused by racist policy, discrimination microaggression, influence the ways participants form attachments to the Maltese society. However, by actively surrounding themselves with positive minded people, they deploy their agency within the room they have for manoeuvre (Anderson & Ruhs 2010, 178)

[19] *Photo 6 – Jemal: This is my colleague. Now I work at a place where people accept me and treat me equal. I became very good friends with them.*

Community

NGOs and community support are two important factors when talking about a carving out a space of belonging for oneself. There are many different NGOs where migrants receive support with practical matters, legal matters and learning the English language. The Blue Door English Language school for example helps people learn English while at the same time assisting them with practical matters. Approaching NGOs helps migrants to build a network

[19] Photograph taken as part of the photography project

of positive minded people and can help them in carving out a space of belonging for themselves. When drawing sociograms with participants the closest social relationships were often built with people that they met through NGOs or communities. As Elias, a young migrant from Eritrea told me:

"Most people that I'm close to have had the similar experiences. I meet many people through the Eritrean community. We share history and we know what it's like to start a new life in Malta." [20]

[21] *Photo 7 - Habtom: This is taken at the Paris Lounge Restaurant, an Eritrean restaurant in Hamrun. We had an Eritrean celebration here with the Eritrean community with Easter, with a lot of people, food and music. After we finished fasting.*

[20] Elias, 24-02-2022
[21] Photograph taken as part of the photography project

There are numerous migrant communities established by migrants themselves. Some are linked to nationalities others are specifically for migrant women or for youth. In such communities people create atmospheres of support and trust. Often, as Elias described, they find support as many have had similar experiences. Thomas, talking about the Cameroonian migrant organization, noted that it's also about creating a platform:

"… to help ourselves, because we have to build a unified platform where we can help ourselves. And looking for opportunities to create jobs, like jobs for immigrants."[22]

Such migrant communities have a double function. Getting welcomed into a community where people know what you have been through and where they are fighting together for their rights, helps to create a safe space of belonging. These feelings of belonging might not be to Malta as such, but rather to these national or international communities (Faist 1999; Staeheli & Nagel 2005). At the same time, with the support of these communities migrants establish and maintain cross-cultural ties to the Maltese society. Spark15, the youth organization established by Dursa amongst others, forms a space with such a double function. During one of the football trainings one of the guys standing along the sideline explained: *"I just enjoy with all my friends and it makes me… don't be depressive."* [film 19.47 – 20.12] The organization offers a safe space for migrants to meet friends, socialize and network and at the same time, as Dursa explained:

"the aim [of these activities] is bringing people together. Helping people how they can… you know, less loneliness, less stress. Find a way how they can make friends or how they can be more active. That's the idea behind it. And on the other hand we try to push and bring the Maltese community as well to see what the other cultures look like. It's just a platform where we bring two people together, who have a different lifestyle, a different culture you know. Bringing people together, you know, understanding each other."[film 18.34 – 19.40]

[22] Thomas, 10-02-2022

The relational dimension of belonging pre-eminently shows how migrant integration and belonging are inherently connected to migrants' agency. Despite situations of precarity, caused by the temporality of legal status in Malta, but also by different forms of discriminatory treatment, migrants find opportunities to deploy their agency. Migrant communities formed around support organizations, like Blue Door English, or established by migrants themselves, like Spark15, form spaces in which participants find opportunities and room for manoeuvre (Anderson & Ruhs 2010). Within this safe space, participants explain, how they make friends, connect with people with similar experiences, who support each other in building up a life in Malta and develop feelings of belonging, not necessarily to Maltese communities, but rather to national or international migrant communities (Faist 1999; Staeheli & Nagel 2005). This demonstrates that belonging indeed exists without being tied to a specific locality, but at the same time remains rooted in Malta (Raffaetà & Duff 2013; Fallov et al. 2013), as Malta forms the backdrop for establishing these migrant communities. Out of the safe space the communities offer, together migrants can deploy their agency and strive to overcome obstacles towards belonging within the larger society (Chun 2011; Bailey 2012; Paret & Gleeson 2016), by bringing people together and working on creating mutual understanding. The next section explores the spatial dimensions of how migrants in Malta negotiate a sense of belonging.

Photo 8 - A few of the players on the Spark 15 football team after a training on Saturday evening.

Place: a Safe Have and Dreams for the Future

Jemal and I are walking alongside a quiet road in Valletta. On our right there are the typical Maltese houses with colorful balconies. On our left lays the Grand Harbour with it's blue shimmering water. A mild spring wind comes in from the sea in front of us. "Because Valletta is just a beautiful place. I like coming here and looking at the sea. When I have time though." Jemal answered when I asked why he wanted to walk around Valletta with me. Jemal participated in the photography project and took the disposable camera with him. We stopped a few times to take a picture, mainly of the sea and the Grand Harbour. During our walk Jemal explains that he comes to Valletta quite often, as he works there: "I love this place and the view, but I don't come here often, usually I just go to work and go home." When we sit down in the shade on a bench in a garden overlooking the sea I ask him whether he thinks he will stay in Malta the coming few years. "To be honest, I have no idea" He tells me laughing. "I am happy to have the subsidiary protection here for now. I feel safe and I can earn money, chill with friends, live my life. I probably won't be able to go back to Eritrea ever, but I can't be sad about this. Going to another country in Europe is difficult too. So maybe the VS. I don't think I will stay here forever, but I can't say for sure"[23]

[24] Photo 9 - Jemal: I like this place in Valletta. You have the view, the sea. I like to walk around this place and just chill.

[23] Jemal, 19-04-2022
[24] Photograph taken as part of the photography project

Malta as a safe haven

Despite the often-precarious life situations migrants face in Malta, because of uncertain situations regarding their legal status and discriminatory treatment, they often state that they are glad to be in Malta and to have received subsidiary protection or asylum. This offers them a safe space for now, in which they get a chance build up a new life, follow education or earn money. However, many of the participants do not necessarily connect or form attachments to specific places on the island. As Agnes explained during a conversation:

"… I'm not that person who goes out. I'm five and a half years in Malta, but I went to a restaurant for the first time last Christmas for lunch with my kids. (…) I didn't even go to the beach, but I'm trying to see it with my kids. Yes, it will be better."[25]

Many migrants are busy working, often combining two or more jobs, and do not find time or energy to explore the island. As such it is not so much the island of Malta itself, to which they feel connected, but rather the safe haven that Malta has become in their life stories. It represents a temporary safe space. As Dursa said in one of our last interviews: *"Don't get me wrong. I am happy to be here and for now, like yes, it is our home."*[26]

Integrating or moving on?

One of the topics that almost always came up when talking about the migration journey was that almost no one intended to end up in Malta. As Moussa, a young Sudanese migrant stated: *"I didn't know about Malta before coming here. We just arrived here, not on purpose, so yes that's how we end up in Malta."*[27] Some arrived accidentally by boat due to the sea currents and the wind. Others, like Agnes [see film 10.51 – 13.00] came to Malta on a temporary visa either for work or study and ended up getting protection or asylum in Malta as well. As most never intended to end up in Malta specifically, they often state that they would like to travel to other countries in the future, although traveling to other European countries can be difficult as Jemal noted in the vignette above. Dursa explained why many younger migrants move on:

"…I find out there is a lot of younger people moving on. For so many different reasons. And why I don't move on? I try to help in my community and helping myself, making sure I

[25] Agnes, 28-01-2022
[26] Dursa, 02-03-2022
[27] Moussa, 04-02-2022

integrate in the community. But when I get all of this challenge, I don't see why do I have to struggle? You know if I move on, with this experience, I can live anywhere, I can fit in anywhere. There is a lot of younger people who want (…) to do something for themselves and want to impact the community, but they find a lot of challenge and have to move on. That's the choice."[28]

The wish to move on to other countries is thus often because they do not find the opportunities they came looking for in Malta. Malta offers a safe space for now, but that does not mean they do not face many challenges in Malta, often feeling discriminated and not accepted by Maltese communities. Like Dursa, more participants, stated that they try to integrate in the community, but still do not feel accepted or welcome. Ada, a migrant from Ghana, noted the following: *"We pay taxes, we do our best to integrate, but it doesn't make sense if they continue to treat us as less. That's why I don't feel attached to the Maltese."*[29] Ada followed the recently set up Maltese integration program, titled 'I belong' in an effort to become more accepted in Malta. She explained:

"You are supposed to do the Maltese course as part of the process of getting our documents and all those things. But we did it and it's a different story, they [ed. Policy makers] are just using us for money and taxes. They don't see migrants' worth. I did the stage one [of the integration program] and they are telling me come and do stage two but I don't see myself coming and do stage two."[30]

Like Ada, many migrants are discouraged when they notice their integration efforts do not necessarily pay off. Whereas the title of the official integration program, 'I belong', suggests that if one follows this program, one will develop a sense of belonging to Malta, migrant experiences show that just following this program is not sufficient. The challenges that they face in the broader society, regarding racist policy and discriminatory treatment continue to exist. It would be beyond the scope of this article to assess the full impact of this integration program and what is more, only a limited number of migrants I met attempted to follow this program, as the NGOs and migrants still face uncoordinated action regarding the program. However, it does show that integration efforts indeed need to be reciprocal (Ager & Strang

[28] Dursa, 26-01-2022
[29] Ada, 04-02-2022
[30] Ada, 04-02-2022

2008; Huizinga & van Hooven 2018; Paunova & Blasco 2021), which migrants not always experience to be the case in Malta. As a result, especially young migrants, like Jemal in the vignette, decide that they might just as well try their luck in another country. They often state they have the experience of what it is like to start anew in a foreign country and like Dursa says, this gives them the confidence that they can build up a life again in any country. Making the choice to move on to other countries can thus be because of a lack of feelings of belonging to Malta as a place specifically. At the same time, it is an example of how migrants deploy their agency in continuing to fight for a space to belong (Wille 2011; Mainwaring 2016). How migrants negotiate a sense of belonging then is indeed not bound to place and transcends national borders (Wright 2015). Rather, migrants negotiate and search for a sense of belonging by looking for a place where they can feel safe, where they are respected and where they feel home, whether in Malta or someplace else.

[31]*Photo 10 - Habtom: This is one of the places in Malta close to my home where we hang out sometimes. Together with my friends we were taking pictures here.*

[31] Photograph taken as part of the photography project

Belonging, Integration and Agency

A sense of belonging, as the feeling of being comfortable within certain places, situations, or groups, might indeed be developed within mutual or reciprocal integration (Ager & Strang 2008; Huizinga & van Hooven 2018; Paunova & Blasco 2021). However, in this research, through hanging out, doing interviews and working on film and photography projects with participants, it became evident that developing a sense of belonging is not just a process that takes place in integration or that is the desired outcome of integration. Rather, carving out a space of belonging needs to be understood as a process migrants actively engage in, by deploying their agency within the room they have for manoeuvre. This is not to state that belonging is not of relevance to integration processes, as when integration efforts are reciprocal, a sense of belonging might indeed be fostered to migrants' new country. However, when studying how migrants in Malta themselves negotiate a sense of belonging in a new place, it comes to the fore that a sense of belonging is mainly negotiated within migrant communities formed around support organizations and NGOs.

The different dimensions of belonging show how negotiating a sense of belonging is a dynamic and fluid process. The temporality of migrants' legal statuses creates a precarious living situation in which migrants essentially live on policy makers time. The waiting and uncertainty obstruct developing a sense of belonging. Contrarily, with the help of support organizations and migrant communities, like Blue Door English, Spark15 or national communities, migrants are enabled to find 'safe spaces of home' (hook 1990; Bailey 2012) that serve as a shelter against vulnerability caused by racist policy and a hostile social climate created by some Maltese communities (Gonzales et al. 2020). Out of such safe spaces facilitated by collective efforts, migrants fight for a space to belong within society at large (Chun 2011; Bailey 2012; Paret & Gleeson 2016), by bringing migrants and Maltese citizens together and working on creating mutual understanding. Authors have argued that belonging is not necessarily tied to one specific locality (Raffaetà & Duff 2013; Fallov et al. 2013) as is indeed the case with many migrants in Malta, who are not necessarily attached to Malta as a place, but rather appreciate Malta as the safe haven and opportunities it offers them. As a result of the struggles regarding racists policy and discriminatory treatment, but also when integration efforts do not seem to pay off, several participants stated that they would like to move on to a different country if they could, in order to continue their journey and try their luck elsewhere. Whereas for the migrants who I worked with in this research this are still ideas and dreams for the future, taking such decisions or keeping these options open, shows

how migrants continue to rely on their own agency to find a space where they can belong within society. Together the three dimensions of belonging give a better understanding of how belonging is experiences and searched for by migrants. Uncertainty and limited time can obstruct migrants' attachments to Malta as a place and influences the way migrants form relational attachments (Fallov et al. 2013; Huizinga & van Hoven 2018; Ryan 2018). Relational connections made to other migrants or other positive minded people positively impact the development of a sense of belonging, whereas encountering racist treatment from other people has a negative influence on the amount time one wants to spend on Malta and the connections made to Malta as a place. Lastly, when migrants dream of traveling further to other places or when they do not really feel connected to Malta as a place, this influences how one experiences time and relationships build to communities on the island. The different dimensions are interconnected and influence each other. When within the spatial and temporal dimensions migrants do not always feel they have a lot of room for manoeuvre, to deploy their agency and build meaningful connections, within the relational dimension people are able to regain their agency and fight back against oppression and overcome precarious situations. Individual and collective action of migrants, support organizations and migrant communities in carving out a space of belonging within the Maltese society helps migrants on the individual level to overcome precarious situations, feel safe in a certain space and feel supported in building up their lives (hook 1990; Bailey 2012; Paret & Gleeson 2016; Gonzales et al. 2020). In fact, the effects of deploying agency in carving out a space of belonging do not stop here. Individually and collectively, migrants have the potential to resist power that other have over them and that causes precarity in migrants' lives (Frank 2006). Such resistance can be seen as a form of micro-politics, where migrants strive for positive visibility within society, for equal treatment and for a right to belong. Migrants, empowered as grassroots leaders, can bring out actual change in society on a local, national and international level. By not giving up when facing though situations with long waiting times, uncertainty and a hostile social environment and striving for acceptance in society, migrants can challenge and resist exclusionary policies and politics (Chun 2011). Migrant communities like Spark15 and support organizations like Blue Door English are "challenging the invisibility of asylum seekers' and refugees' lives and expanding the notion of politics to embrace a wider notion of community politics with solidarity." (Bailey 2012, 864). As such migrants are not only fighting for a space to belong for themselves, but also potentially restructuring socio-political contours locally as well as across global regions (Rodriguez 1996, 27).

Conclusion

This research aims to explore how migrants themselves negotiate a sense of belonging through temporal, relational and spatial dimensions in the process of building up a life on the island of Malta. Although there are many factors that obstruct carving out a space of belonging, like uncertainty regarding legal status, discriminatory treatment, and an uncoordinated approach regarding integration programs, migrants find different ways to fight for a space to belong. Especially, through deploying agency, even if this is against the backdrop of precarious life situations, migrants can carve out spaces of belonging, for example through surrounding oneself with positive minded people, supporting communities or by deciding to travel on to other places in search for a space to belong in the world. Throughout this project it comes to the fore that in carving out a sense of belonging migrants show their resilience, strength and determination in claiming a right to belong in their current country, but also in the world at large.

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