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BITTER ORANGES. AFRICAN MIGRANT WORKERS IN CALABRIA

ABSTRACT

The working conditions of African labourers in Calabria are characterized by severe precariousness, exploitation and poor remuneration, which lead to deplorable living conditions. Thousands of migrant workers live in unheated tent camps and makeshift barracks.

The catastrophic living and working conditions of orange pickers in Calabria are widely unknown to the general public. The Bitter Oranges project combines documentary photography, self-representation and short captions explaining the economic and political conditions that provide a framework to the visual ethnographic material. The goal of the visual ethnographic exhibition is to show the widely ignored working and living conditions of African migrants in Southern Italy to a broad public all over Europe. The exhibition responds to one of the urgent needs migrants in Calabria's camps expressed: to overcome the structural and epistemological violence of their hidden and unseen exploitation. The participatory approach of this visual anthropological study further aims to render "voicing" possible: giving the people the means to photographically document their destitute everyday living conditions. Finally, this visual anthropological study aims to empower people who are ostracized and forced to live at the margins of European society by offering the opportunity to represent themselves and gain a public platform. This exhibition contributes to a decolonized gaze, putting a focus on people's agency despite the slave-like conditions that are imposed on them structurally.

KEYWORDS

African migrants, refugees, participatory action research (PAR), Photovoice, precariousness, deprivation, inequality, postcolonial perspective, visual ethnography

THE AUTHORS

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CONTEXT OF THE PROJECT

The Bitter Oranges project started in 2012, and was funded by the Luxembourg Ministry of Culture Higher Education and Research, the Luxembourg National Research Fund as well as the University of Innsbruck. It was a continuation from past research projects by the researchers on migration, precariousness and the European border regime (Reckinger 2013, Reiners 2010). The Bitter Oranges project addresses some desiderata in recent sociological and anthropological research about boat migration to Southern Italy by ethnographically following the migrants after they are brought from Lampedusa to the Italian mainland, and by trying to understand how the control of migration movements on national and EU levels are intertwined with precarious labour markets.

The exhibition, "Bitter Oranges. African Migrant Workers in Calabria," was first launched on December 2nd, 2014 at Abbaye Neumunster Cultural Centre, Luxembourg. It has since been shown in different cities in Europe and North America.

BITTER ORANGES

Thousands of immigrants arrive by boat to Italy every year, widely overstressing the access to housing facilities and state support. More and more immigrants, including asylum seekers as well as refugees, are left to their own devices. To survive, they have no other choice than to seek seasonal day-to-day labour on fruit and vegetable plantations in Southern Italy. The declining sale prices for oranges in the 1990s forced Calabrian small-scale farmers to increasingly employ migrant seasonal workers from Eastern Europe on lower wages in order to remain competitive. A new reservoir of even cheaper labour became available with the increasing number of boat migrants from Africa a decade later. In recent times, the situation has become more critical with the heavy influx of refugees. With more nation states closing their borders as the Schengen area falls apart, it has become impossible for many migrants to leave Italy.

African harvest workers are hired on a daily basis without legal contracts. On average, a daily wage for 12 - 14 hours of work amounts to 25 euro. Competition is intense and most African harvest workers only find work a few days a month, resulting in monthly incomes ranging from 100 to 300 euro.

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Photo 01 (Orange picker) Carole Reckinger

Most African harvest workers live in emergency shelters built outside of town in a remote industrial area. This distance from the heart of the city was intentional. After an uprising in 2010, when African migrants protested against exploitation and recurrent assaults by local youth, the workers were forced out of town and the abandoned factories where migrants lived were demolished. Many workers returned shortly afterward, as no alternative harvest work was available during the winter season. Italian civil defence provided tents for a maximum of 500 people, but neither electricity nor any organisational or administrative institutional structure was provided.

Authorities demolished the tent camp citing hygienic reasons in the summer of 2013, but the ragged tents were never disposed of. A new tent camp was built only 200 meters away. Presently, access to water is only available in four sanitary containers. These are not connected to a sewage system, and a tank truck empties the septic tank once a week. As the camp is not connected to the power grid, the residents have tapped into the street lighting for electricity.



Photo 02 (blue tents) Carole Reckinger

The capacity of the camp is by far insufficient to accommodate around 2000 workers during the harvest season. A sprawling slum area built out of plastic sheets and other available material develops around the camp city. The hygienic conditions are disastrous.



Photo 03 (slum) Carole Reckinger

During the 2015/2016 winter season, the camp spread out even further when several hundred additional African migrants joined the camp in hope for work. For many migrants, the orange harvest is a last resource for migrants that have not managed to find decent work anywhere else in Italy. A new slum has developed a few hundred meters further in and around an abandoned industrial building. Those who cannot afford to migrate within Italy at the end of the harvest season to find other seasonal work remain during the hot summer months. With no available jobs, many of them suffer from hunger and malnutrition.



Photo 4 – (tents summer) Carole Reckinger

How can people whose voice is continuously excluded from public discourse make themselves heard? This concern also challenges ethnological methodology: how can ethnographers discuss the grievances of participants without adopting the role of a spokesperson, thus again silencing the voices of the people affected? The participatory approach of the photographic project takes this concern into account. Originally conceived as a text-only project, the researchers quickly understood that the flagrant humiliation of illegalized migrants in Calabria could not be documented nor analysed and conveyed to the scientific community and the general public through texts alone. Therefore, they teamed up with photographer Carole Reckinger who had a long experience with working with deprived populations. To raise Europeans' awareness of these hidden realities, they decided that the research results should also be made available outside academia through a photo exhibition combining ethnographic narratives and interview passages as well as photos and video material. We reflected on the power relationship of three privileged white Europeans documenting the social violence inflicted upon hundreds of black males by European bureaucracy and white Europeans inside Europe, in light of the critical perspectives of postcolonial, feminist and critical whiteness studies. Recognizing migrants' urgent desire to speak out for themselves, the research team developed a more participatory way of conducting empirical research. The researchers handed digital photographic cameras to migrant men who asked to participate in the project, wanting to document their daily lives. The photographers wanted to capture migrants' perspectives for the outside world and to document voices of the socially disenfranchised. Some men also contributed pictures and video recordings using their own mobile phones. Moreover, the cameras facilitated administrative needs, e.g. taking passport pictures, and could in turn be used as a resource to the community. In total, five men participated in documenting their living conditions. As some migrants wished to stay anonymous, the team collectively decided to use only the first letter of each name in photo credits. The exhibition combines documentary photography, self-representation and short captions explaining the economic and political conditions that provide a framework to the visual ethnographic material. The goal of the visual ethnographic exhibition is to show the widely ignored working and living conditions of African migrants in Southern Italy to a broad public all over Europe, while responding to one of the urgent needs people expressed: to overcome the structural and epistemological violence of their hidden and unseen exploitation. Taking pictures and accusing the structural living conditions publicly is thus a strategy of agency that gives people back their role as social and political subjects that is structurally refused to them.



Photo 5 F.



Photo 6 S.



Photo 7 I.



Photo 8 Carole Reckinger

R. has one of the few fridges in the tent city and sells some typical African ingredients besides canned food and drinks. To buy the former, she regularly takes a train to Naples, 400 km to the north.



Photo 9 I.

The mobile phone is an indispensable possession. It serves as a connection to the family, a way to share information with each other, and as a replacement for a residential address. The authorities notify the migrants by phone if they need to pick up or renew their documents. Often, family members who depend on the support of the migrants call several times a day asking them to send money.



Photo 10 I.

Many of the workers' pictures show people putting their skills and resources to work as a means of earning a supplementary income, and running micro-businesses such as a bicycle repair workshop, offering services as a barber or selling buckets of hot water heated over an open fire. The prices vary according to what the customer is able to pay. The shared conditions of deprivation thus create an economic coping structure among the inhabitants of the tent city that relies on both solidarity and mutual interdependence.



Photo 11 M.

Most of the men had fled persecution or poverty by immigrating to economically well-off North African countries, which offered job opportunities and decent housing conditions. As foreign workers, they could earn a living that allowed them to send remittances for their relatives. Violent crises and civil wars that followed the Arab Spring forced many sub-Saharan migrants re-emigrate to Europe.



Photo 12 F.

A number of pictures by the camp inhabitants focus on the most urgent aspect of poverty: the scarcity of food and the problems of food conservation and health-threatening conditions. F., the author of the picture, belonged to the economic elite of his country of origin before his family was killed in a political overthrow.