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# Visual and Oral Narratives of Place and Belonging during Brexit

Maria Abranches and Ulrike G. Theuerkauf 

Using visual and oral approaches, this article presents new findings on the social construction of place and belonging in the aftermath of the UK's Brexit Referendum. Photographs by our British and non-British participants depict everyday life in a seaside town, with rare references to political aspects of migration. In their oral narratives, by contrast, the same participants emphasize the contested nature of belonging, which they associate with Brexit. We argue that the production of distinctly non-contentious photos is a strategy to deal with political uncertainty, reaffirm individuals' sense of place and belonging, and transform experiences of disruption into hope.

## TAKE A PHOTO!

"Can you take a photo of myself standing next to my photo?" asked Elisabete, proud of the image she had captured of her cat ([Figure 1](#)), on display in the Lady Paine's Bedchamber of the Strangers' Hall Museum in Norwich during Refugee Week 2017. This was exactly one year after the Brexit Referendum that had taken place on 23 June 2016. In the Walnut Room, another photo showed her with a group of work colleagues in a pub, cheering to celebrate a birthday ([Figure 2](#)).

"We all come from different countries in Europe," she said, smiling, when describing the latter photo. "We are Italian, Portuguese, English ..." This intention of materializing her sense of place and belonging through images of peaceful coexistence is also to be seen in her photographs of international flags

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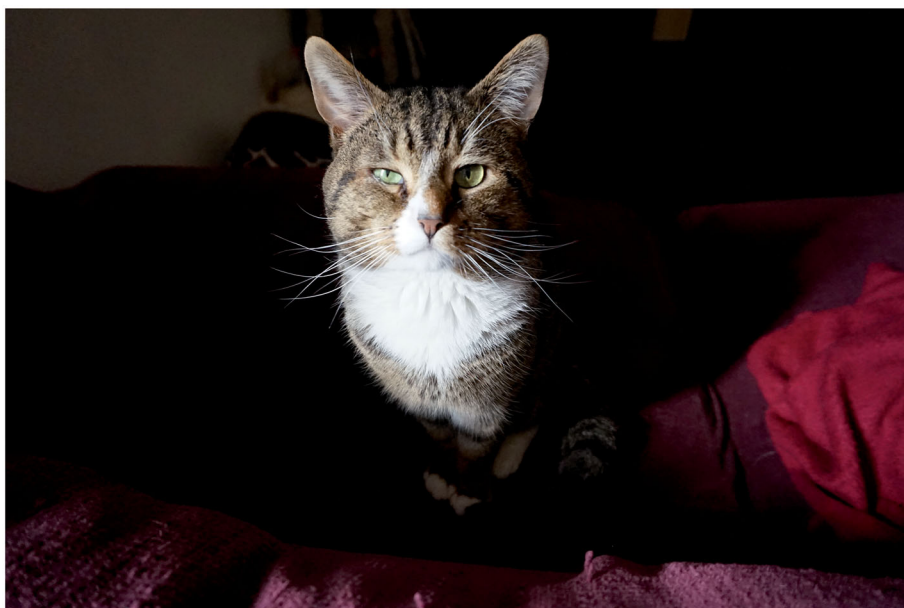


Figure 1 Elisabete's cat. (Photo © Elisabete Bigodinho)

(Figure 3) and international businesses (Figure 4)—which Elisabete described as representing “cultural and economic complicity.”

Elisabete's photos, however, stand in contrast to the stories of xenophobic encounters that she narrated in her interviews and conversations with us. These stories include experiences of cultural violence<sup>1</sup> as a Portuguese migrant in Great Yarmouth since 2012, expressed in statements such as “if you can't speak English, you shouldn't be here,” “you can't do your work properly, you should go back,” or “there are too many foreigners here,” comments that were increasingly heard, according to Elisabete, in the period just before and after the Brexit Referendum.

Her photographs were taken as part of a research project that had begun in early 2017 and was designed in explicit response to the results of the 2016 Brexit Referendum. The project sought to uncover how individuals with or without an international migration background make sense of their everyday intercommunity relations in the seaside borough of Great Yarmouth, a place that—with 71.5 percent of voters choosing to leave the European Union and 28.5 percent choosing to remain—had the 5th highest proportion of “Leave” supporters in all counting areas of the UK (BBC 2016).

The findings discussed here are based on the visual and oral narratives of five research participants, all living in the Borough of Great Yarmouth in 2017, but with different migration backgrounds. In an attempt to overcome methodological nationalism (Bhambra 2017), we intentionally included British and non-British citizens in our research project, and asked them to engage in



Figure 2 Birthday celebration. (Photo © Elisabete Bigodinho)



Figure 3 Amusement park. (Photo © Elisabete Bigodinho)

semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, production of photographic images, and related workshops. Two British and three non-British participants agreed to contribute to the participatory photography component of our research, and together they produced over 100 images in early 2017. Of these, 24 images were selected by participants in collaboration with the researchers, and then exhibited at three different occasions.<sup>2</sup> In this article, we will focus on 17 of these 24 images, to analyze how they produce meaning in addition to the spoken word that was shared with us in informal conversations and interviews (Pink 2007; Leon-Quijano 2019).

The brief we gave the participants in a first participatory photography workshop was to capture images of intercommunity relationships in the aftermath of the Brexit Referendum. The political aspects of migration, however, and the ways in which these had been instrumentalized during the Brexit campaign (Durrheim et al. 2018; Abbas 2019), hardly feature in the photos of either our British or non-British participants. Rather, they all took images for public exhibition that are distinctly non-contentious and—instead of constructing polemic or racialized boundaries between social groups (Mellinger and Beaulieu 1997)—convey mundane messages about everyday life. Although places and landscapes that express ideas of the past feature prominently in the photos of our British participants, allusions to the future are central to most images by both British and non-British individuals, highlighting the temporal as well as material links between visual imagery, sense of place and belonging (Tilley 1994; Bender 2002; Howes 2004; Massey 2005; Moore 2011).

In both past and future-oriented materializations of place, a predominant concept in our participants' visual narratives—which they explicitly mentioned during the workshops and in the run-up to the first exhibition—is that of "hope." Participants mentioned hope when they described the photos they had taken of their everyday dwelling-places and explained how they associate these places with a sense of stability and comfort that they hoped would overcome the current experience of uncertainty and anxiety. As an analytical concept hope encompasses both temporal and spatial possibilities, and contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between individuals' aspirations and structural opportunities as well as constraints (Kleist and Jansen 2016). Having recently gained more attention in migration studies, hope reflects an increasing sense of unpredictability and crisis in the world today (*ibid.*). As we will demonstrate, is experienced not only by migrants but also by non-migrants as a way to mediate the current uncertainty of their lives. Rather than fear and doubt, hope embodies potentiality and anticipation for the future and, despite being embedded in uncertainty, is grounded in practice. Hope enables meaning-making by helping people make sense of their lives (Kleist 2017) and, consequently, create new ways of being (Moore 2011).

Yet the non-contentious and hopeful visual narratives presented here stand in contrast to the research participants' oral narratives. In interviews and informal conversations, they all emphasized the contested nature of belonging and how they experienced political tensions in their place of residence, many of which they associated with the Brexit process. We argue that the differences



between the oral and visual narratives of our research participants are not so much a contradiction in how people experience, idealize and envision diversity in their place of residence. Nor is it just a question of what participants choose to express towards a larger, anonymous audience as opposed to the more intimate settings of talking with researchers one-on-one. Rather, by understanding meaning, representation and experience as similar ways to construct reality, we identify these differences as part of people's everyday strategies to deal with political uncertainty in the aftermath of the Brexit Referendum, to reaffirm their sense of place and belonging, and to transform experiences of disruption into hope.

## THE BOROUGH OF GREAT YARMOUTH

The Borough of Great Yarmouth is located on the east coast of Norfolk (U.K.), and had a population of about 98,700 in 2017 (Great Yarmouth Borough Council 2019). It includes, in addition to 21 rural parishes, the seaside towns of Gorleston-on-Sea and Great Yarmouth, in the latter of which all of the participant-led photographs were taken.

Socio-economic inequalities and deprivation are an acute concern in this borough, as it was (and continues to be) one of the 20 percent of most deprived districts in England at the time of our research (Public Health England 2017, 2018). This is reflected in a range of life expectancy, health and education indicators that have been significantly worse in Great Yarmouth than the English average in recent years, including *inter alia* male life expectancy at birth, suicide rates, and GCSEs achieved at school (Public Health England 2018; Great Yarmouth Borough Council 2019).

According to the most up-to-date data available (Great Yarmouth Borough Council 2019), the level of ethnic diversity in the Borough of Great Yarmouth has been lower between 2001 and 2011 than the east of England and England as a whole, even though its ethnic minority population has increased from 1.4 percent in 2001 to 3.2 percent in 2011 (*ibid.*). White Britons have remained the largest group in the borough, with nearly 93 percent of the population in 2011, followed by the next largest group of "Other White" with 4 percent. According to official documents by the Great Yarmouth Borough Council (2019), most migrants now living in Great Yarmouth are from Portugal, Poland and Lithuania (although precise numbers are difficult to obtain).

In the immediate aftermath of the Brexit Referendum, as further details about the referendum result were being disclosed, Great Yarmouth was quickly identified as one of the biggest support sites for the "Leave" vote. With 71.5 percent of voters in the borough choosing to leave the E.U. (Barr 2016; BBC 2016), it earned the informal title of "Norfolk's Brexit capital" (Hannant 2018, n.p.).

While multiple studies have invoked the label of Brexit as a "critical juncture" for the U.K.'s political development (Baldini, Bressanelli and Massetti 2018; Jennings and Lodge 2019; Ranta and Nancheva 2019; Zappettini and Krzyżanowski 2019), we are less interested in its macro-level causes or consequences (Dennison and Geddes 2018; Gamble 2018). Rather, we are more concerned

with its relevance as a period marker of political, social and economic uncertainty for people residing in a strongly Leave-supporting site. Put differently, Brexit matters as the context of our research, as it represents a moment of heightened uncertainty about future political, social and economic developments, in which previous "rules of the game" have become unsettled; radical or at least significant changes are possible; and the role of agency and contingency have taken on heightened relevance for the institutional paths that lie ahead (Hogan 2006; Capoccia 2015; Peters 2019). This heightened uncertainty is far-reaching and profound, as it affects the U.K.'s economic system, model of political institutions, immigration policies, geopolitical standing, demographic makeup and national identities (Baldini, Bressanelli and Massetti 2018; Gamble 2018; Lavery, McDaniel and Schmid, 2018; Jennings and Lodge 2019; Kelly and Pearce 2019; McCarthy 2019; Miller 2019; Ranta and Nancheva 2019; Tyrrell et al. 2019).

It is against this background of heightened uncertainty in multiple dimensions that the visual and oral narratives of our participants unfolded. The photos they took are part of "the strategic management of ... [their] identity" (Schroeder 2003, 87), and—while still being open to interpretation by those who view them—reflect what the photographers seek to tell us of a particular moment (here, the aftermath of the Brexit Referendum) as well as their own presence and identity within that moment (*ibid.*). In this manner, our research contributes both to the emerging academic debate on Brexit and belonging (Botterill and Hancock 2019; Rzepnikowska 2019; Tyrrell et al. 2019), and to longer-standing scholarship on place and belonging as an emotional attachment that is materialized in everyday practices and may become politicized when threatened (Gilmartin 2008; Yuval-Davis 2011).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The visual and oral narratives on which this article is based were shared with us by three first-generation migrant and two non-migrant residents of Great Yarmouth in 2017. These narratives were part of a broader research project that sought to uncover how individuals with or without an international migration background make sense of their everyday intercommunity relations, following the Brexit Referendum in a strongly Leave-supporting site. The project team included British and non-British researchers, and used an intensive primary data-gathering strategy consisting of semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and participatory photography. The bulk of primary data was collated from early to late 2017, although informal conversations with some of the research participants continue to this day. The project's different components involved a total of 15 research participants and dealt with topics such as people's experiences or perceptions of migration, satisfaction with life in Great Yarmouth, their views on the local and national economy, and their expectations for the future following the Brexit Referendum.

From the 15 research participants, five—two British and three non-British residents of Great Yarmouth—agreed to join the participatory photography component of our project, with a brief to capture "relationships between

different communities” in the borough. The production of photos by our research participants during Spring of 2017 was a key part of our data collection strategy, as we wanted to go beyond oral data on belonging during the Brexit context—as used by Lulle, Moroşanu, and King (2018), McCarthy (2019), Ranta and Nancheva (2019) or Gawlewicz and Sotkasiira (2020). Instead, we were looking to combine oral with visual narratives so as to gain a deeper understanding of people’s everyday aesthetic and sensorial experiences through different forms of expressing themselves (Giritli-Nygren and Schmauch 2012; Lombard 2013; Leddy-Owen 2014; Alam, McGregor and Houston 2018).

The photographs created are an invaluable data source alongside our interviews and informal conversations, as they capture not just an image but the photographers’ underlying meaning and the context under which the image has been produced (Laloti 2005; Leon-Quijano 2019). By prioritizing these images and their explanations, as well as the participants’ reflection on the experience of producing them, we took a sensory and situated approach to visual practice (Drew and Guillemin 2014). This approach served to elicit information on the social construction of group and individual identities, including the power relations between them, in a more rounded way than oral narratives alone (Laloti 2005; Leon-Quijano 2019).

We informed research participants, from the start of the project, that a selection of their photos was to be exhibited at Strangers’ Hall Museum in nearby Norwich (as part of Refugee Week 2017), and that we were hoping for additional exhibitions at the Time and Tide Museum in Great Yarmouth (which were confirmed later, and took place during Autumn and Winter of 2017). Aware that each museum visitor will have her own knowledge, expectation and interpretation of the images on display and the subject matter that underpins them (Becker 2015), the aim of the museum exhibition was to incentivize research participants to share their narratives. Put differently, it was meant to create an explicit “transmission mechanism” (Marschall 2010, 78) for research participants to express their points of view to—and have them publicly acknowledged by—a broader audience.

We explained the purpose of the participatory photography component and the aims of the research project as a whole to our participants multiple times in writing and speaking. This was done to address ethical considerations and to ensure that our research participants understood how their photographs would be used and what that would imply (Lombard 2013).<sup>3</sup> The participants willingly entered the public domain as they had their (not anonymized) photos exhibited at public events, and they agreed to the use of their real names in this article: Ana, Bob, Elisabete, Patrice and Sheena.

Ana, Elisabete and Patrice were all migrants to the U.K. under the age of 40 in 2017. Ana is a Portuguese woman of Cape Verdean descent, who taught Zumba and ran an African-Portuguese youth dance group at the time of our research project. She had then been living in the U.K. for 14 years, five of which were in Great Yarmouth. Elisabete is Portuguese and had lived in Great Yarmouth for five years by 2017, where she worked as a croupier. Patrice is a



Polish photographer and make-up artist who had lived in Great Yarmouth for 10 years at the time of our study. Sheena and Bob are British nationals (both over the age of 40 in 2017), who volunteered as reminiscence trainers for people with dementia.

Our methodological approach allowed us to build close relationships with these participants, and to get greater insights into their everyday experiences and emotions (Lombard 2013; Alam, McGregor and Houston 2018; Miller 2019). By making sure that all participants interacted with both the British and non-British researchers on our team at different stages of the project, we sought to minimize the potentially confounding effects of researchers' national identities.

At the same time, it is important to reflect on ways in which our own and our research participants' positionality may have influenced the research. Their willingness to participate in the photography component of our project itself could indicate that our participants already were reflective observers of their own realities and interested in the visual expression of meaning. Patrice, for example, had professional photography experience and used technical terminology on light, color, brightness and contrast to illustrate her sense of place through the images she produced. Similarly, Bob's and Sheena's age and occupation as reminiscence trainers may have influenced their references to longing and the past in their photos, interview and informal conversations. Ana's identity as a Black migrant featured prominently in her visual and oral narratives. However, precisely because images are of a constructed nature based on experience, memories and sensations (Lombard 2013), these issues of positionality are not so much limitations in our research as they are a necessary part of using photographs to convey people's intimate sense of self and place (Giritli-Nygren and Schmauch 2012; Leddy-Owen 2014). Following the debate within critical visual methods that sees participatory photography as a means to understand both the everyday experiences of research participants and the meanings associated with certain images (Emmison 2004; Yates 2010), our methodological choice to engage with a small but diverse set of research participants offers a unique opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the social construction of belonging in the aftermath of the Brexit Referendum.

From the first moment of contact, participants were informed of the project's intention to capture everyday interactions between migrant and non-migrant communities following the Brexit Referendum. In order to minimize bias resulting from a potential desire by participants to satisfy this intention by representing such relationships in a certain manner, we adopted various techniques to establish rapport and reflect on our research practice. This included regular debriefing sessions with the participants, and discussions amongst the researchers on how to reduce social desirability tendencies (Bergen and Labonté 2019). The fact that the team included both male and female researchers, and that these people in turn came from different national backgrounds (British, Portuguese, Swiss and German), was meant to limit the risk of changed or underplayed sentiments about migration and belonging. It also was intended to create a framework of trust that allowed participants to share

their personal experience with different team members from whom they expected less risk of social judgements. Despite the inevitable influence of other aspects of our positionality (such as age or perceived socio-economic status), we developed these strategies as an attempt to minimize what we considered the most salient sources of potential bias. The effectiveness of these strategies is illustrated in participants' visual narratives which center on issues of comfort, stability and connectedness. These issues were chosen by participants themselves as being what they considered most important in their everyday experiences and aspirations, and they stand in contrast to the political aspects of migration that the research team mentioned in the project outline. This illustrates the way social differentials were minimized by giving participants decision power over how to represent their narratives.

To guide our visual analysis we drew on the interpretive engagement framework (Drew and Guillemin 2014). This framework deals with the analytical complexities of qualitative visual research by relying on a three-stage process of interpretation, one that involves five key elements: the researcher, the participant, the image, the context of its production, and the audiences (*ibid.*). The first stage of this process, participant engagement, took place during two photography workshops and five follow-up interviews. In the first workshop participants were formally introduced to each other and to members of the research team, and given technical guidance on how to use the project cameras as well as some general recommendations on aesthetic composition (such as the rule of thirds). Following a brief description of the research project, we then outlined the project's underlying aims and objectives in more detail, culminating in the brief for research participants to capture images relating to intercommunity relations. Discussions during the workshop and guidance in the project's consent form intentionally left the precise interpretation of intercommunity relations up to each individual participant. In the second photography workshop, as well as during follow-up interviews, we recorded participants' reflections on their images and on the process and context of image production.

The second and third stage of our interpretive engagement framework analysis involved greater input from the researchers. This complemented the first (participant-focused) stage and was grounded in a commitment to collaborative methods in which researchers and research participants consciously work together to produce knowledge (Becker 2015). In the second stage, we established themes and connections between themes, based on the images generated by participants and further information from our discussions in the photography workshops as well as in the run-up to the first exhibition. In the third stage, we embedded the interpretation of these themes within the academic debate on the social construction of place and belonging. This was a dynamic analytical process, where participant interpretation and researchers' theoretical frameworks were continuously revisited and reworked. As a result, we changed the focus of our analysis from intercommunity relations—the initial guidance given in the first photography workshop—to sense of place and belonging, since our participants seemed more preoccupied with their embodied, emotional and material experiences of living in Great Yarmouth.

Altogether, the participants submitted over a hundred photos for consideration, 24 of which were showcased in three different museum exhibitions during 2017. As it was the first event at which the photographs were publicly displayed, we will focus here on the “We Are All Strangers” exhibition at Strangers’ Hall Museum in Norwich on 23 June 2017, co-organized by museum representatives and the research team as part of Refugee Week 2017. The selection of images for display took place mostly during the first stage of our interpretive engagement framework analysis, though it was finalized in the second and third stages. Following the production of photos, participants were asked to identify their preferred images and justify their choices. Although our intention was to delegate power and authority to participants, their engagement at this stage of the process varied, with most highlighting their eight to ten favorite photos but leaving it up to the researchers to choose the final four to six for exhibition. Our visual analysis accompanied this phased selection process, which means that themes were also identified in stages and revisited several times.

The exhibition was constructed around three themes that emerged from the analysis of participants’ favorite photographs: “Community and Diversity,” “Relationships and Everyday Encounters,” and “Discovering Places.” Researchers and the museum curator organized the exhibition space based on these themes, which in turn will have influenced the way in which visitors understood and interpreted the images displayed (Kratz 2002). It is important to acknowledge that photographs as data are the product of a network of uneven relations and negotiations between participants, researchers and audiences (*ibid.*; Drew and Guillemin 2014). However, while the analytical process was researcher-based and the exhibition was organized collaboratively between researchers and the museum curator, we took care to prioritize the participants’ choice of images rather than the expectations that museum visitors and exhibition organizers (including ourselves as researchers) could have on what should be seen and how it should be presented (Kratz 2002). To reduce the risk of researchers’ intention biasing the exhibition experience, we also supplemented the display of participant-generated images with guided tours, a written questionnaire to gather audience feedback, and three conversational sessions between visitors, research participants, researchers, practitioners and the museum curator. Although we recognize the role of audiences’ interpretation of images in the production of knowledge, it is not discussed further here. This is because our analytical focus lies instead on the experience of our participants, and how they used visual and oral narratives to express their sense of belonging and place.

#### PARTICIPATORY PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE AESTHETICS OF PLACE AND BELONGING

Place, landscape and everyday activities were the main focus of our participants’ photographs. Most images portrayed a quotidian experience of place that, while mundane, carried important meaning (Meneses and Frohlick 2019).

In the context of migration, meanings and experiences of place—which include immediate sensations and emotions—are important for an understanding of belonging, as they help to explore practices and strategies of survival and existence that not only involve positive feelings, but also barriers, borders and exclusions (Yuval-Davis 2011). Moving beyond nationalist politics of belonging (*ibid.*), our study illustrates how both migrants and non-migrants have experienced changes that they associate with the Brexit process, and how these changes have affected their own experiences of security, threat and anxiety in the places in which they dwelt. These experiences, however, were not represented in the images they produced, which instead conveyed the comfort of everyday, taken-for-granted landscapes and activities.

As others have noted, a familiar aesthetic surrounding is often appreciated for the life-affirming qualities it expresses, such as safety, comfort and stability (Nomikos 2018). Elisabete's photos, with which we started this article, are a good example of this. She chose to capture the beach as the place "where peace and relaxation happen" (Figure 5). The park (Figure 6), she explained, materializes nature, and "the trail between the trees represents the path of life and the choices we have to make", which she considered crucial in the period of Brexit-related uncertainty.

The comfort gained by dwelling in familiar places was described by all of our participants as a way to cope with the anxieties, tiredness and concerns raised by the result of the 2016 referendum. For Elisabete, comfort is materialized in the aforementioned landscapes that created a sense of belonging (Tilley 1994), and in the need to "be free from life pressures" which, she said, is represented through the photo of her cat (Figure 1). Walking in the natural landscape of Great Yarmouth (the beach, parks and gardens) was, for Elisabete, a way to experience a connection to place that she did not feel during her busy work shifts in the local casino. Ana, in contrast, chose to materialize visually the comfort and familiarity that she experienced in the places where she was living for work. For example, she described the colors of a mural located next to the building where she taught sports activities (Figure 7) as illustrative of the sense of joy and connectedness that she felt in that place through those activities.

An emotional attachment to place is also visible in Bob's photos, which have Great Yarmouth's coastal tradition as a recurrent theme: in his words "one of the best seafronts you'll ever see." In the same vein, Bob captured the community garden outside Great Yarmouth's library square (Figure 8), to illustrate a community project that is set around the sea and fishing. For Bob, both the sea and fishing are important signifiers of local history and part of his affective connectedness to Great Yarmouth as a place. His experience of the town is, in his words, one that juxtaposes the "glitz and all the glamor" of the seafront with the deprivation of "the back streets." Between the two, he chose to focus on the former in his photos, as a way, he said, of representing current government efforts to "turn things around."

The sea is a common background landscape in Sheena's visual narrative, too. This includes an image from a day spent with her grandson at the





Figure 4 Town center. (Photo © Elisabete Bigodinho)



Figure 5 Beach. (Photo © Elisabete Bigodinho)





Figure 6 Green area. (Photo © Elisabete Bigodinho)



Figure 7 Painted mural. (Photo © Ana Moreira)



Figure 8 Library Square. (Photo © Bob Warnes)

seafront (Figure 9), and a view of the remains of an old jetty (Figure 10). She described the latter with reference to the past and something that is “partially lost,” while also appreciating its form and architecture—which she described as one of her interests. Like Bob, Sheena saw Great Yarmouth’s seafront as materializing the prospect of government-led town regeneration programs, and as a place where she experienced the juxtaposition of possibility and loss.

Patrice took images which, according to her, represent hope and connection through expressions of light, color, brightness and contrast. Her photo





Figure 9 Great Yarmouth wheel. (Photo © Sheena McBain)

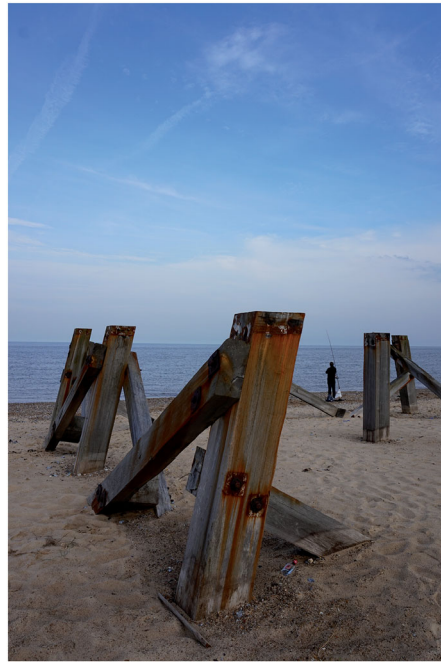


Figure 10 Old jetty remains. (Photo © Sheena McBain)

of the van (Figure 11), for example, represents an opportunity for change, “a symbol of our relationships, which can be based on stereotypes, past mistakes and current scares. All we need is a bit of color—a new light on something old.” Likewise, she decided to edit her photograph of King Street (Figure 12) in a way that emphasizes the Portuguese shop and specifically the message of “the color, contrast and togetherness” that she wanted to convey.

The aesthetic of these images deepens our understanding of how people’s concrete and imaginary aspects of social life—which include thoughts, feelings, longings, desires, hopes and expectations—are connected by color, rhythms or familiar landscapes such as the sea and the environment (Moore 2011). Indeed, the immediate sense of place conveyed in our participants’ photos provides insights into the emotions that are involved in the social and material construction of people’s meaningful landscapes (Lombard 2013). These emotions—and any ambiguity they may express—are part of the unfinished and changeable nature of place as we understand it here (Tilley 1994; Bender 2002; Howes 2004; Massey 2005), especially in a context of (in this case Brexit-related) uncertainty, when the aesthetic character of one’s everyday living environment may be perceived as threatened (Rzepnikowska 2018). They are also part of the

practice and politics of belonging in contexts of political change and uncertainty (such as during Brexit), when the everyday safety of—and emotional attachment to—place acquire particular importance (Yuval-Davis 2011).

Our visual analysis allowed us to get new insights into how migrant and non-migrant residents in Great Yarmouth perceive and experience their localized lives through landscape and intimate ecologies, as the local is simultaneously integrated into a larger system of relationships during a politically vulnerable moment. Place, seen as dynamic and in progress, is of course embedded in social life (Moore 2011). This means that our participants' photos of intimate landscapes are not devoid of social life, even if many do not show social interactions. Rather, they are constituted by a wider set of social and spatial relations, of which they form part. In this sense, intercommunity relations remained an element of the images that our participants produced, as they contribute to intimate sensorial experiences that are part of place-making (*ibid.*). These sentiments, as will be discussed below, are represented through ideas of hope in the photos, but stand in contrast to the research participants' oral narratives of tensions in their interviews and informal conversations.

#### PHOTOGRAPHING HOPE, VOICING TENSION

Participatory photography allows for attention to be placed on forms of belonging and attachment that otherwise might be overlooked when studying situations of political, social and economic uncertainty. The absence of representations of fear or tension in our participants' images, for example, highlights the "therapeutic" value of everyday landscapes and activities which they chose to capture (Harrington-Watt 2015). This choice emphasizes the affective and emotional dimensions of hope embedded in those landscapes and activities, as a taken-for-granted part of social life (Anderson 2006). Ana, for example, produced photos that are in large part related to her community work with migrant-descendant children, and the locations in which it takes place (Figures 7, 13-14).

For Ana, these are meaningful places that anchor her everyday life and activities. They are part of her place-making experience, or of the way she created place as an attempt to contest the spatial segregation that she observed between "locals" and "foreigners" in Great Yarmouth. In her oral narrative she explained:

I saw that British and foreign people didn't go to the same places, and I thought I needed to do something about it. King Street, where all the cafés are, is an area where very few British people will walk past. It's the foreigners' area. People say they are afraid. Not that someone will attack them, but of feeling intimidated, because we like to stand outside, smoke a cigarette, chat with friends... they think that's intimidating, but it's only cultural.

Ana's engagement in community work was part of her strategies for dealing with uncertainty while making sense of her daily experience. As part of her



Figure 11 Painted van. (Photo © Patrice Szubska)



Figure 12 Portuguese café in King Street. (Photo © Patrice Szubska)



community work, she organized a group of young migrant-descendant girls to perform their own or their parents' Afro-Portuguese culture for the local population in Great Yarmouth through dance and music.

In her images, Ana chose not to express her experiences of discrimination and segregation, which she narrated in an interview. Instead, her images represent visually the hopefulness that emerged from those experiences, a process described by Anderson as the transformation of experiences of "diminishment" into a renewed feeling of possibility (2006, 744). Indeed, her photographs show how her community work is embedded in hope, an emotion linked to a desire for connectedness (Andits 2010)—a "not-yet become" (Anderson 2006) that she emphasized during the informal conversations that followed the photographic exercise.

Yet, the hopefulness conveyed in Ana's images of her community work stands in contrast to her oral narratives, in which she shared her experiences of cultural violence and feelings of increasing uncertainty about what it means to be a migrant in the U.K. following the Brexit Referendum (Abranches et al. 2020). Although she chose not to represent this in her photos, in the interview and further conversations, she told of more racist and discriminatory encounters since the Referendum, especially through social media but also in face-to-face comments such as "if you live here, you need to speak my language." Her oral narratives thus expressed a feeling of sadness and frustration that is not captured in her photos, for seeing how intolerance may manifest itself more soundly, possibly because perpetrators of racist cultural violence felt somehow legitimized by the result of the Brexit Referendum (Rzepnikowska 2019). These concerns over the perceived negative effects of Brexit on dynamics of intercommunity relations in Great Yarmouth do not necessarily contradict the sense of belonging and connectedness intentionally represented in Ana's photographs. Rather, they reflect how Brexit as a period marker seems to exacerbate the complexities and nuances of relationships between migrants and non-migrants, especially the co-existence of conflict and conviviality in everyday life (Karner and Parker 2011).

Like Ana's emphasis on non-contentious imagery, Elisabete described her photos of the birthday celebration, the international flags at the seafront and the three food businesses (Figures 2–4) as materializing "the things we have in common" and the hope that "although we live in one country, different cultures and economies can coexist in harmony." Just like Ana, Elisabete chose not to represent experiences of racism and xenophobia in her photos, but instead narrated them in interviews and conversations. In her oral narratives, she recounted her encounters with cultural violence, especially in the period right before and after the Referendum, explaining [that] "the idea that there are too many foreigners coming to work here is often heard."

The juxtaposition of hope captured in participant-generated photographs, and incidents of intercommunity tensions and conflict—as well as outright racism and xenophobia—narrated in interviews and informal conversations,



Figure 13 After teaching a zumba class. (Photo © Ana Moreira; photo taken by her daughter, used with permission)



Figure 14 Youth dance group rehearsal. (Photo © Ana Moreira)

was also present in our encounters with Patrice. One of her photos (Figure 12) depicts King Street as an example of diversity and a materialization of hope for connectedness: "King Street used to be one of the 'go to' places—bright, colorful, thriving, with various businesses. But things have changed since the arrival of migrants, and many older English folks that I know don't like going there now. I wanted to show a bit of color, a bit of contrast and togetherness."

Hope here is expressed by capturing a material setting that reflects both change and familiarity, "a bit of color ... and togetherness", to communicate Patrice's ideal vision of diversity. Yet in our interview and informal conversations she described King Street's reputation (noted by all our participants at one point) as a place where tension and conflict are experienced, and confessed her own fears about it:

King Street used to be a really good place to be or have a business in. I used to work in King Street when I first came here. Now it is actually quite a scary place to go [...]. I don't like to go there on my own [...] because you have groups of, you know, especially men, young men, standing in the doorways of the cafes or something [...] African-Portuguese, and Lithuanian and Polish... I mean, our guys can be really bad! Kind of violent, especially after, you know, drinking too much. They can be quite messy.

Like Ana and Elisabete, Patrice also described an impression that locals' attitudes towards migrants in Great Yarmouth had become increasingly (or at least more openly) hostile since the Brexit Referendum, but suggested an understanding towards British nationals' fear of the foreigner:

I do understand where they were coming from as well, with the Brexit... Although the whole thing just went around the wrong way... Because that was another thing—my [Portuguese] friend, she has children and she goes to school to drop them off, and she was hearing things so nasty and people just saying, you know... They knew she could hear it and they were saying 'what is she still doing here... go back to your country'—that kind of attitude.

At first glance, these points shared by Patrice in her interview—of increasing cultural violence since the Brexit Referendum and her fears relating to King Street—seem to stand in opposition to how she chose it as a site of connection and togetherness in her photographs. Rather than contradicting each other, however, the sentiments that she expressed in her visual images as opposed to her oral narratives are part of "the simultaneous prevalence of desire, disdain and anxiety around connectedness" (Andits 2010, 1005) that our methodical approach strives to uncover.

As others have found, visual and oral narratives incorporate contradictions, ambivalence and ambiguity (Becker 2015), since both are constructed in particular contexts (Drew and Guillemin 2014). We argue that such contradictions need to be embraced in visual research on migration, as they are an intrinsic part of people's strategic responses to the constraints and opportunities of urban life,

whereby rebuilding belonging and connection—a process that Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2016) have named “emplacement”—is necessary. Whereas the study of these relationships has tended to focus on the migrant experience, in this article we show that they are also part of the everyday life of non-migrants.

Sheena’s and Bob’s visual and oral narratives manifest the complex juxtapositions of hope and tension amongst our British research participants. Both of them described migrants’ presence in Great Yarmouth as partly intimidating and a source of tension in their interview and informal conversations with us. However, when talking about their photos, they advocated for the need to “break down barriers” and promote trust, by getting to know and understand unfamiliar habits that they saw as a likely cause of hostility. Sheena’s images, in particular, express an aspiration towards a more convivial experience of diversity in Great Yarmouth. One example of this is the photo of her three Portuguese neighbors (Figure 15), which she described by recalling the laugh they had together when she took the photo and how they talked about her neighbors’ habit of parking their car in the middle of the road. Yet in her informal conversations with us, Sheena noted that the same habit had been a cause of upset and tension, and mentioned the remark made by a British friend when she approached the Portuguese neighbors to photograph them:

“I can’t believe you just went and asked!” he said. “Anything could have happened.” And it’s that mind-set that because you went and asked some strange men who you don’t understand and you don’t know what they’re saying, you asked if you could take their photograph, anything can happen to you. And I thought “Well, why should it?”

In her interview and informal conversations with us, Sheena explained that a different habit or unfamiliarity with local customs, such as where to park the car, can cause a hostile response towards intercommunity co-existence. Her photos, in contrast, materialize an ideal space where conviviality and understanding can happen. For example, she described her photo of a Lithuanian couple fishing (Figure 16) as an expression of familiarity and commonality, representing an activity widely shared by people of different origins. As she explained, “I thought it was interesting that we’ve got the same hobby, people like you and I.”

Overall, our findings suggest that, although they might appear contradictory, orally narrated experiences and visual representations are both fundamental elements of our research participants’ strategies to deal with Brexit-related uncertainty about the future. Such ambiguities are in line with the feeling of hope that is emphasized in participants’ choices of what to photograph, as hopefulness emerges from difference or disruption and comprises both harmonious and unharmonious relations (Anderson 2006). As hope “holds the capacity to draw past and future together” (*ibid.*, 745), it also ties into issues of temporality that visual methods are particularly suited to uncover.





Figure 15 Neighbors. (Photo © Sheena McBain)

## HOPE AND TEMPORALITY: THE CONSTRUCTION OF HOPEFUL FUTURES

Visual methods have the potential to deepen our understanding of the relationship between imagined or emerging futures and constructions of past or present. Since the moment of analysis is extended from the first contact with the camera to post-photographing reflections and discussions (Otto et al. 2018), visual methods have the capacity to challenge the tendency of much social analysis for “analytic closure” and instead “establish analysis as a continued, iterative movement of dialogue and critique” (*ibid.*, 308).

This temporal nature of participatory photography methods goes alongside the temporality of hope that can be seen, for example, in Bob’s photo of the two ships (Figure 17). He described it as representing the big offshore wind turbine project, and the multiple ways in which it may influence the revival of Great Yarmouth, embodying possibilities and providing resources for the construction of a hopeful future. Bob, like Sheena, was concerned for future generations of the town’s inhabitants and praised the local community efforts to create occasions for interaction, including the organization of community fairs, where he and Sheena also volunteered.

At the same time, the emotional attachment to place that is recurrent in Bob’s photos of the seafront and sea-related activities (Figure 8) seems to be





*Figure 16 Fishing. (Photo © Sheena McBain)*



*Figure 17 Two ships. (Photo © Bob Warnes)*

embedded in memory and feelings of loss as much as in uncertainties and expectations about the future. Born in Norfolk, he considered it as his home and highlighted the importance of understanding its history and the history of its diverse community. He spoke about the past of fishing in Great Yarmouth and of his interest in collecting news stories about this industry which once made the town thrive. His experience of place is linked to these early memories, as much as to aspirations of what the town may look like in the future. The latter concern was expressed in a desire for the revival of its allure, which explains his choice of sea-related imagery.

Sheena, too, explained that she was “protective of Yarmouth” and that she hoped trust would overcome hostility in the future, for the benefit of her grandchildren. She described her relationship with the town, where she had been living for 36 years, as “passionate,” despite considering home to be “either Durham, Northumberland and Scotland,” areas where she had lived earlier on. As in Bob’s narrative, there is an implicit reference to the past in Sheena’s photo of the old jetty (mentioned above and this issue’s cover photo), coupled with a sense of belonging to place with future-oriented hope, as illustrated for instance in the photo of her Portuguese neighbors and an anticipation of greater conviviality.

Both participants referred to the deprivation that could be seen in the “back streets” of town, but they preferred to focus on community and connectedness in their photos. When talking about his view of the library square Bob called attention to “a plaque on the wall out here which says the community, the Great Yarmouth community, is sailing through the town, or something like that. But the little strapline they put, if you read it, was ‘crewed by many different nationalities,’ and Yarmouth is crewed by so many different nationalities.” Bob’s visual narrative therefore bridges past and future experiences and aspirations related to place and to the history of migrant presence in the town.

These references to temporality and change have transformative potential, which Moore (2011) describes as the final utopian moment that works as a reference point for many of our actions and knowledge practices. This potential is expressed, *inter alia*, in Bob’s and Sheena’s wish to develop reminiscence work with migrants to “find out how they used to live and how they used to work,” while also noting how difficult it can be to do this type of work due to migrants’ lack of trust towards them and their intentions.

The strategic functions of voicing tension and photographing hope as two coping mechanisms to deal with Brexit-related uncertainty therefore become evident in the links between future, change and temporality. In the case of our migrant participants, this includes the possibility of return or further migration, emphasized in their oral narratives as a response to the tension that they experienced after the Referendum. Patrice, for example, has since left Great Yarmouth and migrated to Portugal in 2018, to her partner’s country of origin. In her interview she had told us about this plan: “So we’re thinking, you know, at some point there’s going to be some children and stuff. I don’t see

this is where I would like to have my children growing up. I just don't like what's going on. I think the future is quite scary."

Leaving Great Yarmouth thus was a way of protecting herself and her family from the threatening uncertainty of being a migrant in the U.K. following Brexit: "So I think I get to the point where I'm imagining myself living in the middle of nowhere, you know, kind of my little oasis—whatever is happening in the world, that's fine, I'll just come home, close the door, that's it, you know. Just block it all."

Hope has a central place in the visual narratives of our participants, both migrant and non-migrant. It is part of their representation of the places in which they live and serves to materialize their understandings and experiences of everyday life in Great Yarmouth. Although several photographs by our British participants contain prominent references to the past, hope is mostly imagined or future-oriented for all, and simultaneously tied to the power relations embedded in the social life that creates space (Harvey 1996; Massey 2005). As Valentine (2008) has argued, we must look beyond the celebration of diversity and connectivity that urban spaces may stage, so that we do not neglect socio-economic inequalities and the power of spatial relations. However, as our findings illustrate, the conflict and hostility that may result from these power relations are entwined with research participants' choice to represent their place of residence in a non-contentious way. This choice, in turn, is associated with hope for a (re)gained sense of belonging in turbulent landscapes, where people are forced to juggle memories of old places with incomprehensible new ones (Bender and Winer 2001). These sentiments become particularly relevant in the context of Brexit-related uncertainty about the U.K.'s further political, social and economic development more generally, and its implications for people's everyday life in Great Yarmouth more specifically.

## CONCLUSION

Our findings contribute to the emerging academic debate on Brexit and belonging (e.g., Botterill and Hancock 2019; Rzepnikowska 2019; Tyrrell et al. 2019), and to longer-standing scholarship on place and belonging (Gilmartin 2008; Yuval-Davis 2011). Based on a combination of visual and oral data, our findings show that, irrespective of their nationality, gender, age, occupation or political orientation, there is a pattern in our research participants' narratives, in which they chose to capture images of hope and connectedness in photography, while disclosing experiences of intercommunity tensions in their interviews and informal conversations. Possibly due to their occupation, age and/or nationality, Bob and Sheena's images contain more prominent allusions to the past. A "not yet become" sense of place, however, is central in all our participants' photos, and indicates that both migrants and non-migrants have

similar strategies to create a sense of familiarity and belonging in the context of Brexit-related uncertainty. The oral narratives suggest that the hopefulness which is captured in the photographs may itself emerge out of experiences of threat or discrimination.

Our intensive data gathering strategy included images produced through participatory photography and combined them with oral accounts from interviews and informal conversations. Through a combination of visual and oral data, we were able to strengthen our understanding of how people construct and represent their realities in a way that is relevant for them, by attributing meaning to their realities through experience, senses and emotions (Desjarlais and Throop 2011). This research approach is based on the recognition that people have a critical capacity to construct meanings in their social world (*ibid.*). Such an approach is crucial when dealing with constrained and tense social realities, especially in a moment of heightened political, social and economic uncertainty, as was the aftermath of the Brexit Referendum.

Future research may want to build on our findings and further analyze how visual participatory methods themselves may induce change in the relationship between tension and hope (Burles and Thomas 2014). As Sheena said:

And again, going back to this camera thing, I learnt a lot, actually, doing that and just taking photographs, because King Street—just there—I have always found intimidating ... and St. Peter's Road ... I have to walk both of those if I want to go to town. And I have always found them intimidating, but actually, going round and taking photographs ... and I just went up to people and said 'can I take your photo please?'[ ...] And now, when I just walked up the other day with Lewis, they were waving to me! And it had broken down the barriers. So that photographic project, I have learnt a lot from it. For me, it's broken down some barriers because now they're not as scary as they were ...

This potential to effect change may have become magnified in our methodical approach, as the combination of oral and visual narratives has allowed participants to share their hopes, perceptions and experiences through multiple media with the research team and a wider audience. This, then, led to further conversations with visitors at the Strangers' Hall exhibition, who expressed surprise at the mundane scenes and landscapes materialized in the photos, as they saw them as insufficient to challenge pre-existent views of "us" as opposed to "others." Our research participants were able to disrupt these audience views of how intercommunity relationships "ought to be" represented, by sharing their underlying rationale and intentions.

Audience reactions and the transformative potential of participatory photography methods may be fruitful avenues for further exploration. The findings presented in this article, however, suffice to illustrate how visual aspirations for sense of place and belonging may be captured in the mundane and do not necessarily contradict the experiences of hostility and conflict revealed in oral narratives.

## NOTES

1. Cultural violence refers to norms, values and beliefs—e.g., of a racist or xenophobic nature—which are used to legitimize direct violence (i.e., physical fighting) and/or structural violence (i.e., suffering caused by social, political and/or economic inequalities and social discrimination) against certain individuals or groups (Galtung 2007).
2. The participant-generated images were exhibited on 23 June 2017 at Strangers' Hall Museum in Norwich (as part of Refugee Week 2017); during 13 Sept.– 11 Oct. 2017 at the Time and Tide Museum in Great Yarmouth; and on 4 Nov. 2017 at the Time and Tide Museum in Great Yarmouth (as part of the ESRC Festival of Social Science).
3. Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the School of International Development, at the University of East Anglia.

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