

## Luxa's Prism

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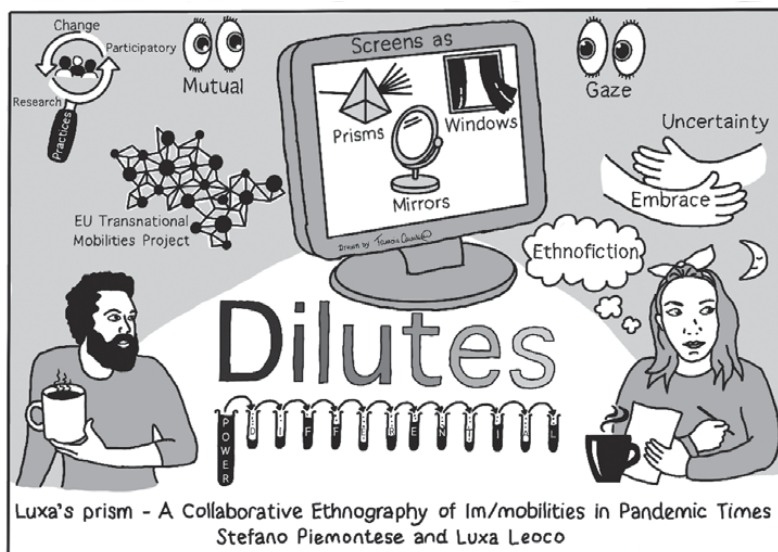
# Luxa's Prism: A Collaborative Ethnography of Im/mobilities in Pandemic Times

*Stefano Piemontese and Luxa Leoco*

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## Themes discussed in this chapter

- the practical and conceptual implications of experimenting with collaborative methodologies with people of different socioeconomic and experiential backgrounds;
  - the positive role of uncertainty and failure in building trust relationships and diluting power differentials within participatory groups;
  - the potential of digital technologies in reconfiguring the modes of collaboration and reducing asymmetries within participatory groups.
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## Introduction

This chapter is the fruit of a collaborative exercise between us, Stefano and Luxa. Its purpose is to reflect on our attempts to conduct a collaborative ethnography of the social and geographical mobilities of disadvantaged European youths in pandemic times. In what follows, we present a theoretically informed, empirical account of our joint endeavour over the course of six months and 30 online video conversations to carve out a space for sharing our knowledge and building a common understanding of this topic.

The idea of co-authoring a research paper had been in the air since the beginning of our collaboration. However, the initial proposal to write this chapter came from Stefano after being invited to contribute to this volume. He first provided Luxa with a common writing structure and, at her request, with some guidelines on finalizing each section. Then, the writing process took place individually, with Stefano composing in English on a word-processing software and Luxa handwriting in Spanish and then copying her writings into a shared note-taking app. After a couple of weeks, Stefano combined the narratives into a single document translated into both languages, one for Luxa and one for the editors of this volume. This first draft then underwent a process of mutual commenting and further synthesis, with Luxa asking for more clarity and Stefano for more details. Ultimately, Stefano's editorial work on Luxa's final text was limited to providing comments, selecting and integrating extracts from field notes she took previously, and making minor syntax changes required for a nearly literal translation from Spanish to English.

The text stemming from this process is not a mere account but an essential component of the collaborative process it describes. Indeed, this chapter

represents both the summation and culmination of our collaboration in that, by working together on it, we relied on the work practices learned during our earliest months of collaboration. In the first section, we set the background of our encounter and describe why we chose to work together. The second section accounts for the multiple forms of collaboration we tested along this journey and what they meant for us. Finally, Stefano explores the practical and theoretical implications of our experience. To faithfully represent our understanding of collaboration as a 'chain of conversations' (Rappaport, 2016, 20), and in the wake of the seminal work by Paloma Gay y Blasco and Liria Hernández (2020), we have assembled the text in the form of a dialogue.

## Doing ethnography in pandemic times

*Stefano*

In autumn 2019, I started working on an EU-funded research project called 'Resilience and Resignation among Transnational Roma and non-Roma Youths'. This project aimed to understand the drivers of educational and post-educational marginality and inclusion in contemporary Europe, looking particularly at the movements into adulthood of disadvantaged young people affected by mobility. The project built upon my doctoral thesis on the experiences and expectations of Romanian Roma youths growing up in Madrid (Piemontese, 2017) but aimed to expand the field of observation beyond Roma biographies to include non-Roma peers sharing similar patterns of social and geographical im/mobility. My approach sought to examine Roma inequality in relation to broader socioeconomic dynamics and challenge their common portrayal in public debates as a group that is socially excluded and culturally separated from the majority society. A further methodological ambition was to privilege the experiences and competencies of disadvantaged Roma youths and use them as a prism to examine and signify the broader phenomenon of youth mobilities in Europe. For this reason, I arranged to recruit two young Roma as co-inquirers and proposed that they contribute to research planning, data collection, analysis and communication throughout the project.

Compared to other more conventional approaches, I assumed that involving research participants as co-inquirers would have been desirable in several respects. In the first place, I believed that welcoming and validating young people's insights and analytical acumen would have led to a more reliable understanding of their social and geographical navigations. I also assumed that actively involving disadvantaged Roma participants in my project would help to challenge the public portrayal of Roma as vulnerable, passive or threatening subjects. Eventually, I expected that unpacking and overturning power relations within the participatory group and across the research process would have contributed to ongoing efforts to decolonizing the field

of Romani studies. In particular, my project aimed to achieve this goal by enabling members of an ethnic minority historically treated as an object of study to unsettle epistemic relations, not only by producing knowledge about themselves but also by devising a critical understanding of a phenomenon broader than their ethnic ascription, such as youth mobility in Europe.

This methodological direction was not accidental but inserted into a broader movement to decolonize knowledge production within Romani studies. For centuries, non-Roma like me have produced most academic research about the Roma, positioning themselves as the authorities or ‘experts’ on them (Silverman, 2019, 79). Such power imbalances have resulted in scholarships tending to essentialize, objectify and romanticize the Roma. Recently, Romani and non-Romani scholars and activists have begun to recognize the colonial biases in this academic field and interrogate issues of power, positionality and participation in knowledge production, primarily focusing on the relationship between researchers and their interlocutors (Dunajeva and Vajda, 2021, 228). Far from sabotaging the legitimacy of non-Romani scholars (Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2015), this approach invites them to understand their role in maintaining the structure of privilege and, at the same time, welcomes their support to dismantle such structures (Vajda, 2015). Consequently, anthropologists have become more attentive to including Romani perspectives and non-Romani reflexivity in research practices, with participatory and emancipatory approaches materializing as a keystone to this process.

Participatory research seeks to address existing power imbalances in knowledge production by creating space for the voices and experiences of those who are rarely heard, actively involving them in all stages of the research process: it is about bringing people together in a creative act of knowledge production based on horizontal, reciprocal and dialogical relationships between researcher and researched. During the last decade, scholars have increasingly adopted collaborative approaches in research with Roma, spanning reciprocal ethnography (Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2020), visual methodologies (Marcu, 2019; Piemontese, 2021), community-based action research (Greenfields and Ryder, 2012; Dunajeva and Vajda, 2021) and the involvement of Roma in scholarly research on Roma (Munté et al, 2011; Matras and Leggio, 2017). What all these scholarships accommodate is the idea that methods, interpretations and knowledge are ‘situated’ (Haraway, 1988) in our particular lived experiences and, therefore, are influenced by asymmetrical relationships of power based on our ascribed social memberships and identities. However, rather than limiting the attainment of objective knowledge, this epistemological approximation appeals to profound and genuine reflexivity on one’s positionality as a way to ‘situate’ the perspective from which knowledge is constructed and, therefore, to produce research that is more sensitive, ethical and academically sound (Dunajeva and Vajda, 2021).

When, in the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic spread into Europe, I had to reimagine the overall fieldwork activities and adapt the recruitment of co-researchers to a changing global scenario. At that time, I had already started the paperwork for employing Lauren, a former research participant from Romania who was supposed to join me in Birmingham to commence collaborative ethnography through his transnational ties and connections. In the beginning, the pandemic did nothing but limit our conversations to the phone. For some weeks, I listened to and took note of Lauren's oral accounts regarding his young friends' and acquaintances' dreams, educational choices and working conditions. I assumed he had already scrutinized and analysed the world I wanted to investigate. Therefore, I only needed to help him remember and reveal his 'situated knowledge'. But unfortunately, our experiment ended very soon. Lauren was very busy working as a seasonal agricultural worker, with few breaks, tired, often with little or no connection and dependent on the internet data of wealthier friends. As a result, he did not have time to engage in these conversations regularly. So, after the increase in COVID-19 cases in autumn 2020, I began envisioning alternative solutions to ensure my fieldwork could unfold despite the circumstances. It was at that juncture that I thought of Luxa.<sup>1</sup>

I met Luxa, a young Romanian Roma woman, in 2015 during my doctoral research, and we have remained in contact since then. Our relationship was mainly based on a patchwork of casual meetings, shared acquaintances, small talk and mutual sympathy. As I had recorded in my field notes from that period, I considered her stubborn resilience to the hardships of life as a privileged entry-point for developing a critical understanding of disadvantaged young people's biographical navigations. Moreover, knowing her openness to learning and the entrepreneurial way she approaches new challenges, I was persuaded that offering her to collaborate with me would provide her with experience, material resources and intellectual stimulation that she could mobilize in her toil for a better life. Thus, towards the end of October 2020, I invited Luxa to join my research project, offering her a flexible 100-hours casual work contract as a fieldwork assistant, paid from my research budget. Proposing her a salary, albeit for a limited time, was a first way of legitimizing her expertise by experience as a source of knowledge and letting her know that I would trust her whatever the outcome. Although managing the project money put me in a position of command, my greater reliance on her assistance partially counterbalanced our economic and power disparities: indeed, while Luxa could do without my money, I could not do without her. Furthermore, I thought she should also enjoy the economic and symbolic dividends of our partnership: as much as I relish doing research, I refuse to do it for free, so why should I offer Luxa different treatment? She finally accepted, and for the next six months, during the second peak of lockdown restrictions, we met weekly on Zoom, the popular online

video conferencing platform, and experimented with alternative ways of conducting an ethnography of mobility from the motionless isolation of our rooms in Birmingham and Madrid.

### *Luxa*

I met Stefano in Romania when we went on vacation with my two children and my husband in the summer of 2015. Well, I do not know if it was a vacation. In reality, we were going through a bad situation in Spain, so we decided to return to Romania. But we only stayed there for about five months. It turns out our neighbour, Lauren, was a friend of Stefano, who had already been there during the winter. Since he was doing fieldwork, he came during the summer as well. I do not remember how long he stayed there, probably two weeks. I barely exchanged a few words with him. Then, he told me that he was studying at the university in Budapest and interviewed young Roma, but he lived in Spain. A few months later, I returned to Spain with my parents, four sisters, two children and my husband. Before we all came back, my father and my husband went to Madrid to prepare a house and get some money for our trip. My mother was pregnant, so she had to get there soon because her pregnancy was getting complicated. My younger sister Ramona was also in Spain working as a cleaning lady to help my parents with the money for the trip. My father had scraped together some cash and ‘bought’<sup>2</sup> a two-bedroom flat. Then he came to Romania for us, together with my husband.

When we arrived in Madrid, we went to the house in the Entrevías district, which was a house that we had squatted in more than three years earlier. The place was nearly collapsed, and there was no electricity or water. In the past, we had lived there only when there was nowhere else to stay. We had constantly been moving into slightly better houses in previous years, but we were used to going back there when they kicked us out from other places. Anyway, the next day we went to the new flat that my father had paid for to see if we could live there or not. There was no light there either. The flat was not comfortable at all. It was spooky, like it had ghosts or something, I do not know. Maybe it was just my imagination. And there was no space. It only had two rooms, and I needed one for my husband and two children. We were a total of nine people, ten with a newborn. So, my husband and I decided to return to Entrevías and leave my parents and sisters in the flat. They stayed two more days there and then went to Gabi’s house for a week. Later they also returned to the home in Entrevías.

After my mother gave birth, Stefano came with his girlfriend Cristina to eat at our house one day, since he knew my sister Ramona. That day Stefano interviewed her, and the following week he came to interview my father and my husband. We told him we didn’t want to stay in that house anymore because it was dangerous and damp. He informed us about a local

housing rights assembly. He suggested we get help from them to get into a bank-owned flat in the block where Gabi lived. I thought it was dangerous. We were afraid that social services would take the children from us. Then, Stefano read about the Spanish Association Against Depopulation. He got the contact number and passed it on to my father, suggesting that he contact them. Thanks to this, my father got a house and a job in a small village near Burgos. After that, I saw Stefano as one of our few friends, since he helped my family and sometimes visited us.

When, in October 2020, he contacted me, my life was neither bad nor good, considering that I had experienced many difficulties since I arrived in Spain in 2007, at 14. What happened is that, at that time, I was unemployed. At the beginning of 2020, I started working in a restaurant. But when the first COVID-19 cases were detected, the restaurant owners had to close their business, like many others in Spain and worldwide. As a result, they put me on furlough. I was a little sad because it was the first job I had ever gotten, since I always found it difficult to find a job. We felt terrible because of all the COVID-19 cases and the people who lost their loved ones. Yet, like many, I could not change anything. Although the pandemic had caused many to lose their jobs or businesses, it was good for us. A few days after they declared a global pandemic, our social worker called me to tell me we could rent the flat we were irregularly occupying. The apartment was owned by a bank. We wanted it so much since we had been squatters for a long time and had also been to the courthouse. I was crazy with happiness. We all were. We signed the contract, and they made us pay the amount of €240 per month. Getting an affordable rent (*alquiler social*) was terrific, since renting an apartment generally costs €700–800 per month. Now we had a flat, but we had lost our jobs.

At the end of the summer of 2020 we had used up all the unemployment and furlough money and were no longer entitled to it. My husband found a job in a car wash, but his salary was much smaller than what he used to get in his other jobs. I was also looking for work, but there was none because many bars had closed again by the end of the year because there were too many cases of COVID-19. Then, one of those days, I received a message from Stefano telling me he would call me to talk about something important. He then contacted me, asking if I wanted to participate in a project on young immigrants and saying that he would offer me a contract. I had never imagined something like that. He suggested that I interview young resources-poor immigrants who lived in Madrid to see their mobility and how they could get ahead and reach their dreams. I was very excited to do it, but I was very afraid of not knowing how to do it well and that he would be upset for trusting me and then me not meeting expectations. All I knew was more or less how he worked, and I imagined him to be very demanding. So, I accepted, but I was not too sure, but I was also excited. My husband also encouraged me

to do it, since only he worked, and he thought it was good that I earned some money as well. I do not know if I would have accepted if Stefano had not paid me. I am not sure about doing it for free, but the truth is that I was excited. At first, it made me feel like someone important. Because, of so many people he knew, he had chosen me for the project. And that made me happy. For me, it was like an achievement. And also, I could show off a little to my friends. We did not know where it would lead.

## **New forms of collaboration**

### *Taking field notes*

#### *Stefano*

At the end of the summer, the possibility of meeting people on work-related grounds despite the progressive tightening of restrictions on physical distancing persuaded us that Luxa could start conducting exploratory fieldwork visits in one of the slums where she had previously lived. Indeed, if I were in Madrid with her, we would have recruited participants in those same suburbs where, during previous decades, a concatenation of centrifugal forces had relentlessly accumulated dreams of social mobility, interrupted aspirations and experiences of resilience and resignation. So, I proposed that Luxa followed the ties and connections she had forged over the last decade with the individuals inhabiting these locations and lay the foundations for our ethnography of im/mobility, starting from her personal observations, impressions and conversations with them. Consequently, I invited her to verify people's availability to participate in interviews and write down some field notes about her visits too. I expected we could use her logs to elicit reflections and identify some common lines of research during our following Zoom conversations. Moreover, introducing her to note-taking and inviting her to navigate these places and networks without a precise direction was a way to let her familiarize herself with ethnographic methodologies and train ourselves to conduct fieldwork together after the end of lockdown restrictions.

#### *Luxa*

At the end of October 2020, I started visiting some friends dwelling in a shantytown in Fuencarral, a district in Madrid. Some of them are from my village in Romania. Stefano suggested that I take field notes. I did not even know what it was about, but he explained it to me. The process was complex. I had doubts because, before feeling comfortable telling them why I was there, I did not know how to have a conversation without letting them notice that I was taking notes, so I did not. When I came home and wrote about what we had talked about, I surprised myself with how much I could remember.

It was like an achievement. And since then, I have learned to observe people more. For instance, during my first visit, I remember I met a girl from a town close to mine. We introduced ourselves and started talking a bit. I asked if she was going to school, and she told me that she had accomplished the 3rd year of ESO (compulsory secondary education), but now she was not studying anymore. She was 18 years old. I asked her why she did not study anymore, and she replied that it was because of COVID-19, but I noticed she was not motivated to continue learning anyway. She was looking for a job. However, she did not have the proper documents to be employed. Her parents had always collected scrap metal, so they never had the necessary resources. So I advised her to continue studying, since she would need it, and I know what I am talking about because I do not have much education, and now it is complicated for me when it comes to looking for a job. She told me that at that moment she was not interested. Then I asked her if they were going to continue living there. She said they barely got enough food with what her parents earned, and the rent for a flat was very high. After this visit, I continued going to the shantytown from time to time. Some people knew I had also lived there, but the main problem was that people feared me because some of them did bad things and were afraid that I had direct contact with the police. The reason was that once I told them I was collaborating with the University of Birmingham and desired to interview them. Some of them said things like, "I should tell you my life, so you take me to the police?" They would not let me interview them even for €100.

### *Writing fictional stories*

#### *Stefano*

My research project had carefully thought-out research questions and a detailed methodology. Yet, like any ethnography, its orientation relied heavily on the cues I would find in the field. Anti-contagion measures, however, robbed me of the empirical world to which I could apply my ambitious plans. I felt the pandemic had stripped me of my sensing body, the tool without which I could not do ethnography. Against this backdrop, I expected that Luxa, with her wealth of personal experience and physical presence in the field, could help me reveal a suitable research direction and provide an entry point into the experiences of other underprivileged young migrants like her. And so it happened. Progressively, Luxa's written notes and oral reporting regarding her daily encounters and observations came to represent a driving force for our conversations and, in the long run, became the compass I was looking for. So, during our meetings, four recurring themes emerged that she considered crucial for understanding the world of the people around her: the nexus between poverty and criminality, the phenomenon of male prostitution, the experience of labour exploitation and

the issue of illegal housing occupations. Accordingly, we decided to devote at least one session to each theme, during which we shared our experience, knowledge, questions and objections related to each topic.

With these thematic conversations, I expected we could familiarize ourselves with topics that we would subsequently discuss during our interviews with research participants. However, the more days passed, the more we became aware of the difficulty of conducting face-to-face interviews in the near future. In fact, outside of her small group of close-knit friends, Luxa felt unable to build trusting relationships with potential participants, whether they were perfect strangers or residents of the slum she had previously inhabited. Moreover, physical distancing measures and the upcoming closure of commercial activities did nothing but increase her anxiety about being unable to contact potential research participants, and my concerns about the viability of our strategy. So, because Luxa had disclosed to me on several occasions that she would like to write about her life, I invited her to explore writing as a way to organize her 'situated knowledge'. For each topic, Luxa wrote a fictional story based on real-life events. For her, 'ethnofiction' (VanSlyke-Briggs, 2015) became a way to reflect upon her experience as a migrant, claim a space for herself and describe her world without exposing the people who inhabited it. Furthermore, through the practice of writing, Luxa encountered an answer to a problem that haunted me, but that I was unable to solve exclusively by moderating my behaviour: the fact that, despite having the appearance of exchange, our interactions tended to become monologues or, at best, conversations dominated by one – my – leading voice (see Briones, 2016, 33). Instead, Luxa's fictional stories, written in the solitude of the night, became a space in which I could not interfere but, if anything, only observe, comment and admire in deferred time: a space for personal discovery and self-determination. The four accounts she wrote left me speechless, as they revealed narrative skills, analytical depth and a wealth of experience that I believe would have never emerged otherwise. I would like to highlight how, reading Luxa's narratives, as well as her passages in this chapter, always moves me. Yet this reaction generally embarrasses me because, in my view, it epitomizes the measure of my 'situated bias'. However, discovering that Luxa's virtuosity unsettled my scale of expectations in the same way that the uncertainty and non-directivity of my approach upset hers shows how recognizing and challenging mutual prejudices is the starting point of any collaboration.

### *Luxa*

When I first took notes about my friends living in the shantytown, this is when Stefano had the idea that I could try to write down something I already

knew. I had started taking some field notes, but I was not convinced about what I was doing. The problem was not that I did not like it, but I felt I was not good at it. Then Stefano suggested that I wrote about something I knew. So I started writing a dialogue between a male prostitute and a former woman prostitute who had fallen in love with each other. I liked it. Stefano also liked it, and he told me that I had talent. I had told him that I had yearned to write something long ago, but I never dared. I also told him about my insecurities, that I have never felt capable of doing what I set out to do. He told me that he also feels insecure sometimes. So, I wrote these stories in a notebook and later transferred them to our shared online notebook. I usually did some housework, such as cleaning, and then I wrote. When I felt inspired, I did not stop. But since I did not always have time during the day, I would start writing at night, when I also felt more inspired. I am not a writer; I often get stuck and am very insecure, but one could see a passion for writing in these stories. I liked to write and arrange facts a bit in my way. Although the stories had true things in them, I could put them in the way I wanted. Somehow, I was the one who controlled the story, and that gave me confidence. When details were missing, Stefano would ask me questions and provide comments, and then I modified the text a little bit later, and the result would be more or less acceptable. The first story arose from a conversation with Stefano when I told him about someone I knew involved in prostitution. So, he told me to try to write something on the subject. In addition to the story about prostitution, I have written three more. One is called 'Learning to Steal' and talks about the robbery of a car from four points of view: the thief, his brother, his wife and the policeman. I did not change many things in this story: that's how it happened. I wrote about this to understand why some young people see stealing as an easy way to make money. The story about labour exploitation is inspired by a person very close to me. Instead, the last one, 'A Real-life Story about a Migrant Squatter', is still unfinished but very long already. It tells my story since when I arrived in Spain and expected something different and felt disappointed.

### *Conducting interviews*

#### *Stefano*

Dialoguing on Zoom allowed us to explore and compare our experiences, knowledges and questions regarding specific topics. It also became a space where Luxa could feel encouraged and get feedback on her writing exercise, and I could try new methodological approaches. At the same time, our weekly meetings became an occasion to get her acquainted with the ethnographic method and questions of social inquiry and train her to conduct interviews autonomously. So, on the one hand, building on the notes that I was taking during each conversation, I drafted a basic methodological

and theoretical guide for Luxa. This document crystallized our shared understanding of the methods we would use and the essential sociological concepts she had to handle before conducting the interviews. On the other hand, during our sessions, we discussed the criteria for selecting the sample and designed a structure for interviews. This process monopolized a significant amount of time and was challenging in several respects. My urgency was to provide us with tools that could facilitate our transition to a post-pandemic collaboration and allow us to gather data beyond our own experiences. The interview structure also responded to our different concerns, namely, Luxa's apprehensions about the lack of a clear direction and my doubts about the value of our methodological experimentations. In contrast, working towards a standard data collection method like the interviews, in addition to reassuring Luxa, gave me confidence that, at worst, we would have had life stories to analyse and compare.

Focusing on the interview structure, however, turned problematic as it positioned our collaboration in the domain of scientific expertise, thus prioritizing my authority at the expense of Luxa's experience. Another element that contributed to amplifying pre-existent asymmetries in this phase was the imbalance of my investment in this tool and my reluctance to completely lose control over a device that could have become the methodological backbone of the whole project. Although I believe my worry was overt and legitimate, its results positioned our collaboration on sloping ground, reinforcing asymmetries of power and expectations. This process was affecting Luxa's self-esteem and driving her interest away. Also, her detachment fuelled my insecurities about my capacity to be a good researcher. If she didn't see 'the light at the end of the tunnel', as she often repeated, I wondered if what I saw was a mirage instead. So, after dragging Luxa into creating a multilevel structure for life-stories interviews that, weeks later, we realized was impossible to use, we started all over again. Similar to our work on this chapter, I provided her with a simple structure for collecting the primary observational dimensions we deliberated together and then asked her to fill them in with her interview questions. I later contributed to her proposal with comments and integrations. Finally, we interviewed each other to test this last structure and enable Luxa to train herself on how to conduct interviews. Between March and April 2021, Luxa interviewed three women: a close friend, an acquaintance of her husband and a stranger who had responded to an ad on Facebook.

### *Luxa*

It took us a long time to design the interview structure because we had to do it in such a way that the questions we asked fitted our goals. Only in this way could we get good information and bring up topics that interested us. At first, I was a bit scared because I did not know what questions to ask.

Then my husband suggested three or four questions to me, so I thought: 'If he can do it, I can too.' Stefano told me that he thought I was able and that we would develop the questions together. This gave me confidence. I remember feeling terrible one day because I wanted to develop some research questions, but they did not come out. When I started to think about the questions, nothing at all came to my mind. I felt very frustrated and stuck. In the end, we edited the structure three or four times until we finally managed to find the right one together. The questions had to be clear so the interviewees knew what we were asking and did not get lost. When we first made the structures, we thought we had it, but then we realized something was missing or did not work even when we tested it ourselves. In general, it has been the most challenging part of the whole process due to my lack of experience. It seemed helpful to me but very long, and since something also came up in my family, it was even more difficult for me and sometimes I did not want to continue. But in the end, it went well, and I was delighted to see that it paid off. We tested the last version to see if it worked. I had to interview Stefano, and he had to interview me. I had no problem with him interviewing me again. The interviews went more or less well. He was teaching me how I had to ask questions. I felt I was not good at even interviewing Stefano. So, sometimes, when I was at home, my husband would let me ask him a few questions so I could see if they worked. This gave me more confidence when I had to interview people I could interview. Once we finished, I was happy and looked forward to doing the interviews, although the truth is that I also saw a lot of danger in interviewing strangers. But I was lucky because I already knew two people. So, Stefano suggested I try first with my sister to feel more secure and see if it worked. Initially, she said she was available, but I was not sure I could interview her at her house. So I thought about bringing her to my house, but she did not have much time either. Eventually, I did not manage to interview her but convinced a good friend living in the shantytown to do the interview with me. In general, it felt very good to know that I am also capable of doing things. Let's see if I change my mind and stop thinking I cannot do many things. Stefano is not always too sure either, but here we go. I thought it was very cool that he would also use the structure we made together to do his interviews in Birmingham.

### *Dealing with our emotions*

#### *Stefano*

For about six months, Luxa and I enabled ourselves to delve into each other's lives, emotions and interpretations as a way to generate an understanding of a phenomenon – youth migration – that we had experienced from entirely different perspectives and social positions. This tentative process of producing

knowledge through mutual learning and reflexivity occurred by alternating well-structured thematic sessions with informal talks on the most disparate subjects. For us, rolling a cigarette or pouring coffee into our cups as if we were sitting in the same kitchen became a way to build a space of intimacy in which to converse about our desire to change the course of our lives, analyse the roots of our low self-esteem, recall our experiences of disempowering people and places and be astonished at how similar we were, despite the tremendous differences that separated us. Driven by the need to place our deviations under the umbrella of ethnographic practice, from time to time I used to remind ourselves how reflecting on our own fragilities was also a way to recognize and signify the emotions we would encounter during interviews and conversations with other participants. Moreover, training our 'mutual gaze' (Gay y Blasco, 2017) enabled us to set some comparison criteria between our different experiences and understandings of social and geographical mobility. For example, interviewing each other and drawing visual maps of our mobility experiences not only served to test some methodological tools but also allowed us to reflect upon the different faces, causes and impacts of urban and international hypermobility on our lives and the lives of our families and peers sharing similar experiences. In fact, although our maps were so similar that we could interchange them, the underlying causes of our trajectories were tremendously unequal. However, the most important result of these deviations was to build a personal relationship without which some thoughts would not have been guessed, some ideas would not have arisen, some confessions would have remained secret and we would not have written this chapter.

### *Luxa*

What I liked most about this project was having conversations about topics I knew and writing fictional stories that had a significant part of the truth. I also enjoyed talking about my mobility experience. I do not know how much I have contributed to the project but what I do know is that I shared the little knowledge I had. I had a different perspective on life than Stefano, since I went through many adversities. And bad things give you experience. Besides, I knew many people from my town who had similar experiences, and I shared their stories with Stefano. I realized that if I did not manage to write and think, it had to do with my state of mind, not my ability to do it. And because good things were not happening in my life at that time, writing has been painful. I felt my life was awful because I could not find a job. So, focusing on this project helped me forget about my problems which sometimes made me sad, ashamed and frustrated. Sometimes, although it had nothing to do with what we did, I enjoyed talking with Stefano about how I felt or what had happened to me in my life, even if sometimes I felt

somehow uncomfortable. These conversations caused me to remember how we had lived before and our difficulties in accessing housing that would be in a good state. Although my children were little, they knew that we had nowhere to live, and they were afraid the police would come to take us out of the house. This made me feel very powerless as a mother. This is a chapter of my life that I sometimes would like to forget, but it is also part of me, and perhaps it has also made me grow as a person.

## Conclusion

The pandemic has complicated everyone's plans. In particular, social scientists had to rethink their methodological approaches and develop more imaginative ways of doing research. Yet, anti-contagion measures not only impacted on carefully planned fieldwork activities but also demanded a further reconfiguration of the 'modes of collaboration' (Marcus, 2018). Building on my experience working with Luxa, in this last section, I, Stefano, will discuss how changes in the modes of collaboration caused by the pandemic contributed to (1) reducing hierarchies between us, (2) repositioning orality and memory at the centre of my anthropological inquiry and (3) unsettling existent regimes of participation.

### *Screens as windows*

Some authors have highlighted how the normalization of digital technologies has played a prominent role in the 'refunctioning of ethnography' by allowing reflexive subjects outside academia to elaborate sophisticated analyses on emergent social issues, thus actively contributing to contemporary social thinking (Sánchez Criado and Estalella, 2018). This trend, which in pre-pandemic times was reflected in the democratization of editorial and cultural work through the proliferation of blogs, magazines and podcasts, during the COVID-19 pandemic has turned into the backbone of every collaborative effort, spilling over into the working practices, and tools of many professionals, including ethnographers.

In this context, online video calls have not only moved fieldwork encounters from physical to virtual spaces but also shaken existing hierarchies between places and the people who inhabit them, at least in terms of accessibility and visibility. For instance, in previous years, the places where Luxa and I used to meet contributed to further amplifying our asymmetrical relationship. Because my economic privilege allowed me to reach her places physically, I had been the one entering her apartment in Madrid, visiting her village in Romania and staying overnight at her father's place close to Burgos. In contrast, she never had access to the sites of my daily life. But when we started meeting online, our webcams became responsible

for balancing the portion of intimacy that we could reveal to each other, smoothing the line between seen and unseen and allowing us the same glimpse into each other's life. In this sense, video calls worked as 'critical points of intersections between lifeworlds, social fields, and moral and value systems' – a proper digital interface that 'simultaneously links together those things that it separates' (Waltorp, 2018, 117). As a result, I was no longer the dominant observer.

On the contrary, my webcam had placed Luxa's gaze on the same level as mine: she, too, could chat with my wife, take a tour of my home, comment on my furniture and the quality of my house and build a reasonable image of my private life. So, over time, our screens turned into facing windows of the same apartment building from which we could chat and observe each other's spaces, habits and relationships. Although our different positionalities, especially in terms of class, gender and ethnic identity, still blurred the 'mutual gazes' (Gay y Blasco, 2017) that bridged our private lives, the unusual symmetry that permeated our reciprocal observations became the keystone for building a space of intimacy in which to share our different emotions, memories and understandings.

### *Screens as mirrors*

When anti-contagion measures obliterated physical spaces of socialization, making it difficult for Luxa and me to conduct fieldwork and interviews in person, I initially felt suffocated by the limitation of the ethnographic field to the isolation of my home. But then I realized how that space of observation for which I yearned in vain had to be searched for instead in another spatial and temporal dimension. I thought that, since we could not look 'outside', we were left with nothing but to observe ourselves as in a mirror and reflect reciprocally on our stories. Following Rappaport's (2016, 1) conceptualization of collaboration as a conversation that does not appropriate knowledge but explores what is 'already there', I started conceiving our isolated bodies as 'walking archives' (Okely, 2008, 58), that is, as a receptacle of unwritten ethnographic data ready to be elicited through memories and emotions. Our conversations then became a forum for revealing pre-existing personal interpretations and a catalyst for a collective knowledge that could not have existed without that dialogue. So, our 'experimental collaborations' (Sánchez Criado and Estalella, 2018) moved away from visual observation and fieldwork experience as a privileged modality for ethnographic knowing and started resorting to memory, the spoken word, creative writing and autobiographical accounts as a way to assemble knowledge (see Okely, 1992). Like participants' narratives in life-story research, Luxa's memories, and the conversations they sparked, became a prism through which I could capture a reality that she had already observed and conceptualized. However, her

memories also became the asynchronous proxy of an imagined field that the pandemic prevented me from crossing and observing and, more importantly, a compass that gave me access to an imaginary for research and oriented the research questions outside of the expected plot (Holmes and Marcus, 2008). Indeed, Luxa's contribution was never limited to a descriptive and reflexive account of her own life. Instead, emerging exclusively from her personal experience, it was obstinately directed towards elaborating hypotheses and interpretations helpful for understanding broader social phenomena she had experienced at first hand.

Our approach to collaborative ethnography assumed that, as Briones (2016, 32) put it, 'we always produce situated knowledge within situated contexts and histories. Thus, instead of general statements on the topic, what we all can share are situated experiences.' Eventually, we resorted to reflexivity and memory elicitation processes to validate our lived experience as a legitimate source of ethnographic knowledge. Yet, in doing so, our practices also reconciled the assumption that ethnography is a reflexive and experiential process mediated by the ethnographer's sensing body (Okely, 2008) with the limitations posed by anti-contagion measures and online interactions.

### *Screens as prisms*

Acknowledging the role of power, positionality and reflexivity in research challenges the idea that only academics are legitimate for developing theory and validates the experience of their interlocutors as a source of empirical and theoretical knowledge. But if everyone's experience is a legitimate source of ethnographic knowledge, who is the ethnographer, and who is not?

The epistemic relationship between Luxa and me addressed this question by exploring and challenging the boundaries of collaborative ethnography. In fact, my initial attempt to define our experiment using the conceptual vocabulary of social research progressively revealed the existence of different 'regimes of participation' within which we were operating. With this expression, I refer to the multiple ways that scholars conceive, legitimize and semantically describe 'collaboration', depending on their positionality within the participatory group. These regimes also shape how researchers relate to co-researchers and conceptualize their expertise, and how participatory groups negotiate asymmetries of power, authorship and expectations.

Simplistically (as this is not the place to develop a theory of the politics of participatory research), we could place different participation regimes along a continuum between two opposites. At the one end, we find collaborative research with subjects (such as officials, activists and artists) whose thinking and professional practices resonate with scholarly researchers. Their involvement in ethnographic inquiry is based on the assumption that they are endowed with a sort of 'para-ethnographic consciousness'

or curiosity about their own practices that precedes the encounter with the ethnographer (Holmes and Marcus, 2008). These subjects are often described as ‘epistemic partners’ because they are seen as ‘experts’ in their own field and, therefore, able to shape the theoretical research agenda on an equal footing with the ethnographer. At the opposite end of our continuum, we find research with subjects perceived as vulnerable, oppressed and therefore needing to liberate themselves through processes of conscientization (Fals Borda and Anisur Rahman, 1991). In this case, ethnographers tend to favourably understand their work as a tool in the hands of oppressed communities that supports their struggles for social justice. However, this approach also risks neglecting the competencies and interests of subjugated groups when these are detached from the urgency of collective social transformation, thus visibilizing their lives only when they become a matter of political concern.

The double standard used to conceptualize participatory practices raises the question of whether and under what conditions disadvantaged subjects can be considered epistemic partners. Part of the answer lies in the prevailing understanding of ‘expertise’ as the practical and theoretical knowledge produced by elite cultures that disregards the know-how of people with the least wealth and power in society. This view echoes the reticence of mainstream scholarships to frame deprived subjects as capable research partners. As a matter of fact, although their experience represents the raw material of much social research, it hardly informs its theoretical scaffolding.

So, as I struggled to conceptualize the specific mode of collaboration developed with Luxa and to position our practices along the continuum of participation regimes, I observed how interpersonal affinities could represent both a first step towards establishing equal epistemic relationships and the bridging element between different scholarly ways of understanding expertise and collaboration. Affinities are not about having a shared object of curiosity but about abiding by each other’s positionalities, stories, interpretations and ways to communicate them. In this regard, scholars conducting participatory research highlight the importance of interpersonal commonalities, especially when collaborating with people with racial, economic and experiential backgrounds different from theirs. Interestingly, several authors in the field of Romani studies have signalled womanhood (Gay y Blasco and Hernández, 2020; Dunajeva and Vajda, 2021) and sexual orientation (Fremlova, 2018) as overarching bonding identities that help to overcome significant social distances within the participatory group and create temporary alliances that mitigate the inevitable frictional or conflictual moments (Vajda, 2015). In our case, this was not an option. Instead, during our encounters Luxa and I had to rely on other kinds of affinities, such as our shared experience of hyper-mobility, living in a foreign country, being subject to the same politics of labour precarization and being parents and partners. Without disregarding

the substantial difference in privileges and resources that separated us, becoming aware of the social structures looming over us not only brought us closer but also made us stand in solidarity with each other. However, the main ingredient of our relationship and the foundation of our affinity have been uncertainty and failure. Speaking our doubts, voicing our fragilities and failing together, besides resonating with an experimental ethos, contributed significantly to building more symmetrical ways of collaborating (see also Gay y Blasco, 2021). Indeed, embracing uncertainty and failure allowed us to balance reciprocal expectations and self-perceptions regarding our capabilities and, by diluting power differentials and recognizing our mutual biases, to demonstrate that there are also experts at the margins.

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### Lessons and recommendations

- Epistemic collaboration requires creating a relational space that both facilitates interpersonal connections beyond ascribed social roles and positionalities and is simultaneously deeply reflexive about their impact on knowledge-production processes.
  - Memories, emotions and situated experiences are legitimate sources of ethnographic knowledge and constitute a common epistemological denominator in any participatory group. Scholarly efforts to recover and validate them can play an essential role in democratizing knowledge production processes and facilitating collaboration among people with different competencies and experiential backgrounds.
  - Research can aspire to be transformative and empowering only if scholars are available to change their research practices and methodologies, adjusting them to their interlocutors' interests and abilities.
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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The collaboration with Lauren and another fieldwork assistant, Alin, continued in different forms, resulting in the production of two video diaries: 'Lauren's video diary' and 'Alin in the ghost town' (see <https://vimeo.com/stefanopiemontese>).
- <sup>2</sup> In this context, 'buying a house' refers to the practice, especially widespread during the 2008–14 Great Recession in Spain, of paying brokers for accessing generally bank-owned vacant flats they had previously kick-opened.

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