

Guided Into a World Unknown: Reflections on the Making of a Visual Essay With Refugees

Shirley van der Maarel

Volume 13, Number 2, 2022

Travelling by Photograph: Representing and Reframing Migration

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094932ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.TP.13.2.9>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

York University

ISSN

1918-8439 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

van der Maarel, S. (2022). Guided Into a World Unknown: Reflections on the Making of a Visual Essay With Refugees. *Imaginations*, 13(2), 207–226.
<https://doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.TP.13.2.9>

Article abstract

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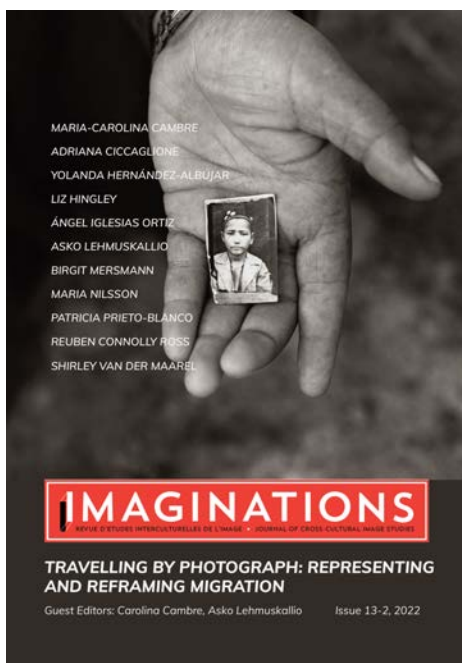
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IMAGINATIONS:
JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES |
REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE
L'IMAGE

Publication details, including open access policy
and instructions for contributors:

<http://imaginations.glendon.yorku.ca>

Travelling by Photograph: Representing and Reframing Migration

Guest Editors: Carolina Cambre,
Asko Lehmuskallio
2022-11-09

Cover image: Fazal Sheikh's presentation of a
portrait shown to him in 1997 at an Afghan
refugee village in Ghazi, Northern Pakistan, of a
child killed in Soviet bombardment © Fazal Sheikh

To cite this article:

van der Maarel, Shirley. "Guided Into a World Unknown: Reflections on the Making of a Visual Essay With Refugees." *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2022, pp. 207-226, doi: 10.17742/IMAGE.TP.13.2.9.

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.TP.13.2.9>



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GUIDED INTO A WORLD UNKNOWN: REFLECTIONS ON THE MAKING OF A VISUAL ESSAY WITH REFUGEES

SHIRLEY VAN DER MAAREL

The constant presence of refugees in the media has constructed its own reality, at the expense of lived reality. Any work concerned with refugees' lived experience will need to find ways to encourage people to see beyond this discourse. Based on research with refugees placed in depopulating villages in Italy, this article follows the process of collaboratively creating a visual essay that reflects the lived reality of refugee participants. The essay's aim is to let readers share in an experience, rather than merely documenting that of others. This article reflects on efforts to achieve this through experimenting with the essay's form, poetics and aesthetics. In doing so, the article discusses an alternative way of communicating research and presenting a visual essay.

La présence constante des réfugiés dans les médias a construit sa propre réalité, aux dépens de la réalité vécue. Tout travail visant à parler de l'expérience vécue par des réfugiés devra donc trouver les moyens d'encourager les gens à voir au-delà de ce discours. S'appuyant sur les recherches menées parmi des réfugiés placés dans des villages abandonnés d'Italie, cet article suit le processus de création collaborative d'un essai visuel qui reflète la réalité vécue des réfugiés ayant participé à cette recherche. Le but de l'essai est de permettre aux lecteurs de partager une expérience, plutôt que de simplement documenter celle des autres. Cet article rend compte des efforts déployés pour y parvenir en expérimentant la forme, la poétique et l'esthétique de l'essai. Ce faisant, l'article discute d'un moyen alternatif de communiquer les résultats d'une recherche et de présenter un essai visuel.

The constant presence of refugees in the media has shaped how people see, think, and talk about refugees. This public discourse is not grounded in refugees' experiences, but in

(political) interests that construct their own politicized and media-tized reality, at the expense of any actual or lived reality (Strömbäck 239; Krzyzanowski et al. 6). This is what I was confronted with in conducting and communicating research with refugees placed in Italy's depopulating villages. Interested in how refugees create a home in a place others choose to abandon, I spent three months with primarily young African refugee men¹ in four different villages in Valle di Comino, a valley between Rome and Naples.² In communicating research findings, I struggled finding the words that would encourage others to see beyond mediatized realities; not just to agree, disagree, or nuance the public discourse on refugees, but to have a different conversation altogether.

In response, I worked with research participants to create a visual essay. The project became both a method of *conducting* research (van der Maarel) as well as a way of *communicating* the research. This article discusses the latter, by considering the multimodal use of photos, videos, audio and drawings to offer glimpses into lived realities, and reflecting on how playing with the essay's design can evoke experiences rather than merely describe them.

The essay's format was inspired by the Subjective Atlas series.³ Where a standard atlas takes a bird's eye perspective, the subjective atlas tries to grasp what it means to be in an area from the diversity of human perspective. Rather than place being predefined, it turns it into a question. The research participants might be geographically living in Valle di Comino, but what really surrounds them? What are their physical surroundings, but also what surrounds them socially, emotionally, virtually, and what thoughts, memories, stories, concerns, and questions surround them? Based on conversations and observations, different pages were created, each exploring one aspect of their surroundings.

As we made the materials for the visual essay, and as I put them together on a page, what slowly emerged was a world. Though living in the same geographical location, the lack of interaction with Italians and in Italian daily life meant that refugees did not share in the world that Italian residents inhabited.⁴ Rather than only describing,

documenting, or offering evidence of lived experience, the essay experiments with form, poetics, and aesthetics to evoke meanings that let readers briefly share in an experience (Pauwels 2). To share an experience, is not to have the same experience. The closest one can get is to share in the same space (Irving 98-99). When Andrew Irving (100) is “walking fieldwork” he takes the rhythm of his walking partner and thus shares a temporal space. Annika Lems (43-46) used life story interviews to enter a narrative space, and Steven Feld (464) used audio recordings to share in the Kaluli’s sonic space.

In a similar manner, the visual essay was conceptualized as a guide; a way for readers to be guided into a world shared with research participants. This is reminiscent of Trinh T Minh-ha’s “speaking nearby” (Chen). The nearby implies closeness (being there), but also distance (not being quite there yet). In the visual essay, descriptions, images, and stories give an understanding of an everyday life and express research insights (Sutherland), while the use of metaphors, ambiguities, and the polysemous nature of images and video (Barthes 38), are always pointing beyond these stories. By defying closure, the work tries to resist taking a definitive position in the public debate on refugees and thus maintain both the proximity and distance of the nearby. The full visual essay is accessible online via www.land-unknown.eu/guide. In what follows I discuss elements from the making of the essay, to provide an insight in the way it recreates a world and guides readers into it.



How to begin a story? With the objective of recreating a world, one starting point could be place. Valle di Comino is an inland depopulating valley surrounded by the Apennine mountains between Naples and Rome. It is sparsely populated, and like many other depopulating villages, it is characterized by a vicious cycle of abandonment where shops and businesses move away, jobs decrease, older people pass away, and young people move away. The image above portrays the sparsely populated valley where the research took place. Starting this story as such, however, would make it seem as though place is already defined, located on a map, and able to be visited simply by driving there. Instead, the essay's intention was to turn place into a question; to guide readers into a world that does not exist geographically, but that can only be explored by engaging with the people inhabiting it.



Thus the story might begin with two of the participants, Amadou and Koné, trying to find their way through a pathless forest. It is an apt metaphor for the way many of the refugee participants were navigating ambiguous asylum procedures (Tuckett), incomprehensible languages, and unknown Italian customs. It however gives the impression that this is a story about a world unknown to *refugees*, where instead it was meant to be a guide for *readers* to explore a world unknown.



Walking through Villa Latina, one of the villages hosting refugees, there was a small building with frosted windows, one of which was broken. Through the window I saw a micro world, with remnants of people and stories, as well as new life reclaiming this abandoned place. This became the cover for the visual essay. Rather than being a guide to a particular place or the lives of particular people, I invite readers with this image to be guided by a curiosity for what is alive in the ruins (Tsing 20–25).



If place is not outside our bodies, but the result of bodies dwelling in place (Ahmed 9; Ingold), then presumably the best way to explore a place is to be guided by the people inhabiting it. Taking this literally, I asked Rana to guide me through his beloved Arpino (watch the video at www.land-unknown.eu/discover-arpino-with-rana). To the camera he spontaneously presented himself as a tour guide. While showing the sights, what stands out is how his understanding of place is always pointing beyond place; weaving his own memories and life stories through what he had learned about this place.



Yaya

Posta Fibreno

I was living in an island in Senegal, so there are no cars, in the middle of the sea. When I would wake up, from my bedroom I can see water, the sea. So that's why when I see the water here, I think I am in my house, or in my village. The first time I came here was with a group of people, with lots of different nationalities, and I feel good, I feel comfortable and happy. To meet people that are so open and also when you are together with the other people, you cannot feel... you can feel bad but at the same time you can feel good things.

Continuing to explore how people understood their physical surroundings, I asked participants to bring me to their favourite places.⁵ Similar to Rana's Arpino, also Yaya and Koné's stories show how the meaning of place cannot be predefined, but is instead the product of experiences elsewhere, in their case expressing a longing for social interactions that they missed in their everyday lives.



Koné

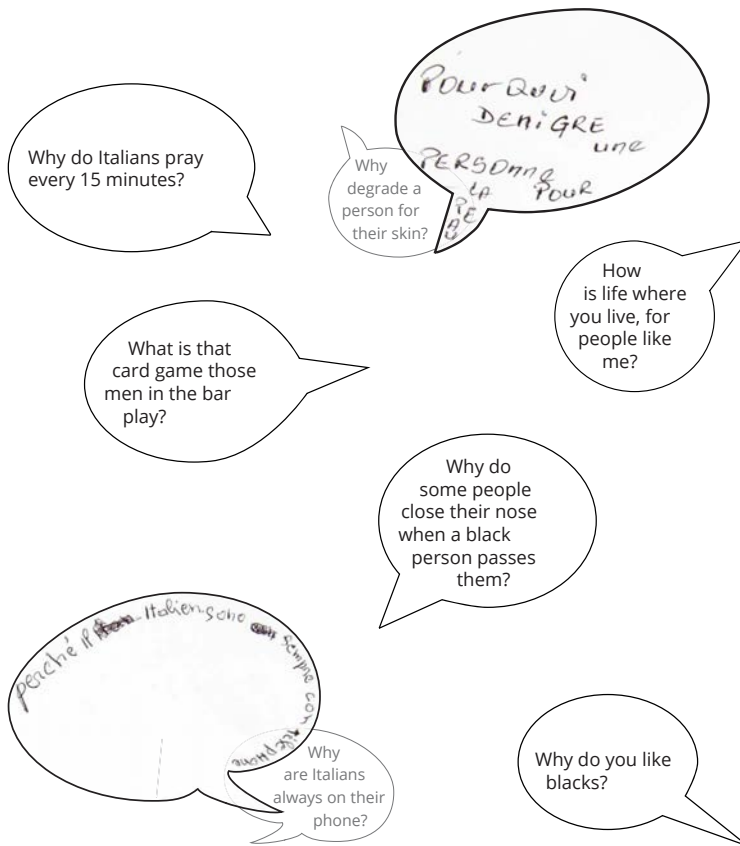
Garden bar, Atina

Ici en Europe, pour trouver les gens, pour échanger, il faut aller dans les bars. Ici il y a toujours du monde. La première fois j'étais venu ici pour un ami qui voulait faire un transfert avec Western Union. Ici, tu prends un café, tu trouves des amis, c'est amusant. Les personnes ici sont trop gentilles, ils sont souriants avec toi. Ça attire les clients. La première fois que je suis arrivé, bon... j'ai trouvé ça genial. Je ne changerais rien, ça me plaît comme ça.

Social interactions rarely took place between Italians and refugees, who lived largely parallel lives in the villages. Exploring the gap between these separate worlds, I asked the African refugees what they would want to ask Italians. As they wrote and spoke, it seemed that what mattered were not the answers to the questions, but the fact that they had these questions at all. Instead of having Italian residents answer these questions, I included them in the essay to reveal the space between Italians and refugees, that participants were confronted with in everyday life.



As well as expressing a gap in understanding, the questions also express ways of understanding the world. For example, church bells in the region would sound every 15 minutes. Based on the Islamic call for prayer, Koné had assumed that this must mean Italians are praying every 15 minutes.⁶ The question “why do you like Blacks” had been directed at me personally. Based on the more common experience of being ignored by Italians, Khalifa had interpreted my interest in their lives to mean that I liked “Blacks.”



Similarly, when Amadou wrote “why are Italians always on their phone,” he was not looking for an answer, but expressing an experience. He explained it to me as a great pun, for so often he had heard Italians critique Africans for being on their phones, now he would question *Italians* for being on *their* phones.

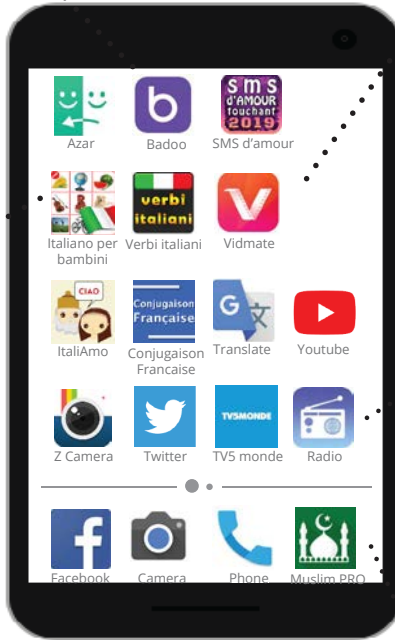
To explore the world of the phone, I asked Amadou and others to guide me through their phones, and from these stories recreated two typical phone screens.

Meeting new people This is just a fun way of meeting new people. Look, if you open Azar it starts a video chat with a stranger who is nearby. This is how you make friends. Sometimes I look at SMS d'amour to know what kind of nice things I could say to women.

Vidmate There is no internet in my room, so I download music and films to watch in my bed.

Italian learning Before, I was using these apps a lot to learn Italian, but now I know it all already. ItaliAmo is in Chinese, I don't speak Chinese, but it teaches you Italian too.

Radio Radio Kiss Kiss is my favourite. On the other stations they talk a lot in Italian and I don't understand that.



Muslim pro The times for prayer change with the position of the sun. This app reminds me to pray throughout the day. It wakes me up every morning - just before sunrise. I also read from the app, it has lots of different languages.

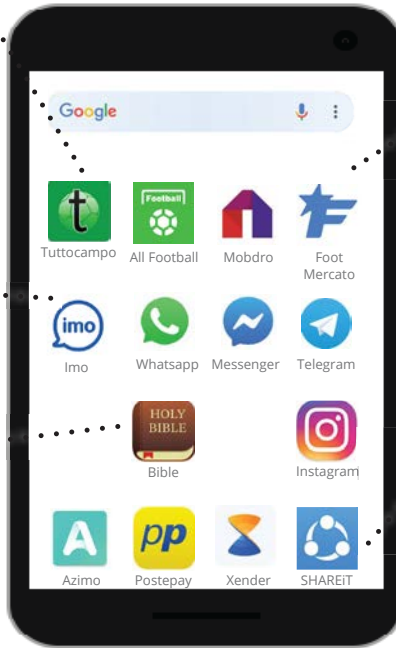
Tuttocampo is for Italian football. It also includes the team I am playing for: Marafrika. Here you can see our team players and the goals. They only show one team player though, and only his goals, even though I have also scored 5 times. They are not being fair, it is because we are an all-African team, and we are too strong.

Football apps I check All Football to know which team is playing, then I watch the match on Mobdro. Through Foot Mercato I can follow player transfers.

Messaging I call my mum in Guinea through Facebook. Some friends use Instagram to text, others use Imo or Whatsapp, that's why I have different ones.

Sharing offline The internet is so weak, but if you use SHAREIT you can transfer files and also apps by connecting both to the same network without internet.

Bible I prefer to read the bible on my phone. Every week I copy a quote and place it on my 'wall' in the app. Now I'm on a five-week streak.



These phone apps express a multitude of experiences, interests, and needs. The apps for finding new people, and staying in touch with friends and family elsewhere, show how social relations were created and maintained through the phone. The Bible and Qur'an apps are standing in for a religious community that could not be found in the surrounding area, as the nearest mosque was many kilometres away, and even Christian refugees were unable to go to church because the already limited bus network did not operate on Sundays.

Intrigued by the importance of football, illustrated by the many football apps that were used, I asked participants to draw their favourite teams. Listen to photo below here:

www.land-unknown.eu/listen-to-watching-football



5th of March 2019, Champions League, Ajax versus R al Madrid. Ajax surprises the world by winning 4-1, continuing to the quarter finals, throwing R al Madrid out of the league.



Sidike My first team, my last team. This team is my happiness.



Yaya El Hadji Diouf is my hero and he started playing for Liverpool. When he left Liverpool, I remained with the team. I will remain with Liverpool for the rest of my life. Have you seen this motto: 'you'll never walk alone'.



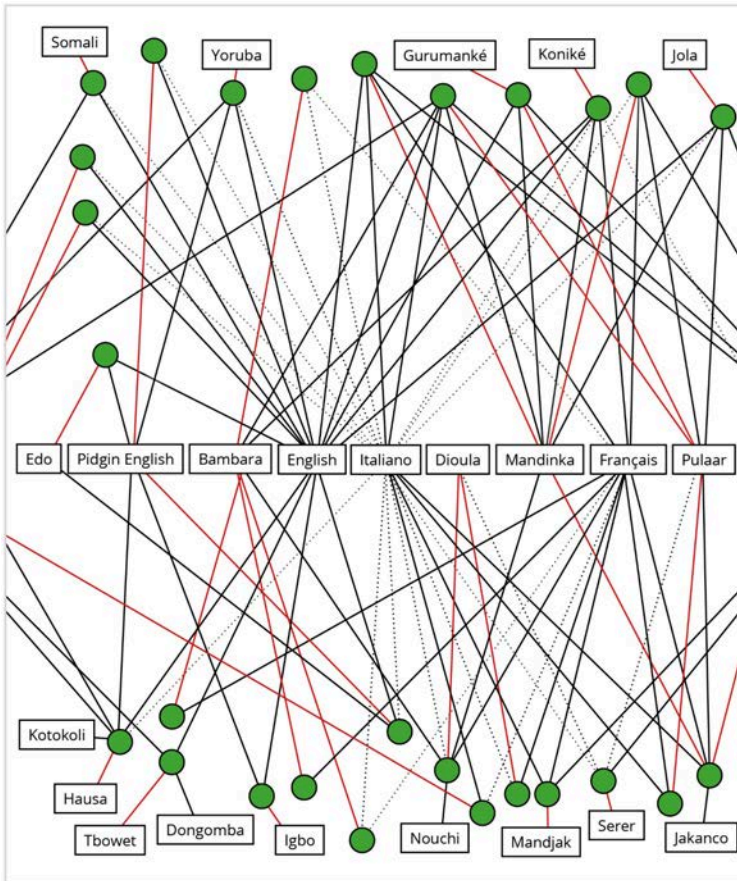
Souleymane J'ai connu ce club gr ce   mon cousin. J'avais 10 ou 11 ans quand il m'a appel    venir regarder, Juventus contre R al Madrid. Il me parlait du style de jeu de Del Piero. Apr s le match j' tais impressionn  de l' quipe.

What I thought would be a quick process of sketching, turned into hours of painstakingly copying every detail of the football emblem. As we worked together, talked about their teams, and watched football matches, for a moment I shared in the joy, frustration, and home that is football.

The image and sounds also give a glimpse into life inside the refugee house. There were houses like this one all across the valley, sometimes with as few as three people, other times as many as 26. Most of the refugees were from across Sub-Saharan Africa, and rarely would they live with people from their own country or ethnic group. As a result communication was complex. Amadou could be speaking Mandinka, then turn around and continue in Pulaar, answer a question in broken English, and then turn to me to speak in Italian. For an untrained ear, all African languages merge into one, so that the number and diversity of languages might not immediately be recognized or appreciated. In an effort to explore the world of communication, I mapped with participants the different languages they spoke.

The maps shows that in this rural valley in central Italy, more than 27 languages could be heard on a daily basis, by people who spoke an average of four languages each. The map was intended to make this great linguistic capacity visible for Italian residents, who often complained that refugees did not speak 'the language'. What was for me an effort acknowledge and celebrate the beauty of language, actually made some participants uncomfortable as I was not only making their language skills visible, but also the ethnic identities that were associated with those languages. To circumvent this issue, the map does not include any names, and people are only represented by a green dot. This made the map even more complex, evoking even better the chaos and complexity of everyday conversations.

Readers can enter this world of communication by tracing how one person (green dot) might communicate with another, in a shared language (white box), through the lines that indicate speakers' linguistic ability: native (red), fluent (black), conversational (dotted).



By reflecting on the creation of a visual essay, this article explored the question: how might we communicate other people's lived experiences, especially when these are being framed by politicized and mediatized realities. The visual essay responds to this through a triple movement where creating shared experiences was at the heart of the making process, the reading experience and the essay's intended impact. Rather than being guided by a discourse on refugees, the shared making of the essay's materials was a way for participants to guide me through parts of their lives, beyond the realities presented in politics and the media.

This invitation to enter a world was then extended to others through a visual essay that experimented with an alternative reading experience. The essay presents the materials in such a way that it raises as many questions as it provides answers, thus defying closure and maintaining the distance that is necessary in "speaking nearby." (Chen). Instead of offering a comprehensive narrative and thus explicitly or implicitly confining people to a story told about them, the visual essay only discloses the world in-part, through glimpses into lived realities. Moreover, the essay plays with form, poetics, and aesthetics in an effort to evoke experiences in readers, rather than only describe the ones of others. It was assumed that it is not a specific mode (text, image etc.) that is particularly evocative, but the way it is employed. The essay thus appeals to a multimodality where people, stories, images, and experiences temporarily hold together on the page, creating a micro-world that readers can briefly share in.

Lastly, by maintaining both distance and closeness, understanding and misunderstanding, a sense of familiarity and strangeness, it is hoped that the essay triggers curiosity, so that readers, including the residents of Valle di Comino, feel encouraged to seek contact and share in experiences with others also outside the page.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and editors of this special issue for assisting me in giving shape to this article. This research was part of a postgraduate degree Visual Ethnography at Leiden University and I am thankful for the generous financial contributions of the Leiden University Fund, the Trustee Fund, and the Minerva Fund that made this research possible. I am grateful to friends and student colleagues at Leiden University for their encouragement and feedback, and to Dr. Mark Westmoreland in specific, for his always critical yet supportive supervision throughout the process. I continue to be indebted, and remain immensely grateful to participants and friends in Italy, who not only helped create the visual essay, but also welcomed me from the very beginning, offered their time, and trusted me with their stories and images.

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IMAGE NOTES

Photos of Yaya and Kone's favourite place (Figure 5 and 6) were made by Silvia di Passio. Drawings of football emblems (Figure 11) were made by the participants Yaya, Sidike, and Souleymane. App icons (Figure 9 and 10) were taken from the App Store/Google Play. All other materials created by the author.

NOTES

1. A note on terminology. When I use the term "refugee" I refer to the people who were hosted in the asylum facilities, where most of them were awaiting asylum, and a few of them had been granted or were

rejected asylum. Italians in the region would generally not use the word refugee, which they instead associated with victims of wars they had seen on TV. Italians who worked with refugees would generally use “richiedenti asilo” (asylum seekers), “migranti” (migrants), or occasionally “immigrati” (immigrants). The average Italian resident, however, would use “extracomunitari” (non-EU citizens) or “i neri” (black people). The refugees themselves would use the term “African,” unless referring to someone from outside of Sub-Saharan Africa, in which case they used the relevant nationality.↵

2. The research was part of an MA degree in Visual Ethnography, Leiden University, supervised by Dr. Mark Westmoreland. Research on site took place between January and March 2019, in the valley of Valle di Comino, Italy. The valley hosted just over 100 refugees in shared housing and apartments. The majority of refugees were men (82%) from across Africa (83%). The full visual essay includes the creative contributions of 15 people, but is based on research activities conducted with 40 research participants, primarily young men from across Sub-Saharan Africa.↵
3. See www.subjectiveeditions.org.↵
4. This is not to say that refugee participants experienced the world in the same manner, nor that there is a single world shared between them. Rather, it is to say that there is a space shared between refugees in a way that there was generally not a shared space between Italian and refugee residents. For more on world-making, see for example Nelson Goodman (Goodman).↵
5. Over the course of one day, with a group of refugees and a local photographer, Silvia di Passio, we visited participants’ favourite places in the valley. This activity was inspired by *A Monday in Kabul*, a work by Dutch photographer Marieke van der Velden (van der Velden).↵
6. In the villages, church bells would sound every 15 minutes to indicate time. There are two different kinds of bells, one to indicate the hour, and a different bell for the minutes; once, twice, or three times for respectively for 15, 30, or 45 minutes past the hour.↵