

Chapter 6. Transgressing The Fortress...Creativity in the Borderlands

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Migration is no stranger to the Maltese narrative. Accession to the European Union coincided with new possibilities for migration for the Maltese, and the arrival of migrants from the European Union and beyond. For many, migration has created opportunities for adventure and new possibilities – for others it has served as an escape route, in the search for safety and security. The attempts to securitize the European Union and control the migrant ‘other’ have been violent, divisive and dehumanizing; the consequences on human lives have been devastating. But this is only part of the picture. The border also embodies a creative, exciting and humanizing space that provides the possibilities for transformative practice. In this short piece I position Malta and contemporary migration patterns within a historical and geopolitical narrative, and present some of the creative initiatives implemented by a team of young people committed to working beyond the border.

On ‘Malteseness’, the border and migration...

Colonialism, trade, poverty, conflict, sea and sunshine, love or employment- just some of the many reasons that people have travelled to, from or through the islands of Malta. Migration lies at the core of the Maltese narrative: for thousands of years, and for an array of reasons, migrants from around the world have reached the shores of Malta and made it their home. Evidence of these migratory movements are everywhere in the languages we speak, the buildings we inhabit and the food we eat. Towards the end of the twentieth century migratory movements to Malta took an interesting turn. Accession to the European Union meant that Malta could now benefit from a ‘borderless’ Europe, and thousands of migrants from around the EU chose to make Malta their home whilst many Maltese spread their wings in search of employment, education and adventure in another EU member state. In order to ensure free movement within the EU, the removal of internal borders coincided with the strengthening of the external borders. Situated at the centre of the Mediterranean, Malta is located on what has come to be known as the Central Mediterranean Route. In the absence of any safe and legal routes, the Maltese islands are located along one of the key passages – and by far the most deadly - used by migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, forced to flee the coast of North Africa in search of security and safety.

Fortress Malta

The historical fortresses surrounding the Maltese islands were reinforced - metaphorically and physically - as a new group of migrants, specifically asylum seekers fleeing war, persecution, violence and poverty from countries in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, sought refuge in Malta. The majority were young men, in their late teens and twenties, in search of safety and new opportunities. Their arrival has largely been met with structural violence. For many years Malta implemented a mandatory detention policy for all arrivals, the conditions and duration of which were condemned by the European Court of Human Rights as violating basic human rights. Racism, Islamophobia and hard line policy approaches that are rooted in militarized border apparatuses became the norm; attempts to strip the ‘illegalized’ body of agency and a life of dignity. At a political level, the border serves as a state instrument of control, and also as the ideological marker for the construction of national and political identity – delineating who belongs, and who does not; who has rights, and the right to rights (Pisani, 2016). For those making the deadly crossing, the border has come to represent both death, and hope.

At the borderlands...

It is within this context that we decided to establish Integra Foundation, a not-for-profit NGO. The Foundation’s vision is that of supporting inclusive, non-discriminating and nondisabling societies, where all individuals have the right to human dignity, freedom, respect and social justice. Our mission is that of facilitating the space for marginalised individuals and groups to be listened to and to have an active and meaningful say in their lives and well-being on their own terms. Over the years the Foundation has grown and developed, thanks to a team of volunteers who are committed to our core values and eager

to work towards our vision of a safer, just and more inclusive world. Our work includes advocacy, research, lobbying, the provision of English and Maltese lessons and running *Dinja Waħda*, a community drop-in centre. Nestled in the backstreets of the fortified city of Valletta, the drop-in centre was set up to provide a space for young asylum seekers and refugees to meet up, learn English, access information, forge new relationships and feel safe.

In many ways, *Dinja Waħda* has emerged as a hybrid, liminal space wherein “the prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (Anzaldúa, 1999: 25). Thanks to our volunteers, and the relationships they have forged with young refugees and asylum seekers, the Integra drop-in has morphed and embraced new pedagogical conditions, disrupting and contesting divisive geopolitical borders and the binaries established in policy and populist discourse. Young people, be they volunteers, interns or refugees, locate a liminal space: neither adults nor children, transiting perhaps between school and employment, positioned between multiple spaces of belonging: nation, gender, sexuality, legal status. Within these borderlands, albeit still bounded by time and space, young people construct a sense of self, and create their own possibilities, confronting borders. Their bodies, the site of multiple scripts, inscribed by patriarchal, colonial, statist, ageist and capitalist histories (Pisani, 2013), are no longer subject to control and regulation, but instead explore, embrace new opportunities, and take on new and multiple subjectivities and untamed possibilities; they laugh together, they cry together, they play, they write, they discuss, they share, and they struggle. They create. In doing so, they defy the dominant discourses of who can and who cannot belong, of who is human, and indeed what it means to be human: who has the right to rights? Creative projects using different mediums have taught us how imagination can be a catalyst for transforming the group. Learning English moves beyond the functionality of conversing in a new language, or compiling a CV, to writing poetry and short stories. And as they write, their flesh becomes text that can move through each of our bodies, transforming the writer and the reader (Keating, 2009). The space has opened up new possibilities for entertainment and laughter. Evenings include film nights, followed by discussions and the sharing of experiences, hope, dreams and fears and film nights include food preparation and sharing. And as weeks have morphed into months, the young people have started to explore beyond the confines of the safe space. Together they have danced at Maltese festas, followed the Carnival floats, jumped on buses and explored the beaches and countryside, attended art exhibitions and museums. They explore, they photograph and document, they laugh and they share. In doing so they reconstruct that liminal space and what it means to ‘belong’.



Stejjer Imfewha, Integra Foundation – Photo Credit: Kasia Zmoka

Our projects have also included collaborations with artists and creatives. The project *'Ħwawar u Fjuri'* (Herbs and Flowers) created opportunities for Maltese and migrants from around the world to meet and to 'get to know the other' through the narration of stories on the use of herbs and flowers in one's own country and culture of origin. The following passages, documented during one of the workshops, provide the reader with a small example of how simply talking about flowers can break down the borders.

Anyone familiar with the Maltese landscape will be familiar with the bougainvillea, a flowering vine also found in Somalia. The first passage recounts memories of home before the war, whilst the second narrative is that of a young Somali and life in Mogadishu. Those of us who have not encountered war, however, may now begin to appreciate the devastation of violence:

"I grew up with flowers actually. They did not grow in the war time, when I saw the picture of our house, it was gone, I could not see a dead root of the flowers in my house, not even on tree I planted. We had these hanging trees from the wall, there was a gate, it was a small villa, the house was... what is it called? I take a picture of this flower every time I see it, 'bougainvillea'...It was the colour of my house... When I see it I stop and dreams for two minutes, and then I continue walking."

"In Somalia we never saw flowers, only in a peaceful place, they are like humans. War kills flowers"

Building on the success of *Ħwawar u Fjuri*, *Stejjer Imfewħa* (Scented Stories) was an artistic heritage project that aimed at creating, preserving and communicating the historical and cultural significance of spices and flowers. Artists worked with the narratives that emerged through workshops, and documented them through various art forms including photography, performance and collage. Both projects aimed at reaching out, inviting others to enter the borderlands and exploring new possibilities, new ways of knowing, together.

We live in difficult and uncertain times. Borders can be deadly and divisive – I want to use this space to invite the reader to cross the border, to enter and embrace an alternative space which offers a response that is rich in creative expressions, with unexplored possibilities and experiences that defy the tick box analysis provided by the Cultural Participation Survey 2016 (NSO, 2017). Within the borderlands, a messy, vague space that transgresses imposed borders, young people are resisting false binaries, both physical and metaphorical. For a moment they are liberated they resist, they reclaim their voices, they cling to new opportunities for political and creative expression, they expose us to new ways of knowing, of understanding and of resistance.

References

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