



# Will migrant workers rescue rural regions? Challenges of creating stability through mobility



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## ABSTRACT

Many rural communities experience new growth through in-migration. In Herøy, Northern Norway, this is a result of increased labour migration in the fishing industry and a comprehensive effort by the municipality to encourage migrant workers to settle there. This paper addresses the ambiguities of creating stability through mobility. Through a case study from Herøy, we explore the complex relations between migrants' mobile economic practices and social integration processes by analysing how migrants engage with Herøy's landscape in multiple manners. This landscape entails networks of people and relations, materialities, dreams and hopes. Studying engagement, in addition to contestations and intersecting trajectories, we analyse how the landscape of those on the move is interrelated with that of those "being moved through". We argue that creating stability in rural communities by encouraging migrant settlement requires going beyond economic integration – emphasising the more versatile and vulnerable processes of relating to unfamiliar places and worlds. It also requires an understanding of stability that embraces uncertainty and opens up towards various forms of belonging.

## 1. Introduction

"When I think of the word home, my mind is dark and empty". This is the opening line in Darta Turite's short documentary "A place".<sup>1</sup> In this beautiful film from Tjøtta, an island off the North Norwegian coast, the young film student and immigrant Darta Turite reflects on what it means to feel at home in a place. The film portrays Darta's best friend Signe and her strong feelings and attachment to her home place. It also reveals Darta's own thoughts of attachment. Signe is born in Tjøtta and is closely attached to the place – to her house, the mountains and the spectacular view. "She knows what home is", Darta says. We see how Signe moves around in the landscape so dear to her, explaining how she has this incredible place to which she can always return and how that makes her strong and happy. Darta lives in the same place. However, she does not have the same attachment to this landscape. Darta comes from another place, in Latvia. She ends the film with the following lines: "In a way, I wish I could feel the same way Signe does. That home is a place. But for me, home is not filled with amazing people or beautiful nature. My home does not exist. But it doesn't mean that I'm unhappy, it just ... I just don't have that feeling".

This poetic short film addresses questions of great immediate interest in our world of mobility: how do established as well as new

inhabitants relate to and engage in the landscape in which they live? Darta's reflections invite us to open our perspectives on places and landscapes to a stronger sense of movement. Landscapes are in flux, with people on the move bringing in new experiences and engagements. The relationship between mobility and place attachment has been subject to considerable discussion within the field of mobility research, and it is well established that mobility is a driver of change in rural areas (Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014). The increased focus on mobility raises questions about the complex interplay between movement, fixity and place, and Milbourne and Kitchen (2014) call for more ethnographic research regarding rural mobility. We address this interplay using a case study from Herøy, in which we have followed the municipality's integration programme. Many people, such as Darta, have come from other places, particularly from Eastern Europe, but now live in rural Norway and are trying to find their place in this landscape.

The stability of rural places is often associated with senses of belonging, tradition and stasis (Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014), and according to Bell and Osti (2010), mobility is a neglected phenomenon in rural studies. However, mobility is and has always been central to the enactment of the rural (Aure, 2008; Gerrard, 2013; Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014; Munkejord, 2016; Neis et al., 2005), and rural areas are currently experiencing various types of migration, which are changing

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<sup>1</sup> A place (original title: "En plass"), edited by D. Turite, is a result of a workshop for young filmmakers at Filmveksthuset Tvibit, Tromsø, and a winner of the award Dokfilmfangst 2013.

the composition of rural populations: marriage migration, asylum and refugee migration, and labour and lifestyle migration (Collantes et al., 2014; Hedberg and Haandrikman, 2014; Jentsch, 2007). The opening of the European borders led to many Eastern Europeans moving to Western Europe in search of work and new life opportunities. This represents a significant demographic trend and can be observed as a response to the population decline in rural areas, which are experiencing an ageing population, out-migration, a labour force shortage and pressure on public services (Hugo and Morén-Alegret, 2008). It is argued that migration is a pre-requisite for rural economic regeneration (Stockdale, 2006). Herøy, an archipelago located on the coast of Nordland with 1777 inhabitants, is one of these rural municipalities where a long decrease in population has changed direction. The population is now growing due to increased international labour migration in the fishing industry and a comprehensive effort by the municipality to encourage temporary labour migrants to settle and become new inhabitants. The municipality sees mobile workers as a means to create and sustain stability in the community. Whereas burgeoning research has been conducted on the political-economic processes that explain why people may move to rural areas (Dufty-Jones, 2014), understanding why people stay is less researched and represents a shift towards a more contextual and relational approach to migration (Halfacree and Rivera, 2012). Recognizing that the fluid and the fixed are relationally interdependent (Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014), there is a need to study how emerging mobile lifestyles impact the stability of rural places (Shubin and Dickey, 2013).

Whereas the migrant workers in Herøy are actively sought after and immediately involved in the labour market, we try to understand the more versatile and vulnerable processes of relating to unfamiliar places and worlds beyond economic integration. As Bender (2001) argues, we need to ask how people on the move understand and interpret the places at which they arrive. Engagement with the landscape is an analytical lens that allows the investigation of interrelations between the social and the material as well as mobility and stability. Through this approach, we aim to contribute to the debates over integration and migration with a sensitivity to the complex connections – and disconnections – between place and belonging. The study addresses the processes involved when trying to create stability in a rural community through the settlement of migrant workers.

The article proceeds with an outline of our theoretical approach. After a section on methodology, analyses of how migrants engage with the landscape of Herøy in multiple manners follow. To illustrate the complexity of these processes, we first present two contrasting stories of in-migration to Herøy: one of a Baltic work migrant and one of a Norwegian lifestyle migrant. We then discuss how the hierarchical processes in the workplace and labour market infiltrate other arenas in Herøy. We analyse the ambiguity of creating stability through mobility by investigating how including and excluding mechanisms in social arenas are intertwined and how the robustness that is created also produces new vulnerabilities and uncertainties that people have to live with. Through these stories, we analyse the manner in which migrant workers engage with Herøy and the challenges of social integration in a context of highly segregated working environments. We conclude with a discussion of the relationships between fixities and fluidities, and suggest an understanding of stability that embraces uncertainty and various forms of belonging.

## 2. Theoretical approach

Recent work regarding migration to rural areas points to how mobility influences not only the everyday lives of those on the move but also the socioeconomic situation of the host communities and vice versa (Knight et al., 2017; Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014; Shubin and Dickey, 2013). Many studies emphasise how processes of migration have become processes of settlement (Simard and Jentsch, 2009; de Lima, 2012; Bonifacio, 2014; Collantes et al., 2014). However, the oppositions

between temporary and permanent, or mobile and settled, are challenged by emerging migrant lifestyles that create different patterns of living and working ‘on the move’. As argued by Shubin and Dickey (2013: 2960), Eastern European migrants appear to ‘settle within mobility’. Their mobile lifestyles are often perceived as a ‘threat’ to the stability of the host community (Stockdale, 2006). Place attachment and mobility are often regarded as contradictory, even though such assumptions are contested by empirical findings (Gustafson, 2001). Milbourne and Kitchen (2014) emphasise that the relationship between mobility and place attachment is not one of contradiction and mutual exclusiveness but instead connected and related to the elasticity of place. There is hence a need to challenge the assumption of the permanency of rural migration and explore how rural places become meeting places for people at different stages of complex journeys through time and space, as also argued by Milbourne (2007). To understand the following rural transformations, Jentsch (2007) and de Lima (2012) call for studies of the interaction and negotiation of migrants and their new communities. Our contribution is to study the interactions between migrants, established inhabitants and place by analysing engagement with landscapes of movement and stability, in addition to contestations and intersecting trajectories. Investigating engagement with landscape, we are concerned with the landscape of those on the move in addition to that of those being moved through (Bender, 2001) and how these interrelate.

Our theoretical ambition is to explore how a performative perspective on landscape can serve as a key to examine the complex relation between place and mobility. Ingold (2000) is crucial to the understanding of landscape as related to the practices of the dwellers. He defines landscape as “the world as it is known to those who dwell therein, who inhabit its places and journey along the paths connecting them” (Ingold, 2000:193). Rejecting the division between the mental and the material, he moves beyond the opposition between a naturalistic and a culturalistic view of landscape. Landscape, he says, tells – or is – the story of life and dwelling; it enfolds the life of generations who have moved around in it (Ingold, 2000). In this sense, a place owes its character to the experience and activities of all those who spend time there – also those on the move that ‘journey along the paths’.

Both Bender (1998) and Massey (2006) have criticised the dwelling perspective, warning against assuming essential harmony. Bender emphasises that the manner in which people understand and engage with the worlds around them is always historically and spatially contingent and potentially conflicted (Bender, 1998, 2001). She claims that studying landscape is about the complexity of people’s lives and that landscape must be studied as political, dynamic and contested, constantly open to renegotiation. Focusing on movement, migration and exile, Bender rejects the common understanding that global movements create a dislocation between people and landscape. People are never nowhere; they always relate to the landscape through which they move. Bender thus gives attention to the way that contemporary developments come together in landscapes. She discusses how and why people sharing the same landscape yet engage with it so differently, how people on the move create a sense of place and belonging, and how engagement with the landscape is influenced by gender, ethnicity, class, and other factors (Bender, 1998, 2001). Landscapes thus become a means to link the local and the mobile, the stable and the temporary. We join Bender in arguing that we need to work with landscapes as polysemic, contextual, biographical and particular and study how people create sense in a world of mobility. This allows differential accounts of lives and places, imaginaries, intentions and aims. The landscapes of those on the move also affect the landscapes of the less mobile.

Massey emphasises the political aspects of place and landscape (Massey, 2005, 2006). She argues that place and landscape must be understood as “events, as happenings, as moments that will again be dispersed” (Massey, 2006, 46). Massey conceptualises places as locations of intersecting relations and trajectories, and she highlights the

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