“Seykou” at the club where he works in Barcelona, handing out flyers

Vecinos:
Making a Neighborhood Arts Project
Barcelona, Spain
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Sydelle Willow Smith

This photo essay and accompanying short film Vecinos (available at http://vimeo.com/82091772) were part of a residency Smith completed at Jiwar, Creation and Society based in Gracia, Barcelona and funded by The Africa Centre and the Spanish Embassy of South Africa. Smith focuses her artistic practice on memory, place, and home making with a strong focus on migration. Her film Vecinos has been published on Africa is a Country previously and reviewed on The Postcolonialist.
Vecinos (Neighbours)
Many participants for this project, who are all originally from Africa, had never met a white South African before, and my cultural identity became a wealthy topic of debate and discussion. Most participants I worked with, coming from Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Ghana, Mali and Senegal, did not have extensive knowledge of Southern African and assumed me to be a European who spoke bad broken Spanish. One shared experience we could relate with was a sense that interactions with strangers in Africa tended to be warmer and more welcoming than in Europe. Being a South African can be weird, our history is complex, as are the constructs of race deeply rooted in the national psyche. My skin is on the pale side. Every couple of months someone will ask me “But where am you really from?” I am a product of colonial history.

Spending the six weeks in Barcelona I forged a small path through the city. I am intrigued by how people who are a minority, such as African “migrants” in Barcelona, navigate the city. What is their experience of it? What happens after one survives the treacherous crossing by boat, such as participant Mamadou Dia, or how has the experience changed after living here for twenty years, like Xumo Nunjo? How does one hold onto a deeply rooted sense of self, a cultural identity, and make new paths whereby lines of ethnicity, race, and nationality begin to shift and become malleable in order to adapt and make new forms of home? My tourist eyes have partially interpreted the stories shared with me. A collaborative conversation was had between people from different parts of Africa, in a complex beautiful city - Barcelona – and in the process a visual document of interpretations of “neighbourhood” was made.

Personal Diary: Day Three, November 1st 2013
The residency is so beautiful. Tiled magical intricate floors. Pressed ceilings. Stained Glass windows. A courtyard garden. Gracia is magical. Old. Gaudi’s psychedelic lines, fairy castle twists and turns. So many young faces adorned in Halloween tribal party paint. All night wanderings, letting the river of Barcelona take you. Monday the real work starts so excited to meet new faces and bring an empathetic eye to stories I encounter. Immigration often framed sensationally – the camera a weapon the photographer a hero, devoid of personal subjectivity, personal pleasure, personal pain.

4:30 pm that same day: The conflict of public space and claims to ownership that create public space. Art that engages breaks barriers of access of bureaucracy, policy, government. I met Mamadou and Seykou today, both from Senegal, both been in Spain for a number of years. Mamadou wants to let young people back home know that life in Europe is not paradise and its not easy, it comes with a lot of difficulties. Seykou was a bit shy with me, and also my Spanish is atrocious.
Methodology
How does one hold on to a deeply rooted sense of self, a cultural identity, and make new paths whereby lines of ethnicity, race, and nationality begin to shift and become malleable in order to adapt and make new forms of home? Armed with a complex position, a great deal of curiosity, and a wealth of questions; this project needed to be multilayered. Thus Vecinos is a multidisciplinary project. I worked in different modes from documentary portraiture to participatory photography, whereby people took pictures on disposable cameras of what they wanted to show of Barcelona in terms of their experience of navigating and negotiating the city, thus “neighbourhood making”. Some people I met are very rooted within Barcelona, surrounded by friends, studies, dreams, their lives are lived in the present – home being where they are, and this is what they chose to photograph. Some of these participants had been in Barcelona for more than ten years, arriving when they were quite young, thus “growing up” in Spain to a degree. Others had only arrived in the past five years as adults seeking economic opportunities. Most participants I worked with felt strong connections to home, running organización no gubernamentales (ONGs or NGOs in English) to educate youth at home in Senegal and Ghana, like Mamadou and Ousmane, or traveling back regularly to see family, like Xumo. Participants, such as Woyta, chose to photograph the struggle for everyday survival they encounter, scouring for leftovers in rubbish bins across the city where people from many different countries come to eek out an existence.

While my participants took their own photographs, I made a short film based on my conversations with them, layered with interviews reflecting varied experiences of coming to Barcelona, making the strange familiar, and the continued strange unfamiliarity of certain things, such as a sense of European individualism. Ousmane, for example, chose to photograph storefront windows of luxury brands, such as Gucci and Versace, and scrap metal collectors. Scrap metal is collected by many African migrants in Spain and sold for small amounts to make a meager income. He told me he found the juxtapositions in wealth ironic. These contrasts were unfortunately not completely captured in the photographs due to the lack of flash in the images of the scrap metal collectors at night.

Xumo Nunjo, originally from Cameroon, “I am from the planet Earth, born in Africa, I have lived in Europe for the past twenty years. You can never lose your
African roots — they are too strong, but you have to be universal, you have to be planetary. Home is the cosmos. Home is this planet. Don’t accept anything else”.

His photographs taken in the area where he lives, La Raval, Barcelona on a 35mm disposable camera I gave him for the project:

Xumo’s Quotes from the short film:
“I feel at home everywhere. Feeling comfortable or not here, I feel at home, at home with problems, but at home.”

“What is the point if you have 3000 friends on Facebook and you don’t even know your neighbour?”

“And also, like in the Raval I am living, if someone talks next door we hear him, so I think this direct physical relation here it is a little bit delicate you know. Everybody mind his own business here, in Paris if you fall down on the metro, maybe people think if they touch you they can catch a disease.”

“The advice I could give to Young African people, they have to be universal. I don’t like the Word. They have to be open, planetary. Their home, their own home. You never lose African roots. African roots are too strong. You cannot lose them. You can forget everything. You can live like a guy from Paris or New York, but the African thing is there because you grew up in Africa. What you take there you can never grow out of yourself. It’s too strong.”
Mamadou Dia has been living in Europe for the past eight years. He came to Spain by boat from Senegal, “The term *neighbour* in my country is a sacred thing. In fact we always urge people to consider them, the neighbors are an extension of the family. I was lucky to live a short time in Barcelona and to become friends with my neighbors. We always recommend to look at the community where we live, a mother, a father, brothers and friends, so it will feel protected as a family and people can live in harmony”.

Pictures Mamadou took:

Mamadou has written 3052, a book about his experiences, representing the number of kilometres he traveled from Senegal to Spain.

Portrait of Mamadou at his flat, when I met him he was busy organizing his NGO’s next trip back to Senegal and tying up loose ends.
Woyta, from Mali, did not understand why I was interested in working with him, and was frustrated at times with my lack of comprehension of Spanish, he told me through a translator that he was African but had learnt Spanish quickly so why couldn’t I. He also often reminded me that my country’s national soccer team, Bafana Bafana often lost to Mali in international games, a fact he found amusing. I did not spend that much time with Woyta as he spent a lot of time looking for work, and obviously could not give too much time to the project. He did however attend the public presentation of the project and the exhibition and became increasingly involved towards the end. He chose not to appear in the short film, and did not want to disclose information about his history and how he had came to be in Barcelona, but was a keen participant in other ways and attended all of the public exhibition events held for The Making Neighbourhood Project.

Woyta is originally from Mali, he is 28 years old and has been in Spain for 5 years.

“He escogido estas fotos porque se vea como la gente vive aquí, la vida, qué hace la gente para sobrevivir, que la vida aquí no es tan fácil.” I took these photos because I want people to see the life we are living to survive, and the life is not easy.”

Making Neighbourhood Project in Barcelona with Jiwar Creation and Society.
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Originally from Ghana, Ousamane Umar traveled to Libya on foot where he took a boat to Spain, and was housed by the Red Cross on arrival in Europe where he met a Spanish couple that adopted him and brought him to Barcelona. He now lives in Gracia, studying Computer Science and working in a bike repair shop part time.

"I think home is where you live in peace and comfort. Sometimes we lose our time waiting or saying we will enjoy when we go home, but here we are. We are not just here to work and get money. Let’s remember that this is home too, and every minute you lose will not come back again. So let’s make the most of our time no matter where we are. It is true that there is no place like home. But this is also our home so let’s enjoy it and make neighbourhood”.

Photos by Ousmane Umar:
Gelia Barila Angri is the last interviewee to feature in the film, but unfortunately her disposable camera was faulty and none of her pictures developed.

“I’m 24 years, and I’m from Equatorial Guinea. I came to live in Barcelona when I was 16. So I’ve been here eight years … For me, a home is where you make your home, where you feel comfortable. No matter where you are born. For me personally my home is here, but I always remember my roots. I never forget where I come from”.

Quotes from Gelia from short film:

“(Not) all people who’ve come here have come by boat or live on the street, or have nothing to eat, or have nowhere to sleep … there are also immigrants who are here and who are actually fighting for their future, who are studying, who are working and trying to find a better future. Not all migrants come from their country to another country to steal or to do harm - to see another part of immigration … not what people are used to see, what they see on TV, what the news shows of Africa, that people are starving. No, Africa is much more, encompasses much more than what they show in movies.”

“I came here to seek a better future, to study, to have better studies, to have a better job and a future. On arrival it cost me a bit to adjust the first year because it was completely different, new, alien, and of course I didn’t know people, I didn’t know anyone. But it became easier when I lived with my aunt who had two daughters - one more or less my age… I went with her into the street, she presented me to her friends…until I enrolled at a school and I got to know people slowly. I was meeting people and so came to form my own circle of friends, you know? The point is to meet people and to make friends.”
“I do believe that there is racism but less and less. I personally have never experienced racism on my part, but I do believe there is. People are slowly accepting that there are many immigrants from outside … people who want to integrate, people who are seeking a better life, who are not coming to take your job, or anything like that … you know? I think people are tolerating it more.”

Sydelle Willow Smith was born in 1987 in Johannesburg. After living in London and Scotland for two years working as a cleaner and dishwasher and backpacking South America, she attended the Market Photo Workshop where she completed her Foundation and Intermediate Courses in 2007. In 2011 she graduated from the University of Cape Town with an Honors Degree in Social Anthropology, and an Undergraduate degree in Video Production specializing in Cinematography. She works as a photographer/filmmaker with a keen interest in migration, memory, place making and participatory social projects. She has exhibited in South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Holland and Barcelona. She is based in Cape Town, a city of great beauty and vastly horrendous spatial and economic divides that drives her crazy, but she still can’t seem to leave, however in October 2014 she will begin her Msc in African Studies at Oxford University in the UK.

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