

# Invisibility and (Dis)Integration: Examining the Meaning of Migrant Inclusion in Everyday Lived Experience in Rural Areas

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## Abstract

The settlement of migrants in rural areas that are facing population decline has gained increased attention in recent years as an economic, social, and political issue, as well as an opportunity for development for local communities. Studies have primarily focused on investigating whether and how migrants are integrated and included within these areas. This article adopts a fresh perspective by examining how the meaning of “integration” and “inclusion” is given shape by residents and migrant workers themselves. Our research centres on a small rural town in Sardinia, where individuals from Romania and West Africa have relocated to fill job positions traditionally held by Italians. Based on participant observation and in-depth interviews, we examine the everyday experiences of residents and migrants to develop an understanding of the lived realities of integration and inclusion. In doing so, the article calls into question the perceived value of these processes for the very individuals that are supposed to benefit from them.

## Keywords

depopulation; exclusion; inclusion; integration; invisibility; lived experience; migrant workers; refugees; rural and remote areas; small towns

## 1. Introduction

In rural and depopulating Sardinia, a place many young people choose to leave, there is a growing presence of non-white people; not the amenity migrants or tourists, whom Sardinia is relatively used to, but workers who (try to) settle down. In the last decade, migration from non-European countries has also reached small rural towns, often as a consequence of Italy’s asylum and refugee dispersion policies.

The literature on non-EU migrants in rural areas includes an abundance of studies on the so-called “good practices” of integration (e.g., Driel, 2020; European Committee of the Regions, 2020; Moralli et al., 2023). On the other end of the spectrum, and especially in popular media, there is a lot of attention on instances of poor integration management, leading to conflict and politicised opposition (e.g., Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020). In this article, we look at something that has hitherto been overlooked: What happens *where* and *when* the arrival of people from different cultures and with different skin colours do not make noise? What do integration and inclusion mean for both residents and newcomers? Are such concepts even relevant in their everyday encounters? We engage with these questions based on research conducted over nine months in three different villages, with a particular focus on a small town in rural Sardinia, anonymised in this article under the fictitious name of Bellamonti.

Bellamonti is home to a thriving food processing industry with three major brands that produce traditional delicacies known and loved across Sardinia. Despite their importance and the potential economic wealth, these businesses struggle to find enough employees. Once a wealthy town of over 3,000 residents, the population has more than halved since the early 1900s as a consequence of low fertility rates, high levels of out-migration, and an aging population (Istituto nazionale di statistica e informatica, 2021). Few Italians who try the work decide to stay as it involves intensive and repetitive manual labour that is mostly underpaid, and precarious because of its seasonality. To fill the gap in the workforce, Romanians have established themselves over the past years, and more recently Bellamonti has become home to young men from West Africa. Their dark skin colour, foreign languages, and Muslim religion, combined with a tendency for Italians to self-identify Italy as white and Catholic (Levy, 2015), have made the West African men particularly visible as Other. Bellamonti is different from most other rural towns because the arrival of non-EU migrants is not the result of top-down dispersion policies, and their presence is not managed by municipalities or third-sector organisations. Additionally, their work is of vital importance for the economic and cultural survival of a whole community. It is this scenario that gives a clear view of how integration and inclusion are given shape and meaning by residents on one side and migrants on the other, rather than by policies and official actors.

The article is articulated in five sections. After this introduction, the theoretical background discusses how the concept of integration has been developed (and questioned) “in theory” as a policy and research objective, and “in practice” based on research that discusses lived experiences. The subsequent section briefly introduces the methodology and expands on how a mixed-method approach is reflected in this article. In the fourth section, we consider how the political and theoretical understanding of integration is perceived by Sardinian residents in everyday encounters with non-European newcomers. Here the case of the depopulating town of Bellamonti is explored in detail to discuss the changing experiences of three Gambian men who moved there to work. Finally, we consider how the varying everyday experiences of residents and migrants enrich our understanding of the lived realities of integration and inclusion. In doing so, we call into question the perceived value of these processes for the very individuals who are supposed to participate in and benefit from them.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. Rural Areas' Specificities

Research on immigrant integration in cities has been well-established and recently an interest in migration into rural areas has increasingly gained attention (e.g., Caponio & Petracchin, 2021; Flamant et al., 2020;

Moralli et al., 2023). The “local turn” has pushed migration scholars to move their focus from the national level to cities and metropolitan areas (Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017). Whereas the recent “rural turn,” mainly triggered by national dispersion policies of humanitarian migrants (i.e., anyone applying, having been granted or denied international protection) has meant that scholars and policymakers now focus on extra-urban areas (European Committee of the Regions, 2020; see also Horizon2020 projects MATILDE, Welcoming Spaces, and Whole-COMM). These studies highlight how a well-managed system of reception and inclusion in rural settings has fostered, under certain conditions, the revitalisation of local communities and local development (see, e.g., Galera et al., 2018; MATILDE, 2021; Patuzzi et al., 2020). Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic underlined the essential role of migrant workers, especially in the primary sector (Kalantaryan et al., 2020). This affirmed once again the demand and opportunity for migrants’ settlement in rural areas (Gruber & Zupan, 2022).

In our study, we worked with humanitarian migrants who, after leaving the reception system, moved or remained in rural and remote villages to work. These areas grapple with population decline, aging, reduced services, and a shrinking workforce. Residents are generally not used to seeing non-EU and non-white migrants and are therefore prone to more conservative prejudices and political positions towards migration (Haselbacher, 2019; Huijsmans, 2023). In a 2002 study, the EU Fundamental Rights Agency, formerly known as the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, studied and defined “rural racism.” The study highlighted that racism can be exacerbated in rural areas because of the isolation of immigrants and cultural minorities and the inadequate infrastructure for their integration. It also evidenced that in Italy racism in rural areas was mostly connected to unemployment and poor working conditions (Blaschke & Torres, 2002). Simultaneously, studies show that small villages might equally favour integration by potentially increasing the number of interactions with long-term residents and local institutions (Flamant et al., 2020). In line with other recent studies on interactions between long-term residents and newcomers in rural areas (Hadj Abdou & Katsiaficas, 2023) we argue that the quality of interactions, rather than their quantity, is essential in ensuring inclusion. Furthermore, the unmediated settlement of newcomers in these areas might result in de facto invisibility and exclusion, even where unemployment is not an issue.

## ***2.2. Integration in Theory vs. Integration in Practice***

Integration policies and theories have been adapted to address the challenges posed by migration and governance. In the 1990s the focus shifted from the state to the local level and embraced interculturalism both in theory and practice (Joppke, 2004). Intercultural policies, replacing multicultural approaches, emphasise individual diversity over group differences and promote interaction and dialogue instead of recognition and separation. This approach contrasts with assimilationism, where minorities are expected to adapt to the majority culture (Wood, 2009). Within this framework, diversity is seen as an opportunity that can foster human and social development, cohesion, economic growth, productivity, creativity, and innovation (Council of Europe, 2015).

Integration is defined at the EU level as “a dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation by all immigrants and residents of EU Member States” (European Commission, 2005; Spencer & Charsley, 2021; Strang & Ager, 2010). At the Italian level, however, there is no definition of integration. A National Integration Plan exists only for the small group of humanitarian migrants with a recognised status, and it does not emphasise a “two-way process.” Instead, it encourages newcomers to adapt to Italian values and

norms as well as places the protection of their rights and needs primarily in the hands of (public) service providers. Comparing this to the UN's definition of inclusion as a "whole-of-community" endeavour (Caponio & Petracchin, 2021) makes clear that the Italian approach overlooks the crucial role that Italian citizens could have in the integration process.

The question that we address in this article is whether these approaches to integration (interculturalism, assimilationism, multiculturalism) along with their definitions (two-way process, whole-of-community) have any bearing on residents and officials in their everyday encounters with non-EU migrants. Hence, we do not focus only on migrants' lived experiences, but we address also locals' lived experiences to shed light on how (dis)integration works in practice (Glorius et al., 2020; Phillimore, 2021). We look, for example, at implicit biases that both locals and migrants might have, particularly considering that people might be implicitly biased and explicitly unbiased at the same time (Allport & Kramer, 1946; Holroyd, 2015; Kelly & Roedder, 2008).

Previous studies of lived integration have focused on either the successful implementation of policies and practices of integration or on very contentious situations in which integration is an elusive goal as xenophobia and segregation seem to prevail. Studies on social exclusion, on the other hand, have focused mostly on urban areas where social exclusion is associated primarily with economic exclusion (Glorius et al., 2020; Phillimore & Goodson, 2006). However, there is a less studied and probably more diffused experience of (dis)integration that both migrants and local communities live. This is a silent and seemingly uncomplicated indifference between the two groups (Hadj Abdou & Katsiaficas, 2023), even in the presence of economic inclusion.

A recent strand of literature sheds light on migrants' lived experiences of inclusion/exclusion by focusing on homemaking processes and emplacement (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2013, 2016). Homemaking literature looks at migrants' everyday practices in making a place one's "home" as opposed to trying to negotiate integration in that place. It urges future studies to look at how space is used by both new settlers and long-term residents (Boccagni & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2021). This literature also delves into power dynamics at local and individual levels, underlining the potential for public spaces to become a battleground of everyday claims and aspirations of belonging. These spaces are therefore ideal for observing perceptions of exclusion or inclusion (Fenster, 2005; May, 2011). Following the approach of homemaking literature, in section 4 we focus on the lived experiences of migrants and demonstrate that the meaning of integration is not decided by policies or theories, but shaped and ever-evolving in everyday encounters.

### 3. Methods

This article draws on collaborative research conducted as part of two different research projects (i.e., the Horizon project Whole-COMM and a PhD project in visual anthropology), with similar objectives and interests, but using different analytical lenses and qualitative research tools. The collaborative data collection took place between March and November 2022. We conducted semi-structured and in-depth interviews lasting on average one and a half hours with 12 new residents, 14 long-established residents, five mayors and members of the municipal councils, and five organisation representatives, including business owners employing migrants and managers of refugees' reception centres. The interviewees were spread across three villages in Sardinia, fictiously named Bellamonti, Villaruna, and Santoli in this piece. We returned

to Bellamonti more than 10 times, each time staying either a day or a half day. Here we spent extensive time with three Gambian men, whose names have been concealed through the use of pseudonyms throughout this article. There we conducted participant observation using visual methods and we also organised one focus group with long-term residents of the village.

Bellamonti was selected by combining the criteria for case study selection of the two research projects: a small, depopulating town with low population density and where a small group of non-EU migrants who previously applied for international protection decided to settle. Bellamonti is a unique example in Sardinia of a small and depopulating town with a thriving economy that relies on migrants, including (former) humanitarian migrants from different countries in West Africa. It is also a town that has been hosting foreign workers (mainly from Romania) for many years and in which the political leadership declares support for the arrival of newcomers, even if no policy has been implemented to this end. The choice of engaging repeatedly with the small group of Gambian men who arrived most recently in Bellamonti stems from the need to follow how interactions between long-term residents and newcomers are established and change over time. This allowed us to gain an understanding of integration and inclusion from a lived experience point of view.

After a period of research on-site, recorded interviews were automatically transcribed using Microsoft Office automated transcriptions software, notes on interviews were digitised, and data was anonymised and tagged using Obsidian software. In analysing the data, we specifically looked to compare the views on migration from the perspective of different societal groups. Once we identified specific lines of argument and relevant quotes, we returned to the original recordings for a more accurate transcription where necessary. A wider understanding of the research topic benefits from the authors' separate research work. One of the studies is part of the Whole-COMM project, taking a comparative European perspective on the interactions between, and lived experiences of post-2014 migrants and long-term residents in small and medium-sized towns and rural areas; the other study focuses on conducting extensive ethnographic work on depopulation across Sardinia as part of a PhD in visual anthropology at the University of Manchester. The collaboration has made it possible to explore individual lived experiences in-depth, while placing these in a wider socio-political context. The article reflects this dual approach.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. *Integration as Invisibility*

Notes from a conversation with a resident of Bellamonti reads:

Romanian, African, Ukrainian, the important thing is that you behave yourself and you will be one of ours. But don't go in the wrong, because if you make a mistake.

Does this hold also for all people in Bellamonti or only for outsiders?

Everyone, but especially outsiders. For example, when I was living abroad, when you go out, you are not in your home country, so they ought to adapt. Similarly, if someone comes here, at the very least you ought to adapt because this is not their home. This is something the Romanians have understood, they have adapted themselves to our customs. Don't disturb us, don't create problems, don't cause

trouble [*non rompere le scatole, che non fai problemi, che non crei casini*]. Whether you have money or not, it doesn't matter. What matters is that you are humble and one of us.

You talked about the Romanians, what about the Africans?

Actually, these Africans are more invisible. It seems a contradiction.

The observations made by the resident from Bellamonti are repeated in different ways by residents across the three villages we researched. A group of residents in Villaruna told us: "I believe they are well integrated. Yes, they don't cause problems. They are not often here, they go to other towns." Similarly, a former cultural mediator in Santoli said: "I welcome everything, everyone can come. Of course, you have to respect the local culture; eat our food and don't wear the headscarf." The words are also reiterated by officials like the Mayor of Bellamonti: "Yes, they are well integrated, they have never made themselves heard. Look, it's almost as if they're not there [*cioè, guarda, è come se non ci fossero*]." "I won't say imperceptible, but let's say [their presence] is very quiet," said the Mayor of Villaruna. The language used by residents across the different villages is surprisingly uniform; to be a good foreigner is bordering on being invisible. This invisibility could be either because they "keep themselves to themselves" or, if they do "show themselves," they should do so in an assimilated form where signs of difference are hidden.

The result of this normative invisibility is that the non-white migrants became largely invisible in people's minds. When presenting our research projects and asking locals about interactions with migrants, we were consistently given examples of people who had moved into the village from mainland Italy, France, the Netherlands, Britain, Poland, Romania, and other European countries. Yet, when we asked more directly about people from African countries, residents always knew about their presence, where they worked, lived, and spent their time. As the resident from Bellamonti indicated, it seems a contradiction; to be both so visible in the space, and so invisible in the community. The contradiction stems from the idea that a white body can pass invisibly, while the non-white body in a white space can be made hypervisible (Ahmed, 2007, p. 159). In these villages, dark skin became the single most distinguishing feature based on which people would not "pass," were made hypervisible, or even excluded from public interactions.

This dynamic became especially clear in the case of Villaruna, where the newly opened reception centre for asylum seekers initially did not offer Wi-Fi. As a consequence, asylum seekers would go to the town's main square where there was open internet. Local residents complained because the newcomers were sitting on the benches and walls, and mothers said they were afraid for their children's safety. The mere presence of non-white people created disturbances for the residents. The mayor asked the centre's manager to resolve the situation, which he eventually did by installing Wi-Fi in the reception centre. Similarly, there had been a timetable in place for when the people from the centre were allowed to use the publicly accessible football field so that they and local football players would "not bother each other," despite the fact that the field was largely unused and locals struggled to put a full football team together. In the library of Villaruna, an important place for social interactions, language learning, and cultural exchange (Faggiolani, 2022), the librarian told us that people from the centre rarely visited. They used to come but she stopped lending anything to them because they would borrow DVDs that were then returned scratched. The library made the rule that anyone from the centre cannot take anything out of the library. "How do you know they are from the centre," we ask. "Well, the skin colour," she answers.

In each of these scenarios, it was not migrants' skin colour that initially caused their exclusion, but rather the disturbances that residents experienced in interactions. Nonetheless, because there were no black Italians in the village and all black people were associated with the centre, over time skin colour became the de facto reason for excluding people from social interactions with residents. In other words, through the visibility of their skin colour, a form of invisibility was being imposed.

Racial difference was equally present in Bellamonti, albeit more nuanced. While the integration of white migrants was positively defined (by both locals and Romanian long-term residents) as the presence of mixing with the community, for non-white migrants it was negatively defined as the absence of trouble (see also Ager & Strang, 2004). For example, Bellamonti's residents stressed the idea that Romanians are very well integrated because their kids go to school, they speak Italian well, and a few join for a drink at the bar. Meanwhile, *i neri* (literally "the blacks") are similarly considered integrated but this is connected to not creating problems (for example, by not being drunk in public, picking fights, or simply "hanging around too much"). Skin colour would categorically be rejected by residents as influencing their behaviour towards the newcomers, promising us they did not "see" colour. As the above shows, however, the skin colour made people visible as Other and changed the way they were treated. That said, both groups of foreigners were perceived to "keep to themselves" as they continued to build relationships mainly among their small communities; Romanians in Bellamonti for example married among themselves or brought their spouses over from Romania. Similarly, the West African men who came to work (sometimes only seasonally) spent most of their time in their houses, among themselves, and were largely absent from public spaces and the wider community.

Integration is thus understood by residents as a form of assimilation that seems to have succeeded, in the case of the West African migrants, if they were largely invisible in the community. In the next sub-section, we move on to discuss how the three Gambian men living and working in Bellamonti experienced living in this small and remote town. We describe not only the events that shaped their relations to the local community, but also how they make sense of them, the meaning they ascribe to them, and how it ultimately shaped their interactions and relations to others. It is only by studying these experiences in depth that we can make the distinction between the events and their meaning, as well as how the meaning ascribed to them changed over time.

## 4.2. Disintegrating Relations

### 4.2.1. Bellamonti is My Home

During research in the rural villages in Sardinia, gaining access to residents had been an uncomplicated, natural process. Simply sitting at the bar, striking up a conversation at the library, in a shop, or on the streets, would result in informal conversations on people's thoughts on and experiences with depopulation and migration. Meeting non-EU migrants, however, involved a more complex process. Population data told us that non-EU migrants are present in rural Sardinia, and we knew there were several asylum centres on the island and in remote areas. Reports and literature also speak of the presence of significant groups of Senegalese and Moroccan migrants (e.g., Bachis, 2016; Zurrú, 2009). Through our network in the region, we managed to arrange interviews with organisations, but we were advised not to get in touch directly with the migrants. Different from other regions in Italy, there were very few news articles, no relevant community initiatives

promoted on social media, and we struggled to find anybody who was in direct contact with non-EU migrants. It was as if, despite clear evidence to the contrary, they did not exist. Non-EU migration in these areas was kept stubbornly invisible, ensuring it made little to no noise.

Eventually, we met someone who supports marginalised groups of people and works with asylum seekers and refugees. She told us that once people receive their asylum they move around a lot, so she usually does not know where they end up living, except for one Gambian man, Sanu, who started working in Bellamonti. Hence, we decided to visit Bellamonti and start our work there, with Sanu.

Sanu's employers were convinced he arrived through an organisation, but Sanu himself tells us it was an unknown Moroccan man at his lawyer's office who simply asked if he was looking for work. As in other rural contexts in Italy, most of the approximately 9,000 West Africans across Sardinia (Istituto nazionale di statistica e informatica, 2021) find work through such informal networks. While in the cities and seaside towns they commonly work in hospitality amongst a culturally diverse group of people, in the rural areas they might be the only or the first black people in an otherwise largely white and culturally homogeneous community—as was the case with Sanu. Residents in Bellamonti would tell us there is little racism, but as a remote village consisting of few inhabitants that have travelled outside of Italy, it is unsurprising that people were apprehensive.

When Sanu arrived in Bellamonti he was initially sent away by the manager of the potential employer, Bore, who told him that although he could offer employment, the problem was finding accommodation. It is a common issue that despite the many empty houses in rural villages, there are rarely any houses advertised for rent. To find accommodation an outsider is mostly dependent on insider contacts. Therefore, the problem was not so much the lack of housing, but the willingness of Bore to help find suitable accommodation which, he himself admits, was in part due to skin colour:

I regret having sent Sanu back initially, I regret not having hired him earlier, because they [i.e., the Gambians] are really good. Maybe it was also of the skin colour, not because I was scared, but because I had never come close to someone like that. We have had Romanians for years now, but the Gambians are better. The Romanians have already understood how Italy works, they are more *furbi*, more cunning.

Sanu continued to call Bore and after a bad work experience elsewhere, he returned to Bellamonti where he slept on the streets for a few nights, until eventually Bore found him a house. Sanu has been very grateful for the support, and for the work contract that allowed him to apply for a work visa, which then made it possible to book a visit to his home country. In turn, the business gained a good worker that, to paraphrase Bore, unlike Romanians, will not exploit the Italian system. When we met Sanu, it had been three years since he arrived, and he never wants to leave:

Bellamonti is like my home, like my home country. I have been to Milano, Calabria, but these places are busy, rough, life is hard. I came here and it is the most beautiful place I've seen. People are so open. At the beginning, I was alone. Very lonely. But then the boss told me: "I need one worker, good like you." I brought someone, but the boy don't like this place. The place is too lonely, so he left. The boss was very angry. They are always afraid that I go too. Even when I go somewhere he says: "Don't worry, I'll pick you up or bring you." But I would never leave, he helped me a lot, I can't turn my back on him.

#### 4.2.2. They Have Turned Their Backs on Me

Over nine months we regularly meet Sanu, his closest friends Kingston and Sulayman, and various West African housemates and colleagues working with them in the busy winter season. Sanu's house is opposite two bars, and each visit we sense curious eyes on us. "What do the people at the bar think about us coming here?" we wonder while climbing the stairs of Sanu's place. An unexpected response from Sanu: "No, it's good, let them know that if they abandon us, we have friends. The whole place, nobody is our friend, they see you guys [i.e., us, researchers] coming here, for us that is rare." The response is followed by Kingston telling a story of something that happened in a bar:

A few days ago, I bought something for €1.30. I only had €1. The man [i.e., bar owner] said: "Take it and return with the 30 cents." The next day I had the money but there were many people standing at the bar, so I didn't feel comfortable entering. The man shouted: "Boy, come and pay my 50 cents." I go in and tell him it wasn't 50, but 30 cents. We get into an argument, and I quickly say: "Never mind the difference, take your money." He continues talking and then pushes me. Outside we find the police on patrol. They ask only us for our documents, not any of the other men at the bar. If someone pushes you, you have the right to defend yourself, but we don't do that, because we know that the black person goes immediately to prison.

The incident changed how the men engaged with the community, as Sulayman explains: "That was my favourite bar. I would go there every morning for coffee on the way to work. I won't go there now. We are working, we come home, eat, and sit on the couch."

Sanu, who had told us Bellamonti was his home, now shares various past experiences. One time a drunk Italian was breaking bottles outside Sanu's house and shouting that he and his housemates do not belong there. There was the time his friend got into a quarrel at the bar on the day his contract did not get renewed. The friend did not normally drink, but he got drunk, spoke in English, a language that locals did not understand, and the people at the bar got upset with him. People in Bellamonti tell us that Sanu is well-integrated particularly because they see him play football, but Sanu now tells us his manager does not allow him to play because it is risky. Sanu decided his work is more important than football and therefore no longer plays.

In conversations with residents and newcomers, it becomes apparent that many of their diverse experiences stem from misunderstandings, fear, and a lack of communication. However, without positive or mediated encounters, these issues remain unresolved and the two groups seem to inhabit separate realities. "I imagine Bellamonti is an exception among other small villages because we are very hospitable and open," tells a council worker. Bore says it is easy to make friends in Bellamonti and believes he does not see the men much in the community because they prefer to be *fra di loro* (amongst themselves). Even if they do know of the incidents that affected Sanu and his friends, they dismiss them as being insignificant. "Oh, yes, the guy still owed me money," said the bar owner about the story on the missing 30 cents. "I did think it was out of character for the guy to drink and 'kick up a fuss,' but it had nothing to do with the termination of his contract," mentioned the employer of Sanu's friend.

Meanwhile, like many other depopulating rural villages, there are few natural meeting places for residents, let alone newcomers. There is a sports field but no lessons or clubs, the school is no longer open, and the

traditional Italian square is crowded with parked cars, rather than people. The only meeting points are the three bars, primarily frequented by groups of older men who consume alcohol, which the Gambian men avoid for religious reasons. Thus, it is not just that there are few places of encounter, but also that their physical settings do not actually encourage encounters between migrants and residents (Spenger et al., 2023). As a consequence, few meaningful exchanges occurred that could resolve or mitigate the misunderstandings and negative encounters.

As time passes, we notice that leaving the house with the Gambian men almost always involves some minor or major negative encounter, from small comments by residents to being stopped for a prolonged period by the *Carabinieri* checking their documents. Other types of encounters do occur too, such as occasionally receiving free groceries from the local supermarket or the mayor publicly criticising the unknown man who had broken bottles outside Sanu's house. However, just as the residents see the negative incidents as insignificant, the Gambian men consider these potentially positive incidents as exceptions to the more frequent experiences of microaggression. They begin to withdraw from interactions with the community. Kingston explains that he is now trying to avoid any form of contact, including greeting someone or making eye contact: "I am scared to say *ciao* because then *ciao* becomes a problem. *Adesso*, right now, me, I just look at my phone when I pass them."

Without a local social network, it had been their employer who acted as their support network. Bore, the manager, tells us they had to help resolve issues like replacing expired healthcare cards, arranging housing, acting as guarantors, or helping to find a doctor. Without an organisation that supports this kind of integration, it is the businesses that have to support such matters. In offering this support, Bore believes he is doing the West African men, as well as the Italian government, a favour. He explains:

The government should give us money because we are helping them. These men have more difficulty finding work, also because of their skin colour. *Io do lavoro, io li sto integrando in questo mondo* [I give work, I'm integrating them into this world].

For Bore integration thus seems to mean offering the possibility to partake in the formal economy, as well as supporting them with the challenges they face. Meanwhile, however, Bore also heavily relies on Sanu. He admits he would never find enough Sardinians to keep the business afloat. Sanu provides him with a new workforce, trains them as they arrive, familiarises them with the work etiquette expected from them, and provides cultural mediation when needed. This two-way exchange means that some minimum form of integration, as defined earlier in the article, is taking place. The value of this is however nullified when Bore reframes the exchange in terms of a one-way relationship, modelled on the stereotypical story where he is the benefactor, and the African men the beneficiaries (Adichie, 2009).

When summer arrives, demand for the food products produced in Bellamonti wavers, and inevitably the work slows down. Contracts do not get renewed and many of the West African men leave again to seek work in other parts of the island. Often this is when issues with payments start to arise. Sanu decides to visit his family in the Gambia and sees his daughter again for the first time in six years. This is overshadowed by worries as Bore did not pay his last salary. Sanu's friends and colleagues continue to work and continue not to be paid for several months. Their Romanian colleague borrows money to pay rent, and Sulayman and Kingston lend money to Sanu while he is in the Gambia. We discover that the men have part-time contracts but often work full-time hours or more, without additional compensation. They do not know when their shifts will finish from

day to day, and regularly work more than five days a week. The men are effectively treated as a workforce constantly on-call without proper remuneration.

Clearly, the employer “as support network” fails when the employer him/herself is the source of the workers’ problems. Bore is convinced that he is treating his employees from African countries well, “like I would treat anybody else,” and he repeats, in their presence, that “*cavolo, ti sto inserendo nel mondo* [damnit, I am integrating you in the world].” Repeated conflict and hurtful words like these mean that the situation is not just creating financial problems, but also affects how the Gambian men experience their sense of place in the community.

When we first met Sanu, he had told us proudly how he had become a senior employee, appreciated by the manager and a point of reference for newcomers. Sulayman said he was faster and better than anyone, and he had developed skills that even the manager himself was not able to match. Their interactions with the wider community might have been increasingly limited, but in their work they had felt valued. Now, they say, they just feel lonely. Following Sanu’s return from his trip to the Gambia, he recalls:

In Gambia I was treated as a king; people killed a chicken in my name, and for two months my family would cook my favourite dishes every day. I did not miss Bellamonti. It is so lonely here, so, so lonely. You cannot miss a lonely place.

He continues comparing the Gambia and Bellamonti: “In Gambia if someone helps, you cannot turn your back on them.” Those were the words with which he had also explained his commitment to Bellamonti at the start of our interactions. Now he says: “Italians, however, they have turned their backs too many times on me.”

#### 4.2.3. I Will Not Return to Bellamonti

Winter arrives again, and production peaks. We have difficulty meeting with the Gambian men as they work weekdays and weekends, late into the evening, and they never know when they can finish their shift. Additionally, they have been asked by the business owners to find more workers. On one of the rare occasions in which we do manage to meet, Kingston jokes: “they need people? I will bring them one mad boy, one crazy boy. I will tell him, work good for one week, and then cause trouble.” The Gambian men are confident that they can find new work in Sardinia, listing work requests to convince us, perhaps as much as to convince themselves.

After the winter season, the Gambian men leave Bellamonti to work in one of Sardinia’s coastal regions. What their new work cannot offer however is the minimum level of stability that they had constructed over the years in Bellamonti. It had taken Sanu a long time before he found an apartment in Bellamonti with a rental contract, which is a condition for their visa renewals that are required every couple of years. Similarly, although their work contract in Bellamonti continued to be temporary and they were often paid late, they understood that their manager could not afford to let them go, especially in the busy winter months. It is this minimum level of economic and legal stability that was at stake in their decision to leave. Speaking to Sanu later on the phone he explained his decision to leave and how he managed to navigate the uncertainty associated with it:

In Bellamonti I couldn’t build a future, I didn’t leave my country for that. I was being taken for granted, but at my new work people are good. They have no problem with Blacks. The owner says he has never

seen anyone work so hard, and he never wants us to stop working for him. We get paid, always on time and with contract. They close after the summer, but the boss promised us that he has plenty of work in construction. I will not return to Bellamonti, but we will pay for the house to keep the contract.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

While policymakers continue to emphasise concepts such as integration and inclusion, the theoretical underpinnings of these terms do not necessarily align with the practical significance they hold for migrants and residents. The Gambian men we worked with had the intention to stay and a desire for companionship and community acceptance. This human need for connection is however not interchangeable with the desire or hope to integrate. Their response to experiences of rejection was not to assimilate in a one-way process of integration, or to seek a resolution in a two-way exchange of mutual accommodation. Instead, they avoided further confrontation in order to escape more animosity and racist incidents and reverted to their primary objective of being in Bellamonti; to work and earn money to support their families. Rather than leading to increased *integration*, the social interactions in the village resulted in forms of *disintegration*, where the migrants started to remove themselves physically and socially from village life.

Meanwhile, residents across the three villages, including mayors and community officials, did consider integration important, but saw it as synonymous with migrants not causing any trouble; to remain either physically or socially invisible. For them, the West African men's increased withdrawal from the community and lack of contact—essentially their invisibility—was considered a sign that they were well integrated.

The remote location also meant that many residents had only ever seen a non-white person on the news, while showing little awareness of any biases, let alone of covert racism (Coates, 2011); convinced they were treating the West African men the same as any other neighbour, colleague, or employee. Small villages might be places where there is more social exchange, but we demonstrated that this is not always the case as depopulation causes the closure of public services and meeting points. This allows for very few occasions where residents and newcomers can meet to overcome prejudice or address differences. As a consequence, encounters between migrant and Sardinian residents were few in quantity and remained transactional in quality.

It is peculiar that in the case we studied, neither Sardinian residents nor officials such as the mayors, deemed it necessary to seek contact or create lasting relationships with the migrants, even if the community's economy and cultural heritage are somewhat dependent on them. This finding should give pause to policies and research that assume social exchange is a given in small towns, and that place their hopes on migrants reviving depopulating towns without investing in positive exchanges between residents and newcomers.

In an effort to go beyond preconceived ideas of integration and inclusion, we asked in this article how migrants make sense of their experiences in a rural community in Sardinia, Italy. Based on research in three villages, including an in-depth case in which we followed a group of Gambian men as they worked in the understaffed but important food processing industry, we demonstrated that both residents' and migrants' interests in one another and the ability to identify, navigate, and resolve difference, cannot be assumed. Integration theory and policies that pay little attention to such lived realities, risk being built on false assumptions and falling short from the outset.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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