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# Belonging in 'kurbet'? Geographies of Albanian migration in contemporary art practices

Dimitra Gkitsa

Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, Winchester, UK

## ABSTRACT

Since 1991, thousands of Albanians have been compelled to seek new homes in *kurbet* (migrant places), often navigating xenophobia, racism and structural exclusion in host countries. This sustained migration has shaped not only Albania's recent history but also the socio-cultural and political landscapes of its destination countries. While previous research has explored the political, social and economic dimensions of Albanian migration, the cultural production emerging from these locations of mobility and displacement remains critically underexplored. This article addresses this gap by examining how Albanian migration has shaped contemporary art production, and how artistic practices, in turn, engage with the geographies of migration. Drawing on debates in cultural geography, art and migration studies, it analyses how Albanian artists of the first and second generations negotiate issues of identity, collective memory and belonging through visual practices that are both spatial and embodied. The article argues that Albanian diaspora produces invisible, affective and political geographies that often escape dominant discourses on migration.

## Appartenir au « gurbet » ? Géographies de la migration albanaise dans les pratiques artistiques contemporaines

### RÉSUMÉ

Depuis 1991, des milliers d'Albanais ont été amenés à chercher un nouveau foyer dans des gurbet (lieux de migration), souvent confrontés à la xénophobie, au racisme et à l'exclusion structurelle dans les pays d'accueil. Ce niveau de migration constant a façonné non seulement l'histoire récente de l'Albanie, mais également les paysages socioculturels et politiques des pays d'arrivée. Alors que des recherches précédentes avaient exploré les dimensions politiques, sociales et économiques de la migration albanaise, la production culturelle issue de ces sites de mobilité et de déplacement reste largement sous-étudiée. Cet article répond à cet écart en examinant comment la migration albanaise a façonné la

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## MOTS CLÉS

migration albanaise; culture et migration visuelles; production culturelle; créativité et mobilité; appartenance et identité spatiale; pensée frontalière

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Migración albanesa; cultura visual y migración; producción cultural; creatividad y movilidad; pertenencia e identidad espacial; pensamiento fronterizo

**CONTACT** Dimitra Gkitsa  [d.gkitsa@soton.ac.uk](mailto:d.gkitsa@soton.ac.uk)  Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, Park Avenue, Winchester, Hampshire, SO23 8DL, UK.

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production artistique contemporaine et comment les pratiques artistiques, à leur tour, interagissent avec les géographies de la migration. S'appuyant sur les débats en matière de géographie culturelle, d'art et d'études sur la migration, on analyse la manière dont les artistes albanais de première et de deuxième génération négocient les questions d'identité, de mémoire collective et d'appartenance à travers des pratiques visuelles à la fois spatiales et incarnées. L'analyse retrace une évolution générationnelle : des artistes de première génération cherchant à entrer dans les circuits mondiaux de la production culturelle jusqu'aux artistes de deuxième génération qui utilisent l'art comme une forme de résistance et de contre-narration. S'inspirant des concepts de « pensée frontalière » (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006) et de résistance agonistique (Mouffe, 2005 ; 2013), on soutient dans l'article que la diaspora albanaise produit des géographies invisibles, affectives et politiques qui s'évadent souvent des discours dominants sur la migration.

## **¿Pertener al «Kurbet»? Geografías de la migración albanesa en las prácticas artísticas contemporáneas**

### **RESUMEN**

Desde 1991, miles de albaneses se han visto obligados a buscar nuevos hogares en kurbet (lugares de migrantes), a menudo lidiando con la xenofobia, el racismo y la exclusión estructural en los países de acogida. Esta migración sostenida ha moldeado no solo la historia reciente de Albania, sino también el panorama sociocultural y político de sus países de destino. Si bien investigaciones previas han explorado las dimensiones políticas, sociales y económicas de la migración albanesa, la producción cultural que surge de estos lugares de movilidad y desplazamiento sigue siendo muy poco explorada. Este artículo aborda esta brecha examinando cómo la migración albanesa ha moldeado la producción artística contemporánea y cómo las prácticas artísticas, a su vez, interactúan con las geografías de la migración. A partir de debates en geografía cultural, arte y estudios migratorios, analiza cómo los artistas albaneses de primera y segunda generación abordan cuestiones de identidad, memoria colectiva y pertenencia a través de prácticas visuales que son tanto espaciales como corpóreas. El análisis traza un cambio generacional: desde artistas de primera generación que buscan integrarse en los circuitos globales de producción cultural hasta artistas de segunda generación que utilizan el arte como forma de resistencia y contra-narrativa. Basándose en los conceptos de "pensamiento fronterizo" (Mignolo y Tlostanova, 2006) y resistencia agonística (Mouffe, 2005; 2013), el artículo argumenta que la diáspora albanaesa produce geografías invisibles, afectivas y políticas que a menudo escapan a los discursos dominantes sobre la migración.

## Introduction

Albanian diaspora artists are producing complex and often disruptive counter-narratives that reframe how migration, displacement and identity are understood across Europe. Over the past three decades, Albanians have been among the most mobile populations in the region, migrating initially predominately to Italy, Greece and, more recently, the United Kingdom. Across these different contexts, political and public discourses have consistently homogenized and racialized Albanians: from the vilification of Albanians as the 'other' of post – Cold War Europe in Italy and Greece during the 1990s, to the criminalization of Albanians as 'illegal migrants' in the UK more recently (Dimitriadis, 2023; Mai, 2005; Tsaliki, 2008). These dominant narratives reduce Albanians to abstract figures of illegality and economic precarity, erasing the lived experiences, memories and cultural practices that have emerged from these migratory trajectories and the complex geographies they produce.

Although the relationship between cultural production, visual arts and migration has been explored in the field of visual arts (Bal & Hernández-Navarro, 2011; Bublitzky et al., 2024; Demos, 2013; Miyamoto & Ruiz, 2021; Peterson, 2024), alongside significant contributions to cultural geography (Hawkins, 2017; Merriman, 2012; Rogers, 2015), there has been no sustained critical engagement with the cultural production that has emerged from over 30 years of Albanian migration. This is surprising given the scale and intensity of Albanian mobility and its unique position in the discourse on migration in Europe. Addressing this absence is crucial not only to understand the specific dynamics of Albanian migration but also to broaden theoretical understandings of how systems of representation, visibility and belonging are negotiated through artistic practices. Albanian diaspora art provides a lens into the often invisible and affective geographies of migration: the embodied, emotional and intersectional dimensions of displacement and assimilation that are rarely captured in conventional 'push and pull' frameworks of migration research or creative industry analysis.

In response, this article makes two key contributions. First, it offers the first sustained, critical examination of the visual cultures and artistic production of the Albanian diaspora, analysing how artworks, exhibitions and their circulations negotiate, and often unsettle, dominant systems of representation and visibility. Second, it identifies a generational shift within the diaspora itself: first-generation artists who pursued visibility through integration into the global art market, gaining recognition following Albania's first pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1999; in contrast, second-generation artists are increasingly turning to art as a site of resistance and counter-narrative, engaging critically with the structural and discursive forces that shape migrant lives. By tracing this shift, the article expands debates in cultural geography and migration studies, showing how art operates as a spatial and affective practice: a way of negotiating assimilation, articulating resistance and reimagining belonging in contexts of structural inequality and shifting political demands. These emerging practices reveal what is often overlooked in the geographies of migration, including the embodied, affective and intersectional dimensions of displacement, and the spaces where resistance is enacted within or against dominant cultural frameworks, institutions and infrastructures.

The article conceptualizes these interventions drawing on Mignolo and Tlostanova's (2006) work on 'border thinking' and Mouffe (2005, 2013) theorization of agonistic

resistance. In doing so, the article argues that Albanian diaspora art emerges from the fractures and asymmetries of global hierarchies to produce grounded, context-specific interventions that generate affective geographies for understanding the geo- and body-politics of migration. Border thinking conceptualizes cultural production as rooted in marginalized epistemologies that challenge dominant frames, while agonistic resistance emphasizes the creation of contested spaces where dominant narratives are renegotiated. Through this lens, Albanian diaspora art is not only a form of documentation but also a political and affective practice that disrupts hegemonic understandings of Albanian mobility, rendering visible the complex, often invisible routes and experiences of displacement, belonging and resistance.

Following an engagement with theoretical debates at the intersection of art, migration and cultural geography, and a brief contextual overview of Albanian migration and its cultural production, the article is structured in two main sections. The first examines first-generation artists such as Adrian Paci and the collective Two Gullivers, analysing how their work navigates global art systems while negotiating experiences of mobility and marginality. The second section focuses on second-generation artists, including emerging artists such as Kairo Urovi, Doreida Xhogu and Fjorida Cenaj whose practice foreground intersectionality, belated justice and transnational solidarity. These works move beyond frameworks of entry and assimilation into Western art production to articulate a more expansive, situated politics of migrant identity and resistance, deeply grounded in embodied and diasporic experience.

### **Affective geographies: mapping systems of representation, visibility and resistance**

Dominant systems of representation have long shaped how migration is seen, interpreted and governed. Stuart Hall's (1996) concept of the 'constitutive Other' highlights how migrants are positioned as outsiders in ways that stabilize dominant cultural identities. Within media, policy and institutional narratives, migrants often appear as either faceless victims or threatening outsiders. Arts and culture play a critical role in fostering visibility and belonging among migrant communities. As Levitt notes, migration is never only economic; rather, 'culture permeates all aspects of the development enterprise – as a challenge and an opportunity' (Levitt, 2010, p. 142). Migrants bring ideas, skills and cultural repertoires that are often rendered invisible due to structural exclusion, racism and limited access to networks of representation. Beyond these inherited cultures, migration generates new cultural products and imaginaries that reconfigure ideas of home and identity within local, regional and international contexts (Miyamoto & Ruiz, 2021, p. 5).

Researchers have also demonstrated that artistic practice, a core dimension of culture, can disrupt dominant political narratives by providing agency and visibility to forms of representation produced by those denied the rights of citizenship (Demos, 2013). In doing so, art becomes a powerful tool for marginalized communities to assert their identities, express their experiences and challenge the exclusionary frameworks that often silence or misrepresent them within broader social and political contexts. Here, Bal and Hernández-Navarro's (2011) concept of 'migratory aesthetics' further reframes visibility as a process of becoming rather than a static act of representation. This approach resists simplistic depictions of suffering that risk reducing migrants to spectacles of trauma (Bennett,

2005) and instead recognizes migrants as active producers of cultural meaning. Recent scholarship similarly argues that creative practices contribute to the 'rehumanisation' of migrants, countering the tendency in policy and media discourses to reduce them to anonymous statistics (Martiniello, 2022; Sievers, 2023).

Yet, despite the growing body of literature, much of the work in the intersection of arts and migration studies has remained at debates of representation, focusing primarily on what artworks depict rather than interrogating the infrastructures, institutional frameworks and systems of circulation through which first- or second-generation migrant artists operate. The ways in which migrant artists adapt to, assimilate within or resist these structures, particularly geographies of cultural production that mediate visibility and value, need more attention. This article responds to this issue by engaging directly with these dynamics, situating artistic practice not only as a representation but as a spatial, affective and institutional negotiation.

Cultural geographers have also highlighted art's capacity to illuminate the complex relationships and exchanges between people and places, and the ways in which these are socially constructed and formed (Hawkins, 2011, 2014). As Hawkins notes, 'creative practices produce geographies, they make places, shape the bodies, subjectivities and minds of those conducting them, and weave together communities and evolve environments' (2017, p. 2). This recognition of art as an embodied and spatial practice is particularly significant in migration contexts, where place, home and space are continually renegotiated and often contested. In this regard, creative practices do not simply depict diasporic experiences; instead, and more crucially, they actively produce and reconfigure transnational spatialities (Rogers, 2015), shaping new ways of understanding mobility, belonging and identity. This is especially evident in the work of minoritised communities, which often face structural exclusion from dominant cultural narratives and institutions. In such cases, creativity becomes a means of producing alternative spaces of visibility and intercultural dialogue, embedding meaning into what Warren (2020, p. 237) calls 'everyday spaces and everyday lived culture'.

While cultural geography has significantly advanced understandings of the geographies of creative practices, there remains a need to extend these discussions beyond the usual focus on global cultural hubs and urban centres (Gibson, 2010). More attention is required to the geographies of art production and circulation that emerge in less recognized contexts, where networks of visibility, infrastructure and mobility operate differently. This article takes up this challenge, using the Albanian case to interrogate both the dominant and the less visible affective geographies that shape how art is made, circulated and received within and beyond dominant systems of representation. As Rose (2020, p. 966) observes, 'the history of geographic thought on culture has gone back and forth between exploring culture as habitual phenomenon engendered through interactive material relations to exploring it as a representational project informed by relations of power'. This tension underscores the need to look at geographies beyond static notions of the material or spatial, towards the fluid flows of circulation and the affective instances of knowledge production that artistic practices enable.

This article builds on and extends this interdisciplinary literature through a conceptual and epistemological framework grounded in 'border thinking' (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006) and Mouffe (2005, 2013) theory of agonistic resistance. As Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) argue, borders are productive spaces: they organize labour, mobility and

belonging under global capitalism while simultaneously opening sites of friction, resistance and negotiation. Border thinking allows us to foreground the *geo-* and *body-* politics of cultural production, situating art within the lived realities of marginalization and systemic inequality, and tracing how creativity from the 'borders' of power disrupts dominant epistemologies. Mouffe's framework complements this by emphasizing that resistance is not only oppositional but generative, creating contested and plural spaces where dominant narratives are negotiated and re-articulated. These theoretical perspectives enable this paper to conceptualize Albanian diaspora art as an embodied, situated and spatial practice that not only represents but actively produces invisible, affective and political geographies of migration that becomes sites for producing counter-narratives. This approach advances current debates in cultural geography by showing how attention to space, infrastructure and circulation deepens our understanding of the politics of visibility, belonging and resistance in contemporary migratory contexts.

### **Visibly invisible: the complex case of Albanian migration and its cultural production**

Albanian migration has been unique in both scale and intensity (King, 2005), making it a distinctive case within European migration geographies. The collapse of the socialist regime in 1990 triggered the first large-scale movement, opening Albania's borders for the first time in nearly half a century (Vullnetari, 2007). For many, this was less a celebration of newfound freedom and more an escape from mounting socio-political and economic chaos brought about by the abrupt shift to neoliberal democracy, a transition that dismantled state industries and institutions, generating widespread precarity. Italy and Greece became the primary destinations for these initial flows due to geographical proximity and shared cultural ties (King & Mai, 2008). The now iconic images of overcrowded ships crossing the Adriatic in 1991 rendered Albanians hyper-visible in European media, where they were constructed as threatening 'others'; post-socialist migrants coded as outsiders to the European project.

The turbulence of the 1990s further intensified mobility: the 1997 collapse of pyramid schemes, which had absorbed half of Albania's GDP, triggered violent unrest (Kajsiu, 2015; Musaraj, 2020), while the Kosovo War (1998–1999) displaced hundreds of thousands and reshaped regional migration networks (Vathi & King, 2013). During this period, Albanian migrants faced deep systemic exclusion. In Greece, Albanians became targets of institutional racism, from police violence and discriminatory housing policies to routine labour exploitation (Lazaridis & Psimmenos, 2000). In Italy, similar dynamics of stigmatization and precarity persisted, positioning Albanians in low-wage, informal labour sectors while simultaneously criminalizing them in public and political discourses (Zenelaga & Goga, 2021). These exclusions were not only structural but also cultural: migrants often concealed their identities, changing names, adopting dominant cultural codes and avoiding overt associations with 'Albanian-ness' as strategies of survival (Kokkali, 2015; Mai, 2005).

By the 2000s, long-term settlement and naturalization became more common in Greece and Italy, but these processes did not erase the entrenched stigma or the precarity of migrant life (Gemi, 2017). The global financial crisis of 2008 produced another wave of migration as economic opportunities contracted in southern Europe, prompting re-migration to northern European countries or returns to Albania (Gemi & Triandafyllidou,

2021). In the UK, recent migration flows reflect these shifting geographies, shaped by economic precarity, kinship networks and increasingly restrictive regimes (Dimitriadis, 2023; Hoxhaj, 2022).

These successive and layered migrations underscore the fluidity and adaptability of Albanian mobility, as well as the persistence of racialized and marginalizing narratives across diverse European contexts (King & Mai, 2009). This complex historical backdrop is critical to understanding the cultural and artistic practices that have emerged from, and in response to, these dynamics, particularly as artists grapple with issues of identity, visibility and displacement in their work.

Albanian migration cannot be understood through a static framework of origin and destination; it is a transnational and multi-scalar phenomenon. Since the 1990s, Albanian mobility has created complex diasporic geographies shaped by circular migration, return and layered economic, political and cultural exchanges (Gemi & Triandafyllidou, 2021; Vathi, 2015). These dynamics have fostered transnational networks through which ideas, cultural practices and affective attachments circulate and transform. This cultural field has been accompanied by significant shifts in Albania's art scene since the collapse of the socialist regime. As Kalo (2021, p. 76) notes, Albanian artists have continuously negotiated 'the local and the global in their work and in relationship to their status as artists working in the so-called European periphery'. Memory, the afterlives of socialism and Albania's ambiguous positioning as both geographically 'in' Europe but systemically outside the cardinal points of influence have become enduring motifs in contemporary Albanian art.

It could be argued that these tensions are part of what Esanu (2021, p. 2) terms the 'postsocialist contemporary', a cultural condition shaped significantly by Western-led initiatives such as the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, established throughout Eastern Europe in the 1990s. While these infrastructures provided opportunities for visibility and entry into international circuits, they also embedded hierarchies of value that privileged Western and neoliberal modes of cultural production, often positioning Albanian artists as representatives of a peripheral and 'transitional' context. What becomes particularly evident in Albanian art practices is also the rupture of socialist utopias and the unrealized promises of neoliberal democracy (Gashi, 2022) which has been explored by artists such as Armando Lulaj, who represented Albania at the Venice Biennale in 2015. Art has also been deeply entangled with architecture and politics in Albania's public spaces (Isto, 2020). The case of Prime Minister Edi Rama, himself an artist and former instructor at the Academy of Arts in Tirana, illustrates these entanglements. His urban interventions, most famously documented in Anri Sala's *Dammi i Colori* (2003), have continuously sparked debate over the instrumentalisation of art as a tool of state branding and soft power, raising critical questions about art's capacity for critique within infrastructures that are both enabling and constraining (van Gerven Oei, 2016).

Within this context, the work of diaspora artists reveals parallel and often critical negotiations of visibility, identity and power. For first-generation artists in the 1990s and 2000s, entering global systems of cultural production often meant working within established narratives of migration and displacement, sometimes leading to a 'self-exoticisation' that enabled entry into global markets. At the same time, their work documented experiences of mobility, marginalization and transnational belonging. Emerging second-generation artists, by contrast, mobilize more intersectional and critical practices. Their work engages with questions of belonging, justice and collective memory,

transforming art into a site of agonistic counter-narrative. These practices respond to and disrupt the invisible geographies of exclusion that persist both in host countries and within the infrastructures of global art production.

### **Methodology: employing the ‘visual’ as a method**

This study employs visual art both as an object of analysis and as a methodological tool to interrogate the complexities of Albanian migration. Public perceptions of Albanian mobility have been shaped by powerful visual regimes of representation, particularly those produced by news media, which have historically reinforced the ‘otherness’ and criminalization of Albanian migrants (Alpion & Roberge, 2017; Mai, 2005). By shifting attention to the visual cultures produced by Albanians themselves, in both diasporic and transnational contexts, this article seeks to destabilize dominant narratives and reposition the marginalized ‘Other’ as a producer of knowledge and meaning. Following Rose’s (2002) notion of critical visual methodology, the analysis considers not only what is visually presented in the artworks but also the social, cultural and spatial conditions that shape the production, circulation and reception of these visual artefacts (Elwood & Hawkins, 2016; Rogoff, 2000). The visual is approached as a situated practice, embedded within specific historical, political and institutional contexts, rather than as a neutral medium. This orientation rejects the reduction of visual art to mere illustration of theory (Ryan, 2003), treating artworks instead as complex sites of knowledge production that reveal experiences, affects and spatialities emerging in and between the spaces of migration and displacement.

The selection of artists was guided by three key considerations. First, the analysis focuses on artists whose work explicitly engages with themes of migration, borders, identity, displacement and diasporic identity. Second, it includes artists who have participated in significant public and institutional exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale, that influence how their work circulates transnationally and intersects with global infrastructures of cultural production. Third, it presents an intergenerational focus, analysing both first-generation artists who emerged in the 1990s and 2000s and emerging second-generation artists whose practices have developed in the 2020s. This allows the study to trace continuities and shifts not only in the visual languages but also the geographies of art production and participation through which Albanian migration has been articulated.

To ensure analytical rigour and reflexivity, the visual analysis is guided by a set of recurring analytical codes that structure the interpretation across artworks. These include (1) spatial imaginaries (borders, routes, thresholds and sites of transit); (2) modes of visibility and invisibility (erasure, hypervisibility, surveillance); (3) symbols and visual registers of collective memory (including the communist past, affective and family experiences and references to migration histories); (4) material and aesthetic strategies (medium, scale, repetition, practices); and (5) institutional positioning (exhibition context, curatorial framing and audience address). These codes are not treated as fixed or exhaustive categories, but as heuristic tools that enable systematic comparison while remaining attentive to the specificity of each artistic practice.

The analysis draws on multiple sources of data and materials. For first-generation artists, it includes archival research of exhibition catalogues, curatorial texts, press releases

and art criticism to reconstruct the context of production and reception. For second-generation artists, the study integrates personal observation and documentation of exhibitions attended in Greece and other European countries in the past 5 years, as well as publicly available artist interviews and critical reviews where relevant. This multimodal approach allows for close readings of visual and textual materials, tracing how each artwork is produced, circulated and interpreted within specific cultural and institutional settings. Where biographical or career information is crucial for contextual understanding, it is incorporated within the analytical sections to clarify the artist's positionality and trajectory.

In analysing these artworks, the paper draws on border thinking (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006) to recognize artistic practices as epistemic interventions that disrupt dominant knowledge systems. At the same time, it mobilizes Mouffe (2005, 2013) theory of agonistic resistance, which conceptualizes artistic practice as a political act that opens contested spaces of representation and belonging.

### **A note on positionality**

My analysis is informed by an awareness of positionality, which foregrounds the fact that researchers are situated within the social contexts they examine, and that these contexts are not neutral but already interpreted by the actors who inhabit them (Holmes, 2020). My positionality is shaped, first, by my own experience as a second-generation Albanian who grew up in Greece, with parents who migrated from Albania in the 1990s. This location distances me from experiences of first-generations, but it positions me to a closer affective and cultural proximity to the concerns articulated by the second-generation artists discussed in the latter part of the article, particularly in relation to memory, belonging and the afterlives of migration, while also requiring sustained reflexivity to avoid assumptions of shared experience.

My positionality is further shaped by my own disciplinary background in contemporary art studies and my experience as an arts professional, which informs my analytical attention not only to what artworks depict but to how they are produced, mediated and made visible within specific institutional and curatorial frameworks (Bismarck, Schaffaff & Weski, 2012; O'Neill, 2012). This perspective foregrounds questions of circulation, exhibition contexts and cultural infrastructures as integral to the meaning of visual work, rather than as external conditions. Combined, these positional locations shape an analytical approach attentive to both affective resonances and structural conditions, while remaining aligned with Trinh T. Minh-ha's notion of 'speaking nearby' (Chen, 1992): an approach that resists speaking for or about 'Others', and instead situates analysis in critical proximity, recognizing artworks as active agents of meaning-making rather than passive objects of interpretation.

## **From assimilation to resistance: the visual production of Albanian migration**

### ***First-generation: navigating geographies of cultural capital***

Mignolo and Tlostanova (2006) remind us that borders are not merely geographic demarcations but, more crucially, epistemic distinctions established by the coloniality of

power. This framing is crucial for understanding Albanian contemporary art of the 1990s and early 2000s. My analysis here is not concerned solely with the way migration, displacement, or identity are represented in the works of Albanian artists of this period. Instead, it examines how these borders operate as structural mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion within global systems of cultural capital, shaping both the production and the reception of these works, and determining the hierarchies of value within these practices circulated.

Recurring themes of displacement, memory and transit spaces in Albanian art of this period cannot be reduced to aesthetic gestures or personal narratives of exile. They also functioned as strategic entry points into the Western circuits of validation, where biennials, galleries and critical discourse positioned the 'post-communist' Albanian artist as both a subject of fascination and an object of discovery. The first Albanian pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1999 exemplifies this dynamic. It provided unprecedented visibility to a generation of artists navigating the shift from local contexts to global art circuits, while also highlighting how access and recognition were mediated by specific networks of privilege and mobility.

Before delving into the artworks of this first Biennale, it is also worth reflecting on Sislej Xhafa's unofficial *Clandestine Pavilion* (1997), an intervention that laid bare the contradictions of the Biennale's nationalistic infrastructure. Dressed in an Albanian football jersey, Xhafa wandered the Giardini without an official invitation or assigned national space. This seemingly simple gesture confronted Albania's invisibility within the Biennale's rigid nation-based structure while simultaneously mirroring the precarious and 'clandestine' present of Albanian migrants navigating European cities during the 1990s (Proctor, 2007). As such, the performative action exposed the tension between hyper-visibility and exclusion, with the migrant figure being simultaneously seen, surveilled and erased. Two years later, Xhafa transitioned from outsider to insider, participating officially in the first Albanian pavilion curated by Edi Muka. This shift underscores the contradictory logic of visibility in the global art system: the disruptive outsider ultimately absorbed and legitimized by the very structures of power he once sought to critique.

Other participating artists in the 1999 pavilion included Alban Hajdinaj; Besnik Haxhillari and Flutura Preka (*The Two Gullivers*); Edi Hila, whose practice bridged the socialist and post-socialist periods; Lala Meredith-Vula; Gazmend Muka; Adrian Paci; Astrit Vatnikaj; Anri Sala, who at that time was being framed in curatorial texts and art reviews as a 'rising star' of contemporary art; and Edi Rama, still known primarily as a painter prior to his political career. Many of these artists had already relocated abroad for study and residencies, or at the very least cultivated transnational networks that positioned them advantageously within the emerging geographies of cultural production constructed around the 'newly discovered' art scene of Eastern Europe.

It could be argued that the pavilion and its participants emerged within a broader post-socialist moment in which 'post-socialist contemporary art' was not only being produced but actively constructed as a new category in the art market. As Esanu (2021) argues, the 1990s saw the rapid establishment of art infrastructures built through targeted funding, the training of artists, the emergence of the 'curator' as a new key figure and the establishment of networks across the former East. Foreign foundations such as the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, promoting and legitimizing 'democratic' and 'open' artistic practices as both aesthetic and ideological departures from the state-

controlled systems of the socialist era, became vehicles for implementing neoliberal art structures in a previously state-managed cultural landscape. These new infrastructures introduced and normalized unfamiliar mediums such as installation, video and performance, effectively recalibrating what counted as 'contemporary' and embedding local practices within global hierarchies of taste and value (Esanu, 2012).

This was also the case in Albania. Curators like Edi Muka, naturalized within Western contexts and deeply embedded in these networks, became central figures in promoting a 'new' Albanian art that aligned with dominant global narratives of resistance, experimentation, and post-authoritarian renewal. Muka frequently reflected on this emerging scene in interviews and curatorial texts. Reflecting on the *Ekspokult 1992* exhibition organized by the Soros Foundation in Tirana, he describes the 1990s as a period in which Albanian artists, unable to physically migrate due to political and economic restrictions, sought instead an 'escape' into abstraction and formalism; a revival of painting styles that, while often dismissed abroad as 'outmoded', marked a radical departure from the visual codes of socialist realism and the ideological rigidity of the previous era (Muka, n.d.). Similarly, in a text for the second Manifesta catalogue, Muka (1998, p. 214) highlights how many Albanian artists were 'escaping painting' and experimenting with other mediums such as 'photography, installations and video art', a trajectory that was often framed, particularly by external observers, as typical of post-authoritarian contexts. This framing coincides with other important events of this decade such as the third iteration of Manifesta in Ljubljana in 2000, where foreign institutions entered the post-war Balkans with an enthusiasm that often bordered on exoticisation, imposing Western interpretive frameworks rather instead of critically engaging with the region's specific social and cultural dynamics (Gkitsa, 2026).

At the same time, young artists of this generation such as Anri Sala, who began experimenting early with new media, came to embody the kind of 'newness' that curators and critics in global centres were eager to canonize. Their practices, while deeply embedded in the rapid transformations of post-socialist Albania, were made legible through aesthetic and conceptual vocabularies familiar to international curatorial discourses. As a result, Albanian contemporary art in this period was produced and received within asymmetrical geographies of cultural capital, where its value often emerged less from local diverse experiences and more from its ability to be assimilated into Western narratives of experimentation, resistance and post-authoritarian renewal.

This first-generation of post-1990s artists thus emerged not only as cultural producers but as strategic navigators of the hierarchies of cultural capital. Their mobility, either physical or linguistic and social, positioned them close to the institutional frameworks shaping the Western art canon and its neoliberal markers and infrastructures. The 'Albanian artist' became legible within global circuits primarily through universalized tropes of displacement and mobility, facilitating circulation while simultaneously inscribing these artists within peripheral or transitional positions: 'post-communist', 'post-socialist' or 'emerging'.

Anri Sala's *Intervista* (1998), shown in the 1999 pavilion, crystallizes many of these dynamics. The video begins when Sala discovers an old reel of silent footage of his mother as a young woman speaking at a communist youth event. Intrigued by the absence of sound, he consults a lip-reading expert to reconstruct her speech and then confronts his mother with the 're-discovered' words. The work moves between the archival footage, the

lip-reading process and an intimate interview with his mother, who comes to reflect on their communist past, the ideologies and ideals that fuelled her youth. What unfolds is not only a personal dialogue but a meditation on history, memory and the instability of translation. Its restrained yet emotionally charged visual language made it widely accessible, allowing it to travel seamlessly across biennials and exhibitions worldwide, with critics viewing it not simply as a personal encounter and recollection but as emblematic narrative of Albania's communist past.

Yet, as van Gerven Oei (2018) critiques, *Intervista* also participates in a problematic flattening. Sala's mother, Valdete, becomes a stand-in for the collective experience of Albanians under socialism. As van Gerven Oei (2018) observes, Sala's English subtitled translation provides a distorted, sometimes mistranslated version of his mother's words, softening or exoticizing her responses, and other times a disbelief in what the lip-reader has unveiled to which the mother responds: 'those are not my words', rendering her an archetype of historical trauma, rather than an active subject negotiating her past. This mistranslation is not a minor detail but part of the larger epistemic asymmetry that governs the geographies of cultural production, where to be legible within global circuits often means being reframed through Western interpretive tropes of irony, trauma and inevitability.

A similar dynamic shapes the practice of the Canada-based duo The Two Gullivers (Flutura Preka and Besnik Haxhillari). Their performative action *Transparent Voyage* (1994–ongoing), also featured in the 1999 pavilion, revolves around a plexiglass suitcase, a portable object repeatedly staged in performances and photographs across public transit zones in Europe and North America. The suitcase, simultaneously transparent and impenetrable, evokes both hyper-visibility and dispossession: migrants often travel with limited belongings, while their presence in public space remains heavily surveilled and precarious. By inviting interaction from passers-by or leaving the suitcase unattended in public spaces, the work exposes the instability of borders and the liminality of migrant existence: always in motion but never fully arriving. Like Sala's *Intervista*, the performative clarity and minimalism of *Transparent Voyage* aligned with global curatorial expectations, ensuring its circulation while underscoring how physical, cultural and institutional borders shape both the conditions of migration and the frameworks through which it is represented.

Adrian Paci, another participant in the pavilion, extends these tensions in a different register. One of his most cited and exhibited works, *Centro di Permanenza Temporanea* (2007), addresses the contradictions of migration and its representation within systems of control. Filmed near the US – Mexico border, the video shows a group of migrants waiting to board an airplane stairway, their faces marked by quiet anticipation and resignation. As the camera zooms in on each face, the 'individual experience is illustrated as a collective, shared destiny, seemingly impossible to change' (Galante, 2024, p. 110). While referencing detention centres in Italy, ironically labelled 'temporary' despite their indefinite timelines, the work also gestures to a globalized condition of liminality and deferred belonging. The visual economy of *Centro* is strikingly clear, making it easily adaptable to biennial and museum contexts: its abstraction from specific geographies allows it to circulate smoothly as a universalized narrative of migrant precarity, even as it emerges from and speaks to highly situated realities. Its abstraction, however, transforms this highly specific political reality into a distilled,

universal image of precarity, perfectly suited for biennial and museum contexts eager for symbols of global displacement.

How, then, are we supposed to read these artworks? What social realities and contexts does their contemporaneity actually respond to? These works are frequently interpreted through universalized tropes of displacement, exile and mobility. These are themes that made them legible to global curators and critics and facilitated their smooth circulation in the biennial and museum circuits of this period. This framing positioned Albanian artists as carriers of a particular kind of 'post-socialist' difference, a difference translated into the visual codes of global contemporary art and calibrated for easy exportability. Seen together, these works are attentive to the borders that structure both physical migration and cultural legibility, but also, they reveal how artists from a marginalized geography like Albania could claim space within the hierarchies of global contemporary art only by performing certain narratives and aligning with dominant aesthetic and discursive frameworks.

Yet, a critical reading also requires us to acknowledge the limits of this circulation. These artworks engage with complex questions of exile, migration and displacement, but they do not operate in a socially engaged or activist register. Unlike participatory practices that intervene directly in the lived realities of migration, these works remain oriented towards the rarefied spaces of galleries, biennials and museums, all spaces where art is being produced, circulated and institutionalized within elite networks. They navigate systems of privilege, produced for and consumed by audiences already fluent in the codes of contemporary art.

However, this does not diminish their importance. These works remain critical visual archives and cultural testimonies of Albania's negotiation with geographies of cultural production in the post-socialist era. They map a moment when access to global circuits depended on the ability to translate local experience into universal, mobile forms. They also expose the enduring epistemic and spatial hierarchies of the global art world, where borders are not merely territorial but cultural and institutional, dictating who is seen, how they are interpreted and under what terms they acquire value. In this sense, these artworks chart not only the migration of people but also the migration of cultural capital, tracing the routes by which Albanian contemporary art was assimilated into, and sometimes constrained by, the creative industries of the West.

### ***Second-generation: producing agonistic geographies of counter-narratives***

For second-generation artists, migration is not a singular event but a layered and evolving condition, shaped as much by inherited memories as by ongoing negotiations with identity and belonging. Migration scholar Zana Vathi (2019) highlights the 'identification limbo' experienced by Albanian-origin teenagers in Greece, who may assimilate publicly by speaking Greek and adopting dominant cultural codes, yet remain excluded from full belonging because of the restrictive, ethno-nationalist construction of Greek identity (p. 34). This persistent in-betweenness, navigating spaces of belonging while inhabiting multiple cultural geographies, becomes a recurring lens through which the artists of this generation interrogate their experiences. Their practices mobilize personal and collective memory not only to reflect on displacement, claiming a belated justice for past violence,

but also to address the intersectional dimensions of gender, sexuality and class, expanding conversations that were largely absent in first-generation artistic discourses.

For instance, Kairo Urovi, a young artist working predominately with photography, explores this intersection through a deeply personal journey of return. Born in Italy to Albanian parents who migrates in the 1990s and later relocating to the UK in 2014, Urovi confronts his Albanian cultural heritage through the lens of his queer identity. *In Light Are the Wounds, Heavy Is the Wind* (2023), initially exhibited as a part of his degree show, Urovi visits Albania for the first time as an adult and shortly after undergoing gender transition. The series draws inspiration from the Marubi National Photography Museum in Shkodër and particularly its collections documenting Ottoman-era queer practices. By placing his trans identity within the newly discovered Albanian home, Urovi challenges the invisibility of queer bodies in Albanian public life. This act of re-placing the queer body into the Albanian cultural imaginary pushes back against patriarchal and heteronormative narratives that have historically framed Albanian migration exclusively through the lenses of economic survival and cultural conservatism.

Identity in transitional and migratory spaces blurs the line between ‘feeling at home’ and ‘being away from home’. Sara Ahmed (1999) captures this migratory experience as a disjointed sense of belonging, where memory cannot fully reconcile with the new environment, resulting in a lingering discomfort and feeling of not fitting within one’s surroundings (p. 341). From this perspective, Urovi’s reflection explaining how the visual project underscores a need to reconnect with a cultural identity that the UK did not manage to offer (Avdyli, 2023), becomes emblematic of Ahmed’s observation: home is experienced less as a stable site than as a fractured relation, marked by absence and longing. From this perspective, the notion of home becomes inseparable from the notion of identity or selfhood. Home is not a fixed location, nor is it a ‘homeland’ confined by borders. Instead, we create homes, or in other words, we ‘home’ places. Thus, being at home is a sense of belonging to a particular place. In a similar vein, Avtar Brah argues for ‘a distinction between “feeling at home” and declaring a place as home’ (Brah, 1996, p. 197). Brah suggests that one can have multiple homes, including the one left behind and the new homes established in diasporic spaces. The crucial point is that belonging means carrying an identity that is not excluded or discriminated against. In other words, it is to feel ‘a particular sense of being at home, of being accepted, of being safe’ (Wilding & Winarnita, 2022, p. 284). Urovi’s photographs, therefore, are not simply images of return; they are propositions for a different kind of belonging, one that refuses the binary of home and away and insists on the fluid, shifting nature of diasporic identity.

This reconfiguration of absence and presence finds resonances in the work of other second-generation artists, such as Fjorida Cenaj’s *Lule Jeta* (*Life-Flower*, 2023), which was created within the context of ELEUSIS, a multidisciplinary project in the city of Elefsina in Greece and later screened in grassroots settings such as the MiQ Festival, a two-day film festival organized by the collective MiQ (meaning ‘guest’ in Albanian) which created a belated space of showcasing Albanian films in Athens opening dialogues with diasporic local communities. Borrowing its title from her mother’s name, Cenaj’s video uses the personal archive as a tool for excavating the layers of invisibility that often shape migrant women’s lives (Figure 1). The film depicts Cenaj’s mother applying makeup, which as the viewers finds out, is an act rarely performed while raising her children in Greece after migrating from Albania. As her mother narrates her life, sharing



**Figure 1.** Fjorida Cenaj, *Lule Jeta*, 2023 (video still). Video, colour, sound, 07:07. Presented at the #monologues series, conceived by Myrto Papadopoulou for 2023 Eleu-sis, European capital of culture. Courtesy of the artist.

experiences of working in the fields during communism, forgoing education and later dedicating herself to her family, the video meditates on migration, gendered labour and care. The mirror in the video becomes a reflective device that positions her mother not only as an individual but as an embodiment of countless Albanian migrant women, whose everyday sacrifices enabled their families' futures but whose own aspirations were constrained by intersecting systems of patriarchy, economic migration and precarity. Like Urovi's reclamation of queer subjectivity, Cenaj's piece centres the intimate, embodied and often invisible experiences that unsettle given narratives about Albanian migration, foregrounding the quiet politics embedded in the intimate, the personal and the affective.

Researchers have noted that migrant women often faced a 'double burden', balancing their newfound independence through work with the traditional roles expected of them within their households. The contributions of Albanian female migrants in Greece and Italy often go unnoticed and unrecognized, but they played an important role in filling a gap in care labour, enabling Italian and Greek women to move beyond domestic work and engage in productive employment (Danaj, 2022). Similarly, Doreida Xhogu's ongoing multimedia project *Mama Klorin*, exhibited at the The Demos Center in Athens (2024–2025) uses collaborative processes to amplify the voices of Albanian women working as cleaners, which remains a demographic often excluded from dominant migration narratives despite their structural importance in European economies (Figure 2).

The project spans several interconnected forms. A video component follows Xhogu as she joins her mother, herself a cleaner, and other migrant women in their daily routines, documenting the physicality of cleaning as labour while also capturing the quiet exchanges and solidarities that form within these spaces. This moving-image documentation is currently being developed into a longer film, which has begun to circulate across film festivals, extending the project's reach beyond traditional art spaces and into more community-oriented contexts. Alongside the video, Xhogu produces together with the women a series of small clay sculptures representing everyday cleaning products, such as spray bottles, buckets, brushes, objects that simultaneously symbolize invisibility and



**Figure 2.** Doreida Xhogu, *Mama Klorin* (exhibition view). The Demos centre, 15 November 2024 – 31 January 2025, curated by Ioanna Papapavlou and Pati Vardhami. Photo by the author.

resilience. The process of shaping these objects is also filmed, creating a visual archive of the women collaboratively producing their own representations, while accompanying photographic portraits situate these women not as anonymous workers but as individuals whose labour and stories are integral to the fabric of contemporary migration. By collecting oral histories and incorporating them into these participatory forms, Xhogu reclaims spaces of cultural production for those routinely excluded from them, collapsing the distance between artist, subject and audience. The project makes visible what Vergès (2019) terms the ‘economy of exhaustion’, where migrant women’s bodies sustain the rhythms of neoliberal capitalism while remaining socially and politically invisible. More than documentation, *Mama Klorin* builds a collaborative archive of care and labour, challenging the hierarchies of the art world by foregrounding participation and shared authorship. In doing so, the work not only illuminates the embodied geographies of migrant work that underpin both migration and its cultural imaginaries but also transforms visibility into a form of collective agency, carving out a space where the women, the main protagonists of the project, are co-authors of their own narratives.

The use of memory in these practices resonates with Hirsch’s (2012) notion of post-memory, but here it is charged with critical urgency and activist intent. Rather than simply inheriting trauma, these artists activate memory as a tool for critique and political

imagination, revisiting silenced histories and interrogating the systems that produced violence, exclusion and marginalization. In Urovi's reclamation of queer belonging, Cenaj's re-framing of migrant mother, and Xhogu's collaborative work with cleaners, memory is mobilized not as static inheritance but as an active, situated and agonistic practice. By engaging with the everyday and the intimate, these artists expose the biopolitical borders that structure migrant life, from gendered expectations to labour precarity, and challenge their normalization.

This politics of counter-memory reaches a powerful collective articulation in the interdisciplinary collective Latent Community, composed of visual artists and filmmakers Sotiris Tsiganos and Ionian Bisai. Their film *Otranto* (2020) revisits the tragedy of the *Katër i Radës*, a boat carrying 120 Albanian migrants that sank in 1997 after colliding with an Italian naval vessel, killing 81 people, mostly women and children. Although a memorial was erected in Italy, the victims' families' calls to return the wreck to Albania have been ignored, and no formal justice pursued. In *Otranto* (Figure 3), Latent Community stages a collective 'time-based monument' (Isto & Community, 2021) that becomes a counter-memory of violent event: relatives of the victims re-enact the journey from Vlorë to Otranto. However, instead of document the journey, the film resists linear chronology, looping between present and past, returning to the memorial, where the names of the dead are read aloud. This temporal and spatial looping refuses the closure offered by official memorials, transforming the film into a space of agonistic remembrance and political critique. Unlike the aesthetic universalization characteristic of many first-generation works, *Otranto* is situated and collective, foregrounding the lived realities of those directly affected while exposing the ongoing violence of Mediterranean border regimes (Forensic Architecture, 2024).

Through these practices, second-generation Albanian artists produce counter-narratives that are deeply embedded in the geographies they critique. By leveraging memory, collaboration and alternative forms of visibility, their work embodies an agonistic resistance which refuses assimilation into dominant frameworks and instead produces



**Figure 3.** Latent Community (Ionian Bisai and Sotiris Tsiganos), *Otranto*, 2020 (video still). Video, colour, sound (DCP), 24:41. Courtesy of the artists.

contested, plural spaces for dialogue, recognition and justice. Unlike the first generation, whose works often entered the global art system by aligning with dominant codes of representation, this generation actively challenges those codes by foregrounding situated, intersectional and participatory approaches. Their audiences also shift: while first-generation artists frequently addressed global elite circuits, biennials, museums and institutional platforms, second-generation practices extend beyond these spaces, engaging diasporic communities, grassroots initiatives and alternative cultural platforms. In these contexts, the artwork becomes a living process, a catalyst for collective reflection and solidarity rather than a static object of contemplation.

By activating counter-memory as a form of agonistic engagement, these artists contest the epistemic and cultural borders that have historically positioned Albanian migration within reductive frameworks associated with its post-socialist identities as was the case with first-generation artists. Urovi's insertion of queer subjectivity into the Albanian cultural imaginary, for example, unsettles heteronormative narratives of the migrant family, while Cenaj and Xhogu's attention to women's labour reclaims agency for subjects typically erased from the public record. Similarly, Latent Community's *Otranto* refuses to monumentalize the tragedy of the *Katër i Radës* as a static history, creating instead a dynamic, collective process of remembrance that keeps the event open as a site of contestation and political demand. It could be argued that rather than offering closure, reconciliation or assimilation, they open what Chantal Mouffe (2013) calls an 'agonistic space': a terrain where conflict is not erased but made visible, acknowledged and negotiated. In this sense, counter-memory in these practices operates not as a restorative gesture, but as a critical and political act that challenges dominant narratives while refusing to resolve the tensions they expose. In doing so, second-generation artists expand the geographies of Albanian migration beyond trauma and marginalization, mapping spaces of resistance, care and possibility that traverse local, diasporic and transnational scales. These works reconfigure the terms of visibility itself, offering a more complex and critical understanding of what it means to inhabit, contest and reimagine the borders that continue to shape migrant lives.

## Conclusion

The rich and long-standing tradition of *kurbet*, the act of leaving home and migrating to support one's family, has deep roots in Albanian history. As King notes, this practice often reflects a sense of pride and courage, involving risky journeys and significant personal sacrifices (2005, p. 135). Migration has shaped not only the lives of those who have left Albania in recent decades but has also profoundly transformed the country itself, as emptying villages, remittance-driven economies and transnational family structures testify to an ongoing search for opportunity abroad. Yet, a closer look at the geographies of Albanian migration reveals a persistent imbalance: while migration has been central to Albanian life, Albanians in *kurbet* have been largely deprived of the right to narrate their own experiences, with their stories mediated, or erased, by external systems of representation and power.

Second-generation Albanians, positioned differently within global geographies of education, culture and mobility, are reshaping this dynamic. Now integral members of their societies, they are not only seeking belated justice or access to existing networks but

also constructing platforms through which to reclaim collective memory, counter dominant narratives and challenge the epistemic borders that have long defined them. Their practices make visible the intersections of migration with gender, sexuality, labour and class, and in doing so, they complicate and expand the narrative terrain of Albanian migration beyond tropes of economic precarity or cultural nostalgia.

This article underscores the importance of recognizing creativity and visual culture as critical tools for detecting the geographies of agonistic spaces including ways in which conflict and contestation are not erased but brought to the surface as conditions for new forms of dialogue and recognition. Through photography, film, performance and collaborative practice, these artists mobilize counter-memory not as a restorative gesture but as an active and political act, one that keeps histories of exclusion open and unsettled. In this sense, their works do more than provide visibility to the stories of Albanian migrants: they reclaim agency over representation, insist on the complexity of migrant subjectivities, and demand a reconfiguration of who is authorized to speak, and under what terms.

Engaging with these practices also demands a mode of spectatorship that is critical and reflexive, one that recognizes the positionalities, privileges and power dynamics that shape our encounters with these works. Such engagement becomes an act of decolonizing knowledge production, challenging the hierarchies that structure both the circulation of art and the narratives of migration themselves. In this regard, bringing geography into critical proximity with visual culture enables a deeper understanding of the epistemic injustices and spatial hierarchies that underpin migration, allowing for an interrogation that emerges 'from the center to the margins, to the site at which new and multi-dimensional knowledge and identities are constantly in the process of being formed' (Rogoff, 2000, p. 20). In recognizing and amplifying these practices, we begin to map not only the histories of displacement and exclusion but also the emergent geographies of resistance, care and possibility that Albanian contemporary art continues to chart.

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