

Photomontage as a Mirror: Reflecting Latin American Migratory Narratives in Japan

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This study explores collective photomontage as a visual participatory method within Latin American migrant communities living and working in peri-urban areas in Joso, Japan. This process bridges the gap between the two-dimensionality of printed photography and the three-dimensionality of the landscape (Itozaki, 2006), serving as a medium to evoke narratives and memories (Napolitano, 2015) and understand the spatial dynamics within these communities (Mainsah & Sánchez Boe, 2019).

Historically, the development of relations between Japan and Latin American countries has spanned over a century, making them integral to this narrative. The first diplomatic relations with Latin American countries started with Peru during the Meiji era (Goto, 2007). Japan's demographic crisis in the late 19th century, juxtaposed with the labor needs in Brazil and Peru for coffee and sugar cane plantations, sparked a wave of Japanese migration to South America (Takenaka, 2004). The migration commenced with the Sakura Maru's voyage in 1899 to Peru (Kawabata, 2011) and was marked by the arrival of the Kasato-maru in Brazil in 1908 (Nogueira, 1995). By the late 1980s, the Japanese population in Brazil swelled to 1.2 million, predominantly settling around São Paulo (Neuman, 2004), forming the most significant Japanese diaspora worldwide (Cornell & Smith, 1970). Decades later, Brazilian and Peruvian descendants of Japanese immigrants started moving to Japan, especially during the 1980s and 1990s. Japan sought a workforce for its burgeoning industries and introduced new regulations to facilitate their entry (Matsumoto & Okumura, 2019). Joso, in Ibaraki Prefecture, emerged as a hub with a significant foreign population, with over forty percent of Latin American descent. This demographic composition has left an indelible mark on the city's visual communication (Urano, 2002).

Migrants transform spaces into personal interaction zones, acting as cultural conduits (Pietro-Blanco, 2021) and providing a lens for locals to view the world, a mirror, and a window (Flusser, 1985). This research aims to comprehend the collective identity construction and highlight migrant Latin American narratives in the surrounding landscapes. Taking notes from Colombian researcher and founder of the Participatory Action Research Collective, Fals Borda, he engaged with traditional and academic knowledge (Rappaport, 2020) and research activism (Lomeli & Rappaport, 2018). Participatory visual methods (PVM) emphasize understanding social experiences and viewpoints through active collaboration between participants and researchers by producing visual materials (Chalfen, 2011) while promoting collaborative image creation and establishing connections between migrant experiences.

One of the goals of this work is to understand how these communities, through a collective photomontage process, influence, understand, and reshape their surrounding landscapes, thereby emulating the dynamics of migration and shared experiences. This research contributes to the broader discourse on community engagement, migrant narratives, participatory media, or photomedia.

This approach provides a nuanced understanding of the transformative power of visual narratives in migration, offering a rich, multi-layered perspective on the subject.

Through a participatory approach, this project combines visual methods with collective storytelling. Collaborative photomontage sessions are central to this methodology, providing a space for shared creativity and expression. The study navigates logistical constraints faced by participants, many of whom work on weekends, and institutional challenges in securing local urban spaces that affect both the researcher and participants. To accommodate these challenges, the project incorporated individual "catch-up" sessions, enabling participants to integrate their previously made photographs into the collective montage, thus ensuring continuous engagement and narrative construction. In contrast to traditional photomontage projects, where a singular artistic vision often dominates, this study emphasizes equitable participation. For instance, projects like the University of Tokyo's "Keitai Trail!" (2009) in Japan or the photo-collage installation of trans women by the Argentinian collective Archivo de la Memoria Trans (2023) presented in the Sao Paulo Biennial have showcased collective photography efforts but have typically been assembled under a singular artistic direction, in other cases the decision-making of selecting and assembling photos goes to one person or at least not to the whole collective, sometimes highlighting power imbalances in collaborative practices. In contrast, this approach decentralizes the creative process, allowing each participant's voice and vision to contribute equally to the collective narrative.

This work shows a dynamic process of collective memory-making and landscape transformation. The resulting photomontage, assembled in an "Exquisite Corpse" style, is a tapestry of the participants' layered experiences. This method illuminates the diverse yet interconnected narratives of the migrant community, highlighting their unique contributions to the cultural and physical landscape of Joso. The photomontage emerges as a visual product that carries a dialogue between individual stories and collective experiences. Lastly, this research offers insights into the role of participatory photomedia in empowering migrant communities. By engaging in the collective creation of a photomontage, participants actively shape and reinterpret their lived experiences, fostering a sense of community and belonging. The study also contributes to understanding how migrant communities interact with and transform their environments through collective artistic practices, highlighting the potential of visual media as tools for community bonding and cultural expression.