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Mobilities, locality and place-making: understanding categories of (non-)membership in a peripheral valley

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ABSTRACT

This article employs a mobility lens to investigate the ways in which membership is organised in a peripheral(ised) place. We show that adopting such a lens makes it possible to tackle important pitfalls in migration studies – an urban and sedentary bias and national- and ethnicity-based epistemologies. By including different types of transnational, national and local mobilities and applying a unit of analysis that comprises all people who live in or pass through the place under study – rather than only a particular ethnic or national group – we are able to identify the processes in which (im)mobilities are entangled with each other and their relationship with local processes of community formation. Based on ethnographic research in a Swiss valley, our study depicts a scheme of ordering (non-)membership that we refer to as the *imagined community of fate of the Valley-ers*. The latter can be understood as 'emplaced peripheralisation' that is the outcome of a dynamic and nested form of boundary work in which the most important categories and markers are socio-economic – rather than nation- and ethnicity-based. Our results demonstrate the importance of de-centring the role of migration and the city when it comes to understanding the social organisation of difference at particular places.

1. Introduction

Tonight, we [the two PhD students working on this research project] are invited to attend a dinner in a village in the Val-de-Travers hosted by a local organisation to thank people for supporting a cultural event. We get into a discussion. One of the participants, Sylvie, is a Belgian woman who settled in the region with her husband almost 50 years ago. A second woman and her child join in; they are from Kosovo and live in another village in the valley. When a woman comes through the door, Sylvie immediately announces that she is from Lithuania and has a Spanish husband, and when a couple from the village arrives a few seconds later, Sylvie says: 'Ah, here are the first Swiss!' [. . .] At the table, we sit next to a couple who emphasise that they have always lived in this village and the husband shares some clichés about the Val-de-Travers – that from the outside it looks like a 'native reserve' and 'a hole'. Later, he recounts how a friend of his one day suddenly had a health problem in the street in Neuchâtel [the nearest city] and nobody came to help him. The man explains that this would never happen in the Val-de-Travers: 'Here, people care about others.' (Fieldnotes)

So, for people, the valley is a hole: we live there, we die there, but we don't move there! What you need to know is that all valley activities are outward-looking ones. Take the economy, which was based on watches, lace, absinthe, knitting machines – these are all export products. Lace was sold all over the world, watches in China. So, everything that happens is for the outside world. We live there, but it's a place of passage. Goods move, and I would say people do too. (Man, 70 years old, lifelong resident)

These excerpts from our fieldnotes offer a first glimpse into the ways in which a place, the Val-de-Travers in the Canton of Neuchâtel, Switzerland, is peripheralised, but also transnationalised and diverse.[1] They also illuminate how mobilities and locality – the latter understood as 'people's ideas about the significance of place' (Strathern 1984, 44) – shape the social organisation of difference. This 'hole' is indeed economically, politically and culturally produced by multiple mobilities at different scales (Urry 2007), rather than defined by fixity.

Based on a long-term qualitative-interpretative ethnographic case study in the Val-de-Travers, located in French-speaking Switzerland on the border with France, this article describes the particular scheme of ordering we have found in the valley. We call this *the imagined community of fate of the Valley-ers* (Valley-ers is the translation from the French word 'Valloniers'), which can be understood as an emplaced peripheralisation: it is the outcome of dynamic and nested forms of boundary work in which the most important categories and markers are socio-economic – rather than nation- and ethnicity-based. This scheme unfolds at the interface of processes related to locality and different types of mobility. In the following we demonstrate the relationship between conceptions of membership in the valley and the valley's history – it evolved from an important watchmaking centre in the early 20th century to a peripheralised region, especially since the 1970s.

Taking a specific place, understood as 'a meaningful segment of space combining location, locale, and sense of place' (Cresswell 2013, 280),[2] rather than a type of mobility or a group of people, as the unit of analysis makes it possible to develop an encompassing understanding of the local organisation of difference and to explore the dynamics of mobilities and locality that have been significant in the emergence of this imagined community of fate. This specific scheme of ordering, in turn, offers the opportunity to enhance studies of peripheral places by emphasising their critical embeddedness in external dynamics and within national, European and transnational orders. In particular, we focus on the creation, maintenance and contestation of categories of difference and membership, namely, the symbolic and social boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002) partaking in the (re)production of what we call an 'imagined community of fate'.

Our article provides new insights into two subject areas – peripheral places and migration – while simultaneously connecting them. First, although extensive research has been conducted in peripheral places in many disciplines, these places are rarely apprehended in terms of the (interrelated) dynamics of mobility and locality. Furthermore, most of this literature has not directly addressed the entanglement of (im)mobilities and their relationship with local processes of community formation. In other words, we propose a renewed form of 'community study' of a peripheral place, one which brings new insights into these dynamics through a focus on mobilities and interconnections.

Second, we contribute to what has been called 'reflexive migration studies' (Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014; Dahinden 2016) by making a case for de-centring the role of the city and of migration when it comes to understanding the social organisation of difference in particular places. On the one hand, migration studies traditionally mostly focused on cities when investigating membership and place-making. We show that peripheral places provide important insights into these issues. On the other hand, migration studies most often examines only one form of mobility, that referred to as 'migration' – the movement of humans across national borders that is expected to lead to settlement and which is thereafter discussed in terms of 'integration'. This 'sedentary bias' (Urry 2007) in migration studies is entangled with methodological nationalism and the logic of the nation-state (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), according to which mobility across national borders is a problem, an exception and disruptive (Hui 2016). By including transnational, national and local mobilities in this study, we demonstrate that mainstream integration theory overlooks important aspects of the ways in which processes of inclusion and exclusion operate in contexts shaped by transationalisation and mobilities.

This article thus seeks to enhance the understanding of dynamics of (non-)membership beyond the common distinction between locals and newcomers. To this end, in what follows, before presenting our methodology, we theorise our approach by combining reflexive migration studies and mobility studies in order to critically operationalise our perspective on a place that has so far

not attracted much scholarly attention. We then discuss our case study by examining the different processes participating in the emergence of the imagined community of fate of the Valley-ers. We demonstrate the entanglement between different dynamics of locality – such as the economic peripheralisation of the valley and the historical resistance to this process – with different mobilities – such as cross-border work, inter-village mobilities, tourism and the valley's historical participation in European labour circulation. Through this example, we show that dominant conceptions of membership in local imagined communities might be based on shared feelings of marginalisation and on local and socio-economic issues, rather than on ethno-national origins. People's shared sense of emplacement is inextricably shaped by marginalisation. We therefore demonstrate the critical importance of de-centring research in migration studies both conceptually and geographically.

2. Investigating a peripheral place through a mobility lens

Of course, conducting research in peripheral places is nothing new. On the contrary, extensive research has been conducted in peripheral places in many disciplines – for example, anthropology (Cole and Wolf 1999; Stacul 2003), human geography (Milbourne 2007) and sociology (Coquard 2019). However, peripheral – or rather *peripheralised* – places are rarely apprehended through the (interrelated) dynamics of mobility and locality. Instead, the existing literature on human mobilities in villages has mostly documented specific types of (im)mobility, such as the mobilities of youth (Farrugia 2016), the mobilities of homeless people (Cloke, Milbourne, and Widdowfield 2003), contemporary rural in-migration (Stockdale 2016) and processes of staying (Erickson, Sanders, and Cope 2018). While a few studies have worked on the emplaced construction of difference and membership through a migration or mobility lens (Schech 2014; Villa 2019), scholars have rarely addressed the entanglement of (im)mobilities and their relationship with local processes of community formation (as an exception we can point to the work of Olwig (2003)). Our study contributes to these questions by combining dynamics of mobility and locality while analysing how they partake in the evolving and shifting contours of the imagined community of fate.

At the same time, European and American research on the transnationalisation of social realities and the diversification of populations has focused mainly on global (or smaller) cities embedded in neoliberal economies, as have mainstream integration or assimilation theory (Baumann 1996; Smith 2001; Hanley, Ruble, and Garland 2008; Wessendorf 2013).

While these studies provide important insights into the ways in which diversity is structured, lived and organised in urban spaces, locally and transnationally, they suffer from an *urban bias*. As Milbourne and Kitchen have argued, 'Much of the recent geographical scholarship on mobilities has focused on the city, with "the urban" constructed as the archetypal space of hyper-mobility' (Milbourne and Kitchen 2014, 326). More recently, Schmiz et al. (2020) have argued that migration studies has not only an urban but also a metropolitan bias: their bibliometric analysis of journals in the fields of urban and migration studies demonstrates that a large proportion of migration studies is conducted in large cities. Our study de-centres migration studies by investigating how the social organisation of place-making in a peripheral place is influenced by various local and transnational dynamics and types of mobility.

Furthermore, our article contributes to a strand of literature that attempts to incorporate greater epistemological and theoretical reflexivity into migration studies (Nieswand and Drotbohm 2014; Dahinden 2016; Anderson 2019).

First, it has been argued that migration studies suffers from a *sedentary bias*. A newer body of work maintains that, contrary to mainstream integration research, place-making cannot be reduced to dynamics between 'natives' and so-called migrants (critically see, e.g. Favell 2016), because different types of mobility play a role in determining who does and does not belong (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Moret 2018). A mobility lens (Cresswell 2010), which we apply in this study,

reverses the ontological and epistemological assumption that pairs territories and people to re-orient research to the entanglement of mobility and immobility (Cresswell 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006; Amelina and Vasilache 2014).

Second, following this change of perspective, we are interested in all the varieties of human mobility that can be found in this place, and we investigate the role not only of migration – typically understood as a permanent move across international borders – but also of local mobilities within the valley, cross-border commuting and tourism. In addition, we argue that, alongside mobility, locality is also crucially important in framing group membership. We investigate how locality as 'people's ideas about the significance of place' (Strathern 1984, 44) – which we understand as the subjective results of being 'rooted', or historically, socially, economically or politically anchored in a given place (Dahinden 2010) – is produced and conditioned in interaction with mobilities.

Finally, we build on Cresswell (2010) but also on post-colonial scholars (e.g. Mayblin and Turner 2021) who argue that research in the social sciences needs to take mobilities of the past into consideration in order to understand their present forms and meanings. While the discourses and practices explored during our research in regard to mobilities are situated in a specific place and period, we also take into account the (recent) history of the Val-de-Travers and the evolution of mobilities and their perceptions.

In short, we attempt to de-migranticise research (Dahinden 2016), and this attempt extends to our research design: we do not adopt a national or ethnic group as our unit of analysis, but instead those who live in or pass through this place – residents and people who work but do not live there, regardless of their nationality, whether or not they are migrants and whether they are long-term residents or newcomers. This approach makes it possible to identify how membership is socially organised and which categories of difference are significant. We therefore investigate inductively the categorisations that our interlocutors mobilise in order to produce and negotiate the relevant social and symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002; Wimmer 2008; Dahinden and Zittoun 2013), which in turn inform the social organisation of this peripheral place and lead to the emplaced marginalisation we observe. We are particularly interested in symbolic boundary work, namely, in the 'conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. [. . .] Symbolic boundaries separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership' (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 168).

3. Methodology

Our case study is based on long-term qualitative-interpretative ethnographic research in the Val-de-Travers that began in early 2019. We first conducted four expert interviews (Meuser and Nagel 2009) with historians and local authorities in order to get an overview of the social landscape and the historical, legal and institutional environments that frame the interactions between mobility and locality in the valley. With the same objective, we also analysed available documents and research, including reports, statistics and historical studies about the valley.

Second, we conducted 29 problem-centred interviews (Witzel and Reiter 2010) with people involved in different types of mobility, including cross-border workers, asylum seekers, people involved in the tourism industry, people working in local organisations for foreigners and people who came from other parts of the canton or Switzerland. We also conducted interviews with people who have lived in the valley for their entire lives. We asked our interlocutors about their experiences of the meshing of different mobilities, their ongoing negotiations of symbolic boundaries and their imaginations and representations of themselves, others, the locality and the future. One objective of these interviews was to pinpoint processes of self-identification and categorisation in the valley (Stokoe 2012).

Emmanuel also conducted participant observations in the villages – in places where people meet, including cafés, museums and parks, but also during specific events and activities such as conferences, festivals, film screenings and community events. This ethnographic data explores interactions

between mobilities and the socio-institutional system, daily encounters with alterity and the negotiation of shared categories (Hammersley 2006). Emmanuel visited the valley on a weekly basis over a period of five months and later rented a room and lived there for two months. He also conducted informal ethnographic interviews in the form of day-to-day conversations. Finally, Emmanuel conducted two focus-group discussions with members of an association that offers 'integration' activities to beneficiaries of the Migration Service and other social services. These focus groups were used to present our preliminary results to the participants, and to engage in a discussion by sharing our interpretations with them and taking their reflections into account in our analysis.

The data analysis began with a global analysis (Flick 2009), which allowed us to discover the main themes in the documents and interviews. Thus, we identified the observations and transversal discourses and categorisations that define the contours of this imagined community of fate. We then targeted specific passages, coding and classifying the results to explore the dynamics of this specific ordering scheme.

4. The emergence of the Valley-ers' imagined community of fate

In what follows, we investigate how different individuals, who live and/or work in the valley and those who pass through for various reasons are involved in boundary work in order to differentiate themselves from others – actors, geographic entities, 'centres' – while producing ideas of membership and cohesion in regard of the group 'Valley-ers'. The Valley-ers' *imagined community of fate* has emerged under the specific condition of being peripheralised in various ways, and at the interface of narratives related to locality and various types of mobility, namely, cross-border movements, historical European labour circulation, internal mobility within the valley and tourism.

We are not interested in determining which specific individuals are or are not members of this community, but in identifying the effects of mobilities and locality on the social organisation and representation of the Val-de-Travers. While we acknowledge that the use of the term 'community' runs the risk of essentialising social processes (Amit and Rapport 2002), we argue that it also makes it possible to understand the specific mechanisms through which 'groupness' (Brubaker 2004) and corresponding relational boundaries emerge and are emplaced. That is, we use the notion of 'community' to illustrate the situational emergence of a relational sense of membership to a collective – the Valley-ers. We do not consider it to be 'out there'; rather throughout our analysis we seek to identify the circumstances and boundary work in which the local actors are embedded when they negotiate its contours and we shed light on the significative and interrelated dynamics of mobility and locality in this social process.

4.1. A transnationally embedded 'periphery of the periphery'

'We are on the periphery of the periphery' (Man, 45 years old, lifelong resident). This quotation succinctly captures many layers of the narratives and categorisations we heard in the valley.

Obviously, 'periphery' is a situationally and relationally constructed term (Wirth et al. 2016). In valley residents' discourse, 'periphery' has a strong symbolic and spatial dimension, and when the residents discuss the boundary of 'periphery' they oppose it to three different types of 'centre'.

First, the valley is perceived as *geographically* peripheral. It is relatively far from what our interlocutors call 'urban centres'. It is a narrow valley between two mountains, barely 20 kilometres long and 3 kilometres wide. A river, which follows the main road, runs all the way through the valley and passes through most of the villages before flowing into Lake Neuchâtel. Due to its topography, the valley is a confined basin separated from the rest of the canton by a small winding and hilly road. A trip by train or car from the city of Neuchâtel to the entrance to the valley takes about 25 minutes. Furthermore, being located on the border with France, the Val-de-Travers is regarded as the periphery of a canton that many people already perceive as the periphery of Switzerland. This reinforces the idea of the Val-de-Travers as geographically decentralised, a view that is mirrored in

the legislative programme of the local government: 'It is essential to give ourselves the means to constantly improve the image of the Val-de-Travers, which will always remain a peripheral municipality of a peripheral canton' (Val-de-Travers 2016, 3).

Second, the valley is perceived as *demographically* peripheral. It has a small population – 11,772 inhabitants scattered across three municipalities and 11 villages (DEAS 2019).[3] And third, the valley is perceived as *economically* peripheral. Historically, agriculture and watchmaking were the main economic activities in the valley, but watchmaking reached a breaking point in the 1970s due to, among other factors, the oil crisis and declining demand for mechanical watches. In addition to watchmaking, a knitting-machine factory in the valley that had as many as 1,200 employees at one time closed down in 1988. The economic crisis of the 1970s and 1980s caused the permanent loss of about 2,000 jobs in the valley (Mairy 2008, 266). The regional authorities subsequently developed an economic programme to diversify the economy (before its economic decline, nearly 50 per cent of its jobs had been in watchmaking and machinery) and attract employers. The programme included the creation of industrial zones, renovation of infrastructures, development of tourism and improvement of the image of the region. Even so, relative to the rest of the canton, average income in the valley is low, a greater percentage of the population is employed in the primary and secondary sectors and educational levels are lower (DEAS 2016). This situation has prompted some, especially the young and non-Swiss citizens who lost their jobs, to leave the region (expert interview, local historian).[4]

Nonetheless, being the 'periphery of the periphery' does not necessarily mean that the region is disconnected from 'centres'. Translocal and transnational connections are a fundamental part of the valley's history and present. Local industries – the lace trade at the beginning of the 17th century, and watchmaking from the mid-18th century until the 1970s – were always connected transnationally and often entangled with the colonial capitalist system. Lace products were exported to Europe and North America. In the 19th century, the watchmaking sector benefitted from the outward-looking approach established by the lace industry, and many young people from the valley moved internationally to continue their training and develop their businesses (Jelmini and Vaucher 2008). In the 20th century, prestigious watch manufacturers established themselves in the region, again reinforcing international connections (Mairy 2008).

Long-standing transnational connections were also established through population movements. Beginning in the late 19th century, the watchmaking industry created significant demand for workers, triggering important waves of immigration, first from other cantons, then from France and Italy, and, after the Second World War, in the form of guest workers from Italy, Spain and Portugal. As a result of the Switzerland–EU Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons (AFMP), which came into effect in 2002, the region has also seen an increasing number of cross-border workers from France. These *frontaliers* ('border-crossers'), as they are called, live in France but commute to the valley daily for work.[5] In addition, the valley has experienced an increasing number of tourists (mainly from Switzerland's German-speaking regions), seen the opening and closing of several centres for asylum seekers and witnessed the arrival of people looking for cheaper real estate, especially those with low incomes and families wishing to settle in single-family homes.

As we demonstrate in the following sections, the strong feeling of being a periphery together with the transnational embeddedness of the valley form the foundation upon which the Valley-ers' imagined community of fate is built.

4.2 Local mobilities within the valley: blurring the boundaries between villages and the emergence of the identification as Valley-ers

The mobility of people within the valley is the first important dimension underlying the symbolic boundary of 'Valley-ers' that residents adopted for themselves in the 20th century (Jelmini 2009). Milbourne has argued that 'short distance re-locations are the most significant movement between places' and emphasised that researchers should be aware of the 'difference that a few miles can make to constructions of localness in the rural context' (Milbourne 2007, 385). His

observation is valid for our case. Historically, the valley was clearly separated into distinct villages, each of which was presented as having specific characteristics. One, for instance, was defined as the 'cultural and bourgeois centre'. It is in this village that most of the museums, the castle and most important historical buildings are located. Another was proclaimed the 'watchmaking centre' of the valley. The village in which the knitting-machine factory was located was known as the most industrial – it contained a large industrial zone and was said to have a working-class character. These distinctions are still present in residents' discourses and generate a certain 'rivalry', to use our interlocutors' term, but they are also fading. While the inhabitants told us that earlier generations identified strongly with their villages, self-identification today is based on the valley as a whole:

> I used to listen to my parents talk about the different villages. I attach less importance to that. We come from a 'neighbourhood', which is one of the villages. It's also a question of generation. I don't hear young people talking about one village or another. (Woman, 48 years old, lifelong resident)

Local mobilities within the valley play an important role in this shift towards a higher-level identification and the emergence of the category 'Valley-ers'. Importantly, people who have lived in the valley for a long time often juxtapose the immobility of villagers in the past with the mobility between different parts of the valley today. Our interlocutors mention two main factors as responsible for this change. The first is the closure of shops, bars and services in some villages, which has forced people to be mobile within the valley. At a café, a woman told us the following: 'Small local shops have closed in some villages – the bakery, butcher's, dairy, etc. That encourages people to move to other places. We now have to go to [the neighbouring village] to shop' (Fieldnotes).

Second, over the last few decades the region has seen an increasing number of organisations that link the villages in an inter-communal or regional network. The Association Région Val-de-Travers (ARVT), the valley's regional association, for example, was created on the basis of a Swiss Confederation initiative to support peripheral regions. Local authorities endorse this development, invest in inter-communal infrastructure, centralise services and encourage inter-communal organisations. At the initiative of the ARVT, the local population voted in 2008 to merge nine villages into a single political municipality, thus consolidating the bonds between the villages. Importantly, these reinforced connections are also mirrored in new public-transport infrastructure, which facilitates circulation within the valley. A cross-border worker pointed to the importance of mobility between villages in promoting social identification with the valley as a whole:

> I don't feel like there are village identities. People are very Val-de-Travers; it's more of a Val-de-Travers identity. [And what are the things that unite people in the Val-de-Travers?] Well, you Swiss are the champions of mobility! And look at that, you have these small public-transport lines between villages that are very efficient, and that makes people move between villages a lot. You've made it easier for people to move around. People go from one village to another and know they can come back whenever they want. (Man, 53 years old, cross-border worker)

The category of Valley-ers has developed in parallel with the increase in local mobilities and the corresponding mobility infrastructure (associations, transportation), and it is crucial in framing who is an insider or outsider, as we will show in the following.

4.3 Locality in terms of a history as an economic periphery: The emergence of a 'community of fate' and concomitant ideas of solidarity

While increased local mobility has produced the identifying term of 'Valley-ers', *locality* has a twofold importance in giving content to and bounding this term – the valley's history as an economic periphery and the role of 'tradition' as a positive symbol for the valley. This subsection delves into the first aspect, and the next discusses the second.

Val-de-Travers is strongly defined by its status as an economically peripheral region. Residents describe the valley as economically disadvantaged, and they convey a general feeling of economic inferiority in their narratives. The relevant 'Other' in view of this boundary is the neighbouring city, Neuchâtel, which is represented as a place with more economic capital and better educational and professional opportunities.[6]

In 1998, a journalist from the valley expressed these differences in an article in the French-language Swiss newspaper *l'Hebdo*:

> There is a feeling of abandonment, a feeling that, in this canton, everything happens in Neuchâtel and La Chaux-de-Fonds[7]: that's where you invest, that's where you dig the tunnels, that's where you attract companies. And, too bad for us, we're next door. (Rebetez 1998, p. 30, our translation)

The economic decline discussed above still looms large in the collective memory. Some interlocutors speak of 'traumatic' periods that marked a turning point:

> In the 80s, the situation was terrible in Val-de-Travers. All the watchmaking companies were closing down. We lost Tornos [a large local company]. We were wondering if we were going to have to close the village. People were being laid off, a lot of people we knew, people we met on the street. (Man, 65 years old, lifelong resident)

These memories nourish the Valley-ers' imagined community of fate: 'You're a real Valley-er when you've been here for a long time and have experienced this kind of thing [the economic crisis]' (Woman, 30 years old, lifelong resident). That this speaker is 30 years old demonstrates that those who claim ownership of discussions on the economic difficulties of the 1980s were not necessarily working at the time. Economic marginalisation and historical trauma trigger a discourse in which solidarity among the Valley-ers is presented as vital for survival, and they contrast this with the city of Neuchâtel where, they claim, nobody cares about anybody, as the quotation that opened this article indicates. As one interviewee put it, 'And there's something important: you have to be ready to show solidarity if you're from the valley' (Woman, 30 years old, lifelong resident). A report issued by the municipal council makes similar claims:

> On average, the population of the Val-de-Travers has significantly lower incomes than the other regions of the canton, and the country. Nevertheless, the solidarity that exists among the inhabitants and the social conscience of the region's companies generally make it possible to maintain socio-economic cohesion. (Hoya 2015, 11, our translation)

Following Baehr (2006), we label this element of self-representation 'fate'. According to Baehr, a community of fate comes into being when a group of people face 'an unwanted, yet socially recognised, emergency which confronts people with a major challenge to their existence' (Baehr 2006, 182). Interestingly, a local politician also employed the term 'fate' in an interview:

> We are a small peripheral region of a peripheral canton. So if we don't care about our fate, others won't either. [. . .] When you come from a small region, if you don't stick together, you're screwed. (Man, 45 years old, lifelong resident)

Another important facet of this 'fate' is inhabitants' belief that they are perceived negatively by outsiders. Our interlocutors, whether newcomers or long-term residents, repeatedly stated that outsiders view them as 'farmers' and the valley as 'a hole', and that 'no one wants to move here' (Fieldnotes). A man described outsiders' perception as follows:

> I went to high school in Neuchâtel. I was the strange animal in class who came from the Val-de-Travers. We've always experienced this marginalisation vis-à-vis people from the city. And even today this hasn't changed. It also creates a bond between the people of the valley. The simple fact that we're marginalised by others makes us stronger. That's a mechanical principle of survival. [. . .] And hardly anyone from the outside moves here. People think, 'What the hell are you doing here, this is the end of the world'. Good if they think that, we don't! (Man, 63 years old, lifelong resident)

This perceived negative external categorisation strengthens internal cohesion and reinforces the discourse regarding solidarity. As Van Houtum and Van Naerssen argue, defining an 'Other' reinforces feelings of membership with the group: 'Others are needed and therefore constantly produced and reproduced to maintain the cohesion in the formatted order of a territorially demarcated society' (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002, 134). Valley-ers' imagined community of fate is based as much on this feeling and experience of living in an economic periphery and being perceived negatively as it is on the supposedly superior value of (seemingly) unconditional solidarity. This local (historical) condition was so important that people began identifying with the new category of 'Valley-ers'.

4.4 Locality: 'traditional' absinthe production as resistance to being peripheral and a positive symbol for the valley

More surprisingly, this imagined community of fate derives also from inhabitants' view of themselves as a community of resistance based on what they call the 'traditional artisanal production of absinthe'. This is the second element of locality informing community formation in the valley. Barth (1969) insisted that groups mobilise various cultural elements – what he called 'cultural stuff' – in order to mark boundaries from other groups and confirm similarities within the in-group. Any *subjective* cultural trait can serve to mark group boundaries. Max Weber (1996[1922]) argued that what is called a community of origin is always subjective, but that this *subjective belief* in a community of origin and common descent can nonetheless be important for group-formation processes. Both Barth and Weber were referring to the formation of ethnic groups, but a similar mechanism operates here. Traditional artisanal absinthe production becomes cultural stuff, a marker of group boundaries, a constituent of the myth of a common origin among Valley-ers and a symbolic element of their positive group identity.[8]

In the early 20th century, the valley was a significant producer of absinthe, but in 1908 a popular initiative was accepted at the federal level banning the production of absinthe in Switzerland. Following a homicide supposedly caused by the consumption of this hard liquor, it was claimed that absinthe had the potential to transform its consumers into murderers and arsonists and lead to the destruction of the family (Delachaux 2008). The valley was heavily affected by this decision. Nonetheless, many local producers continued to make absinthe illegally until 2005, when the ban was repealed. Many myths emerged around this traditional prohibited drink, and they remain important. The century of illegal production is regularly described as a period of resistance and solidarity (Hertz, Roth, and Wobmann 2014). When we asked a woman whether anyone was opposed to the illegal production of absinthe and whether any producers were reported to the authorities, she answered: 'I've never heard that. There was solidarity among inhabitants. It was in our genes' (Woman, 65 years old, resident in the valley for 40 years).

Absinthe became a positive symbol in the valley, an origin myth that reinforces the idea of a community: 'Absinthe, it creates ties' (Man, 55 years old, resident in the valley for seven years). On the question of what is important to the identity of Valley-ers, an interviewee elaborated:

> Of course absinthe, we identify with the history of absinthe. This legacy came out of prohibition, and it's really strong among people. We talk about it a lot, and we talk about it with pleasure. (Man, 31 years old, lifelong resident)

Since the legalisation of absinthe, it has acquired significant economic importance, in terms of both production and as a tourist attraction. There is now a museum dedicated to absinthe production in the region, which it refers to as 'the cradle of traditional absinthe production' (Fieldnotes), although absinthe is also important in neighbouring France.

This origin myth is also mobilised and reinforced by younger people and newcomers, both of whom are heavily involved in the absinthe industry. They exploit and reinforce it by presenting absinthe as an element of local authenticity in order to attract tourists. In this way, locality has

become entangled with a form of enhanced mobility – tourism. Tourism has started to play a role in reinforcing this local origin myth, thus contributing to the representation of the community of Valley-ers.

4.5 International mobility and boundary work regarding outsiders: French cross-border workers and other non-members

Another form of mobility is also fundamental for community building among Valley-ers. Following the AFMP, the number of cross-border workers from France has increased: there are now some 1,200 in the Val-de-Travers, where they hold 20 per cent of the jobs (DEAS 2019).

These *frontaliers* have become the focus of (sometimes violent) debates. Although some interlocutors describe these debates as racist and xenophobic, they reveal a particular type of boundary work in which nationality and language (the cross-border workers speak French, the same language as the local population) are of minor importance, but where another logic, again related to the view of the valley as economically peripheral, dominates. Cross-border workers are reproached for not contributing to the local economy.

Most of the inhabitants we talked to acknowledge that the valley does not have enough workers to cover its job demands, and that unemployed residents do not always meet employers' expectations. In this sense, cross-border workers are accepted and even seen as necessary: 'Without cross-border workers, there's no factories' (Man, 65 years old, lifelong resident). Instead, they are resented for not consuming in the valley and paying little in taxes there. Cross-border workers take advantage of the difference in purchasing power between Switzerland and France: salaries are higher in Switzerland, while the cost of living is significantly lower in France and cross-border workers are eligible for benefits such as health insurance in France. As a retiree told us at a local bar, 'Cross-border workers come with their sandwiches or eat in the company cafeteria and then leave for France' (Fieldnotes). He compared this situation to the 1980s, when the knitting-machine factory was still in business: 'The employees were from the region and ran the businesses. After work, when the factory closed, they went to restaurants and bars' (Fieldnotes). Hence, this human mobility is strongly intertwined with the mobility of money in the form of taxes and wages spent outside the valley, which is contested by some residents and which reinforces the boundary with cross-border workers.

Political authorities and local associations have initiated several measures to encourage cross-border workers to spend their money locally. For instance, in 2016 Val'Action, a local association,[9] created a local currency, the Val (with one Val equal to one Swiss franc), in order to promote the use of the currency in the region and thus support the local economy. This association comprises all shops, restaurants and other locales where it is possible to pay in this local currency (Fieldnotes, discussion with a founder of Val'Action). The municipal government also plans to create a label of certification for companies that recruit their employees locally (Val-de-Travers 2016) and has created so-called welcoming kits for newcomers and cross-border workers.

> There are a lot of commuters who come here only for work, and they leave as soon as the workday's over. These welcoming kits are a way of saying, 'Look, the region you come to work in has other advantages besides offering you a job. Try to visit the shops, go to the restaurant, take advantage of the leisure infrastructure'. So, it's trying to raise awareness so that people who work here might want ... at least to do stuff here, and maybe even settle here. (Man, 45 years old, lifelong resident)

Nationality is not the central issue in tensions over *frontaliers*. As a French citizen who has settled in the valley told us,

> What they [people in the valley] don't like is people who cross the border every day – the *frontaliers*. They're much more open with people who live here. Because I'm almost like them. Same taxes, same way of life. (Man, 30 years old, resident in the valley for two years)

This interviewee emphasises that because he has settled in the valley he is not a victim of stigmatisation. Interestingly, the few Swiss people from the valley who have moved to France and commute back for work are also stigmatised by some residents. The following is an extract from an exchange during a focus-group discussion:

> E: And how are the Swiss [who have moved to France to save money and commute to the valley for work] perceived in the valley?

> Interviewee: Badly. [...] They [those who have moved to France] tell us that we're really stupid, that we don't understand anything, etc. [...] A woman in her fifties [who moved to France], she goes shopping every weekend for 500 bucks. And she shows up like this. She laughs at us, she laughs at people like us who live here, who work here and who haven't moved. This kind of thing is badly perceived. (Woman, 35 years old, lifelong resident)

In other words, an outsider is anyone who does not participate in the local economy, regardless of their nationality. This is an important insight, given that an understanding of belonging on the basis of descent continues to colour these processes, as the following quotation demonstrates:

> If a French person settles here, it's much better [than if they only work in the valley]. It's like they arrive, they buy local, they are local. There's even a little kindness towards them, 'Ah, it's nice, they make the effort'. [...] We have a strong feeling of betrayal towards the Swiss person who moves to the other side [France]. We knew them, and they commit this act of betrayal. (Man, 28 years old, lifelong resident)

Hence, while international mobility is seen as economically necessary, it is also contested when mobile people are seen as not contributing economically to the place. At the same time, Swiss – who could be considered as 'naturally belonging' – become outsiders if they do not participate in the valley economically or if they settle on the other side of the border.

4.6. An 'imagined extended family': belongers and outsiders

The processes we have presented so far culminate in a final necessary element for the emergence of this community of fate – the view that Valley-ers belong to an 'imagined extended family', 'imagined' in Anderson's (1983) sense. Although the valley has almost 12,000 inhabitants, in Valley-ers' imaginary they form a large family:

> Everyone knows everyone! We go to school together. Then there are our little sisters, little brothers, or big sisters, big brothers. So already at school we all know each other. And we all go out together to the same village festivals. We all live according to the same calendar [i.e. everyone goes to the same local events]. (Woman, 30 years old, lifelong resident)

This quotation sheds lights on the dynamics of closure that go along with the imagined extended family that comprises the Valley-ers. Lifelong proximity with other Valley-ers creates barriers that are difficult for newcomers to overcome. For instance, a German woman who married a man from the valley said that she is a 'fake' Valley-er, while her husband, whose family is from the Val-de-Travers, is a 'real' one (Fieldnotes).

In the valley we find mechanisms similar to those described by Elias and Scotson (1965) in their discussion of established groups and outsiders. They pointed to the importance of old established groups when newcomers arrive, and demonstrated that established groups close ranks and reinforce internal cohesion to keep the newcomers at the bottom of the social hierarchy. In a group discussion, a woman said:

> I totally agree [with the assertion that you have to be born in the Val-de-Travers to be a real Valley-er]. I've always felt like an outsider, even after 30 years. [...] When I first got here, I'd hear people say, 'She's the French one'. (Woman, 65 years old, resident in the valley for 30 years)

Valley-ers employ the same means as those described by Elias and Scotson, but there are some distinguishing characteristics about the way they do so. The distinctive characteristic of being the 'periphery of the periphery' complicates the insider/outsider configuration considerably. How long

one has lived in the valley and how deep one's roots there go matter considerably. But other elements are also significant. For example, those who are seen as not supporting local daily life economically and socially might indeed be considered outsiders, regardless of whether they are foreigners or Swiss, mobile or immobile. Similarly, Coquard (2019), who has studied declining rural areas in France, makes a similar observation. In marginalised and impoverished regions, sharing economic and social difficulties and membership in the same circle of acquaintances are decisive in determining inclusion and exclusion. Ethno-national origins are of secondary importance.

These processes of boundary closure not only determine who among the sedentary and inwardly mobile can be considered members of this community, but can also cause outward mobility by pushing people to leave. Not all inhabitants in the valley identify (primarily) with this imagined extended family. This is true of some people who did not choose to live there but are required to do so (e.g. asylum seekers, whose place of residence is determined randomly), and of some people who grew up there but identify with other social groups in other places. A young asylum seeker who has been living in the valley for three years emphasised that he rarely has contact with other people in the valley and wants to leave as soon as he can. Thus, simply living in the region for a few years is not enough to become a member of this imagined family. This is especially true for asylum seekers, who, in addition to being highly stigmatised and racialised in Switzerland, are perceived as not contributing to the local economy. Moreover, some people, whether regarded as insiders or outsiders, want to leave in order to 'escape' social control. A young man in his twenties who grew up in the Val-de-Travers emphasised that he wants to move to Neuchâtel as soon as possible:

> There's a feeling of being one large family, but not everyone's like that. [. . .] When I go to Neuchâtel, it's peaceful. I do my groceries and I'm quiet [i.e. I don't have to talk to anyone]. Here, you have to say hello to everyone because you always meet people you know. It's a bit annoying because when you do something stupid, the next day you can almost read about it in the newspaper. You do something now and people will talk about it and spread it around. (Man, 22 years old, lifelong resident)

This young man is not alone in his sentiment: the flip side to the perception of solidarity and extended kinship is that young people, as many of them told us, find it impossible to be anonymous, and many wish to leave.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we have asked how sameness and difference are organised in terms of categorisations in a peripheral(ised) place subject to transnationalisation and local and international mobilities. We have investigated the Val-de-Travers through a mobility lens and brought to light the relevant categories mobilised in boundary work. We have shown that the imagined community of fate of the Valley-ers has emerged in the context of a relational, historical and situational process shaped by both mobilities and locality. Historically, the valley was transnationalised by the mobility of people, money and goods. More recently, internal mobility within the valley, facilitated by the development of public-transport and organisational infrastructure, has replaced the previous identification with specific villages with identification with the valley as a whole. Economic and symbolic marginalisation, an important facet of locality, reinforces this imagined community of fate. Another facet of locality, 'tradition' – here in the form of the formerly illegal and now industrial production of absinthe – also reinforces the boundaries of this community. Tourism, another form of mobility, helps strengthen this element of locality. Finally, cross-border (human and economic) mobilities are also essential to this community of fate.

We have demonstrated that (interrelated) dynamics of locality and (all forms of) mobility are as important as international mobility in defining insiders and outsiders in this valley. More importantly, we have shown that the current local understanding of membership and the boundary work are grounded more in local and socio-economic issues than in ethno-national origin. The social, symbolic, spatial and economic peripheralisation of the valley and the entanglement of 'new' and 'past'

mobilities relegate ethno-national origins to a secondary place in membership representations. For instance, the valley has experienced transnational mobilities for several decades, and the ways in which they have been perceived have changed over time. While guest workers from Italy, Spain and Portugal who arrived after the Second World War were strongly ethnicised and stigmatised by Swiss residents (Piguet 2017), these individuals might today be perceived as members of the imagined community of fate (notably due to their economic contribution). In other words, while other modes of identification exist – in some contexts, people refer to themselves as 'Swiss', 'Italian' or 'French' for example – categories related to the valley's political economy are more decisive in determining who is an insider or an outsider, and processes of differentiation vis-à-vis social and geographical 'centres' – the city of Neuchâtel in particular – also reinforce internal cohesion and solidarity.

Importantly, the boundaries of this imagined community of fate are not immovable, but instead contract and expand like an accordion depending on the issue being considered. When it comes to protecting jobs and the local economy, the group seems large and the closing of ranks is strong. The absinthe-based origin myth might matter most to older residents and those of the younger generation who exploit it economically. But belonging is also strongly influenced by family genealogy and how long one has lived in the region. If people contribute to the local economy, they may be considered members of the community of fate in some contexts, but they may still be considered 'fake' Valley-ers in others. The image of the accordion allows us to highlight the complexity and what Moerman (1965) called the 'nested' character of boundary work (see also Jenkins 2008): people identify with it differently depending on the economic, social, historical and political context.

Finally, our case study challenges the epistemological assumptions of mainstream integration or assimilation theory that continues to dominate migration studies: the emic category 'Valley-ers' is linked to neither nationality nor migration. As such, traditional migration studies, with its epistemology centred on nation-state and ethnicity and concomitant blindness to forms of mobility other than migration, is likely to overlook its importance. This study demonstrates that boundary work in the valley is not in the first instance based on nation-state categories such as nationality, and that the categories that do influence group formation can contribute to our understanding of mobility-related issues. In other words, processes of place-making and membership are contingent on the place in question: depending on how it is positioned in the global economy, different processes and categories may determine membership differently. As such, we make a plea for the inclusion of peripheral places in the theorisation of the organisation of social differences and concomitant processes of inclusion and exclusion.

Notes

1. This article was jointly written by the two authors. The first author conducted the ethnographic fieldwork, was the lead in writing the empirical parts of this paper and contributed to writing the theoretical and analytical discussion. The second author was the lead in writing the theoretical and conceptual discussion and contributed to writing the empirical parts.
2. The Val-de-Travers is thus both a 'place', as theoretically defined by Cresswell (2013), and a region, as geographically and politically delimited in the Canton of Neuchâtel. We privilege the notion of place given its dynamic character, but we also use 'region' when presenting our case study, this term being regularly mentioned by our interlocutors.
3. The other regions of the canton have a population of 94,076 (Neuchâtel), 53,373 (La Chaux-de-Fonds) and 17,499 (Val-de-Ruz) (DEAS 2019).
4. The population fell from 13,953 in 1970 (OFS 1970) to 11,381 in 1980 (OFS 1980).
5. Today, some 20 per cent of the population living in the valley are not Swiss citizens. This is close to the percentage in the Canton of Neuchâtel as a whole, which is 25 per cent (DEAS 2019).
6. In Switzerland as a whole, the city of Neuchâtel is itself seen as rather peripheral.
7. Another large city in the canton.
8. Interestingly, the region's watchmaking history is rarely mobilised as a symbol of group identity in the Val-de-Travers. Although the economic importance of the industry is undeniable, the fact that it is not specific to the region and has been 'claimed' by other localities in the canton (such as La Chaux-de-Fonds and Le Locle) diminishes its symbolic importance and prevents the Val-de-Travers from using it as 'cultural stuff'.

9. See also www.valaction-vdt.ch

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