

Otherwise

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Spaces

BelMix

This piece collects six spaces of intimacy as people migrate between continents and cultures.

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A. Fresnoza-Flot

Living apart together

A. Fresnoza-Flot

"I visited many countries. [...] I'm very flexible. I can handle myself to different cultures. So... because I travelled a lot, it's very easy for me. Then I say, where can I live? I didn't like the climate (in Belgium) and you know, when I'm retired what should I do? Whole day in Belgium? So I say, I would like to live in a nice country where life is easy and inexpensive."

This was what Romain told me during our conversation in 2019. In a café in a large Thai mall, he explained to me what he liked about the country:

"You know, everytime I came to Thailand, I was so happy and the people... (we)re so nice, smiling people, very nice. Every time that I stay(ed) here two weeks, I (went) back to Belgium. I fe(lt) I w(ould) suffocate for a few weeks."

After visiting Thailand for holidays several times, Romain decided to settle in the country in 2013. He confided that he was divorced from his Belgian wife of several years with whom he had a child. His former wife had remarried six years after their divorce, but he only decided to tie the knot many years after. He announced to me his upcoming wedding. I asked him if he ever envisioned getting married in Thailand. He replied, "Yes."

"I'm not staying alone. I always live for marriage or just partnership...I don't like to live alone."

His intention to live with someone was realised when he met Ratre, a Thai woman 35 years younger than him. They resided together in his house, but kept some aspects of their lives separate.

"We start with not eat[ing] together. [...] In the beginning, I said 'we have to sit.' And she said 'why? You know, if you are hungry, you can eat, you don't have to wait.' And at the beginning, it was shocking and ... that is something I know. And sometimes, she sits in front of TV, she eats. Or ... sometimes, she sits on the table. And I am always sitting at the same [place]."

Aside from eating separately, Romain disclosed that he and Ratre also slept in separate bedrooms. He reasoned that his snoring impeded her from sleeping, but he did not elaborate.

After almost two hours of conversations, Romain's phone rang and he told me that it was his Thai fiancée. They would shop together in the mall, which they regularly did together as a couple.

One year later, Romain and I met again in the same café. During this meeting, he told me about his costly traditional Buddhist wedding in Ratre's home village and his plan to marry her legally with a pre-nuptial agreement.

"I keep my property, and she keeps her property."

I asked him if he and Ratre still slept in separate bedrooms, and he replied affirmatively.

"I'm snoring ... I am moving very much when I sleep. So, I'm not disturbed by anybody ... It's okey, it does not bother me... its doesn't make a difference between us."

Nonetheless, he revealed he did have sexual intimacy with her sometimes.

“Well yeah... okay, not regularly. The age is so... let's say it's tiring.”

Despite their separate eating habits, bedrooms and properties, Romain and his wife were both in the same boat when it came to sustaining the well-being of their Thai entourage. Romain provided a monthly allowance of 40,000 baht for Ratre'e's child from a previous relationship and for her house investment. He gave 20,000 baht monthly to Ratre'e's parents in their home province to support their basic needs. He also treated Ratre'e's child as his own, and the child called him “daddy”.

Asked about their arrangement when he became much older, Romain happily replied that Ratre'e would be happy to take care of him.

“Okay, it's a long-term contract, a long-term contract,” he emphasised.

Asuncion Fresnoza-Flot is tenured research associate of the National Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S.-FNRS) and senior lecturer (maîtrese d'enseignement) based in the Laboratory of Anthropology of Contemporary Worlds (LAMC) at the Université libre de Bruxelles. She is principal investigator of the research project on Belgian-Asian couples and their contextual mobility (BelMix: <https://belmix.hypotheses.org/>) and the study of decision-making of aspiring Asian (re)migrants to/within Europe (AspirE: <https://aspire.ulb.be/>). Since 2012, she has been specifically researching conjugal mixedness in Belgian-Thailand transnational social spaces.



This compendium of stories on spaces is the fruit of long-term collaboration among the members of the BelMix research team, based at the Laboratory of Anthropology of Contemporary Worlds (LAMC) at the Université libre de Bruxelles. The team has been studying migration and conjugal mixedness in Belgium and selected Southeast and East Asian countries. Recently, BelMix has expanded its analytical gaze to include other cases and situations of mixedness beyond the Europe-Asia social spaces. It aims to bring new insights into the dynamics and evolution of present-day societies as well as the changing meanings of intimacy and the family.

For more information about BelMix's activities and publications, please visit the [project website](#).

Space's illustration is by Athos Bayani Flot



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