



BECOMING LOCAL:
MIGRANT SPATIAL INTEGRATION
AS A SKILLED PRACTICE

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Introduction

To think about migrant spatial integration is an exercise of bridging different bodies of scholarship. From the one side, migration studies have been struggling for decades in order to come up with theories of migrant integration or incorporation with regards to the various aspects where integration might be aimed, such as the labor market, political participation and, eventually, spatial integration. From the other side, disciplines such as human geography, phenomenology, anthropology and urban studies have been concerned with space itself and with the ways it is practiced, experienced and represented. Bringing together different approaches may be very fruitful and often necessary, but it risks just as well assembling each field's own problems and distortions.

I believe research on the spatial integration of migrants has to face two theoretical shortcomings that have been pointed out both from scholars interested in migration and in space. From the migration side of the equation, a number of researchers have claimed for a more careful use of ethnic, racial, or cultural categories (Brubaker 2002; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002; Glick Schiller, Caglar and Guldbrandsen 2006; Knowles 2012a, to name only a few). They argue that this ethnic/cultural/national lens has *distorted* migration scholarship (Glick Schiller et al. 2006:612) and obscured the diversity of migrants' relationships to their place of settlement and to other localities. By assuming that migrants' (spatial) experiences would be naturally determined by their belonging to a given ethnicity, culture, or nation, many studies have overestimated the binding power of ethnic affiliation and overlooked the importance of cross-community interactions and other intervening factors like age, gender, sexuality, class, or education, which intersect with ethnic categories and might come to play a decisive role (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002:324).

From the spatial side of the equation, recent criticism has been raised regarding the boundedness of spatial categories and the sedentarist bias present in many conceptualizations of space and spatial practices (Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Cresswell 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006; Knowles 2010; Ingold 2011). The argument here is that either an overly abstract take on space (the cartographer's bird's eye view) or the normalization of rootedness and fixity - and its consequent abnormalization of mobility - have led to overly abstract and bounded notions of space. This logic, as Tim Ingold (2000) argues, operates in such a way that movement becomes boundary, pathway becomes limit, emplacement turns into enclosure, and travelling becomes transport. The aforementioned sedentary bias also reinforces an understanding of dwelling as static rather than dynamic, therefore construing places as containers for people and their

practices. These notions would tend to ossify the dynamics of urban space in particular, losing grasp of the many ways inhabitants traverse urban space and connect places through everyday practice.

Research on migrant spatial integration is where these two problems overlap. To the facile recourse to the 'ethnic community' unit of analysis is linked its spatial expression, that is, a tendency to perceive migrants as locally bounded in enclosed neighborhoods or certain delimited urban spaces. As Caroline Knowles has noticed, the worldwide seemingly indiscriminate use of terms such as 'Little Italy', 'Chinatown' and other 'ethnic enclaves' not only leaves unquestioned the settled connections between ethnicities and space, but it also serves to consolidate distinctions between non-migrants and migrants, entitlement and questioned belonging "fuelling nationalist political agitation for more stringent immigration controls" (2012b:512).

Borrowing from various disciplines, the purpose of this paper is to think about migrants and their relations to their place of settlement in two ways. The first one is based on the figure of the 'native'. I argue that Appadurai's critique on the term 'native' (1988) within the anthropological tradition may help illuminate this double distortion impinging upon migrant spatial integration research. The second way revolves around another figure, the 'local', as we tend to name people who live in a certain place and, therefore, know it well. Evidently, these two figures are not the only relevant ones, nor are they new conceptual inventions. Nevertheless, I believe that thinking about migrants as 'becoming locals' or 'locals' may open up useful avenues for investigating migrants' relations to urban spaces, just as it is also able to circumvent some of the distortions mentioned above.

Migrant: the native who has travelled

In 1988, Appadurai wrote an article called *Putting hierarchy in its place*, an article where he sought to explain how the tendency to simplify/exoticize certain populations and the tendency to conceive these populations as spatially confined have walked hand in hand within the anthropological tradition. In order to explain his critique, Appadurai resorts to the figure of the native.

Who is the 'native'? According to Appadurai, technically the term 'native' has come to replace older terms that have been deeply criticized such as 'primitive' or 'traditional'. Etymologically, 'native' means the one who is born in a certain place and, thus, belongs there. Every person would then be native of somewhere, whether from a little community in the middle of the Amazon forest, or Lisbon, Tokyo, or Paris. Still, in anthropological discourse, 'native' is the word normally used to refer to persons and groups who were born and belong to those parts of the world that are distant from the metropolitan West. A simple search in the Internet will show that no white people appear if you type 'natives' on Google Images, for example.

What is the difference then between a 'true native' and all other people who are just 'from a certain place'? Why are only some people referred to as natives while others are not? What Appadurai tells us is that natives are not only persons who are from certain places, and belong to those places, but they are also those who are somehow *incarcerated*, or confined, in those places. The mobility aspect here is crucial not

only in its physical sense, but also in terms of culture. The opposition is clear: in one side, the classical anthropologist rarely thinks of himself (as they were mostly men) as a native of some place, even when he knows that he is from somewhere. Anthropologists, just like explorers, administrators, outsiders, are regarded as quintessentially mobile: they are the movers, the seers, the knowers. They are able not only to travel in space, to the far ends where they find 'natives', but they are also able to travel within cultures (Clifford 1988). The anthropologist, as a Western explorer, is capable of 'taking distance' both physically and metaphorically from his place of origin.

In the other side, natives are incarcerated both physically and metaphorically. Natives exist (or to use a more accurate term) *occur* in a given place. They are immobilized by their belonging to a place where the ethnographer can travel to. But most importantly, natives are confined by what is assumed to be their relationship to their territory. It is imagined that what natives know, feel, and believe is determined by their geographical placement, by their localness, by their local quality. Inasmuch as this strong anchorage between natives and place is conceived, classical anthropology simplifies, stabilizes, and freezes natives at the same time as it imprisons them to a local mode of thought. While Western societies are dynamic and complex, natives are stable and authentic. In this sense, to speak of natives is to speak about their places and vice-versa, not only because they are assumed not to leave place but *because place does not leave them*. In other words, while the Western anthropologist comes from place, the native *is* place.

The dangerous effects of this metonymic freezing of certain peoples is that their relationship with place is seen as natural, organic. By blurring the distinction between people and place, this logic of incarceration assumes, thus, that natives somehow represent themselves, their history and their place, without distortion or residue; people and place are transparent sides of the same reality. This logic that territorializes people and culture into container units of space is what has allowed scholarship to represent the social and cultural world as a multichrome mosaic of monochrome ethnic, racial, national or cultural blocs (Brubaker 2002; Gupta and Ferguson 1992).

And now we turn to migration. What happens when non-Western migrants now live at the heart of Western cities? What happens when those who have always been seen as natives now come to live in European cities? We would naturally assume that migration would once and for all disrupt the artificiality of this formula that equates people to culture and to territory; we would imagine that superdiverse cities and multicultural formations would force us to rethink this seemingly unproblematic link between identity, people and place. And yet, in a significant part of migration and integration scholarship we can identify a myriad of mechanisms that work for the persistence of the incarceration logic: no more confined to their 'native' countries, immigrants find themselves, nonetheless, ontologically incarcerated into neighborhood, group or community research.

Take for instance the literature on transnational and diasporic communities. The binding power of national affiliation is imagined as so strong - and, indeed, natural - that even after moving to a different country, migrants are assumed to recreate a sense of national attachment by living together with co-

nationals (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). The immigrant is thus a national from another country and, as such, is faded to reproduce his or her national quality elsewhere. Following this logic, an Angolan migrant in Lisbon, as way of example, would thus be conceived as someone who would live in proximity to other Angolan migrants, to have a social network composed mostly by Angolan people, to shop in Angolan shops and so on and so forth.

Needless to say that this is not about denying the power of ethnic, cultural or linguistic affiliation over migrants' practices and the scientific research developed in this sense. To do so would be throwing the baby out with the bathwater. On the contrary, literature concerned with processes of ethnic or migrant ghettoization, spatial concentration or migrants' immobilities have identified how migrants' socioeconomic opportunities are differently affected by the location of their neighborhood of residence or the composition of their social networks (Miltenburg 2011; Ruiz-Tagle 2013). What is at stake here is rather the methodological implications of assuming beforehand migrants to be more stable, fixed or communitarian than other populations (Buhr 2014).

Although in integration literature the term 'natives' is normally used to refer to nationals of the receiving country, thinking about migrants as 'natives who have travelled', in the classic anthropology sense, forces us to question many settled assumptions. One of them is the interchangeable use of both the 'ethnic community' and the 'immigrant neighborhood' as units of analysis: a spatially delimited area becomes the clustering of migrant interaction. The residential space is then reified as the only site that matters in terms of migrant social interaction and physical presence, while non-migrants are always seen as less localized and more mobile.

But perhaps the most important conclusion here is that the tendency to simplify people and root them into bounded territorial units does not affect all kinds of migrants equally. Why are some nationalities, ethnicities, religions more easily assumed to form groups than others? The answer to that question is beyond the scope of this paper, but I believe there is a good chance that the tendency to incarcerate, freeze and stabilize people into groups, communities and places grows in that Otherness and difference are more evident (Said 1978); it has to do with the power of categories used to describe Otherness and subalternity (Foucault 1980), and it has to do with the distinction between entitlement and those whose belonging is questioned.

Migrant: becoming local

In this section I would like to focus on migrants and their place of settlement using the figure of the 'local'. But before I unpack my argument, we must clarify what is meant by 'local' here. We always hear about this ubiquitous figure when we travel and decide to go to places where the 'locals' go, or when we ask a 'local' for information, or buy a local's guide to a particular city. There are even a number of websites devoted to spreading tips and knowledge from locals of many cities around the world. A tentative

definition for 'locals' could be those who have been living in a place for an amount of time that has granted them with certain intimate local understanding, a degree of familiarity that allows them to do certain things that non-locals wouldn't do, or to do them with more ease than non-locals would.

Locals are those we turn to when we need insider's information. They know the tricks of living in a particular city, from practical competencies of how to get about (such as knowledge of bus and metro timetables, notions about the best time to travel, etc.) to geographical competencies (knowing where places are and the best routes to get to them, for example) (see Binnie et al. 2007:166). Their intimacy with place allows them to distinguish safe areas from dangerous ones; they know the best times to travel, how to avoid peak hours, how to find shortcuts. As Knowles (2011:140) has put it, locals often know 'where to go, what for, and the rules of access and social engagement'. All these competencies are testament to how something as simple as being able to 'move around' in a city is far from being a given. More than that, it makes evident how, for instance, the difference between the spatial know-how of a local and a tourist cannot be reduced to the possession of a map, whether it is a foldable tourist map or a so-called 'mental map' (Gell 1985; Ingold 2000).

If we come to think of our relationship towards the urban space where we live as lubricated by a sort of situated knowledge, then locals are those who are able to move around and 'get things done' smoothly rather than frictively. This metaphorical opposition between smoothness and friction of movement should not be mistaken with the more widespread concept of flow. As Knowles has argued, the concept of flow obscures the mechanisms by which it operates:

people, objects and so on do not flow: they bump awkwardly along creating pathways as they go; they grate against each other; they dodge, stop and go, negotiate obstacles, back-track and move off in new directions propelled by different intersecting logics. They do all of these things and more; but they do not flow (Knowles 2010:374).

Instead, research concerned with locals' knowledge and their processes of apprenticeship has to look at how smooth movement is produced; it is about understanding the mechanics of mobility and the manifold techniques and competencies that calibrate, ease or hinder spatial practices.

But why would the 'local' be a useful figure from which to think about migrant spatial integration? To begin with, the term 'local' is not as ethnicized or essentialized as correlate terms such as 'national' or 'citizen'. A 'national' is a figure that brings up a cultural or ethnic basis; being a 'national' is about belonging and often about being recognized as such. By the same token, 'citizen' is a category of formal recognition, of entitlement. A 'local' might be a 'national' or a 'citizen' in the city of settlement, but those are not necessary conditions. At the same time, everyone is a 'local' in relation to where they live; a 'local' has no particular face, no specific physical traits, no essentializable identity. Anyone can be a 'local' and, for that matter, there are many kinds of 'locals'.

Being a local, therefore, depends on practical apprenticeship. It is not a formal category (no one has documents proving to be a local as they do to prove they are citizens, for example) and it is not either a homogenous category, meaning that all locals possess the same skills or knowledge. On the contrary, as a practical category it accounts for the diversity of roles and experiences people play out every day (as neighborhood residents, as shoppers, as workers, as commuters etc.) and for many practical varieties of spatial expertise there can be. For instance, locals who rely mostly on private transportation will probably develop skills and accumulate information on how to access places by car, at the same time as their possibilities might be limited to those places that are only reachable by car or where there are parking lots available. A taxi driver, for example, is sure to possess a very rich repertoire of routes and itineraries, but might ignore pedestrian-only pathways or shortcuts. By the same token, it is more likely that persons with reduced mobility (elderly people or those who need wheelchairs) would be more aware of accessible routes or wheelchair-friendly parks than those without physical mobility restrictions.

It is precisely in that 'being local' depends on embodied practice that the figure of the 'local' may be an interesting tool for rethinking migrant spatial integration. Migrant bodies, differently from ethnic or cultural categorizations, are not homogenous; they are rather the site where intersectionality takes place. There have been many claims for considering corporeality and intersectionality in spatial research (see Longhurst 1997 and Di Méo 2010 in human geography; Bürkner 2012 in migration and integration studies). The very notion of superdiversity (Vertovec 2007) is one that faces the evermore-varied and intersectional complexities emerging from ethnicities, migrants' origins and statuses, although it might be argued that it has not yet fully addressed the micro-dynamics of urban embodied navigation (Knowles 2012a).

More than helping to reconstruct the complexity of spatial practice and to avoid reductionism or simplification, focusing on the migrant body and on its journeys can also shed light on superimposing and cumulating features of discrimination and social exclusion as experienced by individual migrants (Bürkner 2012:182). In that 'becoming local' is a skilled practice, my hypothesis is that it has direct effects on migrants' fruition of city spaces: it is about being aware of what the city has to offer and of the possibilities or impossibilities of reaching out for that offer.

Thinking about migrants as 'becoming locals' brings to the forefront the practical aspects of carrying a life locally. It consists of seizing the many ways situatedness is experienced, the legibility of places is constructed, pathways are forged, and routines come to endow places with a sense of coherence, defining networks of practical territories, places of interest, a web of familiar and unfamiliar spaces (Mar 2002). The 'spatial' in spatial integration involves not only the urban built environment and its locations and morphologies, but also a complex system of knowledge and skills that are employed by inhabitants in order to cover distances, use spaces and comply with all kinds of life requirements. And yet, migrants do not necessarily acquire and develop all spatial skills and knowledge from scratch; perhaps a more

biographical account on migrants' histories of travel would shed light on the cumulative nature of practical competences and dispositions that result from inhabiting other places (Dureau and Imbert 2014).

Furthermore, conceiving migrant spatial integration in terms of 'becoming local' allows us to consider the manifold ways migrants mobilize and manipulate spatial knowledge, from the activation of transnational contacts and networks to the use of new technologies of information and communication. Inspired by the literature on transnationalism and translocalism (Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1992; Faist 2010; Brickell and Datta 2011), it may be argued that 'being local' has less and less to do with 'being provincial', as the local level and the local experience are increasingly permeated by translocal connections and channels through which even practical urban knowledge is transmitted and shared.

The last point I would like to make here concerns the non-normative aspect of thinking migrant spatial integration in terms of 'becoming local'. As we have seen before, 'local' is a practical category fleshed out by enskilment and situated learning. Being a 'local' does not depend on descent, sharing values or perceptions, or with social integration more generally (Schinkel 2013). Migrants may become 'locals' and yet continue to be discriminated against, feel they do not belong to or do not identify with their place of arrival. 'Becoming local', therefore, does not assume that the only possible relationship migrants could establish with their surroundings are the binaries identity/no identify or belonging/not belonging. It is possible that 'becoming local' could ease migrants' feeling of social cohesion, but, in analytical terms, these two aspects should not be conflated. Being able to orientate oneself, navigate urban spaces, and accomplish ordinary tasks that depend on moving around are perhaps even more primordial needs for migrants whose spatial competence is precisely the one competence missing when newly arrived.

In lieu of a conclusion

Being a migrant is always sudden. Even when migrating has been a plan for a long time, or when the very journey towards a new place unfolds across weeks or months, being a migrant is to be catapulted somewhere different: you arrive in a day, and when you wake up the next morning, a migrant you are. Evidently, there are many forms of being a migrant. You may be a labor migrant, a trailing spouse, a so-called 'expat', an undocumented border crosser, an international student and so on. More than those (semi)official categories, as a migrant you are always from somewhere: you may have migrated for the first time, or maybe you have already lived in many countries other than the country where you were born. It might even be the case you never lived in the country that has issued your passport. Moreover, you are a man or a woman, a transsexual, straight, gay, black, white, rich, poor, with or without a degree, atheist, muslim, catholic, young, old, handicapped. Although your official status as a migrant often recognizes only one or two of the aspects mentioned above, you are inescapably a combination of multiple 'categories' and each one of them might influence, limit or allow you certain practices and experiences as a migrant, just as they can also shut some doors.

When you wake up in the morning and you are suddenly a migrant, there are many things which to worry about. Depending on the kind of migrant you are, the first thing you will do is to try to find a job, or housing, or the papers you will probably be asked for. Maybe you will have to worry about finding a suitable school for your children, or meeting people that might help you, or just picking a place where you could go brunch with your fellow expats. Regardless of what you worry about, as you step outside your new house/shelter, a very primordial question that pops up is: how do I go about in this city? But also: where is this or that place? Where is the bus stop? Do I have to pay to park my car in the streets? How much are the metro tickets? Can I walk around safely in this neighborhood? Does this bus line operate on Sundays? Which way is the shortest? Should I hop on in the front or in the back door? As you stand by your door and you need to go somewhere, as a migrant you are faced with a complex system of routes, locations, transportation, access and tricks you do not have a clue of and yet you realize you will need to know as soon as possible.

To think about migrants as 'becoming locals' stems from the two considerations described above. This paper has suggested that if we are to understand the way migrants relate to the new urban spaces where they happen to be - and eventually integrate – a useful starting point would be migrant bodies themselves for spatial practices are always embodied practices. No one is only a migrant; migrant bodies are gendered, raced, aged, exoticized, camouflaged. It is the migrant body, bearing signs of visible and invisible differences, that has to wait in a bus stop, that has to find its way to work, that has to traverse the city for one or another purpose. And yet, migrants are those who find themselves in need to use an unknown city, to understand certain practicalities for moving around in a place that is not yet familiar.

Familiarity, rather than a 'natural' attribute of spatial relations, is constructed and lived as an ongoing practice, a skilled practice (Ahmed 2000). Departing from the ways individual migrants live and embody the process of urban apprenticeship encourages us to catch up with many recent claims for taking seriously the role of immigrants as true actors in the production of the city (Fonseca, Malheiros 2005; Glick Schiller et al. 2006; Knowles 2010). I believe when migrants are seen as knowledgeable and skilled inhabitants not only we do more justice to the complex engagements people undertake with space, but also help liberate (or disincarcerate) migration and integration studies from the fixity of traditional categories.

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