

Reflections

Migrant agency and embodiment in space – commentary to van Liempt

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In this reflection, I use van Liempt's analysis of emplacement as a helpful instigation to challenge and nuance three current theoretical debates in migration studies and geography. Focusing on the spaces of embodied migrant agency I counter the legacy of static concepts such as 'immigrant integration', refine ideas about the city and public space, and explore the contemporary politics of refusal. In each of these conversations, bringing in ideas of the spatial agency of migrants helps us to contest received ideas and categories and open up new ways of thinking about scale, society, public space, and refusal.

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Introduction

Ilse van Liempt's (2023) excellent paper on local emplacement in Amsterdam focuses on how forced migrants forge their own sense of belonging in a city through *placing themselves* in certain locations and spaces. Rather than relying purely on state provided forms of accommodation and aid in the local infrastructure of reception centers, the migrants also form alternate social and spatial relationships as they negotiate their surroundings. In addition to the empirical data brought out in the study, the idea of active emplacement and migrants' agency and embodiment in space

contributes to several key theoretical debates and ongoing conversations. Here I briefly explore three of these and consider how they are emerging as important sites of discussion and contention in the broader migration literature.

Immigrant integration

Over the last decade, the concept of immigrant integration has been vigorously critiqued by a number of scholars in diverse disciplines (Wieviorka 2014; Korteweg 2017; Schinkel 2017, 2018; Favell 2019; Penninx 2019; Abdelhady & Norocel 2023). In many respects, however, immigrant integration still remains a dominant way of framing the manner in which migrants are perceived to become part of a national society. Eminent migration scholars continue to write evaluative studies comparing immigrant integration around the globe (e.g. Alba & Foner 2015), and governments continue to fund research programs geared toward finding successful ways to integrate newcomers into the supposedly bounded and static territory of nation-states. Given the staying power of the concept, it is worth repeating some of the main points of critique, and showing how an emphasis on migrant agency and embodiment in space can help to counter its stubborn legacy.

The focus of immigrant integration is almost always on the society or social system as seen from above, rather than on the actions, everyday practices, experiences, and subjectivity formation of migrants themselves (Wieviorka 2014). While primarily a demographic project at core, it is nevertheless also an exercise in neocolonial power, using tools of measurement that quickly become problematic in how they define and establish categories, especially those involving racialized communities (Schinkel 2017; Abdelhady & Norocel 2023). These definitions and categorizations are important to consider because they often have negative material effects for immigrants, through the formation of discourses, flow of resources, establishment of systems of governance, and subjection to violence. The concept of immigrant integration also tends to reify the idea of a bounded entity (the nation-state or the society) that is breached and threatened by immigrants who are projected as bringing difference with them, jeopardizing the existing society and in need of management. The core idea of 'society' itself is based on an unexamined and vague meaning, with implicit assumptions about boundaries and stasis and lacking a deep engagement with colonial history or power. It assumes an identity that is always already complete, setting up a perpetual tension between insiders and outsiders (Schinkel 2018).

The concept of immigrant integration also rests on assumptions about scales as fixed in time and space, rather than as actively produced and reproduced socially (Marston 2000). It is a good example of the operation of methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002), reflecting essential assumptions about a national society that is bounded and contained, with a reliance on the nation-state as the key unit of analysis and theoretical back-stop. In addition to the now large literature on transnationalism, which highlights the importance of transnational ties and ongoing movements *across* social spaces and scales, the idea of emplacement similarly challenges the fixity and stasis of immigrant integration through its emphasis on the interdependencies *between* scales. The concept of the 'geosocial' is a helpful way to further conceptualize these global-local interdependencies, the "dynamic relations by which, on one hand, the borders and territories of the world order are maintained, challenged, and (re)defined; and on the other hand, people constitute themselves as subjects and communities capable of transformative agency across and within such border-laden realities" (Mitchell & Kallio 2017, 1; Mitchell & Sparke 2020).

Emplacement, as van Liempt's (2023) paper shows, is composed of everyday, local actions by migrants who use and produce space in new, fundamentally geosocial ways. The migrants create new scales through giving meaning to events and places that are important to them – not necessarily at the level of the local infrastructure that is provided by the state, nor the broader neighborhood, nor even necessarily the city. It is a kind of insurgent spatial and social integration from below that cannot be identified or categorized or managed in advance. These small, often private actions are constrained within larger structures of power, yet nevertheless challenge the idea of static scales wholly produced from above, such as the nation or even more vaguely 'society', that are joined by immigrants coming from 'the outside'. Rather, migrants are constantly producing new spatial scales and new societal forms through their movements and actions across space and between scales, and through taking space

and reworking it in ways that give their lives meaning (Sparke 2018; Vuolteenaho & Lyytinen 2018). It is through this intimate process of meaning-making and creating personal belonging that migrants aid in the (re)formation and transformation of an already integrated and interdependent society.

Stadtluft macht frei (City air makes you free)

According to historians, there was a period in German history when serfs who escaped to the city and took up residence for 'a year and a day,' *id est*, a long time, could become independent and continue living as free inhabitants. This potential urban freedom was possible because of the avoidance of recognition by the serf's owner – presumably because of the numbers of people cohabiting in one place and the invisibility it brought. Equally important, it was possible to survive economically outside of the social world of the manor house; an escaped individual could make an independent living – either through providing labor to others for some form of exchange, or through the possibility of taking common or 'public' land and using it for a livelihood.

I start with this medieval German phrase to underscore a long-standing assumption about urban space: that it can provide the path to some form of individual freedom from social servitude or constraint; further, that this opportunity is derived, to a large degree, from the potential to be invisible and/or to access public space. I would add a third, more modern urban freedom, that of the flaneur. Baudelaire described the flaneur as a person who could wander unrecognized in a crowd, encounter others in fleeting ways and enjoy being part of something, yet without any feelings of social attachment. This figure and idea of the wanderer became a metonym for the experience of modernity (Berman 1983). Van Liempt's (2023) article brought out some of these practices and assumptions about the value of the anonymous city experience for 'outsiders' and complicated them in interesting ways.

Unlike reception centers that were often isolated or located on the urban periphery, the larger city of Amsterdam appeared to be a space of freedom for many migrants interviewed in the article. It offered a number of free or inexpensive places to do things that were impossible or difficult to achieve in private or more managed places. These included eating, drinking coffee and socializing in a park, going to a library, visiting a community center, and just sitting and people-watching. In these uses, it was the physical spaces of the city that felt liberating to migrants. The ability to access commonly held land and property enabled a kind of temporary escape and refuge from surveillance and management, enabling people to let down their guard, at least for a time. Many felt liberated by being invisible in the sense of not being seen or recognized vis-à-vis their identities as refugees. Additionally, 'semi' public spaces, such as balconies, were especially enjoyable for some, as they enabled a degree of public access and sociality, while simultaneously maintaining a boundary of privacy and protection. In many respects, these experiences typify those of the archetypal flaneur.

These embodied practices of space-making are important to validate, and help to counter top-down narratives and evaluations of 'immigrant integration' as noted above. At the same time, it is also useful to reflect on assumptions about public space, visibility, and the figure of the unrecognized outsider in a more fine-grained way. While the city was reported as a site of freedom for some migrants because of the ability to enter common space and to passively and ephemerally encounter different types of people without necessarily being recognized as a refugee or outsider, this was not a universally positive experience. Some migrants in the study desired greater social contact and more of a personal encounter, attempted to converse with locals, and were largely rebuffed. The figure of the flaneur, as described by Baudelaire and others, is known for 'his' (see Wolff 1985 for one of many feminist critiques on the essentially masculinist quality of the figure) ability and willingness to pass unnoticed through the urban crowd. Yet this passage *through* a place presupposes a point of return *to* somewhere, presumably a 'home' with social ties and a familial sense of belonging. For those migrants seeking to create their own sense of belonging in a new environment, wandering without the possibility of a deeper engagement or more personal encounter was not merely unsatisfying, in some cases it was humiliating and depressing. When invisibility is desired and brings security and freedom, as it does for some, it can be a wonderful experience. But when it is not a choice, because of racial prejudice, linguistic or cultural challenges, or other reasons ascribed to one's personal identity, it can produce great emotional distress and harm.

Further, as feminist critiques have pointed out, the capacity to wander unnoticed depends on who the outsider is and, I would add in the situation for many migrants, where the city is located. Because of visible characteristics of difference such as skin color, what may be possible for migrants in large, diverse cities such as Amsterdam, may not be possible in smaller and/or more ethnically homogeneous cities. In these types of situations, as Kallio and Häkli (2023) document, the fear of standing out, as well as the constant effort to blend in, hide, or become 'invisible' can have extremely negative physical and psychological effects.

Thus, the promise and lure of the city – the idea that *stadtluft macht frei* – is a highly contextual one. Public space and the anonymity of the crowd can be alienating as well as liberating, especially if a more intimate encounter is desired, yet seemingly impossible to achieve. If visibility and invisibility is not a choice, but rather a condition, it can have the opposite effect of the flaneur's encounters of pleasurable urban anonymity.

The politics of refusal

Through my recent work on church asylum (Mitchell & MacFarlane 2022; Mitchell 2023), I have become interested in the form of refusal that is expressed when migrants grow tired of waiting for the decisions of both state and pastoral actors and decide to 'take' sanctuary by squatting churches. In a sense they are refusing their positioning as docile subjects; they are also challenging and resisting the time horizon and spatial norms of hegemonic institutions such as the church and the state. Taking spaces and times back that would normally be 'given' through humanitarian processes, such as a legalization of refugee status or sanctuary in a church, refuses the normal order of things. It resists temporal and spatial logics that seek to manage and contain migrant bodies, even when ostensibly beneficent in intent. What does it mean to opt out of humanitarian programs and forms of care, to refuse aid or the promise of aid? To not 'stay' where one is put?

The concept of refusal as a form of resistance has re-emerged in the last few years in the domains of both humanitarian assistance and academic research. It is a complex idea with a complicated history. The idea of 'ethnographic refusal' was first employed in anthropology by Ortner (1995), who used the term critically, challenging ethnographers' refusal to deploy thick, or nuanced analysis in the study of subaltern forms of resistance, for fear that their research would undermine their subjects of study and advance dominant narratives. More recently it has been taken up in Indigenous studies, where it is employed differently by different scholars. For some, refusal emphasizes an unwillingness to engage with researchers, journalists, humanitarians, and others outside the community to promote narratives that have become harmful to those inside the community (Tuck & Yang 2014). These include, first and foremost, individual 'pain narratives' that have set up minoritized and Indigenous populations as passive victims of slow violence, instead of directing readers towards the institutions causing the structural damage in the first place (Dorries & Harjo 2022; Mitchell-Eaton & Coddington 2022). For others (Simpson 2017), refusal is an important epistemological stance, one that runs counter to recognition politics in systems of settler colonial governance.

Contemporary cases of research refusal are starting to attract scholarly attention in migration sites as well. These include refugee camps, border spaces, and migrant squats (Spathopoulou & Meier 2020; Giudici 2023). Additionally, refusal is becoming more evident in the growing resistance of some migrants to various forms of delayed or insufficient state-based and pastoral care, as noted above. Resistance in these cases takes many forms, including squatting, public demonstrations, the refusal of traditional forms of allyship, and the constitution of new alliances and solidarities (Pfeifer 2018; Dadusc & Mudu 2022; Meier forthcoming).

Humanitarian assistance of all kinds, whether it comes from the government, NGOs, non-profits, or individuals is often desperately needed, yet it is also inevitably imbricated in larger structures of violence and power that can produce harm for recipients (see the essays in Mitchell & Pallister-Wilkins 2023). Assistance is often accompanied by various forms of surveillance, management and control, much of which can make recipients feel listless and passive. The state-based provision of housing for forced migrants in the Netherlands described in van Liempt's (2023) paper is just one example of this type of migrant assistance and management. As she shows, there is little to no choice of location or

type of housing accommodation, and the expectation is that the migrants will need to relocate quickly and often. Among the ramifications of this kind of constant movement and constraint on agency are not just the loss of choice, but importantly, also a loss of a sense of belonging and capacity to create a home. The constant (dis)locations caused by being 'placed' by others in temporary arrangements, as well as the sense of time passing fruitlessly by, can lead to feelings of alienation and passivity, especially when paired with the inability to work.

In this context of waiting, anxiety, displacement, and (re)placement, refusal is made through the act of emplacement. Emplacement in locations and situations chosen by migrants themselves is an example of political agency through a resistance to spatial determination from above, and the use of space in ways that have not been granted or managed by others. In this context, forging spaces of belonging in public and semi-public spaces exemplifies a contemporary politics of refusal, an act of being *against* humanitarian care and its properties of management and control, and *for* a fuller and more embodied agency in space.

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