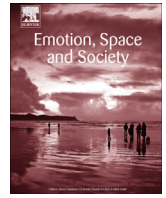




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Hope emplaced. What happens to hope after arrival: The case of Ecuadorian families living in Italy

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ABSTRACT

In the literature, hope has been mainly analyzed as an emotional state linked to temporality. This stance has prompted criticism of hope as projecting promises, which may never be fulfilled, into an indefinite future. Whilst this is partly true, this paper aims to enlarge previous approaches by illustrating hope's connection with spatiality. The paper examines 'hope' among Italian families of Ecuadorian origin, through analysis of affective states produced by the place to which they have migrated. Hope emerges as a dynamic relation between the resources one has and the place one is in. The spatial dimension of hope mitigates criticisms of its evanescence; the paper emphasizes the political aspects of hope as a resource for migrants to realize their agency and interact with the world.

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1. Introduction

The idea of a 'promised land' is a strong cultural trope (Fenton, 2006) which binds together hope (in the guise of 'promise') and space (the 'land') for the people traveling to find it. In the literature, however, hope has been mainly analyzed in its temporal dimension, as an emotional projection into the future. Considered in purely temporal terms, hope may appear as an illusory state, and therefore a potentially deceitful condition, which projects promises which may never be fulfilled into an indefinite future (see, for example Warren and Manderson, 2008). This argument certainly has some truth to it. However, the spatial dimension of hope has been neglected and this has obscured hope's important aspects. In this paper, I take a complementary approach which conceives hope as space and, in doing so, enrich time-related views on hope by showing its spatial characteristics. This paper analyses the everyday lives of women who have migrated with their husband and/or children from Ecuador to a north-eastern region of Italy. Some of the Ecuadorians who took part in my research, in recounting their lives, indicated that hope is materially distributed in significant spaces. Thus conceived, hope is not just a coping mechanism to be engaged while waiting for a better future. Rather, it also affects and

affects people's lives in the present. The spatial dimension of hope mitigates criticism of its evanescence. By identifying hope within spaces, these migrants found resources with which to accomplish their agency in the best and most creative manner possible, and which enabled them to interact with the host community in their own cipher.

Moreover, the study of hope within migration studies is usually focused in the expectations formed before migration, as part of the imaginative work at the base of the motivation to migrate. Not enough work is done to think about what happens to hope after migrants' arrival. By focusing on migrants' experiences after arrival and through settlement, the paper shows that the abstract and time-related aspects of hope become more concrete when they are elaborated in relation to the place of settlement. Unraveling the specific actions and practices which give meaning to hope yields understanding of its connection with space.

To discuss the spatial aspect of hope, I employ the conceptual framework offered by Duff (2011), who proposes a logic of 'enabling places' grounded in a comprehensive review of research on health and place. On examining the enabling dimensions of place, Duff (2011: 152–5) proposes three classes of enabling resources: social, material and affective. This paper is focused on the last class. Affective resources are the ways in which individuals and groups manipulate or modify their affective states through places: for example, in the ways that certain places help to generate or sustain

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discrete feeling states (Thrift, 2004: 59–64). The analysis of affective resources is intended to capture something of the resonant ‘feeling’ of place alluded to in discourses on hope. Space contributes to generate hope both through its physical and material experience, and through the social and relational aspects of these experiences (Thrift, 2004).

2. Research setting and methods

This study derives from ethnographic research conducted from 2011 to 2013 on the experiences of immigration and parenting among 17 Ecuadorian families living in Val Rendena, an Alpine valley in Trentino, a northern region of Italy. Most Ecuadorian migrants in Val Rendena originate from the Province of El Oro (in the south-west coastal region of Ecuador, close to the border with Peru). Financial instability in the late 1990s and early 2000s induced more than a million Ecuadorians (7% of the national population) to emigrate, mostly to Italy, the USA and Spain (Boccagni, 2011: 1). In Italy, most Ecuadorians settled in Genoa, Milan, Rome, Perugia and Piacenza (ISTAT, 2011), with a significant number being established in Trentino, where they settled either in Trento, the most populous city in the region, or in Val Rendena. Trentino counts around 48,000 migrants, or 9.2% of the provincial population (Ambrosini et al., 2011). The total population in Val Rendena amounts to almost 10,000 people, of whom only 587 are migrants, with approximately 137 originating from Ecuador (almost one-quarter of the total number of migrants in the valley) (Servizio Statistica della Provincia Autonoma di Trento). Despite the substantial geographical isolation of Val Rendena, it is a destination for migrants because Trentino has a history of significant political and economic autonomy. Val Rendena, moreover, is a tourism region. These two factors jointly ensure relatively high living standards compared to elsewhere in Italy.

A series of strategies were employed to ensure diversity in the recruitment of families across the region, and occurred through local family health and social services, Val Rendena’s multicultural association, and personal networks. Initial participant contact was complemented by snowball recruitment as primary research participants gave further contacts through their families and social networks. The interviewees were chosen by means of theoretical sampling (Becker, 1998). The research participants selected had to be currently living in Val Rendena, to have been born in Ecuador, and to have one or more children aged 6 years or younger. Consistent with these criteria, participants were aged between 22 and 42 years, with a mean age of 25. Of the 17 families recruited for the study, 15 were ‘closed’ in that all members were Ecuadorian; one family was mixed, with an Ecuadorian woman married to a local Italian man; and there was one single parent (mother) family. Observations encompassed activities and places in which both parents were present. In contrast, interviews were mainly carried out with women because I established more intimate contact with them; they also felt more comfortable than men in discussing their parenting experience with a female researcher.

A three-stage methodology was devised to analyze participants’ experiences of migration. It involved in-depth interviews, *in situ* participant observation, and photo-elicitation according to the ‘photo-voice’ method (Wang and Burris, 1997). Interviews were conducted in Italian and/or Spanish, as the interviewee preferred. A full participant information and consent protocol was administered prior to the commencement of all research activities.

Early contact with Ecuadorian community members, especially women, created opportunities for more extensive participant observation. Accompanied by my pre-school age daughter, I often met local Ecuadorian mothers and their children at local playgrounds or in their homes. Following these initial encounters, I was

invited to attend weekend community gatherings, various parties, and community celebrations. I also attended public meetings organized by a multicultural association operating in Val Rendena and undertook volunteer work as an Italian language teacher for an association offering Italian language classes to newly-arrived migrants.

Issues of affect, space and place emerged as key themes throughout the interviews and observational research. The use of photo-voice to document local places enabled me to understand the links among place, community and belonging more deeply. The use of photo-voice was stimulated by recent calls for more innovative methods to trace the interplay among the environmental, social and symbolic dimensions of place and place-making (Conradson, 2005; Cummins et al., 2007; Fogel et al., 2008; Macintyre et al., 2002). Visual methods such as photo-voice are particularly suited to understanding people’s experiences of place, with emerging evidence suggesting that they are especially well suited to tracing the embodied, material and affective dimensions of place and belonging (Pink, 2006; Tolia-Kelly, 2007). Consistent with the photo-voice method, I asked participants to take photographs of local places that they particularly liked and/or felt attached to. Of the 17 families interviewed for the study, 10 elected to participate in this component of the research. Each was offered a disposable camera, although eight decided to use their own camera.

Interviews, photographs and fieldnotes were analyzed thematically, with analytic categories emerging to inform the development of further coding variables. All quotations reported below were translated from Italian/Spanish into English.

3. Destination hope

I began my inquiry into the Ecuadorians’ understanding of their migratory paths as part of a research project on parenting and migration, and was particularly interested in understanding how being a parent interacts with migration. I had no pre-conceived idea about, or interest in, hope or space, but these issues strongly emerged during the research process and I adapted my research focus and methodology accordingly. This included employing photo-voice methodology to go deeper in eliciting Ecuadorians’ meaning of place.

For most of the people interviewed, hope prompted their decision to leave Ecuador in search of a better life. Quite conventionally, the people I met explained to me how their decision to leave was sustained by the hope for a better future given the precariousness of Ecuadorian daily life. This kind of hope is an imaginative work, fully projected into time, and was based on stories of other migrants, relatives and friends who did succeed abroad. These narratives helped them to imagine their future abroad and that of their children, while developing a hopeful attitude. The research focus on parenting practices accidentally contributed to elicit reflections on the temporal aspect of the migratory experience. Often, the decision to migrate was motivated by the fact of assuring a better future for the migrants’ children. Parents decided to bear the hardship of a migration because they imaginatively projected their lives into the future path of their children.

After arrival in Italy, hope remained linked to time in various ways. First, people continued to imagine and work for a prosperous future. Second, some hoped to return to Ecuador at an indefinite point in the future, perhaps when they reached retirement age. Toward the end of my fieldwork, this hope was evoked more often, as Italy’s economy and political prestige declined and Ecuador was re-structuring its welfare and bureaucratic system.

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