



“A country full of snow”: Spanish migrants in Switzerland and their engagement with places, memories, and personal migratory history

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ABSTRACT

One of the migrants interviewed for this study believed that Switzerland must be “a country full of snow.” Other migrants described their engagement with places, memories, and personal migratory history in less poetic but nonetheless meaningful ways. This paper analyses the spatial accounts of Spanish guest workers in Switzerland. It shows that places are connected to meaning, memories, and stories that are experienced through emotions. The paper proposes a look at migrants’ emotional attachment to places to gain insight into engagement with the social context where the migrants live. Two types of places are discussed: places of identification, which point towards migrants’ identification with values, stories, and illusions of and about Switzerland; and places of daily action, which are constituted through migrants’ everyday lives and which become a locus to analyse migrants’ involvement in their social neighbourhood. Emotions are a key term used to analyse migrants’ notions about these places and how they “feel” about them. Focussing on emotions helps in analysing not only migrants’ attachment to these places but also the meanings that are inscribed into these places.

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1. Introduction

In the popular imagination, migration is often coupled with emotional images such as parting, the longing for people back home, feelings of belonging and alienation, and caring for family and friends abroad. As such, research on migration is full of emotional moments, but it lacks an analytical focus on the actual emotions involved. Migration research usually fails to make use of emotional qualities of experience when “at particular times and in particular places, there are moments where lives are so explicitly lived through pain, bereavement, elation, anger, love and so on that the power of emotional relations cannot be ignored (and can readily be appreciated)” (Anderson and Smith, 2001: 7).

Studies and biographies on return migration deal with these emotional moments and portray the hopes and fears of returning (see, for example, Bovenkerk, 1974; Gmelch, 1983; Rodríguez et al., 2002). These emotions are generally not central to the investigation but rather serve as an explanatory factor for returning. Gmelch (1983) stated in an early study that Irish and Newfoundland returnees return for similar reasons. They continue feeling an attachment to their home country, their family, and other social relationships, which pulls them back home. These feelings of

attachment to the home country are usually combined with a sense that the stay in the guest country is temporary. Nonetheless, these emotional aspects have only rarely been addressed in research (see, for example, Klimt, 1989).

The discussion about caring in transnational settings of migration provides another example of studies that engage with emotional aspects in the context of migration. Feelings are inscribed into the discussion about caring in a similar way as in the discussion about return migration: they are essential to care-giving and caring in general, but they are only seldom explicitly debated in any depth. Different forms of transnational care-giving have been described. Satellite mothers, astronaut families, and parachute children are some of the terms used to grasp the organisational structures and familial arrangements that ensure care, care-giving, and care-receiving over long distances (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002; Yeoh et al., 2005). Feelings of transnational motherhood (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila, 1997) have been portrayed as a difficult “long distance intimacy” (Parreñas Salazar, 2005: 317) that derives from “the spatially ruptured practices of migrant families” (Landolt and Da, 2005: 625). However, focussing on the remittances sent to siblings, McKay (2007) proposes to understand the money sent as a transmission of emotions. It is not clear whether long distance breaks families apart emotionally or whether the possibility of sending money and showing affection for others is a means to bridge the distance and bring the family closer.

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While most studies on migration acknowledge emotions as an important element of migratory experience, they still fail to look closely at how emotions can be a key point of analysis. Recently, an increased interest in places has inspired various studies (e.g. Conradson and McKay, 2007; Ehrkamp, 2005; Ho, 2009) to make emotion and emotional attachment a starting point in investigating the intersections of movement, bodies, and emotions that are inherent to migration (Conradson and Latham, 2007: 232). This new interest in place comes from two different directions. On the one hand, the right to a place has been formulated for migrants in the context of a critical inquiry of the integration and assimilation debate (Terkessidis, 2007). This claim turns the integration debate upside down as it takes migrants' rights as a point of departure instead of arguing about migrants' obligations. It further focuses on the concrete places where migrants live instead of talking about integration into a society that lacks a clear definition and remains a very vague idea into which migrants are urged to integrate. The claim to the right to a place is the right to a place to live. Enquiries into the spatial aspects of social interaction and everyday lives have demonstrated that places with inscribed social structures are produced by social interaction (Massey, 2005) and are therefore also sites of a powerful encounter between the individual and the social. Concepts such as being "in place" and "out of place" (Cresswell, 1996) point towards how people feel, whether they belong to a place, and whether they are allowed and accepted in a place.

On the other hand, studies on transnational migration emphasize the importance of the spatial approach (Featherstone, 2007; Glick Schiller et al., 2006; Silvey, 2006). In particular, a transnational focus encourages a perspective that captures the place where people touch ground (Ley, 2004). Places are mostly conceptualised as sites where national law, the local and global economy, communal networks, familial relations, and so on come together and form the specific context in which migrants (and others) live. The emotional aspect of these encounters and engagements with space and local places are still mostly neglected. "It often seems as if the role of the researcher is still to overcome the immediacy of people's corporeal experiences—in relation to the demands of migration, exile, integration and resettlement—by acts of will and intellect" (Anderson and Smith, 2001: 9).

A few studies have engaged questions of place-making and how attachment to place and emotional belonging are intertwined. For instance, Turkish immigrants in a German city (Ehrkamp, 2005) start appropriating the area where they live by setting up shops with Turkish specialties and founding teahouses. The teahouses even mirror the social differences that criss-cross the Turkish community: age, gender, and region of origin. Staeheli and Nagel (2006) focus further on questions of home and belonging and stress the emotional aspects that are attached to these places as concrete localities with stories, memories, and history. Ho (2009) goes further and conceptualises not only belonging but also notions of citizenship through an emotional lens. Her study of Singaporean transmigrants in London shows two sides of emotional citizenship. On the one hand, she uses the emotional perspective to describe more precisely the different elements of citizenship, like belonging or love for the nation; on the other hand, emotional citizenship serves as a tool of analysis to study the politics of citizenship.

Inspired by these perspectives, this paper analyses place-making and place attachment of migrants based on their emotions. With this analysis, I hope to gain insight into what holds typical guest workers from Spain back in their supposed "guest" country. Emotional geography, as the field of study that analyzes social relations and attachment to place from an emotional point of view (Anderson and Smith, 2001; Pain, 2009; Thien, 2005),

provides the theoretical background. I prefer the term "emotion" rather than "affect" because debates in human geography and other disciplines have situated emotion in a tradition that focuses on subjects, their bodies, and the spatiality of social praxis. Feminist geography made an important contribution to the studies of emotion and everyday life (Davidson and Bondi, 2004; Sharp, 2009). This is important insofar as attachments to space and place-making need to be understood as gendered processes. It is further important because feminist geography has a long tradition of analysing the body as a personal space and as a space that communicates with the space around it (Sharp, 2009).

This paper analyses the emotional attachment to places of Spanish migrants in Switzerland. By using emotion as the key term of analysis, this paper grasps the relationship between place attachment and social practice (Simonsen, 2007). It then continues with a short section describing the study on Spanish migrants in Switzerland, which provides the empirical material. A second section outlines the context of Spanish migration to Switzerland, gives necessary demographic information, and sketches the political changes that have occurred during the period between the arrival of the first guest workers and this study. The third section focuses more specifically on emotional geographies and develops an emotional focus on two kinds of places in particular: places of daily action and places of identification. These understandings of two types of emotional engagement with places are then applied to the analysis of empirical material. Finally, the paper discusses these findings with reference to the questions surrounding belonging, returning, and staying.

2. Methods

This paper represents a rethinking and rereading of material I collected for my doctoral thesis, which investigated the question of migrants' insertion ("integration" in the Swiss and general European wording) from their own point of view (Richter, 2006). The research question was not whether migrants were integrated according to some pre-existing definition but rather how they themselves experienced everyday life. These stories proved to be rich accounts of belonging that translated into different forms of attachment to people, places, and memories connecting people and places.¹ Even though the spatial and emotional foci were not inscribed into the project from the beginning, they emerged through the interviews and became prominent through the analysis of the transcribed accounts.

The research was based on interviews conducted in the winter of 2002–2003 in Zurich, Switzerland's biggest city. Twenty migrants of Spanish origin were interviewed in depth (Fontana and Frey, 1998); they related their migrant biography from the moment they thought of migrating to the present. The course of the interview was left open to give the respondents maximum flexibility to tell their stories (Schütze [1977], 1978). The interviews were recorded on tape and later transcribed verbatim. In order to respect respondents' privacy, pseudonyms are used. The sample was selected among migrants of the first generation aiming at maximum diversity along axes such as gender, age, length of stay, professional background, and formal qualification. The sample comprised eight men and twelve women, with an age range from 32 to 65 years, and arrivals in Switzerland between 1957 and 1999. Some of the informants were approached through Spanish cultural associations in Zurich, others through personal contacts and the

¹ This article focuses on spatial attachment and emotions that are attached to places. Other emotions related to social relations, work satisfaction, or feelings of acceptance have been discussed elsewhere (Richter, 2006).

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