

Migration without Mobility

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Abstract

Marking ten years since its inception as a discrete field of interdisciplinary inquiry the present is an apt moment to reflect on the contribution of Mobilities Studies to the academy. In this paper I review Mobilities Studies' achievements, but also highlight its relative failure to impact on another interdisciplinary field with which it ought to be especially cognate, Migration Studies. Following a brief review of the overlaps and divergences between the two fields, I highlight a 'mobility deficit' in Migration Studies that is extant particularly in the contemporary trends for migrant 'transnationalism,' 'exceptionalism' and 'category proliferation.' Furthermore, I suggest, these trends might be regarded as forms of discursive violence against the migrant subject that have, simultaneously political, definitional and conceptual dimensions and that, collectively render representationally the migrant subject immobile. I conclude by arguing that Migration Studies' way out of this impasse is greater engagement with Mobilities Studies, and that such engagement may constitute an important part of Mobilities Studies' intellectual agenda into its second decade.

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Introduction

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Ten years of Mobilities

2016 is a significant moment for Mobilities Studies, the interdisciplinary field concerned with all aspects of mobility, from the physical to the imaginative movement of things and people. It marks ten years since the launch of the journal *Mobilities* and the key position papers that effectively established Mobilities Studies (or the 'Mobilities Paradigm' as it was more modestly labelled then) as a discrete field of research (Hannam, Sheller & Urry, 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Prior to this the study of mobilities had grown in dispersed and eclectic academic contexts (Faulconbridge & Hui, 2016). In Anthropology, for example, concern with mobilities can be traced to the postmodern turn and, especially the critique of the 'field' as a trope of textual authority that also, it was claimed, resonated with sedentarist ideologies such as nationalism (Rapport & Dawson, 1998, 7). In Cultural Studies it emerged largely in calls to reconceptualise traditional objects of study, such as places, from being seen as 'sites of dwelling' to 'sites of travelling' (Clifford, 1992). In Sociology it emerged largely from recognition of the need to come to grips with accelerating globalization and, of course, the global mobility that was enabled by new transportation and communication technologies in particular (Vannini, 2010). It was, indeed, Sociology that provided a scholar with the requisite trans-disciplinary insight to forge the inception of Mobilities Studies as an integrated field. And it is in this sense also that 2016 is a significant moment for Mobilities Studies. This year saw the sad passing of John Urry, undoubtedly the doyen of the field. What, then, one might ask is Urry's legacy?

As a field of substantive inquiry Mobilities Studies has been extraordinarily successful, especially through the study of physical mobility. There has been exponential growth in research on various different forms of non-mechanised mobility, such as walking (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008), bicycling (Aldred, 2012), orienteering (Altshull, 2008), skiing (Edensor & Richards, 2007) and canoeing (Waskul & Waskul, 2009) to name but a few. And this has been surpassed in volume by the study of mechanised forms of mobility, from airline (Adey, 2010) and helicopter (Cwerner, 2006) travel to train journeying (Lofgren, 2008) to motor-biking

(Pinch & Reimer, 2012) and, of course and overwhelmingly, to car driving (Vannini, 2010, 117). Likewise, the field's methodological successes have been notable too, with the emergence of a range of new mobile techniques and approaches to researching mobility such as, most ubiquitously, multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995). More ambitiously, Urry and his colleagues proposed mobility as a lens through which foundational concepts in the social sciences, that had become commonplace because of misplaced assumptions of the normalcy of sedentary lifestyles, could be refigured. Thus, for example, where once we may commonly have spoken about society, culture and place, we may (and increasingly do) now speak in a new mobile vocabulary of networks, flows and de/reterritorialized sites. Lastly, perhaps the greatest measure of these successes is the extent to which Mobilities Studies has embedded itself within the curricula of universities. By way of a small, but illustrative sample, a quick glance at the subject guides of my own university reveals a range of subjects, from 'Migrancy, Home and Exile' to 'The Mobile World', which draw explicitly on the mobilities 'tradition.'

Mobilities and migrations

Against this background of growing orthodoxy another fact of Mobilities Studies seems peculiarly strange and ironic. Mobilities Studies has had a curious lack of traction in the very interdisciplinary fields with which it ought to be most cognate. Dawson, for example, observed that Migration Studies has been concerned principally with the causes and impacts of migration on both sending and receiving societies. Thus, whilst Migration Studies is concerned with what happens at migrations' points of departure and destination, it is interested less with much of what takes place in-between them, including mobility (2008). Conversely, Transport Studies is, in fact, concerned with mobility, but only in heavily circumscribed ways. It seeks to understand how efficient and risky mobilities (car accidents and the like) can be maximised and minimized respectively (Vannini, 2010). Consequently, in short, in both Migration Studies and Transport Studies insufficient attention is paid to understanding experiences and the meaningfulness of mobility for those who participate in or are otherwise affected by it.

The tenth anniversary of Mobilities Studies has brought reflection on the reasons for the aforementioned 'mobility deficit', particularly in Migration Studies (see, for example, Hui, 2016). This is not my purpose here. Rather, I seek to reflect on some of its consequences for Migration Studies, in particular how Migration Studies conceptualises its research subjects. I highlight, as examples of a mobility deficit, three particular features of contemporary Migration Studies – the 'transnationalism' perspective, limiting of the boundaries of the field through what Hui describes as 'migrant exceptionalism' (2016), and, in a somewhat countervailing tendency to migrant exceptionalism, the 'proliferation of migration categories' (see also, Dawson, 2015). I explore the mobility deficit in these ways through a case study from my empirical research on Bosnians (Croat, Muslim and Serb) who were displaced to Australia, Western Europe and other parts of former-Yugoslavia during the 1992-95 Bosnian war of succession from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Given the spatial limitations of the paper, I focus on one migrant informant only, Vesna Krstić (pseudonym), a Bosnian Serb who resettled in Australia as a young woman early in the war. Her not exceptional case suffices for the purpose of illustration.

Migrant transnationalism, exceptionalism and proliferation

Transnationalism, a focus on the social processes that transcend national boundaries, is now, undoubtedly the dominant perspective in contemporary Migration Studies. In a foundational study Basch et al defined transnationalism as “the *processes* by which immigrants forge and sustain *multi-stranded* social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (1994, 7). However, often practice does not match promise. Firstly, as Amit and Rapport pointed out, relying heavily on the related concepts of ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1983) and ‘ethnoscapes’ (Appadurai, 1996), the study of transnationalism in Migration Studies often focuses on the imagination of transnational communities rather than the concrete processes underlying their formation (2002). These processes, which Amit and Rapport argued, can only effectively be explored ethnographically, include migrants’ mobilities, such as homeland re-visiting and the like. Secondly, despite Basch et al’s sensible foregrounding of multi-stranded relations, and later warnings about the perils of ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002), the study of transnationalism in Migration Studies scholarship focuses predominantly on very limited forms of social relations, in particular ethnic and national transnationalism. Granted, a range of studies considers gender-based (see, for example, Yeoh and Ramdas, 2014) and familial (see, for example, Anh Hoang and Yeoh, 2012) transnationalism. However, more often than not, the ethnic or national group still remain as the primary units of analysis: transnational family networks amongst Vietnamese migrants, or gender-based transnational networks amongst Philippina maids, etcetera.

The exponential growth of transnationalism studies within Migration Studies (see, for example, Vertovec, 2007) has corresponded temporally with the emergence of Mobilities Studies. However, and perhaps even because of this, the constitution of their respective objects of study has differed markedly in various ways. Whilst Mobility Studies is concerned with the movement of objects and people, Migration Studies is concerned fundamentally with the movement of people. Migration Studies’ concern, for example, with the movement of non-humans, such as flows of remittances, is not with them as non-human ‘actors’, but as, simply ‘tools’ of the field’s primary object of study, people who migrate. Even more obviously, Migration Studies focuses exclusively on migrants. In contrast, Mobilities Studies is concerned with all forms of human mobility – vacationing, commuting, nomadism, etcetera – amongst which migration is merely one subtype (Hui, 2016, 71). Lastly, and most remarkably, in a process of what Hui described as migrant exceptionalism, Migration Studies scholarship has tended to categorise only a very limited range of groups who migrate as being actual migrants and, thus, worthy of the field’s academic gaze (2016). Perhaps the clearest illustration of the point is Faist’s observation that while in migration research unwanted labour migrants are regarded as the most legitimate subjects of study, in-demand skilled professionals are often presented, conversely, as ‘mobiles’ rather than migrants (2013).

Having said this, in more recent years migrant exceptionalism has been met by a countervailing trend in Migration Studies for the identification of new and discrete migrant and migration types and subtypes – labour migration, forced migration, including conflict-induced forced migration, environment-induced forced migration,

etcetera. Some such new types and subtypes present as migrants the very high-status groups who might once have been regarded as mobiles. One thinks, for example, of ‘astronaut migrants’ (Ong, 1999), that category of professionals who live and support families overseas, or of ‘lifestyle migrants’ (Benson and Osbaldiston, 2014). It is a moot point whether these people should be regarded as particular types of migrant or, simply just people on exceedingly long overseas work engagements or vacations. A case of ‘you say tomato, I say tomato,’ perhaps. However, we cannot treat the matter so flippantly, for, worryingly, in some instances, such as in the case of recent work on lifestyle migration, very robust arguments have been made for viewing these as bases for discrete fields of inquiry (Benson and Osbaldiston 2014), mini (sub-) disciplines so to speak. There are various, usually questionable, reasons underlying this process (see Dawson, 2015). In the context of the current discussion it is perhaps worth suggesting that they may include a desire for Migration Studies not to cede academic territory to fields such as Mobilities Studies through practices such as, of course, migrant exceptionalism itself. However, this is not my concern here. Rather, I seek to explore some of the resonances between the making of transnationalism as predominantly ethnic and national, migrant exceptionalism and migrant category proliferation with the everyday life experiences of migrants themselves, in this case Vesna Krstić.

Serb, economic migrant, humanitarian migrant, leisure migrant, all of the above or just Vesna?

In what is now, almost the canonical approach to ethnicity in the social sciences, Barth states, “the critical focus of investigation from this point of view becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses” (1969, 15). What Barth is drawing attention to here is the fact that ethnic identities emerge out of and do not exist *a priori* to the coming into being of relationships between people we regard as ‘ourselves’ and ‘others’. Consequently, as an important way in which such relationships are brought into being, migration is often central to ethnic consciousness. As Vesna Krstić once expressed it concisely and with customary anger, “when I lived in Bosnia I was just Vesna. Now, somehow, I am an immigrant and a Serb.” As with many other of my informants, the bases of Vesna’s discomfort are threefold.

The first (1), and most significant of these sources of discomfort is conveyed in Vesna’s humorous account of arrival in Australia. In passing through the immigration hall at Melbourne airport she was met, as prearranged, by an elderly member of the local Serbian community. On the drive into town, assuming incorrectly that the former-Yugoslavia had barely modernised since his departure in the 1960s, he explained, “Vesna, these are traffic lights. Red means stop and green means go.” As if she didn’t already know that. Later on in the journey he panicked when he saw his oil warning light flashing, and pulled over for help. Unfortunately, having spent most of his life in a diasporic Serbian enclave – ‘Suburbia Srpska’ as Vesna liked to call it - , and having not mastered the English language, he could not convey the nature of the problem adequately to the petrol station staff. Fortunately, like many of her peers who had enjoyed the benefits of socialist Yugoslavia’s education system, though a lifelong inhabitant of former-Yugoslavia and newcomer to Australia, Vesna spoke near perfect English. As such, she was able to translate for her host. Finally, when they reached their destination Vesna was asked to change in preparation for a welcome party at the

local Serbian club. However, she was bewildered when asked to participate in Serbian folk dancing. With not just a little irony she explained, “unlike these so-called Australians, me the Serb couldn’t bust the moves. Back home all we learned was Salsa.”

Simply, of course, the discomfort being alluded to is Vesna’s feeling of the absurdity of being categorised ethnically. Beyond this she frequently expressed anger and discomfort at a common sentiment articulated by less welcoming locals that she, and others of her type are, in fact ‘undeserving’ (2) labour migrants disguised as humanitarian migrants, refugees. Conversely, and perhaps a little more surprisingly, she was discomfited by (3) her classification as a humanitarian migrant too. It was true, she pointed out to me, that she had been displaced by ‘ethnic cleansing’ in her homeland, and that she had officially and deservedly been admitted to Australia on a humanitarian visa. However, escape from persecution was not her sole reason for coming and being here. Thus, she is as disdainful of those who pity her for, and identify her solely in terms of her displacement as she is for those who resent her presence. In her words, “I came to Australia not just to escape the negatives, but also to embrace the positives that Australia offers. I am not just a poor Bosnian. I am building a career. And I am someone who wants fun. Why can I not be all of these things – refugee, professional and good time girl?”

Conclusion – doing violence to the migrant subject by taking the mobility out of migration

The situations that Vesna describes as occurring in the recent migrant’s relations with others mirror uncomfortably the academic processes of: (1) the making of transnationalism as predominately ethnic and national; (2) migrant exceptionalism, and (3) migrant category proliferation and specification in Migration Studies. Furthermore, I would argue, just as she experiences everyday life amongst diasporic Serbs, migrant haters and refugee pitiers as discomfiting, these processes that have been promulgated within Migration Studies might be regarded as ‘doing violence to the subject’ (Jenkins, 1992). The provocative title of Jenkins’ piece referred to the manner in which post-structuralist theory in the social sciences dehumanises and representationally strips people of agency by rendering them theoretically as mere ‘texts’ from which it is the task of the social scientist to read the meaning of any given social context.

What, it might be asked is the specific nature of the violence to the subject entailed in Migration Studies? It is more than mere representations of: migrants principally as ethnics and nationals, some migrants as migrants and others not, and some people as particular types of migrants when they may think of themselves otherwise, *a la* transnationalism, exceptionalism and category proliferation respectively. It is, I argue, a kind of violence that consists of rendering the migrant subject discursively immobile. How so?

Firstly, by presenting transnational migrants as, first and foremost, ethnics and nationals, the transnationalism perspective in Migration Studies privileges forms of identification that are, fundamentally sedentary. Ethnic nationalism, for example, is, after all, an identity based on the idea of a group of people who see themselves as culturally and genealogically associated, seeking also a shared state and *territory*.

This discursive sedentarising of the migrant subject might be regarded as a kind of political violation. Secondly, regarding some mobile people and not others as suitable for the category migrant and, thus, worthy, or not of the academic gaze of migration scholarship, might be regarded as a kind of definitional violence. Thirdly, proliferating new migration types and sub-types and specifying to which ‘one’ particular migrants ought or ought not to be categorised might be regarded as a kind of conceptual violation. In short, it misrepresents the ‘category mobility’ – as people like Vesna, for example, ‘move’ seamlessly between the identities of refugee, labour migrant and leisure migrant (“good time girl”, as she put it) – that is the reality of many migrants’ lives. In these ways, I argue, Migration Studies has, more often than not, rendered the migrant subject discursively immobile, politically, definitionally and conceptually. Its way out of this impasse will be, I suggest tentatively, greater engagement with Mobility Studies, a field attuned to appreciating both the physical and imaginative movement of people and to developing a more empirically, methodologically and conceptually form of social inquiry. This may form part of Mobilities Studies’ agenda in its second decade.

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