Reflections on researching transnational migrants and the fieldwork challenges of studying co-nationals abroad

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Abstract

This article offers reflections on the process of researching transnational migration, and particularly the fieldwork challenges and difficulties that can emerge when studying co-nationals abroad. Based on two distinct research projects on transnational migration (one on Brazilians in London and the other on Britons in Beijing), which used similar methodological tools and faced similar challenges, we argue thatcombining a mobile ethnographic methodological tool (documenting journeys) with in-depth biographical interviews and historical and contextual analyses, makes our data open to analyse migration as a translocal process at the same time that provides a connection between both macro and micro scales of analysis. Our methodological tools allowed us to understand how people speak of, engage with and negotiate mobile experiences in their everyday lives, in the macro political and social structures organising immigration and emigration.We conclude by reflecting on the challenges of researching co-nationals abroad,our own positionality in relation to our fieldwork and the multi-layered power relations involved in our respective research process.

Keywords: transnationalism, Brazilians in London, Britons in Beijing, ethnography, journeys.

Introduction

Based on two distinct researchprojects on transnational migration, one on Brazilians in London[1] and the other on Britons in Beijing[2], this article offers reflections on the process of researching transnational migration, and particularly the fieldwork challenges and difficulties that can emerge whenstudying co-nationals abroad. Transnationalism, which some scholars (Rastas, 2013) call the transnational turn in migration studies, is an important development in the study of globalized, multi-ethnic/cultural societies. The methodological challenges and difficulties of capturing multiple ties and interactions linking people and institutions across the borders of nation-states are well rehearsed (Vertovec, 1999; Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007). Transnational scholars, such as Peggy Levitt and Nadya Jaworsky (2007) and Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2002) have outlinedserious shortcomings and challenges in the contemporary theorizationof, and methodological approaches to, transnationalism. These include, on one hand,concern to avoid what is often called methodological nationalism and analyse migration astranslocal processes (Hannerz, 1998), developing research in multiple sites, and capturingconnections between sites; andon the other hand, questioning the appropriate level of analysis as well as the connections between scales (Vertovec, 1999).

Steven Vertovec (1999) warns that researchers must be aware of the problems of approaching transnationalism through either an exclusively macro perspective,which focuses on the structural causes of migration, or a strict micro-level analysis, which focuses only on lived experience. Other scholars suggest developing analytical tools that reveal how global processes interact with local lived experiences (Sayad, 2004; Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007). Sensitive to these concerns, in this article we discuss how weeach developed a reflexive mixed-methods approach to gathering qualitative datathat reveals the connectionsbetween everyday experience and wider economic, political and historical contexts connecting*both* places of emigration and immigration. Combining a mobile ethnographic methodological tool (documenting journeys) with in-depth biographicalinterviews and historical and contextual analyses, we think our data is open to both macro and micro scales of analysis. Our methodological tools allowed us to understand how people speak of, engage with and negotiate mobile experiences in their everyday lives, in the macro political and social structures organising immigration and emigration.We conclude by reflecting on the challenges of researching co-nationals abroad,our own positionality in relation to our fieldwork and the multi-layered power relations involved in our respectiveresearch process.

Our reflections come from two distinct research projects, which used similar methodological tools and faced similar challenges.Thefirst,conducted byAngelo (Brazilian) explores how Brazilians understand, produce and negotiate differences of 'culture', class and region (intersected with gender,'race' and documental status) in London. It involved18

◆ Reflections on researching transnational migrants and the fieldwork challenges of studying co-nationals abroad
◆ Angelo Martins Jr (UL); Caroline Knowles (UL).

31

months of ethnographic work, following Brazilians to places of leisure around London, and 33 in-depth interviews. The second conducted by Caroline (British), involved 68 in-depth interviews with over 60 informants in 7 trips to Beijing between 2011 and 2017 and explores the ways in which British migrants navigate landscapes of new settlement in that city. Borrowing from Les Back (2007), we both try to 'read against the grain', seeking out stories that are rarely visible in dominant narratives about migration: illuminating the 'hidden life of objects and places' by seeking the life that is 'concealed' or 'bleached' by 'formalities of power or the forgetfulness of conventional wisdom' to look for "the outside story that is part of the inside story" (2007, p. 9). We aimed to shed light on some of the less-dominant narratives weaving their way in, around and through the discussions of migrants from the Global South and from the Global North.

Ethnographic mobile methodological and thinking tool: Journeys

Ethnography, Veena Das argues, is a relationship of responsiveness that seeks to move beyond the replication of hegemonic collective representations to "enlarge our field of vision" (2007, p. 4). This has become an important methodological goal in migration studies, especially when researching 'transnational communities' (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007). Accompanying migrants along their daily paths, ethnography challenges dominant macro representations of migrants as workers moving in search of economic opportunities. It potentially reveals a map of movements underscored by significant contacts, in contexts as varied as work, leisure, and religious practices. José Guilherme Magnani notes, that this allows researchers to grasp 'the behavioural patterns, not of atomized individuals, but of the multiple, varied and heterogeneous sets of social actors, whose daily lives' move "along the landscape of the city" (2005, n. p).

Ethnography plays an important role in our research; it allows us to apprehend mobility for its social texture, going beyond abstract concepts like *flow* proffered in much existing migration and mobility thinking, and which claim that people, objects, images, information and waste materials *flow*, thus composing a 'world on the move', connecting the local to the global (see Urry, 2000, 2008; Sassen, 1988; Tilly, 1990). Understanding that people and objects do not simply flow, but rather, "bump awkwardly along the pathways they create, backtrack, grate, [and] move off in new directions, propelled by different intersecting logics" (Knowles, 2014, p. 7), we argue that in order to understand the social textures composing the world on the move, we need better thinking and methodological tools than the abstract assumption that people flow.

Using Knowles (2014, p. 9) concept of *journey* offers a methodological and 'thinking tool with which we can make sense of a world on the move' since "lives are lived and narrated through journeys". Knowles (Amit and Knowles, 2017) calls this *spatial biography*: life stories narrated in movements. By accompanying people on their everyday journeys, working from the ground up, paying attention to individual comings and goings – daily

journeys around a neighbourhood, a workplace or a home – providea "matrix of people's coming and going in ways that lend them to cartography" (p. 9). In this sense, journeys "draw people's maps and in so doing provide a way of thinking about them" (p. 9). Thus, journeys, Knowles points out, "provide a way of understanding the maps people live, at the same time offer a way of making sense of their lives" (p. 9). Journeys are temporally defined episodic and continuous sequences of movement, which ground specifics – who, what, where, how and why people move – and in this lies their value in revealing the operation of social worlds. Of course, peopleare more than a collection of journeys, but journeys provide a powerful analytical tool for thinking about people in a world on the move – about where and how do they go, and why? Using journeys as a mobile ethnographic thinkingand research tool to study migration, following people in their everyday rounds, enables us tocapture urban dynamics that might otherwise go unnoticed. Wefollowed our participants in their everyday journeys with the aim ofunderstanding howeach group of migrants – Brazilians in London and Britons in Beijing – constructed and navigated mobile lives and experiences in their daily encounters withpeople and city spaces.

Following Brazilians in spaces and places of leisure (Angelo)

> I never go there [Guanabara, Brazilian club in London], actually I never go to any Brazilian place, so I am not sure what we will find there today, I am sure good thing and pretty people won't be [Manoel].

My fieldwork notes, written on the bus on the way to a night out with Manoel at Guanabara, a Brazilian Club in London, record my expectation that leisure spaces will prove significant in understanding how Brazilians interact with bodies and spaces in London. Despite the obvious importance of work, Ihad chosennot to develop ethnography at work sites as I had my earlier ethnographic research on migration (see Martins Jr., 2014). Reaching beyond work, and contrary to much research on migration which discounts leisure (Anderson, 1999), I anticipated that migrants would have a rich life beyond work, going to parties, celebrating christenings, birthdays and weddings, football tournaments, religious celebrations and rituals (Magnani, 2005, Ramirez, 2015). With this in mind, I developed an approach, using participant observation, which involved me watching and engaging with researchparticipants in their different activities (Wacquant, 2004) and following them on their leisure journeys and social encounters around the city in which the social networks of different kinds of Brazilian migrants intersect.

Over eighteen months, from July 2013 to January 2015, I began frequenting what I had identified as Brazilian places of leisure, such as nightclubs, restaurants and bars. I would meet Brazilians there and talk about my research, later making follow-up contact and arranging for them to take me with them on nights out; making notes on the resulting encounters and experiences. These excursions generated 180 pages of ethnographic notes, my conversation with Manoel, at the beginning in this section, for example. On that particular day, after an interviewing in which Manoel told me about his experience

◆ Reflections on researching transnational migrants and the fieldwork challenges of studying co-nationals abroad
◆ Angelo Martins Jr (UL); Caroline Knowles (UL).

33

as a (male) Brazilian living in London for over 13 years, he invited me to go to a Brazilian club with him. On the way to the club, Manoel, who claims he is not like 'the others Brazilian migrants in London', since he came to London to 'have a life experience and develop myself as a person, and not to work, save money, go to Brazilian clubs, exploit one another and do illegal things', made sure that I understood that this was an exceptional occasion: his friend was singing at Guanabara. I began to understand that he was telling me about himself and his relationship with London and other Brazilians in this statement.

Hearing similar statements from others, I became aware of how following Brazilians during their leisure time could be a critical methodological tool to both create links with my participants, and to unpack the different ways in which they think about themselves and interact with people and places in the city. I would often start conversation by talking about the music or the football match or any other subject connected to where we were. This dispelled the atmosphere of inquisition that is often present in interviews. As Magnani and Bruna Mantese (2007) note, leisure represents an opportunity to establish, strengthen and exercise rules of recognition and loyalty that ensure a basic network of sociability, as well as creating boundaries with those who do not share the same 'lifestyle'. If I was to understand the social distinctions which London based Brazilians constructed between themselves, then places of leisure, I decided, should be a crucial part of my investigation.

I had become aware that there is likely to be an order which links 'lifestyles' and groups, to places (Thornton, 1995; Amaral, 2001). As Sarah Thornton (1995) notes in her research on (night) club cultures, 'Club cultures are *taste cultures*: crowds generally congregate on the basis of shared taste in music, consumption of common media and, most importantly, their preference for people with similar tastes to themselves' (p. 15). Parties and clubs, as Rita Amaral (2001) argues, are a mode of self-expression and sometimes a political tool, construing 'racial', classed, ethnic and religious associations. Parties and places of leisure express belonging, *and* they are potentially a site in which power relations shape 'racial', gender, class and sexual interactions (Back, 1996; Kosnick, 2009) between Brazilians in London.

Following Brazilians to house parties and dinners as well as to various clubs and pubs in London, not necessarily labelled as 'Brazilian environments', I discovered that there were two places in particular that Brazilians use to mark class division between them. Guanabara, one of the most famous Brazilian nightclubs in central London, provides 'Brazilian entertainment' and attracts both Brazilians and non-Brazilians. It is characterised by many middle-class Brazilians[3] as a place of leisure frequented by 'uneducated' 'economic migrants'. Clube do Choro is a monthly event, which plays

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3   In this article I dialogue with Torresan's (2012) work on Brazilians in Portugal. As Torresan (2012) has argued, when defining Brazilian middle-class boundaries, despite occupation and income being important, there were other attributes that go beyond position in the job market. Middle-classness in Brazil: involved having a good education that would lead to a stable job with a salary sufficient to acquire a car, save for a house (and eventually buy one), travel, and purchase clothes, and other domestic goods. It was also important to partake in casual and frequent entertainment that would provide some cultural capital and a sense of 'educated' taste with which people could distinguish their situation within the flexible boundaries of the middle class. (Torresan, 2012, p. 115).

chorinho (a genre of Brazilian music), attended by both Brazilians and non-Brazilians. Many of the Brazilians who attend this event are middle-class, postgraduate students, Bruna, for example. Bruna told me she was at Clube do Choro for the third time, with some non-Brazilian friends from university. Even though Bruna was at a party organised by Brazilians, with Brazilian music and a Portuguese name, she told me that she does not go to Brazilian places of leisure in London, like 'the majority of Brazilians stupidly do'. When I interjected that 'Clube do Choro', was a Brazilian place, she said:

> Yes, it is, but, it is different. You don't want to compare people who come here to those who go to Guanabara or, compare chorinho to the music they play there. Come on, you are Brazilian, you know exactly what I'm talking about. Guanabara is different. Everything there is disgusting. It's full of ugly people. They put the lowest class of Brazilians all together in that place.

Even though the places mentioned above are often described by Brazilians as linked to (sub) cultural practices of distinction (Thornton, 1995) – shaped by class and nationality – it would be, as I discovered, a mistake to regard places of leisure as defined only, as Kira Kosnick (2009) notes, "a group of people that have features in common such as age, musical taste, style, (sub)cultural capital, class positions, possibly ethnic backgrounds, gender expressions or sexual orientations" (p. 26). As Back (1996, p. 229) argues, within "the alternative public spheres of the dance-hall, club and house party", we can see not only the description of, but also the 'suspension of social divisions' that 'exist outside the dance and enable new forms of expression'. Places of leisure can provide, for instance, a space for what Back has called 'profound forms of transcultural dialogue and cultural transgression' where 'different truths about the politics of race can be spoken, nurtured and circulated'. With this in mind I paid attention to the socialities that developed in encounters between different bodies, without making assumptions about the constitution of 'ethnic' or 'classed' affiliations. As Kosnick (2009) argues, it is by being alert to the socialities developed inside of these places of leisure that we can understand "how people actually engage with each other', andwe can describe 'the quality and dynamics of their affiliatory practices and the social formations they (re)produce or transform" (p. 27).

Thus, I examined the affiliations and dis-affiliations of nationality and class, being produced, shifted and negotiated through the interactions developed in these places. These interactions were not only between Brazilians butbetween Brazilians and people marked by other national and ethnic affiliations. In addition to paying attention to how people engaged with each other, I was attentive to how they engaged with me in particular contexts. This highlights the importance of participant observation, since it allowed me to take notice of the nuances of situated and often non-verbal acts that tend to be screened out by other methodological repertoires such as verbal narrative. As Back (2009, p. 212) comments, "social research needs to reduce its over-reliance on interviews and embrace the opportunities to re-think its modes of observation and analysis" by developing different kinds "of attentiveness to the embodied social world in motion", and not being limited

◆ Reflections on researching transnational migrants and the fieldwork challenges of studying co-nationals abroad
◆ Angelo Martins Jr (UL); Caroline Knowles (UL).

35

"to what people say explicitly" (p. 209). In this sense, my observations allowed me to access detailed un-spoken information, for example, observing how different groups of Brazilians move and position themselves in space, as well as how inter-group sociability is developed: situations that I would most likely not have access to if I were to only conduct interviews.

This was the case when I arrived at Guanabara with Manoel. Manoel only spoke English with the staff, even with the waiters who were Brazilians. He kept complaining about the 'uncivilised Brazilianess' of the place, about how people were uneducated, pushing each other all the time, speaking loudly, women dancing promiscuously, about the music. Yet when his friend started singing Brazilian songs, Manoel realised everyone, including non-Brazilian women, were trying to sing and dance to the music. He then started dancing and singing along, close to the non-Brazilian women. At this point, singing and dancing *properly* became a form of symbolic capital. Manoel chooses to emphasise his 'exotic Brazilianess' displaying his 'Brazilian corporeality', gaining the attention of the girls around him. After dancing with them, he turned to me and commented, 'Here (Guanabra) is the only place in London that, sometimes, being Brazilian can be good'. At that moment, the same features of 'Brazilian corporeality' (speaking loudly, dancing sexually, pushing people and so on) which are identified as 'negative makers' by those who are critical of Brazilian places of leisure, are re-signified when 'Brazilianess' is taken as something positive.

Following and observing people in places of leisure led me to constantly reformulate my theoretical assumptions. As I had previously conducted research on Brazilians in London, and was influenced by research in the US (see Oliveira, 2003), which shows a clear classed spatial division among Brazilians in terms of where they live and where they go for leisure, I imagined the same would be true among Brazilians in London. I assumed for instance that middle-class Brazilians would not go to Guanabara, as the Brazilian middle class in London claim they do not go to Brazilian places. Yet, when doing the research, I found that many middle-class Brazilians did in fact attend these places of leisure, but were constantly negotiating their reasons, and explanations, for being there, as with Manoel, and in my conversation with Bia, a 30 year-old Brazilian woman from Rio de Janeiroat Guanabara. The first thing Bia told me was that she never goes there: 'If you invite me to go to a Brazilian place, I punch you in the face. I only came [to Guanabara] because it's my friend's farewell party and she insisted that I come. But normally I run away from Brazilians'.

Following British migrants around spaces of everyday life (Caroline)

> 'It is really nice and protective over there (Embassy House), and you have all your friends, and you go to whatever it is, they play bunker and they do all these things, they're all there, but the other side is that you could feel a little claustrophobic …I wouldn't like that. I don't like everyone knowing what I'm doing all the time… but that works for girls who've never lived overseas before, and they need that help and protection, the safety blanket.' (Penelope)

In my research interactions with migrants, and like those Angelo describes, there is often a moment when they try to convince you that they are not like their co-nationals.

Penelope is drawing attention to her skills with the unfamiliar, which distinguish her from other migrants. This serves as a reminder to read the city *with* and *against* the grain of migrant experience*and* to allow the existential dimensions of mobile biographies some breathing space. In my research in Beijing, which followed a project on British migrants in Hong Kong (Knowles and Harper, 2009) after 1997 when this city reverted to China, I hoped to piece together fragments of UK migrants' version of Beijing as a moving mosaic of migrant life: to capture both migrants' lives and the city itself through the dynamic generated between them. Cities are not one, but many places, and they are crucial arenas in capturing the challenges we face in transnational research. Cities, or more precisely city neighbourhoods, are the places where migrant lives are made intelligible and the platforms from which they make connections with other places, articulated throughthe links offered by transport routes and so on. Urban landscapes are a shared lived-in world (Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p. 256) co-composed in built material and human fabrics (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Leese 2002; Darroch, 2010; Swanton, 2010; McFarlane, 2012; Harvey, 2006; Ingold, 2000; Latham and McCormack, 2004; Boutros and Straw, 2010) suggesting that space is open, multiple and participatory (Massey, 2005; Crouch, 2010): composed in the social encounters of countless journeys enacted through the lives of mobile subjects. Cities are nodes, condensing the people and object journeys that converge upon them. This provides a way of thinking about them in the context of migration research, which for me problematizes the city itself at the same time as the migrant lives it routes and expresses.

Crouch (2010, p. 6) suggests that "we live in journeys": they are as I see it a manifestation of mobile biography. Drawing on Ingold's (2000) notion of journeys as ordinary everyday wayfinding, as improvised exploratory movement, I have suggested elsewhere (Knowles, 2014), that in exposing routes and reasons as well as methods and conditions of travel (Knowles, 2003), journeys are concrete travel practices. They generate cartographical accounts of lives that are sensitive to the multi-scales on which they are lived. Journeys capture enactments of mobility locally and translocally, and, in being central to the production of migration itself they are useful devices for thinking about migrants' lives, from the clubbing routes of Brazilians in London to the meanderings of the British in Beijing. It is, however, important to note that mobility is not about linear trajectories or pathways from point A to point B. Instead they involveimprovisation and ad hoc navigation as shifting circumstances on the ground demand (Amit and Knowles, 2017).

Operationalizing these messy conceptual tools in Beijing proved even messier. While I had become familiar with Hong Kong asBritish migrants lived it, Beijing – a city with a population of over twenty one million, compared to Hong Kong's eight million and comparable to London where I live– overwhelmed me. On my first scoping trip in the summer of 2011 I struggled with the heat, the pollution, the language, a state of the art metro system that was too small for the city and left the unsuspecting visitor walking miles between metro stops, and the sheer difficulty of just finding a starting point from which to unravel what for me was a vast and indecipherable landscape. These were also the feelings of many of those I interviewed as I subsequently discovered, and so these

Reflections on researching transnational migrants and the fieldwork challenges of studying co-nationals abroad
Angelo Martins Jr (UL); Caroline Knowles (UL).

37

early struggles were instructive. I had found a serviced apartment only a 20 minute walk from the Guomao metro station in the Central Business District (CBD), which is where I suspected the corporate-types lived and worked.

I started roaming the city on foot and on overground metrolines, trying to get to grips with its overwhelming size as I pined down appointments to meet those British migrants who were open to it. Wherever possible I got myself invited to their homes so I could see where and how they lived; otherwise I would arrange to meet them in a place where they liked to spend their leisure time. Each contact yielded further contacts and soon I was rushing around the city – with great difficulty and no Chinese – in taxis and metro-trains meeting people during the day and most of the night, sometimes doing 3 or 5 interviews in a day. I arranged to follow people on their daily rounds. I got myself invited to the Stich and Bitch group that met in a café in Central Park. I went shopping with women and lingered with them over lunch. I met their friends and families. I watched their children's swimming and ballet lessons. I sat in their lounges and shared meals at their kitchen tables. I sat in bars and cafes with them. Interviews were focused on informants' journeys around the city: what did their Beijing look like? What were its constituent places? Where in the city did they go and how? What did they do, and with whom did they interact? Where else in China – and in the world more generally – have they been? What was the path that led them to Beijing? Why Beijing and not some other place? The cartographies of their Beijing and the world beyond slowly emerged. When I wasn't interviewing I spent time in the city-spaces they had introduced me to. I would walk around them and take notes: I would make drawings and take photographs. I would eves drop on conversations in bars and cafes trying to understand what British migrants talked to each other about.

I began to compile from interviews and other sources the residential and leisure geographies of over 60 British migrants in 7 visits to the city between 2011 and 2017: on each visit gaining confidence in navigating this city-in-the-making, (re)discoveringit with each visit. Beijing once had a 'foreign district' in Central East Beijing around the Embassies. Although it no longer requires it, migrant geographies, as I discovered, are none-the-less concentrated into 4 areas. Young British migrants (aged 22-30) live and play either around the Universities in West Beijing where they are learning Chinese and or teaching English, or in the area just North of Tiananmen Square around the hipster cafés and traditional courtyard buildings (hutongs) in the Lama Temple area where there is a lively party atmosphere. Older or more family centredmigrants live in the East-Central part of Beijing around the second ring road, in an area called Chaoyang. This incorporates the CBD and a development of high-rise apartments - Central Park – with Western styled cafes and bars; and Sanlitun, an upmarket area of bars, designer shops and restaurants also frequented by wealthy Chinese. The fourth British concentration is in Sunyi, a suburban area on the Eastern edge of the city. This appeals to teachers and families using the international schools for its suburban feel, its leafy spaces and gated housing estates offering a range of upscale accommodation from huge detached houses to apartments. As these compounds have their own leisure facilities, clubhouses and Western

styled shops, trips into the city are rarely necessary, and this appeals to those who chose side-step the challenges of the megacity.

Along with this rough map of British Beijing I developed a sense – through mobile interviews, walks and eves dropping – of migrants routine city journeys and methods of travel, on bicycles, in metro-trains, on scooters, on buses, in taxis and in private cars with drivers. These methods of travel, and the spaces they connect, revealed a complex patchwork of social factors that shape, and are shaped by, migrant topographies, such as social class, age, gender, available resources, local knowledge, Chinese language abilities and general anxieties about the city, but in no systematic way that could be read or predicted from these social locators. This accentuates the benefits of in-depth micro-research in specific locations.

Mobile biographies and their social contexts

> Well, before anything, it is fundamental to talk about our roots. I can't talk about London without telling you my story in Brazil, my story in London wouldn't exist without my story in Brazil (Tiago, May 2014).

> 'So that's another big reason why I am living here, and not in London, because I can afford quite a nice place to live and have a quality of life as a free-lance writer which would be unimaginable back in London'(Alex, April 2014)

We noted earlier the importance of allowing mobile biographies to reveal their broader context. For us this has two dimensions. The first is micro in scale and connects immigration with emigration *as a set of personal circumstances*, revealed in our interviews. The second requires attention to the social structures and circumstances contextualising biographies. Bourdieu (1987) insists that researchers take structural influences into account; and we both took care to probe the broader social circumstances in which migrants' lives are cast, exploring the tensions between structure and agency inspired by Bourdieu's conception of habitus. In what social or political circumstance is migration a solution? And what is it a solution to? On macro *and* micro scales, connections between immigration and emigration emerge in the stories we collected. Sayad (2004) notes that immigration and emigration are inextricably linked, and we think that spatially calibrated biographical interviews are a useful tool for excavating *both* the micro and macro connections between immigration and emigration.

Mobile biographies and their social contexts: Brazilians in London (Angelo)

Motivations to migrate are never simple or straightforward. It was difficult for me to find an interviewee in London who pointed to one reason to emigrate: these are, it seems, not singular, but multiple and contextual. Decisions to migrate were related circumstances (such as the end of a relationship), to life cycle/age (being single, young) and so on. Individuals' class and gender, for instance, position them differently, opening

Reflections on researching transnational migrants and the fieldwork challenges of studying co-nationals abroad
Angelo Martins Jr (UL); Caroline Knowles (UL).

39

up and/or closing down possibilities for navigating wider political, economic and social contexts in Brazil, as the journeys of Leonardo and Elza show.

Leonardo, a descendent of Italian migrants who was born in 1986, and grew up in a countryside town in São Paulo State, viewed migration as a temporary life experience, a cultural investment, an opportunity to improve his cultural and social capital, which would better position him in high-skilled labour markets. The middle son of three, his mother was employed in a public service job at a bank and his father was an entrepreneur. He lived among the upper middle classes, studying in good private schools, until he was 17 years old when his father's company – a petrol station – went bankrupt.

> After that we went to live in Brasilia. My father got a job there and my uncle was also supporting us. My parents registered me to study in a public school, but I stayed just 3 months there. The school was very bad: we never had classes. I went back to a private school, finished my high school and started doing business and management at UNB [Federal University of Brasilia]. Because the economic situation of my family had changed, I couldn't have the experience of studying in another city… After my graduation, I was already working in a telecommunications company in Rio [de Janeiro]. It was a good job and I loved Rio. But I decided to register myself in a traineeship abroad, so I could have this cultural experience that would also be good on my CV, and I could improve my English. I ended up getting offered a traineeship at the same company that my brother was working at, in Switzerland. After three years there, the company asked if I would like to move to London. Economically, I would earn less than what I was earning in Switzerland. But, coming to London would be another opportunity to have different experiences, working in another country, with another culture. It wasn't because of the money: it was an investment in myself.

Even though Leonardo's family experienced economic problems, his family network provided them with support to start a new life, which included providing him with a good education in private schools that resulted in him studying in a prestigious university. Despite not being able to experience living away from his parents, Leonardo's cultural and social capital later helped him to have this experience abroad. Whilst doing his BA, Leonardo already began working as a trainee in a good company, through a contact of his brother's employed at the same company:his brother's overseas move facilitated Leonardo's.

Born in the same year as Leonardo (1986), Elza comes from a different class background in Brazil. She also saw coming to London as an investment, but (initially) fits the classic image of the 'economic (female) migrant'. The youngest daughter of a working-class single mother, Elza is a black woman born in Goiania, the capital of the state of Goías. Elza learned to be mobile at a very young age, navigating many informal jobs to bring in extra money for her mother. She finished (public) high school whilst working in a factory that made sweets. There, when she was 18 years old, she started dating the man who would be her husband and the father of her first daughter. The factory belonged to her husband's aunt, who had set it up with the money that she

earned working as a migrant in the U.S. After two years of being married, working and earning the Brazilian minimum wage in the factory, Elza and her husband decided to go to Europe, work for a short time, save money and later open a small business in Brazil, as his aunt had done.

> My husband came first. His aunt was illegal in the U.S and things were getting harder there. So she went from the US to Italy to request her Italian citizenship. She got it, and took her nieces and nephews to Italy to also claim their citizenship. This is how my husband managed to come here, in 2006. He worked and saved money for one year to buy my ticket. I came to London in 2007 with my daughter, aiming to stay for two years, and here I still am [2014].

From these two biographical interviews I could see how migrants from different social locations in Brazil create dreams and expectations of success connected to classed and gendered possibilities. Their journeys illustrate how institutional, economic, political and social contexts, alongside subjective, emotional and personal reasons – shaped by classed and gendered experiences – intersect in shaping complex decisions to migrate. These decisions are inextricably linked to the different political economies in countries of origin and destination, which influence migrants' personal dreams and aspirations without completely explaining them. For Leonardo, for instance, in Europe he can pursue work experience which will further increase his prospects in high-skilled labour markets, allowing him to acquiring more cultural, social and symbolic capital to add to his C.V: he will improve his English, meet more people, and acquire more knowledge by working in a valued, multinational Western company. For Elza, migration was also a means to improve hers and her husband's situation in Brazil. But for her London was a place to make a quick economic investment, even though she came to London because her husband decided to.

Working with biographies took me beyond the standard representations of 'economic migrants' moving from the Global South for economic reasons. My interviews permitted me to see, for instance, how Brazilian migrants' journeys were differently shaped and are continuously produced and negotiated through social markers, such as class and gender.

Mobile Biographies and their social context: British in Beijing (Caroline)

Many of the British migrants in my study had charted their journeys to and around Beijing in response to the uncertainties unfolding in British life, clearly connecting immigration with emigrationas spatial biographical events, at the same time as explicitly denying that they are *migrant*s. 'Ex-pat' is the term they use to describe themselves, not migrant or immigrant, a term I suspect they reserve for others, particularly for those who enter Britain from other countries as immigrants, the Brazilians Angelo writes about for example, but they do not think about themselves in these terms. This common disavowal is repeated in an email from the British Club of Beijing in April 2014 in response to my asking if I could visit one of their monthly meetings in order to make contacts with 'British migrants living in Beijing'. The club's email reply refutes the term 'British' as a

◆ Reflections on researching transnational migrants and the fieldwork challenges of studying co-nationals abroad
◆ Angelo Martins Jr (UL); Caroline Knowles (UL).

41

description its membership: 'we are not only British, our members come from all over the world'. And, it continues, 'we are not migrants, but expats who have lived all over the world'. I am denied access to their meetings despite being myself British in Beijing. Researching co-nationals bestows uneven advantages when it comes to access!

Ben, for example, articulates the difficulties of London life underlying his move from London to Beijing. He is from a comfortable middle class family, which, even through divorce manage to provide him with free places to stay in order for him to take advantage of London's opportunities. Some of his friends' parents extend him the same privilege, and so he is able to move around a network of friends and family in some of the most expensive parts of London. He graduated from an elite UK university and is learning Chinese. I interview him at an outdoor bar on the university campus where he works, after his English classes are finished for the day. I am probing the story of where he has lived (spatial biography) – in different parts of London – and how he came to Beijing, and it is not long before the immigration/emigration connection surfaces in his narrative.

> 'My mother lives in Mortlake, and my father moved out to Surrey to Walton-on-Thames, so I think after graduating, I lived with my father for a little bit, and it wasn't very easy, and then just before I came to China, I moved back in with [my mother] for a little bit to save up a little bit of money, and that was somewhat easier... probably a lot of people my age feel as though it's not really the sort of life you want to be living if you're in your twenties living at home… I think when I was living with friends, maybe... for quite a while I was on minimum wage...So all my money was going on rent, and then for a while I had a few different jobs, really, always entry level, so at one point I was earning enough to live reasonable comfortably. At other times, I was just about getting by, so I suppose I never really... decided on a career. My efforts were intermittent; sometimes I would and sometimes I would just be drifting along. Sometimes I was trying to make something happen but neverreally got to the point where I started on a career path in a particularfield. And I think I realised that my life here would be better, and I think it's turned out that way. I think when I left London... I'd done … a bit of research on a project to do with Alzheimer's, I'd done a bit of work for social services, but this wasn't really leading anywhere in particular, and I left my job and decided that I was just going to go away, and to travel and to teach English. And I came here because … I thought China was the most interesting, culturally, so I decided to come to China to teach English. And then I heard that my friends were teaching in the university here, so I was in the process of applying for jobs here, and was lucky that I heard about this job and applied for this and got a job offer, probably on the strength of their recommendations. I think both my friends are quite popular with the boss; he values their work and thought that he would give me a chance as well' (Ben).

In Beijing, Ben, in his mid twenties, lives a viable adult life he couldn't live in London. His salary covers his rent. He has a relationship with a Chinese woman. He has many friends with whom he can afford to socialize in the bars, cafes and restaurants in Beijing. While this sounds like a classic economic migration story, it is also more than that. Ben

is drawn to a complex and challenging city by cultures and a language he struggles to understand, a situation that is compounded by having a Chinese girlfriend he also struggles to understand; and to an urban life that offers him an enjoyable young person's lifestyle among friends.

The macro-structural underpinning of his circumstances were evident from his story if I listened to in an open way and filled in the gaps around what is implied but not said. In post financial crisis Britain stagnant middleclass wages that have failed to keep up with inflation are eroding the living standards of the traditionally comfortable and entitled like Ben's parents,who might, in the past, have been able to boost his finances. His prospects probably look worse than theirs would have done at a comparable age, given the current intense competition for jobs and his own lack of direction. Opportunity structures in London support some forms of aspiration – in the financial sector and related services for example – better than others. Neither his comfortable middle class background nor his elite education guarantee his future in this situation; he must make his own way and he chose emigration as a way of addressing his personal situation, which is also the situation of other young people in similar circumstances. Most difficult of all for a generation of twenty-something's is the high cost of accommodation, especially in London, and the gap between entry-level incomes and housing costs, which consign those whose parents are unable to transfer resources between generations to remaining in the parental home or spending all of their income on rent. Twenty years ago to be middle class in Britain was to own property: this is no longer the case due to structural adjustments in middle class incomes and lifestyles.

A mobile biography offered from a different set of locations in terms of age, gender, leisure, social circumstances and employment opportunities, provides a radically different portrait of the British migrant in Beijing. Penelope's story is useful in disturbing any sense of a 'type' that might have cohered around Ben in my thinking, and it reconnects me with the diversities that biographical method offers. I am sitting in Penelope's kitchen, which is on the 38th floor of an elegantly appointed tower block in Central Park, next to the CBD. The apartment is spacious and ranges over 3 floors with stunning city views. Penelope's husband works for an oil company, and this is a high-end corporate rental. A workman is repairing the floor while we talk. She is in her late fifties and has spent her adult life making homes for her husband and children – now grown up – in a world on the move. Aberdeen, California, Caracas, Lagos, Houston, Stavanger, Bangladesh, and now Beijing: the family move every 2 to 4 years to a new posting determined by the company. Her biography reveals the macro-oil geographies of today's world and the ways in which major corporations put their personnel into global circulation. Moving to and constructing family life in new cities is her expertise: she quickly learns to navigate a new city; she improvises a new but familiar life with every move.

> To begin with, and I knew to go to the International Newcomers Network, they're really efficient, they have a whole table full of things, flyers and … [locations of] the hospitals …I walked with the map, because I found it a

◆ Reflections on researching transnational migrants and the fieldwork challenges of studying co-nationals abroad
◆ Angelo Martins Jr (UL); Caroline Knowles (UL).

43

really hard city to begin with. I could not get my bearings, and I would think normally I'm okay at that sort of thing, but I would be walking along and turning the map like this, and all the buildings seemed to look the same to me, and the big China World [landmark] is the same on all sides. You don't know which side you're on…. It is very disorientating. I take two hours to get anywhere… So, after that, I started signing myself up for a few things, and by then, we'd moved to… a serviced apartment, because of course, none of our things had come… I could cook and it got us out of the hotel…but the nice thing about Central Park, is because it's so big, there's 21 towers here. How many thousands of people is that, that live here, and we have all the little restaurants and shops, and gyms, everything is here, and there are kids outside, running about, which I really like, and just behind us is a cinema, and it's all right here, if that's what you want, but it is full on city living…I play golf, that's my other sanity….and I've had that for many years…You learn that if you want to go somewhere, you have to tell them [those who organise company drivers] ahead of time. It really bothers some ladies, because they'll get out the car somewhere, and then he [the driver] won't be able to find her. .. Because, she can't speak the language …so the best thing to do is to get out the car, and say, I'll meet you back here' (Penelope).

Penolope's navigation of Beijing is eased by a driver, and her local journeys – organised around golf, social events and homemaking – are radically different from Ben's. We see in her journeys, Beijing from a different set of cartographical vantage-points, as she constructs (her version of)the city and her own life simultaneously. Beijing is many cities and British migrants live many different lives; layers of urban life that are more readily brought to the surface in taking spatial biographical approaches.

Challenges

Our research posescommon and distinctive challenges. We have both had to be alert to whom we are as researchers, and to the ways in which we interact with urban space and with those migrants who helped us to understand their lives. This has, inevitably, shaped the knowledge we have produced (Scharff, 2009; Fonow and Cook, 2005) making it important to write ourselves into the story (Fonow and Cook, 2005). Studying our co-nationals abroad brought encounters marked by disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty, which required us to understand ourselves, and our partisan biases (Burke, 2011).This is especially important when interviewing co-nationals from different classes. The structural social positions from which we each operate – such as class, gender and 'race' –direct our interest and approach to the researchin uncertain ways that need to be acknowledged. Power, variously contextually defined, structures research relationships, which are rarely equalin social terms. Not convinced by those who claim for researchers a de facto position of authority over those whom they research, we think that power relationships in research are not easily interpreted, but demand case by case examination.

Challenges in researching Brazilians in London (Angelo)

Despite the apparently clear imbalance of economic-power-as-security between me as a PhD student being paid by the Brazilian government to research other Brazilians, some of whom were struggling with precarious work conditions and/or irregular documentation, the fact that we could construct links, whether because of my mobile 'working class' to 'middle-class' background or not, seemed to facilitate ethnographic interaction. In different moments I found myself negotiating different classed and regional markers. My accent, the words that I used, and the subjects I discussed varied according to those I was relating to.

When it came to access and encounters in the field, such as with undocumented Brazilians performing so-called "unskilled work", for long hours and in precarious conditions, my working class background did not fully eradicate moments of uneasiness, nor was the 'nativeness' I share with my co-nationals enough to dispel an imbalance inpower relations.Despite being a Brazilian in London, I am a male researcher, occupying a position of privilege, conducting research on less privileged participants. In many encounters I could tell that people were giving me certain responses designed to justify their positioning in London. For instance, when talking to middle-class Brazilians who had an economic and occupational downgrade in moving to London, they would make sure that I was aware that they were in that situation 'just for a period of time' or that they were in London 'for a life experience'. They would also emphasise that they studied in London and they had been to university to show that they were not 'just a migrant'. On the other hand, my position as a PhD student did not always reinforce these power dynamics. On occasions, Brazilians refused to give me interviews and/or talk to me, thus exercising their own power of silence. This was the case, for instance, when I was talking to a Brazilian man after he had finished his shift working as a kitchen porter. I explained to him that I was a sociologist conducting research for my PhD on Brazilians in London and asked if he minded talking to me. He replied:

> I'm sure you're a nice guy, don't get me wrong, but sociologists are complicated. Like, in Brazil, you guys are the ones who defend thieves; you victimize them and you talk about human rights and all that shit. Thieves don't think about human rights when they're robbing or killing people. We have to kill them, create a concentration camp like they did in Germany and kill them all. But you sociologists protect them; you always say that they commit crime because of their poverty. No, they commit crime because they want to. I was poor in Brazil but I always worked, it has nothing to do with poverty. So if I start talking to you, telling you about all these Brazilians here in London exploiting each other, you'll say it's because of poverty, when you don't know the reality, because you're here to study, not to live with us.

Sociologists, and by implication I, wasbeing discussed in clearly negative terms. Identified as a sociologist rather than another Brazilian, I was divorced from 'reality', since I did not live among Brazilians but studied them instead. This, he noted, would result

◆ Reflections on researching transnational migrants and the fieldwork challenges of studying co-nationals abroad
◆ Angelo Martins Jr (UL); Caroline Knowles (UL).

45

in me misconstruing why Brazilians 'exploit each other'. Such fraught encounters can readily transpire in ethnographic research contexts.

Other challenges appear to have technical dimensions. Turning the recorder on can cause both researcher and the participant discomfort. Clicking the recorder's button felt like activating a hierarchy between us as it announces that we are in a research encounter rather than being friends – a feeling I often relied on when seeking to connect with informants. As soon as I started recording, people would change the way they were speaking, apologising for using 'bad words' or feeling unable to talk. For example, Larissa, a 50 year-old transgender Brazilian woman whom I met and talked to three times in a Brazilian nightclub in London, was uncomfortable with the recorder. She explained:

> Sorry, I'm shy now. The recorder is blocking me, and I didn't expect this. It's funny how I change with the recorder being on. This means that the crazy me has a shy side, which is hidden, that people don't know about. Seriously, the recorder is annoying me. It conditions and moulds me because it seems that everyone can hear now what I'm saying. You should add this to your work. Can you talk about it? Because completely open people like me who are talkative can be completely blocked by this little device.

Although in this case it is important to be mindful that such uneasiness is subject to issues of gender and confidentiality, it might be better to not use the recorder on certain occasions, focusing on rapport and trust, rather than on extracting verbatim narratives.

Challenges in researching British migrants in Beijing (Caroline)

Many of my own challenges in Beijing are well described by Angelo. I always worry about what the recorder excludes as informants select their words with *it*, and their understanding of what I will do with the recording, in mind. On occasions when the participant has denied me the use of the recorder I have had to remember more and focus on fewer areas of the interview as I try to reconstruct the narrative afterwards. I have noticed that when I switch off the recorder, the intimacy of the interview and its disclosures increase, as though they are 'off the record'. This brings its own ethical dilemmas, leading me to self-censor bits of the interview, second-guessing the feelings of the informant about off-record disclosure. With female co-nationals of a similar age to myself I have to resist filling in, from my own migrant experiences of ten years, what I think they mean in their sometimes-ambiguous biographical narratives. Inserting myself into the narrative disrupts it and redirects it away from an active engagement with respondents' biographies. Of course I hear and analyse things in ways shaped by my own spatial biography as well as theirs, but I try to acknowledge this and work with it.

Other challenges are logistical challenges and are mostly concerned with the difficulties of finding my way around Beijing and managing research contacts from the distance of London, with short and infrequent trips to Beijing. People's lives move on, when in my mind I have them trapped in the place where they were when I last spoke with them.

My thoughts on research encounters with informants are not consciously shaped, at least in my mind, by conceptions of power differentials, although they do raise issues of authority – which is also a form of power – shaped by age, gender and class. In my interactions with young migrants in Beijing I was conscious of trading on my position as a university professor. I was aware that they had all recently left university and thus had conceptions about who I might be and what I do, shaped by their experiences of university life. What these were I have no way of knowing and they didn't tell me: they were generous with their time and surprised at being asked about their lives. I was aware of trying not to treat them like my own students and had to supress my inner teacher, ingrained in my being by decades of university life. Sometimes they seemed to want advice; maybe this is in short supply in their suddenly adult world. But resisted the temptation, firmly moving the expertise and authority over their own lives back towards them. There are knowledge imbalances between professor and students but they were the experts in their own lives, and so the power/authority relationships of our interviews are not clear-cut; or so it seems to me.

In interactions with older co-national informants I didn't feel that I held any sort of authority or power. Here too, people chose whether or not to speak with me and they decided what to tell me. Many of them were in higher social positions than I was; they (or their husbands) earned more than I do and they lead quite different lives of leisure and pleasure. I felt their privilege and was often a bit intimidated by them; especially those with legal connections who I suspected were in a position to object to my published comments about them with unusual force and authority. Penelope in particular evoked this feeling. She has lived all over the world in the best of circumstances, brokered by the corporations for which her husband worked, providing her with relocation services, drivers, people to fix the floor while we talked, and a personal trainer who arrived during the interview to measure her waist. She was immaculately dressed and coiffed: she moved around her spacious immaculate apartment among antiques collected from a lifetime of travelling. I felt un-groomed and badly dressed, red faced and sweaty from toiling on public transport in the heat, unsure of where I was going and anxious about being late: An autobiographical reflex? I grew up in a village in the rural SW of Britain – where my gran ran the post office – full of Penelope's, 'home' from a lifetime of empire or overseas postings with multi-national corporations. I would seem that still knew my place in the serving class. I am overly deferential, admiring her life and unchallenging in interviewing her.

◆ Reflections on researching transnational migrants and the fieldwork challenges of studying co-nationals abroad
◆ Angelo Martins Jr (UL); Caroline Knowles (UL).

47

Conclusions

Amixed-methods approach, utilizing a range of qualitative methods, allowed us to understand some small fragments of the lives that Brazilian migrants live in London, and the lives that British migrants live in Beijing, from a different angle than usual. We each began to understand not only how migrants speak about but also engage with and negotiate, mobile transnational experiences in their everyday lives. Using journeys as a mobile ethnographic biographical device and thinking tool, following people in their routine everyday movements, and logging their long-distance moves,allowed us to capture aspects of migration that might otherwise go unnoticed. Journeys are particularly good at revealing the topographies of migrant mobilities in concrete and specific terms. This makes it possible to think about where people go and why, as well as what they do when get there, whom they interact with and so on. Journeys are particularly adept at capturing the connections between macro and micro-scales, and crucially, in the study of migration, the connections between immigration and emigration.

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Reflections on researching transnational migrants and the fieldwork challenges of studying co-nationals abroad
Angelo Martins Jr (UL); Caroline Knowles (UL).

49

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Reflexões sobre a pesquisa de migrantes transnacionais e os desafios de trabalho de campo de estudar co-nacionais no exterior

Resumo

Este artigo oferece reflexões acerca do processo de pesquisa de migração transnacional e, em particular, dos desafios e dificuldades no trabalho de campo que podem surgir ao estudar co-nacionais no exterior. Com base em dois projetos de pesquisa distintos sobre migração transnacional (um sobre brasileiros em Londres e outro sobre britânicos em Pequim), os quais utilizaram ferramentas metodológicas similares e enfrentaram desafios semelhantes, argumentamos que a combinação de uma ferramenta metodológica etnográfica itinerante ('documentando jornadas') com entrevistas biográficas e análises históricas e contextuais, nos fornece material relevante para analisar a migração como um processo translocal. Ao mesmo tempo em que providencia uma conexão entre as escalas de análise macro e micro. Nossas ferramentas metodológicas nos permitiram entender como as pessoas falam sobre, se envolvem e negociam suas experiências cotidianas móveis dentro de macroestruturas políticas e sociais que organizam a imigração e a emigração. Concluímos refletindo sobre os desafios da pesquisa de co-nacionais no exterior, a nossa própria posição em relação ao nosso trabalho de campo e as diferentes relações de poder existentes em nosso respectivo processo de pesquisa.

Palavras-chave: transnacionalismo, brasileiros em Londres, britânicos em Pequim, etnografia, jornadas.

Reflexiones sobre la investigación de migrantes transnacionales y los desafíos del trabajo de campo al estudiar co-nacionales en el exterior

Resumen

Este artículo ofrece reflexiones sobre el proceso de investigación de migración transnacional y, en particular, los desafíos y dificultades que pueden surgir en el trabajo de campo al estudiar co-nacionales en el exterior. Tomando como base dos proyectos de investigación distintos sobre migración transnacional (uno sobre brasileños en Londres y otro sobre británicos en Pekín), que utilizaron herramientas metodológicas similares y enfrentaron desafíos semejantes, argumentamos que la combinación de una herramienta metodológica etnográfica itinerante ('documentando jornadas'), con entrevistas biográficas y análisis históricas y contextuales, nos proporciona material importante para analizar la migración como un proceso translocal, al mismo tiempo nos proporciona una conexión entre las escalas de análisis macro y micro. Nuestras herramientas metodológicas nos permitieron entender cómo las personas hablan sobre, se involucran y negocian sus experiencias cotidianas inestables dentro de macro estructuras políticas y sociales que organizan la inmigración y la migración. Concluimos reflexionando sobre los desafíos de la investigación de co-nacionales en el exterior, nuestra propia posición en relación a nuestro trabajo de campo y las diferentes relaciones de poder existentes en nuestro respectivo proceso de investigación.

Palabras clave: transnacionalismo, brasileños en London, británicos en Pekín, etnografía, jornadas.