

The convergent and divergent boundaries of becoming a migrant academic (0014)

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ABSTRACT

This paper will consider being an academic migrant and becoming a migrant academic. The narrative will be interwoven with other academic mobilities encountered in various texts. It will explore the implications of the notions of boundaries and borders beyond static and spatial configurations of movement. Its framing argues that boundaries and borders that make up mobilities are in fact the multifarious and mostly invisible entanglements of physical movement, representation and practice. In short, mobilities produce patterns and rhythms of movement that define the making of a mobile academic subject like me as both traveller and researcher (ethnographer). Henri Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis presents a useful analytical framework for this consideration. The borderwork that needs to be done to articulate the relationship between mobility and academic knowledge is not neutral. For instance, questions related to 'home' or 'where are you from?' reveal a spatial and directional understanding of movement.

Introduction

Mobility is circulated as a resource of lifelong learning, knowledge transfer and employability. More important, it is channelled and political. It is constituted by socio-technical relations that involve the production and distribution of power. Social relations form various group identities, defining and regulating borders and boundaries of belonging, isolation, alienation, inclusion or exclusion. It is as Cresswell (2010) argues, an entanglement of movement, representation and practice. As such, the notion of mobility is a criss-crossing of both divergent and convergent spaces of motive force, speed, rhythm, route, experience and friction. This paper will consider the implications of mobility, its rhythms and routes for being an academic migrant and to becoming a migrant academic. The narrative will be interwoven with other academic mobilities encountered in various texts. It will explore the implications of the notions of boundaries and borders beyond static and spatial configurations of movement. Its framing argues that boundaries and borders that make up mobilities are in fact the multifarious and mostly invisible entanglements of physical movement, representation and practice. In short, mobilities produce patterns and rhythms of movement that define the making of a mobile academic subject like me as both traveller and researcher (ethnographer). Henri Lefebvre's (2004) rhythmanalysis presents a useful analytical framework for exploring the complex patterns and rhythms of multiple mobilities. The borderwork that needs to be done to articulate the relationship between mobility and academic knowledge involves both the mind and body of the mobile subject and problematises 'home' and the question 'where are you from?'.

Mobility as Place

The 'sense of place' has been construed to have been lost in the dematerialised and disembodied space free from the constraints of bodies and spaces in digital contexts. A discussion of the migrant academic with or without mobile technologies allows a 're-turn' to

the question of place and belonging. To understand and engage with mobility as transformed by both physical and digital movements, this paper turns to Henri Lefebvre's triadic approach to place and place-experience. Both mobility and mobile technology-related studies have revived the interest and renewed concern for place. Place as located in mobile events has been argued as not just the 'where of something', but includes the practices that are integrated in its where-ness (Wilken, 2008). This becomes an important consideration in understanding the historical and geographical formations of border crossing for a foreign academic. Furthermore, place becomes an outcome of practices or that it is weaved through the routes of experience or practices. The key point that becomes important here in the politics of becoming a migrant academic or a mobile subject is the fact that mobility is embodied, mediated, situated and ultimately relational. It is not a mere container of things or fixed in a manner that positions stuff. It is an in-between - simultaneously open and yet bounded by practices and people to 'take place' or when some of those I encounter could not, in their words, place me. This is a shared sentiment of difference with Jones (2013):

"I hope you don't mind me asking where you come from?" (*Actually I do mind, very much so, but I will not let on and instead reply politely.*)

"I live in Rainford."

"No, I am sorry. I meant, where do you come from, originally? Only, I couldn't help detecting a slight accent in your excellent English. But I have difficulty placing you." (*Why do people always try to place me? I am getting so tired of being asked this question!*)

"Do you mean, where I was born?"

"Yeah, what's your country of origin?"

"I was born in Germany, West Germany, to be precise. Bavaria, actually." (p. 10, italics in the original)

'Where are you from originally?'

Does a nomadic subjectivity have an origin? Must it have one? This question has increasingly bothered me over the years. Not so much of what it asks explicitly, but implicitly or what usually follows it in conversations. *How did you get here?* First, the question of origin strongly suggests that I do not belong *naturally* where I am. Secondly, I got there from somewhere else and that I have moved. I fall in to the trap of categorisation in my encounters, not only with the 'locals', but also with fellow border crossers and aliens. I have become more aware of the problematic assumption behind such questions; that each 'alien' is an integrated and singular identity. In other words, there is just one identity to every person. Such singularity has eluded me though my passport and fingerprints would uphold this as primarily true about where I come from.

Body, Soul and Passport to Biometrics

Thus the body has an identity that coincides with its essence and cannot be altered by moral, artistic, or human will. This indelibility of corporeal identity only furthers the mark placed on the body, the body forms the identity, and the identity is unchangeable and indelible as one's place on the normal curve ... this fingerprinting of the body means that the marks of physical difference become synonymous with the identity of the person (Davis, 1995, pp. 31-32).

My 'non-'identity in the UK is further inscribed into how I am put in my place when I travel in and out of the UK and the rest of Europe. The development of new biometric technologies means the body itself is used as a 'mobile document' kept in some database unknown to me, aside from the usual passport I always have to carry with me as a form of identification before crossing borders. My body and its fingerprints, I have to accept, has been the source of surveillance data (Lyon, 2001).

Becoming a migrant-mobile academic

'the reality is that for the majority of academics, the emergent job demands are not the demands described or implied in the 'job descriptions' of the positions for which they were originally employed' (Taylor, 1999, p. 47)

Not only have I moved as an academic, but it has increasingly been obvious that what it means to be an 'academic', regardless if you are a border-crosser or not, is drastically shifting. Kim (2010) has suggested that there are at least three different kinds of 'mobile academics': academic intellectuals, academic experts and manager-academics. If at all I get to choose as a migrant what kind of academic I am where I am, I would insist on being an intellectual – not necessarily because of my intellect or knowledge capital, but because the position of such an academic must assume, Kim argues, that of a stranger and that of a minority. That is simply 'where I am'.

Movement as Method

A relational understanding of mobility, I am arguing here, has considerable potential for thinking about the politics of various forms of academic practices within the broader context of globalisation and becoming a migrant academic. The manoeuvres and encounters briefly described from sources I chose to 'move here' opens a discussion about the politics of mobility in relation to point of departure, border control and academic 'positioning'. All of which implicate identity as part of a much wider geographical and informational networks, as well as networks of social relations and understanding. At a methodological level, a relational conception of mobility has considerable resonance with Lefebvre's concept of *rhythmanalysis*, which is primarily concerned with attending to the varying rhythms of places. In this case, as suggested above, movement is being-in-places.

To consider the borderwork involved in becoming a migrant academic, this paper is informed by Creswell's (2010) geographical-theoretical approach to mobility, which emphasises the geographical and historical formations of movements, narratives about mobility, and mobile practice. An historical consideration is paramount in resisting the pressing and persistent boundedness a singular subjectivity insists upon a mobile subject, made most poignant with the question 'where are you from *originally*'? The main task of this paper is to identify different aspects of becoming mobile as an academic *both in transit and transition* through six (6) political frames of mobility (see Creswell, 2010, pp. 22 – 26 for details) for reflection and analysis in relation to the rhythms of identity as inscribed in places, bodies, academic positions and other people.

1. *Why does a person or thing move?*
2. *How fast does a person or thing move?*
3. *In what rhythm does a person or thing move?*

4. *What route does mobility take?*
5. *How does mobility feel?*
6. *When and how does mobility stop?*

Each of the above elements define and redefine the divergent and convergent boundaries of being a mobile subject – a migrant academic or ‘border crosser’ (Jones, 2013). Though Cresswell’s proposal has separated the rhythms of movement in question 3, I propose that a Lefebvre’s rhythmanalysis can be applied to all elements.

Boundary lines

Mobility has to be understood as a bounded but open and contested site, a complex product of competing discourses, ever-shifting social relations, and internal (as well as external) events. Elsewhere is where I am in motion. In other words, any given ‘place’, such as ‘my place’ or ‘where I come from originally’ is dependent upon the interconnectedness of the six elements described above and always-already dependent on its interconnection with other places, including what my biometrics reveal about my identity.

Before moving on, it has to be said that what the preceding analytical consideration and reflection of mobile subjectivity in terms of motive force, speed, rhythm, experience, and friction highlights the very impossibility of maintaining an uncomplicated distinction between who I am and where I am in an essentialist sense or in any strict or “pure” geographical sense outside the bounded and controlled routes of mediated experience. In fact, as Cresswell (2010) pointed out, each of the facets is regulated at different levels. Therefore, there is no need to place me as I am always positioned as a mobile subject necessarily excluded as a ‘non-identity’ (ie, non-UK/EU).

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