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# Migrant narratives of dis/emplacement: The alternative spatialization and ethnicization of the local urban floor

**Abstract:** From a critical sociolinguistic approach, this paper analyzes the stories of place and locality which emerge during a series of narrative interviews conducted with a small group of Ghanaian migrants who, unsheltered, lived on a bench in a public transport area on the outskirts of a Catalan urban town. By understanding narratives as situated interactional events with which both the researcher and the researched negotiate, shape and co-construct storyworlds, I focus on the social meanings of the stories of geographic (and socioeconomic) dis/emplacement whereby migrants strategically present their spatial orientations in town, which include largely unknown social networking sites. I complement their narrated in-group "safe mooring" spaces and their out-group zones of "mismeeting" with guided co-ethnographic visits to these selected locations. I claim that the imbrication of stories of dis/location with collaborative multi-site ethnography contributes to the study of the migrants' alternative spatialization and ethnicization of their host societies, and to the discovery of alternative localities which challenge some conceptions about migrants' (im)mobility practices and identity management in new urban geographies. These may broaden our understandings of how they make sense of their transnational survival experiences in contexts of extreme precariousness, from a dialogical, participant-oriented, reflective perspective.

**Keywords:** narrative inquiry, mobile ethnography, dis/emplacement stories, migration, identity, Catalonia

> Stories *are* spatial practices that [...] convey in words a sense of the body-subject occupying, inhabiting and traversing space, transforming it into places and specific presences. (Whatmore 2002: 7; original emphasis)

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# 1 Introduction: Narratives of space as venues into how migrants enact geographic (im)mobility

Today, there is not an agreed-upon definition of what counts as narratives (De Fina et al. 2008a). In the ongoing debates on how best to conceptualize them, linguistic anthropologists, sociolinguists and discourse analysts have distanced themselves from views that conceive of narratives solely as (fixed) texts, and have fostered an approach which understands them as situated interactions instead (see, e. g., De Fina et al. 2008b; Gubrium 2010; Wortham 2001). Thus, consensus has been built on a view of storytelling as a historicized, contextualizing practice which speaks of the ways in which we enact and negotiate our place in society (Bamberg et al. 2007; Georgakopoulou 2007; Schiffrin et al. 2010). Following this perspective, stories of personal life are understood as venues into how we put into words the ways in which we manage and make sense of who, where, when, and with whom we are, at a given time and space (Cohen 2012; De Fina 2003a; Linde 1993; Schiffrin 1996).

This social-action approach requires a "sensitive ethnographic study" (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 61) of the contexts upon which storyworlds are grounded, in order to understand why specific narratives get mobilized the ways they do in particular interactions. This also includes fieldwork-based observational data concerning the life trajectories of all narrators, here understood as active speaking and listening subjects who bring their own beliefs and interests into the research project (Creese 2012). Narrative practitioners are conceived of as co-constructors of storyworlds who shape the participants' relationships and condition what gets told or untold in communicative events such as narrative interviews (De Fina and Perrino 2011). For this reason, this view of narrative inquiry demands the problematization of the researcher's and the informants' roles via continued self-reflexivity on the planning, development and unfolding of the entire research project – in other words, on who tells what story and why (De Fina 2008).

With the globalization processes of the twentieth century, this socially engaged, interpretive approach which imbricates narrative and ethnography has gained momentum within the field of transnational migration studies (Spector-Mersel 2010). In fact, it has provided solid knowledge on how, when, where, with whom and why migrant populations apprehend their social (non)-incorporation (or "integration") experiences into their host societies, via storytelling (see, e. g., De Fina 2003b; Lanza 2012; Relaño-Pastor 2010).

Following de Certeau's (1988: 5) oft-quoted argument that "every story is a travel story – a spatial practice," particular emphasis has been put on migrants' narrative constructions of space, here understood as *practiced place*

(see compilations in Baynham and De Fina 2005). These studies, which include  1
narratives of both individual or family transnational (im)mobilities across the
globe (linked to issues of socioeconomic position, educational background, etc.)
attest to the fact that stories concerning spatial orientations, including disloca-
tion and relocation, are a lens on how, more generally, migrants unfold and  5
narrate transnational survival experiences (Baynham 2003).

## 2 Aims and scope of this paper

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Following the critical sociolinguistic ethnographic perspective on narratives
presented in Section 1 above, in this paper I focus on migrant narrative con-
structions of mundane locality by investigating the social meanings of a series of
stories of dis/emplacement mobilized by a small group of unemployed and
unsheltered migrants of Ghanaian origin in an urban town in Catalonia. This  15
is a Catalan-Spanish bilingual society located in Spain of about 7.5 million
inhabitants, including 15.7 % foreign residents (Idescat 2014).

  Firstly, I analyze how, with whom, when and with what aims informants
narrate their experiences of spatial demobilization and socioeconomic displace-
ment in town, paying particular attention to how these dis/orientation stories  20
get mutually shaped and re-defined among themselves and with the researcher.
I argue that the context-bound, co-constructed nature of the individual or
collective narratives which emanate as salient in narrative interviews affords a
better understanding of all participants' interests in telling place-centered stor-
ies, which is crucial to explain how this approach allows us to go beyond, and  25
problematize, the denotational meanings of narratives.

  Secondly, I embed what gets narrated as opposed in-group spaces of "safe
mooring" (Hannam et al. 2006: 2) or out-group zones of "mismeeting" (Larsen and
Hviid Jacobsen 2009: 83) in town with guided co-ethnographic visits to these
selected localities, led by the informants themselves in agreement with the  30
researcher. I claim that the complex imbrication of dis/location stories with colla-
borative multi-site mobile ethnography to these zones contributes to a nuanced
understanding of the migrants' alternative spatialization and ethnicization (or even
racialization) of the local urban floor. I argue that this allows for the observation,
too, of how certain identities (e. g. "Ghanaians" or "Moroccos") get inhabited,  35
resisted or counteracted, and of how certain social relationships that generally
tend to pass unnoticed in transnational migration studies get established within
and across migrant groups (for example, between Ghanaians and Senegalese),
in social networking sites of transnational survival, including public benches and
open-air markets.  40

Thirdly, I show that, by interplaying narrative and ethnography, unexpected localities emerge which contravene the urban center/periphery rationalizations of host-society town planners and governmental authorities. These alternative spaces challenge some trivialized or essentialized conceptions about the (im)mobility practices of diverse unsheltered migrant groups in urban metropolises. All in all, this approach to the migrants' unchartered geographies and redrawn migratory paths contributes to the provision of a comprehensive picture of how migrants enact their transnational survival experiences in contexts of extreme precariousness, from a dialogical, participant-oriented, reflective perspective.

# 3 Context, methods and data: Multi-site co-ethnography and "go-along" narrative interviews with unsheltered migrants

## 3.1 Context and participants: Ghanaians in Catalonia

The study took place in Igualada, the capital of a county called L'Anoia, with about 40,000 inhabitants, at a 67-km distance from Barcelona City. This town was born out of an important river flow which propelled the nineteenth-century emergence of the biggest textile industry in Catalonia, as well as the first tanning market of the Iberian Peninsula (Ajuntament d'Igualada 2013). Well into the twenty-first century, though, the region was struck by an economic crisis of global reach, as a consequence of which l'Anoia experienced the highest percentage of employment loss in Catalonia as a whole. In 2007, the tanning industry – as well as the construction sector – collapsed (Galí Izard and Vallès 2010), leaving the local labor workers and the migrants that had settled in Igualada to work in the leather sector jobless.

Migration movements to Igualada were scarce and occurred late. In 2000, 76.5 % of the town's population was born in Catalonia; 21.38 % in other parts of Spain, and only 2.1 %, abroad (Idescat 2012). After the regularization processes undertaken between 2000 and 2005 by the Spanish government as a way to "legalize" a mass of undocumented migrants, Igualada's demographic picture remained overwhelmingly Catalan, with a percentage of Catalan-born people of 69.72 % and a percentage of foreign residents of 14.66 %, in 2012 (the percentage of non-Spanish residents for Catalonia as a whole at that time was 15.67 %). The first largest migrant group consisted of people born in the African continent (6.49 % of the town's population), the Ghanaian networks (112 people, mostly single men aged between 35 and 44) being the second largest sub-group after the Moroccans (Ajuntament d'Igualada 2012).

The three informants who participated in this study all experienced these
socioeconomic and demographic transformations, as I show below. Alfred,
Benedito and Paul were, respectively, an English teacher, an accountant and a
cocoa farmer in their forties who left an urban town and two rural villages near
Sunyani (the capital of Brong Ahafo, the second largest province in Ghana) and
who moved to Southern Spain between 2000 and 2001, to work in the agricul-
ture sector. During that period, they travelled to Ghana regularly, and they also
visited their relatives in other parts of Europe (like Italy and the Netherlands).
Later on, they moved to Catalonia, pursuing socioeconomic improvement.
Benedito and Paul settled in Barcelona City, and Alfred moved to Lleida
(Northern Catalonia) to pick fruit. They all reported having had a difficult time
in these places, for which, between 2004 and 2007, they decided to move to a
smaller yet still medium-sized town, Igualada, where they could at least access
shelter. This was the place where they met each other for the first time. There,
Alfred started worked in a tannery, Benedito in the biggest foundry, and Paul in
the construction sector, for which they could obtain a temporary residence visa.

In 2008, their situation changed drastically. They became unemployed and
started working in the informal economy, selling scrap from garbage containers,
and begging in the parking lot of a supermarket located on the periphery of
Igualada. They then established regular contact with four temporary work
agencies, without success. None of them was receiving any severance pay at
the time of the fieldwork. Cáritas, the official confederation of charities of the
Spanish Catholic Church, provided them with washroom facilities, food and
clothes. Their transnational mobilities had become very limited (none had
visited Ghana since 2008), because with their type of visa they could no longer
travel to other parts of Europe. They could only pay for a room intermittently, in
flats which were rented in an intra-group manner, from Ghanaian hands to
Ghanaian hands. By the end of the fieldwork, with no more economic means,
they became totally unsheltered and decided to take refuge on the bench of an
open-air public transport area located on the outskirts of the town (in front of
the parking lot and supermarket mentioned above), where they lived under very
precarious conditions, to the extent that they developed serious stomach, lung
and heart problems (one was hospitalized in July 2013).

## 3.2  Methods and data: The collection of small stories

The data for this study were gathered by means of a mobile network ethnography
which allowed me to observe and analyze the life trajectories (and, in particular,
the spatial movements) of these three Ghanaian men, who kindly agreed to

participate in this study in 2012. This type of ethnography consisted of conducting 1
active participant observation of their bench for over six months (I went into the
field three times a week during different times of the day from July 2012 to January
2013, and then, intermittently, until November 2014). I had been observing them
for about a year on my way to the bus station, and we had also had short 5
conversations at the entrance of the supermarket located across the street. I
introduced myself as a Catalan English "teacher" wanting to investigate the life
trajectories of the migrant populations in town. I did so in Catalan (which indexed
a self-ascribed Catalan identity) and then, repeatedly, in English and in Spanish,
too. Fruitful cooperation was only achieved after I laid myself open to some 10
personal scrutiny (concerning where I was living, with whom, and why; where I
was working, for how much, etc.) and after we agreed that I would stay away from
their grey-market activities. They were totally unimpressed by the certificates that I
showed them, and verbal informed consent to participate in the study was not
given to me until they were convinced that I did not work for the town hall or for 15
any local NGO (they distrusted them both).[1]

Once fieldwork started, I also conducted some (initially unplanned) multi-
site ethnographic "walk-alongs" (Carpiano 2009: 263) around the town with the
informants, though we always finished the day on the bench, as they required.
These walks consisted of "co-ethnographic visits" (Convey and O'Brien 2012: 20
339) or spatialized journeys to the particular places that these informants insis-
tently mobilized in narrative interviews at different stages of the fieldwork.
These turned out to be the in/out-group socialization spaces which were most
meaningful and most relevant for them, all at a 20- or 30-minute walking
distance from the bench (see Section 4.3). 25

Negotiations concerning where to draw the researcher/researched lines were
complex to manage, but they were extremely fruitful, for three reasons. Firstly,
they were a way for me to, somehow experimentally, embed the informants'
narratives of dis/emplacement in their "here-and-now," and to conduct a
researcher-generated collaborative study which gave participants some 30
"agency" (i.e. some voice and degree of empowerment; as defined in Giddens
1984) in the shaping of the research project. Secondly, these negotiations
allowed me to discover localities that I would have never visited if I had only
focused on the places where I had intuitively allocated the informants before
following them. Finally, they propelled the emergence of more narratives and 35

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**1** The confidentiality of the data as well as the anonymization and protection of the informants'
identities were ensured by the Ethics Committee at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (file
1818). 40

more negotiations on the meanings of the place-centered storyworlds that had  1
already been discussed.

The data collected through this multi-site ethnographic practice included
the series of stories of dis/emplacement that I have mentioned before, which I
gathered via narrative interviews, here understood as situated interactional  5
encounters in which I tried to focus on space from the perspective of the
informants. In this sense, I asked about locality, but we also discussed about
work experiences and prospects, educational backgrounds, geographic move-
ments and transnational family organizations at length. I tried to get the infor-
mants to initiate the stories, by asking them about their local mobilities without  10
mentioning any place in particular, at times unsuccessfully. These narrative
interviews were co-constructed and dialogical in the sense that once a particular
locality was presented, I asked about the details, on different occasions, telling
informants, challengingly, about what I perceived as inconsistencies, mis-
matches or clashes in their stories. I understood these collaborative meta-  15
reflections on what got told during the interviews as valuable data concerning
the uses and aims of narrating dis/orientation both on the part of the researched
and the researcher.

Alfred, Benedito and Paul talked to each other in Akan; more specifically, in
the Ashanti variant, which is the most widely used code – normally as a lingua  20
franca – in Ghana (Bodomo 1996). They spoke other Ghanaian languages and
other Akan variants such as Akyem, as well as English, the official language in
Ghana. Besides, they all spoke Spanish and had some command of Arabic and
Catalan. I asked them to conduct the narrative interviews in their preferred
languages, which in the end consisted of English in most cases, and of  25
Spanish, too, with extensive code switching, as we will see in the analysis
section (Section 4). This was so because I had no command of any of their
African languages and because they claimed to be "not competent enough" to
answer in Catalan.

These interviews came out as highly informal, particularly when they  30
involved several participants and were collected "on the move" by means of
"go-alongs" (Kusenbach 2003: 455) – that is, when they were audio-recorded
during our co-ethnographic visits. The particular stories of dis/emplacement that
emerged from them were mostly "small stories" (Georgakopoulou 2007); that is,
truncated stories which were not fully developed and which were presented in a  35
disorganized, unclear manner. In academia, small stories have frequently been
disregarded as "instances of incoherent tellings" (Georgakopoulou 2006: 124),
due to their non-completeness, vagueness and unorthodoxy in terms of form
and content – at times dismissing their narrators as non-competent storytellers.
However, more recently, these complex stories, which I understand to be part of  40

the informants' personal life stories, have proved to be a rich lens into the types [1] of counterhegemonic narrative practices that need to be further studied within narrative inquiry (see Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008; De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012).

The small stories that I could collect over the six months of fieldwork dealt [5] with the following intertwined narrative themes (quotation marks enclose the wording employed by informants to mobilize such themes): (i) geographic immobility (e. g. "we always here"); (ii) socioeconomic stagnation (e. g. "no work"); (iii) non-legality status (e. g. "no papers"); (iv) social relationships among themselves (e. g. "we the blacks") and with other migrants (e. g. "the [10] Romanians"); and (v) delegitimized multilingual resources (e. g. "I speak no English").

The data also comprised a series of naturally occurring spontaneous inter-actions (salutations and chitchats) between the informants and other migrant men from Senegal, Morocco and Kashmir, which took place in Spanish, English, [15] Arabic and/or Ashanti (all recordings lasted for about 145 minutes). For the purposes of this paper, a total of eight excerpts (including narratives and spontaneous interactions) have been selected which focus mainly on mundane locality; that is, on narrative theme (i), though, since they were part of the informants' personal life stories, they have close links with the other narrative [20] themes (which I present in detail in Sabaté Dalmau 2015).

# 4 Analysis: Narrative constructions of mundane locality
[25]

## 4.1 Stories of emplacement: Safe mooring spaces

[30]

From the beginning of fieldwork, the informants anchored their lives on the old public bench located on the periphery of Igualada that has been introduced in Section 3.1, which they presented in their narrative as their shared space of local "meetingness" (Urry 2007: 254). The three of them systematically constructed this piece of urban furniture as a defensive space of safe mooring where to gain [35] access to resources which are crucial for transnational survival (like food or information about legality issues) under the protective umbrella of the group, off the radar of governmental authorities. In Excerpt (1), Benedito presents these collective strategic immobility practices via the habitation of the bench (tran-scription conventions are provided in the appendix). [40]

(1)     Narrative constructions of safe moorings: the bench                          1
        @Location:     20 July 2012. Bench.
        @Bck:          The researcher (RES) asks Benedito (BEN) about his favorite
                       place in town, which leads him to anchor his socio-spatial
                       immobility on the bench, constructed as a "Ghanaian"   5
                       shelter.
        1     *RES:    what's your favorite place in Igualada?
        2 →   *BEN:    ok-, for me-, because I'm not working <I don't have> [//]
        3 →            I don't want any problems.
        4     *RES:    ok.                                                          10
        5 →   *BEN:    <I don't have> [//] <I don't want> any problem from
        6 →            any other person so I always come and sit down here.
              %com:    Puts hands on the bench.
        7     *RES:    aha.
        8 →   *BEN:    when I stay hungry I go to the house have my meals late:r I  15
        9 →            come back here around ten o'clock in the night I'll go back
        10 →           sometimes Adom used to come here with me I have my
                       papers
        11 →           every documents so I don't have problems with the police.
        12    *RES:    good.                                                        20
        13 →  *BEN:    I don't fight with any other person I always here.
        14    *RES:    aha.
        15    *BEN:    if I feel to go and sleep I go back to the house and that's it.
        16    *RES:    that's it.
        17    *BEN:    that is all.                                                 25

In the narrative interview presented in Excerpt (1), I wanted informants to
mention the focal spaces in town that were relevant for them *before* I started
mentioning localities, and this is why I inquired about a "favorite place" first. As
a reply to my question, I did not get a name of a space (which I understand as  30
the informant's reaction to a question made by a privileged researcher).
However, the query worked to see how Benedito grounds his orientations in
Igualada on this particular piece of urban furniture by means of the use and
repetition of deictic proximal verbs of movement (e. g. "come" in line 6, and "go
back" in line 9) and canonical proximal locative adverbs like "here" (in lines 6,  35
9, 10 and 13) – and through body language, too.

   I argue that this is a sort of enacted or achieved socio-spatial immobility
tactic, rather than an enforced demobilization. It originates and gets topicalized
in relation to three of the informants' focuses of concern: unemployment

                                                                                   40

(Benedito mentions that he is "not working" in line 2) and vague disorienting or 1
troubling experiences concerning local registration agents and encounters with
unnamed people; basically "problems" and "fights" with the police or with
fearful "Others" (Barth 1969), as seen in lines 3, 5, 6, 11 and 13. I argue that by
mobilizing these focuses, Benedito also uses the narrative interviewing activity 5
to present himself as a "properly integrated," law-abiding migrant.

　　Benedito's story of emplacement on the bench also alludes to the sense of
bodily security that the co-presence of other participants living under similar
conditions of vulnerability produces when occupying a private-in-public area
together, as seen in his comment "Adom used to come here with me" (line 10). 10
The appropriation of the bench is presented as a collective in-group strategy
among Ghanaian compatriots. Further evidence of this is the fact that they
frequently left the plastic bags with their belongings there (i. e. under the
bench) in their quick visits to the supermarket on the other side of the street
(see, also, Excerpt [5]).[2] 15

　　I claim that the habitation of this space by these Ghanaians was acknowl-
edged by other African migrant networks living under similar conditions, for
whom the bench was a real "gateway" to the three informants' scare resources
(which included wine, tuna and cigarettes). Ethnographic observations revealed
that this safe mooring zone was delimited as an Ashanti-speaking Ghanaian 20
migrant space, as I show with the analysis of a particular speech act, a greeting,
issued by a Senegalese man to Benedito, in Excerpt (2).

(2)　Demarcating safe mooring through language
　　@Location:　29 August 2012. Bench. 25
　　@Bck:　　　A Senegalese man (SEN) approaches the bench and greets
　　　　　　　　Benedito (BEN) in Ashanti, which prompts the researcher's
　　　　　　　　(RES) questions about the language practices between these
　　　　　　　　two African groups. Alfred (ALF) supports Benedito's
　　　　　　　　arguments. 30
　1 →　*SEN:　**bone nnim**.
　　　%tra:　No problem.
　　　%add:　To Benedito.
　2 →　*BEN:　**bone nnim bone nnim**.
　　　%tra:　No problem no problem. 35
　　　%add:　To the Senegalese man.
　3 →　*RES:　hola.

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**2** Sabaté-Dalmau (under review) provides more examples on the co-construction of in-group
spaces of safe mooring. 40

|  |  |  |  |
|---|---|---|---|
|  | %add: | To the Senegalese man. | 1 |
|  |  | […] |  |
| 4 → | *RES: | \<what was that language\> [?] \<**bone nnim**\> [?] \<you said |  |
| 5 → |  | **bone nnim**\> [?] \<what does it mean\> [?]. |  |
| 6 → | *BEN: | no-. it's a: language # **bone nnim** there is no problem **bone** | 5 |
| 7 → |  | **nnim.** |  |
| 8 | *RES: | what does it mean? |  |
| 9 → | *BEN: | there is no problem no problem. |  |
| 10 → | *ALF: | no problem. |  |
| 11 | *RES: | *vale si tu dices* +"/. | 10 |
|  | %tra: | Ok if you say +"/. |  |
| 12 | *RES | +" *ningún problema.* |  |
|  | %tra: | +" no problem. |  |
| 13 | *RES: | it's a way of saying good bye? |  |
| 14 → | *BEN: | *sí donde* Ashanti Ashanti. | 15 |
|  | %tra: | Yes where Ashanti Ashanti. |  |
| 15 → | *RES: | *ah pero pero éste es de Senegal.* |  |
|  | %tra: | ah but but that one he is from Senegal. |  |
| 16 → | *BEN: | *sí ya*: he just greet eh from Ghana because eh he gets |  |
| 17 → |  | friends who are Ghanaians. | 20 |
|  | %tra: | Yes yeah he just greet eh from Ghana because eh he gets |  |
|  |  | friends who are Ghanaians. |  |

In Excerpt (2), a Senegalese man whom I did not know approaches the bench and greets Benedito in Ashanti, with the salutation "*bone nnim*" ('no problem'), in line 1. Benedito replies by repeating the same expression (line 2) – I then greet him in Catalan (line 3). When they finish their private conversation (in which I did not interfere), I ask Benedito about the meanings of this expression (lines 4 and 5). He provides a translation in lines 6 and 7, and, on seeing that I did not understand it first, he repeats it, in English, in line 9. Alfred (ALF) provides the same translation in line 10, helping Benedito build a coherent definition of that welcoming Ghanaian expression. After some clarifications, Benedito explains that this greeting is in Ashanti (line 14). Surprised, I tell him that I thought that that person was Senegalese, not Ghanaian (line 15). He confirms this but adds that local Senegalese "greet from Ghana" because they have acquaintances who are Ghanaians (lines 16 and 17). After some time of fieldwork, I realized that the Senegalese men who wanted to establish or maintain contacts with the informants greeted them in Ashanti when approaching the bench, as a way to acknowledge that that was "their" place (and as a way to show deference to their publicly projected ethnolinguistic Ghanaian identity).

Another example of the informants' linguistic dominance over the bench [1] was provided to me by Eva, a local woman in her twenties who had befriended one of Benedito's acquaintances, Jude, from Techiman, also in Brong Ahafo, who lived in another town. I realized that Eva once finished a very brief conversation in Spanish with Benedito with the Ashanti farewell "*ye be hyea*" [5] ('we will meet again'), standing, before taking the bus.[3] This shows that the small migrant group under study successfully appropriated that piece of urban furniture as a reference point for some other migrant networks (as well as for some of their (non)-local acquaintances), which provides further evidence that they had attained a certain degree of recognition (and even empowerment) upon [10] other African migrant groups. For this reason, I claim that socio-spatial fixity among migrants does not necessarily index disorientation, for immobility may be a carefully chosen relocating strategy for transnational survival.

[15]

## 4.2 Stories of displacement: Mismeeting spaces

Stories that are centrally constructed around experiences of socio-spatial displacement may speak of potentially conflictual spaces and, directly or indirectly, of largely silenced rivalries among migrant networks (Baynham 2003). In this section [20] I show that in the case of the Ghanaian migrants under study, the protective urban mooring on the bench analyzed above emerged, in narrative interviews, in opposition to a series of unwelcoming zones of mismeeting apparently inhabited by other migrants in town. These were distant spaces which spoke of the informants' problematic social relationships in their host societies, not only with other [25] Ghanaians but also with diverse groups of migrant Others whom informants categorized as "Romanians" and "Moroquis" or "Moroccos" ('Moroccans'). In Excerpt (3), I show how Alfred and Benedito start constructing one of these inharmonious, darkened spaces in the first part of our interview (note that the prompt I used in this case was "Where are they?" in line 8). [30]

(3)    Mismeetingness: Ghanaian others
       @Location:    20 July 2012. Bench.
       @Bck:        The researcher (RES) asks Alfred (ALF) and Benedito (BEN)
                    about the whereabouts of other Ghanaians, which leads the [35]
                    informants to distance themselves from other migrant groups
                    born in the same place as them.

---

**3** She declined my invitation to participate in the study, and I actually saw her only one more time. [40]

```
 1 →   *RES:  how many people from Ghana like you are in the same        1
 2 →          situation # here in Igualada?
 3 →   *ALF:  many people!
 4 →   *BEN:  +^ ma::ny people!
 5 →   *ALF:  many people many people.                                    5
 6      *RES:  sí?
        %tra:  Really?
 7 →   *ALF:  many people.
 8 →   *RES:  <where are they> [?] I only know you Emanuel and you and
 9 →          then Jo um Joseph +...                                     10
10 →   *BEN:  +^ listen you can't see them you can't see them you can't
11 →          see them because <they have> [//] they don't have money
12            they always in the house.
13     *RES:  aha.
14 →   *ALF:  they're always in the house with the Ghanaians with the    15
15 →          Ghanaians in Igualada there are more than hundred.
16     *RES:  more than a hundred?
17 →   *ALF:  more than a hundred!
18 →   *BEN:  +^ yes!
19     *RES:  how do you know?                                           20
        [...]
20 →   *ALF:  more than a hundred!
21 →   *BEN:  +^ more than a hundred!
22 →   *ALF:  but only <about> [/] about ten people are working-, more
23 →          than hundred but only about ten people are working.        25
```

In Except (3), my question on the number of Ghanaians in town (lines 1 and 2) allows Alfred and Benedito to position themselves as informed migrants with legitimate factual knowledge of other Ghanaian local networks and of their socio- 30 spatial movements in Igualada. This is seen in the part of the extract where they repeatedly mention that "there are more than a hundred" (lines 15–17, 20–23); that "they stay home" (lines 12 and 14); and that they are economically disadvantaged and unemployed (lines 11, 22 and 23), which links, again, the narration of space with one of their focuses of concern: socioeconomic stagnation ("they don't have 35 money" in line 11). This co-constructed expert knowledge is made cohesive and coherent through the use of several emphatic repetitions (e. g. "many people" in lines 3–5 and 7), overlaps to support each other's arguments (lines 4, 18 and 21) and self-reformulations (e. g. "many people" in lines 3–7 and "more than a hundred" in lines 15, 17, 20–23). 40

The two informants, ambiguously, seem to distance themselves from these
other Ghanaian networks, because they do not address them as belonging to
"their" social network. This detachment or Othering arguably seems to be
achieved by means of a term of reference that may show non-affiliation: the
distal third-person plural pronoun "they", linked to "the Ghanaians" (in line 14),
which, still, allows them to speak for the whole group from a self-declared
"insider" position (note that the use of the second-person pronoun "you" in
line 10 allows Benedito to claim that he can actually "see" them).

Later on in the interview, Benedito and Alfred locate this other group who
do not come to the bench on Igualada's map. This is shown in Excerpt (4), where
they make reference to the parking lot of the market situated in the town center,
which is called "*La Masuca*," and to the bank "*La Caixa*," located in the same
place (see lines 26–29, 31, and 37).

(4)   Mismeetingness: "foreigners" in the market
      @Location:   20 July 2012. Bench.
      @Bck:        While presenting mismeeting spaces in town, Benedito
                   (BEN) and Alfred (ALF) categorize the Other Ghanaians, as
                   well as other migrants from different origins, as "foreigners."
      24    *RES:  but how do you know it's um a hundred?
      25    *BEN:  ah!
            [...]
      26 →  *ALF:  in front of in front of La Caixa.
      27 →  *BEN:  +^ the macat Masuca Masuca.
      28 →  *ALF:  Masuca market.
      29 →  *BEN:  <the> [//] la Masuca Masuca.
      30    *RES:  ah la Masuca!
      31 →  *ALF:  la Masuca in front of La Caixa bank # you will see many
      32           Ghanaians.
      33    *RES:  there?
      34    *ALF:  there.
            [...]
      35    *RES:  in front of the Masuca I will go.
      36 →  *BEN:  yes <the parking> [/] the parking <for> [>].
      37 →  *ALF:  <that parking in front of the La Caixa bank> [<].
      38    *RES:  vale vale hi ha un pàrking.
            %tra:  Ok ok there is a parking lot.
      39 →  *ALF:  yeah you see plenty of Nigerians.
      40    *RES:  Christians eh Muslims and +...
      41    *BEN:  yes.

42 → *ALF: Moroc moroquís.

43 *RES: *marroquíes también*?

%tra: Moroccans too?

44 *ALF: *también está aquí.*

%tra: They are also there.

45 → *BEN: there you see a lot of foreigners.

46 → *ALF: a lot of foreigners in that area.

In Excerpt (4), Alfred and Benedito mention the "Nigerians" (line 39) and the "*Moroquís*" ('Moroccans'), in line 42. By the end of the excerpt, there is a semantic extension, a broadening of the social category "the Ghanaians," mobilized earlier, with the introduction of a (non-defined) macro social category on the part of both participants: the metonym "foreigners" (lines 45 and 46). When I asked Benedito and Paul whether they had established some contacts with these "foreigners," the two informants started to present these other migrant-regulated spaces (the parking lot and the market) as dangerous spaces of mismeeting which should be avoided. This time they do so much more explicitly, and by opposing them to their place of meetingness, the bench, in Excerpt (5).

(5)  Mismeetingness: conflictive togetherness

@Location:  20 July 2012. Bench.

@Bck:  When asked by the researcher (RES), Alfred (ALF) suggests that the spaces occupied by migrant Others are based on conflictive togetherness.

47 *RES: they help you if you go there?

%com: "They" refers to "a lot of foreigners."

48 → *ALF: <no:> [!] they don't help them they just go and sit down

49 → there just discuss matters <as we are sitting there> [//]

50 → <as we are sitting here now>.

51 *RES: ok but you don't <you go there frequently> [?].

52 → *ALF: no: I eh we always + ...

%com: Puts hands on the bench.

53 *RES: sit here.

54 → *ALF: sit here.

In Excerpt (5), Alfred states that the relationships established among these "foreigners" are not always based on solidarity or cooperation (he claims that "they don't help them", and he uses a very emphatic "no!" in line 48). I argue

that he presents these spaces of mismeeting as based on social relationships of   1
"conflictive togetherness" (Castells 2004: 30). That is, he understands these
migrant areas as sustained by intra- and inter-group relationships based on
simultaneous trust and distrust, on love and enmity, and on mutual help and
rivalry. According to his narrative, in spaces like the market each individual gets   5
coordinated within the protective umbrella of a group of intimate strangers who
collectively access transnational survival resources, but through interested hos-
pitality, indifference or non-engagement.

By the end, Alfred overtly states that he does not (want to) visit these other
public spaces (he transmits this distancing feeling in line 52, with a "no" in   10
Excerpt [5]). As outlined above, the narrative construction of displacement in
localities of mismeeting emerges in direct opposition to the stories of emplace-
ment in safe mooring spaces like the bench. This is seen, when, with a deictic
pronominal shift from "I" to "we," Alfred repeats the same storyline first
mobilized by Benedito on another occasion (in Excerpt [1]): that they both   15
always sit "here" on the bench (i. e. not "there" with the Others), in lines 52
and 54.

I argue that this narrative interview (presented in different excerpts)
empowered Alfred and Benedito to act as the speaking actors or the storying
Selves in this part of the fieldwork project, for they indirectly presented   20
themselves as more cooperative and helpful than other migrants, when tell-
ing their stories. Being given some voice, the two of them built increasingly
stronger arguments, and finally, in Excerpt (6) (taken from Sabaté Dalmau
2015: 97–98) they present that parking lot as a dangerous space by explicitly
using exclusionary social identities and defamatory racial profiles to talk   25
about its inhabitants.

(6)  The racialization of mismeeting spaces
    @Location:      20 July 2012. Bench.
    @Bck:         When asked about their networks of friends by the   30
                   researcher (RES), Alfred (ALF) and Benedito (BEN)
                   mobilize a plethora of social identities through which
                   they categorize "Romanians" and "Latinos" in a very
                   pejorative way and, simultaneously, show alliance
                   with other "Nigerian" and "Ghanaian" groups.   35
    1 →     *RES:    ok and do you have friends from Romania or Latinos?
    2 →     *PAU:    no:!
    3 →     *BEN:    + ^ no no no no no.
    4        *RES:    no?
    5 →     *PAU:    no <no no> [>].   40

| 6 → | *BEN: | <no no> [<]. | 1 |
| 7 | *RES: | *por qué*? | |
| | %tra: | Why? | |
| 8 | *PAU: | these Romanians and these all these countries Santa Domingo | 5 |
| 9 → | | and these they used to + ... | |
| 10 → | *BEN: | + ^ they are racist they are racist. | |
| 11 → | *PAU: | they used to sell drugs and all other things but I don't | |
| 12 | | want to + ... | |
| 13 | *RES: | they sell drugs and they are racists? | 10 |
| 14 → | *BEN: | yes they are racist. | |
| 15 → | *PAU: | and they used to sell drugs and eh xxx but I'm not | |
| 16 → | | interested in that kind of job. | |
| 17 → | *BEN: | and they are thieves too most of them they are thieves they | 15 |
| 18 → | | used to steal. | |
| 19 | *RES: | they are? | |
| | % com: | The researcher couldn't hear the word "thieves." | |
| 20 → | *BEN: | they are thieves. | |
| 21 | *RES: | oh thieves. | 20 |
| 22 → | *PAU: | *sí:* # for me I don't have any other friend apart from Ghana | |
| 23 → | | and Nigeria Ghana I have friends of Nigerian Ghana but | |
| 24 → | | Romanian or other people I don't have any relationship with | 25 |
| 25 → | | them. | |

In Excerpt (6), when I ask Benedito and Alfred whether they have friends of Romanian origin or "Latinos" (line 1) – note that I employed the particular macro identity labels that informants had mobilized before, in a previous interview – they very emotionally state that they do not want to have anything to do with them (lines 2, 3, 5, 6). Right after this, a plethora of homogenizing pejorative identities emerges in the narrative, in a very emphatic way (again, through repetitions, reformulations and many overlaps), which includes the presentation of "racist Romanian thieves" (lines 10, 14, 17, 18, 20) and "Latino drug dealers" (lines 11, 15). They mobilize these exclusionary identities in such an overtly generalizing way that, ironically, they end up enacting a form of racism, too (see, also, Wortham et al. 2011).

This, once again, allows Alfred and Benedito, still empowered to take the  1
floor, to project their morally righteous Self by indirectly presenting themselves
as non-racists, non-robbers and non-drug-dealers. This moral superiority is then
also extended to some individuals from Ghana and Nigeria, with whom they
now voice explicit alliance, affinity and genuine friendship (lines 22, 23). All in  5
all, this provides evidence that place-centered narratives are a lens on the
migrants' ethnicization and racialization of the local urban floor, as well as on
the under-researched social relationships (and, thereby, identity management
and identity ascription practices), established within and across migrant groups.

 10

## 4.3 The migrants' spatialization of the urban floor

The oppositional safe mooring zones and mismeeting spaces analyzed in the
previous sections illustrate the complexities that lie behind the migrants' socio-  15
spatial trajectories and transnational life localities in their host societies. In this
section, I argue that the imbrications of narrative inquiry and ethnography allow
us to broaden this picture and to go beyond the informants' "fixed" dis/reloca-
tion spaces in order to get closer to the general alternative zoning practices and
the urban spatializations which are constitutive of their everyday life in globa-  20
lized urban geographies – in this case in a medium-sized urban town. That is, I
claim that by tracking down the particular venues that informants make relevant
in their narrative interviews, along with walk-alongs and deep hanging out in
these focal areas, we may discover not only the localities which constitute their
networking sites, but also a more realistic (though obviously totally unfinished  25
and partial) alternative map of the town, from a participant-oriented perspec-
tive, as exemplified in Figure 1.

What is traditionally considered Igualada's town center (circled in black in
Figure 1) encapsulates central buildings such as the town hall, the public adminis-
tration units, the biggest avenue, the municipal library, the most important  30
Christian churches, the main shopping area and the central market. The three
informants' stories of mundane locality, however, take up a radically different
point of departure and generally emerge *outside* the black circle, in more peripheral
areas, on the outskirts of the town. They first locate the meeting points which are
most relevant for them around the streets that lead to the main Barcelona road  35
(West) and to the river (South); more specifically, on the bench, the public transport
area, the parking lot of the supermarket, and, finally, the two flats that they could
once share (these five spaces of relocation are marked in black squares, in Figure 1).
Two darkened spaces of mismeeting for which they express fear and mistrust
emanate from their narratives, too, which are the parking lot of the central market  40

**Walk-alongs in Igualada**

- ▪ Safe mooring spaces
- ◆ Mismeeting spaces
- ▲ Minority religious temples
- ● Temp agencies and Cáritas

**Figure 1:** Migrants' routing practices around Igualada (narrated localities). Source: Ajuntament d'Igualada (2013).

and a call shop that they mentioned in one of the interviews (both marked with a rhombus). Thirdly, two minority religious buildings (a Mosque in a former tannery and a Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall situated in a peripheral industrial unit, both marked with a triangle on the map) are also very recurrent in the informants' place-centered stories, which finally also include five more sites consisting of the four temporary work agencies and the charity (Cáritas) that they frequented (marked with black dots, in Figure 1). These were actually made salient by the informants themselves, unexpectedly. The four temporary work agencies, for example, emerged when they started narrating how they were actively seeking employment and were not simply "hanging around" or relying on compatriots in order to make a living (see Excerpt [7], lines 2, 4 and 6).

(7)    Migrant geographies: temporary work agencies                     1
       @Location:        18 July 2012. Bench.
       @Bck:             The researcher (RES) asks Benedito (BEN) about his job-
                         seeking practices.
    1     *RES:     *<tu cómo buscas trabajo>* [?] *<preguntas a tus amigos>* [?].  5
          %tra:     <how do you do job searches> [?] <do you ask your
                    friends> [?].
    2 →   *BEN:     *<no:>* [!] *<cómo se llama eso>* [?] *<campraral>* [?].
          %tra:     <no:> [!] <what do you call that> [?] <kemporal> [?].
    3     *RES:     oh *<empresas de trabajo temporal>* [?].                      10
          %tra:     Oh <temporary work agencies> [?].
    4 →   *BEN:     *sí.*
          %tra:     yes.
    5     *RES:     *vale.*
          %tra:     ok.                                                           15
    6 →   *BEN:     *con mi teléfono cuando tú tienes trabajo te llaman.*
          %tra:     With your telephone when you get a job they call you.

The focal urban zones that are dotted on the map in Figure 1, when put together,
provide a radically different picture of what counts as the center and what      20
counts as the periphery, for they reveal, instead, *displaced centralities*. These
alternative points of activity open the doors to the largely unknown spaces
where the migrants' social networking practices actually get established, main-
tained or fought, in non-mainstream realms which would otherwise be difficult
to discover and to approach, without critically combining multi-site co-ethno-   25
graphic walks and narrative interviews "on the go."


# 5 Concluding remarks                                                           30

In this article, I have argued for a critical understanding of migrant stories of
dis/emplacement as situated interactions where both the researcher and the
researched dialogically shape and refine storyworlds concerning the socioeco-
nomic stagnation or geographic fixity of present-day transnational populations.  35
I have thereby approached narrative interviews as continued self-reflexivity
exercises on the part of all research participants, which allows us to provide a
rationale for who tells what story, when and why, in collaborative research
projects conducted in contexts of extreme precariousness.

                                                                                 40

I have claimed that migrants' stories of orientation, disorientation or reorientation are a unique venue into the ways in which they make sense of, share, discuss and organize, in narrative, their transnational life episodes and their social marginalization experiences. This contributes to a better understanding of truly transnational narrating practices by multilingual speakers, which have traditionally been under-researched within the discipline of narrative inquiry.

I have also highlighted that, of their stories of personal life, narrative constructions of mundane locality reveal the ways in which migrants enact, embody and actually practice localness on the ground, in the globalized geographies of their host societies. This is particularly relevant within the field of transnational migration studies, for such narrative constructions more generally speak of how migrants apprehend, individually and collectively, their "integration" processes, by providing their views not only as the storied participants but also, uniquely, as the active storying Selves.

I have shown that the imbrications of narrated focal spaces with collaborative multi-site co-ethnographic visits to these mismeeting or meetingness localities prevent us from subscribing unproblematized assumptions about pauperized migrants' (im)mobility practices and strategic spatial movements around their new towns, which actually leads us to discover unexpected places of transnational networking which tend to pass unnoticed by society at large. These imbrications, for instance, allow us to contravene simplistic accounts which tend to associate the habitation of peripheral urban zones with acts of "wrong-doing." Likewise, they are a powerful research tool to deconstruct widespread ideologies which equate private-in-public migrant-regulated spaces with the "ghettoization" of city enclaves, "colonized" by homogeneously imagined groups of migrant Others. This is so because narrative inquiry and critical ethnography, together, afford the analysis of the intricate identity ascription practices and racial profiling mobilized within and across migrant groups. All in all, this study has provided evidence that migrant stories of dis/emplacement may get us closer to what transnational survival on the benches of late capitalist neighborhoods means, from a socially committed, non-essentializing perspective.

# Appendix: Transcription conventions

## Typefaces

| | |
|---|---|
| Plain | English |
| *Italics* | Spanish |
| <u>Underlined</u> | Catalan |
| **Bold** | Ashanti |

## Intonation contours

| | |
|---|---|
| . | end-of-turn falling contour |
| ? | end-of-turn rising contour |
| ! | end-of-turn exclamation contour |
| -, | end-of-turn/intra-turn fall–rise contour |
| -. | intra-turn falling contour |

## Conventions

| | |
|---|---|
| @Bck | background information |
| %com | comment (contextual information) |
| %add | addressee |
| %tra | free translation |
| +^ | quick uptake |
| +… | trailing off |
| xxx | unintelligible material |
| […] | omitted exchange |
| # | pause |
| [>] | overlap follows |
| [<] | overlap precedes |
| <words> | scope |
| [!] | stressing |
| [?] | rising |
| wo:rd | lengthened vowel |
| wo::rd | longer lengthened vowel |
| [/] | repetition |
| [//] | reformulation |
| +"/. | quotation in the next line |
| +" | quotation follows |

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# Bionote

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