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Mercy Mashingaidze and Eva Youkhana

Abstract

One's own life story is made up of thousands of events that influence person's choices from birth to death. These events are to be understood as references that accompany a person's positioning in society and are condensed in individual relationships. Biographies are an attempt to relate the social position to the individual positioning that forms the positionality of everyone in his socio-material world. They allow to disentangle the interplay of our roots and routes so often referred to in individual migration histories.

This working paper presents two selected narrative interviews conducted within the framework of different research projects on migration with a translocational lens. Taken out of the different contexts, namely a Zimbabwean migrant in London and a Colombian migrant in Madrid, we show the benefits of an interview technique that allows conclusions to be drawn from the subjective perspective on social structures that shape individual lives. By zooming into the life stories, influential factors that are significant but often overlooked in transnational migration research become visible. Beyond social relations, these embrace the material world, the spatial and urban surroundings, cultural references and technologies as much as the embodied individual experiences.

Keywords:

Biographic interview, translocational positionalities, critical migration research

Contents

1 Introduction

Migration research is often critiqued for adopting "groupist" ideas without questioning them, taking national or ethnic affiliations as a given in its methods, instead of treating them as variables yet to be explained (Brubaker, 2002, 2009; Wimmer & Schiller, 2002; Youkhana, 2015). Such essentialist methodological approaches often mask the complex subjective realities of everyday life as they tend to provide generalized perspectives to studied phenomena. The key to identifying and critically examining complex characteristics of migration and how migrants subjectively experience and interact with structures and policies that regulate it, lies in selecting appropriate data collection methods. Failure to avoid methodological essentialism (Youkhana, 2015, 2017) or what others have called methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002), exposes researchers to the potential risk of leaving some vital (and sometimes imperceptible) subjective aspects of migration and autonomous migration projects unexplored. In attempting to prevent methodological nationalism, migration scholars have over the years encouraged and gravitated towards the use of transnational and translocal approaches, see for example Amelina & Faist (2012), Brickell & Datta (2011), Faist (2012), Greiner & Sakdapolrak (2013), and Yalaz & Zapata-Barrero (2018).

Transnational approaches capture migrants´ cross-border ties, practices, and their implications (Faist & Bilecen, 2017). They reject the nation-state as the sole starting point of empirical analysis (Amelina & Faist, 2012) and pay attention to ´´{…}other important markers of heterogeneities such as gender, age, language, worldviews, life styles, and migration histories´´ (Faist & Bilecen, 2017, p. 16). Transnational perspectives tend to complement well with translocal analytical frameworks, which account for migrants' multiple and intersecting identities and positionalities outside of their ethnic or national origins (Anthias, 2008; Brickell & Datta, 2011; Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013; Yalaz & Zapata-Barrero, 2018). The use of biographical narratives appears to be popular within these 'anti-groupist' approaches, particularly in research dealing with subjective topics such as migrants' individual trajectories and outcomes of migration. Examples of such research include research related to migrants´ feelings of belonging, integration of migrants, transnational migration experiences, and refugee issues - topics that require deep contextual analysis that may not easily fit into already

existing analytical frameworks (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018). Their capability to produce subjective insights into interconnected aspects of everyday life that would otherwise remain unconsidered, makes them a viable method for critical migration research.

Why focus on biographical narratives?

Drawing on our experiences with the biographical narrative method, the aim of this paper is to contribute to literature that promotes critical methodologies in migration studies. We do so by accentuating the multi-situatedness of migration processes and respective biographical narratives as a rich source of knowledge production. In addition, we also underscore the effectiveness of biographical narratives in facilitating critical interconnected multilevel analysis of individual migration trajectories. Biographical narratives are embedded and situated within particular spatial and temporal scales and economic, political, and socio-cultural contexts. This inherent composite multi-situatedness enables researchers to follow and learn how individuals experience, influence or are influenced by broader and dynamic contexts, structures, norms, and policies that regulate their everyday life.

Furthermore, it reveals how individuals perceive their versatile experiences with these factors, which may possibly remain inconspicuous if other research methods are employed. By paying attention to these inherent features we not only demonstrate the strength of biographical narratives, but also consciously call for comprehensive narrative data analysis that accounts for the translocational positionalities (Anthias, 2001, 2008) of the researched, as well as for the multi-situatedness of their stories. The concept of translocational positionality was coined by Floya Anthias to stress an individuals' tension between a born into position (at the intersection between country of origin, citizenship, ethnic affiliation, class, gender, etc.) and the individuals' positioning in the life course along the shifting locations he/she appropriates and belongs to.

Given that migration is irreducibly particular in its historical specificities and substantive characteristics (De Genova, 2013), the biographical narrative method allows research to capture intricate elements and processes in individual migration trajectories. Capturing these intricacies paves way for comprehensive multilevel analysis of its nature, as well as its interactive enduring impact on migrants, their translocational positionalities (Anthias, 2008), and on relevant policies. Multilevel analysis generates knowledge that speaks to a wide

spectrum of interconnected individual, (trans)local, regional, and global histories, processes, and developments. It is this interconnected multilevel characteristic that we are referring to here as the multi-situatedness of biographical narratives and that potentially leads to innovative ways of explaining migration processes and projects.

In this paper, we present our empirically guided submissions towards enhancing critical analysis of narrative data in migration research. We align our contributions to critical ways of studying migration as a process; that is, something that becomes rather than something that is. We see the narrative approach as the most appropriate method to identify and facilitate the unpacking of factors that constantly influence, inform, and shape that process of 'becoming'. Such critical analysis facilitates a more holistic understanding of how migration influences and is influenced by, regards, and sometimes disregards wider contextual factors. Given this background, we concur with scholars that encourage researchers to be reflexive and to be conscious of how their own positionality/situatedness influences their entire research conduct (Bourke, 2014; Iosifides, 2018). We argue that if the multi-situatedness of biographical narratives is critically considered and highlighted in data analysis, it can provide new insights into the (re/de)contextualization, (re)conceptualization, and (de)regulation of migration.

The arguments presented in this paper are informed and corroborated by our respective experiences of conducting biographical research in different contexts. The first author explored transnational family life practices and experiences of Zimbabwean migrants in the United Kingdom (UK), while the second used the lived experiences of Latin American immigrants in Spain to capture issues of belonging in a space-sensitive and material-semiotic perspective[1]. While both studies reveal post-colonial migration links, what brings them together is much more than the glaring implication of former colonial 'subjects' migrating to the countries of their former colonizers (Zimbabweans migrating to the UK and Latin Americans moving to Spain). The unifying factor here is instead methodological, that is, to explain how biographical narrative data comprehensively captures the composite situatedness of migrants' lived experiences.

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[1] The research on Zimbabweans in the UK was conducted during 2016-2017 as part of an individual PhD project funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). The project on Latin American immigrants in Spain was conducted in 2010 as a project for habilitation within the Research Network on Latin America: Ethnicity, Citizenship and Belonging, funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).

Structure of the paper

The paper is divided into three sections. The first section opens with a run-through of current methodological debates in migration literature. The second section then builds upon these debates by drawing attention to our empirically confirmed effectiveness of using narratives to explain the subtle multilevel interplay between structure, policy, context, temporality, practice, perceptions, and migrants' lived experiences. Emphasizing the multi-situatedness of narratives need not be taken as an attempt to deny the effectiveness of other research methods that should neither be excluded, nor should it be taken as a research radicalization agenda. Rather, it should be seen as a way of urging critical methodological and analytical prudence in migration studies. Making constant reference to our previous research experiences, we avoid falling into the trap of romanticizing narrative research by acknowledging that its use is not without challenges.

To this end, we dedicate the discussion chapter to addressing some of the shortcomings that have generally been levelled against the biographical narrative method and those that we personally encountered. These include issues around ethical guidelines, which we contend should be strengthened, particularly in the current digital era.

The paper concludes that narratives are a viable tool for conducting critical migration research and urges researchers to take advantage of their multi-situatedness when analyzing narrative data.

2 Literature Review

Methodological approaches in qualitative migration research – a brief discussion

Migration as a phenomenon is said to be "not only transforming sending, transit, and receiving countries, but also social scientific studies" (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018, p. 1). While migration has become more visible in the past few decades, there is reportedly still a dearth of literature that pays systematic attention to methodological issues in (European) migration studies (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018). The topic of migration falls within the domain of multidisciplinary research as it can be studied from various perspectives, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Whilst acknowledging the importance and

complementarity of what Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz (2018) call multi-method collaborations, qualitative research has a particular importance for migration studies. This is attributed to its potential for producing rich, in-depth, and nuanced analysis that allows for conceptual refinements with higher validity (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018). Additionally, qualitative research enables the capturing of the process of human mobility between places, across spaces, and through time (King, 2018).

Migration scholars have been encouraged to use research designs that are flexible and responsive to the constantly changing nature of migration (King, 2018). In this paper we single out the biographical research method and present evidence on how it inherently accounts for the said flexible, spatial, temporal, and contextual nature of migration. It has after all, long been established that the biographical approach is "well suited to empirical investigations of migration processes because it offers us a way of empirically capturing the diversity, complexity, and transformational character of migration phenomena {…}" (Apitzsch & Siouti, 2007, p. 3; Siouti, 2016). The biographical approach facilitates the incorporation of both the initial social situation of migrants in the country of origin and in the country of migration (Siouti, 2016). Acknowledging that there has been substantial research done on biographical narrative approaches (Andrews et al., 2013; Apitzsch & Siouti, 2007; Eastmond, 2007; Elliott, 2005; Goodson et al., 2016; Guhlich, 2017; Karacan, 2019; Pepper & Wildy, 2009; Willis, 2019), we use this paper to highlight some seemingly taken for granted characteristics of biographies which if critically considered, have the potential to produce knowledges that can inform and influence policy and various other societal practices.

The practice of multi-sited research (Marcus, 1995) which follows life-histories of individuals or groups of mobile people across space and through time has also been widely adopted in migration research. It has long been established that life stories can reveal the juxtapositions of places and events which may otherwise remain obscured, either because they were previously unknown, or because they were embedded in systems and structures which distorted their true meaning (King, 2018). We agree and add that even in cases where it is impossible to physically engage in multi-sited ethnography, biographical accounts often reflect multiple embeddedness in various places, time periods, contexts, and events. Advocates of translocal approaches to migration posit that "if we are to move beyond a focus on the primacy of national space, we have to map out how other spaces and places can

become significant during the process of migration and movement" (Brickell & Datta, 2011, p. 4). They call for the deployment of a wider range of methodological tools that capture the everyday materiality, corporeality and subjectivity of movement as well as the constant negotiations in everyday becomings (Brickell & Datta, 2011). We heed their call in this paper by focusing on migrants' narratives of personal experiences and accounting for the multiple interconnected factors that shape these experiences.

Situatedness: how it is defined and how we understand multi-situatedness

Chandler & Munday (2016) define situatedness as "the dependence of meaning (and/or identity) on the specifics of particular sociohistorical, geographical, and cultural contexts, social and power relations, and philosophical and ideological frameworks, within which the multiple perspectives of social actors are dynamically constructed, negotiated, and contested". Others described situatedness as the close relation between individuals and their environment, and the influence that this relation has on the nature and development of the individuals themselves (Rehm et al., 2003). Put simply, situatedness is involvement or embeddedness within a context and it applies to both the researcher and the researched (Given, 2008). Researchers that are keenly aware of the situated nature of research are considered to be reflexive (Given, 2008).

Situatedness is seen as "a tricky affair because of the diverse, contradicting, dynamic, uncertain, and constantly shifting ways of being involved in social domains" (Given, 2008, p. 815). We contend that this fluidity can be accounted for and comprehensively explained through biographical narrative approaches to research. While migration can take place under similar structural conditions, its motivations, how it is experienced, its impact on migrants, non-migrants, origin, and host populations is subjectively situated. Likewise, how it is understood, regulated, studied, interpreted, and portrayed also reflects subjective situatedness. Due to their ability to capture multiple experiences that transcend temporal, spatial, structural, personal, and contextual boundaries, we see narratives as being multi-situated. We submit that the potential effectiveness of multi-situatedness is realized when data analysis systematically considers the individual, contextual, spatial, and temporal interconnections that lie latently present in narratives.

3 Explaining the multi-situatedness of biographical narratives through our cases

To ease the flow of discussion under this section and to highlight our points of methodological interest, we introduce two cases from our respective studies. Case 1 demonstrates how complex concepts such as the translocational positionality of individual undocumented immigrants can inherently be captured and explained through narrative interviews. Case 2 addresses themes related to communication, social networks, and belonging. We make the point that the complex nature, relevance, and implications of such issues as multiple positionalities and perceptions of belonging to the study and regulation of migration will remain masked and understudied if the analysis of narrative research data fails to take advantage of the multi-situatedness of narratives. Through our cases we not only demonstrate the strengths of using the narrative interview method to study migrants' subjective experiences, but also expose the inherent multi-situatedness of the data it produces. In other words, our discussion focuses on both the method and the comprehensive analysis of the complex data that it produces.

Case 1: Translocational positionality analysed through a Zimbabwean woman´s experiences of being undocumented in the UK

In her study on transnational family life experiences in situations of protracted asylum limbo, Mercy Mashingaidze broadly sought to examine how the post-2000 migration of Zimbabweans to the UK (re)shaped their family life (Mashingaidze, 2020). She specifically analysed how family life is (re)constituted, experienced, negotiated, sustained, and perceived in long-drawn-out transnational situations where family reunification and visits are restricted by UK immigration policy, and dissuaded by 'crisis' conditions in Zimbabwe[2]. Given the phenomenological lived experience focus of the study, it made sense to adopt a narrative research design. Through using the narrative research approach, Mashingaidze was able to see the chronology of "which events led to which consequences, and derive fruitful explanations" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 4) of individual migrant trajectories. The study was

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[2] Zimbabwe's post-2000 migration movements occurred in the context of a multifaceted 'Zimbabwe crisis'. Over 3 million Zimbabweans are estimated to have emigrated between 2000 and 2010. For a detailed discussion, see Mashingaidze (2020), 'Pooling resources, scattering the family': transnational realities of Zimbabwean post-2000 migrants in the United Kingdom. University of Bonn.

conducted between August 2016 and April 2017. It was multi-sited in nature, comprising twenty purposefully sampled migrants in the UK, selected members of their families in Zimbabwe, as well as detailed analysis of their ICT-mediated transnational family practices. The narrative interview sessions were guided by an initial question that invited participants to share their individual and family life experiences from as far back as they were willing to share. The individual narratives were complemented by expert interviews, participant observation, and archival research. The research participants comprised both men and women, married, single, and divorced, parents and children, aged between 21 and 66. They belonged to at least one of the following immigration status categories - undocumented, non-removed failed asylum seekers, or refugees. In this paper, we use the case of a 58-year old female non-removed failed asylum seeker whom we have given the pseudonym Mai Tongogara[3].

The story of Mai Tongogara

Mai Tongogara migrated from Zimbabwe to the UK in the year 2002. Before migrating, she lived in Chinhoyi, which is the regional capital of Zimbabwe´s Mashonaland West province. Mai Tongogara used to knit, sew, and sell different items as an informal cross-border trader in Zimbabwe´s neighbouring countries, South Africa and Zambia. Her husband had been retrenched from his job during the Zimbabwe Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) in the early 1990s, leaving her as the sole breadwinner for her family. She narrated that:

> After my husband lost his job during ESAP, he would spend most of his time at the local beerhall. He wasn't even making any effort to provide food for the children, let alone school fees. I had to hustle to make sure the family was taken care of. I used to knit, sew clothing items, and do cross-border trading to raise school fees for my children. Although my efforts were paying off, I was not happy that I was doing everything for the family alone. My brother and his wife came here and saw that there were plenty opportunities to work. So, since he knew the situation with my husband neglecting the family, he invited me here to work. My plan was to work for six months and then go back home to my children.
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> Mai Tongogara, Interview, 09.10.2016

Mai Tongogara arrived in the UK on a visitor visa, which she subsequently overstayed, leaving her in an undocumented immigrant status. Her initial plan was to work throughout the validity of her visa and save money for the upkeep of her husband and children who had stayed

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[3] Mai Tongogara's narrative was first described and analysed in detail in Mashingaidze (2020).

behind in Zimbabwe. The reasoning behind was that she would be able to make much more money working in the UK than she could ideally make in the same period through her regular informal trade activities.

In the UK Mai Tongogara became 'trapped' when the visa requirements for Zimbabweans were revised in November 2002. Faced with the fear of not being able to return to the UK in future, she deliberately *overstayed* her visa. After living undocumented for nearly five years, Mai Tongogara then unsuccessfully applied for political asylum in 2007. She never appealed against the asylum refusal decision and after a few years of abiding by the reporting conditions stipulated under the terms of her continued stay in the UK, she abruptly stopped reporting. Her non-removal was facilitated by the UK government´s occasional suspension of deportations to Zimbabwe since 2002 citing politically motivated human rights abuses. The suspension of deportations has meant that there are many more Zimbabwean refused asylum seekers like Mai Tongogara, who continue to live in the UK awaiting deportation whenever the UK authorities deem it safe to do so.

Despite her undocumented immigration status in the UK, Mai Tongogara was able to find work through recruitment agencies owned by 'established' Zimbabwean immigrants. She initially worked as a cleaner, a cook, and a care support worker before deciding to solely focus on live-in caregiving. She kept postponing her return to Zimbabwe, and with each passing year the UK immigration policy became increasingly restrictive. It gradually become more and more difficult to work without the required immigration papers, hence her decision to become a private live-in carer. Simultaneously, the political and economic situation in Zimbabwe increasingly deteriorated. In spite of this, Mai Tongogara still had plans to return to Zimbabwe, depending on the outcome of Zimbabwe's 2018 general elections. By the time she was interviewed in 2016, she had lived apart from her family for fourteen years. Five of her children had since married and she had become a grandmother to more than ten grandchildren, nine of whom had been born after her migration.

Over the years Mai Tongogara had sustained communication with her family in Zimbabwe through the use of various ICTs. Occasionally showing some Whatsapp messages from her children and grandchildren, she shared the following:

> I call my husband once or twice a week, he does not use Whatsapp so I make direct calls. With the children and grandchildren, we communicate on Whatsapp every day. It is difficult to raise

children and give them counsel on the phone because you do not see their actual behaviour. You just play your role as a parent and advise them to behave well and take school seriously. It then hurts when your child misbehaves but you cannot do anything because you are so far away, you feel helpless. I have been working non-stop ever since I arrived here, I never struggled to find a job. I managed to send all my children to boarding schools and supply all their basic needs, but I would always cry because I missed them a lot. I also miss my husband, but it's the children that I miss the most.

<div align="right">Mai Tongogara, Interview, 09.10.2016</div>

Through sending remittances to her family in Zimbabwe, Mai Tongogara managed to buy two houses and start a public transport business in Chinhoyi which was jointly run by her husband and their eldest son. The business however failed to survive Zimbabwe's 2008 runaway inflation.

The narrative of Mai Tongogara discloses the challenges of exclusively *doing family* through ICTs over extended periods of time. Some of the themes highlighted in her story include the following: women, patriarchy and the myth of the male provider/breadwinner, the feminization of migration, the autonomy of migration, transnational family practices, and ICT-based co-presence. Mai Tongogara's account reflects individual agency as well as the role of family and other migrant networks in influencing various becomings of migration. She portrays herself as a devoted hardworking wife and mother who is determined to see her children and grandchildren living comfortably. Her husband is presented as a source of frustration as he makes no effort to contribute towards the upkeep of their family. She explained that because her husband once cheated on her and misused some of the remittances meant for family investments, she stopped sending money directly to him and started coordinating remittances and investments with her eldest daughter.

Her story locates her as a breadwinner, as a primary migrant, as an independent decision maker who embodies the life of an imperceptible immigrant. The concept of imperceptibility derives from Papadopoulos and Tsianos idea of the autonomy of migration by which they also offer a new perspective on (mainly undocumented) immigrants (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2008). According to this, it is not their visibility in the host society that is desired, but rather the wish to fall under the radar, to be imperceptible and thus protected from expulsion. By looking at Mai Tongogara from this perspective we observe a person who responds independently and beyond given regulations that would exclude her from accepting job opportunities. This view is different from the image of a migrant as a young male and

exemplifies the feminization of migration, the precarious conditions for migrating women on the one hand, and the empowerment for autonomous decision making on the other.

The patriarchal context that Mai Tongogara comes from dictates that her role should be secondary to that of her husband, and that she lives at home with her family (not away for more than a decade as a primary migrant). The reality of her situation is however contrary to this expectation and the reasons for this are visible in her story. It confirms that migration is indeed capable of producing its own logics, motivation, and trajectories (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2008). Furthermore, it highlights how undocumented migrants manage to imperceptibly navigate everyday life and engage in acts of citizenship (Isin & Nielsen, 2013). Religion also has a huge influence on Mai Tongogara's life as she is convinced that God has been protecting her against deportation. She also shared that it was because of her religious beliefs that she managed to ward off thoughts of divorcing her husband (Mashingaidze, 2020).

Her translocational positionality as well as the spaces that she passed through in her migration journey are visible in her narrative – from being a visitor to becoming undocumented. Her simultaneous embeddedness in Zimbabwe and in the UK is also evident through her everyday family practices (ICT communication and sending remittances), and through her close following of the 'crisis' situation in Zimbabwe.

Mai Tongogara's account is evaluative, reflective of her past, her present, and her desired future (Phoenix & Brannen, 2014). It confirms that the narrative method makes the transformational character of migration visible (Siouti, 2016). Its multi-situatedness makes it possible to see the connections and disconnections between migration decisions and outcomes[4], the contextual factors that influence trajectories and how they change (in this case how the change in UK visa regulations for Zimbabweans led to overstaying), how individuals respond to policy changes (Mai Tongogara became undocumented), as well as how they sometimes respond to situations in ways that fall outside societally prescribed expectations (sustained migration-induced absence from her husband). The narrative method inherently enabled a clear visibility of her situatedness in two very distant geographical places

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[4] Mai Tongogara experiences positive migration outcomes in that she fulfils her migration goal of raising money for her family´s upkeep, albeit doing so while living in an unforeseen prolonged separation from her family due to her undocumented status.

(Zimbabwe and the UK), three temporal scales – then, now, and the future, as well as in a virtual transnational social space[5]. Her self-perception of her multiple (translocational) positionalities as a wife, as a mother, as a grandmother, as an (imperceptible) undocumented migrant, as a 'respectable' Christian woman, and as a live-in carer is clearly portrayed through her story. She is physically absent from Zimbabwe and from her family, but emotionally, financially, and virtually present. It is ironic that although Mai Tongogara is physically in the UK, her reality is far detached from the everyday goings-on around her, at least outside of her job environment. Her reality is more embedded in the transnational social space where ICTs mediate and facilitate the maintenance of her transnational family life and her envisioned future. Her translocational positionality presents an interesting scenario that highlights the strength of using non-groupist methodologies. Mai Tongogara's complex positioning also speaks to issues of belonging, which we delve deeper into through our next case.

Case 2: Communication, social networks and belonging of a male Colombian youth in Lavapiés, Madrid

In this case, we present the life story of a 20-year-old Colombian (whom we have given the pseudonym José) who left Bucaramanga in Colombia to join his mother in Spain during times of economic prosperity there in the 1990s and early 2000s. Many Latin Americans, and increasingly female labour migrants, used the opportunities in Europe in the 1990s and the 2000s to work as unskilled and semiskilled labour in the service sector. This 'feminization of migration' was fostered by economic crisis in many Latin American countries after structural adjustments, privatization of public services and high unemployment rates. These drivers of migration together with gendered policies in sending and receiving countries had led to both, an increasing amount of left behind children by their mothers, and an increase of youths migrating to follow their mothers into migration. In Spain, during the real estate bubble (1995-2005) labour migration from Latin America experienced a peak, particularly for the construction and service sector (nursing, care and domestic work). Latin Americans benefitted from many policies that allowed them to become naturalized, enter the labour market and even acquire property (Jüssen & Youkhana, 2015). José and his brother followed his mother

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[5] See Faist (1998) and Faist & Özveren (2017) for the concept of transnational social spaces

to the then perceived 'land of promise' in the hope of family reunification and more educational opportunities in 2008.

When he was interviewed (in 2010) it became apparent how hard the financial crisis in Europe and the real estate crisis in Spain had hit Latin American migrants, shattering many expectations of a better life. José's biography presents a young Colombian during his personal identity formation and search for work and survival in a country that was plagued by youth unemployment after 2008. It became clear that the families' history, the trauma of his parents' separation in Colombia and his father's failure as a breadwinner to keep the family together, haunts him all the way to Madrid. The biographic interview presents a young person who had to take up responsibility at an early age and who is plagued by a sense of guilt ("...I was always the problem, somehow...") that continues to accompany him.

José's biography also highlights the importance of neighbourhood movements, social and cultural centers, and a political culture that produces social proximity and compensates, at least in part, for the loss of social life and personal networks suffered through migration. In his descriptions, José states how important ICTs are for translocal relationships, and thus shows that social media can be used to create social proximity and a sense of belonging, and to express political conviction. In that sense, positionality can be developed and shaped through constant exchange with host communities which allow the 'newcomer' to take part in the social urban fabric and to create a social network in Madrid. At the same time social media play an important role for José in maintaining his relationships and friendships in Colombia, but also in obtaining and exchanging information.

> Well, there is internet. In the house we have internet and it's pretty easy to communicate with them (family and friends in Colombia, author's note). I say hello to one or the other friend practically every day. An effort is made to do that. If I don't run into someone in chat today, I write a message and the next day we talk. That is, with my father I speak at night, when it is night here - so often also, since there are these communication possibilities by the Internet. And, on the other hand, the courage to live... In the first months, my father didn't know how to use the Internet, he didn't know how to use the computer. And, he learned it little by little to communicate with us more easily and more often. I don't know, in the beginning we were still calling each other regularly once a week; daily it was not possible because it is too expensive. And now with the Internet, and Facebook, Facebook this social cancer.
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> José, Interview, 02.04.2011

Although José uses the term "social cancer" to allude disparagingly to the excessive influence of the internet and social networks such as Facebook on social life, the benefits for him and for maintaining his relationships in Colombia are very clear. While he previously communicated via the telephone in a cumbersome and costly way, it is the more regular communication with his father, who was still learning the ropes of the internet that seems to delight him. The ICTs allow random and almost instantaneous communication with his family and friends in his home country. Through virtual proximity, social relationships can be experienced in a sensual way. The internet, particularly chats, is downright fun for José, giving him courage to live (ánimo) and the feeling of still being part of the network. Space here becomes an interplay of social action in spatial dimensions that cannot be contained. Even though his Colombian network of relationships endures over distance, belonging to environments in Spain becomes more important than before as he also uses the internet for his networks there. He describes the way he uses the social platform Facebook for his life in Madrid as follows:

> But I use Facebook mainly to know what's going on here in Madrid. I use it like a social network of presentations, organizations, and what else is here, places, for example.
>
> José, Interview, 02.04.2011

At another point, José repeats this and adds:

> In Madrid, I use it for that, for the library, when there is a presentation, a concert or whatever. And, this instrument has turned out to be very effective, because through it I get to know my friends. By going to an event, by talking to someone there and eventually meeting up with them. That's how my social network is formed here in Madrid. [...] I don't use Facebook to communicate or write messages or anything, it's like the network of... to inform me about events, yeah. [...] I'm interested in art, especially poetry, literature, reading. And that's why I'm there. I use it like a channel of communication with, with everyone, with everyone who..., with everything that is art here in Madrid.
>
> José, Interview, 02.04.2011

Using Facebook allows José to access institutions, which are of interest to him, and to meet people who share his political and ethical beliefs. In this way, he can find events, initiate contacts, and especially meet at the bookstores "Traficantes del Sueño" and "La Marabunta," in the district Lavapiés, which he mentions several times. In addition, Facebook is an indispensable medium and important component for José in gaining access to politically motivated activities in Lavapiés and thereby not only thinking about his belonging with similar minded people, but also living it through his political engagement. In this way, José produces

a sense of belonging that is not so much based on specific nationalities or ethnic affiliations, but is owed to his political and ethical values. Through the lived experiences his sense of belonging is animated with concrete activities, which allows him to "enact" a citizenship beyond passport possession and social affiliation, to speak with Engin Isin (Isin, 2009).

Otherwise, José seems almost embarrassed about using Facebook. Several times, he mentions his fundamental aversion to the technology. He prefers face-to-face relationships to virtual ones. This is how he makes friends. Local proximity is just as important as shared political convictions, which forms a vast part of his personal identity.

The biographic descriptions indicate how José tries to break the trajectories and supposed predictability of his migration process, in which he left an economically and politically crisis-ridden country (Colombia) to live again in a crisis-ridden country (Spain). He and his family, the mother in Spain, but also the father in Colombia take a high risk, tear their two sons from their familiar environment in Bucaramanga, trying to escape their socio-economic position, which in Colombia is bound to a stratification system that ranks locations and their dwellers. For José, the decision to try his luck in Spain, is an act of empowerment and positioning outside the predefined social order he and his parents used to live in Colombia. In Spain, he can re-appropriate political and social spaces, which allows him to expand his sphere of influence towards new and broader locations. His translocational positionality (Anthias, 2008) is dynamic, transgressing and gives José the opportunity to become a more active protagonist of his own biography.

Despite the setbacks that affect young migrants in Spain in particular due to youth unemployment of almost 50%, José's story can be described as an autonomous project that grants people in migration an much more active role in the construction, participation and transformation of their socio-material conditions (cf. (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2008).

ITCs are of particular importance for José's migration project and to connect those locations that matter for his translocational life. They are often the main instrument of social networking on the part of those who have been torn apart by migration. The need for social proximity points emphatically to the possibilities of social media, because it makes it possible for family and friends to bridge and overcome physical and spatial distances at low or no monetary costs (Stichweh, 2008). However, this requires already intensively lived and

sensually experienced relationships, such as with the father of José and his good friends in Colombia. Social media (here Facebook) also becomes a survival strategy and a tool for better orientation in the new home. However, local proximity is still essential for building new relationships and friends. His narratives nevertheless underline the importance of a lived political culture for increasing a sense of belonging to the new home, which is being lived in concrete places and through identifiable political institutions and activities.

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4 Discussion and analysis

The two cases show subjective experiences of two people migrating from Africa and Latin America to Europe respectively. A closer look at their stories however reveals structural issues that transcend the personal and reveal complex interconnected matters of local, global, and academic relevance and interest. Guided by these two cases, this paper exemplified the advantages of using narrative research approaches alongside - and sometimes over - other methods in migration studies. Notwithstanding the critiques that have been levelled against biographical approaches (for example, bias and over-reliance on human memory), narratives have the ability to inevitably cover multilevel aspects of individual everyday life and its connectedness to culture, politics, and society. Whereas life history has almost always dovetailed a life story with other sources, such as diaries and letters (Bryman, 2012) it is now well complemented and illuminated by modern technologies. The advantage of ICTs is that they not only provide material that corroborates narrative accounts about past events but are also able to offer real time material as messages, status updates, pictures, videos, and posts that may become available during the course of an interview. Another interesting point (though it raises ethical concerns which have to be discussed with the participants) is that the research does not necessarily end with the interview, as the researcher may still have access to the participants' social media platforms. Whereas it has always been possible to do follow-ups with participants, this was traditionally based on requiring clarifications or additional info based on gathered data. With the advent of social media however, these follow-ups may be influenced by new posts and interactions that researchers may have access to. This makes one wander the extent to which this additional info can be allowed to influence the analysis of the narrative data, and when exactly a study has to stop.

The two cases shared in this paper both revealed the unpredictability of everyday social life and how migrants continuously find ways of navigating around the various structural and cultural 'hurdles' that they encounter at various stages of their lives. The narratives of José and Mai Tongogara explain the subtle interplay between temporalities, localities, structures, policies, practices and how these multiple levels assemble in migrants (in)dividual lives and influence their agency. The biographies of the respondents invite the researchers to apply a rhizomatic thought in the analysis of social relations proposed by Deleuze and Guattari. By zooming into one's individual narrations, we unfold the deterritorialized but entangled social landscapes that matter for migrants´ experiences. The cases provide rich empirical data that is as close to (situated and perceived) reality as possible.

Using multi-situated lenses makes clear the threads that connect individual trajectories from one temporal era (and / or spatial location) to another, showing the continuities and breaks in people's lives. Whereas new places, spaces, people, and experiences bring about new becomings, these all contribute to one big experience. Instead of asking the participants direct questions on political issues in their home country or country of destination or on living undocumented, the narrative approach revealed these in a well packaged way that inherently encompassed time, place, context, and the narrator's responses and perceptions to each of their experiences. Narratives draw attention to the people, structures, places, experiences, and events that they consider significant in their lives. This in a way contributes to removing the generalization of what would generally be considered ideal or typical. The biographical method has the strength of demonstrating "{…} clear commitment to the processual aspects of social life, showing how events unfold and interrelate in people's lives" (Bryman, 2012, p. 489).

Through listening to participants' stories, researchers with insider knowledge or who share a similar background with the participants in addition get a chance to reflect on their positionality, pre-assumptions and prejudices. The narrative approach enables researchers to undergo what decolonial thinkers call 'learning to unlearn' as they encounter other people's perspectives of what they themselves have also experienced. Reflecting on her research experiences, Mashingaidze stated that using the narrative research approach made it possible

for her to 'make the familiar strange' (Holliday, 2016) and see the situation in Zimbabwe and her own family life from different viewpoints[6].

Narratives oscillate between past and present and sometimes capture reflections of an envisaged future. They therefore become a piece of historical reference which can in future be used to analyse other aspects of life like language or cultural values. It can therefore be (re)situated and its analytical or conceptual situatedness is not fixed.

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[6] This reflection stems from the fact that Mashingaidze had an ´insider´ position as a Zimbabwean researching on fellow Zimbabweans.

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