

Experiencing urban space. Moroccan women in the neighbourhood of Lavapiés (Madrid)

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How do some migrant women from Morocco experience and represent a south European city given the actual context of urban transformations and recent flows of migration to "fortress Europe"? The work in progress we would like to present to you flows in between two existential territories: our studies on gender and migration and our political activism in the squat movement and, in particular, in "La Escalera Caracola", a squatted house for women in the multiethnic neighborhood of Lavapiés in Madrid. It is from this specific location that we look for connections between different women inhabiting and circulating this area and it is from this position as white women squatting in the historical center of Madrid that we investigate current and potential forms of **social cooperation** in the neighborhood. The present research exceeds our desire to reflect on and learn how close and simultaneously distant others live and imagine the city, how we, women breaking into empty houses in order to resignify space and assert its potential to differ, make it open for ourselves and others. It also pretends to be an uncertain experiment of interaction, an encounter with performative political value.

Our main question concerns **processes of deterritorialization and territorialization in the city**. In other words, we are interested in how various displaced and marginalized people, in this case migrant and squatter women, articulate a sense of spatial location. We placed this project within transdisciplinary debates that approach the city as a series of complex practices in which economic relations interact with cultural and symbolic processes. From the beginning, Moroccan women's accounts forced us to expand our own limited constructions of the neighborhood into a much broader context, that of the city, a large territory articulated around transportation that contrast with our own processes of territorialization.

Some of the dimensions of the representation of Lavapiés that we examine concern its definition in terms of sites, borders, routes and forms of mobility and its connection with other areas of the city. We also look at the differential practices it evokes and the perceptions and emotions that it raises; feelings of fear, of being constantly observed and still remaining invisible, of vulnerability and anonymity, impressions of being different and still accessible to each other. In this perspective, we regard urban space not only as the by-product of built environment -the geographical physical attributes of a certain area- but also at the level of the social imaginary, what Henri Lefebvre termed the "ongoing social production of space". We have articulated all these heterogeneous dimensions into a **cartographic method** able to link subjectivity and space. It operates on several interrelated levels: a geographical level that charts meaningful locations and traffic conditions, a rhythmic level that takes into account temporal components inscribed into space and an embodied level that pays attention to corporeal and communicative dimensions such as accessibility, visibility, proximity, safety, etc.

As women efficiently trained in western conventions of orientation and representation we started to work with **maps**. On the one hand this turned out to be useless or even detrimental for its ethnocentric view when interviewing Moroccan women, on the other, maps emerged as highly illuminating for those of us that had never imagined people's daily routes on paper. Although we stopped showing maps of the quarter we keep a mapping system for tracing and comparing women's views on space and mobility. We combine static and mobile interviews. The later, **guided walks** and *dérives* or **moves about**, constitute a better way to learn about preferences over daily routes, street encounters, orientation patterns and plurisensorial perception and affects associated with places. We also use our own pictures of Lavapies and others shown to us by Moroccan women in order to illustrate something about the houses and neighborhoods where they used to live.

Our favorite self-produced trope about this quarter consists of an image that is at the same time a mountain, a labyrinth and a spider net. This trope renders a partial view from above and from below shaping Lavapies into a *plane of consistency* that possesses the attributes of a social territory.

According to our own definition as dwellers and visitors and the descriptions made by other women in squats, Lavapies covers an area whose **limits** form an irregular rhombus with the old Jewish quarter at its core and the flea market ("El Rastro") as a temporary fluent border on its west side. The main **structure** derives from several long and steep streets ending in the Lavapies square, one of the most important points for an increasingly eroded communal life. This basic steep structure which has similarities with an undulating spider net coexists with a labyrinthine arrangement that reproduces the rizomatic design of historical urban planning in medieval times. Longitudinal and transversal streets intersect in unpredictable ways and require from the dwellers a certain competence in order to avoid abrupt and intricate itineraries.

We consider this idea of the mountain to be essential in visualizing space. Walking up and down, the façades, most of them old and damaged, invariably remain in passers-by's visual field providing a strong feeling of being in an **old place**, a recurrent impression in the interviews with squatters. While **rehabilitation** has been accomplished in other zones of Madrid catalogued by their high historical value, Lavapies, traditionally a low class area lacking spectacular buildings, has remained until now an uninteresting, that is, non profitable site for rehabilitation. This explains the confluence of elders paying old rents, young people in shared housing and migrants, often occupying the smaller and more deteriorated apartments.

In addition, the labyrinth and the spider net constitute powerful images to describe a preferred a-geometrical anti-panoptical structure. These representations provide a sense of intimacy, of being undercover and inhabiting a specific and delimited environment. They point to alternative processes of appropriation and resignification that are currently taking place in Lavapies, which apart from the squat scene include the gay and lesbian collectivity and other left wing people. Local and safe visibility, recognition and access to each other without erasing differences are key elements for this territorialization.

In contrast, Moroccan women's views of Lavapies point insistently towards the wider context of the city and shift between, on the one hand, contemporary urban requirements of **mobility** and **flexibility** imposed on them and, on the other hand, tendencies to settle in a culturally comprehensible habitat. Women's wage employment, preeminently as domestics both part-time and live-in, and its hard combination with reproductive work in their own households require an extraordinary degree of adaptability, especially now that men's stable jobs have decreased drastically. These patterns of flexible labor interact with residential choices and forms of mobility around the city.

Moroccan women's cartographies of the quarter invariably identify the preeminence of public transport, because this is the means by which the immediate surroundings (house and street) get connected to work place, legal services, mosques and social relationships established in previous neighborhoods. While male patterns of mobility are normally attached to the quarter where street selling and eventual jobs are found in daily wanderings around an increasingly multiethnic commercial area, women spend most of their time in long distance trips [Johnston-Anumwo *et. al.* , 1995]. In this sense, their discourses illustrate an abrupt jump between the closer environment and the wide and indistinct extension of the city.

Fatimah Baroudy, an old woman with high problems of mobility, goes every Friday to the mosque changing from the tube to at least two buses. She sticks to her doctor in Peña Grande where she used to live, a large slum once populated by gypsies who, having been relocated, sold or rented their shacks to Moroccan immigrants. Visits to relatives and close friends often imply moving out of the quarter where social life is felt to be reduced to frequent greetings based on ethnic identification. Malika Majid often takes a bus to visit her sister in Vallecas. Like other women, she insists on "**not knowing people**" in Lavapiés, something that, in some ways, contradicts existing connections among Moroccan women, also made clear on our itineraries with them. Testimonies like this reflect limitations in the way women perceive existing bounds among them. Tamou Chahjnaoni spends one hour and half to go to her work in a residential area; she does her groceries in Cuatro Caminos where she has to change from the bus to the tube. This is, according to her, the most convenient and cheap way. Souad Errahoui stays at her work place, also in the outskirts of Madrid, until Friday when she returns to Lavapiés to share two days with her sons. What these testimonies show is a gendered pattern of urban mobility which contradict assumptions in the literature about the confinement of women of Islamic background and common generalizations over women spatial behaviour [Lutz , 1991], [Rose , 1993].

Mobility and flexibility are also dominant dimensions of residence trajectories. In the last year Lavapiés has received an increasing number of Moroccan people moving out from the slum of Peña Grande. According to Pro-vivienda, a non-profit organization that helps migrant people to find accommodation, their residence patterns are far from stable. They depend on labor conditions but also on the desire to leave paradigmatic scenarios of social exclusion, overcome problems of isolation, move to better houses, avoid police control areas or escape from ostensible forms of everyday racism. Neither the center, nor the periphery represent an ideal environment with respect to these problems.

In this respect, women's stories concerning the **slum** are particularly ambivalent. Peña Grande is depicted as a dangerous, unhealthy and degrading habitat while, at the same time, it allows women to socialize in a supportive atmosphere that weakens spatial boundaries between the public and private domain, the inside and outside of the huts and the spatio-temporal separation between communal life and work. The move from a shack in the slum to an apartment in the city center is regarded, especially by women, as a sign of improvement but experienced with feelings of sadness, boredom and isolation. Tamou hides to her mother in Morocco that she was living in a hut for several years and only invited her when she moved to a house that she did not have to feel ashamed of.

Another significant aspect on women's mobility around the city concerns their attachment to downtown areas. Women's itineraries find in the commercial area of Sol and Gran Vía an attractor partly founded on contemporary confusion of consuming and leisure in large metropolis. For Moroccan women **going out** has nothing to do with daily routines around the quarter, it is about trespassing a border to blend in with human traffic where assimilation and anonymity can be preserved to a certain extent.

No space represents the passage between "disciplinary practices" to "practices of control", as described by Foucault and Deleuze, better than the center of the metropolis. Everyone is able to transit this even space and watch the uninterrupted exchange of people and commodities taking place without being constantly reminded of ethnic difference. If the Fordist city operates by segmenting space as a series of "striures" and by fixing individuals' identities depending on their role in the system of production and reproduction, the diagram of control of the post-Fordist city acts over a smooth surface in which mobility, exchange of positions and anonymity turn into favored qualities. This picture of a diffuse city, which differs from the private and militarized city described by urban theorists in the United States, do not erase disciplinary practices of exclusion. The diagram of the post-fordist city assures subtle but effective mechanisms of control such as video vigilance, the proliferation of private police forces and the constant recodification of information that ranges from the systematic reordering of products inside the stores to the overflow of changing images and messages in public space and television. The resulting paradox is that of a "rigid flexibility", an ubiquitous hypersegmentation where relatively free movement pays the price of command over subjectivity [Negri & Vincent , 1995].

If Moroccan women's fascination with this urban scenario relates to a dominant paradigm of social control and pervasive surveillance it can also be regarded, in a paradoxical way, as a **claim over territory**. Urban wanderers learn how to read the signs of power and exclusion, how to become imperceptible and move with relative freedom in between urban heterogeneity and how to develop spatial strategies of reappropriation, recognition and partial visibility. This is precisely what happens at the core of downtown, in the square of Sol, where Moroccan immigrants find a gathering place founded on unexpected encounters. A specific location where migrants chose to meet, chat and built an assistance network during their incursions into the rather undetermined flows of the city center. The same process, at a local scale, can be detected in the quarter. Here we can see how the city, as a deterritorialized space, is subject to internal practices of reterritorialization.

Our initial exploration about the construction of Lavapies is, in some ways, driving us away from this location to force us into the large cityscape. Two processes of urban territorialization are at stake. Squatters narratives, in which we recognized ourselves, regards the neighborhood as a significant site to be claimed against private and public speculation and the resulting fragmentation and homogeneous codification of urban experiences. By contrast, migrant women's represent themselves in a wider context shaped by requirements of mobility and flexibility. Although Lavapies gives room to ethnic recognition this is often seen by Moroccan women as superficial when not oppressive. It does not prevent feelings of isolation and ethnic control and the resulting reaction of retreat into an imaginary privacy.

On the light of these processes, what is the potential for **social cooperation** that we refer to at the begining of this presentation? What is the sense of relocating it in the local sphere of the quarter? The conceptualization of social cooperation, as envisioned by theorists such as Toni Negri, evolves from the current crisis of political representation and institutional agreements and the crucial advent of "immaterial work" based on transversal and, to a certain extent, autonomous forms of communication. Social cooperation envisions emancipatory practices, some of them already taking place. Good examples of it, in the multiethnic context of Lavapies, are informal networks in which migrant women participate and the ongoing relationship between old native women, living alone in degraded houses, and Moroccan women and their families. These constitute innovative alliances that confront solitude and economical difficulties in and out of the spatial conditions of the degraded courtyards of the quarter. To work together on the lack of meeting places where women can get to know each other and have an adequate space for their children, the ongoing racist initiatives of white commerce owners protected by institutional and police control and,

recently, the new rehabilitation plan of the city council can give rise to creative assemblages across age, race and gender.

Elements of territorialization and deterritorialization are found both on the local scenario of the quarter and on the whole space of the city. If our intention is to build alliances with Moroccan women we have to consider the broader cartographies that we both draw and how in them our different imaginaries of the neighborhood get articulated with representations of areas, the slum, the city center, the periphery, that seem very far away from what we initially thought as our local context. The political and subjective encounter that we are looking for regards all these maps with the intention of drawing new ones made of cooperative assemblages that need to be determined.

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