Proposal for ACME theme issue

Working title: Migration and Activism

Migration is an increasingly contested field. As global inequalities widen, and potential global mobilities develop, states are pouring more money into the control over borders than ever before (Vaughn-Williams, 2010). This has led to the proliferation of new technologies of enforcement that are reconfiguring the border itself: from smart borders that risk-manage flows of people, goods and information (Amoore, 2007), to graduated sovereignty that renders citizenship flexible and selective (Ong, 2000; Salter, 2008), to disparate controls that extend state sovereignty well beyond its territory (Clayton, 2010; Mountz, 2010).

In the face of the growth of states and inter-state co-operatives in the area of migration control, activism and resistance by and on behalf of migrant groups is faced with a series of challenges. Practically, the intentional churning and dispersal of migrants in time and space makes mobilizing support as well as opposition difficult to organise. Symbolically, enforcement logics coupled with the systematic downsizing and outlawing of migrant support activities stifles these efforts (Fekete, 2009). Politically, the co-option of migrant support groups through government contracts and softer forms of co-operation (even as funding is withdrawn) makes political opposition increasingly precarious. Emotionally the relentless criminalization of ‘irregularity’ threatens to sap the energies of progressive groups and oppositional networks.

At the same time, popular and academic understandings of ‘resistance’ itself are changing. Academics have become increasingly uncomfortable with the implicit ways in which resistance shores up existing structures of power by pushing against them. Against this backdrop the special issue seeks to explore the ways in which migrant activism can not only resist, but also rework (Katz, 2004), disrupt (Ranciere, 2010), or trouble (Butler, 1990), existing discourses and configurations. This raises important questions about the relationship between theory and activism not just around borders (as discussed in a recent thematic section of ACME, ‘Frontiere Phalanstere’, 2012) but in the everyday experiences of migrant groups before, during and after traversing a series of practical and performed boundaries. The special issue also explores precisely what the practices of migrant activism involve and where they are located, as well as giving consideration to who today’s migrant activists are and what activist practices look like in this arena.

The special issue draws upon research conducted in Palestine, Italy, Mexico, the UK, continental Europe and the US. This represents a significant collection of papers that brings together an international group of scholars and researchers, with contributions written in Spanish, Italian, and English. The papers themselves draw on work completed in a variety of settings, including Euro-American contexts as well as Latin America and the Middle East. Several papers come from contributors who are directly engaged in activist work including Júlio da Silveira Moreira’s work in international humanitarian law with migrants passing
through Mexico and Federico Oliveri’s involvement with undocumented migrant protestors in Italy, as well as those engaged through professional roles (Smith) and personal practices (Askins) in transforming how we view migrants, their capacity for action, as well as our roles—within and beyond the academy—in migrant activism.

The papers were originally presented at the Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting in New York in 2012, where Gill and Conlon (co-editors for this proposed special issue) convened four consecutive conference sessions that explored the relationship between migration and activism. Four key themes emerged from the sessions. First, the papers represent a call to attend more closely to migrants’ own stories and voices as they resist, disrupt and interrupt processes of marginalisation: they emphasize the significance and transformative power of listening (Back, 2007). In this vein several of the papers critically consider alternatives to narratives that typically cast migrants as passive, or ‘primarily’ as migrants, or that render activists and related support roles as occupying some sort of charitable position toward migrants. Attending to some of the practical and contextual dilemmas that gird asylum seeker and refugee experiences, Smith advances a profoundly intimate perspective on appreciating migrants narratives as resistance, while by highlighting the emotion of interactions with migrants, Askins makes a case for understanding quieter, everyday forms of activism with and on behalf of migrants. Contributors also ask how we can design methodological approaches that respect migrants and their individuality, rather than collapsing them into discourses around victimhood, strangeness and otherness. These themes run throughout the collection of papers but are taken up in particular in the contributions from Smith, Askins and Holt.

A second theme concerns the relationships between vulnerability, resistance and agency as they are played out among migrant and host communities. In accordance with the recent trend towards a deeper and more critical theoretical engagement with the notion of resistance, the papers explore ‘narratives of resistance’ as a key practice among migrant women who perform their agency through recounting their life stories (Smith). Taking as their focus the extreme vulnerability and precarity encountered not only by asylum seekers but also refused asylum seekers, Waite et al. present a lucid account of the possibilities of resistance in situations of subjugation and forced labour. Also focused on labour issues, Caraccioli calls attention to how the physically embodied materialities of resistance allow for a richer understanding of precisely how and where resistance and disruption occurs in the current era.

A third theme examines contemporary places and spaces of migrant activism. Holt elucidates how domestic and imaginary spaces serve as sites of resilience, survival, hope, and activism among displaced Palestinians. Focusing on Latino migrants in the U.S., Caraccioli calls attention to the transnational spaces within and between which migrants live today in order to draw out some of the implications of these changed contexts and spaces for possibilities of political autonomy and action. Nicholls takes the well-established
immigrant gateway city of Los Angeles as a case study for examining the specific role and
dynamics that urban centres play in bringing together diverse migrant activist interests and
the role cities can play in developing a coherent immigrant rights movement. From a
different vantage point, Oliveri considers how a struggle by undocumented migrants in the
city of Brescia that manifested as the occupation of a mechanical crane expanded the
activists reach and literally and symbolically elevated migrant activism in Italy to new
heights.

The fourth theme emerging from the papers concerns the relationship between migrants
and centres of power such as states. The papers examine the extent to which migrants can
tactically utilise elements of the state to their own advantage. Oliveri’s paper, for example,
examines to what extent migrants can successfully use notions of ‘citizenship’ to challenge
established configuration of power and control. While da Silveira Moreira asks, to what
extent do states shape migrant networks through a politics of avoidance and absence, and,
relatedly, what are the implications of this politics for the violence that migrants
experience? And Suffee develops an analysis of intersecting sites of migration policy,
control, and activism, including state and international supra-state structures that exposes
the multiple self-contradictions that operate in these realms and consider how they might
be turned toward the service of marginalised migrant groups.

It is a reflection of recent developments in human geography including, for instance,
interest in emotional geographies (Bondi, 2005; Pain, 2009; Pile, 2010) and feminist
geopolitics (Hyndman, 2007; Sziarto and Leitner, 2010) that the substance of the papers
included here represent a shift in focus from an earlier thematic section of ACME on the
theme of borders and immigration. In that issue, published in 2003 with a lead article by
Harald Bauder outlining the case against immigration restrictions in Canada, contributors
examined the ideal configuration of borders: how should borders be and indeed, should we
have borders at all? While contributors remain engaged with these questions, in this special
issue contributors ‘dig in’ and dwell upon the emotional and psychological costs of various
types of borders in addition to delving into pressing political and practical issues in
migration and activism such as the DREAM Act in the US (Nicholls) and the practical
challenges for legal activism that attend migrants’ deaths in cross-border contexts (da
Silveira Moreira). While this special issue represents a distinct lens on migration, there is
continuity with the earlier ACME special issue in that contributors’ take up ongoing
questions about the ways borders and immigration control can be confronted and usurped.
This underscores the intractability of borders as well as the challenge and necessity of
thinking critically about border logics as they intersect with migration and activism in the
contemporary era.

Overall, the themes elucidated in these contributions advance two general objectives. First,
the contributions seek to expose and to theorise the strategies that are mobilised in order
to control human movement in a variety of different locations. Second, the papers describe
and theorise the ways in which these strategies are being, or could be, effectively interrupted by migrants and groups that seek to support them. Our intention, then, in bringing these papers together in a special theme issue of ACME titled Migration and Activism is to generate trans-national debates around effective counter-strategies in a difficult era for migrants and migrant support organisations alike.

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Abstracts
Narratives of Resistance: Listening to Women Refugees in the United Kingdom
Kate Smith

This paper will explore the narratives of women seeking asylum in the UK, expressed through voice and body (Gilligan 1982). It will look at how far women refugee narratives challenge public and policy perceptions of the ‘refugee experience’ or ‘imaginary refugee’ which are primarily identified and configured as male (Freedman, 2008; Hunt, 2008; Treatcher et al, 2003). Women who are named as dependents in the asylum process are regarded as passive dependents to men (Siddiqui et al, 2008) and secondary to men (Bloch et al, 2000). Furthermore, women claiming asylum are often regarded as ‘victims’, particularly of sexual violence and rape (Hajdukowski-Ahmed et al, 2009); ‘apolitical’ (Oxford, 2005); ‘non-political’ participating in ‘indirect political activity’ (Freedman, 2008); experiencing ‘private’ persecutions in domestic situations (Freedman, 2008); ‘vulnerable’ (Johnsson, 1989), living without family or community structure; and passive in decision making (Hajdukowski-Ahmed, 2009).

The narrative approach used in this study resists the essentialising, generalising or universalising of refugee experiences (Mallki, 1995) and attempts to ground academic activity in practical struggles and experiences of women’s lives. This paper opens up the possibility that narratives create resistance in the telling, offering accounts of women’s intentionality. The act of narrating experiences creates the possibility of a transformative process and resistance to the dominant understanding of what it means to be a woman.

If we accept that women’s experience narratives are not fixed or constant, it is inevitable that they reflect, are shaped by and located within economic, historical, cultural, social and political contexts. The narratives offer potential insights into: “the authority of marginalised voices” (Stone-Mediatore, 2009) and contribute to thinking about experience narratives as resistance through contradictions and experiences that are determined as un-categorisable, accommodating moments of ambiguity, vulnerability, fragmentation, uncertainty and discrepancy in the narrative.

Being Together: Everyday Activism and Emotion
Dr. Kye Askins

This paper explores the ways in which interpersonal relationships, and specifically the emotions caught up in these, may challenge dominant discourses of exclusion in the north east of England. It draws on a continuing participatory action research project with refugees, asylum seekers and local residents in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, engaged with an organisation that as part of its work runs a befriending scheme. Asylum seekers and refugees are paired with volunteer befrienders, whose role is to informally support new migrants to the area however the individuals in any pairing decide. Rather than a ‘mentoring’ relationship, the emphasis is on ‘being together’. A key theme emerging from
the research is the ways in which personal relationships develop through everyday activities in the local area: going for walks, coffee, to the cinema, being invited to each other’s houses, cooking meals ... and particularly the emotional and affective dimensions of being together. It is in the quotidian, small acts (rather than more traditional activism) that befrienders and befrienees negotiate differences, connections and identities, with emotional geographies caught up in resisting/shifting dominant narratives of exclusion/Otherness for all involved. The research also works through whether and how such relationships filter beyond the individuals concerned: where, when and why befrienders challenge racist perspectives in local societies and where, when and why befrienees disrupt discourses within asylum seeking and refugee communities that construct dominant society (in the NE of England) as unwelcoming.

The Palestine of Our Imagination: Refugee Women and Meanings of Home
Dr. Maria Holt

‘Home is memories and history. Home is a sense of self. Home is having a place in the world’ (Susskind, 1998)

But home is also loss and pain and insecurity. In order to mark the anniversary of the 1948 nakbah (‘catastrophe’) on 15 May 2011, thousands of Palestinian refugees made their way to the Lebanese-Israeli border. When I visited Lebanon just over a month later, I saw and heard evidence of their journey: a flag stained with the blood of a ‘martyr’, the account of a child who believed he had been to Palestine. The sense of home and homeland remains very strong for Palestinians in Lebanon and, out of this sense of rootedness, has emerged a resistance movement determined to make real the ‘Palestine of our imagination’. Inspired by memories of their homeland, successive generations have enacted forms of resistance, from militant activism to resilience and survival. As refugee camps have been invaded, homes destroyed and lives fragmented, Palestinian women have responded with stoicism and the abundant fruits of memory and imagination.

Drawing on fieldwork research carried out in Lebanon in 2006, 2007 and 2011, I will explore refugee women’s memories, coping mechanisms and dreams, and will argue that, while imagination is a necessary source of comfort, there needs to be real progress, at local and international levels, on the vexed question of how to solve the Palestinian refugee question.

Dr Louise Waite, Dr Hannah Lewis, Professor Peter Dwyer and Dr Stuart Hodkinson.

It is widely recognised that the lives of many asylum seekers and refugees are characterised by poverty, social exclusion and destitution, yet there is little research documenting their experiences of unfree labour and the reasons why they may be engaged in it, despite much anecdotal evidence that asylum seekers and refugees are touched by unfree labour. This
paper is drawn from a project that aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of unfree labour among asylum seekers and refugees based in England. The very nature of coercive employment practices for asylum seekers and refugees invoke lifeworlds outside the public gaze where acts of concealing and hiding are stitched into their everyday tactics of survival. Spaces of work become liminal; both to protect unscrupulous employers and to evade encounters with those who ‘police’ such spaces. In order to contribute to theoretical discussions of strategies of resistance in such unfree labouring environments, the paper will explore how individual and group resistance can be enacted through webs of coerced choices and involuntary actions that are characteristic of the relations of domination and dependency within unfree labouring. It will consider how to acknowledge both the unfreedom and the agency of the workers participating in our research, and it will discuss whether particular acts can be seen as tactical manipulations of power within a framing of resourceful tactics of the ‘weak’.

**Materialities of Resistance: Spaces of Public Autonomy in the Americas**  
Mauro Caraccioli

Scholars have long studied the challenges, resources, and strategies migrants bring with them to a new home. Terms such as ‘transnationalism from below’ and ‘grassroots globalization’ have been employed to make sense of the ways immigrant communities rely on increased access to technology to remain connected with their home countries, while also becoming integrated to local economies and communities (Appadurai 2000; Guarnizo and Smith 1998; Hirschman 2005). The subsequent ‘bifocality’ of migration – where migrants are “[obliged] to live within a transnational space” of displaced communities, while also “making a living by combining quite different forms of class experience” (Rouse 2004: 31) – has made the relation between displacement and tactics of ‘im-placement’ central to the study of contemporary Latino politics (see Casey 1993). Despite emphasis on migrant communities’ dual experience of place, what receives less attention is the way in which the changing contexts of Hispanic migration have generated political changes and autonomy within new destinations. In simpler terms, how are Hispanic migrants shaping local concerns in U.S. politics? How are these same groups – in transnational and international exchanges – affecting politics in their home countries? What makes their efforts today radically different than previous groups and efforts?

This paper looks at tactics employed by Hispanic migrant groups in the U.S. to enact instances of political autonomy. Hispanic immigrants today have increasingly joined forces in the face of state coercion to resist persecution, economic exploitation, and environmental injustice. While recent studies in political science, sociology, and human geography have attempted to frame the struggle for political autonomy and influence in light of transnational, cultural, religious, and citizenship dynamics (see Stepick et al. 2003; Williams et al. 2009; Nelson and Hiemstra 2008), this paper offers a broader place-based framework.
Specifically, it argues that in turning towards activism, migrant groups in the U.S. have embodied practices and ideals of place-making that transform and re-envision definitions of community, economy, politics, and their place within a broader environmental framework. Thinking otherwise about geopolitics, I suggest that these groups are presently situated in both a geopolitical and conceptual crisis, where community and work spaces inhabited by Hispanics are being re-thought and re-constituted through advocating for agricultural workers’ rights, immigration reform, and environmental justice campaigns. I unpack their history and activities through the lens of migrant dislocation and the employment of a counter-logic of immediate placement (‘im-placement’), highlighting the experiential dynamics of migrant place-making and their potential for autonomy.

The Urban Basis of the Immigrant Rights Movement in the United States
Walter J. Nicholls, University of Amsterdam

Recent literature on the immigrant rights movement in the United States and Europe has shown how marginalized immigrants use methods of collective action to express their rights claims in receiving countries. These movements are vehicles for ‘giving voice’ to highly stigmatized people with few rights and little legitimacy. While the literature has revealed some of the mechanisms than enhance the power of immigrants, it has largely ignored the explicit role of cities in this process. In keeping with much of the social movement literature, contributors to this literature largely assume that these mobilizations unfold on the ‘head of a pin’. Through the case study of Los Angeles, this paper reveals how the specific qualities of the “urban” contributed to fostering powerful relations between diverse activists within this social movement milieu. This milieu is constituted by activists from different worlds including immigrant rights associations, labor unions, universities, religious organizations, and political parties. Certain places in the city have become ‘connecting points’ for these diverse activists (e.g. universities, religious centers, events, cafes and bars, etc.), providing activists with adjacent interests to develop relations with one another. The incremental process of stitching together relations between these diverse activists has permitted them to develop trust, solidarity, and collective knowledge; assets that have enhanced their mobilization and innovation capacities. Moreover, on-going discussions between diverse activists in the same city permit the construction of common critiques, frames, and narratives, contributing to a loose but relatively coherent critical political imaginary. Rather than cities being the backdrop of the immigrant rights movement, the relational conditions found within them have made certain cities (Los Angeles in particular) into central hubs for driving the national immigrant rights movement forward. These relational processes are examined through one particular campaign: the effort to pass the federal Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act) in 2010. The paper employs 31 semi-structured interviews and content analysis of the New York Times.
‘We’re all on that crane’: Undocumented migrants’ struggles in Brescia, Italy
Federico Oliveri

From October 30th to November 16th 2010, six undocumented migrants have blockaded themselves on top of a 115 foot high crane in the city of Brescia. They were part of a demonstration against the criminogenic effects of Italian immigration laws. These migrants refused to come down before the government agreed to instigate a new regularisation procedure. They denounced the existence of a huge amnesty fraud: after having applied for a permit to stay, paying the government 500 euro, they were dropped from the procedure for having produced false employment documents sold to them by swindlers. Moreover, some of them fell under a new governmental decree punishing with prison those who had remained in the country after a first expulsion. After long negotiations and two court decisions against the crime of irregular migration, they obtained the permit to stay and the re-opening of about 24 000 frozen regularisation files.

This paper presents the ‘crane struggle,’ emulated in many other Italian cities, as a strategy to denounce the role played by the law in the creation of migrants’ working and living conditions, and to substitute the image of undocumented migrants as criminals by nature with the image of right-bearing subjects fighting not only for their own rights but for many others as well. Especially in a time of crisis, the universalistic dimension of these struggles (‘We’re all on that crane’) explains why they enjoyed a significant echo in the media and gained unexpected popular support.

Violence against Migrants en route Through Mexico: The Tamaulipas Massacre
Júlio da Silveira Moreira

This paper is a synopsis of research into violence against migrants travelling over Mexican territory. It attends to problems and theories of human rights and international migration. It offers a detailed study of the experiences of migrants travelling over land through Mexico and examines the violence they encounter with a specific focus on the story, meaning and repercussions of the Tamaulipas Massacre. At the same time it also explores the significance of seemingly mundane processes such as the mapping of routes taken by migrants across Mexican territory both to the processes of sharing knowledge among an emerging migrant community of resistance, and in circulating powerful myths about migration among government actors.

Zakeera Suffee
The propagation of restrictive migration policies within the European Union provides a unique example of the now ever presiding sentiment of exclusion and expulsion of irregular migrants at the political borders. However, through local grass roots activists and transnational civil society actors the political landscape of borders and border camps are changing. As examples of Anderson’s reimagining of political communities, migrants and activists have been able to transform and engage in these spaces whether in an attempt to provide basic services, or as arenas of solidarity to better qualify the ethos of rights as a universal concept, rather than the decree of nation states conferring citizenship. After setting out a conceptual framework, this paper examines where these changes are taking place, arguing that a diverse set of places, from border camps to immigration removal centres – can act as the stage for political change. Following this, the paper explores the relationship between migrants at these camps and centres, with transnational civil society and local grassroots activist groups. The aim here is to assess the policy recommendations from the transnational civil society actors coming out of this work, as well as the practical challenges facing effective solidarity for local grass roots organisations to create collective counter-strategies in abolishing the restrictive policies of the EU.

References


