AFRICAN BORDER-CROSSINGS IN A ‘CITY OF OTHERS’:
CONSTELLATIONS OF IRREGULAR IM/MOBILITY AND IN/EQUALITY
IN THE EVERYDAY URBAN ENVIRONMENT OF ATHENS

IOANNA TSONI
Malmö University

This paper ethnographically explores the border-crossing experience of sub-Saharan African migrants in Athens. The everyday social visibility and spatial mobility of migrants in the city is viewed through a critical phenomenological perspective centering on irregularity and border-crossing as a lived experience which, in times of financial crisis, is shared by other vulnerable urban dwellers beyond the migrant/non-migrant dichotomy. The salience of such practices for current discourses and policies concerning migration, urban public space, citizenship and identity in a series of socio-political scales is explored. As migrants’ im/mobility and in/visibility intersect with emerging, crisis-induced patterns of social in/equality in Greece, they become strategic actors who construct new understandings of self and other, indicate emergent political and social configurations, and daily reassert their ‘right to the city’ in the ‘city of Others’.

Introduction

In an effort to strongly highlight the border- and boundary-crossing experience of irregular sub-Saharan African migrants in crisis-ridden Greece—a situated experience that is possibly quite distant from the perceptions, and even the imaginations, of ‘bona fide’ citizens elsewhere in the world—this paper opens with an extensive excerpt from the handwritten journal of one of the research participants, Michel.

This ‘reverse’ approach to academic writing, although uncommon, is an effective heuristic device which helps to convey meaning in a thickly descriptive manner in an individual’s own words. No amount of scholarly translation by the researcher could make up for the density of information and the emotional power instilled in such a text. As King et al. (1998)
succinctly put it in their paper ‘A migrant’s story: from Albania to Athens’, which similarly uses as a foundation the first-hand account of a single Albanian migrant in Greece: ‘Above all, we wish to stress the power and immediacy of the individual’s testimony—part of a growing appreciation in migration studies of the simple technique of listening directly and empathetically to the voices of migrants themselves’ (1998: 159).

Here the powerful story of Michel is foregrounded. This is his personal story, which he wrote himself in his ‘migration journal’ (a method that is explained in detail later on). A few selected participants in my research on African migrants in Athens were asked to record their impressions of the journey they have been on and Michel is one of them. His story is offered as a backdrop, setting the scene for the theoretical points to be raised in the paper.

Michel’s street name is ‘Canada’, a name which was given to him by his friends because of his strong wish to visit Canada one day. He lives in Kypseli, a centrally located and densely populated neighbourhood of Athens with a very high concentration of African immigrants. More specifically, he lives around Platia Amerikis (America Square), a small square in Kypseli where many irregular migrants gather. Indicative of that is the way in which my African participants would refer to the square jokingly as ‘Platia Afrikis’ (Africa Square) since ‘There are no Americans there, only Africans!’.

His native tongues are Pular and French; however, he chose to write in English, which he learnt by himself ‘on the road’. Minimal grammatical corrections have been made for the sake of readability.

The Story

My name is Michel. I am 28 years old. I am a Guinean by nationality. I left my country to Greece to seek human protection for spiritual and political reasons, unknowing that Greece is the worse. I went from Guinee to Sierra Leone, from there to Egypt, from Egypt to Syria, from Syria to Turkey. I entered in Greece 2010: by ship to Turkey and from Turkey to Greece by foot. When I entered I was arrested by the Greek police at the border from Turkey to Greece. I was locked up in prison for a week. They released me and later took me to Alexandroupoli, where they gave me paper and told me that I must leave the country within 30 days. I was at Alexandroupoli for 4 days sleeping outside because there was no money to pay for transport to Athens. When I was in Alexandroupoli I was sleeping in a platia for 4 days where a Greek guy asked me my problems and later helped me by buying me food and bought me a ticket to Athens after I had explained my
problems to him. While I was there, some Greeks were laughing at me and my friends because of our condition at that time. We were 4 in number. Me and my friends were begging for food. During the process some people cooperated and some didn’t, and even mocking at us. Looking us with some kind of low eyes. Sometimes they can even use some words and pointing fingers at us by saying ‘kita mavro’ meaning ‘look at blacks’.

I arrived in Athens at 6 a.m. in the morning at Omonia. I did not know anything and anyone back then. Now I know Omonia is where the drug dealers are in concord with the junkies, the police is in concord with the drug dealers, the pimps with the prostitutes, the prostitutes with the immigrants. Omonia! When I was standing I saw some black people on the bus and I took the next bus with this direction. I came to Kypseli. I was at the park till 2 p.m. when I saw one guy from Sudan who took me to Platia Amerikis where I was introduced to some Guineans who later took me to their house. When I reached in the house where they took me I was asked to pay a sum of 80 euros before they can allow me in. The sorriest part was I entered with 10 euros in Athens. So I told them that I had no money with me, and they didn’t accept me and they threwed me out.

After I went to a demolish house just to find shelter to sleep cause I couldn’t sleep out because of rain and cold. I met some guys in the place where I went to shelter myself. We were living there as family, as friends, though sometimes we used to have little quarrels. I was there with these guys managing life together. They took me to many places where we used to have free food. These places were very far from where we live. These places were located in different areas with different times. The first place was at 9 a.m., the other place was 11 a.m., the other was at 6 p.m. and the last place was 8 p.m. At those places there were many people, also Greek, old and young, that were also sleeping out like us because of the economy in Greece is bad now. They would tell us where to go to get free clothes or shoes and things like that. Sometimes we used to go to all of these places, while sometimes we only go to some of them. Like the place where I used to go in the morning (9 a.m.) I woke up at 6 a.m. to prepare in order to reach early cause sometimes if we are late we will get there and everything is finish and return back home with no food. Sometimes we used to fight for food at the places where we used to go for food.

At the demolish house where I lived it was very cold inside and there was a lot of water right under our beds during raining time. That means when it rains no sleeping and the place was smelling. No water, neither toilet in the demolish house where I lived. We used to go out at night, that is around 3 a.m. in search of water at the platia cause we were afraid of the
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people not to call police for us and not to accuse us of stealing water. Sometimes we can stay for a week with no bath cause the water was very cold, no heater to heat it. And sometimes when we wash with the cold one we get sick, but we just have to because we could not stay without bathing. Sometimes I used to go out at night to pick or look for empty bottle and sell them to the Pakistan shop in order to make money to buy calling cards and for other needs. After one year, I decided to leave the demolish house where I lived and rent a shoplike house—just an old store—because it was very cheap. I started going to dustbin (skoupidia) to look for old stuff that has been condemned by others, and sell them in the market in the street (laiki) every week where everyone goes to buy groceries in order to make some money. Sometimes I have two euro, or three euro and I buy my food. I was on this (picking bottle at nite and going for skoupidia (karochi) during the day."

Greek people are very bad people, they never love black or foreigner, even when we are finding something in the dirtybox, Greek people are very racist, they shout on us and if you don’t go they will call police and the police never asks you for what happened. They just take you to the jail. Maybe you stay there 3 months, or 6 months. And the way the police people treating us like animals, and most of the people in Greece, they take us like animals. We the Black, we are not animals. We are a human being like them. Or when we are riding in bus, if you will sit down with them they will leave the chair next to you and will go far from you or they will shout on you and embarrass you and if you want to argue with them they will call police and the police will never ask you what is wrong, they will just take you to the station and detain you.

And after some months I stop picking bottle and continue with the skoupidia work. I leaved the shop where I was and rented a room with my friend. We decided to stay there. Sometime, when I was on my karochi work people used to laugh at me and the police sometimes they disturb me by asking me for paper unecessarily and sometimes they can even take me with them and left my karochi there. They have done that many times to me which pissed me off. But there is nothing I can do about it cause the problem is that any time they catch me, I lost my karochi. Any time they leave me I have to start all over by searching for another karochi. I usually feel very bad about that. Sometimes after filling my karochi to go and sell to the Pakistan or the Yifto they caughted me on the way and lost everything. That means all my effort have wasted. As a result, I decided to stopped and going out to search for job. I was on that for over 3 months searching. Fortunately I found a job to wash cars (plintirio). But the salary was very
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small and the boss always insulted me by calling me fool (vlaka, poutana and malaka) which was very embarrassing and I felted very bad. I left that job and decided to look for another one. After, I got another one that is to work in a restaurant (three times per week). I love this one because the boss and others that work there are very nice people. Since then, life change a bit for me. I am better than before, though the embarrassment is still the same (I mean the police). I pray to be further successful so I can one day go back and to help the development of my country. I am black, and I am proud. I have Jesus in my heart, Martin Luther King in my mind and Malcolm X in my arms. We hope and pray that things will become better some day.

CANADA

Research Methodology

This paper presents some results arising from my eighteen months of exploratory fieldwork among African migrants in the centre of Athens and beyond. Migrant journeys have been followed onwards and backwards in time and space through the elicitation of personal narratives, supplemented by mobile and creative methods. Taken together, this material renders visible the hidden geographies of everyday b/order crossings at the south-eastern borderlands of Europe.

From Ethnography to Autoethnography

Ethnography and qualitative methodologies are the most appropriate for eliciting the perspectives and experiences of marginalised populations in situations of social precariousness and for evoking dense and textured representations of their everyday lives. Irregular migration flows and border controls are complex phenomena calling for increased attention. In this context the role of ethnography is crucial in ‘sensitizing not only anthropologists and other social scientists, but also policymakers, politicians and broader publics to the complicated, often anxiety-ridden and frightening realities of illegality within specific host society contexts and in comparative terms across the globe’ (Willen 2007a: 10).

Since the early stages of this research, the challenge of finding a narrative style that would grant freedom of expression and embrace the totality of my respondents’ experience, as well as mine, while maintaining academic credibility, became evident. Ethnographic methodologies, although indicated for research on migration and borders, could not entirely encompass the
way in which I had engaged with, and been affected by, my fieldwork. I needed to develop a form of narrative that could embrace the vulnerable sides of both the researched and the researcher alike, making the writing of this account meaningful not just as a piece of scientific text, but as a complete human experience. The systematic ‘sociological introspection’ that autoethnography advocates (Ellis 2004) reconciled most aspects of my research, while encompassing the experiences of all participants—myself included. Moreover, it allowed space for me to write an emotionally saturated, evocative account of my observations. The masterful example of the autoethnographic ‘illegal’ border-crossing narrative of Khosravi (2010) provided excellent guidance, as well as scholarly and moral encouragement to endorse a similar narrative style.

**Border Narratives**

Throughout my fieldwork, ‘migrant border narratives’ have been observed, recorded and collaboratively mapped. These are testimonies of mobility and fixity, stories of how undocumented migrants got ‘here’ and why. They are accounts of what types of border and boundary, visible and invisible, and of what scales, had to be crossed. They are rough sketches of how these border-crossings were experienced, of how they were signified and performed. Hanging out on park benches, playing dominos in candle-lit (for lack of electricity) apartments, taking walks, jumping school fences to play football after hours, gathering around a communal bowl of granat soup and fufu, we talked and, each for our own reasons, tried together to make sense of the emerging meanings of the ‘adventure’ of migration, of the city, of what and where home is. We tried to trace who we are: who we are to each other and who we all become through our journeys and through our individual and collective border-crossings.

It has been argued that ‘approaching the border through narratives means allowing for its historicity and relationality’ to unfold (Doevenspeck 2011: 129). Narrativisation is an important medium, which helps people to create order in their worlds, as well as to sustain and construct both personal and collective identities. These identities are continuously narrativised and performed through the available social and cultural discourses. By listening to people’s narratives it is possible to gain an understanding of the meaning of borders in their lives and identities, to clarify such meanings and collect finely nuanced experiences and practices around them.

Migrant border narratives are personal accounts of journeys, centering on the migrants’ encountering, traversing and inhabiting borders and
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From Mobile Field . . .

Migrants’ increasingly complex patterns of spatial mobility—at the urban, as well as at a global scale—call into question static and neat conceptualisations of the research field as a clearly demarcated area that a researcher can enter into and exit from unproblematically. The mobile border-crossing subjects pose challenges not just to our generally kinetophobic and claustro-manic societies (Papastergiadis 2010, Ruming 2009), but to research and its methodology as well. The research field—anchored on the migrating bodies—becomes mobile in itself as migrants navigate urban, national and international space. Therefore, it became obvious to me that it is imperative for ethnographies of migration to develop methods that can trace paths of circulation and travel more efficiently, while also incorporating the mobility patterns of various actors between multiple research sites rather than assume the fixity and rootedness of its subjects.

What became evident early on was the urgency of coming up with a method that would combine the hypermobile lifestyles of irregular migrants with that of the researcher, while allowing us to keep in systematic touch despite the distance as well as the ambiguity and unpredictability of our schedules. What I was grappling with was close to what Clifford (1997: 2) describes as: ‘[the ethnographer’s] field-site opens onto complex histories of dwelling and travelling . . . Fieldwork is less a matter of localized dwelling and more a series of travel encounters. Everyone’s on the move, and has been for centuries: dwelling-in-travel’.

. . . To Mobile Methods

Mobile methods (Büscher and Urry 2009, Fincham et al. 2010) ‘are very useful in recognizing migrant subjectivities as always on the move, always changing, and always shifting within, among, and between various locations and spaces’ (Keller 2004: 207). Such methods facilitate the empirical tracing
of migrant experiences across a geographically dispersed field, fragments of which are embedded in migrating bodies and set in motion with them.

Research methods that are ‘on the move’ open up possibilities to explore the fleeting, scattered and overlapping realities of migrants’ lives, while capturing their affective and kinaesthetic experiences in a context of mobility. As such, they make it possible to collect and weave together thick descriptions of the migrants’ condition of irregularity and their experiences of material and immaterial border-crossings at a series of nested scales converging at the level of the urban, which is this paper’s level of analysis.

Mobile methodologies can also help to ‘unsituate’ the subject in migration so that a better understanding and recognition of subjectivities can emerge as being in flux, on the move and shifting within, among and between various locations and spaces. The combination of such methodologies in the context of multisited ethnographic research brings forth the emerging genre of mobile ethnography (Cresswell 2011).

**The Phenomenology of Borders**

In an effort to bridge the distance between ‘a phenomenology of borders’ (Hanson 2009) and ‘the critical phenomenology of migrant “illegality”’ (Willen 2007a), I draw on the insight of Desjarlais, who notes that ‘Anthropology is in dire need of theoretical frames that link the phenomenal and the political . . . especially [studies] that convincingly link modalities of sensation, perception and subjectivity to pervasive political arrangements’ (1997: 25). This paper constitutes a preliminary attempt to articulate a ‘critical phenomenology of irregular border crossings’ at the level of the urban as ‘a phenomenologically inclined account . . . which attends at once to the concerns and lifeworlds of [ethnographic subjects] and to the interrelated social, discursive, and political forces that underpinned those concerns and lifeworlds’ (Desjarlais 2005: 369).

**Migration Journals**

One such method is the use of the ‘migration journal’, from where the introductory excerpt is taken. The idea of such a journal came up during a casual discussion within a group of research participants on how we could keep in touch during the times I would be away from Athens while, at the same time, they were making preparations to travel further into Europe. These journals were an attempt to keep the conversation going and create intimate, even though geographically and temporally dispersed, spaces of
sharing and meaning-making while, *en passant*, preserving their life-stories as a part of our collective history.

**‘What’s In A Name?’: That Which We Call ‘An Illegal’**

My research participants, mostly men in their twenties, were migrants from various African countries who had entered Greece in an unauthorised manner. In English a number of words are used interchangeably to denote irregular migrants: illegal, clandestine, deportable, unreported (De Genova 2002, Willen 2007b), each one fraught with definitional, ideological and political implications. In Greek discourse, these people are being referred to as ‘*paranomi metanastes*’ (illegal migrants) and ‘*lathrometanastes*’ (contraband or stowaway migrants) or simply ‘*lathro*’. The first term, which, compared to the others, is the most politically correct—although only occasionally used—flatly excludes them from the ethnocentric attribution of ‘the right to have rights’ within the political, judicial, social and territorial dimensions of the nation state. The succeeding term ‘*lathrometanastes*’ denaturalises migrants’ humanity by drawing analogies between human beings and unlicensed, imported commodities. Systematically depicted as ‘villains’, migrant personhoods are therefore reduced to smuggled objects that evade the regular process of being imported, streamlined, quality-checked, sorted out, stamped and stowed or discarded under the market-driven logic of state control. ‘*Lathro*’—its next-of-kin term—further exemplifies the argument: by keeping only the adjective in singular neutral form and dropping the noun ‘*metanastis*’ (migrant) it rejects migrant subjectivities altogether, locking the absent attribute in perpetual abjection and depoliticisation.

The term I advocate, in both my academic and my personal engagement with this topic, the use of which is delimited by the social, historical and spatial scope of my research, is ‘irregular migrants’. By ‘irregular’ I refer both to African migrants in the Greek context who are indeed undocumented, and to those in possession of valid legal documents. This is because darker- and, even more so, black-skinned migrants in Greece, are commonly grouped together by the authorities, the media and public discourse based on their readily observable phenotypic Otherness, regardless of their ethnic or national origins, or their actual legal status. Bound together by their ‘non-belongingness’ to the Greek body politic, migrants are generally regarded as an irregularity in and of themselves and are consequently subjected to indiscriminate discrimination by citizens and authorities alike. Echoing the concern of Willen (2007a), I find it necessary to problematise the transferability of
terms used to describe presumably similar life conditions in different contexts, such as that of migrant ‘illegality’. The role of ethnography in this endeavour is crucial: ‘It is important to note that lack of legal status does not necessarily generate forms of social suffering… Indeed, in some migration settings and some historical moments, lack of legal status may have relatively small impact on migrants’ everyday lives… It is precisely this variation that highlights the need for greater comparative investigation of how the abject condition of illegality shapes migrants’ subjective lived experience in diverse migration settings, or, put differently, for ethnographic research into migrant illegality as the catalyst for particular forms of “abjectivity” ’ (Willen 2007a: 10–11).

Itinerant Paths of African Migration

Despite the long-standing, though numerically moderate, presence of African migrants in Greece, little attention has been given to them in social research. Conflict-torn countries such as Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan used to be the main countries of origin. In recent years, however, there has been a notable increase in the numbers of West African arrivals. The demographics of the group remain quite obscure. According to the data summarised by Papadopoulos and Fratsea (2013: 7): ‘In 2001, 7,000 people were migrants from sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). By 2010, 3.4% of valid residence permits were in the possession of Africans. Nearly 5,000 people from SSA (1% of total migrants) had valid residence permits, over half of them being men and one tenth under 18 years of age. The majority of both men and women were in the 26-to-45 age group. Moreover, more than three quarters of this population is concentrated in the city of Athens’. A large number among them originates from former French colonies (Ivory Coast, Senegal, Guinea-Conakry, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Mali etc.). Their itineraries are found, nowadays, far from the traditional migration routes towards the lands of their former colonisers that vaguely remain as final destinations. This is illustrated in the recounting of the geographical detour in Michel’s journey through Egypt, Syria and Turkey to Greece.

The larger socio-economic transformations in Africa have resulted in increased flows of migration to Europe in recent years. In response, the implementation of concerted Frontex operations effectively sealed off many of the long-established entry points along the Spanish and Italian land and maritime borders (Reid-Henry 2013). In addition, bilateral agreements regarding readmissions and the further securitisation of borders were signed
between Spain, Italy and several African countries (Baldwin-Edwards 2006). Paired with the externalisation and ‘offshoring’ of EU borders inside African territory (Bialasiewicz 2012), the aforementioned factors caused a sudden change of direction in sub-Saharan migratory flows further to the East. Greece, which was traditionally a country of emigration, suddenly turned into a de facto immigrant destination, as well as a stop-over and transit ‘highway’ for irregular migration and refugee flows heading further north-west into the European Union.

In the aftermath of the recent regional geopolitical developments in Africa and the Middle East, Greece is currently one of the main entry ‘gates’ to Europe, upon whose borders diametrically different worldviews and necessities collide. Sub-Saharan Africans emerge as the archetypal postcolonial postcolonial subjects from a geopolitical territory where the colonial nation-state project remained largely inchoate up to the recent wake of postnational cultural and political formations (Balibar and Williams 2002). Traditional precolonial and prenational conceptualisations prevalent in Africa perceive space as mobile, borders as flexible, boundaries as resources instead of impediments, and circulation as the most appropriate method of managing the uncertainty of life (Breusers 1998, Mechlinski 2010). In the same manner, routes are viewed as not necessarily fixed, straightforward and rational, but rather as discontinuous, indeterminate and serendipitous. African loyalties, identities and belongings are fragmented and coincidentally re-articulated in constellations in which national identification plays only a part.

Greece’s geographical position and the unmanageability of its long and intricate borders, paired with regional geopolitical shifts and the long-standing failure of successive governments to formulate and implement coherent migration policies, led to a steep increase in the scale and diversity of incoming migrant flows. This was followed by a dramatic increase of the death toll instigated by precarious border-crossings (Strik 2012). These border-crossings have become hot debates as they are intertwined with issues of culture, identity formation and citizenship, the EU and Greek state policies on security and sovereignty, and social constructions of Otherness and of nationhood.

However, it is worth noting that, despite the portrayal of migrants’ arrival as an ‘imminent invasion’ by the media and the authorities (de Haas 2008), most African migratory flows are contained within the African continent and remain restricted to internal and regional migrations. Regional circulation has traditionally been viewed as the most appropriate method to manage the uncertainties of life. In much of sub-Saharan and Sahelian Africa, production and livelihoods derive primarily from the activity of circulation,
which affects goods, people and the locations themselves (Malam Moussa 2005, Walther 2009). The externalisation of EU borders, however, has increased the difficulty of releasing the traditional ‘socio-economic pressure valve’ through internal migration. Facing ever-increasing difficulties in migrating over short or medium distances so as to alleviate precarious life conditions, would-be migrants may feel compelled to embark on intercontinental journeys, which bear a significant additional allure despite the dangers they pose.

Cultural differences regarding perceptions of migration are illustrated by the way in which migrants from the former French colonies systematically refer to this process as ‘adventure’ (aventure) and to themselves as travellers (voyageurs) or adventurers (aventuriers), while seasoned migrants who have succeeded in their journey are informally called ‘guerriers’ (warriors) who have become hardened and unafraid from ‘travelling border to border’, as opposed to ‘wimpy regular migrants’ who just took an aeroplane to a Western European capital. The term ‘aventurier’ has recently started coming up in francophone research (Pian 2005, Vidal 2011). The conceptualisation of the adventurer departs from understandings of the migrant as a heterodirected individual who is caught between and subjected to ‘push and pull’ dynamics. Instead, this notion opens up actor-initiated angles at perceiving migration, stretching our vocabulary and mental frames on sub-Saharan dispositions towards human mobility.

The Minefield of Erupted Borders

Greek national sovereignty, under the impetus set in motion by the financial crisis, seems to be ‘hollowing out’ through the exodus of core state authorities from the national regulation and their transfer either to supranational institutions (EU, ECB, IMF, Frontex), or private corporations (large-scale privatisations, outsourcing of detention centres). Although appearing antithetical at first glance, these overwhelming pressures act, in fact, synergetically. With the added strain of cross-border mobility, a process resembling a vacuum implosion of the nation-state nucleus has been triggered. The external national borders have subsided, fractured and dispersed themselves across the internal territory of Greece, creating a scattered minefield of physical, social and symbolic barriers upon whose lines different authorities interlock, and which can be encountered down to the smallest micro-social scale.

Modern national sovereignty appears to be increasingly becoming an act of negation (the creation of groupings of ‘us’ against ‘them’ and the
ensuing assignment of rights and responsibilities to each). The erosion of sovereignty paired with the disintegration of social cohesion in Greece has set forth several non-democratically accountable forces. These ‘vigilante’ groups—the most prominent among which are the street-squads of Golden Dawn—coalesce and attempt to impose or reinforce ethno-national symbolic boundaries, in an effort to carve out exclusionary ‘lebensraum’ [sic] for them and those ‘like them’ against the threat of ‘Others’. Such behaviours are widespread and legitimised in public discourse. As indicated in Michel’s narrative, but also as testified by literally every participant in my research, migrants encounter such behaviours daily. The reactions of a large part of Greek society towards migrants cover the entire spectrum, ranging from mockery, suspicion and discrimination, to open hostility such as racial slurs and physical attacks.

Greece is currently suspended at the crucial moment of becoming a normalised ‘state of exception’ in itself: ‘the moment where the borders are erected within the national territory; tearing up any apparent society of equals’, becoming the signifiers of modern national sovereignty, as Papadopoulos and Tsianos (2007: 232) aptly put it, and where ‘the originary relation of law to life is not application but abandonment’ (Agamben 1998: 29). This condition of arbitrary de-bordering and re-bordering of material and immaterial boundaries is in itself a cause and effect of the newly emerging patterns of migrant immobility and of the ways in which these intersect with the rapidly shifting positions of other social groups within and beyond state, race, class and gender boundaries in Athens.

Reminiscent of another city in the South—Mexico City—the reinforced Greek borders turn inwards and cut open their capital. In the words of Erfani (1998: 143–144), ‘It is not that the U.S.-Mexico border . . . has been relocated to the capital, but, instead, that yet another borderland has sprung right up in the heart of the country’. Athens becomes a borderland within a border land since Greece, under the impulse of the financial crisis, seems to have become unshackled from the Eurocentric North and now drifts on a flailing southbound trajectory. The city is staked by a multitude of visible and invisible limits. These political, mental and symbolic boundaries are set in place by the series of dialectical supra- and sub-national processes which are currently at play in the region. The question: ‘Does Europe have a South?’ (Dainotto 2011) sounds disquietingly familiar. Along these lines, the European South, and within it Greece, seems to become ‘intimately tied to a global south and inseparable from it: they are both the “state of exception” defining by antithesis the spirit and identity of Europe’ (Dainoto 2011: 37).
Constructing ‘The Other’

Until recently, policies regarding migration in Greece only revolved around the containment of ‘illegal’ migration and border controls, aiming at the preservation of the monoethnic and monocultural character of Greek society (Triandafyllidou 2005). Existing laws were inconsistently implemented due to the idiosyncratic discordances within and between the various political agendas in Greece and the fragmentary attitudes of public opinion on these issues. In addition, the discourse on immigrant integration was systematically obfuscated with that on ‘illegal’ migration, further disorienting public opinion.

Triandafyllidou and Veikou (2002) argue that ‘a hierarchy of Greekness’ is constructed in Greek political discourse as different immigrant groups are organised in concentric circles around the ethno-genealogical concept which lies at the core of Greek national identity. This hierarchy creates multiple levels of inclusion and exclusion between migrant groups, based on qualities such as ethnicity and religion. Certain groups of Greek ethnic origin, such as Former Soviet Union Pontians and Greek-Albanians, are favoured by state policies. Besevegis and Pavlopoulos (2008) argue that the ‘cultural distance’ assumption is validated in the case of Greece, since migrants of Greek ethnic origin are followed by those from European countries and the Balkans, with individuals of Arabic, Asian and sub-Saharan origin occupying the lower tiers of this hierarchy.

‘Plastic citizenship’, which creates ‘plastic subjectivities’ (from the notion of plasticity) are two terms coined by Konsta and Lazaridis (2010: 368) to denote the development of pliant civic identities in Greece where ‘boundaries are blurred and processes of becoming, or not, are fluid, changing over time and influenced by notions of who should belong and who should not, who is entitled to what rights and who is not’.

Claims of social inclusion in Greece are guided by such assumptions of a ‘hierarchy of Greekness’ and the ensuing ‘plastic subjectivities’, which are becoming ever more exclusionary. The recent financial crisis seems to reinforce these hierarchies and to solidify the formerly semi-pliable civic identities, while xenophobic media representations lead to the exacerbation of negative attitudes towards migrants.

‘Others’, who may be defined in terms of a number of criteria (race, ethnicity, religion etc.), are constructed in opposition to the ‘we’ of the Greek imagined community and are systematically marginalised and to be eventually expelled from the Greek body-politic. As Bauman mentions, ‘All societies produce strangers, but each kind of society produces its own kind of strangers, and produces them in its own inimitable way’ (1997: 17). In the past, the threatening ‘Other’ was personified primarily as ‘the Albanian’.
During the last decade, however, migrants from South-East Asia, Afghanistan and Africa took their place as Albanian migrants integrated to almost complete indistinguishability within Greek society.

In this context, sub-Saharan Africans are not only perceived as extraneous to material aspects of urban space—in which they should remain invisible—but also as falling outside institutional regulations, symbolic codes and social practices, which serve to put people ‘in their place’ in social and spatial contexts. Those who embody the triptych ‘black-Muslim-man’, as most of my respondents did, are therefore personified as the ‘extraordinary exceptions’. They are the absolute Others who should remain hidden, out of the public realm and be restricted to private spaces.

However, Africans in Athens find themselves placed—unlikely and unluckily—at the very heart of a heavily securitised metropolis and at the epicentre of political discourse. Michel has to dwell in dilapidated and abandoned buildings, now found abundantly in the centre of Athens. In a peculiar interplay between social visibility and invisibility, the daily routines of irregular migrants such as work, praying, personal hygiene and eating, which are primarily performed in private, are now transferred to the public realm. Michel makes his living dragging his cart along central avenues looking for recyclable materials. He searches for water in public spaces and joins food lines in public squares. Interiority is thus brought into exterior spaces. Privacy is performed publicly, yet ‘invisibly’, by people like Michel who undeniably stand out in this context.

In the political and socio-economic turmoil that Greece is currently in, and despite the ever-closer intertwining of Greece with Europe, we observe the paradoxical phenomenon of Greece falling ever-outside the mental borders of Europe. As ‘the cradle of European identity’ is being ejected to its utmost periphery, and as Greeks are being perceived around Europe as ‘less than Europeans’, they find themselves at the very epicentre of discourses about the essence and future of Europe and, indeed, the world—quite like the migrants and the vehement rhetoric around them. As Greeks become the European ‘Others’, this pressure is alleviated internally with the invention of ‘domestic Others’—the ‘Others of the Others’.

In Athens, migrants negotiate their social visibility among an array of other actors in urban space: the police, Greeks living around or below the poverty line, their well-off employers, and other groups of immigrants and urban subalterns with whom they form makeshift alliances under the effects of the financial crisis.

It is within this context that ‘irregular’ migrants in Greece find themselves sharing their spaces of social and spatial exclusion in ever-closer proximity
to ‘regular’ citizens. The ‘regular irregulars’ of Athens (migrants, junkies, prostitutes, the homeless, Roma people) today live side-by-side with the ‘irregular regulars’ (the downwardly mobile native Greeks who are the social and economic casualties of the crisis), joined in their ‘irregular irregularity’ inside the urban underbelly.

**Athens as a City of ‘Others’ and the Beehive of Kypseli**

In an increasingly urbanised and globalised world, the urban context plays a crucial role. Cities have great importance in the organisation of migration, all the more so in the present context of global crisis, as societies undergo rapid economic, social, political and cultural change (Kaika 2012, Mantanika and Kouki 2011). Through their spatial and material qualities, cities become the terrain of concentration, as well as of contestation, of ever-increasing tensions occurring at national and international level, one among which is the heated topic of transit and/or settlement of large numbers of migrants within them.

The presence of the ‘stranger’, the ‘Other’ and his positioning along a series of binaries—inside/outside, close/far, mobility/immobility and, most importantly, the division between public/private in public space—is central to urban theory. In a social environment such as the Greek, which bears deeply the imprints of a mandate of conformity and compliance to an elusive yet imperative ‘regularity’, it is surmised that the material manifestation of society—the urban space it inhabits—should also be characterised by such ideologies engraved on its surface. In Athens, indeed, these core binaries of urbanity are called into question and get further exacerbated in the current climate of increasing socio-economic polarisation and endemic racism, directed against virtually all non-Greeks (Iosifides and King 1998).

The Athenian centre, as it was traced out through the narratives of migrants during my fieldwork, currently comprises an intricate and fragmented socio-cultural environment, characterised by elusive, yet clear-cut, fissures and urban border zones amidst a landscape of rapidly escalating racism and ‘xenophobia’ (Stolcke 1995) in crisis-ridden Greece.

Even though the particularities of urban development in Athens have significantly diluted the spatial effects of social stratification and the closely interrelated socio-economic segregation to be found in other Western cities, the image of a ‘dual city’ starts to emerge: ‘On the one hand [there are] “native spaces”, with little or no immigrant presence; and on the other hand, “different” or “mixed” spaces with a strong immigrant imprint. These
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[have transformed] into “alien” spaces according to the immigrants’ needs and socio-spatial concentration/exclusion, and the clear rejection of these areas by the indigenous population’ (Iosifides and King 1998: 226).

Invisible urban borders—and the areas they would otherwise denote as safe/dangerous—are constantly moving, leaving migrants with syncopated, porous, penetrable and deeply vulnerable spaces between which they have to remain constantly mobile, inventing new ways of viewing, perceiving and using the city. Unable, and often unwilling, to entirely withdraw from public view and space, irregular migrants settle in ceaseless mobility while being caught in debilitating immobility, as they end up not merely crossing or inhabiting borderlands, but embodying their inescapable skin-thick version, ‘being the border themselves’ (Flynn 1997).

Crisis as a Catalyst

The effects of the subprime credit market collapse that reached Europe in 2009 and transmuted into what is by now the most severe recession since World War II culminated in a catastrophic convergence in Greece: ‘a multifaceted crisis that spreads like cancer across all segments of society . . . a financial, moral, social, cultural, civic and political emergency that seemingly calls for a rapid recoil of the most basic social and community acquis, in order for solely the financial acquis to be maintained . . . a collision of a series of political, social and economic disasters that compound and amplify each other, one expressing itself through feeding the other’ (Tsoni 2012).

The crisis has caused a profound downward restructuring of the living standards and everyday reality of the country’s population, accelerating the socio-economic marginalisation of dispossessed social groups, the majority of which reside within or around major urban centres. New consolidations of ‘Otherness’ are formed among their ranks as they no longer consist only of the familiar categories of urban subalterns, such as drug addicts, alcoholics, the homeless, Roma and irregular migrants. Nowadays, former members of middle classes who recently dropped ranks—Greece’s ‘nouveau poor’ (Kaika 2012)—find themselves in new constellations of ‘irregular Otherness’, jostling with the ‘regular irregulars’ of the city.

One can see them side by side in the streets of Athens, begging or rummaging through garbage for food. Yet, Athens’ nouveau poor can be distinguished easily from Athens’ veteran poor. They still wear decent clothes, and their body language is erect and dignified; they are convinced they do
not deserve what they got; they have not reached—yet—the level of misery that turns human beings into wretched creatures...; they have not—yet—entered the terrain where their existence is defined only by their position as beggars in a troubled peripheral European economy (Kaika 2012: 424).

Despite the fact that criminalising and penalising policies are gaining importance and policy makers are using and abusing discourses of fear and crime against all ‘socially atypical’ groups, and migrants in particular, these multilayered subaltern communities gradually peacefully take over the vacant niches of public space for lack of other options. Migrants, homeless Greeks, Roma—those forming the human ‘matter out of place’—claim space and make place, often together, in its heart. Their ubiquitous, resilient presence makes it impossible to dismiss their existence or to ignore them socially and politically. Their persistent visibility is a constant reminder of the need to reformulate understandings of the condition of urban marginality and inequality. In this way the ‘general public’ is forcibly called to re-evaluate the analytical categories within which ‘Others’ and their rights are understood and protected (or not) and how relevant to each other their lives are in the potentiality of ‘abjection’.

However, these inhabitants of marginal spaces are not merely on the receiving end of structural relations, doomed to a lack of agency and acute voicelessness. Trying their best to adapt and survive, they often transcend previously established social boundaries between them. They form new groupings, new modes of individual or collective life-making strategies and new occupational niches (Alexandrakis 2013). Often, uncommon solidarities and networks of support are formed, offering glimpses of alternative imaginaries in response to the economic downturn. Unable and often unwilling to withdraw from public view, all those living in ‘irregular irregularity’ reassert, collectively and individually, their ‘right to the city’ (Harvey 2003), reclaiming space for themselves, against the odds, and therefore reshaping Athens into ‘a city of Others’ (Vaiou and Kalandides 2009).

Invisible Borders: Manœuvering the City

Supplementary to the story of Michel, excerpts from my fieldnotes from the early stages of my fieldwork are now offered. They illustrate the various ways in which the social and geographical im/mobility patterns and daily experiences of both migrants and ‘natives’ are entangled. The seemingly different life trajectories they follow in crisis-ridden Greece appear unexpectedly similar upon closer inspection, revealing the unfolding of new patterns of in/equality.
When first setting out for what would eventually become this research I was merely looking for a way to pass my days of debilitating postgraduate unemployment in Greece. Buying myself some time before decisions on my future would inevitably have to be made, and with only a vague idea of what I wanted to research, I got up one day in January 2012, went to Kypseli in downtown Athens and ended up spending the best part of the following year there. Walking around and striking up conversations with random people at first, I then started bumping into them every other day as the geography of the run-down neighbourhood grew disquietingly familiar. We would sit in parks and playgrounds, or huddle outside cafés broadcasting football games on wide screens purposefully tilted outwards. We would give up around half-time however. Winter evenings descend with dry sharp cold spells in Athens; we needed to keep our limbs warm and so we wandered and talked in the meandering streets for hours. Sometimes we would walk into one small ethnic shop or another where the air sat heavy and still, loaded with the chatter of satellite TV and heated discussions in dialects. I stood and watched as people watched me—intrigued by my presence as much as I was by theirs.

Month after month, the recession deepened and prospects of employment diminished both for the migrants I hung out with and for myself. Some of them talked about going back, others planned to move on. Some disappeared from one day to the next—‘He travelled’ was the succint answer to my questions. I had nowhere to go. And so, each evening, those of us left behind kept walking in circles around Amerikis Square.

On a sweltering summer afternoon I was walking along Patission Avenue in downtown Athens with Oumar and Nesta [not their real names], two Guinean guys I had been hanging out with regularly. Blinded by the bright sunlight falling right into our faces as we walked on the northern sidewalk, I put my foot on the asphalt without warning, getting ready to cross to the other, shady, side. I took a step and… ‘NO!!’—Oumar grabbed my sleeve and pulled me back—‘No, don’t go that way!’, he said. I looked at them, puzzled, and Nesta asked: ‘Have you ever seen us walking on that sidewalk?’.

‘Ummm… Not really’. ‘That’s right. We don’t go walking down that side of the street’. ‘Huh? What’s the deal?’.’ ‘This, there—Nesta waved his palm vigorously, indicating the double line separating the traffic directions in the middle of the avenue—this cuts the street in two’. ‘This sidewalk’, he continued, pointing with a stiff index finger, ‘belongs to the police station of Kypseli. That one, over there, belongs to the department of Michail Voda. You understand now?’.
And suddenly, I did. Right there and then, all the strands of all the unravelled stories I had been holding onto for months, and which were slipping through my fingers, weaved themselves into a coherent pattern, with echoes of dark times of Greece’s past. During the period of dictatorship in Greece, Patission Avenue was similarly demarcated, albeit for different reasons. Further down towards the city centre, the crucial spatial delimitation marked along the course of the road was again between two police stations’ jurisdiction – those of Exarchia and Omonia—and the crucial referent was the political ideologies of apprehended citizens. Nowadays immigrants get ‘colour-picked’ and are stopped for paper checks by the police daily in central Athens—sometimes the same person could be checked several times per day. If stopped on the correct sidewalk—ours—they would just go through the usual routine—well-known and much rehearsed by both sides. They would lose ten to twenty minutes, or be held at the spot until a sufficient number of immigrants was collected and then they would all be walked in choreographed formation down to the Kypseli police department a few blocks away. There, they would spend some hours or stay until the night, when they would be released to return to their homes close by.

If, however, they were stopped on the wrong sidewalk—the opposite one—they risked confrontation with some of the most hard-line officers in town. It would not be just a few hours’ delay, nor a ‘minor’ inconvenience to their daily schedule, that would occur. Rather, it was inhumane treatment, ranging from verbal abuse and damage to their physical health (relentless beatings inside that police station were a common occurrence) to detention and deportation. Immigrants (documented or not) apprehended within the jurisdiction of this particular police station were loaded onto police buses and sent to the Central Alien’s Department each night after midnight. There, they were the most often just ordered to get off the bus outside the premises and walk the 10 km back to the city centre on foot—often without even a check on their documents. On a bad day, they would have their profiles or fingertips run on the central database, which could potentially put their lives on an entirely different trajectory. At the same time, the police station at Michail Voda Street also happened to be the Frontex local reference department, notwithstanding being an infiltrated stronghold of Golden Dawn.

Caught in limbo in time and space, we—the migrants and I—were in a country that was falling apart; with nothing useful to do, scraping for coins at the bottom of our pockets; wishing to leave but having nowhere to go; held back by some hope, propelled forth by another. Finally grounded, I was left perching on the edge of that broken, dirty sidewalk, on a much more equal footing with my black immigrant friends than any of us would
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dare or care to admit. And it was there that, for the first time, an additional, visceral dimension of the city that I thought I knew so well emerged: that of the irregular migrant of colour.

Hundreds of asylum seekers and refugees flow into Athens each month, only to disappear among the crowds with the ‘fyge’ in their hands. African-origin migrants gather in Kypseli; in this polysynthetic enclave of peripheralised population at the very heart of Athens (and which in Greek interestingly enough means ‘beehive’) they get indefinitely caught in a vacuum between mobility and immobility, in limbo before an attempt to continue their onward journey. For them the Greek capital presents a ‘concrete reality’ (Ang 2006), manifesting on the ground the consequences of a cascade of (supra)national policies. Like any metropolis, Athens is also a grid of infrastructure and authority, a collection of armatures and enclaves, whose micro-territorialities irregular migrants have to learn to navigate. Their use of the infrastructure set in place to streamline and facilitate the daily flows of mobility of bona fide citizens and visitors is diametrically different. Their daily itineraries require a variety of manoeuvres to control their social visibility: their routes are rarely direct, and their paths are meandering to avoid police control or any type of unnecessary harassment. They live mostly off the grid, in houses without electricity or running water, landline phone or Internet. Their houses are temporary shelters, shells to be left behind, moorings on the surface of this landscape of horizontal (geographical) and vertical (social) mobility that does not offer any guarantee of directionality and only a vague sense of purpose.

Our times have been heralded as an era of a ‘proliferation of borders’ (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) which are permeated by variable dynamics of securitisation. These dynamics range from the ‘massive global proliferation of deeply technophilic state surveillance’ along territorial borders to the ‘startling militarization of civil society’ throughout the national territory (Graham 2010: xi). They reach down to the urban borderlands of our sprawling metropolises; and deeper down to the borders inscribed upon the ‘geography closest in —the body (Rich 1986) and its embodied, ‘deeper-than-skin-deep’ lines of distinction.

And then I remembered Abdulai, the 17-year-old boy from Sierra Leone whose genuine papers were torn apart and thrown in the garbage one night by three policemen, who said that they were fake. Abdulai remained undocumented from then on, but still went about the city in careful calculation every night for his job—collecting garbage for recycling with his supermarket cart. Only rarely would he dare to roam further from his neighbourhood, and only if accompanied by friends. Once, when a large group of us had
gone to watch the migrant associations’ yearly football competition, I suggested taking some of my friends from Kypseli out for a coffee in the suburbs where I lived. Most of them readily accepted. After much hesitation and great efforts to convince him, Abdulai, too, agreed to come with us. His strength could only carry him just a few steps past the ticket machines of the nearest metro station, however. When all of us walked in the direction of the line towards the suburbs, Abdulai froze in his tracks. He fixed his eyes on the strip of red marble on the grey floor, which divided the entrances of the two tunnels going in opposite directions. He started sweating and shaking with the signs of an anxiety attack. I was not forcing or holding him, yet he squirmed away from me and kept saying ‘No, no, no, no Joanna... No, no, no, no, please let me go back. Another time Joanna, I promise. I can’t... I need... need to go back. I’m sorry! So so sorry!’.

This boy had traversed the worst part of two continents by himself to get there, crossing some of the most heavily guarded and militarised borders stretching between his country and mine by any means available to him. Now this same boy was immobilised just three metres past the ticket machines by the prospect of going in the opposite direction to the one he was familiar with. What was he actually seeing right there and then, with his eyes wide open and fixed on the tiles on the floor? What was he reading behind the inconspicuous red lines which, in my eyes, were drawn to streamline and helpfully demarcate rather than prohibit passenger movement in any way?

When I started this research I had not set out to discover borders or boundaries, nor how people moved through and around them. Yet, I discovered that I had, all the while, been clumsily stepping in and out and all over them. Borders were in fact everywhere I went, and yet for me—and others like me—they were nowhere to be found. Daily movement and survival in interstitial migrant spaces required exhaustive exercising of capacities that the ordinary citizen has atrophied for lack of training. And so I had been tripping its wires and setting off alarms and detonators, staggering through erupting minefields of boundaries through which I went unscathed while others near me risked losing their very lives as they tiptoed around and sidestepped their lines across the city.

These survival skills, however, were acquired rather than inherent. They seemed to increase as people found themselves falling through the holes of social welfare. The ‘nouveau poor’ Greeks that Michel encounters in his daily life were needing to learn how to adapt in the urban margins, how to navigate the city, how to source food and available facilities. These are skills they often had to lift off migrants, or utilise services that were set in
Conclusion

The theoretical aim of this paper was to connect urban theory, critical mobilities (Jensen 2009), and critical border studies (Parker and Vaughan-Williams et al. 2009, 2012) with irregular migration in the metropolitan context of Athens in times of financial crisis. To this aim, a critical phenomenological perspective was adopted, which centred on the migrants’ irregularity as a lived experience. Having as a starting point the story of one such immigrant, I attempted to portray a place-sensitive ethnographic account of migrant irregular border-crossings at the level of the urban. Instead of an introduction, Michel’s story broadly sketches the backdrop along which we follow him through his geographical and social mobility and stasis, while attempting to juxtapose theoretical insights on his personal storyline as it unfolds in the socio-economic and spatial environment of Athens. This story was then supplemented by autoethnographic fieldnote excerpts that highlighted the commonality and difference of experience between ‘regular’ and ‘irregular’ urban dwellers, and the moments when their perceptions become concurrent. In this way we observe unforeseen ‘constellations of mobility’ (Cresswell 2010) and ‘irregularity’ emerge, while unlikely regroupings of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ people occur: tens (if not hundreds) of thousands of undocumented immigrants currently detained in Greece struggle for survival in urban marginality alongside Greece’s 3 million people living at or below the poverty line.

Irregularity is therefore understood as the point of convergence of a series of ‘deviations from the expected rules, regulations and the general norm’ in the face of the neoliberal restructuring and state deregulation currently rampaging throughout Greece. Irregularity is approached as a lived experience and a mode of being-in-the-world mainly, but not exclusively, by undocumented migrants, as it lately starts to be shared as a life situation by other—regular—social groups, too.

On European soil, African immigrants personify the extraordinary exceptions. They are the exemplary Others that the new European legal system has constructed as falling outside the symbolic boundaries of race, religion, etc. Their very existence and circulation in the context of undocumented travelling towards and within EU-rope contests preconceived
Eurocentric notions regarding the impetus of their migration and challenges a series of boundaries set in place to keep them as extraneous.

Whilst xenophobia, racism and populism, as well as the (inter)national migration policy regime, attempt to reduce irregular migrants into contemporary immobile and invisible ‘*hominès sacri*’ (Agamben 1998), they should not be simplistically represented as located merely on the receiving end of structural relations, doomed to a lack of agency, an acute voicelessness. Irregular migrants are understood as agentic, socially and historically situated actors in the process of pursuing their larger life projects. Their interdependent mobilities (Büscher and Urry 2009) can produce and reform social life across great distance.

The very visibility and mobility of irregular sub-Saharan Africans in the heart of the metropolis boldly challenges established conceptualisations of citizenship, identity and belonging. Irregular migrant spaces are often assumed to be entirely cut off by those of the authorities, those of ‘*bona fide*’ citizens, and those carved out by all the boundaries which are instrumentally used to keep ‘outsiders’ in their place, out of sight. This, however, in the case of African immigrants in Athens, seemed not to hold true. This does not mean that structural and power constraints were erased—quite the opposite—but there was, however, room for manoeuvre, space for negotiation and interplay between structures, the carriers of structures and individual agencies—even if slight and unpredictable. As they claim, appropriate and transform places, even if merely by the inevitability of their visibility in public space, they become ‘strategic actors’ (Ley 2005) who engage with a series of material and immaterial borders, negotiating the boundary-marking behaviour of the nation state and its overarching supranational institutions.

‘We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us’ is a phrase depicting the paradoxical context and mestizaje hybrid identities of Latino migration in the US (Burke and Santos 2000). I found similar echoes resounding in Southern Europe from the mouths of people whose collective and personal histories had been drawn and redrawn by the crossing of borders throughout generations.

Through their daily practices within the emergent urban crisis-scapes, migrants assert that, even in the most subjugated positions, some measure of resistance—and, under certain circumstances, also political action—is possible. Their lives, together with their everyday experiences and struggles, are commonly neglected in accounts of social and political transformation, since they are not identifiable elements of broader, unified social movements. They consist of imperceptible moments of social life, jettisoned in the heart
of our metropolises, living cheek-by-jowl with crisis-bred unfamiliar categories of urban 'subalterns'. Together they pose bottom-up challenges—even if imperceptible—to the dominant imaginaries that the power-lines of national borders and their devolved socio-cultural boundaries are instrumentally used to affix. Their everyday practices, however, open up perspectives from which to view what is currently at stake. The patterns of im/mobility and in/equality unfolding around them call into question the prevalent political, cultural and economic structures, together with their lines of distinction, at a series of nested scales, helping to create new social imaginaries and realities through a reconceptualisation of urban theory and praxis in such critical times.

Notes

1. Note that Michel offers the translation of some of these terms himself. Skoupidia literally means ‘garbage’ and, among the migrants, is used as a job title. Laiki is the traditional weekly vegetable market in each city neighbourhood; the immigrant garbage scavengers set out their rescued items for sale around the edges of the market. Karochi is a supermarket trolley which the scavengers use to collect and transport the salvaged items.

2. Yifto: Gypsy (lit). Roma people are active in the garbage recycling business: they usually own pick-up trucks, which makes it easy for them to drive around and collect recyclable materials like paper or metal from the immigrants who have no other option but to push their cart all the way to the remote areas where collection points are located.

3. Granat (groundnut) soup and fufu (a dough made of pounded yam, cassava or other starch) are staple West African foods.

4. Paraphrased quote from William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, Act II. Scene II, ‘What’s in a name? That which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet’.

5. Ingrid Sahlin (1994) refers to the dichotomy between representations of different migrant typologies—the ‘pitiables’ (i.e. refugees) as opposed to the ‘villains’ (i.e. ‘illegal’ immigrants). Based on which discourse is foregrounded, different political courses of action come into force.

6. Fygé which, in Greek, literally means ‘Go!’ in the imperative form, is the aptly nicknamed ‘document of release’ that undocumented migrants are given by the police when released from the initial detention after turning themselves in or getting apprehended upon entering Greece. Like many of the words in the limited Greek vocabulary of irregular immigrants (which consists almost entirely of words deriving from their encounter with the authorities and, most commonly, the police), this term derives from the verbal order they are given upon the hand-over of the release document. With this document
migrants are granted a thirty-day residence permit after which they are required to leave the country ‘voluntarily, in a direction of their choice’ (Tsianos et al. 2009).

7. ‘The main features of armatures are that they are linear systems for sorting sub-elements in the city and arranging them in sequence . . . armatures are channelling flows and linking nodes in complex networks of distribution. They work as sorting and sequencing devices . . . the armature is the backbone of the network and is scalable from the sidewalk to the global flight corridors. Opposite the armature we find the enclave, which functions as a bounded territory and is defined by its ability to add friction to mobility. The enclave is a bounded unit and comes in the form of an isolated district or enclosed site and territory. However, enclaves also differ in their relative openness towards their context. They are found from hermetically sealed off sites to permeable places criss-crossed by the flows of armatures . . . they may perform in various guises; as linear, stretched and compressed enclaves’ (Jensen 2009: 140).

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