Memories, desires and becoming local in an era of mobility

Clare Rishbeth

Introduction

It felt very different from my country; there was no sunshine, no desert.

As articulated by Hozan, an asylum seeker, the difference between Iran and England is experienced written in the landscape and reactive on the skin (Rishbeth et al., 2019). Global migrants, whether moving for economic, education or sanctuary seeking reasons, encounter environmental unfamiliarity. This new city, new neighborhood is not known: it holds no memories and is uncertain in its affordances. Belonging and un-belonging is personal and embodied, experienced in the efforts of new learning, in sensory confusion, in the difficulty of anticipating ways to fit in.

Clearly the individual pattern of these is informed by relative levels of resources and personal agency. But even for migrants with privileges of choice and without the impact of poverty, unfamiliarity can be de-skilling. The tacit knowledges of urban legibility – the practicalities of moving around, of reading safe spaces and temporal norms – are culturally and geographically defined. Networks of urban parks, familiar and important resources for recreation in many European and North American cities, may be unfamiliar typologies to migrants from other parts of the world: why do you go there, and what do you do? The experience of uncertainty reflects a ‘not-yet-belonging.’ A nurse from Jamaica living in Sheffield talked about her initial disquiet at the ‘leaves shedding’ in her first British autumn (Rishbeth and Powell 2013). A year later this was a past concern, the buds appear in spring, her remembered surprise representative of her arrival story rather than her current situation. Though urban environments are never fully predictable, the measure of ‘a local’ is partly though a shared understanding of the perimeters of normality; what is to be expected, what is unusual and what is a cause of worry. ‘Fitting in’ may mean different things in different locations, but an everyday confidence in understanding your local area is an important baseline. The turning of one full year in the life of a migrant is a marker which reflects both person and place, duration measured in part by amassed knowledge – this is what happens, the extents of this can be understood.
Alongside unfamiliarity, migrants also encounter recognition. Compared to most indoor environments, often the qualities of openness and complexity characteristic of most outdoor public spaces can better support nuances of embodied experience and the stationary time travel of recollection. Newcomers, even those from countries that are culturally and ecologically very different, find points of recognition in oblique ways, from nature connections to opportunities for socializing. In Sheffield, UK, a walk through a wooded valley on the edge of the city reminded Lamin of his home country:

This place remind me of when I live in Sierra Leone … It remind me about the forest and the mountain and the rock … The bush was so green and the day was foggy you know. It remind me of when I was a little boy and me and my grandfather used to walk in the forest during the rainy season. [This place] surprised me. (Rishbeth and Finney 2006, 287)

Migrant’s stories travel with them, past normalities can be related to new ones.

And while for new migrants, much of their larger personal context has changed (proximity to family, occupation, place of living) – especially for those in forced migration who experience this as loss – glimpses of ‘being myself’ may be found in seemingly inconsequential items and actions. A flower, a bench, a basketball, a barbeque are not merely props but sensory experiences, often relational ones. Amidst all that is strange and new, it can be these small memories and affordances that allow a connection with one’s own identity across different parts of the life course, and in time offer a ‘way in’ to using public spaces and to developing a sense of local belonging.

Visibility and un-belonging

The ‘public’ and the ‘open’ in Public Open Space inform a varying visibility of individuals. While taking part in quite specific and straightforward interactions – a member of a kick-about team, a conversation while walking, looking at flowers in a park – there is a parallel public-facing aspect, a legitimate taking up of space and a body present in the public sphere. For new arrivals in the city these times and places provide potential for respite (being ‘in the moment,’ a distraction, a change in focus) but also potential for representation: I am living here. It is to this collective positioning that we now turn.

Being outdoors is not neutral, and Lefebvre’s ‘right to the city’ is not evenly distributed (Lefebvre 1968). In thinking about the challenges of urban population diversity, we also need to attend to the specifics of the encounter and how we experience ‘the being together of strangers’ in the city (Young 1990). The public space as pro-social is voiced by many urban theorists, but can position an overly benign viewpoint of spending time outdoors (e.g. Gehl and Gemzoe 1996; Whyte 1980). ‘Who you are, [and] who you are seen to be,’ has important intersections of gender, class, age, ethnicity, and religion (Rose 2003, 72). For new migrants, and in particular those who are visible as minorities, the realistic option of spending time outside reflects not only the individual confidence of navigating new environments and ‘being oneself,’ but also is a gauge of exposure to threat. While informal hanging-out can be an important first step to belonging, it can also result in a sharp point of ‘un-belonging,’ as evidenced by the rise of hate crime and racial harassment (from the ‘top down’ political discourses from the UK’s ‘hostile environment’ to Trump’s ‘protect the border’ rhetoric (Heuman and González 2018; Liberty 2018). Crime statistics in the UK clearly reflect a greater vulnerability to personal attack for people from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds and a rise in racial and religious hate crime in public places (Webster 2017, 208), and are reflective of statistics in other European and
North American contexts. Understanding how these conflate to typologies of place is important for anyone involved in the design or management of the public realm. Zenith, who has lived in the UK for a number of years seeking asylum from Zimbabwe, talks dismissively about Sheffield’s suburban parks, categorizing them as ‘places for indigenous people and not for people who came from abroad’ (Rishbeth et al., 2019). Excluding experiences such as these are contrasted with feeling included and safe in the Peace Gardens in the city center, a busy square with water fountains, ornamental planting, and city wardens.

So notions of ‘fitting in’ and ‘becoming local’ can seldom or never be attained simply as a product of individual effort, but require an embedding of diversity as a re-making of public space. In urban areas with highly mixed populations, at best this leads to a commonplace diversity and an acceptance of the ‘multiplicities, potentials and practices’ of social identities (Wessendorf 2013; Wilson and Darling 2016, 1). But all too often in neighborhoods where migrants are visible as a minority status, stigmatization and fixed narratives of class, socio-economic status and race can become dominant in supporting perceptions of acceptability or un-acceptability. A singular viewpoint exacerbates the potential for misinterpretation, as succinctly highlighted by Clark’s account of Roma community in Glasgow, UK.

What is often socially constructed as morally reprehensible and anti-social for non-Roma is actually seen as being social, hospitable and inclusionary by Roma themselves. For example, ‘loitering on street corners’ is actually socializing with friends and ‘improper’ rubbish disposal is actually forms of recycling and income generation.

(Clark 2014, 8)

This account is insightful in also reflecting a collective memory by member of the Roma community that shapes ongoing practices and informs ways of performing publicness. In the context of urban parks, Neal et al. (2015) discuss the fluidity of ‘park practices,’ the ways in which transnational dynamics inform everyday patterns of recreation and connection, but the notion extends to other mundane environments; the square, the bus-stop, the school yard. Ways of being sociable are culturally defined and the use of public space inevitably shape-shifts in response to this.

Thus far we have briefly explored three dimensions of migration and urban public space:

- The potential for connections and memories that can unexpectedly shape pathways to glimpsing belonging.
- An acknowledgement that many migrants experience uncertainty and intimidation in accessing various urban public spaces.
- The need to find ways for collective publicness to be diversely expressed and to inform the ways in which public space is used and is changed.

The call then is both to solidarity and activism: an urbanism that robustly defends the diversity of urban space and users of urban space. This needs to move away from naïve aspirations of ‘places for everyone,’ and towards design and management practices that actively and collaboratively facilitate equality of engagement and in doing this challenge the fixity of ‘normal’ ways of being outside. In the concluding part of this chapter, I examine how this might influence practice, presenting findings from a research project that examined the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers living in northern European urban contexts.
Refugees and asylum seekers living in cities have a range of differing histories and experiences, shaped by the contexts of their forced migration and their current legal status (seeking sanctuary, refused sanctuary, or granted fixed term leave to remain) as well as their ethnicity, gender, age and family responsibilities. However, many circumstances are brutally familiar to all but the luckiest: social fragmentation, lack of agency and future uncertainty, poor housing conditions and extremely low living allowances, past and ongoing mental health pressures. In the UK the government has, over many years, implemented a ‘hostile environment’ policy, which means that in practice the day-to-day lives of asylum seekers are deliberately made difficult and psychologically demoralizing (Liberty 2018). More encouragingly, there is grass-root resistance to this, and a plethora of campaigning and on-the-ground initiatives that strive to demonstrate #refugeeswelcome, both in the UK and across Europe (Karakayali 2019). Many of these were started or gained momentum in 2015 during the height of the exodus from war-ravaged Syria.

Amidst this background of challenges, it could potentially appear facile to seek to understand and develop good professional practice in supporting refugees in the use of parks. The principles previously discussed underpinned the intentions of the ‘#refugeeswelcome in parks’ research project: local environments make a difference to quality of lives, safety concerns are important to address, we may need to be intentional about how we bridge differences and respond to the specific circumstances of those caught up in forced migration. We first deepened our understanding, interviewing sixteen refugee and asylum seekers across three cities and two countries (Sheffield and London, England and Berlin, Germany), and thirty-five different stakeholders in these contexts from both the refugee support sector and the greenspace management sector (Rishbeth et al. 2019). We then drew on our findings and examples of projects from across northern Europe to design resources which could inform good practice (www.refugeeswelcomeinparks.com).

Throughout the interviews we found that restorative qualities of spending time in parks and other recreational public spaces can offer temporary respite from the combination of waiting (often termed ‘the limbo’) and anxiety, which is the mundane experience for many seeking sanctuary. A high number of our participants reported benefits to their sense of wellbeing and inclusion from spending time in parks, especially when related to the sensory qualities of nature or human to human connection.

For letting the stress out and having some relaxation by her own, she goes to the lake near them alone, without the kids or the husband. She walks more than half an hour around the lake ... it is not crowded, full of trees, no one sees what the others are doing, she can even cry lonely when she needs to do this without being embarrassed. The sound of the birds, the sound of the trees and how they look, the water in front of her, altogether makes her feeling relaxed, fresh, and helps her to forget her worries and gives her positive energy that she needs to be able to continue in her life.

*(Fieldworker notes from an interview with Nawaj, female, Berlin/Palestine)*

When we sit in the park we say hello to people. When we see someone with an Arabic face we talk to them, but we talk to anyone if they can understand our English.

*(Khalid, male, London/Syria)*
The collective outdoors

I would see no purpose in going [to parks] on my own, but from a moment where my friend introduced me to running, I take part in park running classes regularly.

(Firuz, male, Sheffield/Iran)

However, especially in the initial weeks and months of settling in a new city, many also described feeling lonely, disoriented, and fearful about venturing out. Many have experienced or heard of racial harassment and avoid places where they sense they will stick out. Some will have come from countries in which there are parks and some not, but nearly all will be unfamiliar with the range of types of different types of urban greenspace in a northern European context, from heritage parks to canal-sides, cemeteries, sports grounds, and nature reserves. Local neighborhood parks in particular can be perceived as featureless, and many could not think of reasons why they might visit these places. ‘Hanging out’ here can feel vulnerable and too reflective of the ‘do-nothingness’ of their current situation.

‘You need a certain boldness to venture out’ observed Mercy, a Kenyan woman seeking asylum in London. Boldness is certainly easier to marshal when one has company, and ‘going with a friend’ has potential to overcome many anxieties. But the social isolation and high incidence of depression experienced by many refugees and asylum seekers means that support might often be needed to provide a sociable context. In the project we defined the need for ‘curated sociability’ in supporting access to urban greenspace. This reflects a notion of curating, which draws on its etymological roots as ‘taking care,’ a purposeful sharing of enthusiasms and knowledges that develops meaning and experience. These approaches are relational, providing a human-to-human connection as well as engaging with place. The good practices that we found and promoted included befriending schemes, walking groups, language classes outdoors, gardening projects and easy to access ‘pick-up’ sports such as basketball, football and table tennis, and were initiated both from the refugee sector and the greenspace management sector (all the following examples cited from Rishbeth et al. 2017).

The START initiative recognized that both students and refugees in Plymouth, UK shared experiences of being newcomers, and as such they organize regular walks together through the city parks and nearby countryside (START n.d.). This simple idea reduces anxiety, supports an ongoing familiarity and confidence with the local area but also bridges social barriers and breaks down stereotypes. In Paris, at 6pm each day, language teachers provide outdoor drop-in French lessons to the steps of the Place de la Bataille de Stalingrad. It is a time for developing friendships as well as learning. Situated in a busy location, but one often associated with rough sleeping and drug dealing, the public visibility of this activity is an important side benefit, providing a counter-narrative to asylum seekers as a social burden. We discovered many examples of gardening projects. Some of these are highly specific to refugees and asylum seekers, such as SLAM in London, initiated by a hospital as part of a holistic approach to addressing post-traumatic stress disorder. Others are local community non-profit organizations, which are open to all and provide the experience and skills to create a welcoming safe space for participants with potential vulnerabilities and specific needs.

Growing happens, a cup of tea happens, a lot of conversation happens, people are sharing words with each other, recipes are shared on quite a regular basis. People will bring food to share. They might take produce, and then often they will cook it, bring it back.

(Facilitator at Green City Action, Sheffield, UK)
Two UK national organizations, City of Sanctuary and Social Farms and Gardens, are working together to extend ideas and support for food growing projects that want to start or extend their inclusion of local refugees and asylum seekers, recognizing both its potential and some of its challenges.

Though the specificity of a neighborhood growing space offers very different affordances and levels of security to spending time in urban parks or squares, understanding the practicalities and relationships that may be embedded in ‘curated sociability’ approaches can illuminate some of the creativity and community building that can shape inclusion in a wide range of urban greenspaces. Supporting orientation, providing a time of social connection, giving a sense of purpose, and understanding the wellbeing benefits of nature contact can be important to everyone, but inform specific resonances and challenges with regard to refugees and asylum seekers. At the least they provide pause points of respite and distraction amidst extremely difficult life circumstances, at best they provide starting points for local belonging, with the greenspaces themselves re-appropriated, even re-made, through processes of inclusion and shared agency.

Cultures of mundane inclusion

Underpinning all of the above is the assertion that the use of public open space is a cultural practice, one which both reflects and shapes the mundane and diverse ways in which our collective cultures are changing. In my research, I specifically address collective and personal histories of migration. In the ‘throwtogetherness’ of place Massey (2005) highlighted both integrations and contradictions between the compellingly local and all the ‘elsewheres’ in our lives. In particular, the sensory qualities of spending time outdoors can represent both familiarity and alienation: smell, touch and visual recognition ground us in the here and now, but also come to us laden with memories, tinged with dimensions of loss and joy.

The presence of individuals is social positioning, a person in public outdoor space is both a viewer and as someone in view. While we all are attuned to the nuances of this, the check in the mirror before we head out, the awareness of these dynamics can be heightened and experienced as vulnerability when an individual is uncertain about their ability to ‘fit.’ The notion of ‘fitting’ here reflects both a self-identity (skin color, gender, clothing which affiliates to a particular religion), and the social diversity and complexity of the locality. Ethnographic research seems to indicate that the individual burden of ‘fitting’ (and the practical limits and multiple losses of this) is partially lifted when the context itself is reflective of difference and fluidity of use (Hou 2013; Hall 2015; Rishbeth and Rogaly 2018). At one level, this is shaped by local demographics: where there are high levels of social mixity and population churn to be ‘a newcomer’ is inherently a more usual identity, and it therefore it seems more feasible to establish or expand new niches. However, I would argue that the temporality of public open space, how this is reflected and experienced, can also be important. Local place change reflects global connections: social, economic, technological, and ecological. Of course, ‘heritage’ is never entirely unproblematic, but to be able to trace the layers of history in an environment underpins an often-unarticulated expectation of future change. In a highly publicized strategy to welcome Syrian refugees in Bute, a fairly remote Scottish island, the potential for newcomers to belong was not due to an existing ethnically diverse population, quite the opposite, but reflective of the notion of the island history as fundamentally shaped by both leaving and arriving (Mckenna 2017). In an urban context, the city experienced in a constant shape of re-making is a physical embodiment of top-down and bottom-up successes, failures, and new beginnings. Public open
space reflects these many dynamics, the quality of looseness and adaptability allowing a responsiveness to the fluidity of transnational cultures.

I conclude by taking us back to the urban park. At different life stages (and for some more than others), we choose to spend time in this local venue for recreation, fresh air, and socializing. While acknowledging the limits of equality of access, these places still reflect the ethos of ‘a public good’ and practically offer inclusion within the collective outdoors. In the mundane temporal and spatial patterns of daily use, a diversity of culture is expressed and shaped. Difference is supported and occasionally resisted (no drinking, no skateboarding, do not feed the pigeons). Newcomers to the city chance upon this place and take the opportunity to have a smoke or kick around a football or take a photo of themselves in front of the rhododendron flowers … alongside the other smokers, footballers and selfie-takers who have lived here for decades. These places allow for moments of ‘becoming local’ through the everydayness and visibility of a shared humanity in this city of many strangers.

Note

1 The ‘#refugeeswelcome in parks’ research project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK specifically to support practical change, 2017. It was a collaboration between the University of Sheffield, the University of Manchester, The Young Foundation (London) and Minor (Berlin).

References


