Narratives of Transnational Placemaking: Exploring Migrant Workers’ Hidden Histories through Memory-Guided City Walks: A Migrant Woman’s Narrative

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Cover Page Footnote
I am grateful to my research assistants for their support in the research on which this article is based. I also thank the editors of Narrative Culture and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions. Moreover, I am grateful for the financial support of the Austrian Science Fund (FWF T702; FWF V681). I also thank the University of Vienna who hosted this research project and the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Vienna for their support.
Narratives of Transnational Placemaking

Exploring Migrant Workers’ Hidden Histories through Memory-Guided City Walks: A Migrant Woman’s Narrative

Introduction

“I want anyone traveling on the U4 to think of me because I was there from day one. I made so many drawings, drew so many plans, and worked so many night shifts.” These words were shared with me in an interview with a woman who came with her toddler son from Rijeka, Croatia, to Vienna, Austria, in her early twenties as a so-called guest worker. After taking several unskilled jobs, she trained as a technical assistant and then worked on the construction of Vienna’s subway line U4. This was one of many stories of placemaking I encountered in the field, including memories of tangible and visible changes to the cityscape, particularly the narrative of labor migrants’ contribution to the city’s infrastructure through construction work. On many occasions, men who worked on construction sites claimed their contribution to the physical (re)building of Vienna’s cityscape. The practices I encountered that will be an integral part of the discussion here concern placemaking in a rather metaphorical sense, as in appropriating and individuating the city, creating attachment to particular places that generate specific spatial identities (Massey, “Contestation”). In Certeau’s understanding, walking in the city is a way to appropriate the urban space and create place and one’s position
in it. I would like to add a narrative dimension to this understanding. During my fieldwork with labor migrants in Vienna, I observed that the appropriation of urban space is also closely linked to the practice of “narrating urban space.” Thus, I argue that the creation of places is ultimately also a narrative process.

I reflect on the intertwining of narratives and places in two ways: how narratives constitute and preserve places and how places shape and reinforce narratives about the past, acting as mnemonic devices. In the migrant context that I examine here, places act as mnemonic and narrative devices in very specific ways—that is, connecting different locations and places called “home.” In my research, I investigated narratives of placemaking and place-attachment practices among labor migrants and their spouses who came to Vienna, Austria, as young adults in the 1960s and 1970s. This work investigated how narratives of the past and place are interlinked. Of particular interest were moments of arrival as they are remembered today and the gradual appropriation of Vienna, the city, as well as the transformation of urban space and the production of social places.

The first guest worker contracts were signed between Austria and Turkey in 1964 and between Austria and Yugoslavia in 1966. Of the approximately 265,000 people recruited by Austria as guest workers between 1961 and 1973 (many more entered the country through other channels), about two thirds came from the former Yugoslavia. Almost half of the labor migrants were employed in Vienna. While many returned to their home countries, a considerable number stayed in Austria. Migration biographies differ greatly among women migrant workers (Lorber; Reinprecht). Among my interlocutors were men and women who came to Austria alone; others came with their partners or spouses, some came with some or all of their children. Among my interlocutors were also single mothers. When these women and men came to Austria as labor migrants, they had limited work and residence permits, were given temporary poor-quality accommodation, and were not offered integration measures (e.g., language courses). Austria mainly recruited unskilled workers for construction and for other industries, including textiles and paper, as well as for the tourism business. While in 1962, about 19 percent of foreign workers in Austria were women, the proportion rose to 31 percent by 1973. Despite the male connotation of labor migration, Austria actively recruited women who were much needed in the job market (Lorber).

These labor migrants contributed significantly not only to Austria’s economic success after World War II but also to the diversification of Vienna’s cityscape. The fact that Austria’s postwar economic success was only possible because of
the labor of these women and men is rarely publicly acknowledged (e.g., by ruling politicians, the media, school textbooks, or museums of local history), and the history of migrant workers has widely remained unknown (Hintermann). Recent activities around the fiftieth anniversary of the first guest worker contracts tried to make migrants’ histories and contributions visible. With such activities as exhibitions and initiatives to archive guest worker histories, first-generation migrants along with the second and third generations, often in cooperation with civil activists and scholars, have created spaces in the city to initiate various forms of self-organization and self-historicizing.

In this article, I first discuss theoretical approaches that attempt to link narration and place. I then move on to a methodological reflection on the research, paying particular attention to the memory-guided city walk method. This is followed by ethnography that mainly centers around one particular memory-guided city walk conducted with Dunja, a labor migrant who came to Vienna from Serbia in 1971. While all memory-guided city walks conducted in the course of this research (including Dunja’s) were unique, focusing on one of them in depth allows us to elaborate on the specifics of this methodological approach and reveals theoretical insights regarding the relation between narrative and place in contexts of mobility, gender, and migration. The article concludes with a discussion on the intertwining of narratives with places in the specific context of migration.

**Placemaking: Interweaving Narratives with Places**

Herein place is not understood as a fixed category but as narrated and imagined: “Places are doubly constructed: most are built or in some way physically carved out. They are also interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined” (Soja). I build on the insights of several scholars who have shown that the ways people view places are always filtered and likely to change in the course of the different life stages they experience (Rishbeth and Powell). This implies that places are not static but are continuously renegotiated and that multiple interpretations and narratives of places may coexist. “Cities are not empty pages, but narrative spaces in which particular (hi)stories, myths and parables are inscribed” (Lindner 57).

Narration of the city has so far been explored primarily through the naming and renaming of public places, especially street names (Azaryahu). In this
literature, the meaning of urban spaces has been examined particularly from a
top-down perspective around the question of how naming and renaming public
spaces legitimates national histories and politics. The significance that street
names hold for the wider population and how renaming streets relates to popular
understandings of history have rarely been addressed (Hoelscher and Alderman;
Palmberger, “Nationalizing”; Rose-Redwood et al.). Elsewhere, in my research on
renaming public space in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I argued that everyday expe-
riences play a major role in understanding and perceiving public spaces, and this
in turn leads to a multitude of perceptions of and attachments to urban places
(Palmberger, “Nationalizing”; see also Fischer-Nebmaier and Berg).

I understand places as products of social relations constituted by lived and
narrated experience. In the same vein, I understand placemaking as a relational
practice to which social dissonance and contestation are integral (Massey, Space,
Place, For Space; Till). Different groups use, understand, and ultimately narrate
public space from a range of perspectives, so a variety of experiences—including
gendered experiences—and meanings coexist (Stevens and Sumartojo). Only
relatively recently has attention been drawn to how alternative narrations and
interpretations of sites, alternative placemaking practices, and ambivalence and
indifference about a certain history inscribed in the cityscape disrupt the original
meaning of a site. Such a narrative focus provides room for analyzing how different
individuals and groups relate to places in multiple ways and how this generates
a coexistence of meanings (Palmberger, “Nationalizing”; Palmberger and Tošić).

Narratives that I encountered during my fieldwork were tightly entangled
with the past, with personal and group memories. The migrants’ memories I am
interested in here are thus understood as narratives of the past. As Trouillot has
rightly stated, “human beings participate in history both as actors and narrators”
(Trouillot 2). This means that individuals are narrators of history and also actors,
and thus are not entirely free to choose since their narratives of the past are based
to a certain degree on personal experiences and on wider public narratives they
have been exposed to (Palmberger, “Social Ties”). Remembering has little to do
with mere retrospection on the past but is an active process that enhances polit-
cical subjectivity. Memory, as narrative more generally, is tied to the past and acts
as an orienting force. Certain visions of the future shape how the past is narrated
(Kerby; Koselleck). Ultimately, narratives of the past are understood here as cre-
ated, manifested, and contested in social fields. Silences (individual and collect-
tive) may be a constitutive part of any narrative (see Palmberger, “Distancing”;
Passerini; Ricoeur; Tonkin). Memories—understood as narratives of the past—are not just found in oral and written forms but are also inscribed in public space. Here the question of which memories are made visible (or invisible) is one of power and politics, and it tells us about inclusion and exclusion processes.

Scholars have demonstrated the long history of elites historically changing urban landscapes to legitimate a certain political order. I draw attention to how alternative and gendered narratives of places are constructed. This focus allows us to examine how various individuals and groups understand and make use of public space differently and how this generates a coexistence of meanings. Memory and placemaking have long been studied first and foremost in the context of nation-states (see Nora) and rarely in that of migration, multilocality, and transnationalism (Creet and Kitzmann; Palmberger and Tošić). It is thus time for a closer inspection of the interplay between memory and movement in today’s conditions of enhanced and diversified mobility as well as growing constraints, immobilities, and inequalities (Tošić and Palmberger).

Place has been identified as an essential device for individuals and groups in the process of remembering. Moreover, “places become ‘charged’ with memory and are constituted through shared memories and stories” (Roberts 99; see also Lems; Meusburger). Massey speaks of “spatial identities” when relating ideas of attachment to places, particularly to places that one calls “home,” and in her words, “Attachment to place is bolstered through participation in the past, reflecting upon life events embedded in particular geographic locales and settings” (Massey, “Contestation” 71). Attachment to places remains important even in our present times of what Bauman refers to as “liquid modernity,” in which people are increasingly faced with potentially having to make (voluntarily or involuntarily) new attachments to new places throughout their lives. While place attachment is of course personal, it is equally important for group identities. Bonds with places do not necessarily need to be positive. People also identify against places (see Easthope). The focus chosen here on narratives related to place and migration allows us to examine how individuals create continuities (and ruptures) between different periods of their lives as well as between different localities.
Exploring Narratives of Multilocal Pasts through Memory-Guided City Walks

My research combines a narrative and spatial approach by paying special attention to the narrativization of space and its performative dimension. The research has faced two methodological challenges. First, how to pay tribute to multilocality and to multilocal memories? Second, how to investigate memory places that may no longer exist? I chose to work primarily with narrative interviews and memory-guided city walks, which I specifically adapted for this research. I found memory-guided city walks particularly helpful for learning more about people’s relationships with the past (in the present) and about memories and narratives thereof connected to certain places. Initially I developed the memory-guided city walk method for research I conducted in the postwar city of Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Palmberger, How Generations; “Why Alternative”) and then adapted it for my research with labor migrants in Austria. In the case of the latter, life narrative interviews preceded each memory-guided city walk. In most cases, memory places already evolved in these narrative interviews. Often lives were narrated in relation to certain places. The city walks that followed were particularly interesting because they brought together a narrative with a spatial dimension, which is the focus of this article. Both the narrative interviews and the city walks were recorded, transcribed, and were translated into English where necessary.

Memory-guided city walks have the advantage that the researcher and research partners spend several hours together, thereby creating an informal and friendly relationship much more easily than is possible in a conventional interview setting. The act of walking through familiar surroundings stimulates conversation in a positive way. As opposed to an interview setting, in which the interviewee travels through time and place only mentally, memory-guided city walks enable interviewees to visit memory places physically. This facilitates “delving into the past” because memories often come back through exposure to specific places, tastes, sounds, and other sensorial experiences (Bach; Pink).

Let me elaborate on the specifics of memory-guided city walks, especially on what makes walking a distinctive (narrative) research method. First of all, walking side by side means that we share the same visual field. It is less confrontational than when we sit opposite each other, as is usually the case in interview situations. As anthropologists, we do not want to “walk into” but “walk with,” as argued by Lee and Ingold. Walking together means sharing a full bodily experience. As a
research method, it has two components: that of participation and that of attunement, meaning that experiences are multisensorial (Pink; see also Kusenbach). Walking through familiar territory stimulates conversation and memory, thus qualifying it as a narrative research method. In the specific case of this research, the memory-guided city walk method integrates migration, memory, and place. Such city walks can have very different characters and can be used in different settings. They can be combined with visual methods: for example, in this particular research, I combined them with photographs and mapping. I will describe a specific memory-guided city walk that will provide material for a detailed discussion of the relation between narrative and place in the context of migration. By means of this memory walk, I will show, in the case of Dunja, not only the particularities of women labor migrants’ memories but also how narratives of the past are tied to particular locations and how they constitute places and how these places may reveal otherwise hidden histories.

On a beautiful sunny spring day in 2017, I met Dunja and my research assistant (who had initiated the first contact with her) for a memory-guided city walk. We met in one of Vienna’s outer districts, the 13th, at the house where Dunja and her husband had been housekeepers alongside their regular jobs. Dunja worked as a cleaner and later as a medical technical assistant in a nearby hospital, and her husband as a construction worker on different sites. The couple lived in this house for almost 30 years, until the new owner decided that it was better to dispense with their services and pay for external cleaning and maintenance service instead. The walk started with a story about Dunja’s life that was closely connected to this place. Dunja was 18 when they arrived in Vienna in 1971, and although this was not the first place they lived, it was where they made their first home and from where they explored Vienna and its surroundings. After all, it was not just the house they had looked after and lived in for almost 30 years, it was where their now-adult daughter grew up. It was clear from Dunja’s narrative that leaving the house was a very poignant event for them, and they still feel very attached to it and its tenants. This was probably also why Dunja decided to visit the house right at the beginning of our walk, and it became our anchor as we explored the neighborhood together. We visited some of the key places that were central to the couple after their arrival and through which they accessed the city. During the walk, Dunja filled these places with stories that were closely connected to her life narrative and to the history of the guest workers. At the time I met her, Dunja still liked to visit some of these places.
During the walk, Dunja suggested we stay in the neighborhood in Vienna's thirteenth district because almost all of her important places—past and present—were located there. She told me: “We settled here in the 13th district after we arrived in Vienna and we decided to stay here. You know, here it’s like in a big village, no high buildings, a lot of green space.” She had mentioned this already in the narrative interview that preceded the memory-guided city walk when she jokingly said: “When I came from the village to the metropolis, that was something totally different for me. In Serbia we say ‘from horse to donkey’ [sa konja na magarca], but this was actually the other way around, ‘from donkey to horse,’ you could say” [laughs].

Dunja and her husband chose to stay in the 13th district because the neighborhood reminded them of the Serbian village where they grew up. They initially thought that they would stay in Vienna for only a short period—a couple of months, but no longer—until they finally settled there. As with many other former guest workers I talked to, this was not a conscious decision; rather, it happened, unnoticed, until eventually the idea of return was postponed until after retirement (Palmberger, “Social Ties,” “Relational Ambivalence”).

Like the other migrant workers I spoke with, even after all these years, Dunja remembers very well the date she came with her husband to Vienna: June 28, 1971. They lived separately at the beginning, and during our walk when we reached the barracks where her husband spent his first years after arrival (Fig. 1), nostalgic memories returned. Dunja told me how they secretly visited each other in the evenings and on weekends. She remembered the good times they had when they were young. Places where Yugoslav music was played were prominent in this narrative. While Dunja's husband's colleagues often returned home to their wives and children in Yugoslavia at weekends, she and her husband, who were both in Vienna and who had no children in the first few years after their arrival, had the weekends to enjoy themselves in the city. The highlights were events where Yugoslav musicians gave concerts in Vienna, mostly in small pubs, cafés, and bars. Dunja recalled:

That was the most important thing, to buy a ticket and go to concerts. Especially in the beginning there were these pubs, you know, where they played our music. Whenever and wherever we had the chance to go to one of them, we jumped over the fence at night. I had a flat, in the hospital compound, and he [her husband] had one from his construction company, in the barracks. He lived
there with many other workers. So if we were late, we had to climb over the fence. ... There was a gatekeeper who locked the hospital gate at 10 p.m., and only the ambulance could get through. We were often late; we came home around midnight and we couldn’t wake up the gatekeeper. So we had to climb over the concrete fence with iron bars on top to get to the other side. The fence was high, concrete and the bars were sharp [laughs], we also fell from time to time, right on our noses, but it didn’t hurt, we just kept going.²

As if to express how carefree those years were, Dunja emphasized that they simply took a taxi to the concerts, adding that they needed a taxi because they did not know their way around Vienna, a city that was still largely unknown to them then. Such statements were characteristic of Dunja’s narrative of their early years in Vienna, conveying the excitement and amusement and including references to their hard work and the unfamiliar city.

The time of their arrival in the early 1970s stood in stark contrast to that of their retirement in 2010. When Dunja told me about her early years as a young
adult in Vienna, memories just poured out of her. In contrast, memories of when she retired seemed like a pause in her narrative. Dunja said she regretted retiring early and that it took her a long time to get used to retirement. She missed how her days were structured and her work and colleagues, some of whom she was still in contact with. This theme of retirement was already prominent in the interview, where she elaborated on the difficulties:

I have been retired since January 1, 2010. Right in the first year I became depressed, because I was used to working, to being with people, to talking with people about different subjects, and suddenly I was left alone. . . . It was very hard; if I had known how hard, I would not have retired. . . . I had worked since I was a child; my body was used to work and, when I stopped, I didn’t feel well. I actually thought I would enjoy being retired but the enjoyment only lasted for five days, on day six I was already bored and I didn’t cope well and it lasted for a year. I don’t know, it was like in prison, like I was in a cell, in solitude, that year was very hard for me. . . . I was looking forward to retiring, but it turned out that I was wrong.

Like other women and men migrant workers, Dunja very much defined herself in relation to her work. She told me how much she invested in work and how little she took from the Austrian state in the form of social benefits. She announced (not without pride): “I was in service for 38 years and six months. And during this time I was sick for only three months.” Dunja spoke of herself as a very devoted worker and added that the contribution of labor migrants is today less appreciated than it was in the 1960s and 1970s.

Interestingly, while visiting her husband’s barracks brought up early memories of Vienna, of arrival and youth, it also evoked more recent memories related to Dunja’s postwork phase. Here, too, the pace of her narrative changed from high to low when she came closer to the present, after her retirement. It became clear to me that the barracks stood for both the adventure of youth and for work and finally for the history of labor migration on a larger scale. After visiting the barracks, Dunja showed me other nearby places, such as the school her daughter went to and the park she visited on a daily basis with her and their neighbors (Fig. 2). When we paused at the park, memories returned of when her daughter was a child, when they came to the park regularly and when on weekends one of her neighbors used to bring his harmonica to make music.
About an hour into our walk, Dunja led me up the hill behind her house, one of her favorite places in the neighborhood. While we sat on one of the benches, she told me about her life between Vienna and her hometown in Serbia, a small village surrounded by mountains. The life narrative that unfolded at this specific place, which reminded her of where she grew up, came unexpectedly. Up on the green hills overlooking the city was where and when Dunja’s narrative became very personal, where she decided to tell me “her” story. This was a narrative situated between her Serbian village where she grew up and Vienna, where she spent most of her adult life. It was characterized by the constant weaving together of her multilocal pasts.

Dunja told me of her and her husband’s great hopes of returning to their Serbian hometown after retirement. They had invested all their savings in their house in Serbia. There they had the nice furniture and the best dinnerware; even the dishwasher, she added with a sigh, was in her Serbian house. “It is a Siemens dishwasher,” she told me. “I just used it twice and now it’s in our house in Serbia, unused,” although they actually had more use for it in their flat in Vienna. Her
hopes of returning to Serbia after retirement have not materialized. For her life narrative, this means finding a new story with a different ending, with a different anticipated future.

Dunja told me all this while we were sitting on a bench surrounded by tall trees in a glade that she liked to visit daily and that gave her a feeling of familiarity, a feeling of home (Fig. 3). In her narrative, her life was characterized by a state of in-between-ness between Serbia and Vienna, by a sense of simultaneity and multiplicity of places. The dishwasher anecdote exemplifies this very well. Where she shared the story with me was also telling, since it was the place in Vienna where she felt most at home and where she was also reminded of her home in Serbia.3

On the way back, but still on the hill, Dunja showed me the villages just outside Vienna. She said that especially at the beginning, after their arrival, Dunja and her husband liked to visit these villages because they reminded them of their hometown. They recognized the same farm equipment they knew from their Serbian village and enjoyed the fresh vegetables they missed in the city. They
bought cabbage and took it back to their flat in Vienna, where they prepared pickled vegetables:

And then we went outside Vienna to see how the farmers live there and to see how rich they were, in contrast to our [Yugoslav] farmers. We went to buy vegetables and fruit there because they were cheaper. We were also interested in seeing their way of life, the Austrian village life. They lived better than the people in the city. . . . I was really excited then—we bought cabbage to prepare pickled cabbage for the winter and so on; it was nice! They also had various celebrations; for the autumn festival in the village, they played music, trumpets; we were also interested in their customs.

In the end, Dunja and her husband found more similarities than differences with their hometown in the villages surrounding Vienna:

Very similar [to Serbia], everything, you know, the language is different, but everything they had, we [in Serbia] had too. The wedding ceremonies were almost the same, maybe with small differences. And other things were also the same—the tools they used, for example, we also had them in our villages: scythe, sickle, they also cut the grass with a scythe, and for the hills they used a machine, and everything I had in my childhood they also had in their villages.

Here we can see how placemaking and homemaking build on memories of the past and the past home and how Dunja narratively weaves the sites together. Two distant places become connected through the narration of her memories that are closely linked to them. In Dunja’s placemaking, places and narratives about them act as bridges to capture multilocal pasts. But her placemaking practices, evident in her narrative, build on the past and are future-oriented, in the sense of homemaking (Boccagni).

**Conclusion**

Narratives of the past are often bound to particular places and to movement between places. Places become meaningful once they are connected by narration to personal memories of past times. Migrants’ narratives and memory places are
likely to show a transnational dimension that reflects the migrants’ mobility and their multilocal pasts. These findings question the continuing concentration on memory and place in a tight national framework. With a focus on placemaking, I investigated the specific forms of appropriating the cityscape from the perspective of a woman migrant worker, showing how places and narratives are interwoven. Places first become filled with meaning through social interaction and the sensory experiences that surround them. At the same time, places shape and enhance narratives of the past. The meaningfulness of places is preserved through narration and by sharing memories. This is of special importance if places no longer physically exist, but also for stories that are marginalized, as is the case for migrants’ histories and particularly for women migrants’ histories. While memories are often linked to places, visiting places in the course of memory-guided city walks with migrants is particularly rewarding. Because the labor migrants’ histories are rarely publicly remembered and are still widely unnoticed, visiting places of the past with former labor migrants provides an opportunity to encounter narratives that would otherwise remain unheard. Placemaking is not solely built on the past but is also future-oriented when facilitating homemaking. In the context of migration, places are likely to be characterized by transnational meanings. They act as mnemonic and narrative devices in very specific ways, connecting new and old homes and memories of departure with memories of arrival and new beginnings.

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NOTES

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1. Vienna's city museum, Wien Museum, was among the first to make the guest workers' histories visible, initially with the exhibitions “Gastarbeiter” (Guest Workers) in 2004 and then again with the exhibition “Migration Sammeln” (Collecting Migration) in 2015. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the first guest worker contracts, there were some media reports and small-scale exhibitions, but far fewer than activists and former guest workers I talked to had hoped for.

2. All of Dunja’s quotes in this article were translated either from German or Serbian into English.

3. For a discussion on migrants’ double homes, multilocality, and in-between worlds see also Bendix and Löfgren; Meyer; Miller; and Rolshoven.

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