

Retracing Propinquity and the Ethno[flow]

Armando Montilla

School of Architecture, Clemson University, Clemson 29634 South Carolina, United States
*Corresponding Author: amontil@clemson.edu

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Abstract Transnational migration flows are the conundrum of mobility and globalization: While transforming entire urban sections of the city into 'ethnic enclaves' - allowing for hosting nodes of reception to new arrivals - they also translate into extrapolated patches of these flows' points of geographical origin, conforming a new urban *polynational* metropolis. The results of this extra-national presence in the city generate instantaneous transnational connections in terms of financial, media and political links, which simultaneously reverse the original flow back to the point of departure. Thus, both flows consolidate themselves into a continuum: *Biopower* (Negri)¹ aggregates to form the incoming flow, while *Immaterial Labour* (Lazzaratto)² configures the reversed flow. Both of them conform the *Ethno[flow]*³ The *Ethno[flow]* both generates and hinders multinational integration and propinquity, allowing for simultaneous tension and harmony. It enhances local urban economies, while financially supporting far away points in the globe. 'Transnational Suburbs' (Davis)⁴ and 'Transnational Community+ies' (Portes)⁵ are products of the *Ethno[flow]* The article gravitates around the concept of *Ethno[flow]* and its impact in the polynational metropolis. Case study analysis will be used to generate critical mass for theoretical elaborations resulting from the study of this phenomenon affecting the contemporary city.

Keywords Immigration, 'Ethnocity', Finance, Electronic Media

1. Introduction: Urban Geographies of Multiculturalism

The definition of Multiculturalism – or what it has become to be called: 'the multicultural society' - has been the object of heated debate in the last few years. Sociologists, Anthropologists and Cultural Geographers all insist in the multicultural society as a given *defacto* product of our times, where multinational migration and mobility are already the number one force behind the growth of major cities in the industrialized world⁶ Yet the unbeatable forces of globalization amalgamate and homogenize the urban

landscape, creating one 'global culture', engulfing everything into a unified, non-descriptive pattern. How is that urban societies can be 'multicultural', and 'globalized' all at the same time? The very essence of the definition of multiculturalism might provide answers to this conundrum.

According to Wieviorka (2012) Multiculturalism [is] "A Concept to be redefined and certainly not replaced by the extremely vague term of Interculturalism"⁷. Following the logic of Colin Rowe – in which a process of fragmentation, collision/superimposition/contamination of many diverse ideas imposed on it by successive generations, (each with its own idea) – conforms the city, it seems the very essence of 'multiculturalism' today, is a hybrid. Cultural values superimposed to each other lead nowadays to new concepts with a cultural twist, such as the Korean Taco in Los Angeles or Japanese-Brazilian Post funk music from São Paulo⁸. While the Kebab stand in Berlin's *Kreuzberg*, or the Spanish signs in Miami's Little Havana have become mainstream manifestations of the urban spectacle, they are in essence nothing more than over imposed, collaged/pasted-in spatial manifestations of culture, all being integral part of the landscape in the contemporary city today.



Figure 1. 'Corrala' typical Madrid dwelling: (16th Century) 18 m x 32 m dwellings around a central patio

Spatially speaking, there are specific programs and uses of urban private and public space, which directly respond to the concept of multiculturalism, from a diverse (non-gazed) perspective: The illegal sweatshops basements in New York's Canal Street or in the outskirts of Barcelona, as well

as the multiple occupants' time-shared dwellings in minuscule apartments at *Corralas* (figure 1) in Madrid's *Lavapiés* district⁹, are spatial manifestations of what I have called *ethnospace*: A space of transnational dynamic and fluid occupancy, with the capacity of changing the urban landscape in short spans of time. The occupation and appropriation of urban residual sub-spaces, and the over-density created by time-shared spaces of dwelling and over-crowded housing (figure 2), are no more than concealed characteristics of the *ethnospace*.

Furthermore, non only geographical, but also virtual connections of all financial, social and human capital, are part of the ethnic configuration of the city, and are constantly toggling between physical and abstract landscapes: While multinational urban migration transforms entire sections of the city into 'ethnic enclaves' - allowing for hosting nodes of reception for new arrivals – such enclaves translate into extrapolated patches of these flows' points of geographical origin, conforming a new urban *polynational* metropolis. The results of this extra-national presence in the city generate instantaneous transnational connections in terms of financial, media and political links, which simultaneously reverse the original flow back to the point of departure. Thus, both flows consolidate themselves into a continuum: *Biopower* (Negri)¹ aggregates to form the incoming flow, while *Immaterial Labour* (Lazzaratto)² configures the reversed flow. Both of them conform the *Ethno[flow]*¹⁰



Figure 2. Ethno[space] by Dwelling 'Pisos Patera' (time-shared shift dwelling for migrants) 'Corrala' in today's Madrid

Yet, a definition of multiculturalism, catering to the pure visual spectacle, serves only to the gaze of the city and bypasses the very rooted fact of the multicultural society: The hardship of the migratory process itself, and the need of establishing a spatial empathy and a sense of community in the new urban settings on the part of new migrants. A "multiculturalism [that] is characterized as a feel-good celebration of ethnocultural diversity, encouraging citizens to acknowledge and embrace the panoply of customs,"¹¹ is now considered a misleading model that communicates a flat-lined concept of what 'multicultural' means, a concept

now rejected by a number of scholars¹²

Consequently, an ethnic occupation of urban spaces is dictated not only by ethnographic values, but also by cultural practices having a direct impact in urban space (Irazábal 2010)¹³. In the space of our cities, aesthetic pollution and retail programming at the street level) (i.e. satellite dishes allowing access to international media, as a medium to connect to cultural origins, plus the proliferation of money transferring and long-distance calling/phone retail outlets) emphasize *ethnoflow*. Meanwhile, mixed programming, such as the micro-Mosque in the back of the *Halal* butchery (figure 3), or the day-showroom turned sweatshop at night, emphasize *ethnospace*.



Figure 3. Back-of-the-store 'mini' Mosque in Barcelona

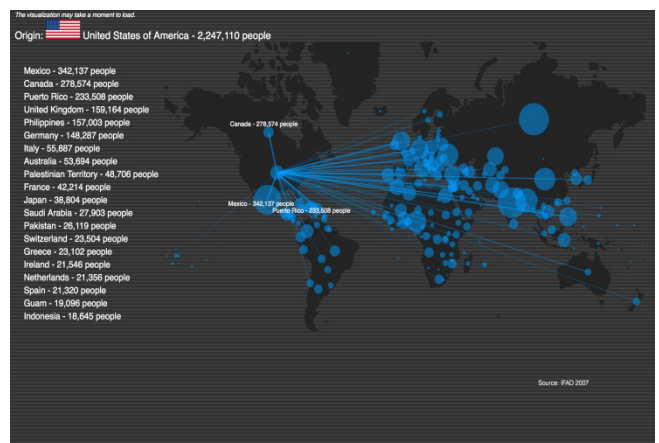


Figure 4. Map representation of money remittances (in number of senders) flows from the US to the 20 largest recipients countries worldwide¹⁵

Notwithstanding, the definition of multiculturalism remains unclear and undefined in spatial terms. Perhaps the clue to untangle this definition can be provided by the concept of *propinquity* - or spatial empathy –¹⁴ as a vehicle to define the colliding of kaleidoscopic cultural values in the midst of urban space: The more in common inhabitants have with their urban surroundings, the more propinquity there is between built space and those who inhabit them. This spatial propinquity comes as a derivative of the idea of *erthäunis* – or the relationship between objects and people – given in a system where globalization acts solely as the conducting medium for the urban phenomena of ethnic/multinational occupation of urban space. Following the Roland Barthes’ sequence from the myth – as described in *Mythologies* - we could say that Globalization becomes the *signifier*, while urban ethnicity becomes the *signified*¹⁶

2. Cases of Study: Amalgamated Flows

2.1. Money Remittances

Globalization itself plays a very important role in conforming the *ethnoflow*, as defined above. Beyond the visual manifestations depicting the ethnic occupation of the city, the financial electronic realm plays an important role in the continuity of the *ethnoflow*: The money remittance industry has multiplied its growth over the last two decades: More than 215 million people (ca 3% of the world's population) live outside their countries of birth. Remittances - the money sent home by migrants - are three times the size of official development assistance and they provide an important lifeline for millions of poor households (figure 4) Remittances to developing countries were estimated to reach \$372 billion by 2011. The overall economic gains from international migration for sending countries, receiving countries, and the migrants themselves are substantial¹⁷ “*Remittance sender and receivers live in what Manuel Castells calls the ‘space of flows’; a timeless place of transnational networks operating beyond traditional institutions and communities*”¹⁸ The mainstream proliferation of electronic media to facilitate money transactions at all levels has only facilitated the fluidity of capital in ways that surpass mainstreams banking controls subjected to scrutiny on the part of National governments agencies. Pre-paid re-loadable Debit Cards, fully participant of the Credit Card mainframe networks, allow migrant whose legal status prevents them from accessing bank accounts to receive payroll deposits directly into virtual cash repositories; which in return allows them to electronically access remittances applications to send cash to any point in the world. Some receiving countries have technologically prepared adopting new ways to facilitate the flow of cash from their own migrant diaspora. As an example of this, the *Smart Padala* network in the Philippines allows users of pre-paid mobile phones, to receive money remittances from the US and many other countries - directly into their mobile

phones by way of text messaging – (figure 5) allowing them to code obtaining cash via a debit card linked to Bank ATMs nationwide¹⁹

2.2. Exchanging Electronic Flows as Commodities

In another case, in field studies realized in the city of Caracas, Venezuela, the proliferation of street outlets/vendors in that city, who rented pre-paid mobile phones to passers-by – offering the making of phone calls at more attractive fees than using personal phones or pay phones – prompted the idea of a network intended to be a ‘Pre-paid minutes Exchange’ (2002) (figure 6) In this network, users could not only use their pre-paid airtime to make phone calls, but they could also trade it in units of minutes to other users within the system - at a real-time value/trade exchange - fluctuating with levels of peak and off-peak usage (figure 7) They could also exchange these pre-paid traded minutes for products and services, replacing the use of debit/credit cards, and fostering telecom users to outsource benefits addressed to the less economically privileged users²⁰. Hitherto and not surprisingly, the financial *ethnoflow* carries a degree of resilience, making it supersede mainstream regulations enforced by local banking systems and other financial regulations in host/sending countries, much in the way Saskia Sassen explains how financial global cities/centers such as London, New York and Tokyo supersede national governments, functioning in a manner independent of National States²¹



Figure 5. ‘Smart Padala’ Money Remittance System via Cell Phone

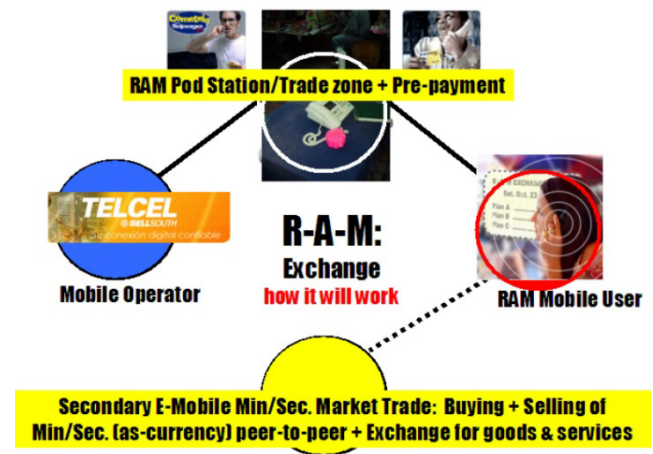


Figure 6. ‘RAM’ (‘Rent-a-minute’) Exchange: Mobile Pre-paid telephony as interface for the flow of trade and services (Co-lateral CCS) 2004

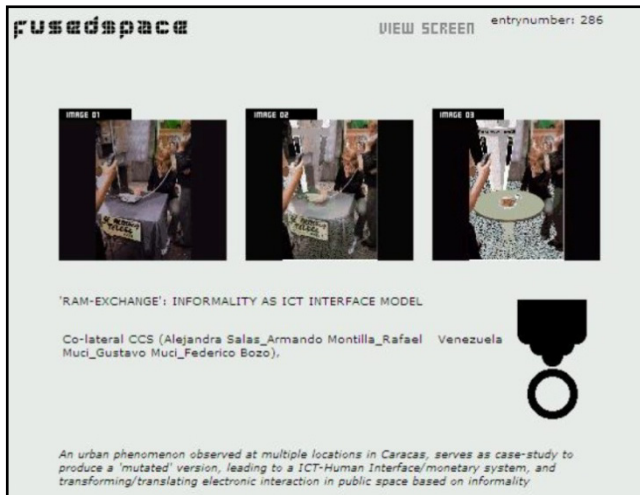


Figure 7. 'RAM-Exchange' Interface Proposal, *Fusedspace* Competition Entry (Co-lateral CCS: Alejandra Salas, Armando Montilla, Rafael Muci, Gustavo Muci, Federico Bozo) 2003

3. Consequences and Manifestations of the Ethno[flow]

3.1. Transnational Suburbs

The ubiquitous continuity of the financial *ethnoflow*, between large urban centers in the industrialized world and remote points in developing countries, reveals another spatial urban complexity: large urbanized areas within metropolitan perimeters, become virtually more connected to distant points in the globe - becoming extrapolated geographies of connectivity to the migrants points of origin - more so than to the immediately local geography. Thus, Theorist Mike Davis denominates these neighborhoods maintaining solid links to specific areas in countries such as Mexico or China 'Transnational Suburbs' ²²

Newly applied disciplines to urban design and planning such as GIS (Geographical Information Systems) are tapping into the nature of these flows, not only to map them but to understand the complexity and fluctuation of these trans-national links, between remote areas in certain countries and dense populated areas of main US urban centers: "Obviously, the design and the reasons for its collection have an effect on the biases of the map. Now that many specialists other than cartographers can make maps, it is specially important to understand the source of data they rely on, the products of which are maps and images that are having an effect on policy, cities, landscape, privacy, and beyond" (Kurgan, 2013:53) ²³ Similarly, not only are the flows of capital between individuals, but also community interests by-passing geographical boundaries, contributing to virtual connections between remotely connected places to be a stronghold of the *ethnoflow* (Portes, 1996) ²⁴

3.2. Socio-cultural Dimensions of the Ethnoflow

Furthermore, another notion from Castells applies to these transnational dynamics: That of the 'Dual City' ²⁵. The overlapping of spatial occupation by different workers' classes and genders within the same architectural envelope, reveals a potential duplicity of flows, which taps into the nature of previously stated processes within electronic media: While the Stock Broker worker monitors financial activity at a different time zone from where he I (late at night at multinational/financial corporate office spaces), the office cleaning worker, working during same night shift, uses her mobile phone to verify that her money remittance transaction has gone through its point of destination (presumably also at a different time zone) Through this usual occurrence Castells reveals traces of social and economical equality that collide using same architectural spaces and same channels of electronic flows. The *ethnoflow* taps into this notion of Castells, as part of the globalized city of today. Outside of city corporate cores and more representative of neighborhood fabric, physical and architectural manifestations of the *ethnoflow* transform the frontage of strip malls and storefronts at street level in the heart of ethnic enclaves (Portes and Bach, 1985: 239) ²⁶. Thus, entire arrays of commercial establishments born out of the need to service migrant urban communities pop up in the city: From money remittances agencies and calling centers for migrants to make cheap phone calls to their home countries or to obtain pre-paid calling cards, to ethnic restaurants and other ethnic-managed business, such as dry cleaning outlets and barbershops. In cities like Los Angeles, where multi-ethnic enclaves are part of the city's fabric, the presence at the same strip mall of a Korean dry clean, a Latino grocery shop, an Indian/Bangladeshi or Pakistani Calling Center and a Chinese restaurant conforms - together with the multilingual signage that accompanies its architecture - (figure 8) simultaneous manifestations of *ethnopaces* and *ethnoflow* within propinquity distance. In these cases, yet another notion needs to be invoked, that of 'ethnoscapes' (Irazábal, 2010) ²⁷. According to this concept, "[t]he landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers, and other moving groups and persons who constitute an essential feature of the world... appear to affect the politics of and between nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree" (Appadurai, 1991:192) ²⁸. As part of the *ethnoscape*, the architecture of the ethnic enclave is conforming a new landscape of ethnicity, which caters not only to complex relationships of provision of goods and services, but also to a cultural dimension that include an urbanity of tension and harmony, fluctuating and changing according to the diversification of the urban transnational migratory process itself.

4. Conclusion: The City of Propinquity

Multinational migration has always existed in urban history, while the notion of the ethnic enclave dates back

almost to the origins of urbanity itself. As an example, Jewish Ghettos were a norm in 15th Century Europe, and *Mellahs* in Moroccan cities were pockets of disambiguation within Northern African Arab societies²⁹

However, today's urban societies bear a number of aspects that imprint multinational migration of characteristics distinguishing them from historical flows of migration in the past, allowing for the notion of the *ethnoflow*:

1. **Globalization** This phenomenon provides a vehicle for mobility to transform urban environments at a much faster pace, providing instant spectacles and the adopting of cross-cultural programming and pop-up spatial territories of tension and harmony.



Figure 8. 'Ethnoscape' Strip Mall in Indianapolis IN²

2. **Propinquity:** This concept changes the notion of Multiculturalism, as it has been traditionally understood until today. Traces of propinquity today accompany the process of migration: From the beginning of the relocation experiences, to the symbiotic relationship with the point of origin. The formerly called multicultural city, the so-called 'polynational metropolis', is now the city of spatial values culturally transformed by multinational migration, or the city of propinquity, per se.

3. **Technology:** Processes of multinational migration have always been determined (in term of the speed of relocation) directly in relationship to existing technologies: Beforehand, those technologies allowing for the travelling of migrants across continents (i.e. sail and steam navigation in the past, airplane travelling today) Additionally, those allowing for migrants to re-connect back to their points of origin (i.e. electronic media: telegraph/fax wire transferring in the past, internet/mobile money e-transfers, plus Satellite TV, today)

4. **Hyper-capitalism:** As mass consumption has been widespread across the world, means of travelling across continents become more accessible to many more nowadays, facilitating faster and easier multinational migration processes and the *ethnoflow*. In the other hand, hyper-capitalism also creates a great degree of social, economical and political inequality – both within cities and between countries - generating points of friction of spatial

and geographical proximity and adjacency. These generate both illegal migration corridors bearing a high traffic of migrants (i.e. Mexico/Central America/Cuba-US, as well Africa-Europe, and Southeast Asia-Australia); and colliding spatial overlapping of different class and genders at the same urban and architectural space (the dual city) All of these points of frictions are facilitated within and are part of the *ethnoflow*.

Talking about urban geographies of multiculturalism opens an opportunity for a dialogue and a vehicle of exploration into the ethnic occupation of the city, based on cultural, economical, and political values. Both flows conforming this migration – the incoming, and the outgoing, are a key aspect of these urban processes and transformations. Therefore the *ethnoflow*, contributes to the balance – negative or positive - of urban propinquity.

The *ethnoflow* will continue to exist as a virtual and spatial continuum, which will keep transforming urban areas and will remain adapting to the different circumstances the migratory process encounters, as long as transnational migration occurs. As cities continue evolving in the diversity of their demographics and their incoming ethnic population grows, eventually abandoning the ethnic enclave and moving to the upward suburbs (Li, 2011)³¹; new incoming population will replace the vacancies of the outwards movement of migrants. The *ethnoflow* infrastructural spaces will only continue to proliferate, defeating notions of center and periphery, and continuing to be an integral part of hyper-capitalism structures of economics and spatial power.

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Communities," in *The American Prospect* no. 25, March-April 1996, p. 74-77)

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