Transcultures and Communities: Exercises on the validation and design of tales of migration

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ABSTRACT
The following work presents a transdisciplinary approach in which literary theory, architecture, sociology, and geopolitics share methodologies to process the topic of migration in the mid-twentieth century. The focus is on how abilities, commodities and cultures determine the way communities settle in alien contexts by interacting and integrating with and within new spatial and social environments. Activities including tagging pictures, debating on transculturality and the elaboration of storyboards are applied to give context to the design of spatial interventions for a building at the University of Alicante (Spain) campus. Students choose transcultural phenomena, as presented by the characters of stories collected by the Canadian Centre of Architecture, to rethink normative contexts by observing common boundaries at the intersection between Humanities, Social Sciences and Architecture.

KEYWORDS
transcultural, tagging activity, architectural model, migration-based design, transdisciplinarity
Introduction

Literary theory focuses mainly on the dynamics and devices involved in the performance and recognition of textual stories. Architectural theory sets a context for designing spaces for experiences and as such, it corresponds to sociology studies to reveal the interrelations between humans and their environment. Lastly, geopolitical studies focus on political powers linked to a geographical space. This paper draws from the shared objectives and methods across these four fields of knowledge on the topic of migration in the mid-twentieth century, to present a learning experience that took place during the first semester of the academic year 2018-19 at the University of Alicante in Spain. This multidisciplinary learning event is discussed to propose transcultural strategies for design studio teaching and learning in architecture.

The research framework in which this contribution is set, focuses on the varied degrees of integration and rootedness of contemporary migrations caused by climatic, cultural, labour or economic reasons. Through a multi- and transdisciplinary approach, this framework provides an opportunity to speculate about streams of non-humans, goods and knowledge that propose complementary perspectives beyond the anthropocentric discourse. More specifically, the subject allows us to compare migrants and remittances, i.e. non-monetary transfers such as consumer goods, customs and technologies. In this context, the educational challenge lies in the definition of methodologies and the achievement of statements. The learning experience described in this contribution invited the students to implement procedures learnt from fields of knowledge that sit outside architecture (such as storyboards, sociograms or image tagging) and to deploy them as the starting point for developing an architectural design project. This educational challenge constitutes an opportunity to rethink the academic context in the fields involved while raising particular questions for architectural theory and practice: What to design? To whom are our designs addressed? How can we demonstrate the suitability of decisions? In relation to what are decisions made? How inclusive are our proposals?

Since its inception, the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA) has curated a range of exhibitions on contemporary subjects suitable for architectural education, with particular focus on revealing the convergences of architecture with other fields across the humanities and social sciences. One of these exhibitions, *Journeys: How travelling fruit, ideas and buildings rearrange our environment*, was selected as the starting framework for this learning experience. Based on literary narratives and non-literary texts on migration, border-crossing and transcultural identities compiled in the book of the same name, this exhibition acknowledges the value of non-human migrant agents by establishing complex connections between them. The stories presented in the exhibition included questions about regulations, transactions, migrated habits, and how these can affect configurations of homes and neighbourhoods, as depicted in the following excerpt:
Now that we have been living in Mazara for nearly a month, I am starting to know my way around the Casbah pretty well (...). The Semzadeta family uses the courtyard for things like hanging out the laundry. I like seeing all their colourful clothes dangling. I also like to pass through them when they are drying and feel the damp on my face and arms. (...) Sometimes when Ali comes to visit, he doesn't even go into the house. He sits on the sofa for a mint tea and some small talk. I haven't quite figured out how it works yet, but I think there are invisible lines dividing our part of the courtyard form other people's parts. I only know that if we stray too far, it's not good, because we're in the Di Dias's section, or else the Semzadetas' or Eddies's, or in danger near the abandoned house (...).

Conversations among characters and messages from narrators introduce the reader into contextual backgrounds such as monetary remittances, idiomatic iconographies, land-based abilities, architectural typologies, agricultural knowledges or collective cultures, among others. Each of these could be considered as an opening to further debate: What traces of neighbourhoods and symbols of communal migrant identity are comparable with global-scale identity landmarks, such as the Red Square in Moscow, the Eiffel Tower in Paris or Niagara Falls? Could a tobacco shop, a bazaar, a hospital waiting room or ‘labour exchange’, generate a similar degree of social appropriation on a smaller scale? Finally, could these situations be described by literary fictions, visualised by sociograms, and amplified by architectural designs? Considering the above, certain tools were utilised to recognize the identity and characteristics of the spatial settings linked to migrant communities. These tools are based on a tagging process, in which students attach concepts to images. The question whether the tools and methods that facilitate this tagging process are useful or suitable for knowledge construction in architecture, sociology, and literature studies, was addressed through horizontal cooperation across students from all three disciplines.

The learning process described here, entails a sequence of diverse but interrelated methodological stages, the general structure of which can be understood through the diagram of methodologies and results depicted in Figure 1. This learning experience borrows time from the time for workshops and practices included in the design units or subjects of each involved discipline. Although various research networks are engaged, it has been mainly designed by the Viceversos Network at the University of Alicante, whose aim is to test the existence of common boundaries among fields of knowledge through participatory methodologies. Twenty architecture students and a variable number of students coming from the other disciplines participated in this project. This paper focuses on the elements that, enhancing the theoretical framework presented above, pursue the sharing of knowledge with the students across two key methodological approaches: engaging with a deeper understanding of forms of narrative as tools of critical analysis and identifying spatial concepts and circulating entities in images posted in social media. These approaches are applied and enabled through the design task of transforming an existing building in the University of Alicante campus, in order to include new uses.
Figure 1: Diagram containing learning outreaches and participation from each discipline; chronology from left to right (Jose Carrasco Hortal, Benito Garcia Valero, Jesus Lopez Baeza 2019).
Translating cultures: transculturality as a guiding concept

The morphological setting, i.e. the form, of a city, a neighbourhood, or a house is the result of iterative processes expanded throughout centuries by a range of overlapping layers: the aspirations of their dwellers, the intuition of their leaders, and the availability of technical resources. In spite of this, drawing from modernist responses to architecture and its city, schools of architecture often explain typologies of morphological settings as stable and lasting entities that do not undergo major transformations. Contemporary studies on migrant communities address this issue by understanding that architecture and landscape are the frame in which lived experiences take place, as well as the space in which connections regarding self-identity, sense of belonging, culture, memory and habitus are created and rebuilt constantly.

Migration offers the opportunity to observe decisions regarding sheltering, safety and security, dwelling or place connectedness, among others. In sum, the form of cities, neighbourhoods, and houses is the result of constant changes. As a consequence, the city can be understood as the result of procedural entities. In this context, scholars within the field of Social Sciences and Geography, such as Tim Edensor or Michael Guggenheim, consider the study of mobility and transition through spaces and the way that movements contribute to the anthropization of territories. These movements may involve people, materials, abilities, commodities, equipment or cultural practices, which are conceived as ‘circulating entities'. These entities occasionally flourish, strengthen, and are assumed by local regulations as new typologies of spaces. An example of this is the case of Bengali bungalow, which was converted into a type of residential cottage for the English middle class workers at the end of the nineteenth century, when they received the right to enjoy two free days a weekend – at the end of a labour week. However, as can be seen in the case of the Bungalow Hotel, these ‘circulating entities' do not always end up hybridising the local typologies or generating new ones upon their transference from one sociocultural context to another:

The Bungalow Hotel (...) it would give me a feeling of being at home too if it were anything like the bungalow in India I grew up in. This place is just a three-storey building with William Morris wallpaper and 1930s furniture. The bungalow I grew up in Lahore was a large, flat-roofed house with a wide veranda all around, set inside a walled compound filled with tropical plants. That was a real bungalow (...).

In the same way, collective imaginary elements of social networks can also be considered as migrant or transiting entities, defined as mediascapes or imagescapes. These entities are the last step of the evolution of publicising renderings, maps, photographs, journals, videos, and websites. From an architectural perspective, such migrations pose an interesting debate regarding which object is actually migrating: is it a building type or a social practice, which crystallises in order to enable a specific form of social relationship; such as the life of a nuclear family, or the reclusion of
individuals to be punished, or the gathering of people who need to pray? To answer that question, Yolanda Onghena proposes transculturality as a new kind of framework in which students and researchers from Social Sciences, Humanities and Architecture share discussions and taxonomies by observing the way migrant communities disassemble and hybridise their cultures through a set of narratives on migrations. Coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in order to explain the hybrid identity of Cuban culture, transculturality refers to the fusing of elements coming from different traditions into a cultural frame, whose elements are different to its metropolitan and original traditions. The prefix trans- suggests movement and, in quite a literal sense, it implies the transposition of objects from one space to another: translatio had in Latin language the original meaning of transferring items physically. The prefix tra- or trans-, having the original meaning of ‘in or from the other side’ or ‘across’ (from Latin), introduces a dynamic movement of physical entities, which admits metaphorical uses: the translation of languages is indeed the transference of meanings from one abstract entity (the original language) to another abstract entity (the target language) via acoustic or graphic materials: words. García Yebra understands translation both as an action and a result, and the same focus can be applied to transculturation: actions apply to the fact of transferring cultural practices, items and customs to environments different from their original setting. Observing the results of these transpositions reveals a series of transformations which are, for us, even more interesting than the action of undergoing movement and exportation. As a consequence, the transposition of things from one context to another entails a transformation of social practices that might be reflected in the configuration of spaces, especially in hybrid ones.

For the learning experience discussed here, students were asked to apply the frame of transculturality into the tales included in Journeys through a process of critical reading. Migrant spaces can be understood as the frame in which relations among people and things operate. The transculturality of migrations can be analysed through non-representational methods, i.e. those that allow the observer to decide how to model, what to depict, or where the narrator is. These methods allow the observer to focus on ‘materials, movements and affective bodies’ expressing the relational rather than the individual, the context rather than the meaning. Following what Eyal Weizman defines as ‘the microphysical approach’ to singular incidents that follow patterns of space and time, one can work with small pieces of evidence, such as photographs, testimonies or films, in order to understand a hybrid and wider context (from a building or ruin to an infrastructure). In this approach, the focus is placed on ‘how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements’. As Tim Ingold suggests, architecture’s ‘(i)nhabitants meet, entwine and trail in a place-binding world’, with place-bound differences, with malleable and unstable lives. The overall context presented to the students was framed by examples of related architectural practices such as Izaskun Chinchilla’s proposal to
reprogramme a cultural archaeological landmark through the addition of ‘new, light and semi-permanent architecture (…) introducing cultural activities’,\textsuperscript{18} aligned to a methodological engagement using digital media. These involved display cabinets with bottom-up content democratically determined by participants, films curated by public voting and played in an outdoor cinema, or resources for computer literacy or museographic way-findings. Husos Arquitectos’ exploration of the transnational urbanism of monetary remittance flows, by means of drawing and storyboarding the involved agents was also a key methodological example, revealing the impact of globalised systems upon local socio-spatial formations within globalisation.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{Narrative: From text to image}

A cohort of twenty students were distributed into groups, one for each case study, thus working with stories contextualised in diverse contemporary situations. The hypothesis was that if a contemporary situation could provide a meaningful inspiration for literature, it could also provide a precise context inside a statement for scripting, storyboarding and rendering design processes. Starting the second month of the academic semester, students from architecture were asked to create models depicting the social and psychological qualities of the characters in the selected stories, taking into account and developing typological considerations that could include not only the formal framework of communal spaces but also the actions by which their identity or social values are recognized. These models, defined by the accidents of the literary context and the human qualities of the characters,
arrived at a degree of definition similar to the Japanese architectural ethnographies led by Atelier Bow-Wow. In this case, a scale of 1:10 was used to allow a particular rather than a complete delimitation of the context, letting layers of cultural objects and patterns of human behaviours be performed.20

In parallel, after reading on Ortiz’s concept of transculturation, students from Literary Theory led a discussion with the remaining architecture students, students of geopolitics and sociology, with the purpose of analysing the cultural elements appearing in the tales. In doing so, the students identified those elements coming from alien traditions and critically observed their evolution in the transition process from one cultural context to another (Fig. 2). Conversational tables with models placed in their centre contained the selected scenes, which in those moments were observed through birds-eye views. Each participant integrating the team could move around his table, open the foam board walls, operate the cut-out paper figures, and comment on the emerging controversies through handmade paper tags; some of them prefixed, some of them left for discussion.

Tagging: from image to social space

After working on their case studies, the students were asked to perform a tagging activity through the tool ImageTagger, a software that enables the analysis and comparison of social and spatial values demonstrated within pictures available in the social network Instagram, retrieved from images posted from the cities and spaces included in the narratives (San Juan de Yapacani, Arnold’s Cove, Brazzaville, Mazzara, Dakar, Barre, among others) (Fig. 3). With this activity, all students labelled a set of concepts attached to
every posted image. Previously, teachers looked for sets of images with traces related to socio-urban or cross-cultural qualities such as a particular way of harvesting a crop, or a particular way of connecting with ancestors (such as the Japanese-Bolivian Bon Odori party, for instance). The goal of this task was to observe whether students can identify relevant issues within these images by observing carefully secondary spaces and backgrounds. The instructions urged them to pay special attention to time and cultural relations between objects and not only the ones established in the foreground. This method let the practitioners the comparison between topics extracted from the selected essays and others observed inside Instagram photos. The outstanding element in this process was that while the literary element might offer a context of fiction, the Instagram photos offered an element of reality that anchors that fiction to something clearly relevant and tangible. The software created a string-based data-frame, in which metadata were associated with each of the pictures by tagging the interpretation of the content manually. Tags were based on a pre-defined matrix of parameters and values, whereby parameters could be associated with a value of choice (e.g. parameter ‘migrant’, value ‘seed’). ImageTagger recorded the selected association and linked all parameters and values to the picture to which they refer to (Fig. 5).

This method, based on big data applied for urban and landscape analysis, follows a research trend with proven successes, e.g. to evaluate the social impact of a newly remodelled street;\(^{21}\) or to obtain morphologies, behavioural patterns or representational trends for diverse urban fabrics – city centre, single-family residences, post-soviet social housing.\(^{22}\)

The final discussion of all materials (such as models, sociological diagrams or results of the labelling activity) delivered a set of statements for undertaking
conclusive design solutions for buildings of the University of Alicante, taking into consideration the transcultural values learned from the narratives.

**Transformative results**

Most of the migrant-based narratives selected for this research include transcultural elements that are altered during a process of migration. To illustrate this idea, we can observe the specific example of the rice grown and harvested in San Juan de Yapacani, by Japanese-born Bolivians and a specific student’s response to it. Rice is a central element of Japanese diet and culture, but in the Bolivian context it has evolved and acquired new cultural aspects:

The first Japanese arrivals, after clearing tracts of rainforest by hand, began to farm rice in the traditional Bolivian way, without flooding the fields;
however (sic) they soon switched to the more efficient method of wet rice farming. With help from contacts in other Japanese colonies in South America, they also experimented with different crops, many of which had not previously been grown in Bolivia. The most successful were soybeans, cotton and macadamia nuts.

In the writer’s narrative, as exhibited at the CCA, the storyteller is absent, and only the dialogues of some of those who attended an informal dinner emerge. The chapter titles match the names of crops (rice, soy, fruit) that are mentioned during the conversation, emphasising the central role of the good as the focus of the cultural context illustrated. Throughout the story, guests at a dinner – experts in Japanese crop imports in Bolivia – discuss how crops have been adapted to Bolivian lands, offering a clear example of transculturation of elements acquiring new qualities in their new land. A storyboard for a micro-film created by the students became the vehicle to transfer the transcultural issues of the original story into a conversational scene with representative characters, as hypothetical users or visitors in a refurbishment addressed to a part of an existing Campus building at Alicante.

The design stage developed several meeting spaces to continue with a kind of progression plan for the Campus Community at the University of Alicante, including a facility with an area specialised in Bolivian-Japanese food, spaces for orchards and celebrations (such as Bon Odori or National Rice Day to commemorate the arrival of the Japanese after the Second World War):

‘It takes place at sunset in the orchard of a neighbourhood in the Bolivian landscape where rice grows; nearby some people are chatting casually; it is a National holiday; the camera enters a room where the protagonists of the scene talk about traditional recipes’ (Fig. 6).

Some efforts were orientated
towards designing new uses to overlap with an existing infrastructure. The design included the minimum steps to understand a cyclical program of nurturing, transporting, storing, consuming and celebrating. The transcultural response to design was also expressed in the student’s consideration of Japanese construction techniques, such as dry construction or tightened membranes (Fig. 7 & 8).

Figure 7: General layout (refurbishment of a Campus building, University of Alicante (Spain). Study case San Juan de Yapacani (author: Adrian Bernad Almario 2019).

Figure 8: Case study of San Juan de Yapacani; details (Adrian Bernad Almario 2019).
Another example of transculturality applied to spatial design can be found in the story of Mazzara di Vaio, a Sicilian town used to embrace different cultures. The narrative revolves around the life of Tunisian immigrants in Sicily, an island where Islamic culture was present during the Middle Ages. The Tunisian protagonist is able to recognize elements coming from this background, especially in the design of the neighbourhood, where he and his family are living, and the fishing culture. However, these elements have undergone a process of transformation due to the Christian presence on the island since that time, and the resulting elements are transculturated as they have integrated several features coming from Mediterranean traditions. One of the relevant transcultural elements in the tale are the back yards of the houses, which are spaces shared by neighbours of different nationalities, and which are typically found in traditional north-African towns. They become the crystallisation of the coalescence of cultures and their evolution throughout history in a specific communal space.

In starting the design practice, the students decided to model one of these yards by means of cardboard surfaces. In order to do that, they gathered spatial information from Google Maps focusing on a representative yard, to which different agents (people, equipment, pets, etc.) were then added. All of these elements were used in a debate about tagging, where new issues arose, such as the involuntary character of migration, the visual connection between private spaces and shared spaces without in-between corridors, or the reason for the social mediation experience included in the tale.

Following Ortiz's criticism, it is desirable to set the focus on these transformed elements when studying cultures that are defined by a hybrid background. It is necessary to highlight that today, in contemporary global conditions, hybridism is a prevailing phenomenon all over the world and that makes Ortiz's approach on the study of transculturalism a fruitful frame for understanding current societies. Besides the focus on transcultural elements, the project we undertake has other trans-features that also enrich its possibilities. The fact that philologists have to collaborate with students coming from different academic backgrounds reveals the transposition of the impacts of hybridisation to the architectural projects under development in the classroom as necessary. These transdisciplinary conditions make them think about how to translate into space and architecture the temporal processes they studied when they accessed the history of these emigrated elements. In other words, a translation of temporal elements into spatial ones is performed.

This transversal criticism is also shared with sociologists and students of geopolitics, who need to understand how contemporary societies are configured on hybrid grounds, resulting from long processes of travelling, immigrating, international commerce and exchange, exile and deportation. It is essential for criticism today to understand and respect the different identity features that coalesce in contemporary cultures. Ortiz's criticism is a great
antidote against the increasing nationalistic attitudes gaining importance nowadays, given that it sheds light on the cross-cultural origin of cultural phenomena, and questions the fictitious homogeneity that nationalism seeks to establish by means of reducing the presence of cultures who are understood as alien in grounds to which they have immigrated. Transcultural approaches allow the students to realise the artificiality of many of these ubiquitous nationalistic discourses.

Regarding the results obtained during the tagging activity, it was easy to recognize that, besides the evident socio-demographic segmentation of Instagram users, the study on subjectivity relied greatly on interpretation, which by definition has a subjective component. Following this advice, final bar-charts served to inform about possible controversies that can lead to other levels of decision or analysis. In the case of San Juan de Yapacani, Instagram images showed cause-effect relationships among certain remoteness in the migratory movement, an almost non-existent social segregation and a strong feeling of place attachment. Links between these concepts are highlighted with dashed lines in Figure 6, and are referred to questions 7, 8 and 11 of the Imagetagger activity. Other questions included in this activity provided a way of identifying non-human agents that also migrate. Some answers proposed skill, technology, typology or seed. In relation with the San Juan study case for instance, seed stands out in a double value in comparison with the one granted by the human migrant. Answers demonstrate greater pre-eminence to the translocation of seeds, and the consequent hybridization of recipes, than to human migration (the value in the answers is double, see bar-chart cities by migrant in Fig.6). These Instagram backgrounds can be analysed in terms of pride, curiosity, happiness, identity, character, etc. and constitute a useful source of documentation and decision for urban and architectural design processes.

Discussion and Conclusion

An unexpected outcome of this process was that the totality of the material produced by the students presented a remarkable cohesion and continuity with the scripts included in Giovanna Borasi’s exhibition for the Canadian Centre for Architecture. The student work acted as an extension of those original stories in illustrating the impacts caused by the transnational migrations of people, abilities, objects and animals.

By means of the tagging activity, students engaged with images to explore the contribution of both low culture (popular, everyday life culture) and sacred spaces to enhance a sense of belonging to communities. They also explored how national identity is represented, performed, spatialised, and materialised. Other students discussed how cultural geography and theory examine tourism and its self-representational dimension, revealing paradoxical ways to understand both mobile and rooted, real and fake spaces. The tagging exercise was useful in understanding the diverse academic and research practices between social sciences, computer science,
However, images are not exclusively a concern of designers and architects. When exploring the boundaries between fields of knowledge, it can be recognized that iconic images and pictures are studied by anthropologists and artists, while philologists focus their attention on literary language, which is commonly embodied by written (or oral) texts, leaving aside the analysis and transformation of visual images that are not portrayed or accompanied by linguistic texts. This learning experience at the University of Alicante proves that images can be used to draw connections between the contexts in which literary texts are produced and their historical backgrounds, which may include images (artistic and non-artistic pictures) and historical material, such as non-literary texts, videos, film, painting or sculpture. In this context the contribution of literary theory students was critical to the development of the projects and creative and visual methods acted as bridges between the different fields represented in the participants. These bridges have a twofold nature: their transcultural value, since they allow the transition of elements coming from different traditions to establish hybrid identities which are commonplace today, and the enrichment that transdisciplinary activity provides to the students.

Mirroring the way Giovanna Borasi decided to compile fictions written by different authors, the research presented in this contribution described how students have integrated those narratives and topics (e.g. negotiation, value, typology) into new sets of design projects and categories. Perhaps the most relevant conclusion to be drawn from this process is that, through these methodologies, students realized that identity is a product of dynamic factors in constant redefinition; as constructivism expresses ‘culture (is) a process of “hybridization or creolization” [sic], implying its malleability and instability, rendering it capable of adapting to new conditions and times’. At the same time, they learnt that mobilities are multiple: migrations, exile, movement of...
goods and food, virtual trips (in real time, transcending geographic and social distance, and forming multiple communities remotely). Similarly to Ingold’s affirmations on the connection and classification of fictional knowledge, the work presented in this paper deepens into the students’ understanding of new taxonomies, i.e. classified knowledge, and associates fictional narrative with contemporary realities through storyboards and architectural models, in which characters replicate and update situations taken from original stories, i.e. fictional knowledge. In this context, as Ingold emphasises, depictions include ‘an ongoing engagement, in perception and action, with the constituents of their environment’.

This work on migrant cultures and transculturality remains open to further research opportunities and to be contrasted from other perspectives. So far, it has helped to question dominant metaphors such as social order, structure, and land by means of a new range of categories, more in line with the transit of today’s multicultural society. Networks and flows highlight that all study must be able to articulate human mobility with those established by the matters that make them possible, moving beyond humanistic or anthropocentric discourse (Fig. 9).

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3 These are examples of spaces in which tales of Journeys take place, understood as those places where people communicate or interact, where feelings of roots or belonging are built.


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