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The Syrian diaspora in London through the transnational lens: a distinctive contribution to contemporary public space and citizenship

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Abstract

Despite cyclical attempts to depict migratory flows as extraordinary, migration has always had a place in human history. Considering the magnitude of human mobility across borders, the management of migrant citizens adopted by affluent Western economies appears both inappropriate and fuelled by panic. In a context of heightened time-space compression, re-articulation of orientalism and neocolonial enterprises and increasing popular discontent towards renewed exclusionary logics, the Syrian diaspora proves to be a crucial interlocutor to understand patterns of transformation and anticipate new spaces of citizenship. Through Syrians' first-hand experience we will try to analyze the Syrian diaspora in the UK beyond the lexicon of humanitarian assistance. A transnational approach and a qualitative, intersectional methodology have been employed to gather relevant information in regard to Syrians' migratory experience, with a focus on their activities in the public space. Ultimately Syrians' accounts will provide a rich, indispensable viewpoint to all-encompassing issues such as human mobility, aesthetics, public space, and citizenship.

Keywords: diaspora; transnationalism; Syria; citizenship; intersectional analysis; public space.

Introduction

Migration is not a novel phenomenon, we might say that Abraham was the first migrant (Levitt 2003). Despite cyclical attempts to depict migratory flows as extraordinary, migration has always had a place in human history. Nonetheless what led scholars to talk about *the age of migration* is the acknowledgment that international migration “has never been as pervasive, or as socio-economic and politically significant as it is today” (Castles et al. 2014: 317). The scale of recent migrant and refugee flows, with about 22.5 million refugees, 2.83 million asylum-seekers, and 244 million international migrants across the world (DPADM/UNDESA 2017) has led to the emergence of what has been termed as *migration crisis* (Banulescu-Bogdan and Fratzke 2015). In addition, as the six-year-long civil war still rages on, Syria has become the main country of origin of asylum

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seekers (UNHCR 2014d), marking a sad primacy of “the largest crisis of forcible displacement in the world and...[posing] a growing threat to regional peace and security”¹.

The present work aligns with scholarship that considers mobility as a fundamental right: as humans we are mobile. In a context of increasing heightened flows of goods, information, and people across borders human mobility becomes irresistible and migration policies seem inadequate to uphold the primary exercise of an elementary freedom of movement (De Genova 2017). The *securitization* of borders (Klossov and Scott 2017) and the escalating ‘criminalisation of movement’ (Council of Europe 2009) do not appear to work in the direction of sustainable and fruitful solutions; rather, migration needs to be framed as a question of democratic cohabitation (cf. Yazgan, Utku, Sirkeci, 2015; Anderson 2017). Hence, assuming the contemporary time-space compression, the re-articulation of orientalism and neocolonial enterprises through the global expansion of capitalism, and the increasing popular discontent towards renewed exclusionary logics, the Syrian diaspora represents a crucial interlocutor to understand patterns of transformation and anticipate new spaces of citizenship.

This study is intended to offer an insight into the Syrian diaspora in London, which appears strikingly understudied. Although a rising number of valuable scholarly works reflect the increasing concern related to Syrians’ displacement (Ragab, N. J. and Katbeh, A. 2017; Sirkeci 2017; Öner and Genç 2015), yet analyses on the Syrian community in London, a destination for Syrians since the 1980s, constitute uncharted territory. Therefore we set out to uncover the characteristics of Syrians’ trajectory as well as illuminate what is, if any, the Syrian diaspora’s engagement in London’s public space. The purpose is twofold: on the one hand, we would like to look at the Syrian migration from a different angle, that is to say, beyond the lexicon of the refugee crisis and humanitarian assistance. On the other hand, we would like to narrow down the focus to Syrians’ civic engagement as a means to advance more general theoretical reflections on diaspora and mobility, public space, and citizenship. A transnational approach and a qualitative, intersectional methodology have been employed to gather primary information in regard to a specific migratory experience and raise broader analytical considerations. It is widely acknowledged that there is the necessity to re-embed migration research in a more general understanding of contemporary society and link it to wider theories of social change “in order to facilitate understanding of the complexity, interconnectedness,

¹ UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres in Orchard and Miller (2014).



variability, contextuality and multi-level mediations of migratory processes in the context of rapid global change” (Castles 2010: 1566). Therefore Syrians' accounts as well as a set of multidisciplinary tools drawn from postcolonial and social studies will help us provide a rich, indispensable viewpoint to all-encompassing issues such as human mobility, public space, and citizenship.

Methodological approach

As of 2015, there were around 22,000 Syrian nationals², 9,000 of which were residing in London and 3,000 of them holding British nationality (Office for National Statistics 2015).

Although the Government decided to launch in 2014 a ‘Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme’ (VPRS) to provide a route for selected Syrian refugees to come to the UK (prioritizing victims of sexual violence and torture, and the elderly and disabled), by the end of June 2015 only 216 people had been resettled in the UK under the scheme (House of Commons 2015: 7)³.

Careful scrutiny of the current literature reveals that the Syrian presence in London as well as in the UK is largely undertheorised. An intersectional qualitative approach has been used to gather rich data due to the dearth of information on the topic. In particular, we would like to find out the characteristics of the Syrian diasporic experience in London and what is, if any, their engagement in London's public space. We conducted participant and non-participant observation in several contexts and locations; in addition, 15 semi-structured interviews were collected; the use of writing memos (e.g. theoretical notes, analytic memos to jot down thoughts) throughout this study was integral to the research process. The intersectional approach was instrumental to show how Syrianness is a salient aspect of women's and men's subjectivities but varies according to the interplay of different markers of social differentiation (gender, age, social, economic, religious background, to name but a few). Participants were recruited using snowball purposeful sampling through Syrian networks in London in order to collect information from a broad range of opinion. This allowed us, first, to address a significant scientific lacuna on

² There is an estimated 22,000 Syrian-born individuals (+/- 7,000) with permanent residence in the UK. If we look at the confidence interval (i.e. +/-7,000), it suggests that the true value of the population lies somewhere between a lower limit of 15,000 and an upper limit of 29,000. Statistics are available at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/adhocs/007160peopleborninsyriabutresidentinukandwithbritishnationalityin2015>

³ Eventually, the Prime Minister announced a significant extension of the VPRS planning to resettle up to 20,000 refugees from the Syrian region over the next five years (*Ibid.*).



an urgent focus of study, albeit through a different critical angle. Secondly, Syrians' first-hand experience will guide us to raise more general theoretical questions concerning how to frame the relationship between diaspora and mobility, public space, and citizenship, situating the migrants at the centre of the analysis.

An explanatory note is in order: this research embraces the epistemological perspective that the distinction between movements of population that are voluntary or involuntary, forced or free, can be misleading since all human behaviour is somehow constrained and autonomy is always situationally determined (Serban-Oprescu 2013, Tsagarousiaunou 2004; Sirkeci and Cohen 2016). In addition, according to classical jurisprudence, a person cannot be illegal; rather, acts can be illegal (Kubal 2012: 4). Therefore we applied rigorous vigilance as regards the lexicon that refers to human mobility (e.g economic migrants, refugees, illegal aliens, clandestine) as it can operate pervasively "perpetrating a rather egregious kind of epistemic violence on [...] those migrants" (De Genova 2002: 422). We will then use the concept of migrant as a general category and provide specific details as required. Drawing upon postcolonial and transnational feminist critique as well as 'acts of citizenship' literature (Hall 1990; Brah 1996; Isin 2008) as frameworks for understanding global North-South relationships and international migration, this work adopts a *transnational*, empirically rich approach. *Transnationalism* here clearly refers to the research paradigm that envisages a semantic, methodological, and substantial shift to problematize dominant discourse on migration, identity and citizenship as bequeathed by 19th-century nationalism (cf. Al-Ali & Koser 2002; Glick Schiller et al. 1995; Cohen 2014; Salih 2003). In other words, the heuristic value of transnationalism adopted in this work is a *bottom-up* approach aimed to capture how people on the move enact transnational practices in their day-to-day life. Furthermore, as a critical constructivist approach, transnationalism entails an auto-analytical reflection which constantly keeps in check both the social scientists observing the social world, the effects that this has on this world and how, at the same time, the forces of the social world shape the outlook of the social scientists (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). Within this framework, we propose the heterogeneity of the *public space*⁴, as this reflects the variety of the social fabric of which

⁴ In accordance with the criticism raised by the concept of 'public sphere', namely its cultural and social conditioning, as well as its analytical purchase, for this text we will use 'public space' to refer to the stage where "communal life unfolds" (Carr et al. 1992). Borrowing from H. Lefebvre's and Hannah Arendt's elaboration, the term will be used in reference to its role simultaneously as an incubator and creator of social ties, a juncture where structure and individual agency display themselves, casting a



migrants are constitutive elements (cf. Fraser 2007). In a similar vein, the concept of *diaspora* here highlights a sense of uprootedness and predates the concept of a nation-state (Cohen 1996). Moreover, inscribed within the idea of *the diaspora* are the notions of community, borders as well as land, and it may sustain an ideology of return. Yet it also “offers a critique of discourses of fixed origins. While taking account of a homing desire, this is not the same as a desire for a ‘homeland’ ” (Brah 1996: 180; cf. also Gilroy 2000). Scholars in the field have warned against the dissolution of the concept of diaspora, as the abundant use of the terms has somewhat stretched it to virtually any type of existence away from the homeland (Brubaker 2017; Cohen 2014). We argue in favour of diaspora not as a normative category but as an analytical category whose characteristics assist us in describing and explore a number of collective migratory experiences and configurations (Bauböck and Faist 2010).

With regard to the research design, a critical phenomenological orientation has been used to elicit Syrian women's and men's diasporic experience and illuminate their civic contribution to the capital city's public space (views, practices, and activities). Yet, we ought to underline that the research design developed emerged out of theoretical and practical considerations, combining different techniques and approaches. The intersection of constructivism and the phenomenology of lived experience constitutes a fruitful combination as it gives a broad understanding of migrants' continuous efforts to reinterpret boundaries, negotiate identities and create multi-layered public spaces. This combination is underpinned by a view of methodology development as an activity that requires close attention, with researchers using both cognitive and intuitive skills (Hycner 1985; cf. also Moustakas 1994; Padgett 2008). The data were interpreted through a theme-centred analysis following Groenewald's five phases, which allowed us to delineate units of meaning, extract themes, and contextualise the findings (Groenewald 2004: 17-19). The research also took advantage of an inductive strategy, open to change throughout the research process, thus recognising the dialectical relationship between theoretical perspectives and data analysis and allowing for a level of flexibility. In order to ensure ethical research, we made use of informed consent.

From the data, it emerges that Syrian men and women started to arrive in London in the early 1980s. This means that there is a first and a second generation of Syrian in the capital city. The age range of our respondents is between 20 and 70. In order not to limit the variety of viewpoints, we

light on questions about democracy and civic engagement.



should specify that some of the young interviewees that would belong to the second generation of Syrians were not born in the UK. The majority of the interviewees were born in Syria, except two: one was born in Saudi Arabia and one in France. As regards their legal status, most of the respondents possess dual nationality: Syrian and British. One interviewee possesses Dutch and Syrian nationality, another French and Syrian nationality. Three have been granted refugee status. Only two are Syrian nationals exclusively. All interviewees identified themselves as Syrian, except two respondents: one chose to identify as Syrian Kurd and another as British Syrian. All of them declared to be deeply attached to the UK for personal and emotional reasons. Most of them have a middle- or upper-class background and lived in urban areas (Idlib, Aleppo, Damascus, Qamishli, Deir Ez-Zor, Homs, Latakia, Swaida). All interviewees are graduates except one. Most arrived from Syria as graduates, many though undertook further study after their arrival.

Respondents have different religious or spiritual backgrounds (Sunni, Christian Protestant, Alawi, non-religious or atheist). Some preferred not to disclose their religious beliefs; they overtly acknowledged the significance of spiritual values and preferred to define themselves as 'citizen of the world' as a means to claim the right to their own spirituality or seemingly in defiance of ways of seeing and conceiving which might be tarnished by islamophobic or reductive stereotypes.

It is our belief that the migrants' angle represents an indispensable primary source of information and we strive to preserve the authority of their experience. In this respect, migrants' own definition concerning their spiritual or religious identity signals the relational nature of identity rather than a rigid notion. Bound to length requirements, we will only to present a sample of excerpts and the relevant context with the aim of maintaining a human aspect to the analysis. The excerpts will be used to illustrate both the complexity of individuals' trajectories and summarize common traits regarding Syrian contribution to London's public space.

For the purpose of confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used. It is worth highlighting that the small-scale, exploratory nature of the study, involving just one researcher and not including any external research grant, enabled the researcher to outline only a preliminary exploration of practices and forms of interaction, meanings, and values that cut across Syrian diaspora's activities in London. It also enabled us to scan the horizon for inconspicuous phenomena that might have unexpected significance. However, further quantitative and qualitative analysis would be beneficial to clarify aspects that were not included in the current research. Aware of the ongoing debate among social scientists regarding the fragmentation



between disciplines, whereby "disciplinary parochialism generates a multiplicity of self-contained migration literature" (Castagnone 2011: 2), we share the vision of conceptual eclecticism as a means to bridge paradigmatic divides (de Haas 2014) and foreground a new *hermeneutics* to study human mobility.

Outline of a migration

The war in Syria is approaching its seventh year. What began as an internal uprising in 2011 has escalated into a conflict that has taken an incredible toll on civilians. Home of some of the most ancient and longest continually inhabited cities in the world (cf. Yassin-Kassam and al-Shami 2016), Syria has now the largest displaced population in the world, with nearly 11 million people - about half its population - forced to flee their homes (House of Commons 2015). As the crisis continues to worsen, there is ongoing pressure for the UK and the European Union to assist more Syrian refugees.

A significant Syrian community exists London, yet the existing literature on the Syrian *refugee crisis* does not deal systematically with Syrian history of emigration. A synthetic periodization of Syria's emigration history can be sketched as follows:

- During the great migration (1880-1914) a large number of the population moved from the Ottoman region known as Greater Syria (which includes the present-day countries of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel) to the Americas. Amongst the push factors, there was the European capitalist penetration of traditional social organizations within the Middle Eastern provinces of the then Ottoman Empire as well as ensuing tensions along religious and ethnic lines due to the western sphere of influences. The pull factors for these early migrants were seeking better opportunities for themselves and their families (Cf. Aita 2009; Fargues 2009). Precise figures are not available due to the classification system: scholars report that migrants would be classified as Turks or Syrian despite the denomination quite likely included inhabitants from Beirut, Bethlehem or Damascus. A valuable study conducted on the production of racial hierarchies in the US and early migrants' struggle for recognition as "white persons" (Gualtieri 2001) is unquestionably worthy of mention but it cannot be dealt with here in detail, as it extends beyond the remit of this work;
- In the years following the end of the French Mandate and evacuation of the French troops (1945-1946), the second wave of immigration began due to structural forces such as political instability following a succession of military coups (Mehchy & Doko 2011; Di Bartolomeo et al. 2012);
- In the 1970s, the rigid occupational structures and the state-dominated economy led segments of the Syrian elite, especially entrepreneurs and professionals, to flee the country mostly towards neighbouring Arab countries (Aita 2009; Kawakibi 2009). Eventually, two major episodes intensified a stream of migration towards Lebanon: a military intervention in the city of Hama (1982) to suppress an uprising led by Islamic



groups, which ended in a massacre of thousands of civilians; and labour shortages in Lebanon, hit by more than 10 years of civil war, which generated a demand for immigrant workers (Mehchy and Doko 2011).

- Lately, the 2011 revolts, met with violent repression by the government, spiralled into a civil war, causing millions of Syrian to flee their country. The lack of progress towards a solution has allowed the war to metastasise, triggering further movement of refugees.

Articulations of Syrian engagement in the public space

A fragment of Syria lies in the heart of London. It presents itself as a hidden gem: Leighton House, a mansion house shielded by a red brick street façade located in the Borough of Chelsea and Kensington, is the exceptional abode that Sir Fredric Leighton, a dominant figure in late Victorian art. The interiors of his purpose-built studio boast a magnificent Arab hall, embellished with a golden dome and a “priceless collection of over a thousand Islamic tiles, mostly brought back from Damascus in Syria, [which] evokes a compelling vision of the Orient” (Leighton House Museum undated).

The controversies generated by the East-West binary and the creation of the semi-mythical construct of ‘the Orient’ as a mirror image of the Western colonial enterprise (Said 1978) would require a dedicated section that lies outside the scope of this work. Yet, cultures are syncretic by nature as they entwine elements from different social formations (Clifford 1992; 1997). Diasporas, as travelling configurations of people, vouch for this syncretic nature (cf. Hall 1990; Sigona et al. 2015) calling into question the concept of homogeneity as the prevailing narrative of Westphalian nation-states system⁵. Interviewees’ involvement in the public space validates this ability to envision as well as enact a virtuoso *cultural bricolage* (cf. Hall 1990). Tensions though are not uncommon. All the respondents revealed to be involved to different extents in social or cultural activities, either as a result of their job, personal interests, or a sense of civic duty towards Syria as well as the wider community.

Their participation in London’s public space acquires several shades, and overtly span across countries. For the second-generation Syrian interviewees, for example, participation in the public space can take on strong political connotations. Adel came to the UK in 2003 to further his

⁵ The map of Europe and the basic notion of the nation-state arose out of the Treaty of Westphalia (1648). The principle of *cuius regio eius religio* (subjects must follow the religion of their ruler) was consolidated by the Treaty. Thereafter social reality started to be perceived in term of geographically coherent, linguistically homogeneous, and sovereign politico-cultural entities, laying the foundation of the modern (i.e Western) nation-state system (cf. Anderson 1983; Gellner 1993).



studies. He now works in the media sector as a broadcast designer but is also a sculptor as well as a member of a network of artists involved in a broad campaign to support the Syrian revolution:

A group of us got together and started working on an [online] page. Basically, we started spreading slogans, the revolution's slogans, we encouraged people to print the stencil, cut it and spray. We want them to spread the word all around the world and show what the people were suffering. It was a peaceful demonstration, it's like a peaceful revolution and we wanted to use a medium that everybody could use. [In order to] get closer to people, graffiti is the easiest way to be seen, you don't need a museum or an exhibition. It's there, in the street for you to see. So that's why we chose graffiti, and we started doing the stencils [...]. We are talking about 2012 here, people were falling like flies, and all you hear about Syria is a funny bulletin at the bottom of the telly telling you 300 people died, 350, so we wanted to tell people that those are not just stupid numbers, those are actual people, like you and me. That's where the idea came from.

Adel's resolve to uphold life led him to be greatly involved as a volunteer supporting young refugees with different social welfare or legal issues in Calais, one of the biggest refugee camps in Western Europe until October 2016, when it was demolished.

In a similar vein, Munir is also active in the public sphere. He is one of the co-founders of a non-profit organization whose activities revolve around raising awareness about the situation in Syria as well as collaborating with other organisations to help build a campaign that can assist Syrian people in their struggle for freedom and peace. He came in 2003 to study for a PhD at a renowned university. He arrived from Jordan, where he had escaped fearing persecution for his involvement in demonstrations at the University of Aleppo. A dedicated student, he tries to balance study commitments, political involvement and "socialize with people, of course!" as he puts it cheerfully. The majority of the initiatives he is involved in are in support of the Syrian uprising and aim explicitly at building a democratic and durable solution to the conflict. He has been quite active since his arrival, however, he does not hide a certain degree of caution as a result of years of experience in different contexts. He elaborates on forms of activism and how at the beginning "[...] I did not want to be a member of any organization...because that leaves me the freedom to be everywhere. When you are a member, you know, you would be framed in a way, you see what I mean?". In line with the characteristics that pertain new social movements, which no longer define themselves in relation to the system of production (Della Porta 2007), Munir's activism is driven by the message and the values he advocates for, thus it cannot be restricted to a class membership or a rigid organizational form. What is



really important to him is "the campaign work, in Syria, we were deprived of that". The non-profit organization he co-founded is sustained only through the work of volunteers and he still maintains a very open approach as a means to "collaborate with other people, trying to bring them also on board and have discussions [...]". Munir also has offered throughout the years volunteer work to ease refugees' situation, regardless of their country of origin, in Greece and in Amman. Clearly, the on-going war and the heavy damages inflicted on the civilians are felt intensely from all the interviewees. Their response may not come out as a forthright political activism like that of Adel or Munir, yet it features humanistic values and somewhat subterranean forms of action. Those who have already a public persona, for example, due to the nature of their work, prefer to express their involvement through imaginative excursions. From their words, it seems as if they appeal to some universal, hidden transcripts without bringing up open challenges (cf. Chua 2012). Salwa, for instance, is a musician and was born in Damascus. She lived there until she moved to the Gulf countries as a music teacher. In 2012 she was selected "among 200 artists from all over the world" and admitted entry to the UK via a visa category called "exceptional talent migration" which "had tough criteria to be accepted". Eventually, she won a scholarship for a Master's degree and she is presently a PhD student and a busy artist. Here she explains her stance, which also guides her art: "When I perform I always bring something very Syrian, [...]. I try to make people understand Syrian culture, I want to bring Syria closer, the Syria I hear about is now strange to me, is not the one I grew up in". She gleefully explains that

the musicians I have been performing with are amazing, and they are from all sorts of backgrounds: India, Britain, Scotland, Australian Aboriginal, African, flamenco guitar, it's fantastic. It puts me on an edge because I am also hungry for these new sounds [...]. My work [...] it's very humanistic, very much about the human state, as I believe politics provide enough to divide people and I am more keen on finding whatever glues people together.

She has also offered her skills to perform at fundraising events and to cultivate other forms of expression. Amongst the collaborative relationships, she has established, particularly significant was the experience with a London based theatre company, which stages innovative productions for young people with multiple learning disabilities. In her words:

I was finishing my Master's and I was thinking what to do [...]. I was performing all the time for fundraising and I thought this is not enough [...] at the time we were rehearsing with the children in a school with profound and multiple disabilities.



There was this girl [...] we were told that [she had] not given any sort of human interaction since about a year and then when she was brought in, she [...] started giving me eye-contact, which it was in itself amazing. As I was improvising she started laughing out loud. [...] the girl basically unfolded and then I thought: if spending 10 minutes with someone can create this why not take this to the refugee camps?

The drive to combine artistic expression and meaningful connections is shared by another young talented woman. Nariman was born in France but soon her family moved back to Damascus. She lived all her life in the capital city of Syria, where she earned a degree in fine art from the University of Damascus. In 2011 she moved to London to study art at postgraduate level:

The plan was to come back, of course, the first year I was like: I'll do a Master's and then I'll go back. [...] I did even a second Master's. Ok, I'll do a second Master's and I'll go back - that was not the only reason of course (she chuckles). [...] I wanted to do something more fulfilling and then by the second Master's I realized ok, I am not going back so ... here I am.

She illustrates calmly and with confidence in her career path, touching on the intense but rewarding experiences that led to work with a publishing house shortly after her postgraduate degree, something rare in her line of work. For a moment a shade of gloom seems to cover her eyes as she recalls when her parents could not join her for the award ceremony as their visa application was rejected. "It was my mum's dream to come and attend my graduation" she comments. She is now an accomplished illustrator and she has moved on to write her own stories. When she tours to present her books she usually engages in public readings. By exposing herself through readings and workshops she aims to create a connection with the audience:

[...] my workshops contain a reading, I read my story and then I do an art workshop that is related to the story. Depending on what the story is about we do an art workshop, something related to the illustration of the book [...]. Mostly I focus on the city of Damascus, the ancient city. We have so many tales hidden here and there; the fountain, the jasmine [...]. I read the books and talk to the children about Syria, they have so many questions: "Why the boy did this? Why the boy did that?". They ask about the story and about Syria, and also their parents because they are interested to know about Syria from a writer's point of view[...]. The Syrianness is what it's all about: the jasmine, the fountain, the courtyards in Damascus, [...] it is really about culture, the Syrian culture.

Capturing the intangible: Syrianness in London

Syrianness, as our interlocutor suggested, is what it is all about. Identity operates as a deeply ingrained *habitus* (Bourdieu 2013; Wacquant 2005) that we all wear, to a different extent, and it is a combination of group history and personal biography. In case of diasporic identities, this habitus



is often mobilized to safeguard, share and transmit a variegated sense of community in the attempt to preserve a past as well as a future. It is a source of legitimacy. Diasporas are intimately connected with the idea of dispersion, therefore diasporic subjectivities often devise inventive strategies as a way of coping with the conditions of the eradicated present and recuperating a sense of self beyond the forceful exile, that is, “not dependent on criteria handed down by others - the past is what the diasporic subjects can claim as their own” (cf. Kaya 2002: 46). This constant negotiation between past and future, *roots and routes* (cf. Clifford 1997; Gilroy 1993) does not seem to evolve in essentializing discourses stressing ethnic purity, as the second generation of Syrian interviewees showed. On the contrary, they seem more inclined to translating and negotiating between identities. This element of *cultural hybridity* (Hall 1992) is part of Syrian diasporic experience and reverberates in London’s public space. It also serves to underscore the need to be wary of the supposed fixedness of cultural differences, as practices and frames across borders may overlap.

An echo of this resonates in the first-generation respondents’ accounts. Rula is an architect and her area of specialization is urban planning. She left Syria in 1986 with a scholarship to continue her postgraduate studies abroad. Since then she has lived in several European countries and, given the nature of her job, has traveled extensively. She now lives in London where she runs her own company. She is also actively involved in other activities that are enmeshed with her cultural and professional background:

My approach to the city involves the social and economical, is about how we as people interact [...]. My perspective is broad, it involves art and more [...]. I perceive my relation to space from these lovely cities: Paris, Damascus, London, Copenhagen, and how we have the responsibility to bring people together, put people together”.

Amongst the varied activities she is involved in, there is one that condenses her urbanite civism. In 2016, she was one of the organizers of an event “made of stories and live music inspired by the rich cultural heritage of Syria’s life and music” which was held in many cities across the world, including London. At the event in London our interlocutor offered an outline of Syria through pictures and personal stories, then an ensemble of international musicians (Syrian and non-Syrian) performed a crossover of eastern and western melodies. The outcome was a sheer sense of *connectivity* (Tsagarousianou 2004): “The event was really good, I mean, we convinced people to do something special for Syria” she says proudly and beaming, hinting at linkages that performers and the heterogeneous



audience made possible that evening, creating new forms of identification. As she goes into the details of the project and how it grew, she affirms:

I am very genuine, things have to come naturally, they have to come from the heart, and they have to come when the moment is there. [...] This is how confidence is built and I think working at a grassroots level very much depends on the level of confidence people build. When the confidence and the intention are there then things happen. [...] It's trust. [...] It's the same with the music, as you noticed, it's not prepared, the main lines are there but the main idea is that each person should listen to their heart and play their own tunes to fit the general ... and this is the message, maybe you are different from me but let's play together the main tune, because it's the main tune which brings us forward.

The excerpt above highlights a portion of the respondent's trajectory and shines a light on the interlocutor's cultural capital, that is "a treasure chest of language skills, knowledge about customs and lifestyles, professional qualifications, but also adaptive skills that allow the bearer to navigate and relate to two or several national contexts, thus engaging in the creation of new forms of capital in the countries of destination" (Erel 2010: 649). Among these other forms of capital, there are some that might go unnoticed, as they seem to belong to the mundane and would fall into the controversial territory of the social capital that pertains the gendered division of labour (Federici 2010). Saba, for example, at the beginning of our conversation seemed quite withdrawn as if the modesty of an ordinary life juggling a teaching job and three children could not have much relevance. She moved to London in 1991 from Damascus. Leaving Syria was not in her plans but, when her husband decided to move to London, it became a family priority. As she explains: "I studied mechanical engineering in Syria, that's why when I came here I was almost crying!" she giggles. "I really wanted to finish my degree and do a Master's but having children, a family...it wasn't easy for me". In addition to being a full-time mother, Saba started teaching privately Arabic and is currently working in a local school. This job allows her to combine work and family life. As our conversation unfolds, Saba discloses that she has often organised cooking and craft classes. Her daughters and her friends would gather at her house, especially during summer when they had more time off school, and learn how to sew: "Each of my daughters' friends made a handbag for themselves, because I told you, my mother wanted me to learn everything so I taught them as well, a bit of [...] sewing, craft skills, pin cushion, and origami". She then recalls the volunteer work offered at her daughters' school. This mostly entailed providing support to the teacher to organize some school activities, amongst which there is, for example, an *avant-la-lettre* cookery session: "a teacher in her school asked if I could help to do something about



Syria [...], and I told her I can bring my food processor and do hummus and she said that could be a good idea. I took pitta bread and made it into strips and I took hummus but before making it, I took like... beans, chickpeas, soaked and cooked, and tahini and lemon and...I showed the children how to make hummus in the school. It was really really nice!". Moreover, she encouraged her daughter to join a group of people who have organized English classes for refugees. "I know she has some spare time and I said: "Why don't you go and help?". Her daughter has taken her mother's suggestion on board and seems very dedicated to the classes as well to other cultural events relating to Syria. Saba thus has managed to circumvent time restraints and pour a wealth of energy and skills into the public space.

In a similar spirit, Edna is a single mother and a chartered haematologist. She came to London with a scholarship by the UN in 1983. Here she met the person who later became her husband and with whom she settled in the UK. Eventually, they divorced and, despite being a single mother and having to deal with a chronic illness, Edna has maintained throughout the years an admirable passion for her job, for Syria, and as well as social activities. Career-wise, she worked as a haematologist for a private company, then the company decided to transfer their business and restructure the personnel due to an accidental fire. They relocated the staff without due protection for the most vulnerable employees. Edna felt that prejudices against her long-term health condition reduced her access to career opportunities despite her remarkable CV. Torn between the difficult choice of being unemployed or underemployed, her dedication to her work led her to accept a position as a locum⁶ but she hopes in time to find a job that matches her qualifications and expertise. In her spare time Edna, who has a gift for painting, has taken classes to perfect her skills. Her paintings were exhibited at a well-known art society in the borough of Chelsea. She also studied counselling. She never practiced professionally but uses her skills to help her friends on a voluntary basis: "I used to go and visit my friends who were old or ill, to support and help them when I had time. [...] my son was very young and I'm a single mother, so I did not have much time, but I did it". Notwithstanding time and a health condition, Edna managed to create, informally, a transient, civic space of mutual aid.

Those first-generation respondents who have a more politicized background use consciously public engagement as a political instrument for

⁶ A locum is a person who temporarily fulfills the duties of another. For example, a *locum tenens physician* is a physician who works in the place of the regular physician when that physician is absent, or when a hospital/practice is short-staffed.



change. Their roles stretch across countries and bridge universal concerns such as education, justice, anti-racism. Sertan is a doctor and has a history of political activism in Syria. His migration to the UK was politically motivated. As a member of the Kurdish community and a political activist for minority rights, Sertan left his country after a major turning point in 2004 when a fight between Kurdish soccer fans and Arab supporters turned into bloodshed (HRW 2009). Security forces intervened with lethal force. Protests occurred as a response to the shooting, but were driven by the long-simmering Kurdish grievances regarding the repression of their political and cultural rights. Sertan's activism made him a potential target of persecution. He fled Syria and applied for asylum in the UK. He has been very active within the Kurdish community in London, serving in leading roles for a Kurdish association which "organizes a lot of events, like the Nowruz [Kurdish New Year] and other social events to bring the community together". Over the years has also been involved in political work regarding petitioning against arbitrary detention in Syria and collaborating with internationally prominent groups such as Amnesty International to campaign for human rights in Syria, as well as creating bridges across ethnic lines: "Turkish Kurds, Iraqi Kurds, Kurds from Iran [...] and work with the Arab community". He affirms though that his political involvement is decreasing due to his work schedule. Other interviewees highlighted the fact that their political participation has progressively changed. For Wasim, this is due partly to a personal schedule but it is also affected by what is happening in Syria: "Since the revolution started, I wasn't 100%...how do you say, I went almost in depression, not acute depression, but I was sad most of the time. I know so many people being captured and lots of them were my friends. Some people can take it easy, you know, 'what can you do about that?' they say, but I couldn't do that. I feel something in my heart", he stops for a moment as if forcing back the tears.

Wasim is a surgeon, he practiced as a doctor for more than 20 years in the UK as well as in Syria. He arrived in London in 1981 to attend a postgraduate course and although he felt he had a better opportunity in this country he returned to Syria where his specialism and his skills were much sought after. However, he soon realized he no longer fitted in: "I find myself a round screw in a square hole". After living between Syria and the UK for over 10 years, in 2005 he decided to settle in London, practicing in different hospitals. He also led a pioneering project for a medical centre at a prestigious British university. He regularly keeps updated as regards what is happening in Syria, especially through news and social networks. He also joins events or other gatherings when he can. As he talks, he discretely shows some concern regarding visibility in the public space, as it can lead



to vulnerability. There is indeed a widespread perception that dissenting voices are at risks in their home country as well as abroad, as opposition is not tolerated either within or outside Syria (cf. Qayyum 2011). Many hoped that the Syrian revolution would bring significant changes. It resonated with the Arab spring, the wave of popular protests and demands for reform started in Tunisia in January 2011, which swept across Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Lybia, reaching Syria in March 2011. Nonetheless, the human cost and the interference of regional and international players slowly morphed into a multifaceted conflict with too many actors.

At present, there is not a unitary response from the Syrian community in London with regard to Syria's future. Mobilization around contentious issues usually coalesces around a general sense of injustice: from an initial individual and uncoordinated stage, it develops through a more focalized and collective stage (Christiansen 2009). Nonetheless, if social movements are not able to galvanize support and create strategies for success, they can fade or turn to factionalism. Syria's heritage of cultural continuity and diversity has been brutally hit by what many Syrian men and women deem as a senseless factional war. Notably, sectarian rhetoric can be instrumentalized to accentuate divisions, exacerbating them for political expediency (Amnesty 2017). On this subject, George has strong views. He is a psychologist and left Syria in 2000. He lived in different countries, in the Gulf as well as in Europe. In 2005 he arrived in the UK to improve his English and ended up achieving a Medical Doctorate. He does not live in London, but he regularly travels to the capital for work and other public activities. He is now a well-established professional and is very active in the public realm. He is an outspoken advocate for human rights, working with different groups in a voluntary capacity, advising on and monitoring the human rights situation in Syria: "We have a network of activists inside Syria and the surrounding countries. [We] keep in touch by the Internet or telephone, and I travel a lot". George acknowledges that the presence of sectarian divisions can hamper unity, especially when they are radicalized. However, when he talks about one of the groups he is involved with, he affirms: "I'm the only Christian within the group. [...] the majority of my friends are Muslims. We work together and we stand for the same principles because we consider ourselves as human beings to begin with [...], and things related to faith or religion are completely personal...so, you know, I don't care if you are Buddhist or Sikh or...as long as we respect each other".



Diaspora, mobility, public space and their interaction: frontiers of a new imagery?

Geography bestowed Syria with diversity and Syria's cultural mosaic allowed various communities to argue and trade for centuries, well before Europe dominated the sea routes (Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami 2016: 1-2). Damascus and Aleppo were situated at the centre of the Silk Road, a key intercontinental route that linked Rome to China. Syrians can claim a legacy built upon conceptions of *diversity* long antedating the growing interest across several disciplines in the social sciences (Berg and Sigona 2003; Vertovec 2007). The empirical evidence collected in this work advocates for a fundamental proposition and concerns changing the focus of research in humanities and social science "from studying the other to studying with the other" (Saffari 2016: 41). Indeed, what is often overlooked by the current alarmed, if not hostile, nature of immigration debates (cf. De Haas 2014) is that most migrants organize themselves through networks and mobilize their collective resources, engaging in different activities not for contentious but for vital purposes. Furthermore, since the nation-state as a container of social process and power seems cracking, it is often the city that provides minority groups with space to see themselves and articulate claims, as 'the loss of power at the national level produces the possibility for new forms of power and politics at the subnational level' (Sassen 2005: 86). The incidence of human mobility as a rising political, environmental, and social question requires not only to rethink the concepts of migration and mobility but to examine actors' motivations, strategies, and practices with a fresh, radical perspective. In this regard a poignant lesson that adds to the epistemological shift required to adopt a meaningful *transnational* approach is that migrants' existence does not start on their arrival to a new country, therefore "sociology of migration must start not from the concerns of the receiving society but from the sending communities, their history, structure and contradictions." (Sayad in Bourdieu and Wacquant 2000: 174). At a closer look indeed Syrian diaspora preserves a valuable *archive* (Foucault 1972) of cultural and social capital that both informs and shapes London's *geoculture*⁷. This thick, heterogeneous *public space* born out of mobility, cross-cultural influences, new proximities, and claims for

⁷ Immanuel Wallerstein put forward the concept of *geoculture* by which he intended the cultural framework within which a world economy operates (cf. Wallerstein 2004: 23). In this essay we draw from scholars who revisited the concept through different lenses and consider *geoculture* as a synthesis of multidisciplinary tools, leading to an analytical category that assumes a complex circulation of physical movements and virtual connections generating a thick, heterogeneous social space as opposed to the thin, supposedly pure, national space. Cf. Rogoff 2006; Berardi Bifo 2015; Fraser 2007; Vertovec 2007, Sassen 2005.



recognition, becomes the stage where the creation of parallel discursive arenas takes place and the normative concept of citizenship is challenged. Here residents can circulate discourses or counter-discourses, develop constructions of their identities, interests, and needs while simultaneously shaping London's polity. As Edward Said eloquently put it: "Far from being unitary or monolithic or autonomous things, cultures actually assume more 'foreign' elements, alterities, differences than they consciously exclude. [W]ho in Britain or France can draw a clear circle around British London or French Paris that would exclude the impact of India and Algeria upon those two imperial cities?" (Said 1993: 15). London's variegated geoculture owes much to tangible artifacts as well as to the intangible semiotic aspects such as goals, values, and visions in which Syrian respondents demonstrate to be active participants.

All respondents display a sharp ability to act as agents of development as well as self-development, fostering a strong sense of connection that straddles several *communities*. This is shown, for example, in statements of gratitude to the UK as well as in a subtle ability to allocate time to arrange events or other activities. Investing own resources, raising funds, sharing knowledge and establishing relationships, gives shape to a "constellation of cultural and political actions" (Mudimbe and Engel 1999, p. 178) that span across UK and Syria. This holds true also for Mohammad, who is an engineer and organizes English courses for refugees of all nationalities through a local church in West London, Mona who came to the UK for a Master's in social sciences and volunteered as translator for a charity, Ahmed who is a dentist and decided to offer his skills to the charity sector and also raised funds with his wife for a project aimed at empowering women refugees living in camps in Greece, Aida who is an architect and organizes a successful supper club to create opportunities for cultural exchange and raise funds for Syria and Sawsan who is very much involved in furthering understanding of the Arab world by working daily to promote its culture and create opportunities for collaboration between people of the UK and the Arab world, all of whom equally contributed to paint this picture. To say it differently, all respondents perform their *droit de cité*⁸ through simple, daily acts of citizenship, regardless of their legal status, thus leaving a significant mark both at a symbolic and substantial level on London's public space. In this respect, one last account will lead us to the concluding remarks.

⁸ Cf. "So what I suggest is [...] a right of residing. It can be generalized in the form of a double freedom of circulation and right of residency (or settlement) - which indeed is a 'principle', like the freedom of opinion or expression are 'principles' (Balibar 2007: 15; cf. also Lefebvre 1968/1996). For a more detailed elaboration cf. Caruso 2013.



Ramzi arrived in the UK in 2013 after a very long journey through smugglers across Europe, crossing fields and seas. The first year he worked as a waiter 7 days a week and not a single day off, sleeping in the backroom of the restaurant where he worked, but gradually managed to save money. He now has his own restaurant and is also actively involved in an organisation that campaigns for democracy and social justice in Syria. In the meantime, he has been granted the status of refugee. He admits unpretentiously that owning a restaurant is not a dream job. He would like to improve his command of English and finish his degree in Economics. Severe bombardments in Aleppo, his hometown, led him to flee leaving everything behind, including the possibility to complete his degree. Yet he is confident that when the time is right he will accomplish his dream. When I ask if he would like to share it, Ramzi seems on guard, as if wants to protect it. Eventually, he amicably opens up and says: "[...] Ok it is hard, I lost everything, but when I started here I say, ok, I am lucky, I feel safe, I feel I'm a human in this country, I can start a life in this country. I was good, I started work. [...] I would like to do something special, because...I have lost a lot of things but I have to do something special.... For a human, for this world, for Syrian people as well. For my family. I would like. I hope".

Concluding remarks

This keen attitude of “giving something back” cuts across all respondents' accounts. It is supported by a sheer self-governing capacity and a distinctive mastery of rights and duties. In ancient Greece, where the concept of democracy was first envisioned, this autonomy was dignified with the membership to the *polis* (city) as a citizen. Citizenship, as it has come to us via the ancient Greeks, refers to civic practices and virtues that sustain a self-governing community. “Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics [which] in the Greco-Roman world implies a relationship with others”. (Foucault 1997a: 284-285). Syrians' pursuit of freedom, in their country of origin as much as in the country of destination, presents itself as a practical as well as an ethical problem: “as the care of the self enables one to occupy their rightful position in the city, the community, or interpersonal relationships[...].” (Foucault 1997a: 287). We concur with those scholars who claim that constituting the world is always an ethical and aesthetic activity, in that it involves not only a framing of the sensible but also a way of conceiving human interaction (Nyers 2010: 130). The Syrian diaspora in London shows through respondents' daily activities how migrants transform the public space “through creative processes that [are] generative of new worlds, identities, and modes of belonging” (Nyers 2015:



34). This evidence also calls into question the one-dimensional representation of 'the Syrian', and by extension that of 'the migrant/refugee', which tends to abstract people's predicament from specific political, historical and cultural milieu and whose representation often relies on infantilized images of victimhood.

Last but not least, the notion of diaspora, used here in a *transnational* formulation, contains in its semantic spectrum both the orientation to a homeland as an authoritative focus of value and the idea of forced dispersion. Yet, it also allows for a sophisticated understanding of shifts in the homeland-diaspora nexus and proposes an alternative to the rigid metaphysics of the nation. As our Syrian interlocutors have shown their diasporic trajectory led them to reinterpret borders and boundaries as porous rather than rigid and impermeable. Hence, diaspora as a *category of analysis* helps us to challenge the cultural and historical mechanisms of belonging. The full implication of diaspora as a *category of practice* (Brubaker 2012), that is, how the protagonists use it to make claims (or articulate projects, mobilize energies, to name but a few) though remain to be drawn. The existing Syrian community in London displays a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time as well as an attachment to a shared land of origin or birthplace, which contemplates the idea of return and, at the same time, the UK as a *home*. Moreover, the respondents' preoccupation for a 'never-ending war' scenario and the geopolitical complications seem an obstacle to coalesce around a collective self-definition. Further investigation that could account more systematically for Syrians' agile diasporic pragmatism and goals would certainly enable us to gain a more subtle understanding of the potentialities and constraints within the Syrian diaspora, as well as unravel implications for human mobility, public space and, ultimately, more inclusive forms of citizenship.

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