

Abstract

The phenomenon of migration is a fundamental concept to evolutionary biology, population studies, and life sciences. It is almost uncontested common knowledge that migration is an indispensable factor to propel difference and change, thus ensuring genetic variation, and ultimately evolution for all life forms. For most species migration is the rule, not the exception. Yet, when referring to human migration, the discussions suddenly turn highly controversial. Underpinning the expected arguments that tie these discussions to human exceptionalism and speciesism, one encounters the deeply rooted links of sedentarism to diverse projects of State formation, the construction of society and its cultural and territorial arrangements into bounded, legible schemes and models.

Arguably, a narrowing vision, which simultaneously claims to capture and organize an otherwise complex and messy reality, is a necessary and effective frame to focus on particular forms of knowledge over and against others. Nevertheless, as is increasingly evident, such narrow frames not only simplify, but also reduce reality, offering static, fixed and schematic falsifications of it, removed as it were, from the actual phenomena to which they allude. Human migration is especially prone to the effects of such simplification, leading to a reduced understanding of the migration phenomenon itself, the multiple agents which emerge from it and that shape it, and their relationality as constitutive of a milieu, or metabolism. For migration, this has a paralyzing effect, as it limits and compartmentalizes the capacity to act in relation to it.

Other discursive schemes (of subject formation) that allow us to think and act differently, creatively and critically in relation to migration are paramount, especially if the intentionality is to physically intervene within it. In other words, migration and migrant agents, when liberated from the grasp of conventionally reductive and simplifying frames, reveal their intricate participation in an ecology that not only engenders the becoming of form, space, matter and subjectivity, but which also shapes specifically human practices and relations. In short, understanding migration as a complex assemblage driven by desire and other, previously unseen forces is to regard it as a process of becoming. Seen from this angle, concepts conventionally associated to human migration –from migrating subjects, territories, borders, to structures and systems-, become fields of latent potentiality and

productive possibilities. It is at this juncture when –perhaps appropriately so- we may begin exercising different forms of nomadic thought when dealing with migration.

The proposal departs from the premise that different theoretical and discursive frameworks are necessary to rethink and act upon the very urgent problem of human migration from a metabolic, relational and systemic point of view. It will do so by introducing and explaining an unconventional approach in which three different ‘logics’ will encounter each other in an attempt to recalibrate the reach of the spatial disciplines and material practices, in particular architecture, within the phenomenon of contemporary human migration: population thinking, intensive thinking and topological thinking. The focus of analysis and spatial intervention will be placed on a specific territory in the southern border of Mexico, which for understandable reasons conventionally has received far less attention than its northern counterpart, but where the phenomenon of migration nonetheless plays a decisive role in the production of the milieu.

Prologue

The Design as Politics Graduation Studio with the theme: A city of comings and goings, approaches the phenomena of migration and their relations with the built environment from a broad perspective, departing from the premise that the current incapacity to respond to these migration flows is only a symptom of a wider and complex problem. Within this framework, my project goes beyond, departing from the paradox that, while for most species (including humans for an extended period) migration is the rule rather than the exception, human migration remains considered an abnormality. Moreover, once that the expected arguments about human exceptionalism and speciesism are transcended, the deeply rooted links of sedentarism to diverse projects of State formation, the construction of society and its cultural and territorial arrangements into bounded, legible schemes and models, are still very present. Within this scenario, it is not surprising to find that governments, academia, and practices (including architecture) consider that a narrowing vision, which simultaneously claims to capture and organize an otherwise complex and messy reality, is a necessary and effective frame to focus on particular forms of knowledge over and against others. Nevertheless, as it is increasingly evident, such narrow frames not only simplify, but also reduce reality, offering static, fixed and schematic falsifications of it, removed as it were, from the actual phenomena to which they allude. In that sense, it is crucial to review other schemes that allow us to think and act differently, creatively and critically in relation to the migration phenomena, especially if the intentionality is to physically intervene within it.

The present graduation project proposal not only shares the initial concerns of the Studio but, stimulated by its research-based design approach, attempts to go even further by understanding migration not exclusively as a socio-politic-economic phenomenon but as a complex assemblage driven by desire and other, previously unseen forces in a constant process of becoming. In that regard, the focus of analysis and spatial intervention is placed on the Soconusco; a specific region in the southern border of Mexico, which for understandable reasons conventionally has received far less attention than its northern counterpart, but where the phenomenon of migration nonetheless has an intricate participation in an ecology that not only engenders the becoming of form, space, matter

and subjectivity, but which also shapes specific human practices and relations. In that sense, the case of the Soconusco proves to be highly compatible with the Studio's theme, on the one hand because of its relevance on the Mexican migration scene and, on the other, because since it has not been as explored and exhausted as other borders, there is less room for preconceptions, and thus allows the possibility for a truly ethical approach. However, as it should be clear by now, such approach would be difficult to achieve without exploring non-conventional theoretical and discursive frameworks. The main problems that I find with the traditional-conventional ones are: firstly, they are usually *prescriptive*, which means that they are based on forms of inductive reasoning that reduces social complexity to a problem-solution dialectic which also transforms empirical observations into ultimate truths; secondly, the abuse of static representational techniques, and idealizations of specific architectural theories, tend to fix the image of the architecture at the core, rather than the practices it affords.

From my point of view, one of the most valuable, if not entirely explicit, features of the Design as Politics Graduation Studio is that its structure gives the students the possibility of exploring their own position, rather than just adopting one. In that sense, the departure point of the project can be framed within Didier Debaise question: "how do individuals constitute themselves from the relations which are interwoven before their very existence?"¹ In other words, and in relation to the project, it is first necessary to understand how different relations or interactions among both, human and non-human agents shape subjects within specific territories. This approach works as an anti-reductionist tool because instead of generalizing and talking exclusively about 'the migration flow in the Soconusco' it opens the need to talk about 'migration *flows* in the Soconusco'. Here, pluralizing opens up an important ethical dimension. If morals preconceive, ethics work with the specificity of the situation: it deals with *what is already there*. Hence, the present project proposal acknowledges the futility of imposing, which is very common in architectural practice, and instead attempts to work with the relations among things, people, and phenomena, teasing out their own agency or capacity to compose new material and spatial arrangements. In that sense, the architect's task, in Félix Guattari's words "is not about being the artist of

¹ Debaise D. (2004). What is relational thinking? pp. 2. From the translation of Thomas Jellis. This article first appeared in *Multitudes*, 18, Autumn 2004, as 'Qu'est-ce qu'une pensée relationnelle?'

built forms anymore, it is about revealing the virtual desires of spaces, places, trajectories and territories². The architect's first task is thus, a cartographical one.

Of course, pluralizing could mean the proliferation of a countless number of possible subjects and territories within the Soconusco region, which demanded to select specific ones to work with on the one hand, and on the other, to develop a method that allowed to uncover the relations that exist among subjects as well as the possible ways to tease out their respective morphogenetic capacities in a relatively organized way. All this guided by the idea of translating this methodological approach into an architectural design that would fulfill the graduation requirements of the Faculty of Architecture. Since the amount of available information on the migration flows and its interactions is very limited³ for the region, it was relatively easy to find three territories where it is very evident how the migration flows conform entire systems with other flows. These are: a) the Suchiate River informal crossing points of Ciudad Hidalgo-Tecún Uman; b) the Miguel Hidalgo Park in Tapachula; and c) Tapachula's Landfill.

Once the specific territories were selected, and to analyze the systems, it was necessary to follow a set of operations, starting with the development of maps of relations and capacities of each territory as a first step towards the formulation of a solid proposal, that would take into consideration the three different 'logics' that shaped the initial research, and which subsequently encountered and informed each other revealing aspects of each territory that otherwise would have remained non-evident. These three logics are: a) *population thinking*, which aims to find the flows (human and non-human) as well as their respective practices and forms of interaction within a territory; b) *intensive thinking*, which attempts to reveal the drivers or desires behind the movement of these flows; and c) *topological thinking*, that focuses on finding the structure of the possible movements within a territory.

In short, these logics simultaneously allow us to map the existing flows on the sites and their drivers (population and intensive thinking), while pointing towards possible practices that could be translated into spatial materializations (topological thinking) that were not imposed on the site but instead emerged out from it. Furthermore, these interventions, rather than attempting to solve what should not (nor can) be solved, start working as parameters that direct the flows towards the formation of their own

² Guattari F. (1989), *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*. pp. 232

³ Though there is an important amount of information that exclusively focus on human rights, as well as some information regarding socio-economic markers.

subjectivities. It is a system that works with the existing and the contingent in an ethical way. It is important to highlight that I cannot preconceive which these subjectivities will be (at most I can speculate) at the outset. Instead, the point is to assemble a 'machine' that pushes them to define themselves and each other. This system or machine directs them to encounters, to intersections, to see what can they produce... to make them face new problems and with that produce their own subjectivities.

It should be evident by now that in this project there is not a clear-cut division within the process into neatly delimited "research" and "design" phases: instead, the design should be understood as a ramification of the process itself. This process is not linear and since it does not follow static models it opens up to what might be encountered initially as a set of many drawbacks. These, however, rather than paralyzing the process, opened it up by producing and evidencing many more questions than answers. Moreover, when placed in the framework of a graduation project, it becomes necessary to devise a strategy that remains coherent with the approach on the one hand, and on the other, allows me to fulfil the specificity of the graduation requirements. In that sense, questions that normally are more straightforward in conventional architectural approaches, like what to draw or what is a relevant fragment to detail, becomes more problematic. In order to answer these questions, it is necessary not only to develop the whole system but also to speculate on how it can possibly work. Only then it becomes clearer where the architectural specificity may be implemented. After all, if the project must be understood as a system, which more than solving or fixing, attempts to direct flows towards moments of possibility, and where the interventions must be understood not as ultimate solutions but as parameters in the system, then the architectural drawings and details become tools that help to make the speculations of how the system works more coherently embracing the unavoidability of contingency, and attempting to work with it.

Finally, even if I believe that the impact and relevance on the wider social context of a project like this is clear simply because of its core thematic and experimental methodological approach, I would like to remark that even when my proposal should be understood as a system or machine, it does not mean that it is a closed one. In other words, since it is not conceived as an ultimate solution closed in itself, but rather as a machine to which more and more parameters can be added, it works as an *open system* that can include other flows, territories and agents, increasing its potential to reach other systems and working with them, after all the project as a whole cannot be reduced to the heterogeneity of its components.

Introduction

Between January and April 2016, 53 766 foreigners were presented to the Mexican migration authorities; 45 576 were sent back to their respective countries. 20 053 were women, and from them 5076 were underage girls. At least 2003 were traveling unaccompanied. In the June of 2014 Barack Obama declared Humanitarian Crisis in the area of Rio Grande Valley, after the American authorities found that in the summer of that year more than 20 000 unaccompanied children from Mexico and Central America crossed the American southern border. By the end of the year the number of children reached almost 60 000.

In July of the same year, after succumbing to the pressure of the U.S., the Mexican government in cooperation with Guatemala launched the Frontera Sur Plan, the purpose of which was to “attend to the humanitarian crisis and increase in all aspects the response capacity of the Mexican State in an integral way, in order to reach *stability and governability*”⁴. This plan was portrayed as a tool to protect and regulate the transmigrants that crossed the Mexican southern border with the aim to live the “American Dream”. Nevertheless, instead of protecting or even regulating, this plan has been very problematic and not productive in the intended way. For instance, the control spots along the highways and the restructuration of “la Bestia”, the train that crosses the country from border to border, far from stopping migrants, have led to the improvisation of new, often more dangerous, routes that give the perfect ground for smugglers, cartels, corrupt police and other agents to expand and operate, having an opposite effect to what the government announced as its intentions.

There are many situations like the abovementioned and often it is argued that the main problem is that Mexico lacks both a proper legal framework and the capacity to deal with the issue. Different ONGs and the academia are constantly releasing new studies and statistics that attempt to explain not only the *problematique*, but also the reasons of its existence (mainly from a socio-politic-economic point of view), while at the same time

⁴ Humberto Mayans Canabal, July 15th 2014

exposing emphatically the dangers, risks and difficult situations that migrants face daily during their journey.

However, acknowledging on the one hand the force, relevance, multi-directionality and unpredictability of the migration flows, and on the other hand that what has been studied, proposed and done so far falls undoubtedly short, I think it is time to stop taking things for granted, and instead start critically questioning our approaches.

A starting point would be to recognize how our backgrounds of knowledge and moral standards as stable (therefore sedentary) societies, when confronted with situations like this, tend to immediately catalogue them as abnormalities. That is how we find that migration, regardless of the field, is mainly approached from two perspectives in one way or another:

- A moral perspective, that reacts to its “abnormality”, and in its attempt to mend it produces the reduction of human subjectivities into diverse forms of subjectivation as victimisation, precariousness, and vulnerability into defined forms of a fixed, static identity (in *being* a victim, marginalised, vulnerable, poor), denying them any other ontological possibilities, including that of qualitative transformation (of *becoming* something ‘else’). The question of what constitutes a migrant, or a refugee conventionally focuses on what there constructs are, where they originate, how they can be measured, or even what they mean instead of focusing on their potentialities, of what they – in their becoming – are capable of doing.
- An abstract perspective where the whole phenomenon is reduced to measurable and quantitative information, like statistics, which fail entirely to demonstrate the complexity and richness of the situation. They pose as being absolute and ‘finished’, while in truth reality is constantly unfolding.

What I want to argue is that if we want to approach the migration phenomena, it is as much about approaching the specific situations that take place in the practice of migrating, as it is about questioning and reformulating our departure points and courses of action; our deeply rooted structures of knowledge and moral standards.

Approach & Method

Since the migration flows cannot be understood without a territory, which implies a constant coming and going of agents (human and non-human), from now on I will refer to assemblages in order to avoid reduction.

Transmigration in Mexico is a very complex assemblage. It involves many different components in constant movement or becoming and the latent capacities of the whole cannot be reduced to any of the components by themselves, even when they preserve their autonomy. Also, it is parametrical; it changes qualitatively at particular critical points or thresholds according to the way the parameters move.

Affect



A recurring aspect in most of the rhetoric surrounding migration (and consequently also research and legislation) is the affective tone in which the information is presented. "Affect is used as a technology of power. This is a way to work with reality, a way to make certain things real by working with, intensifying, tempering, or redirecting processes already underway in reality itself."⁵ Affect is translated into feelings, and feelings are easily

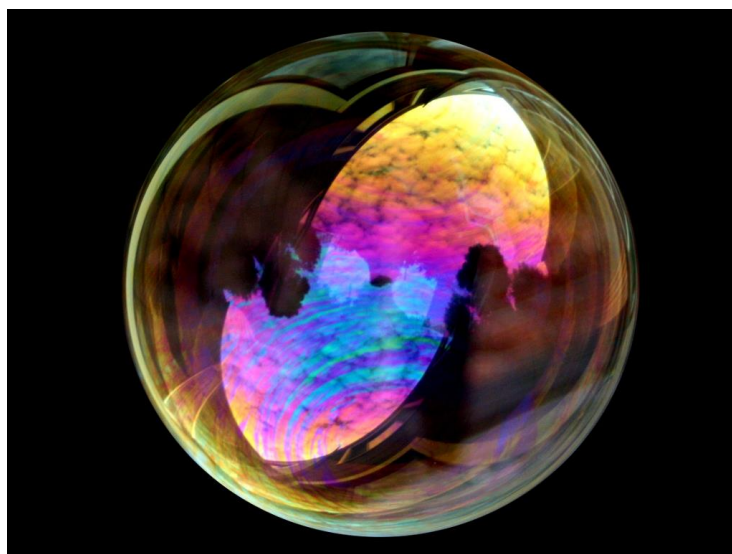
⁵ Nilsson, J. and Wallenstein, S. (2013). Foucault, biopolitics, and governmentality. Huddinge: Södertörn University. Pp.

translated into moral judgements. The problem with moral judgement is that they are preconceived and aim to universalise very diverse situations, therefore hindering the possibility to observe the subject or assemblage in all its complexity.

An alternative to moral judgements is an ethical approach. A truly ethical approach implies not only working with the specificity of each case but also avoiding the trap of anthropocentrification. An ethical approach means that the human condition, is just one component of the assemblage, and since the latent capacities of the whole cannot be reduced to the components that conform it, it is crucial to find a strategy to not only recognise its diversity but also work with present and potential contingencies. In other words, it is fundamental to shift from the view of humans in the world to one of humans as part of the world: as a specie, as animals, as matter; to understand migration as a force with intensive causes and not exclusively as a human phenomenon. This approach lets us focus not only on its properties but, more importantly, on its latent capacities.

Morphogenesis

Matter is morphogenetically charged. In order to solve a 'problem' matter generates form. Take for example a soap bubble. When the soap molecules faces 'the problem' of arranging itself around a quantity of air, they 'solve' it by arranging themselves in a sphere, which is the most effective shape with regard to relation between volume and surface tension. In the same way, when migrant flows are presented with the problem of new controls and regulations, it nevertheless finds a new path in which to flow in the most effective way.

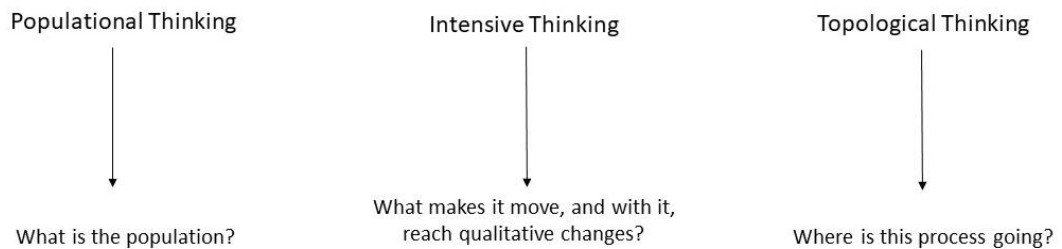


Therefore one of the first questions that arose was this: How (morphogenetically speaking) is the space that engenders the becoming of form, practices, migrant subjects, economies, social issues, etc., produced and at the same time produces them? Secondly, how can those morphogenetic capacities of an assemblage be mapped?

Manuel de Landa proposes that an assemblage should be studied from the perspective of three different types of thinking in order to uncover its morphogenetic capacities. In their encounter, these three logics reveal aspects of each point that would otherwise not be immediately evident. These types of thinking are: population thinking, intensive thinking and topological thinking, and in their combination unlock the fixed and static 'reading' of specific conditions. While population thinking aids in the identification of (human and non-human) flows and their interactions and relations within a territory, and intensive thinking helps in revealing the drivers ('desires') that fuel the movement of these flows, topological thinking allows us to find the structures of the possible movements within a territory.

Ecology

What I refer to as an ecological approach is a way of working with the three above-mentioned logics.



This offers a way of looking at phenomena but one of the goals of this project is to develop a way of doing, based on this analysis. Therefore I developed a method that helped me not only to analyse the components of the assemblage and their deep drivers, but also to speculate about their potentials, which can be further translated into practices, and further elaborated into spatial strategies and interventions.

POPULATION Which are the agents?	PRACTICES What are the practices these agents unfold?	POTENTIAL What are the effects of these practices?	DESIRE Identify interests
POPULATION Other agents, including the architectural parameters	PRACTICES Which agents these practices involve?	POTENTIAL What potential practices these desires might unfold?	DESIRE Speculate desire

Population thinking
 Intensive thinking
 Topological thinking

This table is synthesis a process that, while being presented as liner, is not such at all. Each step informs both the next steps, as well as elaborating and reflecting on the others. Moreover, to be able to fill it it is necessary to find moments in space where the migration flows are clearly present as parameters in an assemblage of a particular territory. For the scope of this project it is important that the presence of these flows are clear on the one hand, and on the other, that it is on a manageable scale in relation with the requirements and time frame of a graduation project.

Territories

The moments in space, in relation with the agents that intersect, interact, affect and are affected by them, are territories. By 'moment' it is meant that no territory or agent is ever the same at two different moments in time.

The selection of these territories was a task that took a long time. The decision had been made since the start to focus on the Southern border of Mexico because there has been less research and attention to it in relation to its Northern counterpart, and thus also fewer preconceptions. Still, the selection of the specific territories became clearer and clearer as the project was becoming. Finally the territories to focus on were narrowed to these three that emerged as clear intensifications of migrant flows.

- Informal crossing spots of the Suchiate River

- Central park “Miguel Hidalgo” of Tapachula
- The municipal landfill of Tapachula

Territorial Thinking

In order to work with the three chosen sites, besides the three types of thinking already discussed, it is important to include another type of logic – Territorial Thinking. Territories are not static. Therefore, before focusing on it directly, it is necessary to understand this movement (what makes them move) first. There is always a desire that makes agents (migrants being among them) move – a driver. This desire, however, is not produced by the subject but by the territory. Such a desire is always an assemblage.

The agent, as topological thinking shows, has potentials, that is, degrees of freedom, or possible ways to move. These degrees of movement mean: how the subject can move driven by the desire. Here the desire should not be confused with interest. The main difference is that desire is always productive, it is always purely productive, it comes before acting. On the other hand, interests are the rationalised way in which we try to justify our actions based on desire. Another way of looking at it is seeing how a territory might contain certain attractors, which might entice interest. However, it is the desire that is the deeper force, which in relation to the territory makes the attractor attractive. In the territory there are attractors. These attractors have an influence zone which remains stable: contact with an influence zone, is going to lead inevitably to the attractor. A habit is a clear example. This is why even when in the territory A, B or C *can* happen, is always X what *actually* happens instead.

Problems arise when attractors are confused with the (intensive) desire. This would be like stating that the ‘desire’ of a soap bubble is to create a sphere and not to minimize the tension. It is a problem because habits can even be counterproductive, whereas the intensive desire is always productive.

Returning to morphogenesis, the idea is to reach critical thresholds that will allow the redistribution of attractors and stability zones. In order to achieve this it is necessary to ‘arrange’ the encounter with the ‘unfamiliar’ – that to which the habit cannot respond, allowing bifurcation, creation, escape from the universal thought flow. The genuine encounter with a problem cannot be confronted with preconceptions. The unfamiliar is not just some random thing but something within the given territory that has potentials for

deterritorialization. This is when territorial thinking becomes crucial: in order to find those components it is necessary to identify the expressive contents of the territory, or the markers. This is how the migrant defines his/her migrant status. Due to the fact that these markers set the limits of the territory they entail a domain, therefore they hold the key to qualitative change.