Narrative constructions of (de)classed migrant Selves: Social class identities and social stratification practices within/across migrant networks in Catalonia

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This paper investigates the multilingual narratives of both socioeconomic stagnation and upward mobility of a small group of unsheltered Ghanaian migrants living on a bench of a Catalan urban town, and shows that class-oriented discursive constructions of the migrant Self/Other are a unique lens into how re-localizing populations make sense of, and embody, their economic realities and orient to the challenging nature of transnational living, in late capitalism.

I first analyze a series of novel "social class dispositions" (Bourdieu 1990) and ambivalent (de)-classed migrant identities, understood as the inscription of social stratification regimes (Block 2014), materially and symbolically practiced among hierarchized social networks. I show that migrants, in the same discursive space and with the same story tellers, may simultaneously present themselves as totally dispossessed, linguistically decapitalized "underclassed" personas (Blommaert & Makoe 2012) and as superficial neoliberal-minded consumerist Selves. I suggest that these incongruities reveal the ways in which migrants engage into the 'internal' gatekeeping of resources which are vital for transnational survival, and argue that the analytical tools of narrative inquiry allow us to go beyond dichotomous 'poor'-‘rich’ migrant status quos and to capture the nuances of their degree of ”social agency” (Giddens 1984) or empowerment. This reveals non-totalizing, fluid class-laden identities which speak of how pauperized populations, as resourceful active social players, effectively defend themselves against the ways in which they are routinely acted upon, not only by wealthier local social players, but also by equally marginalized rivaling compatriots, which may help us problematize hegemonic misrepresentations concerning the migrants’ actual class politics renegotiations.

The data consist of a six-month ethnography of three Ghanaian men, and includes 145 minutes of reflexive narrative interviews and tape-recorded spontaneous interactions with other migrant participants.

Keywords: Narrative constructions of the migrant Self.