

## “NOW IT’S YOUR TURN!” IDENTIFYING POSITIONALITIES AND BOUNDARY SHIFTING IN ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK

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Recebido: 28/02/2018

Aceito: 15/05/2018

**Abstract:** In the field of migration studies there has been significant debate around the advantages associated with sharing a national or ethnic belonging with research participants. This article joins the recent contributions of female migrant investigators who have opted for what I here refer to as *positional reflexivity*, questioning the aprioristic conditions of insiderness or outsiderness and advocating for a constant revision of the positionalities and negotiations of power that come into play in the field. I describe the considerations generated by the implementation of this approach in a qualitative study I carried out in the Italian region of Veneto, in which I examined the complex and shifting boundaries that were explicitly mentioned during my encounters with key informants in institutional and associational environments, as well as during interviews with first and second-generation Argentinian migrants. I observe that multiple positionalities such as legal status, university position, national and provincial origin, ethnic origin, migratory generation, gender and age conditioned my interactions with research participants.

**Keywords:** Migration studies; Ethnographic fieldwork; Positional reflexivity; Boundary lens

## “¡AHORA ES TU TURNO!” IDENTIFICANDO POSICIONALIDADES Y CAMBIOS DE FRONTERAS EN EL TRABAJO DE CAMPO ETNOGRÁFICO

**Resumen:** En el campo de los estudios migratorios ha habido un debate significativo sobre las ventajas asociadas con compartir una pertenencia nacional o étnica con los participantes de la investigación. Este artículo se une a las recientes contribuciones de las mujeres investigadoras migrantes que han optado por lo que aquí llamo *reflexividad posicional*, cuestionando las condiciones apriorísticas del estar *dentro o fuera* y abogando por una revisión constante de las

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posicionalidades y negociaciones de poder que entran en juego en el campo. Describo las consideraciones generadas por la implementación de este enfoque en un estudio cualitativo que realicé en la región italiana de Veneto, en el que examiné los complejos y cambiantes límites que se mencionaron explícitamente durante mis encuentros con informantes clave en entornos institucionales y asociativos, así como durante las entrevistas con migrantes argentinos de primera y segunda generación. Observo que las múltiples posicionalidades como el estatus legal, la posición universitaria, el origen nacional y provincial, el origen étnico, la generación migratoria, el género y la edad condicionaron mis interacciones con los participantes de la investigación.

**Palabras clave:** Estudios migratorios; Trabajo de campo etnográfico; Reflexividad posicional; lente delimitadora.

## "AGORA É SEU TURNO!" IDENTIFICANDO A POSICIONALIDADE E AS MUDANÇAS DE FRONTEIRAS NO TRABALHO DE CAMPO ETNOGRÁFICO

**Resumo:** No campo dos estudos migratórios existe um debate significativo sobre as vantagens associadas ao fato de compartilhar o pertencimento nacional ou étnico com os participantes da pesquisa. Este artigo se une às recentes contribuições das mulheres pesquisadoras migrantes que tem optado pelo que aqui denomino *reflexividade posicional*, questionando as condições apriorísticas do estar *dentro* ou *fora* e lutando por uma revisão constante das posicionalidades e negociações de poder que entram em jogo no campo. Descrevo as considerações geradas pela implementação deste enfoque em um estudo qualitativo que realizei na região italiana de Veneto, no qual examinei os complexos e cambiantes limites que se mencionaram explicitamente durante meus encontros com informantes chave em entornos institucionais e associativos, assim como durante as entrevistas com migrantes argentinos de primeira e segunda geração. Observo que as múltiplas posicionalidades como o status legal, a posição universitária, a origem nacional e provincial, a origem étnica, a geração migratória, o gênero e a idade condicionaram minhas interações com os participantes da pesquisa.

**Palavras-chave:** Estudos migratórios; Trabalho de campo etnográfico; Reflexividade posicional; lente delimitadora.

### Introduction

The term "reflexivity" has gained popularity in the field of migration studies since the second half of the twentieth century (NOWICKA and RYAN, 2015). Considering the concept's notoriety in this and other fields in the social sciences, it is not surprising that it has acquired multiple meanings. Identifying all of these definitions is beyond the scope of this article; however, it is essential to situate the perspective I adopt here. To that end, I find it pertinent to distinguish between two distinct approaches according to the degree of objectivity they associate with reflexivity (GRAY, 2008). In this respect, we may first identify the approach of those

who argue for a “transparent reflexivity” (ROSE, 1997), considering this a tool that leads to a complete understanding of social situations and, as such, allows us to confirm the results and conclusions of the study. Secondly, we encounter the approach of those who defend a “positional reflexivity” (MACBETH, 2001), using this to give an account of the multiple positionalities and power relations that intervene during fieldwork, with the aim of making explicit the conditions of a situated and partial (co)-production of knowledge.

This article falls within the framework of the second approach. I use as theoretical references the works of female migrant researchers who have adopted this perspective in their own research, explaining their positionalities and negotiations of power during their interactions with research participants— in particular, during interviews with migrant population (GRAY, 2008; GUNARATNAM, 2003; LEUNG, 2015; MOROȘANU, 2015; SHINOZAKI, 2015; RYAN, 2015). The contribution of the present study consists in incorporating this reflexive perspective not only in interviews with migrant population, but also in encounters with experts in institutional and associational environments.

This article is divided in four sections. In the first I present a review of the theoretical-methodological question at hand. In the second, I describe a study I conducted in Italy in the capacity of a researcher, woman, and migrant. In the third, I describe the positionalities and negotiations of power that I recorded during my fieldwork, in encounters with key informants in institutions and associations as well as in interviews with migrants. I display the differences I found between and within each environment with respect to positionalities such as legal status, national and provincial origin, ethnic origin<sup>2</sup>, linguistic proficiency, university position, gender, and age. In the last section, I offer some final considerations and present the multiple similarities I have encountered between my own observations and those offered by the female migrant researchers who have used this approach in their studies.

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<sup>2</sup>Ethnic origin is understood here as a categorization that individuals can use to define themselves or others as members of a community on the basis of supposed cultural similarities transmitted intergenerationally. Sometimes, these categorizations coincide with that of national origin; on other occasions, other points of reference are used. In my research, different ethnic origins were identified in the narratives and discourses of research participants. Scales were provincial (e.g. Vincentian or Padovan), regional (Venetian) and national (Italian, Argentinian).

## 1. Positional reflexivity in Migration studies

The approach that I here call positional reflexivity (MACBETH, 2001; SHINOZAKI, 2012) has predominantly been used in studies with a gender perspective, in which it has been called by other names, including “critical reflexivity” (WYLIE, POTTER and BAUCHSPIES, 2010) and “situated reflexivity” (GRAY, 2008). While each of these terms has its own nuances, they share a series of common characteristics. In the first place, they depart from the epistemological presumption that all knowledge is “embodied, localized, and shared” (NOWICKA and RYAN, 2015, p. 4) and must therefore be situated within the conditions of its production in order to move past “the hygienic, transcendent ‘view from nowhere’” (GUNARATNAM, 2004, p. 24) that prevents us from recognizing that we form part of the social phenomena that we study, and that this partially conditions our research questions, processes of analysis, and results. Second, the studies that use this approach examine the multiple positionalities that come into play during interactions with research participants. Understanding that positionalities “refer to both structural social position and social positioning as a process, that is, a set of practices, actions and meanings” (ANTHIAS, 2008, p. 15), these studies propose to examine how gender, age, social class, migratory experience, and national or ethnic belonging, among others, operate during face-to-face fieldwork interactions. Third, these studies attempt to identify and explain the fluctuating and constantly redefined power relations that are generated and (re)-negotiated over the course of the study (PILLOW, 2003). Finally, they aim to move past binaries like insider-outsider or powerful-powerless “from a boundary-work perspective” (NOWICKA and RYAN, 2015, p. 7).

With respect to this last point, it is worth noting that in the field of migration studies there is an increasing number of researchers, both male and female, with a migrant background (LEUNG, 2015); as a result, the dichotomy of insiderness-outsiderness in terms of ethnicity or nationality is one of the most highly contested questions to date. This means that, as with the debates held in the United States with regards to ‘race’ and gender in interviews – in which it was suggested that it was always preferable that researchers interact with people of the same ‘race’ and gender

in order to guarantee the “‘genuineness’ and ‘accuracy’ of what research participants say” (GUNARATNAM, 2003, p. 24) –since the end of the 1980s, there has been debate about the potential advantages when the researcher has the same ethnic or national origin as the research participants.

This argument, called “ethnic bias” (GLICK SCHILLER, ÇAĞLAR and GUIDBRANDSEN, 2006), has been linked with the broader question of “methodological nationalism” (WIMMER and GLICK SCHILLER, 2003). While the latter avoids converging national boundaries with unity of analysis in the study of social phenomena, “ethnic bias” presumes that sharing an ethnic or national affiliation with research participants is naturally beneficial.

In the face of this presumption that a shared ethnic or national origin is invariably positive, numerous female migrant researchers have suggested that this is merely one more positionality in their exchanges with research participants, and that as such, it should be examined alongside others, such as gender, social class, age, or migratory experience (GRAY, 2008; GUNARATNAM, 2003; LEUNG, 2014; MOROŞANU, 2015; NOWICKA and RYAN, 2015; SHINOZAKI, 2012).

This call to revise the relevance of ethnic or national belonging does not underestimate the potential relevance of sharing a language or other cultural features, such as customs and behavioral norms, with research participants. Rather, it implies an invitation to: a) critically revise each one of the similarities and differences that we find in our fieldwork interactions and b) recognize their fluid nature and the constant necessity of (re)-negotiation that results from this condition. In other words, with this perspective we seek to examine ethnic or national belonging as social constructs, and not consider them as entities with static or homogeneous characteristics with the same impact on each and every one of our encounters with individuals participating in the study.

On the basis of this position, several female migrant researchers propose using the concept of “boundary redrawing”(GUNARATNAM, 2003; LEUNG, 2015), understanding this to be the process by which we may understand the intersections between the structures of power associated with each social position and the agency of those who embody them. Said another way, this approach invites us to remove the “ethnic lens” (NOWICKA and RYAN, 2015) and put on the “boundary lens” (SHINOZAKI,

2012), such that it becomes possible to identify the boundaries established in exchanges between research participants and researchers, as well as how and when these boundaries change.

In short, on the basis that we cannot predict the nature of fieldwork interactions, I conceive positional reflexivity as a practice that may allow us to recognize the multiplicity of positionalities and power dynamics that intervene in each one of our fieldwork encounters, and to thereby make visible the partial and situated process of (co)-constructing knowledge.

In the following sections I discuss the considerations generated by the application of this approach in my own research. First, I describe the basic characteristics of the research study and the motives that drove me to undertake it. Later I present the positionalities and negotiations of power that I identified during my fieldwork.

## **2. Introduction to the Study**

In this text I reflect on my doctoral research, an investigation that took place at the University of Padua (Italy) between the years of 2012 and 2015. To begin, I think it appropriate to specify that in my initial research proposal, I planned to examine and compare the migrant trajectories of Argentinian and Ecuadorian citizens in the Italian context in terms of their connection with Italian nationality law. However, my project changed during my first few months in the Italian peninsula, when I realized that in the Veneto Region, where I had just moved to pursue my studies, a whole series of political and legal initiatives that favored the migration of Argentinians with Venetian<sup>3</sup> ancestry had been in development since the beginning of the twenty-first century.

This kind of political and legal measures, which linked the inhabitants of a European region governed by the right with some inhabitants of my native country through familial and blood connections, intrigued me personally for two reasons. First, having been born in Argentina and spent the greater part of my life in Spain, I grew up

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<sup>3</sup> Although the term “Venetian” usually refers to people from the province of Venice, in this text it incorporates all inhabitants of the Veneto Region.

with an understanding of myself as an “invisible” migrant because of my appearance as a middle-class white woman without a marked foreign accent. Second, having worked as a volunteer in various institutions and NGO’s in Spain and Belgium, I am familiar with some of the legal, political, economic, and social difficulties faced by asylum seekers and migrants with national origins considered culturally distant in the contemporary European context.

With these motivations and the support of my advisors, I modified my initial proposal to focus my attention on the “politics of [regional] belonging” (YUVAL-DAVIS, 2011) and their possible connection with the narratives of belonging of Argentinian migrants residing in the region<sup>4</sup> (ROVETTA CORTÉS, 2018). In other words, my decision to examine the migrant narratives of my co-nationals was guided by a desire to link political discourses and practices with migrant narratives. Although my status as a woman born in Argentina and raised in Europe influenced my curiosity, my interest was not guided by any patriotic sentiment or by the presumption that my national origin would be naturally beneficial. Rather, I was motivated by a desire to understand how “my co-nationals” interacted with (favorably) discriminatory political initiatives.

Once the modification of my project was formalized, I planned my fieldwork based in a multisite ethnography. This anticipated meetings with experts in regional politics in institutional and associational environments, as well as semi-structured interviews with members of first- and second-generation<sup>5</sup> migrant families from Argentina who resided in the VenetoRegion<sup>6</sup>. During the first few meetings I

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<sup>4</sup> Even though I conducted a part of the investigation in a region of Spain, in this text I focus on my ethnographic experience in the Veneto Region.

<sup>5</sup> The concept of generations is highly debated in the field of migration studies. I use it, however, according to the conceptual suggestions of MANNHEIM (1959). In the case of second generations, my use of the term is unorthodox, as I include in this definition some children of migrants born after the family’s migration took place (5 out of 12). I do this because my analysis of their narratives allows me to assert that their lives have not been so different from those research participants who migrated in infancy (7 out of 12) with regards to their transnational experiences (relative to transoceanic communication and travels) and because, all being possessed of a privileged legal status (of dual or European nationality), as they spoke of their belonging, other positionalities were shown to be more significant.

<sup>6</sup> Interviewees are middle-class people who migrated for economic reasons between the 1980s and 2000s. They left large cities (such as Buenos Aires and Rosario) to settle in small towns in the Veneto region, where they had some acquaintances (relatives or friends) who helped with the initial accommodation. The first-generation of migrants work, often, in sectors other than those in which they worked in their country of origin: in the care sector, many women, and in factories, the majority of men. Most young adults of the second-generation are completing university degrees and, in many cases, foresee a new migration due to the current economic crisis.

attempted to understand the origin and evolution of the region’s policies (plans, programs, and projects) towards Argentinian people with Venetian ancestry. Through the interviews, I strove to understand the migratory and transnational experiences and the narratives of belonging of twenty-five members of families of Argentinian origin residing in the region (ROVETTA CORTÉS, 2016).

In the following section I detail the positionalities and negotiations of power that I identified in my fieldwork, drawing on the statements, comments, and explicit questions of my research participants during our encounters.

### **3. Positionalities during Fieldwork**

Before going on, I would like to clarify that through this narration of the comments and questions made by my research participants, I do not purport to give an account of each and every one of the complex and shifting boundaries that configured the relationships I established in the field, as “this process may occur subtly and silently and thus may be beyond our awareness” (RYAN, 2015, p. 14). My intention is, specifically, to make visible the expressions of interest that my research participants openly manifested to me, given that from our very first interactions it was evident that some of my characteristics (such as my legal status, national origin, linguistic abilities, gender and age) generated great curiosity in my interlocutors. As such, in an attempt to be as honest and systematic as possible with respect to the conditions of the (co)-construction of knowledge in my investigation, I made note of these stated demonstrations of interest.

In the cases where these questions or comments were produced during interviews or meetings, they were registered by my recorder. On the occasions that they occurred in the moments before or after the interviews, I noted them in my fieldwork diary.

Given that I have identified some significant discrepancies between the positionalities I detected during interviews, on the one hand, and during meetings in institutional and associational environments, on the other, I divide my analysis into two subparts. I include fragments from my field notes to illustrate my insights.



### 3.1. Encounters with Political Experts in Institutional and Associational Environments

According to the metaphor put forth by Maggi W.H. LEUNG, we may visualize our social positions as “a stack of cards we can play strategically in framing our encounters with those whom we study” (2015, p. 2). As such, in my first forays into the institutional sphere, I attempted to invoke my public university “PhD candidate card” in order to complement the written information on the politics of regional belonging available online.

However, my accent while speaking Italian immediately betrayed me as a foreigner before the very first Italian functionaries with whom I interacted in the Offices of Immigration. This led to a series of questions about my legal status in the country, as well as an offer of administrative assistance to help me obtain the residency permit required of non-EU nationals. According to the “stack of cards” metaphor, a different one of my cards played the more active role in my first encounters. My condition as a foreigner was more visible than that of a student, a fact which somewhat slowed my access to information about regional policies designed to facilitate the migration of Argentinian citizens with Venetian ancestry.

Meanwhile, this information became readily obtainable when I later played my “student card” before functionaries of a higher rank. Given that in Italy all students are required to carry out a research project before completing any university career, they provided me with all of the information they had available without asking about my origins, and moreover did so with warmth and a certain pedagogical tone.

The information that I obtained from the Offices of Immigration let me to delve into the associational sphere, having corroborated the existence of a link between the regional government and one of the conservative associations for the diaspora: Venetinel Mondo<sup>7</sup>. Before turning to them, I visited two similar associations of a provincial scope (Padovaninel Mondo and Vicentininel Mondo<sup>8</sup>) to inquire about the

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<sup>7</sup>Veneti nel Mondo was created in the 1990s with the purpose of maintaining cultural and economic ties with all the Venetians and their offspring living abroad.

<sup>8</sup> Vicentini nel Mondo and Padovani nel Mondo seek to provide moral and material assistance to the people of Vicenza and Padova who reside abroad. Both organizations were founded in the 1960s. To

possibility of their participation in regional political initiatives for Argentinians of Venetian ancestry. In both cases, my presence led to a series of exchanges such as the following:

The Padovanin el Mondo headquarters are in the Chamber of Commerce in one of the city’s old buildings. Large, elegant, lavish. When I enter, the secretary (a member of the Northern League) knows that I am the person who called. I introduce myself by name and as a PhD student. (...) I ask if they know anything about the Return Plan and they tell me that they know that it is connected with the Council, but that they themselves had no connection. Following a series of comments on the subject, the secretary asks about my origins. I have not said anything about my background, but I understand that he assumes that I am Argentinian (although I do not know if this is because of my accent when I speak, or because of my curiosity about the policies). When I confirm his supposition, he asks me about my ancestors’ origins. I smile at him, although I feel that this question has a racial tinge that I do not like, and tell him that I have some ancestors of Italian origin. He asks me about their regional background and I respond that I have ancestors from Liguria on my father’s side and from Sicily on my mother’s side. He justifies his curiosity by commenting that the association has Masters’ scholarship programs for young people “descended from emigrants of Paduan and Venetian origin,” and that, unfortunately, I would not be eligible.

(Field Notes, January 2013)

At this organization, as well as at the Vicentini nel Mondo, my positionality as a doctoral student was overshadowed by my nationality and my ethnic origin. Not only was I asked about my background, there were enquiries as to that of my ancestors. As a result, in both cases I am sorted into the category of “Italian descendent,” and each encounter proceeds based on this position.

At both organizations, the discourse makes a distinction between “non-EU nationals” and “our children of emigrants,” and I am made to acknowledge that I am among the latter. In fact, as the earlier fragment of my fieldwork diary demonstrates, my informant goes as far as to lament that my ancestors came from other regions and not Veneto since, ignoring the prior information that I myself had provided about my

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achieve their goals, these associations promote travel and exchange programs, develop cultural activities, and grant scholarships and awards.

situation as a doctoral student, he considers that I could have applied for a Masters fellowship.<sup>9</sup>

In both associational environments I obtain useful information about another kind of sub-regional initiative (provincial and local) that promotes cultural exchanges and tourist trips for people with Venetian ancestors who live abroad; but the general sensation I gain from these encounters is one of extreme discomfort. The connections that these people (all White, Catholic, and middle-class) establish between land, blood, and family scares and outrages me. The essentialized and biologized dichotomous perceptions on which they base one’s belonging to human communities remind me of dark episodes in recent history.

Something different happens in Venetinel Mondo. At this organization, my presence generates a certain suspicion. After I briefly introduce my interest in learning about the migration policies as a student, the general secretary asks for the name of my thesis advisor; when I reference the name of my Italian advisor (my co-advisor works in Argentina), he makes note of it on a piece of paper. Then he states that he finds it strange that he does not know this person, for he is in regular contact with various members of the university and has never heard of her.

To ease the misgivings that my presence seems to awaken, I mention that my director is a young woman and that this might be why he has not yet met her. Even so, with the intent of changing the atmosphere, upon perceiving that my interlocutor also has a Spanish accent when he speaks Italian, I ask him whether we couldn’t talk in Spanish. This gesture seems to have the desired effect, for after asking about my national origin (and not that of my ancestors), my interlocutor’s discourse takes on a didactic tone that allows me to obtain information about the policies and, furthermore, to identify the source of his original distrust. The region’s policies towards the migration of Venetian descendants have received much criticism since their implementation; he was suspicious of my interest in examining their origin and evolution. Although during our meeting my informant maintains that there was no

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<sup>9</sup> This offer was made by an older person with no desire to offend me or invade my privacy by asking about my genealogical tree. However, I cannot help but feel an aversion to this neoconservative discourse which gives so much relevance to regional blood and, as a result, influences access to formative and/or work-related opportunities for young people in the twenty-first century.

ideology behind these initiatives, but that they were simply an “attempt to help,” the political neutrality that he claims over and over again does not exist.

Although I never outwardly express my political thoughts or inclinations, it is possible that my nonverbal language gives away my skepticism towards the words of this man who – with an evidently strong economic situation, a stable job, an active participation in the regional political sphere, and contacts abroad – claims not to have an ideology; after this encounter, he does not respond to my attempts to contact him again. As a result, my investigations concentrate on the analysis of all the information I have gathered to date, as well as written documentation.

To summarize, in encounters with key informants in institutional and associational spheres, my legal status, my nationality, my ancestor’s ethnic origin, my linguistic abilities in Italian, and my university position and contacts were questioned, complementarily or alternatively.

### **3.2 Interviews with Argentinian Migrants**

During my interviews with first and second-generation migrants, I openly used my “national card” from the start. In my interview script this “card” occupied an eminent space; with the support of my thesis advisor, I included not only verbal questions but also audio-visual materials produced by Argentinian artists: a song, a movie clip, and a comic (ROVETTA CORTÉS, 2017, 2016). In this sense, I believe that my own migratory experiences and my understanding of some of the artistic productions (musical, filmic, and graphic) about Argentinian migration in Europe were essential when time came to propose this methodological design.

Beyond the interview format, the initial relevance that my national origin had in my encounters with migrants was evident for at least three reasons. First, because of the “normality” that members of migrant families attributed to my interest in Argentinian migrations; second, the openness with which they provided me the information of other people who I might contact for interviews; and finally, the ability to draw on more than one language in our interactions.

With respect to this final point, I should note that I decided to suggest that each migrant family member choose the language in which they felt most comfortable speaking to me. In this regard, there were noticeable generational and gendered differences; while the entirety of first-generation migrants (13) and the majority of male second-generation migrants (4 out of 5) opted to communicate with me in Spanish, the majority of second-generation women (5 out of 7) chose to express themselves in Italian.

I interpret this difference in linguistic preferences as a boundary marker by which my interviewees seemed to compare their degree of national belonging with my own. Some first-generation migrants considered my accent in Spanish to be more typical of Spain than Argentina, and went as far as to “translate” words or phrases only used in Argentina for me (something which I found completely unnecessary), because they believed that I could not understand them. Second-generation migrant men, for their part, made no comments about my accent, nor did they establish any noticeable differentiation between their degrees of belonging and my own. In contrast, various second-generation migrant women considered my level of “Argentinianess” to be greater than their own, because of the simple fact that I could express myself fluently in Spanish.

This resulted in some difficulty obtaining interviews with several second-generation migrant women. We see this in an excerpt from my fieldwork diary:

I met Julia in the locale of a recreational cultural association a few months ago. I had gone there one night with some of my university colleagues, and one of them had introduced us. He joked about her being a ‘fake Argentinian,’ saying that she only claimed she was Argentinian to make herself ‘interesting,’ ‘exotic.’ Since it was obvious that they knew one another, I didn’t interfere against his comments in the moment, although this classificatory dynamic did not strike me as appropriate.(...) When I contacted her a few days ago, she asked me what exactly my research consisted of, because “she didn’t have much to say about Argentina.” I explained that I wanted to speak to her as a member of a family that had migrated, and not to worry; I wouldn’t ask her about anything beyond her own experience. This relaxed her, and in fact, today’s interview proceeded normally: with very fluid interventions on her part, entertaining comments, laughter, memories of her childhood and transoceanic

travels. (...) She is the second young woman to feel that she has little to say...

(Field Notes, April 2013)

In the case of Julia, her initial reticence owed itself in part to the language; she was afraid that I would judge her “not Argentinian enough.” Although she knows Spanish, she says that she speaks “with an Italian accent,” and this makes her uncomfortable. For this reason, in an attempt to facilitate communication and concentrate our attention on the content of her narrative, I suggest that we speak in Italian, a language in which her linguistic dominion is superior to mine.

This kind of situation, in which second-generation migrant women doubt the relevance of narrating their own life experiences with international mobility, was significant relative to the total number of interviews (3 out of 7). All of these cases had to do with adult women; the girls (3 out of 7) took the interviews more lightly, like a game, an opportunity to demonstrate their transnational understanding and experience.

In any case, the degrees of national belonging employed at the beginning of each encounter did not remain constant, but shifted fluidly over the course of the interviews.

Among the first-generation migrants there were frequent direct questions about my migrant trajectory. Preceded by phrases like “Now it’s your turn!”, questions about my province of birth, my age upon migration, the reasons for my family’s displacement, the places where I had lived, the types of connections I maintain with my relatives in Argentina, the motives that brought me to Padua...were very present in our interactions. This led them to consider me, alternately, Tucumanian, Argentinian, or Spanish – all uniterritorial categorizations.

Among these classifications, the most widely used option was to consider me an Argentinian conational; this meant their narratives frequently included the first person in the plural to describe places, customs, or recent historical events. This required me to pay close attention in order to ask the questions that were frequently taken for granted.

On the other hand, in the cases where I was identified as Spanish I found myself in the aforementioned situation of receiving what I perceived as unnecessary linguistic clarifications. And, on the occasions that I was classified as Tucumanián, the interviewees, all of who came from urban contexts (such as Buenos Aires or Rosario), made geographic clarifications to describe their cities of origin. They also celebrated some historical happenings (such as the Declaration of Independence in 1816) and the contributions of artists (such as Mercedes Sosa or Palito Ortega) from the province where I was born.

Faced with these comments and categorizations, the majority of adult second-generation migrants, men and women alike, positioned themselves, and me, as someone with a migrant background who was still searching for their place in the world.

Independently of the (greater or equal) degree of “Argentinianess” that they attributed to me at the start of the interview, the fact of being in a seemingly similar age led certain migrants to place me in situations similar to their own over the course of the interview, with regards to: (1) not having a stable job (and as such not knowing where we might end up living in the future); (2) having lived migration since our childhoods; and (3) boasting of the same legal status of dual nationality (in their case, Italian and Argentinian, and in mine, Spanish and Argentinian). The fact that we both perceived these similarities, the interviewees and myself, resulted that these interviews were marked by a strong sense of proximity, something that I reflected in my fieldwork diary on various occasions. For example:

This is the first time that I am hearing words with which I can identify: like the fact that he celebrates his two nationalities, or that he says he lives his migrant situation as an opportunity, as something positive that gives him a broader perspective that cannot easily be achieved by people who never had the same option of living more than one reality. I silently nod my agreement, but say nothing. At the very end of the interview, Luisito asks for my thoughts on the conversation, and recognizes that he talked a lot. He is somewhat embarrassed, and so aside from mitigating his discomfort by telling him how much I value his words, I confess that I felt particularly identified with some of his statements. I tell him that, for example, the question that he has been asked since he was a child: “Which do you prefer, here or there?” is something that I, too, have heard since I was a girl, and that I too found it inappropriate, even then. I tell him

that it sometimes happens to me that other people think they can classify me according to a single origin, and he tells me that the same thing happens to him, that when they ask him how long he has been in Italy and he says “since I was 12,” many people say to him, “At this point, you’re Italian!” and that this statement annoys him. After chatting for a few minutes, he says that he really enjoyed speaking with me, that he will ask his father if he would like to be interviewed and that he would love to hear my feedback whenever I feel like telling him how the research is going.

(Field Notes, March 2013)

This kind of reflection on my own identification with various opinions and valuations was repeated, with some variation, in the majority of my interviews with second-generation adult migrants. In each instance I made note of them in order to recognize my own feelings of affinity. I felt much better understood by this kind of binational appreciation than by the uniterritorial categorizations that first-generation migrants attributed to me. Second-generation migrants did not question my multiple nationalities, but considered my condition to be hybrid and similar to their own, not only by virtue of having migrated but also by other structural positions, such as legal status and employment situation in an historic moment of increasing precariousness.

With respect to my interviews with minors, it should be noted that they expressed much less interest in my background. Their few demonstrations of interest were limited to asking me, in a playful manner, to speak to them “in Argentinian” to put their linguistic abilities into practice during our interviews.

Furthermore, I should note that gender also influenced my interactions with my interviewees, although this did not happen in a homogenous or constant way. Independently of migratory generation, many adult women spoke to me with complicity and closeness about experiences beyond the theme of our interviews. Often, women older than me gave me their advice and opinions on life choices, such as choosing a partner or maternity. Meanwhile, the younger interviewees of an age close to my own (between 20 and 40 years) told me humorously of some of their more shocking migrant experiences, such as, for instance, having been perceived on various occasions as “husband-hunters,” being “female Latin American migrants in Europe.”

With respect to my interactions with the men, while they were generally very cordial, they were also more restrained than the relationships I established with the



women. On one occasion, however, a male interviewee more than 10 years older than myself demonstrated an interest in me that had nothing to do with my research. I had to be quite blunt, reminding my interlocutor that the motive for our meeting was purely academic. In this instance, albeit with some discomfort, the interaction proceeded and I was able to conduct the interview.

In summary, during my interviews the variety of perceived and experienced positionings is increased. I am apprehended in terms of my national and provincial origin, my migratory experience, my linguistic competencies in Italian and Spanish, my transnational connections, my gender, my employment status, and my age. Likewise, I detect that migratory generation and age condition my interactions relative to national belonging, and furthermore have other implications. For example, second-generation migrants of an age close to my own tend to include me in their narratives when they speak of the precarious labor conditions they have faced up until that moment, and complain that this experience carries alongside it many future uncertainties.

### **Final Considerations**

In this article I have examined, first, the principal characteristics of the theoretical-methodological approach here called positional reflexivity. I indicate that in the field of migration studies, this approach invites us to remove the “ethnic lens” (NOWICKA and RYAN, 2015), which assumes the existence of aprioristic conditions of insiderness and outsidersness, in favor of the “boundary lens” (SHINOZAKI, 2012) which allows us to identify and recognize when and how to redraw the boundaries between the researcher and the participants in an investigation.

I presented, second, the basic characteristics of a qualitative study that used this approach. And third, I described the positionalities and negotiations of power that I identified in my interactions with research participants.

As anticipated, the contribution of this paper with respect to other studies carried out by female migrant researchers within the field of migration studies lies in the fact that the reflections offered in this article are not limited to the analysis of

exchanges during interviews with the migrant population, but also include encounters in which I interacted with key informants in institutions and associations.

With respect to the interviews, I should note that there are multiple concurrences between my observations and those offered by the female migrant investigators who have previously used this approach in their studies. For example, I have identified, in consonance with the contributions of Maggi W. H. LEUNG (2015), that sharing more than one language with my interviewees facilitated communications with both first and second-generation migrants from the start. Likewise, I have noted, as do Laura MOROȘANU (2015) and Kyoko SHINOZAKI (2012), that gender and age play a crucial role in the fluidity of my exchanges. And I caution, as would Louise RYAN (2015), that the national and ethnic identities that our research participants attribute to us do not always coincide with the descriptions that we would use ourselves.

Concerning my encounters with experts in institutional and associational environments, the positionalities I had questioned and negotiated were, with the exception of the interest demonstrated in my nationality, different from those manifested in my interviews. In interviews, the boundaries that were redrawn were: my provincial origin, my migratory experience, my linguistic abilities in Italian and Spanish, my transnational connections, gender, employment status, and age. In encounters with experts, in contrast, my legal status, my ancestors’ ethnic origins, my linguistic abilities in Italian, my academic position, and my university references turned out to be more worthy of note.

The set of reflections displayed here is based on the statements, comments and explicit questions of my research participants; with this in mind, I do not attempt to give an account of all of the positionalities and negotiations of power encountered in my fieldwork. Instead, taking up the metaphor of positionalities as a “stack of cards” (LEUNG, 2015), I have made an effort to recognize which cards are on the table in the game of interactions with research participants, and how and when these change. That is to say, I have described the rounds in which I, as a researcher, discovered strategic cards (for example, the “PhD candidate card” or the “national card”) in order to facilitate the exchange; the rounds in which I drew cards that I would not have chosen (such as the “descendent of Italian emigrants card”); and the rounds in which I picked

up new cards to redefine the game (for example, renegotiating language in order to gain access to the narratives of second-generation female migrants.)

In synthesis, through the presentation of these interchanges and negotiations I have sought to explain, insofar as this is possible, how the more visible of these complex and shifting boundaries condition the process of data collection and, as a result, the situated and partial process of (co)-constructing knowledge.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my thanks to María del Carmen Villarreal Villamar and Gustavo Dias for their invitation to participate in this monographic edition of the journal. To Annalisa Frisina and Sandra Gil for their support and supervision throughout my doctoral trajectory. To Varshini Narayanan (Nina) for the English translation.

I dedicate this work to the memory of Doctor Jesús Lima Torrado, professor and friend, without whom my doctorate at the University of Padua would not have been possible.

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