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Creolising Nordic Migration Research: Entangled Knowledges, Migratisations, and Reflexivities

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Honoured Custos, honoured Opponent, dear audience members,

A recent media article in *Helsingin Sanomat* (2024) lamented the lack of English subtitles to popular Finnish television series like '*Siskonpeti*'. Given that these series exude Finnish customs, values, and traditions, they would help migrants integrate into society if only they were able to follow the shows. The article referred to Finnish values as white values which one should adopt, while erasing the diversity of Finland's population, such as the Sami Indigenous people, the Roma national minority or migrants and their descendants, many of whom are Finnish citizens. The article, however, did not lament the scarcity of television shows by and for minorities, migrants, and Indigenous people.

The discourse of integration seems to dominate migration policies, practices, and discussions in the Nordic context. The assumption that migrants must adapt to the norms of the dominant society in order to be included is often taken for granted. Recent critical research, however, such as the 2024 PhD study by Ameera Masoud, titled *Constructing the Integrateable Refugee and Immigrant through Integration Policies and Practices in Finland,* challenges this assumption. Such studies reveal hidden realities behind official integration policies. That is, policies focus on 'fixing' individuals instead of addressing structural barriers that restrict migrants' access to most economic, social, cultural, educational, and political spheres.

While Nordic integration policies are built upon the discourse of equal opportunities and inclusiveness, equality is out of reach for many migrants and their descendants, especially those racialised as 'other'. It becomes important to envision alternative and more just practices of and beyond integration. According to the 2023 book *Rethinking Integration: Challenging Oppressive Practices and Pointing to Ways Forward*, co-edited by Zeinab Karimi and colleagues, a first step would be flipping the script by turning the gaze around. Instead of focusing on a particular group as the 'other' who needs 'fixing' in order to fit in, we should turn our gaze to the rigid societal structures and their reproduction of multiple inequalities at the intersection of race, class, citizenship, and gender amongst others.

Rethinking integration by turning the gaze around shifts the terms of the conversation regarding what integration is or should be. This can open up ways forward towards creating and sustaining more just ways of living together. Yet, this is only the first step. The next step relies on imagining what those alternative ways of living together could look like. How can we imagine those possible convivial worlds? And, how can we address ongoing inequalities that cannot be erased? Addressing these questions requires not only changing the terms of the conversation,

but having altogether different conversations. Such conversations have already started taking place at the margins, between people unequally positioned by migration systems and discourses.

Beyond debates about integration, such conversations focus on rethinking what it means to live together in the context of growing diversity *and* rising inequalities. My doctoral dissertation contributes to ongoing debates on rethinking co-existence from the margins, while also addressing power relations and inequalities. I focus on the contact zones between multiple unequal experiences of migration, and on what such interrelations may produce in terms of imagining alternative just worlds. There are multiple types of migration experiences at the intersection of citizenship, ethnicity, race, class, and the visa or residence permit regime one is subjected to amongst other issues. These various experiences come into contact with one another in creative and unexpected ways. Rather than focusing on relations or 'incompatibilities' between migrants and locals, which reproduce the foreigner versus native binary, I focus instead on relations and tensions between differently positioned migrants. Drawing from the 2018 study by Alyosxa Tudor, titled *Cross-fadings of Racialisation and Migratisation: The Postcolonial Turn in Western European Gender and Migration Studies*, I take into account that someone who crossed borders may be constructed as 'at home', while a citizen may be constructed as a migrant depending on distances from or proximities to Nordic whiteness. Alternatively, some migrants experience racism, whereas others do not. Moreover, someone may be constructed as a privileged migrant with access to social mobility, whereas someone else may be subjected to strict immigration controls or denied access to certain residence permits.

Through autoethnographic research in Finland, I followed three entry points that led me to contact zones between multiple unequal migrations: a migrant integration training programme in an adult education centre, which I attended during 2015–2016 as an unemployed jobseeker and Romanian migrant; a reception centre for asylum seekers, where I completed my job practice in 2016 as part of my integration training; and an emergency accommodation centre for Roma migrants, where I worked in 2021 as a non-Roma mediator between Roma women working as cleaners and their Finnish clients. I explored how the interrelations between the differently positioned migrants in those locations may contribute to imagining alternative ways of living together which go beyond the limitations imposed by those institutions. Yet, there may be obstacles in creating convivial worlds, such as ongoing inequalities that cannot be erased. There are tensions. But that is where the key lies in terms of how to create something new from those tensions. I apply the concept of entangled migrations, coined by Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez in her 2021 paper *Entangled Migrations. The Coloniality of Migration and Creolizing Conviviality*, to highlight conflictual moments between the potential of living together across inequalities, of creating possible alternative worlds, and the blocking of that potential through the structural forces of domination. By entangling more or less privileged experiences of migration, I analyse the intersubjective processes where unequal power relations are constantly renegotiated in unexpected ways.

The reception centre for asylum seekers and the emergency accommodation centre for Roma migrants revealed intersecting entanglements. In the reception centre, asylum seekers racialised as 'other' lived and cleaned; people employed as mediators, who share socio-cultural and linguistic characteristics with the

asylum seekers, taught, translated, and offered social assistance; and I did my job practice as part of an 'integration' plan drafted with the unemployment office. In the accommodation centre, Roma migrants lived and Roma workers cleaned; in addition, non-Roma Romanian and Bulgarian workers, myself included, supervised, mediated, translated, trained, and offered social assistance. In the reception centre, the roles of the more privileged subjects depended upon the presence of people constructed as asylum seekers. Many of the managers, social workers, and teachers working in the centre had been unemployed before reception centres throughout the country were reopened in 2015 following the arrival of individuals seeking asylum. Similarly, the existence of the accommodation centre depended on the housing discrimination experienced by Roma migrants. The more privileged jobs of the non-Roma workers depended on the hard labour of the Roma workers, which the former supervised. Yet, both the asylum seekers and the Roma migrants creatively navigated those oppressive settings and influenced important outcomes and decisions. They do so through transgressive means possibly misunderstood or invisible from a hegemonic perspective. They tactically employed various strategies for addressing various subjugations. They creatively defied norms that subdued them by asserting multiple creative ways of being and living together, which cannot be classified or managed through dominant meanings.

Overall, entangling multiple unequal migrations turns seeming paradoxes into relational solidarities. Importantly, they also constitute entangled knowledges shared between the differently positioned migrants, which generate shifts and transformations into each other's perceptions and understandings.

I explored such entangled knowledges through collaborative art-based methods with participants—namely, theatre-based methods, storytelling, and creative writing. Through art-based methods I highlight everyday knowledges which are usually not considered scientific enough to be viewed as knowledge. In doing so, I aimed to reinscribe previously ignored or misunderstood knowledges and realities into migration research. I did not theorise based on those knowledges, but treated them as theories in themselves. As a result, I bring them into conversation with other existing theories and blur the boundaries between academic and nonacademic, researcher and participant, fact and fiction, science and art.

Central to my aim of extending research to plural knowers and knowledges is rethinking research ethics. Ethics is central both as my topic of research as well as a meta-methodological approach. At the meta level, following Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez, in my thesis, I argue for an ethical premise to living together and creating knowledge together on mutually beneficial terms across highly unequal positions, an ethics of interrelational transversality driven by the unexpected toward possibilities of just worlds. This counterbalances modern colonial systems of social and epistemic reproduction. As a research topic, my thesis reflects on the dilemmas of current research ethics in relation to people perceived as vulnerable. Here, I have been inspired by a rather recently emerging strand in Romani studies in which an academic and a nonacademic write ethnography together, while analysing the collaborative process itself. This emerging approach has been strongly guided by the pioneering work of Paloma Gay y Blasco and Liria Hernández, a Roma researcher and a non-Roma co-researcher who wrote about each other and analysed each other's

lives, research relations, and friendship spanning many years in their 2020 co-authored book, *Writing Friendship, A Reciprocal Ethnography*.

In order for disadvantaged collaborators to be considered epistemic partners, it is necessary to disregard normative notions of 'expertise', value alternative knowledges by people with the least power in society, and make practical adjustments to working methods recognising the analytical contributions of interlocutors who might not be formally educated. Interpersonal affinities and commonalities beyond the hierarchical research relationship, embracing uncertainty and failure, and becoming vulnerable to each other have been helpful strategies in my collaboration with co-researchers perceived as vulnerable. Still, following Martin Fotta and Paloma Gay y Blasco (2024), the legitimation of alternative know-how as valid knowledge relies on the privileged researcher's channels, resources, and mediations within established institutional patterns, making clear the deep inequalities upon which such projects are built. This demonstrates the importance of what Anna Tsing (2005: 264) calls 'collaboration with friction at its heart', where co-researchers do not necessarily share similarities, affinities, understandings of research goals and problems, hopes or agendas.

Friction and tensions are fruitful for imagining and enacting new subjectivities and research possibilities, yet also reinforce existing hierarchies and inequalities or produce new ones. To negotiate communicative friction with the participants in my research, the strategy of *complex communication* developed in 2006 by Maria Lugones proved helpful. Through complex communication, people who are differently positioned through relations of power can create new coalitional possibilities by learning how to see each other beyond what they may be within a given structure of power. They learn how to decipher each other's words and gestures in new and unexpected ways. The strategy of complex communication is particularly relevant to the aim I mentioned at the beginning, of not only shifting the terms of the conversation, but in creating new conversations altogether, which imagine alternative and more just practices that go beyond integration. As these conversations take place between people unequally positioned by power relations, complex communication can enable new relational ways of being and knowing beyond structural, dominant meanings. In my thesis, I reflect on more or less successful *and* failed attempts of enacting such intersubjective transformations beyond dominant meanings with the participants.

These can be viewed as unconventional academic research approaches. They do not strive to come up with concrete conclusions and measurable results; they are not fixed to the speed of research and do not operate according to the objectivity and verifiability attached to the hard sciences, which have taken over all of research. In this thesis, I introduce new criteria for the ethics and the quality of migration research. I argue for complex, nuanced, and open-ended research aims and outcomes at the intersection of migratism, racism, exclusion, the dilemmas of whiteness, self-awareness, subjectivation, worlding, and the difficulties of transversal coalitions amongst various others. Furthermore, in this thesis, I explore what the realisation of these mechanisms and paths does for potentially making the world a better place and for relearning to hear each other and think together for the sake of refuturing. These gains are hard to measure and even harder to articulate in a results-oriented way, and they are highly important not just for academia, but for society at large.

I now ask you, honoured Professor Suvi Keskinen, as the Opponent appointed by the Faculty of Education and Culture, to present your critical comments on my dissertation.

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