



Belonging on the Move: A Multi-Method Exploration of Embodied Affect, Place Attachment, and Transnational Mobility in Migrant Lives in Norway

ERIKA GUBRIUM

LAIA COLOMER

**Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article*

RESEARCH

HUP HELSINKI
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

ABSTRACT

The study investigates how adult migrants to Norway develop a sense of belonging through both attachment and mobility. Building on transnational and mobilities perspectives, it emphasizes embodied affect—the sensory and emotional experiences arising from everyday routines, movements, and interactions with place. Drawing on a three-stage, mixed-method design (life-history interviews, mapping, and walking interviews) and through narrative inquiry focused on two ‘telling cases’, the analysis shows that belonging evolves in the interplay of physical environments, personal and family relationships, and one’s broader social and cultural context. Rather than viewing belonging as solely rooted in fixed locations, the findings highlight how the research participants negotiate a sense of belonging ‘on the move’, across multiple sites. These negotiations entail recalling memories of origin, managing daily routines in Norway, and anticipating future transnational ties. By foregrounding the embodied and affective dimensions of belonging, the paper contributes to a nuanced understanding of migrants’ experiences and underscores how movement and place-based attachment coexist and continually reshape one another.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Erika Gubrium

Department of Social Work,
Child Welfare and Social
Policy, Faculty of Social
Sciences, Oslo Metropolitan
University, Norway

erikgu@oslomet.no

KEYWORDS:

Mobilities; Transnational
belonging; Place
attachment; Embodied
affect; Identity; Migration;
Norway

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Gubrium, E. and Colomer, L. 2025. Belonging on the Move: A Multi-Method Exploration of Embodied Affect, Place Attachment, and Transnational Mobility in Migrant Lives in Norway. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 15(4): 6, pp. 1–17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.939>

INTRODUCTION

Migrants experience complex and shifting senses of belonging, shaped by their mobility and transnational ties. By focusing on the experience of belonging by people who, as adults, moved from outside the European Union (EU) to, and have resided in, Norway for many years, we are interested in moving beyond the predominant economic and assimilationist approaches of many European studies concerning the “integration” of migrants (Favell 2022; Schinkel 2017). We explore how people for whom their migration is not a recent event connect the ‘small’ (personal/emotional) and ‘big’ stories (the structural/institutional/social/political) shaping their everyday lives, and how such (changing) connections shape a sense of belonging, all anchored by a dialectical focus on emotions rather than economic rationalities. By centering on this specific group, we aim to unpack the nuanced interplay between place, mobility, and embodied affect in continuously shaping belonging, providing a richer understanding of the term ‘migrant’ within this context.

The transnational and mobilities perspectives offer complementary frameworks for understanding the continuing process of belonging. Transnational scholarship often conceptualizes belonging as tied to multiple nodes of attachment, whether socio-material places or networks spanning multiple locations (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004; Svašek 2014; Yeoh & Collins 2024). This perspective traditionally emphasizes rootedness, with belonging grounded in the calm and connection associated with attachment to place(s) of meaning, opening for a multitude of places that may be called ‘home’ (Lewicka 2011, 2014). Mobilities scholarship complements this idea, shifting focus from static places to the spaces and practices of movement, emphasizing the transformative potential of mobility itself (Christensen & Jensen 2011; Cresswell 2006; Sheller & Urry 2006). Here, ‘home’ may not signify a physical location but a dynamic sense of belonging that arises *in movement*, in between places (Colomer 2017, 2020; Lindley & Van Hear 2007; Ossman 2013).

We adopt an integrated approach, examining how embodied affect—the sensory and emotional experiences arising through bodily interactions with space (Ingold 2021; Pink, 2015)—shapes migrants’ sense of belonging. Everyday movement and routines help individuals negotiate and redefine their attachments to place, memory, and identity, creating new narratives of belonging (Boccagni & Baldassar 2015; Colomer 2020; Somers & Gibson 1994; Szpunar & Szpunar 2016). These narratives allow migrants to make sense of their journeys by intertwining memories of the past, present experiences, and imagined futures.

Through a multipronged, narrative inquiry of data emerging from two biographical interviews, sensory walks, and mobility mapping, we investigate the following research question: *How do research participants, adult migrants now residing in Norway, draw on changing senses of belonging as they describe their experiences in Norway?* We explore the multimodal intersections of place, mobility, and embodied affect, recognizing the critical role of both verbal and non-verbal dimensions of belonging (Adey et al. 2014; Gubrium, Khakurel and Nalwamba 2025). Our approach illuminates how migrants navigate the relational and sensory dynamics of place and mobility to cultivate belonging amid ongoing negotiations of identity and home.

Belonging, as an embodied and affective phenomenon, emerges through the interplay of place, mobility, and transnational experience (Antonsich 2010; Levitt & Glick-Schiller 2004; Sheller & Urry, 2006). Our analysis builds on the dual perspectives of transnationality and the mobilities paradigm to explore how migrants negotiate belonging across different contexts. We draw on the concepts of embodied affect (Shouse 2005), affective homemaking (Boccagni & Baldassar 2015), and place-ballet (Seamon 2015) to understand the performative, relational, and sensory dimensions of belonging.

Scholarship on transnationality has reconceptualized belonging as fluid, multi-sited, and embedded in relational and emotional networks (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004; Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002). The transnational lens moves beyond linear notions of migration to examine how migrants experience simultaneous attachment to multiple places and societies (Basch, Schiller & Blanc 1994; Castles 2004). Migrants negotiate belonging through both physical movement between and emotional ties to meaningful places and may sustain attachments to multiple homes. They negotiate connections to their countries of origin and residence(s), cultivating hybrid identities that are shaped by socioemotional ties, relationships, and material practices (Portes, Guarnizo, & Landholt 1999). A transnational sense of home is thus multi-scalar, encompassing both past and present attachments across various locations (Boccagni 2024). This perspective underscores migrants' capacity to sustain connections across national and cultural boundaries, while simultaneously reconfiguring their identities within local contexts.

Complementing the transnational lens, the mobilities paradigm emphasizes the centrality of movement in shaping the identities and social relations attached to sense of belonging (Gustafson 2001; Sheller & Urry 2006; Urry 2007). Mobility extends beyond physical movement, encompassing enacted practice shaped by social, cultural, and political contexts, as well as by the materialities of everyday life (Adey et al. 2014). For migrants, identity is shaped not solely by origins, but also by experiences of mobility and cross-cultural living (Colomer 2017). This perspective disrupts traditional dichotomies of mobility versus stasis by emphasizing the in-between spaces of movement, where belonging is constantly negotiated and redefined (Cresswell 2006, 2011; Hannam, Sheller & Urry 2006). Belonging, in the mobilities perspective, becomes a performative and relational process, marked by the ongoing negotiation of grounding and re-grounding (Savage 2010). Place attachment is thus a dynamic and sensory connection that transcends fixed nodes or locations (Savage 2010). Places are thus understood as 'on the move', reflecting onward mobility that involves constant relocations and reconfigurations of belonging (Colomer 2017; Lindley & Van Hear 2007; Ossman 2013).

In this context, Fortier's (2000) concepts of *rooting* and *routing* illuminate the dual processes of stability and fluidity in belonging. While rooting emphasizes the emotional and cultural attachments that anchor migrants to specific places, routing highlights the processual and transformative aspects of belonging as migrants move across spatial and cultural boundaries. Extending these ideas, Yasin and Galal (2023) emphasize the role of geopolitical and social dynamics in shaping migrants' attachments to place and to mobility. Their work underscores how systemic structures, such as racialized hierarchies and political regimes, intersect with individual practices

of belonging. This resonates with the mobilities turn's emphasis on the entanglement of mobility and immobility, as well as the barriers and constraints that shape migrants' trajectories (Lindley & Van Hear 2007; Ossman 2013).

The lens of *embodied affect* (Papacharissi 2015; Shouse 2005) deepens our analysis by focusing on visceral, bodily sensations. Drawing on a classic body of sociology that made connections between the senses and the social (Dewey 1967 [1887]; James 1983 [1890]; Mead 1929; Simmel 1997), these scholars regard sensations as social phenomena that are foundational to the emotional experiences of place (Pink 2015; Stoller 1989; Waskul & Vannini 2008). Such an analysis thus treats the senses not as passive receptors, but as active agents in constructing social realities. Migrants' affective responses to external cues such as smells, sounds, and movements serve as anchors, bridging their memories and present realities (Desille & Nikielska-Sekula 2023). The senses are also culturally and socially mediated, and thus emerging understandings are embedded in the social and practical contexts in which they are learned (Ingold 2021). Embodied experiences may be particularly critical in contexts of social or racialized marginalization, where belonging is constantly negotiated within unequal power dynamics (Ahmed 2000; Beaumont 2024).

Relatedly, the concept of *affective homemaking* (Boccagni & Baldassar 2015) highlights the sensory and embodied practices through which migrants recreate a sense of home, even in transitory or liminal spaces. Scholars within the field of migration studies have begun to explore the connection between the senses and sense of home and belonging (Hamilton 2017; Boccagni & Vargas-Silver 2021; Webber 2024). Practices such as preparing traditional foods, engaging in culturally familiar rituals, or decorating living spaces with objects that evoke connections to origins (Abbots 2016; Barkley 2024; Blunt 2005; Corrales-Øverlid 2023; Mazumdar & Mazumdar 2016; Svašek 2014) foster emotional ties to people, memories, and aspirations, providing comfort and continuity amid change. Digital technologies may also enable migrants to sustain transnational connections and create virtual spaces of co-presence (Georgiou 2024; Paul 2024). Such technologies facilitate rooting by maintaining ties to home while fostering routing through dynamic global networks.

Expanding on Fortier's insights into the dual processes of rooting and routing, the embodied routines of *place-ballet* (Seamon 2015) offer a tangible way to understand how these dynamics play out in migrants' everyday lives, highlighting the intimate relationship between movement, place, and the construction of belonging. The concept of place-ballet provides a phenomenological understanding of how bodily routines and movements coalesce with specific environments to create attachment and meaning. These routines, whether as simple as a daily commute or a regular routine, or as complex as transnational travel, foster a rhythm of interaction between people, time, and place. For migrants, place-ballet may become a strategy for adapting to new contexts while retaining connections to the past. The concept further elucidates the ways migrants manage emotional and spatial boundaries, linking their embodied routines to broader processes of mobility and belonging.

By integrating the perspectives of transnationality and mobility, our theoretical framework situates belonging as both a rooted and routed process. Migrants' place-ballets and embodied practices offer stability and attachment, while their movements and trajectories redefine their sense of self and home. This duality underscores the performative and affective nature of belonging, illustrating how it is continuously negotiated in both place and movement.

Narratives of transnationality and mobility connect belonging to the relationships between place, movement, and people. Our analysis of in-depth interviews applied a narrative focus and explored place meanings and attachments. Concentrating solely on narrative, however, might have limited emphasis to the representational dimensions of place attachment without acknowledging their embodied facets (Gubrium, Khakurel, and Nalwamba 2025). Therefore, we used mobile methods (Sheller & Urry 2016), merging interviews with a modified participatory ethnographic methodology. Specifically, we designed a three-stage interview sequence to apply ‘methodological flexibility’ (Stilwell & Harman 2021: 1) and to move beyond gathering data on what an experience was ‘like’ to exploring the meanings of experience, as enacted by bodies in action/motion. The overarching goal was to articulate a sensory linkage between the physical and topographic attributes of movement between places and its narrative and affective significance.

Each interview stage explored the nature of the participants’ relationships to the important places in their lives, both in the country of origin and in the country of residence. Interviews focused on the participants’ migration history, their relocation process, and adaptation in Oslo. In the first interview stage, EG conducted a 2-hour ‘life history interview’ with each participant, focusing on the temporal aspects of their lives, and placing emphasis on the past, the present, and imagined future. In the second stage, EG conducted a 2-hour ‘mapping’ interview with each participant, in which they were asked to ‘sketch a map’ of meaningful places throughout their time in Norway to illustrate ‘neutral’ spaces, places of sanctuary where they felt relaxed and welcome, and places that they avoided or where they felt unwelcome. With a focus on visualizing meaningful places, interview questions focused on spatial context and mobility, as well as the ‘whats’ of experience (Lewicka 2011). In stage three, EG conducted a 2-hour ‘walking interview’ with each participant to explore places relevant to the participant and their meanings, and how these had changed over time. Walking interviews enabled focus on the constitutive co-ingredience of people and place, adding new layers of understanding (Casey 2001). We used the exercise of mapping and the motion of walking to elicit and enhance focus on the embodied, affective nature of belonging.

A total of 12 participants were interviewed by EG in 2021–2023. Participants had all migrated as adults (over the age of 18) to Norway from outside the EU and all were between the ages of 19 and 70 years old. Of the 12 participants, 7 took part in the entire, three-stage interview process. The seven represented a diverse group, demographically: four were men and three women; two were from the Middle East, two from Africa, one from Eastern Europe and one from North America; and two were single, one was divorced, and four were married or had live-in partners. Two had children.

As researchers conducting qualitative, multi-method research on belonging and mobility among adult migrants, our positionality inevitably shaped both the research process and the interpretation of the data. We are both scholars with experience in migration research, but also have personal experience of migration, raising families, and living across national and cultural contexts. While we do not share the exact migration trajectories or sociopolitical backgrounds of the participants, our awareness of negotiating belonging across cultural and spatial boundaries sensitized us to the affective dimensions of mobility and place attachment. This

positionality opened avenues for rapport-building between EG and the participants, particularly around shared reflections on spatial dislocation and adaptation, but also required ongoing critical reflection to avoid over-identification and assumption-making. At the same time, EG's role as a researcher embedded within an academic institution in Norway, where policies and public discourse around migration can be both inclusionary and exclusionary, shaped how participants might have perceived her. This duality made it important for her to foreground transparency about the research purpose and to emphasize her interest in amplifying participants' narratives on their own terms.

We carefully considered potential ethical issues throughout the research process. Before the first interview, each participant was fully informed of the project aims and design, and was provided with an informed consent document to sign, with each receiving copies of this information. Participants were notified that their identities would remain confidential and thus all names and identifying details have been removed from the analysis.

Given the affective and sensory focus of the research, EG adopted a flexible and empathetic interview style, allowing participants to guide the conversations, pause when needed, and avoid topics that felt too personal or difficult. Beyond procedural ethics, EG also practiced relational ethics, building trust across the multi-stage process and recognizing participants as co-creators of knowledge. Ultimately, ethics was understood not as a one-time obligation but as an ongoing relational and reflexive process.

Our analysis follows a case study design (Stake 1995), and thus our analytical goal is not to reach data saturation to present generalized results, but instead to demonstrate the diversity of meaning-making related to belonging, embodied affect, place attachment, and mobility (Yin 2009). Of the seven participants going through the three-stage process, we have chosen to present the cases of two: Thierry and James. Demographically, the two participants are similar, but each case is illustrative of different ways in which sense of belonging may emerge.

EG talked to the two participants in 2021, during the second influx of coronavirus disease (COVID) in Norway. The context of COVID and the three-stage design meant that interviews with each participant took place over months, and in some cases, years. Thus, the participants spent time reflecting on the previous interview before participating in the next. This enabled focus on the intangible and sensory-related conversational qualities that are otherwise challenging to explore in a traditional, sit-down research interview (Adey et al. 2014; Rishbeth, Ganji & Vodicka 2018). This was also a time when international travel had been limited at various times and the routines associated with international travel had been disrupted; in this way, the meanings of such routines were therefore underscored. The interview with Thierry took place in Norwegian, the interview with James in English.

For each case, we analyzed and presented findings from all three interview stages. Using a narrative analytical approach (Gubrium & Holstein 2009), we focused on the connections the participants made between life experiences, meaningful places, and feelings of belonging, also including focus on the meaning of place, transnationally. Our analysis also focuses on how belonging attached to mobilities was embodied and affective (Thrift 1996), as well as multiple and differentiated and relational, including whether mobilities depend(ed) on the (im)mobilities of others (Adey et al. 2014; Massey 1993).

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: NEGOTIATING BELONGING THROUGH PLACE ATTACHMENT AND MOBILITY

Broadening the lens beyond a sense of belonging attached to node, place, or home, our findings in the cases of Thierry and James suggest that belonging is not only connected to nodes of attachment, but also occurs on the move, both in the sense of movement from one place to another, as well connected to the affective senses related to habits and routines. The ways in which belonging is negotiated through the senses, homemaking, and daily routines differs according to one's rootedness or routedness.

Thierry, 42, had left a mid-size city in Africa (AC1) in 2000, seeking asylum in Norway due to war and conflict, and during his third semester of a university bachelor's degree. He continued his university studies in the years after moving to Norway, married a Norwegian woman, and they had two children. After moving several times in the Oslo region, he and his family lived in a big apartment in an aspiring middle class (Ljunggren 2017) neighborhood in the city. Thierry worked as a high-level tech consultant, based at an office located in downtown Oslo. His family, work, and social life were 'rooted' in Oslo. He spoke fluent Norwegian at work, home, and during our interviews.

James, 50, had migrated from a sizable city from another African country (AC2) to Norway in 1990 on a student visa to attend college at the Oslo-affiliated branch of an American-owned college. Like Thierry, James married a Norwegian woman, had two children, and developed a good professional career. James, however, had had regular and lengthy visits to AC2 throughout his time in Norway, where he bought his own home and maintained family property. James, his wife, and two children had relocated to AC2, but had eventually returned to Norway, where, after 7 years of marriage, he and his wife divorced. When we talked, James worked as a remote tech consultant. He had resided in a row house in a quaint, coastal Norwegian town south of Oslo for more than two decades. His children were young adults, and his son still resided with him. Throughout his time in Norway, James described a mobile lifestyle and international identity: he commuted to and pursued work in international business settings, and he preferred to speak English at work, home, and during our interviews. He recalled this being disrupted, and a sense of immobility at points over the years, most notably as a newly divorced father of young children in a small, coastal town, and more recently, during a period of COVID-related travel restriction. James was able to reconcile any need for rooted belonging in Norway by his 'routed' and seasonal movement back and forth between AC2 and Norway, as well as by a digitally mediated space for international work and education.

The experiences of Thierry and James reflect the complex interplay between place, mobility, and embodied affect in shaping their sense of belonging in Norway. They arrived in Norway at a time (Thierry in 2000 and James in 1990) during which Norway's immigration regulations were relatively more open than today, when Norway's comprehensive integration system of today was still in its infancy (Eggebo, Hernes & Staver 2023). Their stories focused less on the migration system and how it shaped their sense of belonging, and after many years in Norway, were framed in the now, looking back. Nonetheless, their sense of belonging merged structural with personal and social dimensions. Drawing on the dual perspectives of transnationality and the mobilities paradigm, their narratives show the sensory, relational, and performative dimensions of belonging that is either more rooted (Thierry) or routed (James).

EMBODIED AFFECT: SENSORY DIMENSIONS OF BELONGING

Sensory experiences shaped feelings of belonging for both Thierry and James. Sensory cues evoked powerful memories, connecting them to past experiences while influencing their present perceptions of place.

Thierry's life was firmly rooted in Oslo, yet he felt a dissonance between this 'rootedness' and a feeling of being 'out of place'. Sensory cues evoked both nostalgia and ambivalence as he sought to create distance from certain spaces and memories from his past. He connected specific smells and feelings to an Oslo neighborhood that he had lived in for a short time after arriving in Norway, drawing it on his biographical map. The neighborhood was well known for its high percentage of migrant residents, and he conveyed a hesitation to be associated with its stigmatized reputation when contemplating his future. He described his early ambitions:

I have to have a different life than [the neighborhood he had lived in]. ...
I'm not going to be in Africa, you know [a little laughter]. ... That's not
the goal. ... I'm not going to make it a part of myself, I've got to get into
society. So, I have to get away from that little ghetto. ... Out into real
society.

The smells of certain places, however, nonetheless transported him back to his early days in Norway:

I can sense the smell of the place. And the smell of other nationalities.
The smell of perfume, from other countries ... it can send me back to the
refugee reception center. ... when I'm at Gardermoen [the Oslo airport].
Or it can send me back to the [refugee reception center] if I go to [the
neighborhood], then I can sense it, then I can, right away, smell that smell.

Thierry's senses connected to a sense of belonging to majority Norway were more than just perceived smells or sights associated with places, however. He also related this to a sense of motion in which things moved at a 'really fast' pace during his initial years in Norway: learning Norwegian, getting a university degree, finding work, settling down. It was this constant mobility that enabled him to tactically manage emotions otherwise stirred by a sense of displacement and distance from home in AC1.

It was only after establishing a family and securing a stable career that a novel sense of stillness offered room for Thierry to reflect on the emotions that being rooted in Norway brought forth. Once his perpetual activity and movement decelerated, he began to ponder his existence and experienced a persistent tension between his personal and work life in majority Norwegian society and his identity as a visible minority. When mobility became stillness, Thierry began to recognize a chronic and pervasive emotional unrest that necessitated repair. As he recalled, 'It was only when I had a chance to catch my breath that I began to dwell on my emotions.' In the stillness, he felt the need to put in emotional work to deal with the feeling of being parked in a category of 'other': 'I notice that people are a little scared, and even worse, you're black, like, it's ... almost ... not that it's racism but that they just don't dare, they're afraid.' Amid the stillness of a life rooted in Norway, Thierry confronted numerous challenges to feel he fully belonged within 'bigger' Norwegian society.

James was neither fully rooted in Norway nor in AC2. He noted that he was 'never going to be Norwegian' but also was 'someone who was visiting [AC2]'. His identity and place-based connections were fluid, and he emphasized that he felt most comfortable when working in an 'international' setting. He adhered to an in-betweenness, to the fluidity of an international outlook and identity, and resisted categorization with the essentialized identity of 'being African'. Like Thierry, he distanced himself from the sounds and smells associated with this static identity. He recalled being in university, when housing administrators had grouped him and the other African student housing residents in a specific hallway, stating that 'this was where the African students lived':

...somebody in the student administration thought that it would be a good idea if all the guys from Africa were together [laughter]. I didn't like hanging out with [them] ... the Ghanaians were very loud you know, and you know they were talking at the top of their voices, and they played very loud music. ... I remember going to the student administration and telling this lady that, 'I would like to move to a different *gang* [originally Norwegian, *hallway*]. Because I just can't cope with that noise.' ... the reason why they placed all the African students together was that the Norwegian students were complaining that our food is very strong. [That] we use lots of spices [laughter] ... Which is just nonsense.

James resisted being 'stuck' in a 'noisy' place that was racialized, set apart because his identity was 'too much' for the Norwegian students. To 'be African' was to experience the emotional immobility of segregation.

As with Thierry, James also fondly recalled frenetic motion of daily life during his initial years in Norway, both in the sense of social mobility forward and an intense schedule of constant movement. In contrast to Thierry, however, James' life remained punctuated over the following years by the motion of regular travel abroad and the fluidity of international work settings. James and his wife had initially moved to AC2, moving back to Norway after several years. Still, James remained on the move, with a weekly commute to a job based abroad, in an international office in Northern Europe. Work from this office enabled him to more easily move between Europe and AC2, and to avoid experiencing Norwegian winter weather. As he recalled, '[the office] was ... very central so it was easy to travel to and from AC2. ... the weather was more pleasant for me than the cold in Norway. So, I really liked [it]'. James eventually relocated full-time to the international company location. As he recalled, '[My family] used to come and visit me...the company would sponsor their trip... They would come and visit me and would stay there ... for a long time, two weeks'.

However, circumstances soon changed: James' mobility came to a halt when he lost his job and returned to Norway full time. While working abroad, he had agreed to relocate the family to his wife's small hometown southwest of Oslo. Once back in Norway and after divorcing, he also needed to live in the town to retain partial custody of his children. He recalled the standstill feeling of life during the first winter back in Norway, as a single parent without a driver's license and balancing his employment pursuits with the increased care responsibilities for his two children:

I wasn't driving at the time. I had these two kids ... so it was not so easy. So, I began learning how to drive, and I couldn't begin looking for job in Oslo. A consulting job would require me to go to clients all the time. So [a

public sector job in a small neighboring city] was perfect [little laughter].
...I cycled down to the [train] station, then I took the train. After I got
separated, I began learning how to drive.

James was still commuting, but his movements were more restricted than he had envisioned. He described a sense of discomposure from the daily puzzle of commuting and parenting in Norway. As he noted: 'It was a bit hectic...because I had to head up and down [to and from work] when it was my turn with the kids ...the commute. ... I was going up and down [the coast] ... then just sleeping on the train [laughter]'.

Once James' children were older, he could again rely on the motion of travel to puncture the sense of stillness he felt, especially when winter approached. Walking together on a cold, rainy October day, he described to EG his anticipation of spending the upcoming winter season in AC2, with its more dynamic social interactions and specific tastes:

I just need to be in AC2 at least once in the winter. Just to charge my batteries. I just need to leave. ... [In AC2], you get different impulses, you go out grilling, you meet people, you meet your old friends. [When I come back to Norway] It is quiet, very quiet [laughter]. ...you feel the quiet and it takes some time to get used to the food. ...because the food in AC2 ... tastes different.

RELATIONAL AND ROUTINIZED DIMENSIONS OF BELONGING

Both Thierry and James engaged constructed belonging through sensory and emotional ties to family and community, a sort of affective homemaking (Boccagni & Baldassar 2015). These relational practices reflected their efforts to bridge cultural identities and foster continuity across transnational contexts. Furthermore, in the face of potential alienation, they enacted and negotiated belonging through embodied, everyday practices. Their routines exemplify Seamon's (2015) concept of place-ballet, where repetitive bodily interactions with spaces foster attachment and meaning.

Thierry, rooted in Oslo, described the relational practices that nonetheless enabled him to cultivate a sense of belonging to reduce the emotional turmoil of being set apart from majority Norwegian society. He sent his children to a private French school, linking this to his own parent's practice of sending him to a French Catholic school in his youth: 'It's important that a part of me, and my family, is also present in their upbringing, that it's not lost just because we're here'. The French school would also allow his children to maintain a connection beyond Norway: 'In the end, it was like, you know what, it's about securing my existence. It's about ensuring that my family also becomes part of the whole project. The family project'.

Thierry also described how monthly gatherings with families from AC1 helped his children to develop a stronger future sense of self, noting that the availability of a safe, additional identity would reduce the emotional unease of potential exclusion from majority Norwegian society:

My kids are going to grow up with a [sense of] differentness ... We must ... be able to make that as clear to them as early as possible. ... That they

have something in common [with other children of AC1 migrants]. ... Because what we're experiencing is that the kids who grow in the AC1 community here, they're not Norwegian. ... It's easy for them to lose their balance. ... it's really [about] belonging ... the kids here grow up with a minority feeling, out in the large [majority]. So, either they're losing themselves in the larger [society], or they're able to account for who they are.

Beyond cultivating a relational sense of home in the French migrant and AC1 communities, Thierry also pursued activities and routines that kept him busy; busyness in his daily life was pivotal to experiencing tranquility and averting despair. Along with weekly visits to a private therapist, he began each weekday at 5 am with a workout at a local gym, carving out 'own time' before preparing his children for school:

I get ... time for me, time for, yes, I don't know, time for meditation, time to calm down, time to kind of take some distance from coming back home. And to get back to speed again. Then I really feel like no matter what happens, I've had my time. ... I can think, I can switch off and can really be in my moment. And I think that's really good, because then when I go to work, I'm already quite happy. Then I've really built up one, a kind of buffer.

Through daily and weekly routines, Thierry mended emotional ruptures and gained a sense of control over his life.

Unlike Thierry, whose biographical map depicted a life in and around Oslo, James, with a life and identity deeply entwined with internationalized activities and regular travel to and from AC2, mapped a life that involved regular travel between places, whether an international workplace in Northern Europe, family property in AC2, or an internationalized workplace in Oslo. He recalled a job he had held in Oslo just before COVID: 'I moved around between [my town and Oslo]. ... [my workplace] was very international, I mean it was very balanced, there was no dominant group, people came from all walks of life ... it was a very dynamic group.' In comparison, James described the experience of working at a 'very Norwegian' company:

it is ... bureaucratic ... I think we are just two ... non-Norwegian nationals working in the whole of [the company]. ... The other person was working in the canteen, and she was from Senegal. ... [There was] one dominant culture, 'we are the Vikings, we know what is best for you' [little laughter]. ... so, I left ... I didn't like [it] ... it was like, I work with these guys ... and when you go home you don't call them in the evening.

For James, the Norwegian workplace offered limited interactions in a strongly uniform culture. He contrasted it with his time in a 'global working environment':

it was a very perfect place for me. ... there are some, these guys from Iran, Sri Lanka... there is this network ... that is there. We just communicate with each other. ... each time I would meet you know, sit there and discuss family in the canteen and then we talk about career. ... I find it helpful.

He drew on the fluidity of interactions inside and outside work and the broader possibilities for establishing his identity when describing a sense of content in his professional life.

The 'international workplace' also better enabled James to enact a sense of belonging and comfort through a regular schedule of travel. Earlier in his stay in Norway, this had been commuting to and from a job in an international office in another country. The sense of comfortable mobility had been interrupted due to a rupture in his private life. Yet once his kids were older, he re-established this through regular travel to AC2. He described this routine travel, timing it with the cold season in Norway: '[At the end of] March ... I have a short break ... So, during this time I just take off. Come back maybe the summer when [laughter]and then the spring is just around the corner....'. His travel schedule also was timed so that he was in Norway during its most neighborly season: 'in the summer [my Norwegian neighbors and I] do lots of grilling.... [they] are very friendly. ... [In the winter, I don't see them socially] apart from fireworks on New Years Eve'.

EG interviewed James in 2021, following the first year of COVID. James described how this seasonal rhythm had been disrupted by not being able to easily travel back to AC2 for an entire year, engendering a new sense of discomfort and a strategy for negotiating this:

[It] felt a bit strange. Throughout the summer and then later in the year not being able to go back to AC2 and visit my family, which is something that we do every year. ... It was a bit lonely in the beginning, but then I quickly figured out, there is something that I can do ... I figured out very fast that this is an opportunity for me to begin a master's program... And that has kept my mind off other things.

In this rare stretch of stillness in Norway, James cultivated an international digital network. He described the sense of community this provided:

there are several students from different countries that are taking the online course. ...And...that's my new network. ... that has got me off being lonely and ...and I like it because I am studying, you know talking to all these guys. ...They are from everywhere.

The digital interface enabled James to internationalize at home and move ahead, professionally, fostering a sense of continued movement forward.

DISCUSSION: BELONGING ON THE MOVE

Thierry and James both connected their senses of belonging to actively recalled pasts and envisioned futures. Both described a migration trajectory in which early on, busyness and mobility in the everyday prevented a sense of uncalm that would otherwise be attached to the sense of being 'stuck' in a new and strange setting. The feeling of 'moving around' provided a sense of calm, of belonging. While a sense of calm linked to movement or motion might seem contradictory, as stillness and movement are typically seen as opposites, for Thierry and James, the two were interconnected. Both referred to an embodied, affective 'noise' when describing the events in their lives that had, in Thierry's case more chronically, and in James' temporarily, ruptured their everyday movements and rhythms of progress.

Thierry avoided sounds and smells of the past and focused on the future of children and his well-being through careful control of the present. It was upon fulfilling the prescribed trajectory to formal integration that he began to bear the emotional

burden of feeling he had reached a sort of glass ceiling for belonging ‘here in Oslo’, as an African person rooted in majority Norwegian society. It was precisely at this juncture, with his existence entirely rooted in Norway, that he began to experience a pronounced sense of tension, of being held back from fully fitting in. He attempted, through strong mental and emotional control and a meticulously regulated routine, to reconcile this everyday tension with his goal to feel a sense of emotional security and belonging.

James, on the contrary, actively and routinely orchestrated his routing, through the movement of a commute and the fluidity of work in an international workplace, but also through regular travel to and from AC2. For James, a sense of emotional unrest only surfaced in short periods of immobility when he had not been able to leave town and was required to stay in Norway for longer periods of time. Neither Norway nor AC2 were ‘home’ for James; rather, it was the routineness of movement and travel, the flexibility of an internationalized identity that was his place of comfort.

Thierry and James understood their senses of belonging through embodied affect, narratives, memories, and the daily interplay of mobility and routines, as persons physically in and moving through the world. For both, experiences of (im)mobility manifested in the tension between the need for stability and the desire for movement, as reflected in their narratives of daily routines and transnational connections. Through their nuanced experiences and articulations, they demonstrated an oscillation between ‘here’ and ‘there’ that is the migrant’s embodied and affective experience of belonging, rather than a direct path from one place-based node to another. Their stories magnify both the physicality of this movement as well as the continual nature of this journey.

CONCLUSIONS

Belonging is not solely about establishing rooted attachments in one place, but rather about the movement between places and the embodied, affective processes that accompany both stasis and motion. Building on transnational scholarship that highlights how migrants forge and sustain attachments across multiple localities ([Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004](#)) and on the mobilities paradigm emphasizing the transformative role of everyday and cross-border movement ([Cresswell 2006](#); [Sheller & Urry 2006](#)), these two cases illustrate how embodied affect, expressed through sensory cues such as taste, smell, and movement, shapes sense of belonging in profound ways.

Belonging is furthermore embodied through daily, sometimes mundane routines ([Seamon 2015](#)). The cases show how the negotiation of identity and ‘home’ unfolds in fluid, relational, and often improvisational ways ([Boccagni & Baldassar 2015](#)) as multiple attachments are navigated. By foregrounding the embodied and routinized dimensions of belonging, these findings enrich existing research on the complex interplay of mobility, place, and identity and underscore the value of attending to emotional and sensory dynamics when exploring migrant lives. These findings invite further exploration of how everyday, embodied practices can help reconfigure and expand our understanding of belonging among those living ‘on the move’.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Erika Gubrium  orcid.org/0000-0002-1407-9827

Department of Social Work, Child Welfare and Social Policy, Faculty of Social Sciences, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway

Laia Colomer  orcid.org/0000-0003-3353-8969

Senior Research Fellow, Faculty of Humanities, Pompeu Fabra University, Spain

Gubrium and Colomer
*Nordic Journal of
Migration Research*
DOI: 10.33134/njmr.939

14

REFERENCES

- Abbots, E.J.** 2016. 'Approaches to Food and Migration: Rootedness, Being and Belonging', in J. Klein, and J. L. Watson (eds.), *The Handbook of Food and Anthropology*. pp. 115–113. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474298407.0013>
- Adey, P.** et al. 2014. 'Introduction', in P. Adey. et al. *The Handbook of Mobilities*. London: Routledge, pp. 1–20. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315857572>
- Ahmed, S.** 2000. *Strange encounters: Embodied others in post-coloniality*. Milton Park: Routledge.
- Antonsich, M.** 2010. 'Searching for belonging – An analytical framework', *Geography Compass*, 4(6), pp. 644–659. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2009.00317.x>
- Barkley, L.** 2024. 'The Taste of (Be) Longing: Food, Memory and Futurity among Palestinians in Britain', in M. Banaszkiwicz, and K. Nikielska-Sekuła (eds.), *Cultural Heritage and Mobility from a Multisensory Perspective*. Milton Park: Routledge. pp. 164–177.
- Basch, L., Schiller, N.G. and Blanc, C.S.** 1994. *Nations unbound: Transnational projects, postcolonial predicaments, and deterritorialized nation-states*. Basel: Gordon & Breach Science.
- Beaumont, M.** 2024. *How We Walk: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of the Body*. London: Verso Books.
- Blunt, A.** 2005. *Domicile and diaspora: Anglo-Indian women and the spatial politics of home*. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470712740>
- Boccagni, P.** 2024. 'Transnational Migration and Homemaking', in B.S.A. Yeoh, and F.L. Collins (eds.), *Handbook on transnationalism*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp. 141–154.
- Boccagni, P. and Baldassar, L.** 2015. 'Emotions on the move: Mapping the emergent field of emotion and migration', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 16, pp. 73–80. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2015.06.009>
- Boccagni, P. and Vargas-Silva, C.** 2021. 'Feeling at home across time and place: A study of Ecuadorians in three European cities', *Population, Space and Place*, 27(6), e2431. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2431>
- Casey, E.S.** 2001. 'Between geography and philosophy: What does it mean to be in the place-world?', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 91(4), pp. 683–693. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/0004-5608.00266>
- Castles, S.** (2004). 'The factors that make and unmake migration policies 1', *International migration review*, 38(3), pp. 852–884. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2004.tb00222.x>
- Christensen, A.D. and Jensen, S.Q.** 2011. 'Roots and routes. Migration, belonging and everyday life', *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 1(3), pp. 146–155. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10202-011-0013-1>

Colomer, L. 2017. 'Heritage on the move. Cross-cultural heritage as a response to globalisation, mobilities and multiple migrations', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 23(10), pp. 913–927. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2017.1347890>

Colomer, L. 2020. 'Feeling like at home in airports: Experiences, memories and affects of placeness among Third Culture Kids', *Applied Mobilities*, 5(2), pp. 155–170. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23800127.2018.1436636>

Corrales-Øverlid, A.C. 2023. 'Food as a social weapon: Peruvian immigrant entrepreneurs claiming home, belonging, and distinction in Southern California', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 46(15), pp. 3338–3359. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2193244>

Cresswell, T. 2006. *On the move: Mobility in the modern western world*. London: Taylor & Francis.

Cresswell, T. 2011. *Geographies of mobilities: Practices, spaces, subjects*. London: Routledge.

Desille, A. and Nikielska-Sekuła, K. 2023. 'Multisensory approaches in migration research: Reflections and pathways', *Visual Studies*, 39, pp. 1–18. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2023.2234874>

Dewey, J. 1967 [1887]. *John Dewey: The early works 1882–1898*. Edited by Herbert Schneider. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Enggebø, H., Hernes, V. and Staver, A.B. 2023. 'Do integration requirements undermine egalitarianism?', in A. Dankertsen, and C. Lo (eds.), *The end of Norwegian egalitarianism? Limits and challenges to a cherished idea*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, pp. 102–116. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.18261/9788215059839-23-06>

Favell, A. 2022. *The integration nation: Immigration and colonial power in liberal democracies*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.

Fortier, A. 2000. *Migrant belongings: Memory, space, identity*. Oxford: Berg.

Georgiou, M. 2024. 'Making a Digital Home?', in M.S. Aguirre, and A. Argandoña (eds.), *The Search for Home among Forced Migrants and Refugees: People on the Move*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003473992-4>

Gubrium, E., Khakurel, U. and Nalwamba, L. 2025. 'Immigrant Belonging: Meaning-Making in Three Interview Modalities', in A. Marvasti, and J. Gubrium (eds.), *Interviews as Activated Storytelling: Contexts and Subjectivities*. Milton Park: Routledge.

Gubrium, J.F. and Holstein, J.A. 2009. *Analyzing narrative reality*. London: Sage.

Gustafson, P. 2001. 'Roots and routes: Exploring the relationship between place attachment and mobility', *Environment and Behavior*, 33(5), pp. 667–686. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00139160121973188>

Hamilton, O. 2017. 'Senses of Home', in J. Lloyd, and E. Vasta (eds.), *Reimagining Home in the 21st Century*. Cheltenham: Edgar Elgar, pp. 179–191. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781786432933.00021>

Hannam, K., Sheller, M. and Urry, J. 2006. 'Mobilities, immobilities and moorings', *Mobilities*, 1(1), pp. 1–22. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450100500489189>

Ingold, T. 2021. *Being alive: Essays on movement, knowledge and description*. London: Routledge. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003196679>

James, W. 1983 [1890]. *Principles of psychology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Levitt, P. and Schiller, N.G. 2004. 'Conceptualizing simultaneity: A transnational social field perspective on society', *International Migration Review*, 38(3), pp. 1002–1039. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2004.tb00227.x>

- Lewicka, M.** 2011. 'Place attachment: How far have we come in the last 40 years?', *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 31(3), pp. 207–230. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2010.10.001>
- Lewicka, M.** 2014. 'In Search of Roots', in L.C. Manzo, and P. Devine-Wright, (eds.), *Place Attachment: Advances in Theory, Methods, and Applications*. London: Routledge, pp. 49–60.
- Lindley, A. and van Hear, N.** 2007. *New Europeans on the move: A preliminary review of the onward migration of refugees within the European Union*. Centre on Migration, Policy and Society Working Paper No. 57. Oxford: University of Oxford.
- Ljunggren, J.** (ed.). 2017. *Oslo: ulikhetenes by*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk.
- Massey, D.** (1993). 'Questions of locality', *Geography*, 78(2), pp. 142–149. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20436564.1993.12220547>
- Mazumdar, S. and Mazumdar, S.** 2016. 'Interiors and homemaking in displacement: A study of Vietnamese Americans in Southern California', *Journal of Interior Design*, 41(2), pp. 23–38. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/joid.12069>
- Mead, G.H.** 1929. *The philosophy of the present*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ossman, S.** 2013. *Moving matters. Paths of serial migration*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.
- Papacharissi, Z.** 2015. *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199999736.001.0001>
- Paul, A.** 2024. 'Connecting more than the Origin and Destination: Multinational Migrations and Transnational Ties', in B.S.A. Yeoh, and F.L. Collins (eds.), *Handbook on Transnationalism*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp. 340–354.
- Pink, S.** 2015. *Doing sensory ethnography*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Ltd. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473917057>
- Portes, A., Guarnizo, L.E. and Landholt, P.** 1999. 'The study of transnationalism', *Global Networks*, 1(3), pp. 181–194. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0374.00012>
- Rishbeth, C., Ganji, S. and Vodicka, G.** 2018. 'Ethnographic understandings of ethnically diverse neighbourhoods to inform urban design practice', *Local Environment*, 23(1), pp. 36–53. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2017.1385000>
- Savage, M.** 2010. 'The politics of elective belonging', *Housing, Theory and Society*, 27(2), pp. 115–161. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14036090903434975>
- Schinkel, W.** 2017. *Imagined societies: A critique of immigrant integration in Western Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316424230>
- Seamon, D.** 2015. 'Body-Subject, Time-Space Routines, and Place-Ballets', in A. Buttner, and D. Seamon (eds.), *The Human Experience of Space and Place*. London: Routledge, pp. 148–165.
- Sheller, M. and Urry, J.** 2006. 'The new mobilities paradigm', *Environment and planning A*, 38(2), pp. 207–226. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1068/a37268>
- Sheller, M. and Urry, J.** 2016. 'Mobilizing the new mobilities paradigm', *Applied Mobilities*, 1(1), pp. 10–25. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23800127.2016.1151216>
- Shouse, E.** 2005. 'Feeling, emotion, affect', *M/C Journal* [online], 8(6). <https://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjjournal/article/view/2443>. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2443>
- Simmel, G.** 1997. *Simmel on culture*. Edited by David Frisby and Mike Featherstone. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

- Somers, M.** and **Gibson, G.** 1994. 'Reclaiming the epistemological other: Narrative and the social constitution of identity', in C. Calhoun (ed.) *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, pp. 37–100.
- Stake, R.E.** 1995. *The art of case study research*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Sage.
- Stilwell, P.** and **Harman, K.** 2021. 'Phenomenological research needs to be renewed: Time to integrate enactivism as a flexible resource', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406921995299>
- Stoller, P.** 1989. *The taste of ethnographic things: The senses in anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812203141>
- Svašek, M.** 2014. *Moving subjects, moving objects: Transnationalism, cultural production, and emotions*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Szpunar, P.M.** and **Szpunar, K.K.** 2016. 'Collective future thought: Concept, function, and implications for collective memory studies', *Memory Studies*, 9(4), pp. 376–389. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698015615660>
- Thrift, N.** 1996. *Spatial formations*. London: SAGE. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446222362>
- Urry, J.** 2007. *Mobilities*. London: Polity.
- Waskul, D.D.** and **Vannini, P.** 2008. 'Smell, Odor, and somatic work: Sense-making and sensory management', *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 71(1), pp. 53–71. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/019027250807100107>
- Webber, R.** 2024. 'Experiences of 'sensory space-time compression' in migrant homemaking', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 25(4), pp. 601–619. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2023.2183246>
- Wimmer, A.** and **Glick Schiller, N.** 2002. 'Methodological nationalism and beyond: Nation-state building, migration and the social sciences', *Global Networks*, 2(4), pp. 301–334. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0374.00043>
- Yasin, A.** and **Galal, L.P.** 2023. 'Geopolitics, mobility, and belonging: Exploring intersections in migrant trajectories', *Mobilities*, 18(1), pp. 32–48.
- Yeoh, B.S.A.** and **Collins, F.L.** 2024. 'Introduction', in B.S.A. Yeoh, and F.L. Collins (eds.), *Handbook on Transnationalism*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp. 1–28.
- Yin, R.K.** 2009. *Case study research: Design and methods*. Vol. 5. Newcastle upon Tyne: Sage.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Gubrium, E. and Colomer, L. 2025. Belonging on the Move: A Multi-Method Exploration of Embodied Affect, Place Attachment, and Transnational Mobility in Migrant Lives in Norway. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 15(4): 6, pp. 1–17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.939>

Submitted: 30 October 2024

Accepted: 05 March 2025

Published: 21 May 2025

COPYRIGHT:

© 2025 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons NonCommercial-NoDerivatives Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0), which permits unrestricted distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited, the material is not used for commercial purposes and is not altered in any way. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

Nordic Journal of Migration Research is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press.