

Places of belonging: Rethinking coexistence from oriental barbershops in a Finnish city

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Abstract

This article discusses how migrant businesses actively contribute to the negotiation of everyday coexistence in a Finnish provincial city. It focuses on oriental barbershops to unpack the interplay between place, power, and social imagination. Against the trope of the ethnic business that reproduces assumptions framing migrant activities in terms of community formation, looking at these salons from the perspective of people's existential need for emplacement reveals how the dynamics of belonging and marginalization are experienced, navigated, and contested by the barbers of Tampere. While the identity-centredness in the definition of diversity and the social hierarchies implied by the discourses of integration force them to negotiate their presence from the margins, the barbers also compose counter-narratives of coexistence. Grounded in an aspiration for recognition, their stories cast a social imaginary that, without ignoring difference, shifts its emphasis towards an ethics of mutuality, thus unlocking a pathway to challenge essentialization and inequalities.

Keywords

belonging, coexistence, reciprocity, diversity, migration, place-making, Finland

In the central area of the Finnish city of Tampere, a dozen or so virtually identical oriental barbershops have opened in recent years. All concentrated within a small number of adjacent streets, these places have transformed Tampere's urban landscape and contributed to the growing visibility of a Middle Eastern presence there. A former industrial

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hub, Tampere is now one of Finland's major urban centres and home to around 240,000 people.¹ Although still relatively low,² the number of people in the city with a migrant background has been increasing significantly since the turn of the century. This local trend is embedded in a national growth of migration inflows. In 2001, Finland had 150,000 foreign-born residents; 10 years later, in 2011, this number had grown to 250,000, and in 2019, to around 400,000 (Statistics Finland, 2020). Migrants originating from Middle Eastern countries have strongly contributed to this trend.³ Like elsewhere in Europe, these demographic changes have inspired the development of increasingly elaborate integration policies as well as public discussions about the newly changing nature of the Finnish society, including openly racist and xenophobic stands (e.g. Mudde, 2007: 74–78; Pyrhönen and Wahlbeck, 2018; Wahlbeck, 2004: 8). Paradoxically, while, traditionally, Finland has been a diverse country due to the long-standing presence of Swedish-speaking, Sami, Old Russian, and Roma minorities, it has established an exclusive conception of its national identity (Saukkonen, 2013: 270). This tendency to conceptualize Finland as a culturally homogeneous country has been intimately connected with the nation-building process and the construction of the Nordic welfare state (Keskinen, Skaptadóttir and Toivanen, 2019: 3; Pyrhönen, 2015: 20).

Finnish integration policies share two fundamental components. On the one hand, they protect the principles of diversity, in particular people's right to maintain their language and culture. However, in practice, "the recognition of demographic change and its consequence for policy objectives and practices are seldom found" (Saukkonen, 2013: 286). Existing procedures bear the risk of institutionalizing group identities and do not recognize the plurality of experiences among migrants (Wahlbeck, 2013: 309). These policies also seek to prioritize employability. Job centres (*TE-Toimisto*) and the regional Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (*ELY-Keskus*) have increasingly become the key actors in the integration process. Integration is understood as an individual's journey toward employment, which starts with the realization of a 'personal integration plan' and lasts for a period of 3 to 5 years (interview, ELY-centre, 22 November 2018). The plan normally includes Finnish language classes and, since 2016, a growing number of hours dedicated to career planning and training (interview, ELY-centre, 22 November 2018). Despite considerable efforts at diversifying the integration resources to ensure their accessibility,⁴ this employment-centred approach has not succeeded in preventing a high unemployment rate among migrants (Statistics Finland, 2021).

Confronted with the difficulties of the Finnish labour market, many migrants are pushed into self-employment (Wahlbeck, 2018: 240) or work in what has been described as 'ethnic businesses' (e.g. Wong, 2005; Zhou, 2004), supposedly relying on cultural bonds and kin networks. This shift toward self-employment and the so-called 'ethnic economy' is encouraged by the Finnish institutions (Wahlbeck, 2007: 553) because it reduces the cost of unemployment for the society and symbolically transfers the responsibility of migrants' marginalization to their ability to succeed or not in the private sector (Hjerm, 2004: 752). They also forge an understanding of diversity centred on consumerism, casting a non-threatening image of alterity similar to 'exoticized consumerism' (Schmidt, 2013: 215) or 'boutique multiculturalism' (Fish, 1997: 378). This capital-driven conception of diversity projects senseless images of naturalized and

well-defined cultural or ethnic identities coexisting side by side in the globalized city. However, as Östen Wahlbeck (2004: 103) warns, the emphasis on ethnicity obscures more than it enables understanding of migrants' experiences. To fully grasp the significance of migrant businesses for the people creating and operating them, it seems crucial to resituate their trajectories, thoughts, and concerns at the centre of the focus. Instead of framing the inquiry in terms of pre-assumed categories, I start from empirical observations in oriental barbershops to question the dynamic interplay between the constraints of the migrants' position as outsiders and their efforts to carve a viable place for themselves in the city and the social fabric. How do the oriental barbershops enable migrants to emplace their life in Tampere? What can such places reveal about the negotiation of migrants' everyday inclusion or exclusion? What can be learnt about coexistence from the experiences of these oriental barbers?

To answer these questions, I draw on fieldwork carried out between 2018 and 2020 among migrants from the Middle East in Tampere. Far from the framework of 'gateway cities', the situation in Tampere, a city in the periphery of the main circuits of globalization, encouraged me to look beyond the tropes of transnational migrant entrepreneurs. Building on critiques of the ethnic lens in the study of migrant businesses, I intend to decouple the examination of their position in the city and the social fabric from the notion of diversity, generally understood from the standpoints of distinctive identity categories. Instead, I rely on narratives collected in the oriental barbershops to delve into the interplay between place, power, and belonging that makes up everyday encounters. What emerges from this shift is an existential inquiry of the dynamics shaping migrants' sense of belonging and marginalization, which illuminates how their presence contributes to the renegotiation of togetherness in local urban environments. When taken seriously, migrants' lived experiences and the ways in which they imagine and project their own emplacement offers critical opportunities to rethink how coexistence can be conceptualized as an everyday reality.

After introducing the theoretical and methodological insights informing this study, I first concentrate on the contribution of places like barbershops in migrants' active construction of their attachment to Tampere. Then, I turn towards the power relations that inform my interlocutors' claims of belonging, showing how they are compelled to negotiate their presence from the margins of the society. Finally, I argue that this focus on place-making processes offers an opportunity to examine the entanglement of relationships that makes up the togetherness of life. Against their marginalization, the barbers articulate imaginations of coexistence grounded in an ethics of mutuality rather than on the idea of diversity.

An interpretative ethnography of coexistence

The literature on migrant businesses predominantly focuses on their ethnic or cultural features (Glick Schiller and Çağlar, 2013: 498; Solano, Schutjens and Rath, 2022: 8), even among the critical voices pointing out the reductionism of this tendency (Rath and Kloosterman, 2000: 63; Rath and Schutjens, 2019: 580). This omnipresence of the 'ethnic entrepreneur' in research, policy making, and the collective imagination can be traced

back to the 1970s (Glick Schiller and Çağlar, 2013: 498). Supported by the rise of neoliberalism and the transformation it has generated in the global division of labour on the one hand, and the increase in international migration on the other (Rath and Schutjens, 2019: 579), it emerged in parallel with a public and political concern for ‘integration’ (Rytter, 2019). The people who resettled in the cities of the Global North, establishing businesses to survive in deindustrialized economies, were understood to belong to distinctive cultures, separate from the local populations (Glick Schiller, Çağlar and Guldbrandsen, 2006: 613). It is therefore not surprising that debates on ethnic entrepreneurship and integration both project the same highly racialized vision of homogenous societies transformed by the growing presence of migrants, who, based on their country or region of origin, are assumed to share values, culture, and identity (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002; Rytter, 2019: 685).

Operating within what has been defined as ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002) – the permanence of national frames in the analysis of migration – the trope of the ethnic entrepreneur ultimately reproduces the untold hierarchies that structure the debates on integration (Rytter, 2019: 692) and confine migrants to the margins of the societies in which they live (Korteweg, 2017: 429). It also casts a vision of coexistence based on the notion of diversity, defined as the co-presence of distinctive identity categories, resulting from a migration-induced emergence of communities along ethno-religious, national or cultural features. Even the concept of super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007), introduced to challenge how migration is understood by exposing the rich internal complexity among migrant communities (Kirwan, 2022: 204), suffers from the same ethno-cultural focus (Glick Schiller, Çağlar and Guldbrandsen, 2006: 613; Jaskulowski, 2020: 383; Meissner, 2015: 558) and remains strongly embedded in a migration-centred definition of social diversity (Anthias, 2012: 105).

Against the prevalence of this communal lens, critical voices in anthropology, migration studies, and urban research have shifted the focus toward the situated experiences of migrant emplacement (e.g. Glick Schiller et al., 2006: 627). Arguing that these experiences cannot be grasped only in terms of difference (Anthias, 2012), this critical scholarship has put forward the heuristic value of grounding the understandings of migrant presence in local places (e.g. Fauser and Nijenhuis, 2016; Mayblin, Valentine and Winiarska, 2016) and everydayness (e.g. Fox and Jones, 2013; Glick Schiller and Çağlar, 2013) to circumvent methodological nationalism and the imaginary of diversity it implies. In everyday life-worlds, places are produced by social and spatial relations (Gregorič Bon and Repič, 2016: 1), through subjective and intersubjective experience of location. In that perspective, places are neither fixed nor confined, but delineated by the ongoing movements of life (Ingold, 2011: 33). While the presence of migrant populations alters the landscapes of contemporary cities, it also composes the significations that craft people’s intelligence of locality and coexistence. Drawing on the works of phenomenological thinkers like Gaston Bachelard (1994) and Edward Casey (1993), Annika Lems (2018: 214) shows how migrants’ efforts to invest their surroundings with meaning and overcome their feelings of alienation reveal the importance of their struggle for emplacement and their aspiration to engage with the society in which they live, not from the basis of collective identities but as the topological foundation of their being-in-the-world.

Beyond the imperious material necessity, opening businesses, like restaurants serving familiar food, grocery stores selling the products needed to cook traditional recipes or barbershops where one can engage in recognized forms of sociability, are all part of this process of making sense of one's presence in a local environment and among others. Through their daily practices, their embodied presence, their transnational networks, and the direction they choose for their careers and personal lives, migrant populations materially and symbolically form their surroundings into places of belonging that support their claims of locality, against exclusive and xenophobic discourses. These place-making practices foster ongoing processes of identification and remain embedded in the flow of power relations that organize the negotiation between concurrent claims of autochthony, territorial appropriation, belonging or denial of belonging (Gregorič Bon and Repič, 2016: 14). This also compels us to understand place-making against the backdrop of a wider landscape of politico-historical horizons and power relations that contributes to the definition of what is socially accepted as local and foreign.

Building on these insights, I propose to start from everyday encounters and conversations to explore the interplay between otherness and togetherness in the experiences of people who work and live in Tampere. I intend to illustrate how the construction of a sense of belonging operates through acts of place-making and narratives of coexistence that have to be understood from the standpoint of local hierarchies of power confining migrants to a marginal position. Although I acknowledge the material dimension of place and the economic necessity behind the burgeoning of oriental barbershops in Tampere, I am analytically more interested in their 'social imaginaries' – that is, the ways in which the people working in these salons "imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows" (Taylor, 2004: 23). These imaginaries, I argue, are located at the intersection between place, power, and togetherness that informs how my interlocutors envision coexistence, their 'situated mutuality' (Glick Schiller, 2014: 105) with the majority populations in Tampere. This renewed understanding of coexistence sets aside the image of migrants as essentially different induced by the trope of the ethnic entrepreneur or the idiom of diversity. It puts forward migrants' presence rather than their alienation to explore the tensions and power relations that makes up the life in common in the society. In developing this approach, I draw on empirical observations conducted in four different salons (Table 1), all situated in the central district of the city (*Keskusta*).⁵

In practice, I engaged in person-centred ethnography (Hollan, 2001) with the people working in the barbershops. Throughout my fieldwork, I was able to visit the barbershops frequently and spend time there, although the time I spent in each shop varied. In my observations, I focused on the mundane exchanges between the barbers and the clients or between the employees themselves, and on the numerous discussions between the barbers and their acquaintances who visited the salons for the sole purpose of sociability. During breaks or quiet moments in their working days, I engaged in conversations with the barbers to learn how they envisioned their professional practice, in particular in relation to their life trajectory. We also discussed at length their interactions with the majority populations in Tampere. Occasionally, I conversed with their clients and acquaintances and reflected with them on the meaning of living together in the same city. Having myself

Table 1. Profiles of the main sites of observation.

Main observation sites	Founded in	Owner's pseudonym	Owner's origin	Employees	Other businesses
Barbershop A	2018	Husain	Iraq/Italy	No	No
Barbershop B	2016	Burak	Turkey	1 trainee (migrant background, recruited locally) 1 relative (daughter)	No
Barbershop C	2012	Jalal	Iraq/ Kurdistan	1 trainee (migrant background, recruited locally)	No
Barbershop D	2014	Hakan	Turkey	6 employees (from Turkey) 2 trainees (migrant background, recruited locally)	2 other salons, 1 tattoo studio 1 beauty salon

immigrated to Finland, we often shared our respective experiences, including difficult encounters with racism and racialization. Most of these discussions arose spontaneously, although I had specified my interest in their personal experience of diversity and everyday coexistence at the time of my first visit. My questions and cues accordingly aimed at encouraging their storytelling around these themes, including biographical narratives. We also exchanged information on more mundane subjects, including national and local politics, food, music, and sport. Finally, to complement the material collected in the barbershops, I documented the transforming urban settings in which all these activities unfolded and interviewed city officials as well as personnel at job centres and staff members of Tampere's ELY-centre.

Observations and conversations were written in fieldnotes and examined with an interpretative ethnography approach. Interpretative ethnography, I suggest, provides an adequate tool to argue against understandings of migrant places and coexistence rooted in representations of cultural, ethnic or national diversity. Because it is "both empirical research and a form of critical theoretical practice" (Malkki, 2007: 166), interpretative ethnography allows for a renewed conceptualization of coexistence that originates in a grounded documentation of the everyday realities of migrants' existence and the power relations that affect them. Combining observations with biographical conversations aimed to uncover the negotiations at work in everyday encounters from the experiential perspective of people who actively construct their presence in a society that perceives them as outsiders.

I analyzed the collected material with a framework underlining the narrative form of lived experience (e.g. Bruner, 2004; Ricœur, 1984), focussing on stories that people "use to make sense of – indeed, to act in – their lives" (Somers, 1994: 618). These personal narratives are themselves inserted into 'ontological narratives' (Somers, 1994: 618) of social and interpersonal frameworks that form the politically and historically disputed

backgrounds in which a person's life unfolds. Hence, narratives are crucial in the apprehension of people's perceptions of multiple dimensions of power and belonging. In everyday situations, narratives take various forms and often remain allusive, partial or incomplete. Close attention to these fragments offers a standpoint from which to delve into my interlocutors' interpretations of their presence in the city. Because there is "no other way of describing 'lived time' save in the form of a narrative" (Bruner, 2004: 692), these interpretations can be understood in the double meaning of attributions of signification and performances (Farrugia, 2009: 270) that participate in people's existential struggle for emplacement in everyday encounters.

Forging local attachment

From an outsider's perspective, most of the oriental barbershops in central Tampere look similar. They share similar window and interior design, usually in black and silver, on occasion set off with typically Middle Eastern or Turkish objects like copper kettles or music instruments as well as pictures from the region or Islamic calligraphy. They are commonly equipped with large black leather chairs and almost invariably display the barber's pole. This last element is in itself intriguing as the tricolour sign, traditionally used in Anglophone countries, was seldom found in Finland before the oriental barbershops began springing up. Its use therefore constitutes a transnational reference that does not relate to the migrants' region of origin but more likely to globalized consumption. The standardization of the salons thus relates to a willingness to adapt to globalized practices with the conventions and trends that would allegedly ensure better chances of success. However, behind this apparent uniformity lies a great variety of situations.

Barbershop A, the first salon I visited, belongs to Hussain. In his early thirties, he is from an Italian-Iraqi family. Hussain previously worked as a barber in Italy and the Netherlands before moving to Finland in 2016. In Finland, he worked as an employee for 9 months in a barbershop in the northern town of Tornio. His trajectory resonates with that of at least two other salon owners in central Tampere, all younger people who started as employees in other barbershops, where they were able to learn the tricks of the trade till they decided to open their own business to become 'their own boss', as Hussain put it to me. Behind this formulation emphasizing freedom also looms the harsh economic reality that features a high unemployment rate and poor working conditions. Hussain equipped his salon with great care, importing the chairs and most of his accessories from Italy, where he had trained as a hairdresser and a barber.

Situated 200 m from Hussain's salon, Barbershop B presents a different reality. Burak, its owner, is a Turk national in his fifties. For him, like many others in his situation, becoming a barber was a relatively improvised decision, motivated by the promise of economic success and improved working conditions:

I came to Finland 24 years ago. ...I have been doing many different jobs. ...I worked in a restaurant for years.... But I prefer to be a barber, the workdays are much easier. You end your shift at five, six or seven instead of midnight or two in the morning. You can see your children growing up! (Burak, Barbershop B)

At the time of my visits, Burak was helped by his daughter, who had trained as a hairdresser in Turkey. He also employed a trainee who was from Iraq and who was recruited through the local job centre (*TE-Toimisto*). In contrast, Barbershop C appears to be a pioneer. Its owner, Jalal, an Iraqi Kurd, opened his current salon in 2012. Before that, he had already worked for almost 8 years in a remote district of Tampere, 6 km away from the city centre. Jalal originally gave his salon a Finnish name. At that time, there were hardly any oriental barbershops in Tampere and few, if any, migrants to be seen in the central area of the city. However, Jalal had to adjust to the growing competition and gradually adopted some of the characteristic features of the more recent oriental barbershops using explicitly oriental branding. The most meaningful evolution may have been the introduction of the tag, 'Kurdish barber' (*Kurdilainen Parturi*), on the shop window in reference to his origin.

Located in the same street, Barbershop D offers yet another picture. It is the property of Hakan, a Turkish entrepreneur who owns two other barbershops in the suburban districts of the city, as well as a vast tattoo studio that he opened in 2018,⁶ and a beauty salon he set up in 2021. In contrast to the other salons I visited, Barbershop D employed up to six barbers at the same time. Among those I met, two were from Iraq, one from Kurdistan, and the other four from Turkey. Ali, one of the Iraqis, arrived in Finland in 2015 as a refugee and found this job with the help of *TE-Toimisto*. He used to work as a truck driver in Iraq. The four Turks in Hakan's employ had been in Tampere for much less time – between 6 and 8 months. They did not speak Finnish and were recruited with specific work permits obtained for them by the business owner. Employees thus coming directly from Turkey is an exceptional circumstance in Finland where access to the employment market is strictly regulated and usually prevents the recruitment of people from outside the country, even more so in the case of non-EU citizens. For these young men, professionally trained as barbers in Turkey, being in Tampere bears very provisional meaning. All of them expected to return home at the end of their contract. Meanwhile, they were saving most of what they earned to send remittances back to their families.

Despite the complexity behind the apparently uniform phenomenon, the development of oriental barbershops nonetheless implies a deep alteration of Tampere's landscape. This change echoes a transformation in the structure of opportunity in the city centre after the municipality initiated the construction of a tramway in 2017. Partly because of this development, but also due to a more general trend in real estate, rents for land plots (*tontit*) owned by the municipality, renewed every 50 years, have dramatically increased. The considerable rise in rents this has resulted in, and the disturbances caused by the construction of the tramway, have led to the exit of many existing businesses, enabling newcomers to move into the deserted city centre. In this context, Middle Eastern fast-food restaurants, oriental grocery stores, and barbershops have proliferated. They are concentrated in a few streets in Tampere's city centre, which has come to exemplify the connections between the economic needs that encourage migrants to open their own businesses and the construction of a sense of locality built through consumption practices, ranging from buying halal meat to visiting barber salons.

These businesses have participated in the literal displacement of formerly invisible migrant identities from the margins to the heart of the city. They contribute to the

emergence among the migrants of feelings of familiarity and community, which make up what Hage (1997: 102) calls “the blocks of homely feeling.” Specifically, oriental barbershops provide essential spaces for sociability. Observing their daily routines revealed how much their significance goes beyond their strictly economic function. Throughout the day, the salons were filled with people. Some of them were customers with migrant backgrounds who stayed after having their hair cut, but the majority were the owners’ (or workers’) acquaintances. Sometimes, these visitors formed groups of between three to six people, but many of them came alone. They usually spent a considerable amount of time watching TV, drinking tea or coffee, or simply chatting, especially when there were no or few clients. These sociability practices immediately highlight a difference of usage between ordinary customers and visitors, whether clients or not, who tend to pass much more time in the salons. While the interactions with the former were generally in Finnish or, sometimes, in English, the discussions with the latter usually took place in the barber’s native language. However, seeing this as a simple divide between migrants and locals would be a mistake. Other lines of distinction were observable as well. For one thing, the salons are generally highly gendered places. Although many of them offer their hairdressing services to both women and men, the majority of the clients and almost all the visitors were males, with the exception of relatives. People’s country and region of origin also played a role, as did their age and life trajectory, in particular the time they have been living in Finland:

Burak spends large portion of time with friends who visit the salon, in particular Volkan, a fellow Turk who is running a tiny fast-food restaurant on the other side of the street, marketed as a “Greek restaurant.” With him, they share many attributes: both are Turks, originating from the region of Izmir. Both have been living in Finland for more than 20 years and have Finnish spouses. They also went through similar professional trajectories: working previously as taxi or bus drivers, construction workers, and in fast-food restaurants. “We are both marginals here,” they said. The owner also explained that their experience does not necessarily fit with the ones of the other barbershops in the neighbourhood: “Many of them are younger and have not been in Finland for as long as we do.” (Fieldnotes)

Gender, origin, and generation all played a role in shaping the sociability unfolding in the barbershops I visited, exposing uniting and dividing factors in place-making. For the people working in them, these salons constitute dwelling sites where they can inscribe their everyday presence in the city. They reveal “the intricate connections that exist between material practices and symbolic productions of belonging” (Ehrkamp, 2005: 361). It is precisely this symbolic production of belonging that I intend to unpack in the next two sections.

Negotiating belonging from the margins

The barbers I met grounded the vision of their social existence in an in-between space, constantly combining their perceived difference with claims of locality. They all used in different ways ethnic or cultural invocations as an idiom of collective identification, like

the ‘Kurdish barber’ sign added in the window of Barbershop C illustrates, often displaying self-evident and essentialized understandings of identities. In doing so, they feed into similar social imaginaries as the national integration policies, which ultimately conceive the majority populations as a homogeneous entity. Yet, this mutual production of distinctive identities operates in radically different ways. While self-essentialization is a strategy that may help migrants to face disempowering differentiation such as stigmatization or racialization (Glick Schiller, 2014: 106), the essentialization induced by the language of integration is an integral part of the ‘vocabulary of power’ that creates discrimination and non-belonging in the first place (Rytter, 2019: 692). Adopting an identity lens that sees the social world through ethno-national, religious or cultural categories thus bears the risk of ignoring the unequal power relations in which migrants are forced to negotiate their presence to forge their places of belonging. It also reifies the world into dualities like us/them, local/foreign or identity/alterity, which do not correspond to the messiness and ambivalence of life exposed in ethnographic observations (Jackson, 2019: 20). To understand how people actually move through, exist in, and make sense of difference in their everyday life, it is therefore necessary to take into account the asymmetrical relationships involved in the struggle for place-making.

Against essentializing difference or, rather, ignoring the inequalities it creates in the everyday, I zoom in on the narratives voiced by the barbers I met to expose how power relations cast the ways in which people live difference as an ambivalent, flowing relationship with others. Our exchanges on the topics of difference and identity originally surfaced in connection with their professional activity itself. Barbers generally made the distinction between ‘Finnish’ and ‘Turkish’ or ‘oriental’ ways of cutting hair. Some customers also underlined the difference and were resolute about going to an authentic oriental barber. They talked about how the atmosphere in the salon and the expertise of the barbers were key factors in their choice. Some expressed curiosity about, or even appreciation of, what they termed the ‘culture’ or ‘lifestyle’ of the countries of origin of the workers. However, others voiced their indifference to the origin of the barber or the style of the salon. The attractive prices were one of the main reasons why customers said they visited the salon. One client also explained that, for him, cultural aspects were not important. What brought him there, he said, was the quality of the barber as an individual, adding that he could not assume that all migrants possessed similar skills. Thus, not all customers with a Finnish background framed their encounters with the oriental barbers in terms of cultural difference. However, it is essential to remember that these clients constructed their understanding from the perspective of the majority populations. Even if entering a salon could mean coming to a place where they were not master of all the codes, this deficiency remained largely situational. Barbers, on the other hand, had to make sense of their encounters with the majority populations from their marginal position in the society as a whole. They mostly expressed an ambivalent relation to Finns in general, successively underlining distance and commonalities. In particular, they repeatedly voiced their difference and isolation from the majority populations as well as the racism to which they were subjected:

Cultures are different. It's like planting grapevines. All grow in different soil and the wine tastes differently, but none is better than the other. ...Unfortunately, and I'm sorry to say it, Finns are often racist. I have only one Finnish friend! In other countries like the Netherlands or Germany, it would be different. I'd worked in a restaurant for years, so I should have many friends. But no! ...It also happened to me to be pulled by the police. I was just driving home, without doing anything wrong. But I was stopped because of my appearance. (Burak, Barbershop B)

At the same time, the barbers frequently stressed the similarities between them and the rest of the population. One interaction powerfully exemplified this tendency. While sitting in Barbershop B on an especially calm afternoon, we engaged in a conversation with the owner and a fellow Turk friend of his:

Burak: We, Turks, are very different from the Iraqis and the Syrians, and all the others [migrants from the Middle East]. It's because Turks are Europeans! Turkey, since Atatürk, is a secular, democratic and social republic. We have equality there, especially between men and women.

Volkan: Yes, there're differences between Turkey and Europe, but also many common points. ...For instance, in Finland, the role of women is often put forward and likewise there is a very famous Turkish saying that states that "the paradise lies under the feet of women." ...But still, we are marginals here!

Burak: We're different! ...With the Kurds [owning the oriental grocery in the same street], we have no problems, because we all are migrants...as long as there's no politics. ...But we're different. Turkey is a democratic, secular and social country. And we're not as religious.

While the conversation touches upon the transported cleavage between the Turks and the Kurds, or the societal divide existing in Turkey between secular and religious social imaginaries, the discussion is very much anchored in the context of Finland. Migrants like Burak have to negotiate their belonging to the Finnish society in reference to the 'ontological narratives' (Somers, 1994: 618) that define Finland, and more largely Europe, as a democratic and secular country, in which gender equality is a fundamental value. Their claim to belong is constructed against orientalist prejudices stereotyping Muslim-majority societies as religious, authoritarian, and impaired by discrimination against women. Resorting to these stories, Burak and Volkan adopt 'identities of distance' (Ray, 2017) – definitions of identities that evade the stereotypes associated with their marginalized and racialized position. Here, their intention is to present a non-threatening portrait of their identity, distanced from the dominant images of Muslim migrants. To achieve this objective, the narratives also introduce distinctions between different categories of migrants, based on their countries of origin, as well as their date of arrival in Finland, bearing the risk of reproducing the implicit hierarchies fuelling the dynamics of racialization and exclusion. As Nicole Dezrea Jenkins (2019) has shown in the case of African diasporas in Las Vegas, marginal and racialized identity categories that appear uniform and stable from the perspective of the majority populations are actually internally contested among the

people who occupy them. Similarly, my discussions with the barbers often put forward their desire to be recognized as hard-working people, in contrast to the frequent accusations levelled against migrants:

When I first came to Finland [in 1999], I spent ten months unemployed. I refused not to work. I went to work in a restaurant with one of my friends. So, I needed to get a work-permit. The person in charge gave me an appointment but first, he refused to give me the permit. I got annoyed and said that it was a stupid decision: "I want to work, but you want to pay me to do nothing!" After that, it took only a few days to get my permit. (Jalal, Barbershop C)

Such affirmations of determination and a good work ethic were omnipresent throughout my fieldwork. During my first visit to Barbershop B, Burak even printed out his résumé and gave it to me, carefully detailing the contents of the document. "I also play the violin and four other instruments," he added with a smile. These stories convey the constraints weighing on Jalal and Burak's everyday existence in Tampere. To negotiate their presence requires placing themselves in existing social hierarchies that reject migrants to the margins of the society in the name of cultural as well as political arguments that pervade the debates about integration. On the one hand, the migrants are accused of being a burden on the Finnish welfare state to which, as outsiders, they did not originally contribute. On the other hand, they are blamed for not sharing the norms and values that supposedly built contemporary Finland. Against these two allegations, the barbers I met adopted two interconnected strategies. First, they composed 'identities of distance' to move away from negative differentiation and minimize the perceived cultural gap with the majority populations, even if doing so meant pushing the stigma onto others. They also used their salons as resources to demonstrate both their personal merits and their societal utility. In doing so, they shift the focus from discourses on migrants as a collective entity towards success stories of individual worth (Moroşanu and Fox, 2013: 448). Second, they also construct 'functional belonging' (Hage, 1996: 473), adopting an idiom of service to the wider society as the way to imagine their role in Finland and their relations with the majority populations.

Obligated to negotiate their presence against some of the prejudices that migrants are facing, the barbers composed their identity through narratives that were not stable or undisputed. Far from a clear distinction between locals and migrants, their claims of belonging draw attention to the power relations that organize manifold lines of inclusion and exclusion. In turn, these hierarchies shape people's efforts to make sense of the bonds and boundaries between them and the rest of the society. Documenting these claims hence exposes the complex interplay between place, power, and social imaginaries in the definition of one's belonging. It also illustrates how the migrants' quest for re-emplacement disrupts the meaning of difference, as the last section elucidates.

Narratives of coexistence

In concurrently downplaying and asserting their difference with the majority populations, the migrants construct their belonging not as contained within a bounded community, but

from and in the margins of the Finnish society. This marginalization fundamentally informs migrants' place-making efforts and their aspirations for coexistence, as a particular fieldwork episode exemplifies. In February 2020, a few days before the spread of COVID-19 halted my visits, two barbers shared anecdotes that bore striking resemblance to each other and outlined an understanding of coexistence that supports what [Rosaldo \(1994: 57\)](#), in another conversation around citizenship, defines as "the right to be different...without compromising the right to belong" to the society in which they live:

While we were sitting inside his salon, Burak started to talk about his encounters with racism. This time, he added that his son has been [a] victim of bullying at school because of his foreign background. "Once, he was even beaten up. So, I decided to go and talk to the school's principal. I told him to let me handle this bad situation in my own way. We organized a gathering and offered Turkish food to everybody in the school. We had a great time. People were talking together and asking a lot of questions. After that, nobody ever bullied my son again." He intended to address the problem of racism, but in a way that reflects what he described as his "cultural background." (Fieldnotes)

The very next day, Jalal told me another story with a similar interpretation of the interplay between togetherness and difference:

One day, I was waiting for a friend in front of his building. He wasn't home, so I had to wait. Three young people arrived. Suddenly, one of them started to insult me. I waited [till] he was done. When he stopped, I said: "Do you know me?" "No", he replied. "And do I know you?" He said no again. "Then", I asked, "why are you insulting me?" He answered: "Because all foreigners are idiots! You're all the same! You're all crap!" I looked at him and continued: "So, could I say that all you Finns are the same?" He replied that it wasn't true. Hence, I showed my hand and invited him to do likewise. "Are our hands identical? No! Because you can check all the people in the world, you'd not find two hands alike. What is true, however, is that we're all different!" He was feeling sorry. He said that he used to be racist but would not say anything like that again. ...When I meet people like that, I try to make them learn something. (Jalal, Barbershop C)

In her study of place-making among Somali migrants in Australia, [Lems \(2018:160\)](#) writes that people's sense of emplacement is deeply associated with how they are recognized and heard by others. The emotional relationships people create are essential to their experience of place and belonging. Likewise, Jalal and Burak's stories denote their active efforts to fight reification and alienation. The Finnish integration schemes place their emphasis on the migrants' adaptation to what is perceived as the local way of life. By learning the language and the social codes, the demand is that, ultimately, they preserve an imagined representation of the Finnish society, defined in relation to an ideal of sameness and equality that is in fact grounded in a vision of separate and hierarchized cultural entities. Integration, as it is practised in Finland, remains a one-way process in which the migrants are silenced and asked to adapt. In both stories cited above, however, the situation is inverted, and the migrant protagonists become those who teach Finnish locals

how to understand them, re-placing them on an equal footing, even if only for a moment. These narratives stress that, as migrants, they are more than just passively receiving knowledge from the Finnish institutions and majority populations. Instead, they demand recognition of their active contribution to the social fabric.

Places such as oriental barbershops provide people like Burak and Jalal with material and symbolic grounds to contest the assignation of otherness and shake off the feeling of never being in their proper place. From that perspective, the two stories introduce a shift from an anonymous identity imposed on them toward a sense of personhood that they compose and perform in interactions with the majority populations. This shift, undertaken in and through storytelling, asserts Burak and Jalal's efforts to make sense of their presence in Tampere, "to speak rather than remaining silent, to act rather than remaining passive" (Jackson, 2012: 15). Both intend to be acknowledged as full participants in the interpersonal relations unfolding in the here and now of the places they inhabit. Importantly, their claim for emplacement is not rooted in a negation of difference as such. Burak's anecdote in particular illustrates explicitly how his engagement with the majority populations is accomplished from the standpoint of practices and values entrenched in what he defines as his Turkish heritage. Similarly, the 'Kurdish barber' sign Jalal added on his salon window redefines his place-making efforts. While, several years before, he chose to conceal his origin in the name of his business, the later transformation of the city gave him the opportunity to assert at the same time his difference and his locality. In the narratives, Burak and Jalal's position oscillates between the celebration of their singularity as human beings, and their attachment to collective identities, at the same time outside and from within the Finnish landscape, hence advocating for the recognition of both their difference from and relatedness to the rest of the population.

From the point of view of the migrants' place-making, the two stories interpret a social imaginary relying on a sense of reciprocity – a mutual, two-way encounter between the locals and the migrant protagonists. Far from erasing difference, they put forward the encounter with alterity to signify and stage a mode of coexistence that would establish reciprocal relationships beyond essentialized images. As has been clearly articulated in these two stories, this preoccupation can be read as a reaction to experiences of othering and dehumanization for people whose presence is habitually viewed through the prism of alterity and alienation. "You have to tell that we are not all the same," Burak told me after I shared my project with him during my first visit to his salon. By recounting such anecdotes, he and Jalal invite their audience to reconsider the standpoint from which difference is understood in the dominant discourses on integration in Finland. They talk of situations in which they could also teach the locals how to understand and live alongside them, instead of being limited to learning how to adapt to an alleged Finnish reality. Even more importantly, instead of focussing on the criteria of differentiation, say how to solve a problem that arose at school, they draw attention to the relationships constructed between people living side by side. For them, belonging to and in Tampere is being recognized and heard by the rest of the population. Their claim of locality was not defined by culture or identity, but against the asymmetric relationships imposed on them by the imaginary of integration.

Fundamentally, this suggests a shift from an identity centred around an ethical approach to coexistence. Their stories point to the mutuality inferred in people's joint presence to establish what Hayder Al-Mohammad (2010: 437) defines as "an ethics of the *relationship* or the *with*" (highlights in the original). Building on Jackson's (2005: xiv) insights that being in the world is being with others, Al-Mohammad (2010: 438) insists on the *with of being*. It implies that our attention should not concentrate exclusively on the issue of coexistence in terms of collective identities, whether based on ethnicity, religion, national origin or any other, but also think *how* coexistence is lived (Al-Mohammad, 2010: 436). Whereas thinking social relationships in terms of identities bears the risk of essentialization, what lies at the heart of Burak and Jalal's narratives is a reciprocal dialogue that is built on an emplaced mutuality. This is not to say, like Bruno Latour (2007), that only relations and networks matter. Here, the focus lies in the togetherness implied in the human experience of being and how my two interlocutors wish to make themselves intelligible within these relationships. They insist on people's joint presence and the encounter with difference as a way to escape prejudices and marginalization. It is a call for empathy, the creation of a bond with alterity, not seen through abstract categories, but embodied in human beings who can be met and discovered. Ultimately, this encourages thinking of existence and coexistence beyond cultural, ethnic, religious or national identities, and following Emmanuel Levinas' (1998) invitation to bypass the metaphysics of being with all the risks of determinism and oppression that it entails to focus on how we could live our shared human presence in the places we inhabit. This relational understanding centred on togetherness and commonality opens imaginaries that do not silence difference but rather point at the power hierarchies at the heart of inequalities and exclusion to explore coexistence in complex societies away from the equally exclusive paths of universalism and essentialization in policy making.

Conclusions

Diversity and coexistence are generally considered from a perspective inspired by methodological nationalism that highlights group-based understandings of identity and belonging. This is particularly obvious in how integration policies have been designed and implemented in Finland. These conceptualizations fail to grasp fully the complexity of the negotiations that shape people's experience of living together. In this article, I started from places of local attachment like oriental barbershops as a strategy to capture how people move through, exist in, and make sense of difference in their everyday. Transforming the local landscape, these salons materialize migrants' presence in and contribution to the city. They provide the people working in them with a sense of familiarity and comfort as well as, more specifically, hopes and prospects for their unfolding life in Tampere. They also create material and symbolic grounds to engage with the majority populations, exposing the contested nature of the distinction between identity and alterity.

The narratives of place-making voiced in the barbershops I visited illuminate how people try to escape their marginalization. Confronted with 'disempowering differentiation' (Glick Schiller, 2014: 106), they do not just contest the prejudices they face by

adopting identities of distance. They also actively promote a social imaginary that does not ignore their difference but puts its emphasis elsewhere, in a reciprocal relationship they aspire to achieve. In this perspective, the coexistence they imagine is not limited to the interaction between cultures or identities. It is grounded in an ethical standpoint that highlights people's joint presence. However, limited or temporary, the sense of mutuality that my interlocutors composed offers a meaningful lens through which we can conceptualize coexistence. Against contemporary integration regimes predominantly constructed against the backdrop of a so-called national culture that lock people in assigned identities and places, it seems crucial to rethink coexistence through an ethics of relationships. In that way, it would be possible to move away from the representation of societies as the emplaced cohabitation between pre-constituted identity categories and concentrate on how coexistence is negotiated locally as a lived reality through ever-coming-into-being temporary settlements that make living with one another possible amidst differences and inequalities.

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Notes

1. Statistics, City of Tampere. Available at: <https://www.tampere.fi/en/city-of-tampere/information-on-tampere.html> (accessed 16 November 2022).
2. Around 7.5% of Tampere's population has a migrant background, which is lower than in the two other main urban areas in Finland, around Helsinki and Turku. However, this share reaches 20% in parts of the city.

3. Among them, Iraqis constitute a majority (3200 in 2000 and 19,000 in 2019), along with Syrians (192 in 2000 and 6700 in 2019) and Turks (2150 in 2000 and 8150 in 2019). In terms of native language, in 2020, there were 34,282 Arabic speakers and 15,368 Kurdish speakers in Finland ([Statistics Finland, 2020](#)).
4. For example, in the Tampere region, all integration materials are available in up to 15 languages (interview, ELY-centre, 22 November 2018).
5. To preserve the anonymity of my interlocutors, I have used pseudonyms for all of them. Likewise, I have not reproduced the names of the barbershops and I have omitted or altered some identifiable details.
6. This studio is situated in the city centre and adopts a name that bears clear reference to a Middle Eastern country.

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