"Resourceful informal networks and the processes of feeling at home: the case of Brazilians in Berlin"

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Introduction

This article discusses the production of semi-public virtual spaces as a prolongation of urban environments (Brighenti 2010), exploring how international immigrants may use, appropriate and articulate both their virtual and personal networks in the process of home-making (as defined by Duyvendak 2011), as a part of the migratory process.

Migratory networks are a specific type of social network that articulate the personal networks of the actors involved, organized around the common purpose of migrating and associated to social, economical, political, symbolic and affective factors. The participation in different social networks and the way how social actors use them in different situations mediate the access to different structures of opportunity related to the migratory process.

A considerable number of researches demonstrate how social networks play an important role in the migratory processes. Studies on the subject have demonstrated how kinship, friendship and community relationships affect the migratory processes (see Massey & Espinosa 1997; Portes 1995; Tilly 1990; Boyd 1989; Massey et. al. 1987). Of particular interest for this study though, are the possible consequences of the use of the internet for the migratory processes (see Hiller & Franz 2004; Parham 2004; Van den Bos & Nell 2006; Diminescu 2008; Ros 2010; Komito 2011).

The widespread use of the internet increased people's access to all sort of migratory mediators, allowing those who wish to migrate to utilize other sources of information and assistance than family and community networks (Zell & Skop 2011). Dekker & Engbersen (2014) argue that social media, more than just new channels of communication in the migratory networks, are in fact transforming these networks and, therefore, facilitating migration. They allow immigrants to maintain strong ties with family and friends, to mobilize weak ties that are important to organize the processes of migration and integration, and to access an infrastructure constituted by latent ties that can can be easily activated, constituting an abundant source of discrete and unofficial information from people who have already migrated (Ibid.).

There are evidences that migratory flows are becoming more complex and diversified, composed by different types of immigrants that do not fit in the typical labor migration (King 2002). As migratory processes become more complex, new patterns of sociability that do not fit to the "traditional" migratory network models are emerging. Through the internet, immigrants build new forms of conviviality online and offline, playing an important role in their sociability and in their ability to mobilize resources through their social networks.

The possibilities afforded by the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) enable immigrants to forge transnational social spaces marked by collaborative and frequently ephemeral interactions. The variety of media technologies available enable the emergence of a situation of polymedia, that is, an emerging environment of communicative opportunities that functions as an integrated structure, in which the media mediates the relationships as well as the other way around (Madianou & Miller 2013).

The participation in different social networks and the way in which individuals use them in diverse situations mediate their access to different structures of opportunity related to the migratory process, influencing their home-making process. Drawing on the reflections of Briguenti (2010) about the material and immaterial being two irreducible yet intertwined layers of the social sphere, this study points to how the networks of immigrants and their home-making practices are extended and articulated through social media, a process that, although not limited to the virtual space, can be grasped by the investigation of the interactions that happen in virtual communities of immigrants.

Drawing on illustrative examples from an ongoing participant observation being held in a virtual community of Brazilian immigrants in Berlin, this study will articulate some current theoretical discussions on social networks, migration, transnationalism, prolongation of territories and feelings of home. The idea is to contribute to the emerging field that problematises the production of space, focusing on the semi-public virtual spaces, concentrated on the articulation of networks through virtual communities and the access to resources. Considering that, the article intends to

contribute as well for the comprehension of the mobilization of resources necessary for immigrants to make the city they live in work for them, and to enhance their feelings of home. The discussion follows within the theoretical framework of relational ontology and grounds an empirical research about the new facets of transnational migratory networks of Brazilians in Berlin.

The first part of the article discusses the relations between the use of social media and possible consequences for the migratory process. The second part of this article will explore how immigrant practices that are mediated by the internet can be better comprehended through Brighenti's argument about the new media as prolongations of the urban environment and through Duyvendak's discussion about home-making practices. The third part will deal with the specific case of a virtual community of Brazilian immigrants in Berlin.

Migration and online social networks

Social media created a deterritorialized social space, therefore facilitating the communication between geographically disperse people that are still part of a migratory network (Dekker & Engbersen 2014). Through them, users can find people with whom they have lost contact or even develop new relations (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007). The development of the internet as a social medium allowed that communications are not restricted to dialogues between two individuals, therefore the social media have made possible for their users to access a wider range of individuals with whom they may establish weak ties (Haythornthwaite 2002; Miyatta et al. 2005).

As social networking sites organized around personal contacts and social media organized around communities of interest converge and overlap each other, they facilitate the articulation of different kinds of activities (Hiller & Franz 2004). Once established, social media offer a structure that allows individuals to selectively participate in communities of interest that don't require that their users know each other previously (Boyd & Ellison 2008; Haythornthwaite 2005; Wellman 2001).

According to Haythornthwaite (2002), social media become an infrastructure of latent ties that can be activated by their users, establishing a base for individuals that

don't know each other to develop weak ties and even reinforce them (Haythornthwaite 2002).

Such characteristics and potentialities are of extreme significance for the people involved directly or indirectly in migratory processes. The new developments and greater accessibility of communication and transport facilities increasingly allow immigrants to maintain relations and interests transnationally (Vertovec 2002). The contemporary migratory networks allow a growing number of people to be simultaneously involved in two or more places at the same time (de Haas 2006; Dekker & Siegel 2013).

Immigrants build transnational social fields that connect their country of origin and other locations in which they establish themselves, acting, taking decisions and developing their identities while immerse within these social networks (Schiller et al. 1992; Levitt & Jaworsky 2007). The emergency of transnational identities became a new aspect that influences the traditional patterns of migration and integration, assimilation and diversity in the receptor societies, so that it is becoming more and more common, for example, the persistence of ethnic or national identity between immigrants and the maintenance and even creation of social contacts between countries (Bates & Komito 2012).

According to Portes (1997), individuals that participate in these networks move more easily between different cultures, frequently speaking two or more languages and maintaining economic, political and cultural interests in more than one country. This presence does not need to be physical, as Ros (2010) points out when she observes that the emergence of the Web 2.0 has opened new digital spaces that can be considered to be social spaces that facilitate processes of transnationalism.

Madianou & Miller (2013), based on a comparative ethnography of transnational Phillippine and Caribbean families, argue that these people use the new media not only as different available technologies for interpersonal communication, but draw on them as a communicative environment of possibilities, which the authors call polymedia. This concept changes the focus on the technical limitations of each particular communication medium for the acknowledgment that most users use a

variety of different medias as an integrated environment and for how they are chosen according to the communicative intention, as well as for the possible social, emotional and moral consequences of using each one of them, radically transforming the migratory experience (Ibid.).

Examples of this new reality date back to the end of the 1990s, when a study about immigrant families found that those who adopted email reported a significant increase in communication frequency at distance with relatives (Wilding 2006). Brekke (2008), in her study about young refugees in Norway, draw attention to the importance of the internet in the maintenance of social relations, realizing that through its use these young people were now not so dependent of finding friends and developing social networks in the place they live, since they considered their online friends to be just as adequate as people physically present. This way, the virtual social networks decreases the feeling of loneliness and the emotional burden of the immigrant situation, thus diminishing the necessity to search for friendship and to integrate to the country of destiny (Komito 2011).

Virtual social networks are often channels of social support through weak ties. Ye (2006) investigated how networks of chinese students that migrated to the United States offered online social support to their members. Chen & Choi (2011) affirms that the computer mediated social support is becoming an efficient complement to offline social support of immigrants. These authors observed how there was a growing number of chinese immigrants located in Singapore that frequently used the internet in order to ask or offer social support to one another, for example, exchange of information, advice or encouragement (Ibid.). Dekker & Engbersen (2014) comment that, although virtual social networks are commonly constituted by weak ties, immigrants' strong ties with people in their country of origin are important sources of resources for their establishment abroad that can be mobilized through these new communication channels opened by social media.

Komito (2011) found that social media can decelerate the integration of immigrants, through the maintenance of social connections that were established before migration, helping to sustain personal communities at distance. Nonetheless,

he observes that, at the same time, they can encourage immigrant mobility from a country to another precisely because of the increasing possibility to stay connected. This way, social media is apparently making chain migration easier, due to increment in the number of friends and relations that can be found and established in another country and that may be willing to offer some kind of assistance (Ibid.).

Lampe, Ellison and Steinfield (2006) found that users of the social networking site Facebook use it mainly to build links with people who they already have met offline, being less likely to use it in order to establish new connections. These conclusions point to an important potential of social media to promote virtual segregation of immigrants in relation to the society in which they are living. However, Aretxabala & Riezu (2012) present a theoretical argument in the opposite direction, proposing that ethnic solidarity, more common and crucial in the first stages of the migratory process, can in fact form the basis for immigrants to develop better connections with the receptor society. Developing upon Putnam's conceptualization of social capital (2000), they argue that as long as the bonding social capital is adequately followed by bridging social capital, that facilitate the relations between different communities and the receptor society, and by linking social capital, that allows social and political participation, there are no great obstacles to integration.

In this sense, Elias and Lemish (2009) conducted a research with 70 immigrant teenagers from the former Soviet Union that were living in Israel and concluded that, although the use of the internet for communication contributed to the reinforcement of a strong Russian identity, this was not always in contradiction with the process of integration, sometimes even representing a powerful resource for young immigrants to establish themselves and adjust to the new society.

McGregor & Siegel (2013) suggest that social media can perform a similar role to the one that previous media did before, as a useful way of getting information about the receptor society. Redecker, Haché & Centeno (2010) highlight the potential of information and communication technologies in assisting families of immigrants to overcome feelings of isolation while: making useful information available for new immigrants; allowing the exploration of their culture as well as of the cultural practices

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of the country of destination; providing opportunities for learning, especially in relation to language acquisition and; promoting academic integration for young immigrants. Thus, since the studies that explore transnationalism have been demonstrating that the processes of integration and transnational engagement are not mutually exclusive (Erdal & Oeppen 2013; Dekker & Siegel 2013), it is possible to say that social media is presents great opportunities for research, in terms of their role in the facilitation of both processes is becoming increasingly evident (McGregor & Siegel 2013).

It is being acknowledged, in the last years, how virtual social networks can transform the way people relate to space and place, especially for the immigrants (Marchandise 2012). The internet enabled the emergence of a transnational public sphere that promotes and influences the creation and development of diasporic identities (Crush et al. 2012) that express and reinforce themselves through it. The expansion of the Web 2.0, through the growing number of websites managed by individuals with no expertise in communication technologies, as well as of the platforms for online social networks, have influenced diaspora communities by significantly incrementing the opportunities for immigrant communities to organize themselves through the internet. Within this context, Diminescu (2012) talks about "e-diasporas" as collectives of immigrants that are mainly active and organized through the internet, whose practices are at the same time those of a community although their interactions are optimized through digital exchange, this way acting both as online and offline entities.

Virtual social networks, prolongations of the urban environment and feelings of home

New Media and the Prolongations of Urban Environment

Social media is not only about quasi-anonymous relationships around common interests or frivolous communications that are limited to the online social space. Similar to the now accepted idea that online communities and relationships are part of

everyday life, complementing social interactions that happen offline (see Wellman 2001; Bates & Komito 2012; Boaes, et al. 2006; Lenhart, et al 2007), Brighenti (2010) brings us the idea of new media as prolongations of urban environments. He argues against the notion that the city is opposed to the media, as if the real urban space would only be defined by immediacy, but instead considers that it is a fundamental part of the public realm. In his argument, the social sphere is composed of two layers or levels, the material and the immaterial, that are unfinished in themselves and porous to each other, so that exchanges constantly occur between them, either symbolically bridged or practically and tacitly articulated.

Brighenti (2012) develops the notion of territory, understanding it not as an object or as a space, but as an act. Territories are imagined, relational and materially processual entities that people make face-to-face with others. As practices, they exist in the tension between the material and the immaterial, sets of repetitions and differences that span various environments, bridging spatial and temporal dispersals that maintain people involved in social relations.

Drawing on Lofland's (1998) work, who distinguishes these social territories as three realms of life, the private, the parochial and the public, Brighenti (2010) observes that physical spaces may become any of them depending on the types of social relationships that are performed there. The social territories or interaction regimes in urban spaces, although materially based, cannot be reduced to that, since its social components and the interactions they create also define them.

Technology, particularly the increasing embedding of ICTs in everyday life and urban spaces plays a pivotal role in defining and reshaping the balance between materiality and immateriality, as media functions as devices to create and edit both spaces and social relationships. The social and the technological, then, constitute two poles or territorial modes that co-determinate each other, presenting zones of indistinction between these two domains.

The prolongations between the two material and immaterial layers of the social sphere define a field of visibility that is not exclusive of neither of them, through which people introduce, establish and negotiate thresholds that either join interpersonal

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territories together or separate them. The layering and mixing of different types of social territories produces the urban environment. New media, as techno-social prolongations of the visibilities and territories they operate, transform the constitution of the urban public realm.

Media, then, is considered as an integral part of the infrastructure of environmental prolongations, and users are conceptualized as poles of series of prolongations that model social territories, constituting thresholds in the visibility field. The new media opens up a set of affordances that can be incorporated into social territories, influencing the degree of complexity assumed by the relations between the social territories of the public, the parochial and the private.

In sum, new media connects information, people, places and events synchronically, so that the territories constituted by prolongations become hybrid material-cum-immaterial constructs that are part of a whole. In Brighenti's words:

> "Each locale is porous because it prolongs towards an elsewhere which, although not present in the here-and-now of the locale, becomes part of a single plenum (Garfinkel, 2002). Objects, actors, events, practices and other concatenations not present in the here-and-now of the locale are important and even crucial components of the plenum. Processes of import and export come about essentially through the media, which act as bridges, corridors or thresholds that traverse the plenum in multiple directions and connect the various here-and-nows. Portions of elsewhere and at-other-times are constantly imported into the locale, just as portions of the here-and-now are constantly exported, projected towards somewhere-else and at-other-times." (Brighenti 2012)

Coming back to the specific immigrant issue, Brighenti's reflections help us to comprehend immigrant online communities. As users of new media are simultaneously involved in manifold interactions of different kinds that prolong into each other, these communities can be seen not only as a medium through which people can communicate and establish connections easily, but also as prolongations of their social territories, opening the possibility of participating in different urban environments and making sense of the place they live through the experiences of others.

Also, immigrant online communities, instead of constituting a different mediated social space apart from the "real" world, are actually the reflection of what happens offline, and at the same time have the potential of shaping the social territories that converge through them.

That said, I argue that productions of semi-public virtual spaces as prolongations of the urban environment have a crucial role in the home-making process of immigrants. Since online communities have the potential of bridging different social territories of users of new media, they are not only vehicles of social support and exchange of information, but also an important tool for immigrants to feel more at home far from their homeland.

Feelings of home

Home is a tricky concept, for it is, at the same time, familiar to everyone and yet people may attribute very different meanings to what they feel like home, based on their own experiences and understandings about it, especially in an era of global movement of people, goods and culture where "places have become less attachable […] while people have become less attaching" (Duyvendak, 2011: 24). Duyvendak (2011) summarizes the debates over the role of place and place attachment by distinguishing between universalist and particularist propositions. Both present negative and positive prospects about it. The universalists argue either that place attachment is no longer possible or, on the contrary, that it is necessary. In turn, particularists claim that people either feel the need to attach themselves or that they elect to belong to some places. Duyvendak (2011) then develops the argument that people can adopt four possible strategies to feel at home: the absence of strategy, which means being lost; embracing their placelessness in the generic (chronically mobile); restricting home to their own dwelling (defensive localists) and; being able to feel at home in different places (elective belongers). These strategies are adopted either by the individual or collectively in different spheres that range from the household to the nation-state and with different meanings.

Drawing on Portes and Smith (2001) discussion about the multiple classification systems adopted by different scholar around the meanings of home, Duyvendak (2011) developed a typology of the feelings of home: familiarity, haven and heaven. The first one, familiarity, emphasizes the knowledge of a place, which is a precondition for the next two features. It may not be a positive feeling, since one may not necessarily like a

very familiar place in which one lives (Blokland 2008). The second one, experiencing home as haven, regards feelings of safety, security and privacy that are commonly related to the micro level of the house, and is always viewed as a positive and comfortable experience. The last one, home as heaven, refers to public locations where one can collectively be and express themselves. Home, in this sense, is more outward oriented and symbolic, a material and/or a symbolic place where people can develop a collective identity and feel connected with others through shared histories. In this sense, social interactions play an important role in the sense of home. It exceeds the limits of the private house, extending the concept of home so that it includes larger public places like, neighborhoods, cities, regions and nation states, but also group memberships. Duyvendak (2011) observes that, "whether experienced as haven or heaven, feeling at home is a highly selective emotion: we don't feel at home everywhere, or with everybody. Feeling at home seems to entail including some and excluding many" (pp.38-39).

Home is then, not only an individual feeling, since it also develops from the relationships established with other people, be them family, neighbours or even country fellowmen. This implies that home is not only territorially, but also socially and symbolically defined. Home can be a material or a symbolic place where people have strong social, psychological and emotional attachments. Feeling at home is a plural and multi-layered sentiment, and the meaning and strategy adopted will dramatically vary according not only to the individual position as well as to structural forces beyond oneself's power of action.

This is especially important for international immigrants, as the dislocation to a foreign country can have deep effects on how the individual experiences and thinks about home. Also, all the changes implicated in the process of migration often imply in changing the adopted strategy to feel at home and the meaning the new home may have. Duyvendak reflections on the feelings of home, belonging and home-making practices are also a valuable contribution to understand immigrant online communities because it fits but also complements the accepted idea that, as discussed in the first section of this article, they facilitate migration and mobility by diminishing the costs

and risks of this enterprise. People may "feel more at home in the in the virtual world of their laptops" than where they are (Duyvendak 2011: 36).

It may also make it easier to find things that make people feel more at home in the new city, such as stores with products similar to what they were used to consume in their country of origin, cultural events, people to make friends or just to hang out, and different forms of social support, from the exchange of information to "real" help like furniture transportation when moving from a house to another, fixing some house equipments or getting "offline" help from other country fellowmen such as presently assisting someone in a bureaucratic office. All these possibilities may, of course, combine with one another. They can also contribute for the people who are part of these networks to better relate with the city they live in, to better know and learn about it and, therefore, make it easier to feel more at home (to belong) to this foreign land.

Case: Virtual community of Brazilian immigrants in Berlin

During the first semester of 2015, I performed a participant observation in a virtual community of immigrants directed to Brazilians who live or wish to move to Berlin. This case is particularly relevant for the discussion developed in this article since this community is focused on a specific city, enhancing the possibility that its members engage in all sorts of interactions, from ephemeral exchanges of information and face-to-face encounters to the creation of durable ties and collaborative enterprises. It fosters new forms of conviviality and the flow of resources between its members, thus having the potential of smoothing difficulties faced during the migratory process. The description below is a result of this observation, in which I examined the different forms of interaction that took place within the mentioned period.

The increasing number of Brazilians who migrate to Berlin is constituting an ever greater community of immigrants that, although very heterogeneous in terms of immigrants' profiles and trajectories, is becoming a visible part of the city landscape. From permanent immigrants that come through work or through family union, to temporary students and even long-term tourists, the variety of this population is, in

part, compensated by a common sense of national and cultural identity, as well as the shared situation of being an immigrant, that facilitate the connections between them.

Since the Brazilian immigrant community in Berlin is so diverse, it is not rare that many of these individuals do not have much in common besides their common language and country of origin. Even so, one feature that is helping this population to connect is the emergence of virtual communities directed towards Brazilian immigrants in Germany and, especially, a Facebook closed group called "Brasileiros em Berlim" (Brazilians in Berlin).

Created in 2011 in order "to group Brazilians of all nations that are, were or will be in Berlin", this group now has around 6.500 members (in July of 2014 it had around 3.200 members). Supported by Web 2.0 technologies that allows the creation and archive of collaborative content by its users, the group is composed of innumerous searchable "posts" and "comments" created by its members, whose content includes offering and asking for all kinds of assistance and social support, advertisement of Brazilian related products, services and events, and the organization of informal meetings for leisure purposes.

Some common types of publication are the advertisement of cultural and festive events related to the Brazilian culture (gastronomy, music, dance, parties, art expositions), stores and services that offer Brazilian products and/or provide services performed by Brazilians or directed to Brazilians. Some of the services offered through the site are informal economic activities like house cleaning, babysitting, cooking/delivering food and home moving. These workers are frequently immigrants who were not able to enter the formal job market, either because of job competition or due to migratory regulations that restrict working possibilities. Also related, there are publications of members who are, on the contrary, asking for these services and even offering positions for Brazilian workers, from regular jobs to temporary services.

Another common type of publication is the asking for assistance. Often, these publications are asking for information about local bureaucracy, labour market, finance, instruction, money transfer from/to Brazil, law and health services or general aspects of the city. Part of these publications are not only asking for information, but

also explicitly asking for advice on specific situations that involve these issues, which sometimes are very urgent complications such as health problems, debt or risk of deportation. Within these discussions, other members usually contribute by sharing their knowledge about the topic, sometimes inviting the person to start a private conversation outside the group. Some people explicitly ask for help in person, for example if someone can accompany them in a bureaucratic office when they are still struggling with the German language and, not rarely, someone volunteers to assist them, either presently or by phone, providing real-time translation.

Other forms of collaboration include buying/selling used objects, offering/asking for donations of food and used objects, informal money exchange, sharing real-time information and tips about what is happening in the city (for example, transport system problems or open-air events) and advertising blogs/videos about living abroad and learning German.

Many of the questions posted by members come from individuals who are either willing to migrate or that already find themselves in the course of the migratory process although they have not still moved from Brazil (or elsewhere). Through the community, these people ask mainly for general and specific information and opinions about the city, legal issues, culture, where is the best and/or cheaper place to live (according to individual criteria), how to find jobs, which the are best and/or cheaper language schools and where or how to find Brazilian products, services offered by Brazilians or Portuguese speaking professionals like lawyers and doctors. Another common situation is characterized by newcomers asking for advices on where to socialize and/or inviting other people to join in a casual meeting, like drinking beer, playing soccer or going to the park, in order to know people and make friends.

Some of the members contribute more often than others, although this may change over time. There are members who interact with others more frequently, not only by asking or offering assistance, but also by casual conversations that happen within another discussion. In this case, it is possible to recognize that some members share a higher degree of familiarity and even friendship, which becomes evident in the way they talk to one another. There are also those members who are not actively

participant, although sometimes post or comment something in the group, mainly asking for some kind of information or assistance, advertising an event or just sharing some information they thought may be relevant for the group. They use the group intermittently, establishing brief interactions that are most likely to limit themselves to that situation.

Finally, there are those who rarely or never actively participate in the discussions, although passively consume the daily flow of content that is produced in the community. Since it is possible to search the history of the group's content and there is even a special session of archives of most commonly asked information. In many situations, there is no need to interact with others through the community in order to learn about the city.

Through participating in the online community, people are more likely to interact online and offline with other Brazilians, making it easier to overcome the feeling of isolation that is almost inherent to the immigrant situation, due to their relative unfamiliarity to the new environment, especially in the first stages of the migratory process and also because of the cultural differences that are not always surmountable.

Many discussions are developed around the Brazilian national identity, becoming evident through comments expressing the proud of being Brazilian, the preference for interacting with Brazilians or consuming Brazilian goods and celebrating the Brazilian culture, especially through music, dance and television taste preferences. But it also goes the other way around, as other individuals, and sometimes the same ones who praise Brazil in some aspects, express themselves very critically when talking about the Brazilian socio-economic situation and cultural traits they consider to be reprehensible and that shock with the German culture (like excessive informality and a willingness to circumvent bureaucratic regulations). Often, these situations are characterized by either temporary conflicts and alliances between members, that sometimes contribute to the development of durable disagreements or friendships, thus taking part in the constitution of their social networks.

Also, within the discussions developed around common problems faced during the migration process, people report and debate about their own experiences with Germans in many different situations such as interactions with neighbours, worker colleagues, teachers and staff from commercial businesses and institutions. Along with all the information exchanged about how the city works, these conversations help members to overcome feelings of estrangement and the obstacles for their active participation in the city.

Although not bonded by strong ties originated in family or friend relationships, these people are able to establish connections between them, temporarily or not, that may prove to be very resourceful in terms of dealing with different kinds of difficulty faced by immigrants. As Haythonrthwaite (2002) stated, social media provides an infrastructure of latent ties that can be easily activated by its users, facilitating the establishment of weak ties and even of reinforcing them. These latent ties, the online version of what Granovetter (1973) once called absent ties, that is, the previous unacquaintance between actors or even their mere common recognition through familiarity, shared online "friends" or virtual group "colleagues", can turn into important sources of assistance for immigrants, which become more easily available through virtual communities such as this one.

At the same time, these connections, once established, are not necessarily meant to endure, but may be discarded or ignored just as easily as they were activated, in times of need. Desmond (2012) helps us to comprehend this dynamic when he discusses the importance of what he calls disposable ties, that is, connections that are established between strangers facing some kind of difficulty that, not rarely, are more efficient for the flow of resources between the actors than through their weak and strong ties, and that, after a while, are no longer cultivated or even broke when the original motive for connecting is no longer present.

This situation can be better comprehended by borrowing the notion of people as infrastructure, developed by Simone (2004). Going beyond Granovetter's (1973) typology of strong and weak ties, Simone's concept of infrastructure pay special attention to the fluid encounters that happen between strangers, embedding social

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relations in a wider set of sociabilities. According to this author, people can, especially in the absence of proper formal infrastructures, engage temporarily in a variety of ways in order to get by through the usual and also not so ordinary problems they face in everyday life. Although Germany is not characterized by the lack of formal infrastructures, not all of them are accessible for immigrants, since migratory laws restrict their period of residence and access to public resources, especially when the immigrant finds oneself in an irregular situation. More than that, being an immigrant entails all kinds of difficulties such as the language barrier, prejudice, cultural differences and unfamiliarity with common bureaucratic procedures. All of these obstacles apparently foment the engagement in "complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons and practices" (Simone 2004: 405) that function as ways of overcoming difficulties that are organized around the national identity.

Conclusion

Through the tools offered by social media, people can engage in different forms of mutual support with greater ease, and even with other people whom they would probably never meet in their daily routine, amplifying the affordances of these temporary intersections. The possibility of maintaining a virtual group of Brazilians who lives in Berlin (or have lived, or wish to live) greatly increases the chances and ways of Brazilian immigrants to exchange information, connect and even help each other, either virtually or physically. Also, the online interactions are not necessarily a separate set of relationships from face-to-face meetings, since many people know each other before interacting online or will encounter each other after establishing online contacts.

As declared in the group description, this virtual community is composed not only of people who already live in Berlin, but also of people who are willing to live there or who have already lived in the city but still want to stay connected and even contribute to the group. This way, the virtual group not only facilitates the connections between previously unknown Brazilian immigrants in the city, but even makes it easier

for newcomers to develop their social networks and learn about the city before getting there through this transnational social space.

Therefore, although the group is supported by this internet based application contained in this specific social networking site, it is an extension of the "real" community of Brazilians immigrants in Berlin, extending its possibilities through the affordances provided by the new developments of social media. The emergence of new kinds of media that allow even unacquainted people to stay connected, organize collective actions and exchange different forms of resources, becomes, as Briguenti (2010) says, prolongations of the urban environment that connect people through different places and events. Instead of being something separated from the "real" life, the virtual interactions are an extension of the social field that connect actors and urban spaces synchronically. The new media not only mediates the interactions betweens the actors, but it is also mediated by the urban environment in which it is based.

In this sense, this virtual community is, at the same time, one of the gateways to participate in this immigrant community (or group of different communities articulated through this virtual group), and the expression of the practices of these population in the city. Different networks of Brazilians are connected and articulated through the virtual community. People get to know each other offline and after that they may keep contact online or vice versa. But, after that, this distinction is somehow pointless. Additionally, online ties that may prove to be resourceful can also never become offline meetings, but even so reflect somehow processes that are happening in the city or that are related to it.

Analysing the online group through the lens of Duyvendak's discussion was also really helpful, as being an immigrant usually puts ones' feeling of home in check. Moving to a new country poses many obstacles to being able to feel as part of the new social environment, as the immigrant cultural background often clashes with the cultural practices of the new society. I argue that virtual communities of immigrants, as an extension of the local and transnational immigrant community, has a great

potential of facilitating different home-making practices that diminish the estrangement faced by immigrants, therefore enhancing different feelings of home.

Through all the information shared and discussed in the virtual group, immigrants may experience the place they live as more familiar than if they did not participate in the online community. Either by passively consulting or actively asking for information and opinions, participants are able to know more about their neighborhood and what to expect from people's behaviour even before actually living there. Not only through the exchange of information, but also relying on other members' willingness to assist others in various ways, people may feel safer (haven) while knowing, or at least expecting that, when facing different problems, there will be someone in the group who can probably help you with your situation. Finally, by counting on the information available in the group, the general will to help and the relative openness of members to socialize with other Brazilians, people may more easily experience the city as a place where they can enjoy and express themselves (heaven).

Besides, the experience of participating in the community, either actively or passively, may itself be felt as a sort of belonging, of feeling closer to "home". This is especially true when people, even without ever meeting offline, share their own experiences in the receiving country with other members whom they consider to be more comprehensive with their personal issues precisely due to their common cultural background. This experience may also be enhanced by the possibilities afforded by new media that allows people to stay permanently connected with their relatives and friends, virtual communities of immigrants and other kinds of virtual groups, as well as having access to constantly updated information about what is happening in the city, where are the people one wants to find and how to find anything that you need near one's location.

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