

‘I speak all the languages of the greenhouse, except Dutch of course.’ Minor integrations in the agricultural contact zones of Westland and Haspengouw

Presentation held at the Burcht, April 9th, 2025

Carolien Lubberhuizen, PhD candidate at the department of Human Geography and Spatial Planning (UU) and at the department of Social and Cultural Anthropology (KUL)

For agricultural migrant workers, greenhouses and fruit plantations are important spaces of arrival, where everyday encounters across differences become crucial in shaping opportunities as well as barriers for forms of integration. This short text, based on a chapter of my PhD dissertation that will also be published in the [forthcoming ReROOT handbook](#), explores these everyday encounters as they take place in agricultural regions of Haspengouw (BE) and Westland (NL), approaching them through the frame of minor integration. In these agricultural regions, migrant- and seasonal workers have constituted the main workforce for the last decades; from Turkish and Moroccan guestworkers, Sikh workers in Haspengouw, and Central and Eastern European workers since EU expansion. The ethnography is based on immersive participant observation whilst working at these worksites and complimented with semi-structured interviews with migrant farm workers, as well as with farmers and other actors.

Against more dominant and normative discourses in integration research and policy, I applied the notion of minor integration (Arnaut, 2023), in order to highlight the friction-filled but productive everyday interactions emerging in agricultural worksites. I argued that such encounters come to constitute meaningful, but precarious, forms of integration. This is even more important considering the broader political, societal, and historical processes of marginalization of migrant workers which, I argue, create a context of disintegration. In the Netherlands, for example, the integration, or the lack of it, of Central and Eastern European migrant workers has become increasingly problematised. This group of migrant workers is becoming more visible as a significant group of newcomers, due to their postponed or abandoned return plans, as well as their precarious arrival conditions. Yet, policy and research alike continue to frame this group of newcomers as distinct from other migrant groups, positioning them as both exempt from and excluded from formal integration pathways and resources (see also Collyer et al., 2020; Mügge & van der Haar, 2016). Against this background, with the help of Pratt's (1991) contact zone, I reframed agro-industrial worksites not as homogeneous spaces of exploitation, but as sites that are shaped by historical, economic, and postcolonial hierarchies. In having to grapple with these

power differences, everyday exchanges and interactions at the worksites reproduce racialised and gendered exclusions. At the same time, in the greenhouses, orchards and other agricultural worksites migrant workers of different backgrounds negotiate differences, exchange (im)material resources, and create forms of enduring sociality; interactions that not only make agricultural work more bearable but can also shape broader opportunities and life trajectories beyond the worksites (see also Alkan, 2021; Phillimore et al., 2018). It is this enduring sociality beyond fleeting encounters that is reflected in the words of one of my interlocuters, which formed the inspiration for the title of this contribution: 'I speak all the languages of the greenhouse, except Dutch of course'. In fact, this migrant worker from Croatia was able to move onto more stable housing through connections with other migrant colleagues, with whom she found ways to speak across language differences, even creating a new 'language of the greenhouse'. While productivity norms exert additional disintegrative pressures, these repeated interactions can thus 'spill over' in ways that help migrant workers move forward, in temporal and spatial directions that are not often considered as 'integration'. While for the Croatian worker this way forward constituted a temporary form of integration (Samuk, 2020), a temporary mooring (Mavrommatis, 2018). Others do aspire and achieve more 'normative' forms of integration. For example, the two colleagues Doina, from Moldova, and Aylin, from Turkey, attempt to help each other practice for their Dutch exams, so that they can pursue other careers in the Netherlands than in the agro-food sector.

In conclusion, in this contribution I attempted to argue that paying attention to these integrations 'in the minor' can show how migrant workers already carve out a space for themselves, as well as where these energies are being blocked. In the context of the work being done at the research institute De Burcht, this raises questions about the implications of these everyday exchanges across differences at worksites for migrant collectivism and solidarity. Lisa Berntsen's (2015) research demonstrated how shared experiences of living and working together - and of marginalization- created feelings of solidarity among a group of Polish and Dutch workers, ultimately convincing them to stand up as a group. Since agricultural and other worksites in the lower segments of the Dutch and Belgian labour markets are often composed of a superdiverse workforce, we reflected on how these shared experiences and forms of minor integration could contribute to building more structural solidarity. This is especially important given the differences within the workforce, which are often exacerbated by intense productivity regimes that pit migrant workers against one another. Moreover, we might ask what existing efforts to mobilize or collectivize migrant workers, such as those led by labour unions, could learn from these practices of minor integration, particularly in addressing the challenges of inter- and intra-group hierarchies

and conflict. Karin Siegmann and her colleagues (2020) have also written about strategies to better mobilize migrant workers, based on the power resources approach, which includes enhancing institutional power, structural power, associational power, and coalitional power. Associational power seems particularly relevant here, as everyday, banal interactions in the workplace might help tailor these associations to migrant social identities and cultural backgrounds, while this contribution has also argued for the importance of taking into account the tensions and hierarchies that exist among and between them.

References

- Alkan, H. (2021). The gift of hospitality and the (un)welcoming of Syrian migrants in Turkey. *American Ethnologist*, 48(2), 180–191. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13012>
- Arnaut, K. (2023). ReROOT Four Pillars: Integration(s). In <https://rerootproject.eu/about>.
- Berntsen, L. (2015). Stepping up to strike: A union mobilization case study of Polish migrant workers in the Netherlands. *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*, 21(4), 399–412. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1024258914567427>
- Collyer, M., Hinger, S., & Schweitzer, R. (2020). Politics of (Dis)Integration – An Introduction. In *Politics of Integration* (pp. 1–18). Springer Science and Business Media B.V. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25089-8_1
- Mavrommatis, G. (2018). Grasping the meaning of integration in an era of (forced) mobility: ethnographic insights from an informal refugee camp. *Mobilities*, 13(6), 861–875. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2018.1500098>
- Mügge, L., & van der Haar, M. (2016). Who Is an Immigrant and Who Requires Integration? Categorizing in European Policies. In B. Garcés-Mascareñas & R. Penninx (Eds.), *Integration Processes and Policies in Europe. Contexts, Levels and Actors*. (pp. 77–90). Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-21674-4>
- Phillimore, J., Humphris, R., & Khan, K. (2018). Reciprocity for new migrant integration: resource conservation, investment and exchange. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(2), 215–232. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1341709>
- Pratt, M. L. (1991). Arts of the Contact Zone. *Profession*, 33–40.
- Samuk, S. (2020). Can Integration Be Temporary? The (Dis)Integration of Temporary Migrant Workers in Canada and the UK. In S. Hinger & R. Schweitzer (Eds.), *Politics of (Dis)Integration* (pp. 61–80). Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-25089-8>
- Siegmann, K. A., Quaedvlieg, J., & Williams, T. (2020). *From regulated precarity to decent work: Improving conditions for migrant workers in Dutch agriculture*.