

This is a draft chapter/article. The final version is available in the Handbook of Diasporas and Migration edited by Ayhan Kaya & Nilay Kilinc, published in 2026, Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd <http://dx.doi.org/10.4337/978XXXXXXXXX.000XX>

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## Urban Diasporas and the Right to the City

Robin Finlay

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-2789-2614

### Abstract:

In this chapter, I revisit and expand the concept of the diasporic right to the city, illustrating its continued importance and examining some of the different domains where diasporas make claims to urban space. Given that diaspora is a spatial process, often incorporating practices of place and city-making, migrants need to access a right to the city to produce a diaspora space. Crucial to a diasporic right to the city is the right to access and produce urban space, as well as the right to difference. The focus of the chapter is on the different societal domains where a diasporic right to the city and diaspora spaces emerge. Through focusing on the production of a Moroccan diaspora space in Granada, Spain, and other research on migrant and diasporic city-making, the chapter illustrates the role of commerce and business, as well as religion, in carving out a diasporic right to the city. The chapter illustrates how the interplay between urban conditions, such as marginal urban space, history and socio-economic context, and migrant place-making practices, significantly shape the diasporic right to the city and the form and scale of the diaspora space produced.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Right to the City, Urban Space, Migration, City-making

### Introduction

Cities have come to be recognised as the central space of diaspora formation and connection (Finlay, 2017; 2022). The nation-state, until relatively recently, was the spatial scale that was utilised most frequently to make sense of the diaspora experience. More recent research has reconfigured the geographies of diaspora formations by asserting the significance “to many people living in diaspora of the city as home rather than the nation as ‘homeland’” (Blunt & Bonnerjee, 2013: 221). Migrants most frequently migrate from and settle in cities, and diaspora formations are deeply informed by the distinct histories, memories, and cultures of urban areas (Finlay, 2017; 2022). Across the histories of cities, diasporas have played a central role in their development in many parts of the world. In what are now considered global cities, such as London, New York City and Istanbul, diasporas have a long history of shaping the economy, culture and neighbourhood characteristics. In the more recent epoch

of globalisation, the speed, scale and visibility of migration have been intensified, meaning diasporas have an increasing presence and involvement in various types and scales of urban areas.

When examining cities and diasporas, it is important to see their relationship as mutually constitutive, simultaneously constructing each other (Finlay, 2017; 2022). The formation of a diaspora is a process and incorporates practices of place making, instilling cities with new cultures and economies and contributing to the transformation of urban space. While the contexts of cities, such as their specific histories, cultures and economies, partly construct and shape the formation of diasporic identities, belongings and ways of living. The focus on the constitutive interplay of diasporas and cities contributes to understandings of diaspora as a spatial process, which affects and is affected by space (Brah, 1996). Given the spatial nature of diaspora formations, which frequently involves practices of city-making and urban change, migrants need to achieve certain rights to the city to formulate a diaspora. Diasporas are formed gradually through achieving and articulating rights to make claims to and shape urban space. Therefore, the right to the city, a concept that has been largely developed in urban studies literature (i.e. Lefebvre, 1968/1996; Harvey, 2008; Marcuse, 2009), is a crucial concept for examining how migrants form diasporas and for analysing 'the spatial opportunities and spatial limitations that migrants and diasporas encounter in contemporary cities' (Finlay, 2017; 787).

This chapter reexamines and develops ideas I first explored in a paper in *Social and Cultural Geography* in 2017, where I introduced the notion of the diasporic right to the city. Here, I revisit and expand this concept, illustrating its continued importance and examining some of the different domains where diasporas make claims to urban space. While the right to the city can refer to many different aspects of urban life, the emphasis in this chapter is on the right to inhabit, transform and produce urban space and the right to spatialise and display difference. These rights to urban space and difference are foundational to a diasporic right to the city and the formation of diaspora space. In this chapter, I examine how diasporas claim rights to the city through specific spatialities and practices, including commerce, business and religion. In doing so, I will draw on my empirical research into the production of a Moroccan diaspora space in Granada, Spain (Finlay, 2017; 2021). This research was based on 8 months of ethnographic research in Granada in 2013/2014 and shorter two-week follow-up visits in 2015 and 2019. I will also draw on ethnographic research into migrant city-making in peripheral urban streets in English cities (Hall, King & Finlay, 2015; 2017), as well as research from other migration and diaspora study scholars. Before I examine the intersections of the diasporic right to the city with commerce, business and religion, I analyse the concept of the right to the city and its connections to diaspora and diaspora space.

## **A Diasporic Right to the City**

The 'right to the city' was introduced by the French urban theorist Henri Lefebvre (1968/1999), and over recent decades, developed and deepened by the work of several other urban studies scholars (i.e., Mitchell, 2003; Harvey, 2008; Marcuse, 2009). While the right to the city is a rather 'fuzzy concept' (Attoh, 2011), its overarching concern is with spatial and material justice in the city (Finlay, 2017). For many, the right to the city is used as a call and demand; a way to imagine and implement alternatives to tackle urban inequalities and injustices (Harvey, 2008). A principal focus and concern for much work on the right to the city is the everyday experiences of the urban inhabitant, and their power and ability to shape the city and participate in everyday life (Lefebvre, 1968/1999). While scholars have examined a wide range of rights in relation to everyday life, a common thread is the concern with the right to access urban space and the right to produce it to some degree.

A lot of focus has been on the right to the city for marginalised urban populations, including low-income residents, the homeless, ethnic minorities and migrants (Friendly, 2024). These populations

often struggle for their right to the city, due to issues such as prejudice, socio-economic inequalities and social exclusion. In recent years, research on the right to the city for migrants has expanded, with much literature focusing on factors that limit migrants' right to the city, as well as mechanisms that enable migrants to realise more rights (i.e., Tsavdaroglou & Kaika, 2021; Norman et al, 2024). A significant factor that can shape the right to the city for migrants is their immigration status. For instance, in many countries, asylum seekers have limited rights, such as being legally barred from working or having no access to public resources, which can translate into a limited right to the city. As a result of the exclusionary context for those seeking asylum, various studies have explored the right to the city for asylum seekers and refugees (Tsavdaroglou & Kaika, 2021; Earle, 2024)

In 2017, I introduced the concept of the diasporic right to the city, which illustrated how migrants need to negotiate certain spatial rights to form a diaspora. Important for understanding the centrality of urban rights to diasporas is recognising diaspora as a process; they are formed by migrants, or descendants of migrants, enacting a diaspora stance. Additionally, as the notion of 'diaspora space' (Brah, 1996) illustrates, diaspora is a spatial process, formed through spatial practices. Diaspora space emphasises the mutually constitutive interplay between diasporas and urban locations, with the formation of diasporas imbuing places with new features, such as cultures and economies, while the context of place shapes the formation of diasporas. Therefore, a diasporic right to the city is fundamental to the formation of a diaspora space. Importantly, a diasporic right to the city 'emerges through the interactions between migrant place-making strategies and the urban context' (Finlay, 2017: 787). As a result, the rights attained and the type of diaspora space produced are contingent on the structural and spatial context of the city. I argue that there are two overarching rights that are central to the production of a diaspora space. First, is the right to actively produce and transform urban space, which is linked to the more general right to inhabit and use urban space. Second, there is the right to spatialise and display distinct cultural identities and diasporic belonging in the urban environment. Essentially, this is what Millington (2011) calls a 'right to difference'; the right to be recognised and incorporated into urban space and urban planning for diverse cultures and diverse identities.

The degree of the rights achieved, and the scale of diaspora spaces produced, can vary significantly, ranging from large ethnic enclaves to less visible diaspora spaces and networks in marginal urban areas. This diversity of diasporic rights to the city and diaspora spaces is shaped by various intersecting factors, including temporality, networks, nationality, immigration status, and inequality and poverty, to name just a few. For instance, diaspora spaces, especially larger concentrated spaces, emerge and grow over time, with migrants gradually attaining more rights, allowing for a growing diasporic spatial presence. For recent arrivals, especially in cities where they are not connected to a historically rooted diaspora, they may forge out smaller and more scattered diaspora spaces in marginal areas of cities (Hall, King & Finlay, 2017), such as a single business, religious venue or a cultural event. Intersecting with temporality are structural forms of racism and inequality and how certain migrants are racialised, which shape the diasporic experience and the way diasporas are formed. And as previously mentioned, immigration status conditions the rights bestowed on migrants and significantly shapes the right to the city and how diasporas are formed. It is also important to recognise that diasporas have in-group differences (Anthias, 1998), such as gender, age, ethnicity, and these differences can create different urban experiences and different rights to the city within a diasporic community.

Diaspora spaces function not only at different scales, but also in different societal domains, be that economic, religious, cultural and political. These different domains create a multi-dimensional diasporic geography in the city. However, the visibility of these different diasporic domains and geographies varies significantly, depending on the rights attained through the interplay between the context of urban place and migrant place-making strategies. In this chapter, then, I will focus on and examine different domains and spatialities of diaspora spaces. I begin by examining spaces of

commerce and business, before moving to religion. I will analyse how migrants forge out a spatial presence in these different domains, illustrating different processes and strategies to attain a diasporic right to the city.

### **Diasporic commerce and businesses**

Commerce and business are central features of urban diaspora spaces. Throughout history, diasporas have been closely associated with entrepreneurialism, and diaspora businesses and economies are key to the construction of contemporary forms of transnational urbanism (Smith, 2001). Researchers have been interested in the economic survival of diasporic communities, illustrating the importance of self-employment and the provision of services and goods to people within the diaspora (Dwyer, 2010). More recently, there has been growing interest in the transnational dynamics of diaspora businesses, exploring global diasporic networks and the global circulation of goods (Dwyer, 2010). Business and commerce, then, are central ways that diasporas gain rights to use and produce urban space, as well as gaining access to local economies. While some migrants may arrive with capital, assisting them to access urban space and set up businesses, the arrival experience for many other migrants is one of marginalisation and socio-economic exclusion (Hall, 2018).

For diasporic spaces of commerce and business to begin to take shape, migrants often need to encounter favourable urban conditions. Because migrants are frequently positioned outside the dominant national register and face structural discrimination, combined with limited financial resources and social networks, their rights and opportunities to access commercial urban spaces and local economies are significantly constrained. Therefore, migrants, especially recently arrived ones, often inhabit and utilise more marginal urban spaces (Hall, 2018). Marginal areas are commonly where migrants initially access a right to the city, in part through commerce and business, allowing for a diaspora space to begin to take shape. While marginal urban spaces are usually sites of socio-economic disadvantage, posing significant challenges, they also present opportunities and possibilities. Rather than being defined solely by deprivation, marginal urban spaces are also sites of urban agency, creativity and resistance (Hall, 2018).

Certain conditions found in marginal urban spaces can allow for new ways 'to get by'. For instance, there is often lower rent and property values, they are often partially outside the eyes of power, and due to shared experiences of marginalisation, social networks can be forged more easily (Hall, 2018). Hall uses the notion of the 'migrant margins' to describe a 'marginalised urban space in which marginal but not insignificant economies are forged by migrants' (2018: 968). Therefore, economic activity and work are particularly important elements of marginal urban spaces, as they are spaces where migrants can find a foothold and an initial right to participate in commerce and business. Through the rights and opportunities that migrants encounter, marginal urban spaces emerge as integral sites for the formation of diaspora spaces. Marginal urban spaces are where migrants often begin to forge out a diasporic right to the city. It is important to point out that other urban conditions and contextuality, and not just the conditions of marginality, also shape and inform a diasporic right to the city. For instance, the distinct histories, cultures and economies of cities can enable and constrain the formation of diaspora spaces (Finlay, 2017).

To demonstrate how these issues unfold in practice, I now turn to my empirical research on Moroccan diaspora formations in the city of Granada in the south of Spain (Finlay, 2017; 2021). In the lower Albayzín neighbourhood of Granada, there is a well-established Moroccan diaspora space, which is commonly known as 'little Morocco' (Finlay, 2017). This case exemplifies how urban conditions, such as marginal space, distinct urban histories and distinct local economic characteristics, intersect with migrant place-making strategies and significantly shape the production of diaspora space. The

Moroccan diaspora space in Granada is vibrant and multifaceted, attending to various needs and purposes, including tourism, commerce, religion and diasporic community formation.

While this diaspora space is relatively central and now a key part of the city's tourism offering, it is a space that has transformed and changed significantly since the early 1990s, and prior to its diasporic transformation, it was considered a marginal and run-down space. Participants reflected on this transformation and how the street was in the past compared to the present:

'This street was empty a while ago, there was nobody here, only a few people would walk through here and now there is lots of activity...the Arabs have changed this street a lot, now it is cleaner, there is more life and activity. There are people who come to Granada and ask where this street is, you know?' (Reda, Male, Morocco, Tangiers)

The disregarded nature of the area, and the small and unused properties that lined the streets, made it economically viable for some Moroccan migrants to rent or buy small properties. Additionally, the rundown nature of this area illustrates that investment and policy were not significantly focused on this part of Granada. It was an area that was partially outside the eyes of power and not over-regulated, allowing Moroccan migrants to develop a diasporic presence with minimal interference from local government and authorities, reducing complications and cost. The marginal nature of the area provided a foothold to access and gain the right to use and produce urban space. This illustrates that for diasporas to develop and grow, the city needs to have certain urban conditions that provide an initial foothold.

Since the early 1990s, there has been a continuous increase in diasporic businesses and commerce. These businesses have created a dynamic and multifunctional diaspora space, and, particularly important, the area has become a key component of Granada's tourism offer. Therefore, the place-making strategies and entrepreneurship of Moroccan migrants have also been central to the right to the city and the formation of a diaspora space. Granada has an assortment of diverse histories, and as it was the last stronghold of Al-Andalus, it is greatly symbolic of Spain's Muslim past (Howe, 2012). Al-Andalus was the name given to the Muslim ruled area of the Iberian Peninsula between 711 and 1492.

Due to a growing interest in heritage since the 1990s, cities like Granada saw tourism grow significantly, and Moroccan migrants found an opportunity to carve out a presence in the city and cater to this rising tourism demand. Through their place-making strategies, Moroccan migrants appropriated the history of Al-Andalus, which significantly contributed to their right to the city. By means of material and sensory aesthetic, and embodiment, Moroccan migrants have produced an overtly orientalist diaspora space, conveying a 'hyperreal' symbolism that alludes to the history of Al-Andalus, and more generally, the non-Western world. In so doing, the diaspora space satisfies tourist demands to consume and experience cultural difference and heritage. Through an array of artisan gift shops, teashops, food establishments, and street traders, the area is imbued with an orientalist aesthetic that encompasses material culture, sensory experiences and embodied performance. As I argued in my 2017 paper, this diasporic place-making is a mobilisation of a strategically self-orientalist cultural capital. The diaspora's cultural capital, albeit in an exaggerated self-orientalist form, fits with a significant historical image of the city, assisting them to gain a right to have a presence in the city, to display an orientalist identity, and participate in the local economy. Participants reflected on the oriental and Arab aesthetic of their businesses and the tourism demand for it:

'Yes, for sure, we try and create an Arab atmosphere. Granada has an Arab look, the small streets, the white houses; it has an Arab tradition, so these shops fit into that'. (Simo, Male, Northern Morocco)

An important aspect of the Moroccan diasporic place-making in Granada is that it illustrates agency and creativity, even while in conditions of marginality and limited opportunity. Through utilising and adapting marginal spaces and innovatively creating an orientalist space of business and commerce, Moroccan migrants have carved out a distinctive diasporic right to the city. My research with Suzanne Hall and Julia King (Hall, King, & Finlay, 2015; 2017) that explored migrant city-making in peripheral urban streets in English cities, also illustrated the creative ways migrants produced businesses and diaspora spaces. For instance, in Stapelton Road, a high Street in a comparatively deprived and marginal area of Bristol, migrants from East Africa creatively adapted a single shop space into 5 distinct but related business and social zones, including a mobile phone shop and internet café, a pool hall, a coffee shop, a card playing room and an outdoor social space (Hall, King & Finlay, 2015). The adaptation of the shop allows for a space of business, to earn a livelihood, but it also provides social spaces of diaspora formations. This multipurpose use of the shop space illustrates the adaptation and experimentation to forge a diasporic right to the city.

Business and commerce, then, are central to a diasporic right to the city. It is a key way that migrants participate in urban life and gain the right to utilise and produce urban space. As illustrated in this section, the intersections of urban conditions and migrant place-making strategies shape and condition diasporic spaces of business and commerce. In the next section, I examine the right to the city in relation to diasporic religious spaces.

### **Diasporic Religious Spaces**

The significance of religious belief, symbolism and organisational structure in the formation of diasporic identities is emphasised by various scholars (i.e. Aitchison & Hopkins, 2007; McLoughlin, 2009). Given this centrality of religion to diaspora formations, religious spaces and religious activity are often key aspects of a diasporic right to the city. Religious spaces allow for diasporic communities to be formed and for diasporic identities and belongings to be produced and maintained. Therefore, religious spaces are a key means through which diasporas actively produce urban space and establish a visible presence in the city. Indeed, the religious landscapes of Western cities are considered to have been transformed by diasporic communities (Oosterbaan, 2014). Nonetheless, achieving the right to produce diasporic religious space and for diasporic religions to have a visible presence is not always a straightforward process, with resistance to religious developments sometimes encountered (Oosterbaan, 2014).

To empirically examine diasporic religion and the right to the city, I again drew on my research into the Moroccan diaspora in Granada, Spain. In Granada, the Moroccan diaspora, along with other Muslim communities, has contributed to an increased visibility of Islamic aesthetics and practices. At the time of the research fieldwork, it was believed to be six mosques in Granada, including the *Mezquita At-Taqwa* in the lower Albayzín, where the research was largely carried out. This mosque opened in the 1980s and is considered the first mosque to be established in Granada since the expulsion of the Muslims in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Fieldwork interview). Spanish Muslim converts first established the mosque, but its main attendees are Muslim migrants, especially Moroccans, as explained by the director of the mosque:

‘In the 1980s, we were the first Muslim community in Granada, Spanish Muslims that is. This is the first Muslim community to be in the centre of the Albayzín, the old Muslim district of the city. We decided to have a centre and open a mosque in an accessible area, central for the Muslim immigrants. It is predominantly Moroccans who come here, they are the majority as they are the neighbouring country...’ (Director of At-Taqwa Mosque, Male, Moroccan-Spanish)

The Spanish Muslim presence was not greatly significant, but it did initiate the contemporary spatialisation of a Muslim identity, paving the way for the establishment of a Moroccan diaspora space. Therefore, the right to the city in relation to the right to display and practice Islam, and the right to access religious spaces, is partly indebted to the presence of the Spanish Muslim convert community. This pre-existing spatialisation of a contemporary Muslim identity provided Moroccan migrants with a space where their Muslim identity was well accommodated. Essentially, it was a space where there was a high level of tolerance to a visible Muslim presence, which is not often the case for new Muslim migrant communities in European cities (Oosterbaan, 2014). While religion is not an innate feature of Moroccan migrants, it has a significant role in the formation of a cohesive Moroccan diaspora, and this religious right to the city contributes to the formation of Moroccan diaspora space. I would also argue that the production of a religious space positively contributes to the economic 'strategic orientalism' of the diaspora space, and as such, assists with the opening of businesses and economic activity. The religious aesthetics heighten the oriental and Moroccan image of the area and consolidate its relevance and connection to the history of Al-Andalus. As the religion of Islam is synonymous with the history of Al-Andalus, contemporary Muslims are an evocative embodiment of that history, assisting them to achieve a religious right to the city. Once more, this illustrates that the distinct urban conditions of Granada partly enabled the diasporic right to the city and the inception of a Moroccan diaspora space.

The marginal nature of the lower Albayzín, as discussed in the previous section, was also important to the initial creation of Muslim spaces. The Spanish Muslim convert community was able to access and transform underused and derelict spaces to develop a Mosque and some initial shops. Urban marginality, then, is also a key factor that shapes religious diasporic rights to the city. The work of Garbin (2013) on how Afro-Christian diasporic Christian churches negotiate and access urban space is particularly insightful. He illustrates the duality of how their churches and religious practices can be both visible and invisible, depending on how urban space is accessed and negotiated. Many churches use unconventional spaces, such as converting anonymous warehouses and industrial spaces into places of worship. These unconventional spaces of worship illustrate constraints on accessing a religious diasporic right to the city, such as a lack of resources, discrimination, and segregation, but they also show creativity and a transformative appropriation of the urban landscape. Garbin (2013) argues that the marginal and unconventional nature of these churches means that, to a certain extent, they are physically and socially hidden. However, the church practices beyond the physical space of the church, such as processions and festivals, provide them more visibility, recognition and belonging. For the Moroccan diaspora and the Muslim community in Granada, the visibility and reignition of the Mosque and Islamic religion have increased in line with the development of the diaspora space and regeneration of the lower Albayzín. The Islamic religiosity of the area has developed from being more marginal and hidden to now being more central and recognised. Therefore, the religious diasporic right to the city has been a gradual process, with more rights and visibility being achieved over time.

While diasporas are not innately religious, and variation of religious identities inevitably exist within a diaspora community, religion and religious space often play a key role in a diasporic right to the city. Nonetheless, as highlighted in this section, achieving a right to have a diasporic religious presence is in large part dependent on urban conditions and often requires producing religious spaces in more marginal areas of the city.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to continue developing the notion of the diasporic right to the city, as well as contributing to research on the centrality of the city to diaspora formations. The broader significance of the chapter is that it illustrates how achieving a right to the city is of key importance to diaspora

formations. Given that diaspora is a spatial process, often incorporating practices of place and city-making, migrants need to access a right to the city to produce a diaspora space. Crucial to a diasporic right to the city is the right to access and produce urban space, as well as the right to difference. The focus of the chapter is on the different societal domains where a diasporic right to the city and diaspora spaces emerge. Through focusing on the production of a Moroccan diaspora space in Granada, Spain, and other research on migrant and diasporic city-making, the chapter illustrates the role of commerce and business, as well as religion, in carving out a diasporic right to the city. I now provide some concluding thoughts on how a diasporic right to the city and the domains of diasporic business, commerce and religion are shaped by the interplay between the conditions of urban marginality and migrant place-making.

Urban conditions, such as local history, culture and socio-economic context, significantly shape the diasporic right to the city and the form and scale of the diaspora space produced. Of particular importance is access to marginal urban space. While having to access marginal urban space illustrates the lack of resources and discrimination experienced by migrants, marginal urban space also provides a foothold and a way to carve out a diasporic right to the city. Therefore, marginal urban geographies and their socio-economic conditions are crucial forces shaping the formation of diasporas. While these marginal urban conditions are significant, they do not solely shape diaspora spaces; rather, they intersect with the agency of migrants and their place-making strategies, as well as urban histories and cultures. Nonetheless, marginal urban spaces can assist creativity and experimentation that initiate the formation of diasporic activities and diaspora spaces. As illustrated in this chapter, creative forms of business, commerce and religion are key strategies of producing marginal urban space, accessing local economies and displaying diverse identities. Importantly, the diasporic entrepreneurialism and creativity discussed in this chapter illustrate the contributions of migrants to urban life and urban regeneration. Therefore, an analytical strength of the diasporic right to the city is that it provides a way to home in on the contributions and exclusions of migrant communities – an issue of increasing importance given the continuing ‘migrant polemic’ in global politics.

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