

## Home from Home? Locational Choices of International “Creative Class” Workers

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**ABSTRACT** This paper focuses on the international migration dynamics of the highly skilled “creative class”. To date, little research has been undertaken to provide an in-depth understanding of the underlying reasons behind the movements of these workers. By providing a micro-level, qualitative analysis of the motivations, experiences and migration trajectories of a sub-group of these workers, namely “creative Bohemians”, this paper offers a perspective that is currently lacking in the literature. These individuals are considered to be particularly attracted by diverse and open urban milieus, as well as being instrumental in creating the type of urban environment that attracts other members of the “creative class”. Birmingham, UK, was chosen as an example of a European city emulating “creative city” policies and being potentially well placed to attract international talent due to its culturally diverse population and reputation for “tolerance”. Findings call for a more nuanced understanding of the factors associated with both the attraction and retention of international talent, as it is clear that migration decisions depend on factors other than simply “quality of place” or diversity and tolerance. Policies focusing on subjective concepts of place attractiveness are thus unlikely to be successful. Instead, cities need carefully targeted policies that address their particular socio-economic and physical realities.

### Introduction

Much has been written in recent academic and policy literature about the competitive imperative for cities to attract and retain high levels of “human capital” (Turok, 2009; Musterd & Murie, 2010). Despite potentially greater international mobility throughout the EU, coupled with the claim that the “creative class”—that is, workers who are highly educated and talented—are individually and collectively highly mobile, moving frequently in search of urban “quality of place” (Florida, 2002a), only limited, mostly quantitative research has been undertaken to provide an understanding of the factors associated with the movements of these workers.

The existing literature on highly skilled migration has tended to focus on intracompany, corporate transfers of “elite” workers (Scott, 2006b)—but it is now accepted that the nature and reasons for highly skilled migration are far more complex. As Ryan and Mulholland (2014) and others (e.g. Conradson and Latham, 2005; Kennedy, 2008) note, there is an acknowledgement of the need for more research in this area. Further, skilled migration has historically been limited to world cities (e.g. Beaverstock, 2005; Nagel, 2005; Scott, 2006b; Ryan & Mulholland, 2014), and much of the literature examines migration to these locations. Second-tier European cities have received very little attention to date, but many are emulating “creative city” policies and are attempting to compete to attract international talent, although they often lack the physical and socio-cultural conditions deemed attractive to the “creative class” (Houston et al., 2008; Brown et al., 2013). Finally, while there is recognition that the heterogeneity of highly skilled migration is increasing, very little attention has been devoted to understanding the motivations or experiences of “creative class” migrants (Hansen & Niedomysl, 2009; Syrett & Sepulveda, 2011). There is a lack of knowledge of

their reasons for migrating; whether or not they prefer locations with specific attributes; the importance of factors such as “diversity” or “tolerance” and their experiences after migration, particularly relations with the host society and existing migrant communities. Also, as the “creative class” is hypothesized to be hyper-mobile, whether or not these migrants tend to move frequently.

As a first step in addressing these issues, the overarching aim of this paper is to assess the findings from qualitative, in-depth interviews conducted with highly skilled “creative class” migrants to provide a micro-level analysis of their motivations, experiences and migration trajectories. The aim is to provide a perspective on these individual’s decision-making that is currently lacking in the literature. Birmingham, UK, was chosen as an example of a second-tier European city emulating “creative city” policies as a critical component in its ongoing regeneration. The role of international migrants in this process has, however, been largely disregarded in city-level policy-making to date, despite the city being well-placed within the UK to attract international talent due to its culturally diverse population and reputation for tolerance (Brown et al., 2007). It thus makes a particularly interesting case study.

The paper begins by expanding on the “creative class” concept and notions of hypermobility as well as the perceived significance of certain physical and social attributes— including population “diversity”—in attracting and retaining international talent; theories of, and trends in, skilled migration in Europe are then introduced. Next, the history of migration to Birmingham is contextualized, and policy designed to attract “creative class” workers briefly addressed. Research methods are then outlined and the main qualitative findings presented. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the research findings for Florida’s “creative class” thesis in the context of second-tier European cities and some recommendations for urban development policy in light of these findings.

### **Attracting the “Creative Class”? Amenities, Diversity and Tolerance**

A new “creative class” (Florida, 2002a, 2005a, 2005b) comprising a hyper-mobile army of highly talented workers is, we are told, moving around the world in search of places of excellence—they “possess the means, resources and inclination to seek out and move to locations where they can leverage their talents” (Florida, 2005a, p.79). The claim is that regional economic growth is now powered by these people, as they bring new innovations and skills to the cities fortunate enough to appeal to them (Florida, 2002a, 2002b, 2005a, 2005b). Leading cities, it is argued, are moving further ahead in the competitiveness stakes due to their ability to provide the “quality of place” attributes emphasized by Florida and others (e.g. Clark et al., 2002; Kloosterman, 2013) as essential preconditions for attracting the inflow of this creative talent: they are rich in authentic cultural experiences, including a vibrant “street-level” culture; offer a wide range of high quality arts, recreational and leisure amenities (including nightlife and theatres and music venues); have varied and abundant (semi) public “third places” for social interaction and for people to meet (such as cafes and bookstores) and have attractive and varied urban living environments (Florida, 2002a).

Moreover, Florida argues that the “creative class”; “prefer places that are diverse, tolerant and open to new ideas” (Florida, 2002a, p. 223). Creative people are often characterized as individualists with alternative lifestyle preferences and non-conformist behaviours. This is particularly the case for those in Florida’s (2002a) “super-creative core”—and especially the creative “bohemians”, who include writers, poets, musicians, designers, actors, sculptors, singers, photographers, dancers,

choreographers, painters and figurative artists, conductors, directors and composers—that is, workers who “fully engage in the creative process” (Florida, 2002a, p. 69) and who are posited to be particularly attracted to such environments (Florida, 2002b; see also Boschma & Fritsch, 2007). Florida describes social “diversity” as heterogeneity in terms of ethnicity, sexuality and lifestyle, and “tolerance” as a form of social openness that includes a willingness to accept new people and embrace different ways of thinking, that is, “low barriers to entry for people” (Florida & Tinagli, 2004, p. 12). He argues that “[d]iversity increases the odds that a place will attract different types of people with different skill sets and ideas” (Florida, 2002a, p. 249), while tolerance “is critical for the ability of a region or nation to attract and mobilize creative talent” (Florida & Tinagli, 2004, p. 25).

The argument is that cities, which can make themselves “global talent magnets” (Florida, 2005a, p. 10) through a combination of these physical and social factors, will outperform those which remain homogeneous, mono-cultural and less open to the outside. But despite popularity in policy circles, Florida’s ideas concerning the “creative class” have engendered much critical debate (e.g. Peck, 2005; Markusen, 2006; Scott, 2006a; Storper & Manville, 2006; Hoyman & Faricy, 2009; Musterd & Murie, 2010). In particular, the assumed “hyper-mobility” has been questioned; as has the claim that highly skilled individuals choose to move to (or from) specific (urban) places simply because of their aesthetic, cultural or recreational qualities. The role of population “diversity” and “tolerance” in attracting talent also remains largely unsubstantiated.

Of particular relevance to this paper, Florida introduced the concept of competition for the “creative class” within the context of mainly quantitative correlation measures and indexes conducted within the US.<sup>1</sup> Research undertaken in Europe indicates that different socio-cultural and political structures; language differences; different education, health and welfare systems; and limits set by legislation on employing migrants, all make movement between countries potentially less frequent than might otherwise be expected (Nathan, 2007; Houston et al., 2008; Hansen et al., 2009; Hansen & Niedomysl, 2009; Musterd & Murie, 2010).

Further, as Hansen and Niedomysl (2009, p. 193) state, there has been an almost total lack of studies assessing the primary “push” and “pull” mechanisms behind the migration of the “creative class”. Exceedingly, little qualitative research has been conducted to determine why highly skilled migrants choose to locate in specific places or the extent to which urban “quality of place” factors influence, or not, these decisions. Significantly, Florida argues that neighbourhoods which are “seething with the interplay of cultures and ideas” (Florida, 2002a, p. 227) act as catalysts for creativity. But, as also highlighted by Syrett and Sepulveda (2011, p. 494, emphasis in original) “the extent to which cultural diversity does produce creativity and innovation within cities, and how it does this, remains curiously underspecified and under-researched”.

Similarly, Florida does not directly address the more thorny issues of increased urban population “diversity”, including the challenges in relation to socio-economic inclusion and exclusion and community cohesion and tension, or the effects these might have on the (continued) attractiveness of certain locations for “creative class” workers, who may choose to move elsewhere if they do not feel welcomed (Syrett & Sepulveda, 2011).

### **Highly Skilled Migration in Europe: Drivers and Trends**

The last decades have seen trans-national migration in Europe that both exceeds and differs from earlier population movements. Marked changes have been seen in the scale of migration flows; the origins and destinations of migrants; migration channels and types of flows and motivation(s) for migration (Vertovec, 2006, 2007). The result is greater diversity within already established cosmopolitan cities and increasingly diverse populations in places where past populations have been more homogenous (Syrett & Sepulveda, 2011, p. 488). Many cities are now characterized by “super-diversity” (Vertovec, 2007, p. 1024) in terms of ethnicity, language(s), religious tradition, regional and local identities, cultural values and practices (Vertovec, 2006).

Highly skilled migration, in particular, has been gaining relative importance in European migration flows since the 1980s (Scott, 2006b). More liberalized immigration policies in many EU countries have led Richard Florida to surmise that “the US’ advantage seems to be shifting” as EU countries are able to more effectively attract and retain global talent (Florida & Tinagli, 2004, p. 6). As Bailey and Boyle (2004, p. 233) point out, however, “social, cultural and political structures remain which make movement between [European] countries less ‘free’ than may be imagined” (see also Martin-Brelot et al., 2010).

Until recently, highly skilled migration mainly consisted of “elites”—trans-national company executives from developed countries who were seconded via their organizations for time-limited durations to mainly first-tier, “global” cities around the world, and who represented a fairly homogeneous socio-cultural group. The associated literature often assumes the notion of “nomadic workers”, remaining in one location for only a short duration, and that of a “frictionless mobility characterized by the absence of any kind of meaningful encounter or incorporation in the host society” (Smith & Favell, 2006, p. 15). Integration, for example, was not generally considered an issue. Due to the removal of barriers for labour migration within the EU, coupled with the stronger support for student mobility within the EU and globally, the socio-economic background and the motives and means of skilled trans-national migration have diversified (Conradson & Latham, 2005; Scott, 2006b).

A small but growing literature suggests that a variety of motivations other than purely economic ones may be important in highly skilled migration. According to Scott (2006b), new skilled migrant groups that include “young professionals” who stay on in the host country as new graduates or migrate at the start of their careers; “international Bohemians” who move to enjoy cultural amenities; and “assimilation-settlers” who marry a partner in the host country, have gained rapidly in importance but have received little in the way of research attention. Ryan and Mulholland (2014, p. 587) found that opportunities for learning English, experiencing a new culture and simply “having an adventure” featured in the migratory strategies of highly skilled French migrants in London (see also Conradson & Latham, 2005). It has been suggested that migration is used to accumulate “cultural capital” and as “a route towards distinction” (Scott, 2006b, p. 1123). Nonetheless, as Ryan and Mulholland (2014) note, this may not be the case, as skills and experiences gained in one context may not be transferrable to another (see also Nagel, 2005). Regardless, as also documented by Ryan and Mulholland (2014), there has been a lack of research on the full range of contemporary highly skilled migratory movements.

A number of researchers now consider that “movement” or “mobility” may be more appropriate when considering highly skilled migration, characterized by patterns of circulation, and temporary,

frequent and non-permanent moves (Koser & Salt, 1997; Favell et al., 2011). What is meant by “permanent” and “temporary” migration is, however, not straightforward: “permanent” migration often occurs following periods of “temporary” migration. Also, the initial intention of temporary migration may be transformed into permanent migration and “vice versa” depending on a number of factors including migrants’ initial experiences in the host country. As discussed by Balaz et al. (2004), temporary migration of young graduates may satisfy their desire for new experiences and boost marketable skills in their domestic labour market, negating the need for permanent migration. Alternatively, temporary migration may provide enhanced knowledge and self-confidence, thereby facilitating further migration. Ryan and Mulholland (2014) found strong evidence that the fluid migratory trajectories and motivations of graduates were associated with a particular life stage, that is, young, single and childless, and they gradually become more “emplaced” with career and family commitments, but, rather than a permanent settlement versus mobility binary, they suggest “a continuum of emplacement whereby migrants gradually extend their stay, while at the same time keeping future options open” (Ryan & Mulholland, 2014, p. 587).

### **Birmingham—A City of Migrants**

Since its assumed position as the “workshop of the world” during the Industrial Revolution, Birmingham has attracted large numbers of international migrant workers (see Brown et al., 2007). Today, the city has one of the most diverse populations in the UK, second only to certain inner areas of London: 32.0% of the population has a non-White background. Resonant with its long history of migration from New Commonwealth countries, Pakistani (9.7%) is the largest minority group in the city, followed by Indian (5.8%) and Black Caribbean (4.0%).<sup>2</sup> The percentage of Birmingham residents born outside the UK is also markedly higher at 20.3% compared with 11.6% nationally ONS (2011a).

Similar to most UK cities, Birmingham has seen marked changes in the nature of migration over the past 10–15 years: immigration has exceeded emigration for the first time; there has also been a significant diversification in countries of origin and reasons for migration, to include asylum seekers and refugees from areas including the Balkans, the Middle East and Africa. Since 2004, there has been an influx of new economic migrants from Accession 8 (A8) countries, particularly from Poland (Green et al., 2007). Student flows also form a major part of international migration movements to and from Birmingham: numbers of foreign students studying at Higher Education Institutions in the city increased by 42.0% from 2002, to 13,280 in 2009/2010 (BCC, 2011). While non-UK nationals now account for some 4.9% of regional employment (Green et al., 2007, p. 10), they represent a diverse profile. Although there are some “migrant dense” professional sectors such as Health and Social Welfare, there has been a trend towards a greater concentration of more recent migrant workers—particularly “A8” migrants—in less skilled occupations, particularly in Manufacturing and Operatives and Elementary Occupations (Green et al., 2007, p. 11&52).

Birmingham has had a difficult post-industrial transition. Following waves of decline, more than two-thirds of manufacturing jobs were lost between 1978 and 2002. High levels of unemployment and social and urban deprivation resulted. Since the early 1990s there has been a steady growth in service sector employment, but the city faces a number of significant restructuring challenges including a continued reliance on lowskilled manufacturing and a lack of a resident skilled workforce (BCC, 2012; Parkinson, 2007). The low level of demand for higher level skills from the region’s

private sector has also had a significant impact on both the retention and attraction of graduates and other “knowledge sector” workers (WMRO, 2009).

The city has long used “culture” as a policy tool to change perceptions and increase its attractiveness for inwards investment. Initiatives have included “flagship” cultural developments (such as Symphony Hall, the International Conference Centre and, most recently, the new library of Birmingham); support for mainstream cultural organizations (including the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and Birmingham Royal Ballet); and events to animate spaces (such as the annual Artsfest, the largest free arts festival in the UK). The city centre has undergone a series of major physical regeneration initiatives, including the re-making of central areas for new economic and cultural activities (such as Brindleyplace, which hosts IKON Gallery; The Mailbox, which houses the BBC; and the new Bullring shopping centre); and the promotion of “city apartment living” in previously industrial inner-city areas (such as the Jewellery Quarter) in an attempt to bring young professionals to live and work in the city centre (Barber & Hall, 2008). Nevertheless, Birmingham still poses a challenging physical and social environment in which to attract international talent (Brown et al., 2007).

Against this background, the creative industries have been utilized as a policy tool by key public agencies for more than a decade—for their own economic impact as well as their ability to generate “quality of place” and boost the economy by attracting other highly skilled workers to the city (Brown et al., 2010). Estimates<sup>3</sup> indicate the creative industries account for around 18,720 jobs, or 3.9% of the city’s employment (lower than the 5.1% of UK employment), with Visual Arts & Design being the fastest growing sector (BOP, 2009). This is more people than are directly employed in the construction, vehicle manufacture or financial intermediation sectors in the city. Birmingham has just under a fifth (19.4%) of all creative employment in the eight English core cities. As a percentage of all employment within the city, however, Birmingham ranks behind Bristol, Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle (BOP, 2009).

The role of skilled migrants in this process has, however, been largely disregarded in city-level policy-making to date, despite Birmingham being potentially well-placed within the UK to attract and retain international talent, due to its existing population diversity and its reputation for tolerance (Brown et al., 2007). For example, culture and the creative industries run through several key strands of the new, 20-year city centre masterplanning document. But while it is acknowledged that the city centre is “not sufficiently diverse in terms of its cultural facilities, heritage, retail offer and services especially for young and ethnic minority groups” (BCC, 2010, p. 11), notably absent are acknowledgements of more fundamental issues associated with attracting international talent, including social and community relations of new and existing ethnic groups; spatial segregation and resultant socioeconomic inequalities.

## **Research Methods**

This paper draws upon data derived from in-depth, semi-structured interviews undertaken in September 2008 with 10 “creative class” migrants living and working in Birmingham. Interviewees were all part of Florida’s “super-creative core”—the creative “bohemians”, that is, workers who “fully engage in the creative process” (Florida, 2002a, p. 69). These individuals are considered to be particularly attracted by a diverse and open milieu, as well as being instrumental in creating the type of urban environment that attracts other members of the “creative class” (Florida, 2002b; see also

Boschma & Fritsch, 2007). As such, the location choices of these individuals were judged to be important for the study.

Interviewees were selected using the following criteria: (1) Using the UK DCMS Creative Industries definition, they were working in the “Music and Visual & Performing Arts” sector (SIC07 90.01 Performing arts; SIC07 90.02 Support activities to performing arts; SIC07 90.03 Artistic creation; SIC07 90.04 Operation of arts facilities; and SIC07 59.20 Sound recording and music publishing activities); (2) they were working in a creative role, that is, not in administration; (3) As a proxy for “human capital”, they were educated to at least degree level or an equivalent vocational-level qualification; (4) they had been resident in Birmingham for a minimum of 6 months and a maximum of 10 years and (5) they were self-initiated movers, that is, none were corporate transferees or had moved with parents.

There is no city-level database of firms or organizations where international migrants are working. Interviewees were therefore recruited using personal industry contacts and thereafter “snowball” techniques were used to identify suitable candidates. In such a convenience sample, it was not possible to control for nationality or to select interviewees proportional to the regional migrant profile. Similarly, it was not possible to control for gender or age. The demographic profile of interviewees is summarized in Table 1.

Interview duration was on average around 45 minutes. Key themes covered were the same for all interviews and included open questions about reasons for migration; factors important in attracting migrants to Birmingham; experiences of living and working in Birmingham, including relations with the host society and other migrant communities; intended duration of stay before arriving in Birmingham, whether these plans had changed and why; and future migration plans. Interviews were all recorded and transcribed “*verbatim*”. NVIVO software was used to organize findings according to the topics detailed earlier.

**Table 1. Profile of interviewees**

| Interviewee | Job title                    | Nationality | Gender | Age |
|-------------|------------------------------|-------------|--------|-----|
| C1          | Audience Development Manager | Indian      | F      | 29  |
| C2          | Freelance Artist             | Swedish     | F      | 30  |
| C3          | Freelance Animator           | Greek       | M      | 29  |
| C4          | Freelance Artist             | Taiwanese   | F      | 33  |
| C5          | Art Curator                  | Australian  | F      | 31  |
| C6          | Freelance Musician           | Kurdish     | M      | 31  |
| C7          | Communications Manager       | Indian      | M      | 29  |
| C8          | Music director               | Australian  | M      | 36  |
| C9          | Freelance Visual Artist      | Polish      | F      | 29  |
| C10         | Freelance Visual Artist      | Polish      | F      | 27  |

### Findings: Migrants’ Motivations, Experiences and Trajectories

As already discussed, there is a lack of knowledge of the factors associated with the international movement of the “creative class”—their reasons for migrating; whether or not they prefer locations with specific attributes; the importance of factors such as “diversity” or “tolerance”; and their experiences after migration, particularly relations with the host society and other migrant

communities. Also, as the “creative class” is hypothesized to be hyper-mobile, whether or not these migrants tend to move frequently. In this section, the main results from the qualitative interviews addressing these issues are presented.

### **1. Does Place Attractiveness Matter? Why Skilled Migrants Move to Birmingham**

No evidence was found to support the claim that “creative class” migrants are drawn to places because of a particular set of urban amenities (Florida, 2002a, 2005a, 2005b). Serendipity played a leading role in decisions to move to Birmingham, supporting other research carried out in the region (Green et al., 2007). Indeed, “quality of place” factors were seldom mentioned, thus appearing to be much less influential than the literature may suggest. Personal developmental opportunities associated with international travel and the idea of exploring another culture or developing an international angle to their creative practice were key migration factors for several interviewees (C3, C4, C5 and C8). It was clear, however, that there was no specific desire to move to Birmingham:

I mean the main reason was really to get out of Taiwan and to see the world and develop my career as a more international artist I suppose [...] to break through that sort of international market at the time I felt like I needed to develop my knowledge of international markets. (C4) ...it was more the idea of coming to a different culture that I wanted to explore rather than the specific area. (C3)

Educational opportunities in creative arts programmes not available in migrants’ home countries were also primary attractors, and 6 of the 10 interviewed (C1, C2, C3, C4, C9 and C10) had initially moved to the West Midlands for this reason. Studies indicate that students who spend periods in education abroad are more likely to undertake further migration during their careers (Salt, 1997; Santacreu et al., 2009). Indeed, two interviewees who came to the region for short-term work placements with arts organizations arranged by their home universities both returned to work in the creative sector after graduating. Social networks formed during the initial work placement partly influenced their decision to return, but the potential to find creative-sector employment was also influential:

I found it quite, well, relatively easy to find employment in creative industry which is, it was for me surprising because I was sure, I’m still sure that if I stayed in Poland I wouldn’t be given so many opportunities and chances to do, you know, do what I’m, really stay with my occupation rather than try to do something completely different and basically just earn money. (C9)

Indeed, the initial links developed while studying in the region, both with creative-sector organizations and with peers—some of whom were already working in the local creative sector—were vital for enabling migrants to become quickly networked into the local creative “scene”. Placements, internships and voluntary work were key routes and ways into further creative employment that strongly influenced decisions to stay in Birmingham after graduating:

...as soon as I start my MA and I meet people from the MA—some people older than me that were already working in the region, and suddenly you are in a network of artists that the references into the City of Birmingham in terms of cultural events and art events are happening more often and more often and then you start getting more clued up to the idea of coming here and seeing what’s happening. (C3) I was put in touch with an organisation called XXXX who are a South Asian arts

development agency and I was doing my internship with them, and that's how I kind of went into the arts....So I did my internship with XXXX and then and stayed and worked for them for a year. (C1)

Again, interviewees pointed out that the choice of Birmingham was largely unplanned:

I would be honest, it wasn't a conscious choice as such, it was the fact that I moved here [Birmingham] with my first job, well my internship, really. (C1)

Similarly, two interviewees who were already living and working elsewhere in the UK had both re-located purely because of specific job/career opportunities. One had been travelling in Europe and was living in London when offered a "dream job" with a major Birmingham arts organization:

I lived in London, as most Australians do, on people's floors and I lived in Italy for a little bit and in Germany for a little bit and got some work in London which was really great and that work actually led directly to an interview opportunity, which got me a job here in Birmingham [...] Honestly, I hadn't really thought of moving to Birmingham until I was aware of the job. (C8)

For those looking at alternative locations within the UK, most had considered London, but living expenses were considered prohibitive. Thus, similar to other European research (e.g. Boyle, 2006; Houston et al., 2008; Hansen & Niedomysl, 2009), these findings question whether amenities and place attractiveness are the key determinants of location choice.

## **2. Birmingham as "Cultural Melting Pot": How Attractive is Diversity and Tolerance?**

Another fundamental premise of the "creative class" thesis is that location choice is strongly influenced by high levels of population "diversity", that is, talent is drawn towards socially and culturally mixed places where anyone from any background, race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation can easily "plug in" (Florida, 2002a). Again, little evidence was found to support this claim. Nonetheless, migrants valued Birmingham's "diverse" and "tolerant" culture, which was regarded as a positive aspect in their experiences of living and working in the city.

Most interviewees reported that they knew very little, if anything, about Birmingham before deciding to move there. For some, the city was known merely as the second largest in the UK, and was chosen because of its size; for others, Birmingham was "just a name" (C10). The perception that several had acquired from colleagues, friends, literature, the internet and the Media prior to arrival was largely negative—a grey, post-industrial city with high unemployment and crime levels and social problems associated with the extreme diversity of the population:

Well, I think before I moved here I had a lot of negative press about Birmingham, it was, like, oh my God, you know, you're going to get shot and whatever. (C1)

Those who had already experienced life in the region during periods of study or work placements were more likely to comment positively:

I knew about it [population diversity] after my first visit which was a year before I decided to move and I knew it was encouraging in terms of, I knew that my accent would not seem strange because you have so many strange accents around. So yes definitely it was helping that you did not feel like an outsider, because everybody seems to be from somewhere else. (C10)

Following arrival, most related the feeling of being accepted and the openness to other cultures, resonating with Florida's (2002a, 2005a, 2005b) ideas around "tolerance", although the importance was downplayed by some:

I found out that people here, because they [are] used to live and work with foreigners and refugees, asylum seekers, now they are more friendly here and we are not a stranger anymore. (C6) I think the fact that it's multicultural helped as well, being, you know, somebody who's not from this country. You do feel more accepted, I guess, though it wasn't such a big factor, I don't think. (C1)

None had encountered discrimination or racism or any of the social integration problems associated with some lower skilled migrants living in more migrant-dense areas in the city (see Karner & Parker, 2011). In general, interviewees did not actively frequent these areas of the city, however. Preferences for residential locations, for example, were for the city's "urban villages" (Edgbaston, Moseley, Kings Heath), gentrifying "middle-class" areas populated by professionals and students. These areas were attractive for their mix of local (independent) and 'niche' shops, restaurants and cafes. Only one interviewee (C6) mentioned the importance of living in within a country of origin ethnic community. Interviewees living in less affluent inner-city neighbourhoods had not chosen these because of their "diversity", rather the choice was housing affordability and a central location near work or transport links. Indeed, one interviewee reported feeling uncomfortable about her inner-city neighbourhood:

...it is very scary to go out on a Sunday and there is no one outside, you just wonder what's wrong or is there something not quite right [...] There are kind of a few gangs of youths that scare me pretty much—but they have never caused any trouble to me, but I have seen them cause trouble to others though. (C2)

There were mixed feelings about the integration of different migrant groups. A couple of interviewees (C2 and C8) commented negatively about spatial segregation:

Despite the fact that it is ethnically diverse, I think that it's—and despite me finding many positive things about that—in certain areas, at the same time, I think that it's quite segregated and you know where you can find the wealthy whites, the working class whites, the Pakistanis, the Hindus, so and that's something I never liked. (C8)

Nonetheless, "diversity" appears to have been a positive factor for creative-sector employment. One interviewee (C7) had experienced racism in the media sector in London and had moved to Birmingham specifically because it widened access to job opportunities. Again, this resonates with Florida's ideas around "low entry barriers for human capital" (Florida & Tinagli, 2004, p. 12):

Wherever I was working in London, basically, different media organisations, I was being typecast either to cover Asian stories or because I worked in PR agencies also, you know, handling Asian clients, and one of the things I noticed about Birmingham, was that a large amount of ethnic population was working in mainstream media, which I wanted to do [...] so, yeah, that was one of the reasons I moved to Birmingham it's quite ethnically diverse but also it's quite integrated. (C7)

A freelance visual artist (C3) indicated that multiculturalism brought an added dimension to his work:

here in Birmingham it's [the cultural diversity] a very visible thing, it's very if you want, 'in your face' as well and that I admire because for me the way I understand it is that people are proud about it and people from different communities and different culture are proud to know that Birmingham has a multicultural, has a multicultural environment, community, everything and that gives, as an artist it's very interesting to go and integrate into that community. (C3)

Integration into some artistic fields was more challenging, however. A professional musician (C3) found that his qualifications were not recognized in the UK, and he was only able to continue his music career through his entrepreneurial abilities, by pulling together a group of other migrant musicians to develop an outlet for their musical talents. Significantly, living in Birmingham had enabled him to work with musicians from many different nationalities and to draw on a variety of musical traditions to produce new hybrid musical creations which he felt was highly positive and would not be possible elsewhere:

I maybe know about 30 musicians here in Birmingham and they are from different nationalities, different backgrounds [...] now we have got another band which I am the coordinator of this band, it is called XXXX—we are about eight or nine different nationalities in one band [...] without the band, we couldn't work together and now because all of us we want to work in the music area and we have to come together and work together and when you work together you make a relationship. (C6)

Finally, while cultural "diversity" was mentioned as an attractive element of city life by most interviewees, this was mainly experienced in relation to specific "cultural consumption" opportunities: the different international cuisines available; the abundance of ethnic food shops; the different cultures that were represented in festivals, traditional and modern music and dance productions as well as art exhibitions and cinema were all mentioned positively and often. Again, there was generally very limited contact and interaction with existing migrant communities and neighbourhoods, however. Social networks, for example, generally revolved around work and other creative professionals and people of similar "social capital" (see next section). Interviewees also typically frequented "establishment" cultural venues in or near the city centre (e.g. IKON; Midlands Arts Centre; Symphony Hall; the Rep Theatre; Drum Theatre), or spent time in their own neighbourhoods. Thus rather than breaking down barriers, it could be argued that highly skilled migration reinforces existing divisions (Peck, 2005).

### **3. Should I Stay, or Should I Go? Mapping Migration Trajectories**

The hyper-mobility of the "creative class" (Florida, 2002a, 2005a, 2005b) was the final element to be explored. A complex mix of factors associated with personal and professional network formation, labour market characteristics and related employment and career opportunities primarily influenced migration trajectories. Although a desire for new challenges and perceived "quality of place" elsewhere influenced some, rather than "creative class", "life stage" and career may explain this migration tendency. Most migrants were ambivalent about how long they intended to live and work in Birmingham before they arrived, but none saw it as a long-term or permanent move. As one interviewee stated; "I came here with an idea to leave" (C9). Some intended returning home immediately after finishing their studies; a few were going to try out a job or see what professional development opportunities there were in Birmingham and what living in the city was like; others saw Birmingham as a "starting point" before moving to London:

Initially, when I took this position, it was interim post for 3 months and basically, for me, that 3 months was the testing ground...testing Birmingham, like, can I live here? (C7) I was just going to try it out and see how it goes. I didn't have any set length of time, but I think in the back of my head, you know, thinking about it and I'd always thought I'd move to London at some point, though I didn't, you know, I didn't know when. (C1)

Migratory trajectories did, however, alter over time. Several had stayed in Birmingham much longer than they initially intended. Most stated "work and people" (C8) as the main reasons they had remained. Job satisfaction and close links with the creative and cultural sector in Birmingham were also factors:

I think it's the job—it's job satisfaction and I'm closely associated with the culture industry over here. So, yeah, that's what's basically keeping me here. It's quite fun. (C7)

Several (C1, C2, C4 and C8) had met UK partners or spouses while studying or working in the city, which made any immediate further migration unlikely:

It's different now of course because, well, I'm married now and I have to consider my partner as the reason to stay, although he doesn't mind going back to Taiwan, but I think we just want to see whether we can actually build something here. (C4)

As interviewees became more socially "emplaced" (Scott, 2006b) within personal networks as well as the creative arts community in Birmingham, this inhibited further migration (see also Ryan & Mulholland, 2014). The importance of high quality social networks for gaining work and for career development in the creative sector is widely acknowledged (see Watson, 2012). Migrants all reported access to strong and generally inclusive professional networks, which were important for retention, echoing findings by Boren and Young (2013). The city size (large but not too large) and relatively less well developed creative sector in Birmingham were seen as beneficial in this regard. In comparison with London, for example, interviewees stated that these networks formed more easily and it took less time for people to be recognized professionally:

...in terms of the art community it's more close, you feel like you've made a lot of friends as artists and that's probably something I can't imagine in London because if you go to private views every night you see different people in London but here, because the art community is still quite small, you get to know people quite well. (C4)

These networks existed for more than the strategic reasons outlined by Blair (2009). Work colleagues often also became close friends, and there was a complex intertwining of professional and social networks which tied people to the city:

with my small group of friends, two of whom still live around the corner from us, even though we have moved a lot [in Birmingham], we are very steeped—they have been in Birmingham for probably an additional 5 years on top of me—very steeped into the kind of arts community [...] They were colleagues of mine at XXXX, but we spend a lot of time with them and just gradually widened our circle of friends. (C8) ...because the whole cultural scene is quite closely intertwined with each other, you know, we work a lot with the Birmingham REP, Symphony Hall team, you know...the Hippodrome, Audience Central and all these people, so it was pretty fast and I made a good circle [of friends], so I liked it here...(C7)

Significantly, a number of “push” factors related to lack of perceived or actual job and career opportunities contributed to migrants considering a further move. These findings support other research on the vital importance of “thick labour markets” for attracting as well as retaining creative talent, especially freelancers who migrate to places that offer wider opportunities rather than for specific firm-based jobs (Storper & Scott, 2009; Hracs & Stolarick, 2011). In particular, the draw of London as a world city and global creative capital was mentioned often:

Well, I think it really depends because we can see how it’s developing in terms of our own career and because the more I do here, the more I feel like I belong here, but then at the same time, like all young artists, we’re still looking at London and thinking whether I should go to London or not. (C4)

Other weaknesses discussed included a lack of a strong client base; high competition for a very limited number of artistic commissions; a proliferation of very short-term contracts and little national exposure of Birmingham-based arts. Some felt that their career ambitions were constrained:

The opportunities there are in Birmingham, they’re very limited after a certain level, there’s a full stop to that and you can’t go anywhere, you know? (C7)

The creative vibrancy of Birmingham was also questioned. Some were critical of the support for the creative sector in Birmingham, and saw this declining:

...Birmingham it was quite up and coming for a while, a couple of years ago, but now it’s kind of a lot of artist led spaces closed down and there’s not really much in terms of, not many gallery spaces, not many studio spaces and it just feels like you need to kind of do it yourself. Which is fine, but if there is not much else going on, it’s not, there’s no infrastructure or not enough infrastructure. (C9)  
...making money seems to be the priority for the city council or to host promotional events for the city. No organic development seems to be supported or appreciated by the city council.(C2)

The external perception that working as a creative professional in Birmingham was somehow “second rate” was also a “push” factor—some interviewees thought that remaining in the city would harm their careers:

...if I go anywhere else in the UK and say I live in Birmingham, people ask me why, why you are an artist and you live in Birmingham, because they don’t see Birmingham as a city where creative industries are developed. (C10)

Longer term, most were still “open to” the possibility of further moves. A general desire for “new challenges” was expressed by some:

I do, at some point fairly soon, actually, want to move out, but, I mean, there isn’t anything pushing me, there’s nothing about the city that’s pushing me out of there, as such, I just feel that I’m ready for other challenges [...] I mean, to be honest, I think, you know, the more I live it, I like it better, but I don’t see myself just staying here for, you know, for the rest of my life or anything. (C1)

Resonating with Florida’s (2002a) “quality of place”, a desire to experience life and work in other cities which were regarded as culturally “more vibrant” and more “cosmopolitan” or which offered a “better lifestyle” (more relaxed way of life; better weather; better social environment) or a more

attractive physical environment was expressed. These possibilities were largely speculative, and included mainly international cities (Berlin, Paris, Chicago, New York and Melbourne). Only Bristol and London were mentioned as alternatives within the UK. The feeling was that these moves would also be temporary, however, an experience, before moving somewhere more permanent. This tendency for further migration may relate more to “life stage” and career stage than a particular “creative class” migration tendency, however. None of the interviewees had children, so their motilities were seemingly less hindered for further moves. For example, several (C2, C4, C5 and C8) indicated that they would consider re-locating back home permanently when starting a family. Furthermore, career trajectories were also at a formative stage and more fluid, demanding a certain degree of mobility for further development, and international locations were seen as a way of fulfilling this. Ryan and Mulholland (2014) similarly found that “life-stage” issues significantly influenced the mobility of highly skilled migrants in London.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The presence of a diverse, vibrant, culturally cosmopolitan urban environment is increasingly regarded as a key, distinctive and competitive requirement for cities wishing to attract (and retain) the hyper-mobile “creative class” (Florida, 2002a, 2005a, 2005b; Musterd & Murie, 2010). Much recent UK and European urban policy has focused on developing the tools necessary for cities to achieve this, and a proliferation of “creative city” strategies have emerged, focused on developing urban “quality of place”. At the same time, only limited—and mainly quantitative—research has been undertaken to provide an understanding of the factors associated with the location choices of these workers. This paper is a first step towards a better understanding of the migration dynamics of the “creative class”. The focus has been on a qualitative analysis of the motivations, experiences and migration trajectories of “creative Bohemians” working in the Music and Visual & Performing Arts sectors in Birmingham, UK.

Rather than urban “quality of place” (Florida, 2002a, 2005a, 2005b), migration for these individuals was motivated primarily by factors related to higher education and personal and career development opportunities as well as creative employment within the city. Thus, while the “creative class” may be attracted to cities such as London, Paris, Amsterdam or New York because of “quality of place”, these findings challenge the idea that international talent might be attracted to second-tier cities purely because of a set of urban amenities. Rather, they support findings from a number of other recent studies (e.g. Houston et al., 2008; Hansen & Nedomysl, 2009; Storper & Scott, 2009; Bore ´n & Young, 2013) demonstrating that jobs, far more than amenities, govern these decisions. Indeed, these findings question whether the attraction power of specific urban amenities deserves to be highlighted in urban development policy for such cities.

Similarly, little evidence was found to support claims that location choice is strongly influenced by high levels of population “diversity”—migrants were largely unaware of Birmingham’s culturally diverse population or reputation for tolerance before moving there. Again, these findings substantiate other UK-based research (e.g. Nathan, 2007). Nonetheless, socio-cultural aspects did play some role. Similar to findings by Houston et al. (2008) migrants valued the “tolerant” and “diverse” culture in Birmingham, which were seen as positive factors in experiences of both living and working in the city. Resonating with Florida’s ideas around “low entry barriers for human capital” (Florida & Tinagli, 2004, p. 12), this appeared to offer advantages by opening up

opportunities in “mainstream” creative occupations. There was also some (limited) indication that the mix of different cultures and influences in the city enabled artistic innovation and facilitated new “inter-cultural” products (see also Ghilardi, 2005). Further research is needed to understand how commonplace this tendency is in the creative industries more widely and how this leads, or not, to the types of innovation and knowledge flows identified by Florida (and others) as precursors to economic prosperity.

Nonetheless, “diversity” was mainly experienced in relation to “cultural consumption” opportunities and there was limited contact and interaction with existing migrant neighbourhoods and communities. Social networks, for example, generally revolved around work and other creative professionals and people of similar “social capital” and interviewees typically frequented “establishment” cultural venues in or near the city centre, or spent time in their own neighbourhoods. Thus rather than breaking down barriers, it could be argued that highly skilled migration may reinforce existing divisions (Peck, 2005).

Similar to findings by Ryan and Mulholland (2014, p. 587), rather than a permanent settlement versus high-mobility binary, migrants gradually extended their stay, while keeping their future options open. Although initial moves to Birmingham were considered temporary, migrants quickly became socially “emplaced” (Scott, 2006b). Several had met their partner or spouse while studying or working in the city, which made immediate further migration unlikely. Access to strong and generally inclusive professional networks—often developed during study—positively influenced retention, echoing findings by Bore ´n and Young (2013). Significantly, these networks existed for more than the strategic reasons outlined by Blair (2009): work colleagues often became close friends, and there was a complex intertwining of the professional and social. It is unclear how typical this pattern of network formation is. City size and hierarchy and the extent and/ or growth stage of the creative sector may be crucial, but these issues have received almost no attention in the “creative class” literature (Bore ´n & Young, 2013) and deserve further attention.

Significantly, a number of “push” factors associated with a lack of perceived or actual job and career opportunities contributed to migrants considering a further move. The creative vibrancy of Birmingham and local-level support for the sector were also questioned. These findings substantiate other research on the vital importance of “thick labour markets” for attracting as well as retaining creative talent, especially freelance creative workers who migrate to places that offer wider opportunities rather than for specific firm-based jobs (Hracs & Stolarick, 2011; Storper & Scott, 2009). In particular, the draw of London as a world city and global creative capital was mentioned often. Cities such as Birmingham may easily lose the skills and innovation capacity they are attempting to build up if they do not address these issues, and there may be very little policymakers can do in terms of “place attractiveness” to mitigate against the departure of the “creative class”.

Nonetheless, a desire for “new challenges” or experiencing life and work in other cities which were regarded as culturally “more vibrant” and more “cosmopolitan” or which offered a “better lifestyle” were also expressed. This may relate more to “life stage” and career stage than a particular “creative class” migration tendency, however. Interviewees were all in their 20s or early 30s, recently graduated and none had children, so their mobility was seemingly less hindered. Several, for example, indicated that they would consider relocating back home when starting a family. Ryan and Mulholland (2014) likewise found that “life stage” significantly influenced the mobility of the highly

skilled migrants they interviewed in London. Boyle (2006) found that while Dublin was attractive to younger migrants, it was less attractive when thinking of starting a family. Certain cities may therefore only be “attractive” to migrants at certain points in their lives. Furthermore, career trajectories were at a formative and more fluid stage, demanding a certain degree of mobility for further development, and international locations were seen as a way of fulfilling this. This resonates with the existing literature on motives for highly skilled migration (see Scott, 2006b). Also, Markusen (2006) found that occupational characteristics (e.g. high levels of self-employment) made creatives more “footloose” rather than a desire for “quality of place”. Further research is needed to explore whether these findings are applicable to other demographics of the “creative class”.

In sum, these initial findings call for a more nuanced understanding of the factors associated with the both the attraction and retention of international “creative class” workers as it is clear that migration decisions depend on a far more complex mixing of factors rather than simply “quality of place” and that what is key to attraction may also differ from that of retention. Hracs and Stolarick (2011), for example, have developed a three-stage model of locational expectations, satisfaction and mobility which offers potential.

The prolific spread of urban policies based on “creative city” strategies has been criticized on a number of accounts. Many are poorly adjusted to the specificities of particular urban contexts (Musterd & Murie, 2010) and often they are “narrowly fixated on a particular vision of a diverse city” (Syrett & Sepulveda, 2011, p. 499). As Peck observes, policies which focus on creating attractive, sanitized, middle-class environments and utilizing culture for “consumption-oriented place-promotion” (Peck, 2005, p. 761) risk further segregation within already segregated cities. Landry (2008) additionally notes that creativity may suffer if existing ethnic groups withdraw into their own cultures as a defence against change.

Instead, carefully targeted policies that address the socio-economic, cultural and physical realities of cities are required (Houston et al., 2008; Musterd & Murie, 2010). This includes recognition that international talent is attracted by more than abstract concepts of place attractiveness. Rather, policies are required to ensure access to a diversity of creative labour market opportunities both to attract and retain talent in the longer term. Localized creative infrastructures are also vital, and the significance of accessible and inclusive local creative networks cannot be overlooked. As Boren and Young (2013, p. 206) indicate, “How these networks operate [...] has a variety of impacts on artists’ mobility and also has implications for the degree to which cities offer low entry barriers to those in ‘creative’ occupations.”

At the same time, the “problematic issues” of policy aimed at attracting a high-skilled international workforce need to be addressed: increased spatial inequalities, segregation and socio-economic exclusion of lower skilled host and migrant communities are often the unintended consequences. As Ghilardi (2005, p. 5) notes “urban policy needs to move beyond the orthodoxy of ‘multiculturalism’ which [...] accentuates difference and even separation, to ‘interculturalism’ in which the interaction of cultures and communities becomes a driver of innovation and growth”. This is seldom seen in UK urban policy, however, which often lacks joined-up thinking and a comprehensive approach to economic development and spatial and community planning. New approaches to the design of contemporary urban living space that allow for cultural mixing and social integration are required. But before cities re-design themselves in order to reap the “diversity dividend” (Syrett & Sepulveda,

2011), further qualitative research is needed to better understand the real needs, attitudes and preferences that influence the locational choices of highly skilled migrants and how relationships with existing communities can be strengthened and made conducive to cross-cultural knowledge exchanges that lead both to wider economic gains and that also support and enhance the creation of culturally rich and socially just cities.

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### **Notes**

1. Florida and Tinagli (2004) focussed their European analysis at the national level.
2. ONS (2011b). Adapted from Table EE1.
3. Accurately assessing that the size of the creative industries is notoriously difficult, and the data and statistical issues well documented (see UIS, 2009).

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