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Migration & Identity

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With a new introduction by the editors

Memory and Narrative Series
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Introduction to the Transaction Edition

Revisiting *Migration and Identity*

**Rina Benmayor and Andor Skotnes**

More than a decade has transpired since the original publication of this volume. And yet, the introduction we wrote some eleven years ago feels unusually relevant today, as the twenty-first century sets in. If anything, economic and political migration has increased across the globe, intensifying fear and reaction, and, at the same time, creating more zones of cultural contact with creative constructions of identity and belonging. Rather than becoming outdated, the essays in this volume marked the onset of “globalization” in the 1990s, and its social, cultural, and political consequences.

A decade ago, Western Europe was just beginning to see waves of undocumented migrants reach its shores. Today, this economic migration is as commonplace in Italy or Spain as it is on the U.S. Mexican border. In the United States, the 2000 census shows that Asian and Latino migration to the United States continues to grow, with Latinos promising to become the largest “minority” by 2020. As the United States has worked to consolidate its position as the “remaining superpower,” it has everywhere pressed its doctrine of (selective) free trade, opening much of the world to the rapid movement of U.S. and Western capital, followed by the rapid migration of impoverished “third world” workers, seeking to survive by working in what is becoming a global network of *maquiladoras*.

The years 1993-2005 are now indelibly marked by September 11. Anti-immigrant demagogy and hysteria were again amplified in the United States by this watershed event, and have likewise been on the increase elsewhere. Popular initiatives designed to deny undocumented
immigrants basic social services, and to compel officials and professionals to report suspected "illegals" to the authorities have, in recent years, become commonplace. New laws—such as the infamous Patriot Act in the United States—sanctioned by the so-called "war on terrorism" are greatly expanding the national security apparatus in many developed countries, and are subjecting many immigrants—especially Muslims and Arabs—to governmental harassment, special procedures, expulsion, or, in some cases, long-term detention. Anti-Islamic racism and right-wing xenophobia have both grown apace across North America and Europe.

Additionally, news of devastation and forced migration due to war has pervaded the last decade. From the wars in the former Yugoslavia, to the genocide in Rwanda, to the decades-long civil war in Sudan, tens of millions have fled their homes to cross borders of all types, and all too often to end up living and dying in the squalor of refugee camps. Then there is Afghanistan, Iraq, and Israel/Palestine.

Not all is dismal, though. In a number of countries, progressive movements with deep roots among displaced peasants, migrating workers, and urban immigrants have won important victories. In our introduction a decade ago, we noted, as did Dagnino in her essay, that the Partido dos Trabalhadores in Brazil had a strong base among these constituencies; since then the PT has won important electoral victories including the presidency of the country.

Overall, then, the last decade has seen millions and millions of people grappling, in circumstances sometimes extreme and sometimes routine, with the realities of migration, with people from cultures very different from their own, and with their identities as migrants. Migration continues to be, as we argued some eleven years ago, a fundamental feature of our times.

In the last decade, the framework of transnationalism has come to describe much more accurately the realities experienced by most migrant groups. Transnational scholarship has amply confirmed that migration is a bi-directional phenomenon and that even those who have been outside their native countries for several generations actively maintain transnational circuits of kinship, economy, and culture (Rouse 1991; Basch et al. 1994; Smith 1999; Portes et al. 1999; Faist 2000). Our understanding of national and ethnic identities, as a result, has become more complex and multicultural (Hudson and Réno
1999), intersected by gender (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003), generation (Chamberlain 1998), and racial constructions (Cordero-Guzmán and Smith 2001). Increased attention has also been paid to theoretical framings of how migrants constitute themselves as new social actors and citizens (Hall and Held 1990), reasserting and redefining who they are and what they want to become. Concepts of “cultural citizenship” (Flores and Benmayor 1997) and “flexible citizenship” (Ong 1999) signal ways in which people are thinking and feeling “beyond the nation” (Robbins 1998). For migration scholars from across the humanities and social sciences, life stories, oral histories, and personal testimonies are still primary texts for understanding how migrants construct identities in the context of globalization and transnationalism.

As noted in our original introduction, the essays in this volume exemplify the attention of oral historians to the impact of economic and political migration, war and displacement, cultural contact, and new hybrid identities. The essays suggest a “doubling”—to borrow Homi Bhabha’s term—of our own identities and practices as investigators, analysts, and social activists. In some instances, scholars whose own lives are marked by migrant experiences have turned the microphone on themselves, using oral history and testimonio as a vehicle for new theorizing about identity, history, and solidarity (Latina Feminist Group 2001). The exploration of memory has moved to the center of oral history work, including studies of migration and globalization (see Chamberlain and Leydesdorff 2004 for an excellent overview). Marking this same trend, the International Oral History Association’s bi-annual conferences attest to a proliferation of interest in migration and its cultural implications on all continents. Themes like “Memory and Globalization,” of the 2004 conference in Rome organized by Alessandro Portelli, attracted perhaps the largest number of scholars in the Association’s history and emphasized the interdependence of memory, narrative, and politics in our field. In the closing plenary, Estela Carloto, president of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, gave a deeply moving presentation of a new Archive of Memory to the “Desaparecidos” in Argentina. This archive, comprised of audio tapes, testimonies, and photographs, is more than a public commemoration of those who were brutally murdered by the dictatorship. For the many children of the disappeared who were
stolen from their parents and illegally adopted, the archive stands as a resource to enable them to discover who their birth parents and families were and to reclaim their histories and identities. Other projects like the massive 9/11 memory project of the Columbia University Oral History Research Office, and the complex work of oral historians with “Truth and Reconciliation” commissions in South Africa, Rwanda, Argentina, Guatemala, and Chile, remind us that the memory and testimonies of migrants, refugees, victims, and survivors are fundamental to our humanity, our identities, our practices as oral historians, and our futures.

References


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I

Some Reflections on Migration and Identity

RINA BENMAYOR and ANDOR SKOTNES

It's mid-1993, and as we write this introduction, we wonder about the continuing resonance of the theme—Migration and Identity—which we chose some three years ago. But a cursory look at the daily news confirms that, in fact, the issue looms large everywhere and will continue to do so.

The New York Times recently reported that Asians are the fastest growing immigrant group in the United States today. Only a short time ago, we were being warned that 'Hispanics' would constitute a full 25 per cent of the US population by the twenty-first century. The persistent metaphor of 'invading hordes', whether 'brown' or 'yellow', permeates the media and the 'white' mind. Its analogue in Western Europe is the hysterical fear of Islamization among whites in France, Great Britain, and Germany. Meanwhile, 300 'illegal' Chinese immigrants run aground in a leaking freighter off Queens, New York, after a journey of more than 100 days, and eight die before the rescue; the captain and crew have been arrested and the survivors—like thousands of Haitian refugees before them—have been carted off to detention jails by Immigration. Some proponents of the unsettled North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) claim that it will stem the tide of undocumented Mexicans and Central Americans who run or wade across into 'el Norte', evading the infra-red eye of the border patrol. Likewise, some hope that the Treaty of Schengen will close Europe forever to the relatives and even children of immigrants who have already arrived.

The news continues. Famine and civil wars have pushed Somali clans off their lands, turning them into economic as well as political refugees, if indeed they have managed to stay alive. The four-year-old civil war in Liberia has claimed the lives of another 300 refugees in a massacre no one claims as theirs. CNN gives us up-to-the-minute, daily images of genocidal ethnic cleansing and forced removal of
peoples from their homes in the former Yugoslavia. Neo-Nazi skinheads in Germany burn Turkish immigrant women and children in the latest wave of racist violence. Meanwhile, the French Government announces the creation of a special police division to stem the tide of non-EC undocumented workers. Foreigners will be required to carry residency permits on their persons at all times for police checks.

Other reports indicate that today, one-half to two-thirds of immigrants crossing borders (the ‘South/North’ ‘East/West’ narratives continue) are women and children—the feminization of global migration? Migrant women everywhere punch into their global assembly factories, if there is one within commuting distance. When the factories relocate and the region ‘restructures’, they will be left more likely to face chronic unemployment or perhaps another migration. Meanwhile, black African day labourers gather on street corners in southern Italian towns, waiting to be ‘picked’ for walnut-picking. Latino men do very much the same on the street corners of Los Angeles, as do migrants from the countryside in front of the National Cathedral in Mexico City, and in downtown Rio de Janeiro, Bangkok, and Manila.

The scenarios of mass disruption abound. At the same time, resistance is manifest, and more creative, hopeful responses appear. Indeed, political resistance, cultural transformations, and constructions of complex identities are at work everywhere. Poor, disenfranchised communities, predominantly communities of ‘colour’—to use the US terminology—continue to press for basic issues of justice and equal rights (even if they have to riot to do so: Rodney King). The Turks of Germany, like other migrant communities in Europe, oppose Fascist terror in tenuous alliances with German anti-racists. The importance of building bridges across national and ethnic lines could not be more apparent, even when it seems so hard to achieve. The dwellers of the shanty towns, the villas miseria, the favelas of Latin America—and, no doubt, of Africa and Asia as well—create new communal forms that are often political and sometimes have dramatic effect, as in the case of Brazil where social movements find expression in the increasingly successful Partido dos Trabalhadores. The emigrants and return-migrants of Barbados continue to lace together a complex network of communities in the Caribbean, Britain, and North America. Some immigrant groups in the Netherlands, France and Germany achieve a degree of economic integration and become upwardly mobile,
without homogenizing culturally; the relatively affluent ethnic Chinese of Australia are in the process of rebuilding their connection with their ancestral home after several generations of detachment. Mexicans as far north as Brooklyn, New York, construct transnational identities; they are Latinos in New York and at the same time continue to be active citizens in their towns and villages in Puebla, Mexico.

Problems of migration and the resulting reconfigurations of social identity are fundamental issues for the 1990s. The collection of essays in this, the third volume of *The International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories*, explores these issues in a number of recent social settings, from a number of methodological perspectives. These essays are focused ‘case-studies’, that aim to contribute to the general understanding of migration. They offer glimpses into the interior of migration experiences, into the processes of constructing and reconstructing identity, without forgetting that, both theoretically and empirically, the problem of identity is a complex and multi-faceted one. They all rely heavily on oral history and personal testimony, highlighting the experience of individuals and small groups, without ignoring the tension that exists between the local and the global. In the introductory pages that follow we, as special editors of this volume want to take turns offering some thoughts on these three elements—the general phenomenon of migration, the construction of identity, and the relationship of personal testimony to the global experience—and thereby suggest some framework for thinking about the essays in this collection.

RB and AS

As a historian, born of several migrations, I believe that migration demands the kind of close, detailed study offered in the following essays. As a social scientist working in the broad traditions of Marxism, though, I feel that a dialectic always needs to be established between the detailed and the general, the local and the global. Of course, the authors in this volume frequently point to the general implications of their localized studies and suggest more global conclusions. However, in this introduction, I want to strengthen the global side of the equation a bit by offering a few general comments on the question of migration and, along the way, explaining some of the parameters we set for this volume.

The main point of our opening paragraphs above was to show, with
a number of examples, that migration is a basic feature of social life throughout the world today. Moreover, by means of these examples, we want to suggest that the sheer scale and geographic sweep of current migratory movements indicates that the causes of these movements are fundamental, located in the basic structures of an increasingly interlocked world system. These points may not appear to be controversial at first glance, but they run against the grain of much common-sense thinking about migration and are ultimately subversive of certain widely held conceptions. Against all evidence, there is a strong tendency, especially in the ‘advanced’ countries, for observers and ‘opinion-makers’ of all sorts—journalists, politicians, scholars—to treat migrations, no matter what their scale, as isolated, random events, outside of the central thrust of social development. Massive population movements are viewed de facto as accidents of history, the result of unusual circumstances, catastrophes, deviations from the norm. After all, the dominating discourses of world capitalist culture tell us that modern society is supposed to be stable and prosperous. Despite the fact that the economic power brokers of the advanced countries frequently foster immigration to form pools of cheap labour power, or stimulate it through their interventions in underdeveloped economies, we are encouraged to believe that something as disruptive as migration has to be marginal, transitional, aberrant. Moreover, we are encouraged to think of the migrants as deviants, as the cause of disruption. Migrants themselves are subject to these ideological notions. Towards the end of his essay in this volume, Iván Jakšić, who details his own odyssey from political exile to immigrant, tells of the watershed in his life when he realized that his individual migration experience was a common one, ‘part of a much larger human experience’. We all need to embrace this insight for what it suggests about the world today—and for the perspective it throws on the essays in this volume.

It is necessary to add that there is nothing historically unique about the dramatic importance of migration to the current world situation. While there have been quantitative ups and downs, massive migration has been a constant to the last five centuries of world history and has frequently been a key determinant of global developments. Take the Americas as an example. Between the late fifteenth century and the present, the social and ecological realities of these continents were totally and repeatedly remade by the successive movements of hundreds of millions of Europeans, Africans, and Asians to and throughout the ‘New World’. Moreover—and this reality is often
obscured by the popular notion that the countries of the Americas are 'nations of immigrants'—the indigenous peoples of the Americas were forced to migrate and remigrate to survive waves of genocidal colonialis onslaught; this migration, too, continues to this day. In other words, one cannot think accurately or effectively about society and history in the Americas without thinking about migration.

It is not just the Americas, though. Everywhere modern social relations have penetrated, massive and repeated population dislocations have resulted: from the countryside to the city, between socio-economic regions, across national boundaries, between major ethno-linguistic spheres, from continent to continent. Migrants have moved long distances or short, once or several times; they have often returned to their point of origin, and the process of leaving and returning has sometimes continued over generations. Whether large-scale or small, forced (and it has very often been forced) or voluntary, compelled by war, famine, social disruption, or the hope for a better life, the complex phenomenon of migration has been fundamental to the whole modern epoch. Such an understanding locates the essays in this book, all of which focus on recent decades, as studies of the latest phase of a long, multi-faceted, world-historical process. And again, this historical understanding of migration is potentially subversive for it challenges certain popular myths of progress and of historical development. Moreover, the essays in this volume study many forms of migration resulting from many different causes; two essays—one by Dorothy Zinn, the other by Francesca Battisti and Alessandro Portelli—even suggest similarities and partial convergences between migration and tourism.

One of the most important myths challenged by this epochal view of migration is the notion that the nation-state—a culturally homogeneous society occupying a distinct territory, governed by a unitary state structure—is at once the natural and ideal basic unit of modern political organization. Of course, outside of the partial exception of a few Western European countries, very few contemporary states were constructed encompassing anything close to an ethnically homogeneous population. But, the myth tells us, as society stabilizes and develops within the framework of a state, ethnicities assimilate, nationalities fuse, and the nation consolidates. Now it often doesn’t work this way for reasons of class, racist, and ethnic oppression that is internally structured into various nation-states. But it especially doesn’t work this way because massive migration is a permanent feature of the world
system, constantly undermining tendencies towards ethnic homogenization in a given country, and condemning the nation-state, as an ideal and a reality, to varying degrees of perpetual and endemic crisis. If one lives within the ideology of the nation-state, one can never admit this endemic crisis and, to come full circle, can never view migration in its modern, epochal forms and complexity as anything but marginal, episodic—and destructive. All of the essays in this book, in one way or another, include stories of cultural and ethnic tension related to the contradiction between the reality of migration and the myth of the nation-state. These range from stories of explicit racial rejection, like those of Dorothy Zinn’s Senegalese informants in southern Italy or Gadi Ben-Ezer’s Ethiopian Jewish (Falasha) interviewees in Israel, to accounts of the subtle and complex ambivalences of self-identity as in Mario García’s essay about a young Mexican-American woman weaning herself from her local community in order to escape poverty.

Now here are a couple of comments on some parameters we as special editors, in consultation with the Yearbook editorial board in Europe, set for this collection of essays on migration and identity. Although the migrations studied in this volume cover, in their origins and destinations, much of the globe, the majority of these essays (six out of ten) are largely on American—North, Central, South, and Caribbean—experiences. There are several reasons for this emphasis. While there has been much transatlantic editorial interaction, we as primary volume editors live in North America and the main frame of reference for our intellectual work is the Americas. Secondly, the international literature in oral history has tended to be more heavily comprised of European-based experiences. Our relative focus here on the Americas is offered as a step towards globalizing the dialogue.

But there is another reason as well. At a recent panel on the quincentenary of Columbus and the Conquest at my college, an African historian from Nigeria and a North American ethnographer of the Mayan peoples both suggested that the study of the migration-related experiences of the Americas may offer particularly important insights to the whole world because of the range of these experiences, the degree to which migration has structured American societies, and the resulting complexity of multiculturalism within these societies. They are by no means alone in making this suggestion. Similar sentiments are being voiced by European intellectuals in countries that are grappling with unprecedented in-migrations of peoples from Africa and Asia, often from formerly colonialized societies. We feel
that there is something to these sentiments, that they should be tested, and that at the very least an emphasis on the diverse migration experiences of the Americas is a good way to stimulate further intercontinental comparison. We offer this collection in this spirit.

Beyond the emphasis on the Americas, this volume focuses on voices and experiences often underrepresented in studies of migration history: those of ‘marginalized’, ‘post-colonial’, ‘Third World’ peoples ‘of colour’. The multiplicity of ambiguous terms and quotation marks in the last sentence requires explanation, and that explanation takes us back to certain fundamentals of the epochal history of migration. What we are talking about is ‘race’, not as a biological category, but a shifting line of demarcation, culturally constructed and reconstructed over the last five centuries. From the European expansion of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, hierarchical conceptualizations of race and colour have evolved to sanction and promote European colonialis and neo-colonialist practices—and the migratory movements that resulted. A kind of internally complex, ever-changing grand master narrative of colour was established and continues to function to this day.

Of course racial conceptions are inconsistent between societies and even within societies. A friend was born and grew up in South Africa where he was officially classified as coloured (of mixed descent); when he moved to the United States he ‘became’ black; when he lived in Brazil for a period, he was surprised to discover that Brazilian friends considered him to be white. At every stop in my friend’s journeys his socially-defined racial identity was different, but (and this is the critical point) at each stop his racial identity closed certain possibilities to him and opened others. Elizabeth Crespo, in her essay in this collection, tells a similar story (with similar consequences) of a Puerto Rican woman who became ‘coloured’ and the object of racial discrimination when she moved from the island to New York. On a world-wide scale, too, racial conceptualization is often vague and contradictory: Latin-Americans, who commonly view their societies as mixtures of all ‘races’, are often viewed by the dominant ideologies of Europe and North America, as unvaryingly ‘brown’. Like ethnicity in general, racialized ethnicity is constructed and reconstructed as a dominant group defines the subordinated as outsiders, the foreigners as strangers, and the content of these definitions changes with various global, national, and regional frames. Also like ethnicity in general, racialized ethnicity can become a basis for community, for resistance, for the assertion of self-determination by the oppressed, and
definitions can be transformed in the context of particular struggles. Despite all the complexity, inconsistency, and even absurdity, racial categorization is none the less pervasive and fundamental, and draws basic demarcations between migratory experiences.

This volume, then, has been shaped from the perspective that migration is a critical problem today; that it has been central to the whole modern epoch; and that for us now, it is especially important to comprehend the variety of migration-related experiences of peoples relegated to the subordinate side of the colour line.

Returning for a moment to the relevance of our theme, we should point out that our desire to put together a volume on migration and identity arose from an understanding that these two issues are profoundly interconnected. Bringing these links into view helps to recast both concepts analytically. The dominant tendency, both in popular thinking and in much of the literature, is to define migration as a single movement in space and a single moment in time. The focus falls on the act of crossing, or the more or less finite period in which relocation takes place. Underlying this approach is the assumption that at a certain point, migration ends and a process of assimilation/integration and upward mobility begins.

As I have learnt from working in the Puerto Rican community in New York City for more than a decade, migration—especially for subordinated, racialized groups—is a long-term if not life-long process of negotiating identity, difference, and the right to fully exist and flourish in the new context. This understanding of migration is borne out by many examples in this volume: the examples of Puerto Rican women in New York, West Indian families in Britain or in the Caribbean, Brazilian peasants in the urban metropolis, Chicanos moving within their colonized lands, and even transnationalized ‘Third World’ students and intellectuals. Being a ‘migrant’ is often a negative identity imposed by the dominant culture on generations of descendants of those who made the trip. Thus, in our usage, the experience and effects of migration are long-term and critical in shaping and reshaping both collective and individual identities. Seen this way, migration becomes a more dynamic concept.

Something similar can be said for the way contemporary global migration has disrupted static conceptions of identity, challenging notions of cultural homogeneity, essentialism, and stereotype. Not only
are nation-states being forced to confront their own myths of cultural unity or racialized purity. New generations born out of mixed ethnic/racial, and cross-cultural marriages resist conformity to an ‘assimilated’ norm (whether that of the dominant society or of the home culture) and affirm instead a more consciously complex notion of who they are. Indeed, cross-cultural marriage itself is a key arena in which migration-related identities are refined, redefined, and transformed, as Catherine Delcroix et al. showed in an earlier article in Life Stories;¹ in such cases, the potential for remarkable multicultural syncretism exists, as does the possibility for acute contradiction, and even worse as we are reminded by the excruciating tragedy of Bosnia.

In response to this complexity, critical analysis has now come to pose identity as constructed, multi-faceted, negotiated, situational, or, according to some, fragmented. It is around this latter point that the politics of identity plays out. On the one hand, social movements of disenfranchised people are placing a wide range of identity issues on the public agenda—from those that address class, race, sexual, and gender inequality, ethnic and religious persecution, to those that arise around vital human concerns for health, the environment, ageing, and so on. Through such struggles, people constitute themselves as social subjects and actors, reasserting and redefining who they are and what they want to become. On the other hand, the crisis of political models and systems, from socialism to national liberation, has made it much more difficult for these movements around identities and rights to have substantial political impact and to make major structural improvements to people’s life chances. None the less, as several essays in this book point out (especially those of Evelina Dagnino, William Westerman, and Gadi Ben-Ézer), communities continue to organize around claims to human and cultural rights. They challenge entrenched institutions and dominant ideologies. They confront the state, and in the process, redefine notions of citizenship and participation that are based on new concepts of equality through difference.

By way of commenting on the contemporary politics of identity, let me turn for a moment to the media, to one of my particular TV addictions, because popular culture sometimes helps us to crystallize the conundrums of current cultural conflicts. ‘Northern Exposure’ is a top-of-the-charts series that takes on, chiefly through parody, many of the post-modern identity debates. Cicely—a fictional town in northern Alaska, founded at the turn of the century as a community of free thinkers by two northern California lesbians (!!!)—serves as a