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Photography and 21st-Century Migration

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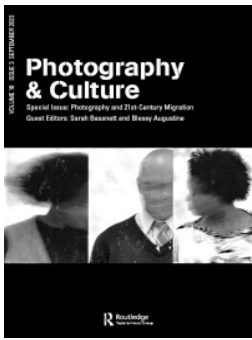
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Photography and 21st-Century Migration

Sarah Bassnett  and
Blessy Augustine

During the spring of 2015, the news was rife with stories of migration. That was when Mexican author Valeria Luiselli began working as a volunteer court translator for unaccompanied children seeking asylum in the United States (US). In this role, she endeavored to make sense of information provided by children from Central American countries such as Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala for immigration lawyers defending them against deportation (Luiselli 2017). In order to build their defense, non-profit organizations offering legal representation to these children designed an intake questionnaire aimed at gathering necessary information. Its forty questions are the scaffolding for the narratives the lawyers would present in federal immigration court and the framework for Luiselli's own story, *Tell Me How It Ends*.

The questions on the form may sound straightforward to an adult: why did you come to the United States? Where did you cross the border? But children struggle to respond. When asked the first question, one child answers, "Because I wanted to arrive" (99). Other questions seek information about the journey, such as how did you travel here? Did you stay in touch with your parents? Still others focus on the child's life in their country of origin: who did you live with in your home country? Did you go to school? Did you ever have trouble with gangs or crime? Luiselli describes the feeling of trying to stitch together the fragments children provide into the kind of story lawyers can use to build immigration cases (Luiselli 2017). She reflects on the variability and multiplicity of stories, as well as the elusiveness of meaning. At the same time, she conveys both the limits of narrative and its necessity. Stories that are fragmented, inconsistent, or circuitous are perhaps those that are most in need of telling. She writes:

There are things that can only be understood retrospectively, when many years have passed and the story has ended. In the meantime, while the story continues, the only thing to do is tell it over and over again as it develops, bifurcates, knots around itself. And it must be told, because before anything can be understood, it has to be narrated many times, in many different words and from many different angles, by many different minds (96–97).

In reminding us that we make sense of uncertainty by telling stories, Luiselli shows how important multiple iterations and perspectives are in unraveling the bifurcations of migration stories amidst the rapidly changing political landscape of the twenty first century.

This special issue of *Photography and Culture* takes as its premise the idea that stories are essential for coming to terms with experiences of migration. Push factors, especially pressures from war, poverty, and the climate crisis, have contributed to the forced displacement of millions of people around the world. Pull factors are also at play, prompting people to leave their country of origin for new opportunities elsewhere. Written accounts of these experiences have explored in graphic detail what is at stake in these journeys. For instance, since the 1990s, Mexican American writer Luís Alberto Urrea has considered the reasons why people leave their homes and the daunting challenges they experience trying to get to the US (Urrea 1993, 2005). Salvadoran journalist Óscar Martínez offers first-hand accounts of the ordeals faced by migrants on the journey through Mexico, including accidents on the trains and kidnappings, sometimes because of collusion between Mexican authorities and the cartels (Martínez 2014). These and many other authors open the way for greater understanding of both motivations for and experiences of migration.

Photographers, artists, and curators have similarly been at the forefront of attempts to chronicle and reflect on migration. Photojournalists and documentary photographers have acted as visual storytellers, informing viewers around the world about the causes and the consequences of 21st-century mass migration. Marie Dorigny, John Moore, and Jérôme Sessini are just a few examples. Meanwhile, different kinds of stories by contemporary artists such as Kader Attia and Reena Saini Kallat have offered nuanced interpretations of migration as it relates to ethical and legal principles, experiences of displacement and diaspora, as well as questions of identity and belonging. These explorations consider many forms of migration, including both forced and voluntary, as well as

temporary and permanent, and they account for the way experiences vary according to factors including citizenship, financial resources, and identity categories. Curators, critics, and cultural theorists have similarly played an important role in bringing discussions of issues such as diaspora, displacement, and spectacle to the forefront (Demos 2013, Respini and Erickson 2019, Mezzara 2019).

The scholarship on photography and migration has addressed related issues through stories about society, identity, diaspora, family, spectatorship, and nation. In the 1980s and 90s, researchers in the US tended to concentrate on the work of individual photographers including Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, who were involved in social reform efforts that targeted new immigrants (Stein 1983, Kaplan 1992). Another approach was to consider how European emigres such as Robert Frank and Lisette Model introduced new perspectives that transformed American photography (Pitts 1995). Migration also emerged as a central theme in cultural studies focusing on identity and diaspora (Hall 1994), as well as in investigations of family photography (Hirsch 1997). In the early 2000s, scholars examined migration as an aspect of nation building and settler colonialism (Osborne 2003, Williams 2003). The literature on media representations of migration has analyzed photography through the lens of spectatorship and by identifying themes and critical issues, such as the use of historical tropes, which often depict migrants as passive, threatening, or as not fully human (Chavez 2001, Wright 2002, Chouliaraki 2006). Then there was a resurgence of interest in family photography and migration with the collaborative research partnership The Family Camera Network. This project established a public archive of family photographs and accompanying oral narratives of migration at the Royal Ontario Museum and The ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives (Phu, Brown, and Dewan 2017), but there has also been a concern for the use of photography in regulating immigration and creating ideas of national belonging (Lee 2008, Pegler-Gordon 2009, Cho 2021). In recent years, scholars have considered the way people and photographs circulate, forming networks

and encounters across cultures (Campt 2012, Sheehan 2018, Lien 2018, Carville and Lien 2021). While this brief survey of the literature on contemporary migration shows a rich and varied field that has led to a greater diversity of stories and perspectives, many stories still need to be told.

A significant portion of the scholarship on photography and migration has focused on the global north in the twentieth century, and literature on the twenty first century has tended to concentrate on the role of the state and the media in shaping policies and perceptions. This guest-edited special issue aims to address gaps in the field by considering interventions that will generate new discussions of 21st-century migration. Contributors explore questions in humanitarian photography and important projects by individual photographers who are working to recast stereotypical representations of migration in a variety of ways. They create artistic work that considers how the legacy of colonialism shapes contemporary debates and reflect on the way disruptive artistic gestures offer insight into the legal basis for citizenship. They introduce picture archives that will allow for new stories of Black and Asian presence in the United Kingdom (UK). And turning to interactions within Asia, they discuss how markets for media technology are also part of the larger story of migration.

In doing this work, we, the editors, consider it necessary to recognize our own positionalities. We acknowledge that we both currently live and work on the traditional territories of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, Lūnaapéewak, Chonnonton Nations, on lands connected with the London Township and Sombra Treaties of 1796 and the Dish with One Spoon Covenant Wampum in what is now called Canada. Sarah Bassnett is a first-generation Canadian settler scholar whose parents were economic migrants from the UK. Her personal experience with the transnational relationships and fragmented identities familiar to many immigrants informs her investigation of photography and migration. This journal issue is one component of her research into how stories of Central American migration to the United States are told through

photography. Blessy Augustine is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Visual Arts, Western University, Canada. Her parents immigrated from their villages in the south of India to the city of Mumbai in search of livelihoods. She herself has lived in several cities in India, and in the US and Canada. But her movement has not only been voluntary but often also whimsical, in search of new entanglements (but never roots). Her research is oriented towards analysing the disruptive and emancipatory potential of art and to do so she focuses on socially engaged projects revolving around the issues of migration and citizenship.

The issue begins with an essay by Juan F. Egea that looks at photographs made at three sites—the beach, the sea, and the fence—which in the context of the borders between Africa and Europe are sites where suffering and photography intersect. These ‘humanitarian photographs’ made by photojournalists are counter-narratives to the images offered by border patrolling agencies. The latter affirms an iconography of surveillance and threat, while the former belongs to an older tradition of using the photograph as evidence, not of crime but of resultant suffering, and in a manner that implicates us. Egea considers the many gazes—the absent gaze of the dead, the piercing gaze of the living, the ‘thousand-yard stare’ of the shell-shocked, the invisible gaze of shadows—involved in these photographs and the writings of Susan Sontag, Ariella Azoulay, and Emmanuel Levinas to reframe established theories of the relationship between spectatorship, ethics, and otherness.

In her article, Sarah Bassnett moves away from journalistic photographs to discuss a series by Griselda San Martín. Titled *The Wall*, the series focuses on the experiences of families at Friendship Park, a park on the border of San Diego, US, and Tijuana, Mexico, that was set up as a sign of unity but now has a wall running through it. The series depicts people in the Tijuana side of the park meeting their family members on the San Diego side, with the wall acting as a screen perforating their interaction. Bassnett argues that San Martín’s decision to photograph these ‘get togethers’ using the

conventions of family photography instead of photojournalism allows for a recognition of the complex nature of relationships shaped by migration and diasporic experience. Using Deva Woody's ideas, Bassnett frames *The Wall* as discarding the stereotypical narratives of migrant hardship and resilience and instead operating in a manner that keeps the focus on the politics of care.

Anahí González Terán's exploration of Moisés Zuñiga Santiago's photography considers a genre that perhaps lies between humanitarian photography and one focused on the politics of care. In her article, González writes about *Migration Stories Whispered in My Ear/Me Susurran Al Oído Historias de Migrantes*, an exhibition of Zuñiga's work, that González curated, and which was presented in London, Ontario, Canada. Zuñiga's photographs focus on the stories of people traveling from countries to the south of Mexico and the dangers and hostility that they face as they cover the vast geography of Mexico to reach the US border. Weaving in text, auditory motifs, and images, the exhibition provided an added nuance to the story of Latin American migration to the US, a story where legal documents mean nothing (the case of José Luis) and photographs go back to their primary function of being evidence (like those carried by mothers of children who went missing on their journeys through Mexico.)

Andrew O'Brien presents a portfolio from his series *Drift Alignment* and an artist statement along with it. *Drift Alignment*, which began in 2017 and is ongoing, engages with the complex history of the US-Mexico border through the practices of astrophotography, celestial navigation techniques, and landscape photographs, and in doing so finds a new way of representing the loss of life along the border and the role stars have played in our understanding of territorial sovereignty.

In her one photo essay, Blessy Augustine isolates an image documenting Tania Bruguera's performative project *The Francis Effect* (2014) to talk about the relationship between the real and the symbolic as it relates to law and morality. Using Bruguera and

the Pope's penchant to indulge in a politics of gesture, Augustine briefly analyzes both *The Francis Effect* and the significance of images of such gestures.

In their article, Anita J. McKenzie and Rhoda Adum Boateng provide the histories of Black Cultural Archives and the McKenzie Heritage Picture Archives. The former, a national heritage centre, was set up in 1981 as a space to celebrate Black communities and their contributions to British history, and the latter was a commercial photographic agency that specialized in images of Black and Asian life. The article discusses McKenzie's contribution as a Black woman photographer in promoting non-racist representation of Black and Asian life and how the collection of Black archives can act as reparative history-making.

And lastly, in an interview between film and media scholar Ishita Tiwary and art historian Sarah Bassnett, Tiwary discusses her research that considers media technologies (mobile phones, cameras, DVDs, etc.) as being migratory. Tiwary's research moves away from the image as representing migration to looking at the image-making apparatus as an illicit aspect of cross-border movement. More importantly, her research looks at the often-ignored patterns of south-south migration, especially between India, Nepal, and China, through an ethnography of 'pirate bazaars' along the borders of these countries and Hong Kong as a portal to the West.

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