

## Migrations

---

**ABSTRACT** Editorial handovers are migrations that signal and embody movement, transition, and transformation. To attend to, and indeed to salute this shift as I launch my editorship of *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*—what I am framing as an editorial migration—I present to the readers the first of a curated double issue that focuses on migration and its attendant features, borders, and margins. I begin this introductory essay by enacting my own experiences of migration before leading the reader into essays by ten writers from distinct disciplines and fields who embraced, energetically and generously, my call to address the notion of migration in their own areas, contexts, subjects, and locations. **KEYWORDS** Migration; Story; Travel; Experimental writing; Personal history

---

### MY MIGRATIONS

I

It is August or September 1947. My father, Sudhakar Chawla, is six years old. Every afternoon, my grandmother sends him and his two siblings to the train station. They are three, six, and ten years old. The siblings have been given one task: to see if their father, my grandfather, is on any of the arriving trains. They are to find him and bring him home. They wait at the train station every afternoon. For many months. Finally, one day, my grandfather steps off a train and walks home with his children.

Where was my grandfather? Why was he missing? Where was he coming from? In 1947, the British, who ruled India for 200 years, divided the country into secular India and the Islamic state of Pakistan. This tragic event, which accompanied the gift of freedom from colonial rule, is called the Partition. It led to one of the deadliest Hindu–Muslim communal riots in Indian history. One million people died, and 20 million were displaced. My family, Hindus who happened to live in what became Pakistan, fled to India and became refugees. Everyone knew the riots were coming. So, my grandfather sent his family to India early, in June 1947. He remained to pack up the house and send our belongings to India by train. This train was looted by a mob. Our belongings

---

*Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, Vol. 8, Number 1, pp. 1–8. ISSN 2333-9489, electronic ISSN 2333-9497. © 2019 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Request permission to photocopy or reproduce article content at the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2019.8.1.1>.

never arrived. Journeys to and from Pakistan were dangerous at that time as trains were the targets of communal mobs. My grandmother knew, via telegram, that my grandfather was still alive and would arrive by train one day. However, she did not know when, and this is why my father and his brother and sister sat at that station, waiting, every day, for months.

It took a few decades for my family to find its feet in their new country. They lived in refugee colonies and relied on the generosity of extended family and friends. Eventually, my grandparents built new homes, collected new belongings, and settled into the new India. It was my grandmother's gold, what was not stolen, that paid for the education of my father and his siblings. They went on to earn undergraduate and graduate degrees in India and abroad. Converting this gold into education allowed my father's generation to lead successful lives. And, in a way, I am here now—a professor at a US university—because of it.

For me, the lesson from this portion of my family story is that even when migrations are forced upon us, we can survive, gain some control over our lives, and eventually thrive. Of course, forced migrations are risky because they involve matters of life and death. However, forced migrations force us to start over—to begin anew. The promise of migration always exceeds the risks that surround it. The promise of migration lies in the gift of resilience. So, when I look at my family story, I do not see only life and death, loss and beginning. Nor do I see a story of victimhood. Instead, I see a story of resilience—of risk and threat, of surviving and persevering, of succeeding. Migration nurtures legacies of resilience, and resilience is both armor and promise.

## II

It is 19 August 1997, exactly 50 years after my grandfather made his train journey. On a crisp, almost-fall midwestern day, I step off a plane at O'Hare International airport in Chicago, with a backpack and two suitcases containing all my worldly belongings. My own migration has begun.

My grandmother was unhappy with my choice to leave home. She wanted her children and grandchildren to stay rooted to India. After all, she knew a thing or two about displacement. However, because of her, I knew a thing or two about resilience, the gift from my family. I promised her and my parents I would be back in two years.

I broke my promise. I never returned. I came to Michigan to get one degree and stayed for another. I met a wonderful mentor who thought I had some talent in studying family life, narrative, and storytelling. She convinced me to change programs—another kind of migration. She eventually encouraged me to

pursue a PhD—yet another kind of migration. The moral of this story is that I am here now—an immigrant in the United States—and there is nowhere else I would rather be.

I moved from Michigan to Indiana to Ohio. Ironically, even as I was choosing to stay in the United States, my research was moving closer to home. Ten years ago, I began exploring the family lives of refugees after Partition. For a decade now, I have traveled between my old and new homes, carrying back and forth—across many borders—the stories of persons like my grandparents.

My own migration was voluntary. I was not fleeing communal riots or civil war or gender-based violence. It was also not a matter of life or death. On the one hand, my migration is quite ordinary. I joined a population of hundreds of thousands of students to come to the United States for an education. On the other hand, every migration is extraordinary because every migration is the start of a new life. Another kind of renewal.

Voluntary migrations teach us a different lesson. They show us the power of choice. They are also physically, intellectually, and existentially necessary. You have to move so that you can change and evolve, grow and learn. Whether forced or unforced, the history of human beings is tied to a history of movement and travel—literal or metaphorical.

To choose migration is to dream. To choose migration is to find another way to enter the world. To choose migration is to want to become someone and something else. To choose migration is to give yourself permission to get lost. This idea is eloquently captured by Rebecca Solnit in *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*: “Never to get lost is not to live, not to know how to get lost brings you to destruction, and somewhere in the terra incognita in between lies a life of discovery.”<sup>1</sup>

### III

I am in a traditional teahouse in Hangzhou, China, listening to a conversation about the city’s architecture; and how and why the city maintains a delicate balance between tradition and modernity. A few years later, I find myself wandering in barns, fields, and farmhouses in rural western Illinois. I listen at kitchen counters as farmers’ wives discuss the price of seed and the bittersweet joys of family farms. Another year finds me following a day in the life of undocumented Thai restaurant workers in a midwestern city. Last summer, I am among folks who live off the grid and build their homes from local materials. I learn that mixing straw bale and clay creates cob. I also learn that windows can be built with salvaged wine bottles.

I have never been to tearooms in Hangzhou, China. In fact, I have never set foot in China. I have never visited any farms in rural Illinois. I have also

never followed the daily routines of undocumented Thai restaurant workers. I do not know a thing about home construction or off-grid living in Appalachian Ohio. My travels into these lives and worlds are textual and imaginative. These places, these people, and their worlds are the sites and subjects of my doctoral students' research. Teaching, working with, and advising PhD students means I accompany them to new spaces, new people, new stories. When my advisees begin new work, I feel a sense of excitement because I am invited to migrate to a new story. And with each story, I know we will become something new.

Many years ago, I was on a routine visit to my dentist in Athens, Ohio, where I live. Just as he was about to drill into a pesky filling, he asked me something about New Delhi, India. A long conversation ensued, thankfully delaying, for a bit, the pain of the drill. When we were done, he said, "I am so busy, I don't get a chance to travel, but meeting patients like you here, brings the world to me. I get to travel a little."

This exchange continues to stay with me. Entering a story, even briefly, is a form of migration. It makes us travel into the humanity of another person. As a professor, even when I teach the same course every semester, I enter a new world; even if my syllabus does not change, the students always do. And new students bring fresh ways to encounter old stories. A book I might have read five times is suddenly given another life. What I am trying to emphasize is this: Sometimes a migration takes place when we accept the invitation to weave new stories, together.

I study narratives. My scholarly work begins from the premise that human beings tell stories. We are formed in stories. When we invite new narratives into our lives, we migrate. When we invite different people into our lives, we migrate. Every miniscule and (in)significant migration reshapes our stories—to become something different, something more.

In writing and performing some of my own migrations in this textual space, my goal is to urge the reader to think a little differently about migration. Most of us have already undertaken numerous ordinary and everyday migrations, even if that is not the word we used to describe them. The first time we leave home for a few hours to go to daycare, to kindergarten, and later to school, we migrate. If and when we leave home, to go to college or to start a job, we migrate. No matter the form(s) that migration and travel take—they are about resilience, they are about opportunity, and they are about invitation. As Pico Iyer gracefully and poetically, states:

We travel when we fall in love, or when we open a different kind of book, or when we get lost driving a car around our hometown. And I think all

those are as valuable as going to the far ends of the earth, as long as we have the ability to appreciate the opportunity they represent and the eyes to accept the possibility. I think travel is mostly a way of breaking out of your familiar self.<sup>2</sup>

\*\*\*

## A CALL TO MIGRATION

Migrations, in whatever version we experience them, signal and embody resilience, opportunity, and invitation. I believe that migration as a concept, as an idea, or as a material condition is an essential force that unifies us as human beings. Any migration is a threshold into a newer personhood. To put it tritely, we are all migrants of one sort or another. It might even be correct to say that the universe as we know it came into being as a consequence of multiple migratory forces. In our contemporaneous moment, “migration” is a word loaded with geopolitical meaning. Our first instinct is to align the word with the movement of people across geographies. Certainly, that is one meaning of migration. And yet, it is possible for human beings to experience migrations without moving but an inch. Migration can also be philosophically understood as a transformation from one state of being to another. Whether forced or unforced, whether real or metaphorical, whether physical or existential, migrations *are* metamorphoses. And every migration as a metamorphosis is distinct and unequal, just as an expatriate differs from a migrant worker who differs from an immigrant who differs from a refugee.

Last year, when I was invited to apply for the position of Editor for *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research (DCQR)*, I posed to myself, and indeed lived with, an existential question for many months. Was I—an academic who identifies as a writer “first”—ready to wear an editorial identity for a set number of years? Could I cross over into the other space, albeit temporarily? As I write this Introduction, my reply to that question is clear, but I arrived at my answer by thinking for many months about movement and metamorphosis, a philosophical and material idea that, as an ethnographer who studies identity and migration, I have been enmeshed in for the last few decades. As *DCQR* undergoes its own editorial migration, it seemed only appropriate—and, I might add, prescient (in these times of extreme geopolitical unrest accompanied by forced migrations)—to inaugurate my editorship with a curated double issue that focuses on migration and its attendant features: borders and margins. To this end, I posed the following set of questions to ten scholars as prompts to invite them to write about

migration from their scholarly, personal, and political contexts and locations. I also asked them to ignore these questions if they seemed unnecessary.

What is a migration? What is your migration? Is it physical, intellectual, existential, or all of these?

Who migrates? A person, an idea, a thing? Or all of these?

Who is allowed to migrate?

How do ideas migrate? What is your experience of this process?

What are the privileges of migration? What are the challenges of migration?

Can migrations ever mean stagnation?

Are migrations and displacements synonymous?

What is the relationship between migrations, borders, and margins?

Does migration have a topography?

The ten essays in this issue either engage these questions directly or refract from them in a manner that forces us to reckon with migration in other ways.

The first two essays attend to migration in the more traditional sense of movement, both from outside and within North America. In “Understanding Migrant Caravans from the Place of Place Privilege,” Karma R. Chávez launches us directly, yet gracefully, into the contemporaneous debate about asylum-seekers from Central America who, even as I write this essay in November 2018, are on the move in their annual attempt to seek refuge in the United States. Writing from a place of place privilege that she shares with Donald Trump (being a US citizen), Chávez asks us to consider migrant caravans as “coalitions in motion, as calls to an ethical relation, and as weapons of the weak.” This reframing is itself a migration because it forces us to attend to the *force* of the caravan. From those who want to move to the United States to those who have been here all along, in “The Great Migration of Whys,” Sean Gleason takes us to Nunalleq in Alaska, a pre-contact Yup’ik village massacred during the centuries-long conflict known today as the Bow and Arrow Wars. Gleason interprets and performs an experimental ethnography that considers the historic events at Nunalleq alongside a new era of migration today as the Yup’ik move farther inland owing to human-induced climate change. Aware that an interpretive and affective distance exists between archaeological fieldwork and a contemporary reader, Gleason announces a reading roadmap of sorts by telling us, “This writing is an oral history. This writing should be read aloud.” And I invite you, our readers, to follow his lead.

Is there a relationship between migration and stagnation? Or should the question be reframed as “What are the forces that stagnate movement?” In a

creative nonfiction essay, “Those Footsteps in the Sand Will Be Your Own,” Kelly Sundberg chronicles her experiences as a young woman from rural Idaho who, in an attempt to escape her predominantly patriarchal community, chooses to work in the wilderness as a way of seeking spiritual transformation. Unfortunately, she finds that her new life as a wilderness ranger in the forest service is no escape from the same intersections of class and gender that shape her hometown. Her beautifully mournful essay makes us ponder whether escape and transcendence can ever be a possibility. Next, in “Migratory Patterns of a Fish Doodle,” Kakali Bhattacharya uses the trope of a fish doodle to draw on a South Asian sensibility of communal and national insider and outsider positions and explores the complicated terrain of Desi transnational existence.

The two essays that follow address directly the politically fraught issue of forced migrations in the stories of Bangladeshi refugees from the Indian subcontinent following the British Partition of India in 1947. Aanchal Malhotra recites the oral history of a female refugee from Bangladesh whose sense of home is located in her memories of the flora and fauna of the country that is lost to her—a sense she tries to resurrect by replicating the same greenery in her new home in India. Next, Priya Kumar attends to the complex issues of clandestine migrations from East Pakistan/Bangladesh into India through a close reading of Prafulla Roy’s Bengali short story “Stateless.” She does so by drawing attention to the Indian state’s slippery construction of the “illegal migrant” and to the increasingly constricting definition of Indian citizenship. “Stateless,” notes Kumar, “enables us to imagine the precarious existence of the *sans papiers* as de facto stateless persons and illustrates the importance of citizenship as legal status for those who don’t have it.”

From the Indian subcontinent, we are escorted to the unknown territory of the migrations that accompany the processes of death, dying, and grieving. In a simple yet poignant telling, Jillian A. Tullis writes about her work with hospice care. She engages Barbara Karnes’s *Gone from My Sight* as a roadmap for thinking about migration in dying and argues that instead of dismissing the language of travel and visitors in the dying process, such metaphors should be taken seriously. What follows, almost seamlessly, is an essay written by Austin S. Babrow and Fran J. Babrow that takes an epistolary form. In letters to each other, written in the aftermath of the passing of Austin’s wife and Fran’s mother, the authors try to “understand stability and change, love and loss, dependence and freedom, the parent–child relationship, and head and heart.” The unfinishedness of the

letters mirrors the incompleteness that follows loss, itself a process of migration in this particular family history.

The last two pieces can only be described as meditations on travel, on movement, and on life as movement. Rebecca Mercado Jones performs, in ethnographic essay form, the banality of everyday migrations by enacting her daily commute on I-75 in Detroit, MI, the motor capital of the world, where the car holds royal status. In exploring commuting as a lived space, Jones shows us how this ordinary, even inconsequential, experience is also always uncertain and precarious.

The final essay serendipitously provides both an opening and a closing to our inaugural theme. In “No Going Home,” Amardo Rodriguez collapses and redefines our common notions of migrant and migration by exploring the different ways he embodies migration—epistemologically, existentially, relationally, spiritually, and pedagogically. Crucial to Rodriguez’s essay are his ruminations about why he chooses to identify as a migrant rather than an immigrant. For Rodriguez, “Destinations are nothing but illusions and delusions. Migration puts us in harmony with a world that is always moving and gyrating.”

I invite readers to approach this inaugural issue as an opening, to look at the essays as conduits that can bring into relief the ideas we can and will engage in the coming years of my editorship. Migration, says Rodriguez, is what life demands of us. I ask that we heed this call. ■

---

DEVIKA CHAWLA is Professor in the School of Communication Studies at Ohio University. Correspondence to: Devika Chawla, School of Communication Studies, 431 Schoonover Center, Ohio University, Athens, OH 45701, USA. Email: [chawla@ohio.edu](mailto:chawla@ohio.edu).

#### NOTES

1. Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 14.
2. Monica Smith, “An Interview with Pico Iyer,” *Mother Earth News*, May 2001, <https://www.motherearthnews.com/nature-and-environment/an-interview-with-pico-iyer-zmazo1amzsel>.