

## Migration and Place

Adaiah Hudgins-Lopez (moderator), Meena Venkataramanan and Jillian Sprenger

**Adaiah:** Okay, welcome to the first podcast hosted by The Scholar Magazine. Today, we have, myself, Adaiah Hudgins-Lopez,

**Meena:** Meena Venkataramanan,

**Adaiah:** and

**Jillian:** Jillian Sprenger

**Adaiah:** speaking about migration as it relates to the concept of Place, which is the overarching theme of our 2022 magazine. Thank you both for joining me in this conversation.

**Adaiah:** So, would you like to provide a quick overview of the research you've done related to migration?

**Meena:** My research with migration started during my undergraduate years, where I conducted independent immigration and border journalism at the US Mexico border. And since then, I became interested in understanding refugee and asylum seeker experiences, both through a journalistic means as well as other English literature. And, my dissertation here at Cambridge focuses on waiting in asylum seeker and refugee literature.

**Jillian:** And for me, my focus on migration is all started during my undergraduate degree. My focus has been mainly on climate migration, particularly in Sri Lanka. So, climate migration essentially just means migration, that's a result of climatic events. So these can be long-term events like drought, desertification, or sea level rise, and the ensuing loss of livelihoods that these types of events bring. But, they can also be sudden things like flooding storms or landslides. As our global climate becomes increasingly volatile, more and more people around the world are going to be forced to migrate to places that are perceived as more resilient to climate change and to places where they can find work. So that's really my focus. I'm coming at this from a different perspective of climate change.

**Adaiah:** And myself, I have—I'm only now entering the migration research space, but I was introduced to this kind of scholarly inquiry in an internship that I had at the International Institute of Metropolitan Detroit, where I began working with undocumented immigrants and legal services.

**Adaiah:** So, let's start our conversation. So, our first question that we're going to talk about is: Migration is first and foremost, an experience in the 'Body'. So, what can that look like according to findings within your research?

**Jillian:** So we know that migration can have a lot of physical effects in the body. Migrants are at higher risk of malnutrition, violence, illness, and other physical issues. But from my

research, I think one of the most important things to recognise is the effect that climate migration can also have on mental health. Mental health is as much part of the body as any other physical ailment. So the climate migrants that I interviewed in Sri Lanka spoke quite seriously about the depression and the anxiety that they struggle with, largely due to the stress of extreme vulnerability, and the very challenging living situations that they find themselves in both before and after migration. So I think it's really important to consider all aspects of the self when thinking about the effects of migration. And from what I've seen, this includes the mental as much as the physical.

**Adaiah:** So addressing this question of what misconceptions we think exist in considering migration and 'Physical Space'.

My own research thinks about borders, and specifically the border between Detroit and Windsor, in the US and Canada. And really, I think people conceive of migration as attached to borders and to nation-states. I think part of that is because of how our legal systems kind of process paperwork associated with that kind of movement. But, migration can happen within nations as well. Migration is not only associated with kind of this foreignness or foreign groups moving to another country.

I think also, the migrant experience is not only about settling in one space permanently, it's kind of an influx status, right. So you're constantly kind of resettling, maybe due to legal reasons, maybe due to the potential for better employment in another location. Maybe you have family living in another place, maybe there's a certain kind of preference for weather, right. So people are constantly moving and resettling. So, migration is not just moving from one place to the next, but it can kind of be a continuous experience.

I think another thing is thinking about illegality and movement. So my own research really thinks about undocumented movement and that also, kind of, being something associated with a nation-state or a non-citizen. Many immigrants – most immigrants – are not living in a country illegally. And so I think we need to, kind of, reframe our understanding of migration and physical space as something that isn't always, you know, associated with illegality. That's a very specific type of migration studies, thinking about illegality and thinking about deportability, because people have different types of shifting statuses as well. For example, in some instances, specifically, when migrants have come to Windsor, Canada, maybe they've come on a migrant farmworker visa, and maybe they've overstayed their visa, right. So thinking about how their status was, you know, went from legal to illegal and thinking about that experience of migration and physical space.

And the last kind of thing I want to touch on is building on the idea of the migrant experience as a continuous one. Thinking about what kind of access you have to certain spaces once settled – is that access is not always a guarantee, right? So where can you go without certain types of identification? Are there places that specifically discriminate against immigrants, or where you could find yourself in a dangerous situation? Maybe consider things like crimes that maybe go unreported because of the fear of deportation. Or think about how many certain undocumented immigrants might not take certain types of transportation, for fear of being stopped or searched or arrested. So this kind of idea of migration of physical spaces – it's not just about borders and nations, it's also about what it actually means to, you know,

exist in a certain type of community and what kind of lifestyle you can have within that community as well.

**Adaiah:** Moving on to this question of what can 'Community' mean in migration and the settlement experience. We've talked about that a little bit with regard to physical space, but what can that mean more broadly?

**Jillian:** So I think in studying migration and settlement, there's a lot of focus on the community experiences among those who migrate in terms of the groups that they migrate with, but also diasporas of communities that they joined after migration. But I think it's also really important to think about community in terms of those who have been left behind. In the context of my research on climate migration, it's often men who migrate usually from rural villages to big cities, and many have families to support who remain in their villages of origin. And so the men will end up sending remittances home. So in my opinion, it's also really important to understand the experiences of these families. Several of the women that I interviewed whose husbands have migrated, spoke about the struggles they experienced in terms of the additional labour that they had to take on, as well as the responsibilities of heading the household and the traditionally patriarchal society. Several also talked about the fact that their husbands leaving had left them quite vulnerable to harassment and violence from other men in the community. And so this is kind of a major dilemma. It's often necessary for men to migrate to provide financial support and reduce vulnerability of the entire family to the effects of climate change. But, at the same time, this increases the vulnerability of women to gender-based violence. And so in studying migration, the focus is often on those who are actually migrating but in reality, the experiences of migration affect the entire community.

**Meena:** My understanding of community often stems from my work, looking at literature that specifically grapples with conditions of imprisonment in refugee and asylum seeker camps. I recently read a memoir by Kurdish refugee and journalist Behrouz Boochani. And, he talks about the conditions of imprisonment almost mandating some kind of self-interested quality among refugees up that almost dehumanises them, simply by rejecting the kinds of communion and generosity that are so innate to our human interactions outside of imprisonment. And he writes of a man whom he met in prison, named Reza, who was known as the gentle giant. And he writes that, 'In contrast to many others, when the giant gets hold of some fruit, he offers it to others without any expectations. A gesture of courtesy in the manner of a child.' And this is the behaviour that other people reflect on and they realise they're incapable of that kind of act of generosity. And he says, 'This is the way that we create the other. When people don't have the capacity to comprehend noble behaviour, they become haunted with despair and confusion. They feel insecure, then they suppress this using anything at their disposal.' So, here Boochani not only talks about the generosity that can be created, through communion with others in a setting of imprisonment, but also how resisting that and pursuing self-centeredness and self-interestedness in this can other-ise yourself and alienate yourself from the kind of humanity that people often take for granted when they're not subjected to imprisonment against their will. And so, I think community in migration becomes particularly important when we're looking at settings where humanity is often denied, such as in refugee and asylum seeker camps and in prisons.

**Adaiah:** Yeah, and I want to kind of build on some of the things that Jillian and Meena have said, in agreeing with them that what community means can vary. It can refer to the people who you directly interact with on a daily basis as an immigrant. It can be restricted to a specific place, as we just mentioned, such as a refugee or migrant camp that could be considered a community. It can also be restricted to the people that you know that share the same background as you. Maybe they're from the same originating country. Or maybe they've had the same migration experiences you. And so, maybe that is how you kind of draw the parameters of community. But, community also includes these kind of larger structures that create the conditions under which people live; places like schools, health systems, community centres, social service providers, legal systems, etc. In my research, I think about the way that the auto industry in Detroit and the labour circumstances of the United States kind of in the 60s and 70s, facilitated shifting legal frameworks that allowed for a freer flow of movement between Detroit and Windsor, right? So that thinking about what community means in the context of migration in that space also includes an actual attention to legal frameworks and to economic frameworks as well.

**Adaiah:** How might the migration experience impact understandings of 'Home'?

**Meena:** I think in terms of home, perhaps it's important to start with where we as researchers consider our homes. I know, Adaiah, you brought up the Detroit-Windsor metropolitan area and you're from there. I'm from the Southern border of the United States, a little bit North of the U.S.-Mexico border, which also has several cities that straddle both sides, including Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora. And one particular region that I'm interested in looking at and that I've interviewed people from is the Brownsville-Matamoros region as well as in Texas. And Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Mexico, they share a border. And, I interviewed a kindergarten teacher who called both sides of the border home, and she recalled being able to freely cross the border growing up without any restrictions. And even as an adult when she became a teacher, she would regularly cross every morning for 25 years. And after 9/11, she recalled increased militarization of the border, which really impacted understandings that Matamoros residents had of home. And what that meant for people who would regularly commute into Brownsville for work, or vice versa, people who lived in Brownsville, but would go to Matamoros regularly to see family or work. And so, I think that the idea of migration is so fluid and the idea of home is fluid because sometimes people call home a place that straddles multiple sides of international borders. And increased militarization can often inhibit the ability for somebody to call these areas their home, and almost make them pick one side.

And I also think, home is an internally constructed concept that people really feel that they have to come to on their own terms, and I think that's important when we consider the experience of refugees and asylum seekers. Because, often, there will be external regulations from law enforcement agencies, such as the United Kingdom's Home Office or the United States Department of Homeland Security. Both are agencies which consider the word home and often seem to embed this idea of home as the receiving country. Whereas home, in a refugees mind might be the place that they've come from, and they never are at the point where they can embrace this new country as home. And so I think home is a very internal conception, and the fluidity of borders helps facilitate that. But often the external regulation of home as a concept can inhibit understandings when it comes to refugees and asylum seekers in particular.

**Adaiah:** So shifting to more questions around how we do our scholarship in migration studies. If you could bring attention to one issue regarding migration in your research, what would it be?

I can start. So, I think there's the importance of maintaining a nuance of, on the one hand, thinking about the kind of micro-lens – right – thinking about immigrant communities and their ability to make their own decisions, to form their own communities, to self-determine. And also, on the other hand, maintaining a kind of shifting gaze outward and paying attention to larger structures that informed the conditions under which they live: legal structures, health systems, etc. I think it's easy to, kind of, essentialise studying migration in one way or the other. But maintaining a balance of that is important in order to think about the actual full experience that migrants might go through. And so, I think that this in particular has been important for my research, thinking about how legal systems, kind of, maybe, inform how immigrants make their own kind of decisions and make their own kind of communities in Detroit and in Windsor.

**Jillian:** I think for me, in the past little while I've sort of shifted my research focus slightly to better understand the legal implications of climate migration, as well as the legal protections that climate migrants are offered under international law. So I think the biggest thing that I'd like to draw attention to here is the fact that climate migrants are not actually covered under international refugee law frameworks. So this means that climate migrants who move internationally are not really entitled to any protection. So receiving states have often argued that they're not really under any obligation to allow these people to stay. And an ethical sense this is really problematic, especially in the context of wealthy countries who are turning away climate migrants from low income countries. In my view, wealthy countries have a moral duty to assist these individuals, because these countries are largely responsible for driving climate change to their historical and contemporary emissions. And so they should be equally responsible for helping those who are experiencing the worst of its effects. I think, in general, there needs to be a greater focus of what can be done to protect climate migrants, including perhaps to other legal frameworks, such as international human rights law, the number of climate migrants is expected to increase drastically in the coming years. And so we really need to have appropriate ways of offering legal protection to these individuals.

**Meena:** My research regarding migration has mostly shifted to the experience of waiting. Like I said, I did more journalistic work in undergrad surrounding immigration and border issues. And often that was tied to more of a legal understanding of migration. But now, I'm looking at more of a narrative experience. And I'm looking at both fiction and non-fiction and understanding how the protagonists, in novels and memoirs, experience waiting not only as a means to an end – which in this case would presumably be gaining refugee status or asylum – but also how waiting is an end in itself, often because people don't know the outcome of their situation and are many times coerced into self-deporting. Or even if a coercion isn't the right term, they often self-deport because they're stuck in this purgatorial state for so long with no sense of what the outcome will be. And so I'm interested in looking at waiting as an experience that is utterly existential, but also one that is so commonplace among refugees and asylum seekers. And so in addition to *No Friend But the Mountains* by Behrouz Boochani, I'm also looking at works including *Exit West* by Mohsin Hamid and *Lost Children Archive* by

Valeria Luiselli. And these works written by both refugees and non-refugees alike really grapple with what it means to wait or, on the other hand, gloss over the experience of waiting through fantastical characterisations such as the creation of magical doors or the use of elements of a fantasy to kind of almost transcend the banality of waiting. And so, I'm really interested in just better understanding waiting as an end in itself and the existential dread that comes with that experience.

**Adaiah:** Yeah. And the, kind of, final question is thinking more reflexively, about ourselves as researchers: So, how can we critically engage in our research and ensure we fairly and accurately represent our informants while acknowledging our own positionality?

**Meena:** I would say that, in my discipline, in English literature, it's incredibly important to let the text speak. And I think that says a lot about really giving a platform to both the authors, but also the narrators and the other characters in a novel or a memoir. And making sure that their ideas are communicable, not through necessarily imposing one's own argument as a scholar onto the writing, but adhering to the text and using close reading and other literary analysis skills to ensure that whatever is being argued is something that can be backed up by the text. And I think that relates to my own positionality as a scholar because I understand I have a relative degree of privilege compared to the refugees and the asylum seekers whose lives are intertwined in the works that I study. And I think it's really important to acknowledge that and, and I think one of the most important ways to do that is to ensure that I am adhering to the works that these refugees and asylum seekers have created.

**Jillian:** I think there's a lot to be said for giving people the space and the platform to tell their own stories. So something that I've thought a lot about is how to use the position that I'm in as a Western, non-migrant researcher to enable this to happen. And I think that art and film and photography have a lot of power in this regard. So I decided to incorporate this into my fieldwork in Sri Lanka. While I was doing my academic research and conducting interviews, I was concurrently making a documentary film. And I think that doing this film really gave people a voice to tell their own stories and represent themselves in the way that they wanted to be represented. The film kind of shows the viewer what the challenges facing these individuals are, rather than having me as the researcher, interpret their words and then retell them. So I think that film and photography have a lot of power to really amplify voices, which are traditionally underrepresented, as well as really humanising a seemingly distant problem. So, of course, I can acknowledge that even in the creation of the film, my perspectives and views are read onto it in the sense that I chose what to include, how to string together a narrative, and how to frame the issue. But I still think it was important to film these interviews and to include them so that people were able to, you know, tell their stories in their own words.

**Adaiah:** I think something that we can do in our research is acknowledge and respect the precarity our informants might feel for themselves or for their families. I think it's important to recognise that the migrant experience – the migrant reality – is something that we can only begin to grasp, and understand that the way that we learn about them are through subjectivities. So painting a full picture of the migrant experience is impossible. There will always be more to learn. I think it's important to continue asking research questions, but also to simultaneously ask our informants about what's actually important to them. And, as Jillian said, allow them to tell their own stories. And I think it's also important to ask them what they

need and ask how we can support them. It's important that scholars engage in work outside of simply their own research in order to kind of support and uplift those communities in ways that they want to be supported.

**Adaiah:** So I think, on that note, we can wrap up this conversation. This is just the beginning of what we hope will result in fruitful and multidisciplinary conversations about migration. We hope others find this conversation interesting and as a starting place to learn more about immigration and the migration experience in their respective communities.

A huge thank you to Meena and Jillian, for engaging me in this conversation. And I'm looking forward to reading more of your work on migration in the future. And, finally, thank you to The Scholar Magazine for hosting a space for us to have this conversation.