

Viajes y escrituras:  
migraciones y cartografías de  
la violencia

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## Preface

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A symphony of hate and violence, pity and compassion, understanding and reflections on the human condition emerges from this collection of articles, written by a variety of scholars, who differ in terms of gender, ethnicity, nationality and field of study, yet largely share the same interests and goals. The aim of this volume is to bring together a range of voices, ideas and stories in order to establish a cartography of bodies and minds that are irremediably affected by powerful waves of deliberate or forced migration.

Human society has always been marked by uneven relationships between “hosts” and “visitors”, words with opposite meanings both contained within the same Latin word *hospes*. It has ever been suggested that *hospes* and *hostis* – respectively “guest” and “enemy” in Latin – share the same root. As Werner Sollors argues in the opening essay, human history has always been the background for these friendly or hostile encounters, and narrations of the violent effects of migration on individuals and communities can be found in the most ancient books, from the Bible to the Greek epic poems. In our time, when the voice of populism and mistrust of migrants are

stronger than ever in many different areas of the world, it is indeed risky to stress concepts such as those of ethnicity and identity – “lies that bind” to quote Appiah’s recent book. By contrast, it is appropriate to turn – as Lily Cho does – towards “the emergence of subjectivities bound by the disparate geographies of home and away, the past and the present” (“The Turn to Diaspora” 113). The articles gathered in this volume, focusing on the narration of the body, attempt precisely to restore the subjectivity (the humanity) of the migrants, seen as human beings rather than as mere victims.

Women, are, often, but not exclusively, the main actors involved in these huge flows, where people move from one place to another for a variety of different reasons while sharing the same precarious life and feelings. Actually, as stated by Cho, we should look at these “traumatic dislocations of people” by differentiating diaspora from transnationalism and focusing on the subjective experience rather than on the “traversing of national boundaries” (112). And what is more subjective and experiential than the representation of the body and its universe of sensory – that is, both physical and emotional – reactions? Sociology and literature thus seem like the most suitable fields to represent, observe, analyse and perhaps deconstruct these traumatic experiences. The introduction written by Alice Favaro, who is co-editor of the volume, clearly points out the power and the responsibility of literature to map the wide articulations of this contemporary epic of the margins, reminding us of the risk of becoming used to this “aesthetics of horror”.

Many of the articles in this volume are devoted to literary works where the very essence of the migrant body is presented to the reader from a range of different perspectives. Within a multifarious geography of violence (stretching from Slovenia to China, from South America to Italy), narratives of abuses on migrants are analysed both as a phenomenon which is increasingly and disquietingly the object of international law and

politics, and a profoundly significant space where all the contradictions belonging to the human race as such occur.

Referring again to Cho, this cartography of violence not only unfolds across space – as the book covers many different ethnic and geographical areas – but also across time, the time of history and of memory.

As compellingly demonstrated by Nicola Montagna, violence exercised on (travelling) human beings is not only physical, but can also acquire symbolic forms as it transforms and influences the existence of people according to the gaze of those who watch and label them. To label someone as black, foreign, female, weak, strange, different and therefore inferior is one of the harshest kinds of violence, and one to which migrants are more exposed than others.

In our societies, where the nefarious power of words is running wild through the social media, the political discourse and the everyday chatter, we cannot ignore the importance of analysing and debunking what Foucault calls “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (*The Archeology of Knowledge* 49).

To name or label someone means assigning them a role, an image, sometimes a destiny: that is the reason why many of the articles in this volume deal with language. Sara De Vido, for instance, proposes an insightful analysis on the recent developments of international law about female refugees, female genital mutilation and domestic violence and their legal definitions.

My own essay on the Chinese migrant writer Yiyun Li reveals how the impact of the (rejected) mother tongue can affect the psyche and the very existence of a woman, whose new and apparently successful life in a new country is still haunted by the violent force of language and family ties. The importance of words and labelling is also the main issue raised by Luis Fernando Beneduzi, who presents an analysis of some interviews with a sample of migrants in Italy, highlighting the difference between

two words often used to define people's and governments' attitude towards migrants: integration and inclusion. The former conceals a forceful and dangerous ideal of equity, which effaces any subjectivity, while the latter may disclose new forms of understanding and coexistence. Although this geography of migration is made up of a plurality of places and languages, a particular attention is devoted to Italy and its experience as a country of both migrants and immigrants. In her article Silvia Camilotti focuses on the marks left by history on the migrants' bodies, proposing some novels by female colonial writers as a case study.

The female body is particularly meaningful and compelling as a specific perspective on migration. This body often becomes a space of political resistance, as is the case with one of the most relevant female writers in contemporary Paraguay, Princesa Aquino Augsten, and her female characters, analysed by Ana Cecilia Prenz Kopušar. In Aquino's novels, women are subjected to all kinds of abuse and violence, but the force of their body conveys a message of unexpected resilience to the reader. A similar view on female migrants is the one proposed by Martina Codeluppi, who reads the novel *The Dark Road* by Chinese dissident (and migrant) writer Ma Jian as a "provocative account that highlights the hardships endured by those who are forced to leave their homeland." The paper focuses on the figure of the escaped woman, which returns with the fascinating image of the "tecunas", the fugitive women described in Dante José Liano's essay. The latter reverses the perspective, though, by delving into the experience of the "abandoned men" featured in the 1949 novel *Hombres de maíz* by Guatemalan Nobel Literature laureate Miguel Ángel Asturias.

Another radical change of perspective is applied by Diana Paola Pulido Gómez, who builds her analysis of the migrant and his/her subaltern condition from the viewpoint of the winners, the colonisers embodied by Pedro de Ursúa, the narrator and protagonist of William Ospina's trilogy.

A peculiar figure which recurs in many of the articles is that of the travelling writer, who recounts from a very subjective and sometimes autobiographical viewpoint the experience of “translated being”, to borrow the expression coined by Michael Cronin (*Translation and Identity*) on the basis of Salman Rushdie’s definition.

One of the most representative and iconic examples of a migrant writer is Cervantes, who – just as the protagonist of his masterpiece – represents the ontological condition of the wandering being. Focusing on the episode of Ricote (which concerns the expulsion of the Moriscos from Spain), in his essay Adrián Saéz reconstructs a range of travel options available at the time – from exile to escape, from missionary work to pilgrimage – and presents the character of Ricote as a symbol of some key feelings of the migrant, such as nostalgia, anxiety, and frustration.

Despite the diverse origins and geographical destinations mapped in this cartography, if we compare the different events and circumstances of the protagonists scrutinised in the articles, we find a striking correspondence between them in terms of life and bodily experiences. For instance, the desperate struggle waged by the immigrants against the hostile metropolis is much the same in Paris (see Francisco de Borja Gómez Iglesias’s article) and in Shenzhen, depicted in Federico Picerni’s analysis of the novel *Northern Girls* by Chinese female writer Sheng Keyi: male but especially female migrants have to cope with alienation and the loss of identity, often resorting or submitting to sexual encounters in order to escape isolation.

The experience of immigrants is depicted by many authors in this volume as “a mosaic of experiences and cultures” – to borrow Gómez Iglesias’s words – where each story, each case represents the “scandal” of the precarious state of the migrants, and attempts to free them from their condition of invisibility.

The act of telling tales of migration can be a “shelter” for the migrants themselves: Branka Kalenić Ramšak and Gabriele Bizzarri – respectively introducing the works by the Slovenian

writer Drago Jančar and the Argentine novelist Samanta Schweblin – shift the focus on the representational forms adopted by the writers in narrating the violence of migration. The former scholar suggests that fiction could be the only means of salvation thanks to the cathartic power of memory; the latter reflects upon the possibility of reacting to the loss of meaning produced by contemporary globalisation and the deterritorialisation of human beings, by crossing the borders of the imagination, just as migrants constantly cross the borders of countries and cultures. Also concerned with the narrative strategies adopted to describe violence is Adriana Mancini's article on the Argentine writer Griselda Gambaro and her ways of coping with political censorship in her novel *Ganarse la muerte*: irony, absurdity, and grotesqueness constitute the approach she adopts in order to show political and personal violence (as in the femicide described in the novel) in all its ruthlessness.

From the ancient past as much as from this restless present, the stories of and reflections on migration contained in this book form an extraordinarily vivid and at the same time frightening representation of our world and the unbearable fragility of our condition. They urge us to rethink and question our claim to a single and stable identity, the dream of a sharable and inclusive territory, and the attachment to values and beliefs about gender, homeland, culture and language that all too often lead to misunderstandings and violence.