

## Review Essays | Ensayos de Reseña

### Displaced lives in the Americas. A review of three cross-border ethnographies

*Book Review Essay by Nanneke Winters*

- *The Migrant Passage: Clandestine Journeys from Central America* by, Noelle K. Brigden. Cornell University Press, 2018.
- *Contraband Corridor: Making a Living at the Mexico-Guatemala Border*, by Rebecca B. Galemba. Stanford University Press, 2018.
- *Lives in Transit: Violence and Intimacy on the Migrant Journey*, by Wendy A. Vogt. University of California Press, 2018.

This review essay discusses three recent cross-border ethnographies that in complementary ways analyse migration, smuggling, and insecurity in Central America and Mexico. The first two ethnographies, by Wendy Vogt and Noelle Brigden, focus on Central American migrants on the move in Mexico, whereas the third ethnography by Rebecca Galemba zooms in on a specific border crossing, its Guatemalan and Mexican residents and the ways in which these residents engage in the smuggling of commodities. All three ethnographies consider people, goods, and livelihoods on the move, the illegalization and violence this movement entails, and its implications for the places along Central American and Mexican transit routes. Although the works by Vogt and Brigden can be positioned in migration studies, and Galemba's in border studies, in this review I join and juxtapose them as 'cross-border ethnographies'. Doing so enables me to bring out their collective strength in exploring displaced lives, more specifically, to highlight the interplay between experiences of displacement and the changing socio-material landscape through which these experiences take place.

## Border crossings and transit communities

In her ethnography *Lives in Transit: Violence and Intimacy on the Migrant Journey*, Vogt explores the journeys of Central American migrants through the southern states of Mexico. She situates her work in the legacies of violence and securitization in the Americas, as well as in traditions of solidarity. Empirically based on one year of volunteering at a shelter in Oaxaca and additional research at other shelters in southern Mexico, Vogt develops a rich ethnography of transit. Her key argument maintains that transit is characterized by both violence and care. She elaborates this argument through a well-grounded notion of Mexico's *arterial border*, which she explains as a constellation of multi-directional and abusive regimes of mobility that channel migrants towards increasingly dangerous alternative routes. These routes are sustained by a proliferating *migrant industry* through which their violent commodification takes place. At the same time, *intimate economies of mobility* develop around these routes, involving emerging (but often temporary) relationships between migrants and state agents, shelter workers, smugglers, activists and other migrants. Working through these concepts and maintaining a dual focus on both the embodied and the material allows Vogt to make strides toward an anthropology of transit. Pointed photography and rich ethnographic vignettes combined with a clear argument enable the reader to achieve an in-depth understanding of migrant lives in transit.

Brigden's ethnography, *The Migrant Passage: Clandestine Journeys from Central America*, takes on the same topic, but her starting point and argument are different. Brigden writes from a combined anthropology and international relations perspective and situates her research in discussions on globalization, borders, and sovereignty. Her main argument is that uncertain migrant journeys rest on improvisation, which in turn produces mobilities that shape the socio-material landscape where migrants pass through. She further argues that as migrants navigate the journey with little resources, information becomes crucial but also a curse, as 'predators' use the same information to track down migrants. Brigden develops the notions of *survival plays*, tactical performances of social roles in transit, and *knowledge-based artefacts*, the material evidence of transit turned into resources of knowledge, to trace how migrants navigate the socio-material landscape of their journey, and how they interact with transit communities and shape their economies. She does so based on two years of research and volunteering with migrants and their families, both in rural El Salvador and in the train yards and shelters along a main Mexican transit corridor, as well as follow-up visits that include destinations in the United States. Brigden takes an original approach in her method and writing, employing a critical cartography based on migrant mapmaking and introducing her material in the form of a tragedy with a three-act structure. This theatrical metaphor allows Brigden to speak of migrant practices as performances, and of a state that sets the stage within a larger political theatre of violent migration policing.

In complementary fashion, Vogt and Brigden touch upon many similar themes, including the role of United States policies and state-criminal entanglements in shaping increasingly violent migrant routes; the necessity and dangers of disclosing/sharing information; and the importance of focusing on transit experiences for understanding contemporary migration beyond origin and destination settings. Moreover, both authors treat the migrant journey as an extended fieldsite, and they share a cautious approach towards the ethics of conducting research among mobile, marginalized populations. Both authors strive to bring out the humanity and embodied struggles of these migrants by focusing on their often extended experiences of transit.

Next to an exploration of the ways in which the local socio-material landscape shapes these transit experiences and migrant trajectories more generally, both Vogt and Brigden acknowledge the imprint that migration leaves on the communities that migrants pass through. Whereas Vogt mainly does so through an exploration of care practices, Brigden focuses on the ways in which sustained passing through of migrants accumulates to changed material and cultural landscapes. However, as the perspective of both authors remains mainly with migrants, the voices of the residents of transit communities do not yet stand out.

It is their perspective that is put centre stage in *Contraband Corridor: Making a Living at the Mexico-Guatemala Border*. In her ethnography, Galemba does not focus on migrants per se, but on one of the many informal border crossings between Mexico and Guatemala that such migrants may pass through on their way elsewhere. Empirically based on one year of living and working at the border and multiple follow-up visits, she attempts to understand the border and its crossings from the point of view of its residents. Focusing on the smuggling of basic commodities by border residents in an exclusionary context marked by what she refers to as *securitized neoliberalism*, or the tying of security and neoliberal economic policies, Galemba challenges common and simplistic notions of security, trade, and illegality. Situating documents, agricultural liberalization, local toll systems, and a diversity of border actors in the historical connectivity and porosity of the borderland, she meticulously details how residents view their longstanding smuggling activities as 'free trade'. She argues that these extralegal practices and their illegalization are part of, and even consolidate, the state and large businesses while criminalizing and further de-securitizing the lives of border residents.

Galemba's focus on these residents, and this borderland, stands out as an original contribution in this Central American/Mexican context marked by migration and migration scholarship. At the same time, however, her book acknowledges how increasing marginalization and militarization has shaped these borderlands, turning them into a violent place for passing migrants as well as into fertile ground for outmigration. Into a place that produces and is produced in tandem with migration. This way, Galemba's work nicely complements and enriches what we learn about migrant trajectories from Vogt and

Brigden. Juxtaposing these three ethnographies shows the importance of a dual emphasis when it comes to migration, transit communities, and cross-border livelihoods: on both who/what passes through, and on the changing socio-material landscape where this passing through takes place.

### **Experiences of place and displacement**

As exemplified by Vogt and Brigden, scholars have increasingly argued for a focus on the winding migrant journeys and extended transit spaces that complicate neat migration patterns (Mainwaring & Brigden 2016; Phillips & Missbach 2017). Due to ever-declining roads to formal migration and ever-extending border externalization policies and practices, migrant journeys become longer and more demanding. Migrants' multiple attempts at movement and the multiple ways in which their movement gets delayed or blocked altogether, in border hotspots, deserts and jungles and at sea, add up to increasingly complex trajectories. Apart from acknowledging the importance of these developments for people's lives, the scholarship on this in-between phase of migration also provides a useful corrective to linear thinking about migration as an uninterrupted one-way move between two fixed poles, instead of an ongoing, multidirectional and multi-local process (Schapendonk et al. 2018).

This flourishing literature on transit migration and migrant journeys has paid surprisingly little explicit attention to particular places that become part of the routes of people on the move. As the ethnographies discussed here illustrate, migrants do not hover over the landscapes between their origin and intended destination; they move through them, becoming affected by them and affecting them as they go (and sometimes stay; Drotbohm & Winters 2018). Local economies start catering to migrants in transit, in legal and illegal ways, through exploitation, entrepreneurship and humanitarianism. Vogt describes a migrant industry that thrives on cheap migrant labour, exclusionary migration policies, and the illegalization of migrants. She mainly focuses on smuggling and kidnapping, but in the broader literature this industry also extends to lucrative governmental strategies such as deportation and repatriation, as well as to more mundane ways of making money off migrants passing through 'underground', for instance local businesses selling overpriced travel items (De León 2015: 160). Likewise, Brigden goes into what she calls the 'transit political economy' along migrant routes, detailing how the smuggling business becomes

the lifeblood of the communities through which migrants frequently transit. ... These practices leave visible imprints on the physical and socioeconomic landscapes, just like the migrants' footfalls cut trails through desert and mountains. Cultural and economic communities orient themselves toward the movement of people across the landscape, and both supporting and predatory activities cluster along prominent paths. These ruts carved by migrants and their smugglers become a transit political economy where entire

communities spring to life along these burgeoning trade routes. Human movement along a trade route is like a river, carving a path through the society it traverses and depositing the physical and cultural sediment of people along its current. (33-34).

Vogt and Brigden clearly illustrate how even populations considered to be in transit leave traces. They change and make place through their everyday interactions, which in turn depend on the particularities of these places. An open view of places (à la Doreen Massey) would entail that place and movement or flows are mutually constitutive. It follows that our understanding of contemporary migration experiences depends on our understanding of the inhabited local landscape they pass through and vice versa, as Galemba demonstrates.

The three ethnographies discussed here indicate that there is good reason to bring people on the move and people inhabiting the places of their trajectories into the same empirical and analytical frame. As recent thinking on displacement indicates, the difficulty of imagining and securing a future at home is not exclusive to migrants, but felt by many people around the world (Ramsay 2019). Tracing disparate structures of colonialism, exploitative capitalism, and environmental degradation, scholars show that experiences of displacement need to be de-exceptionalized and recognized for their hold over people's lives, migrant and non-migrant alike. Many places that become part of migrant trajectories are considered to be marginalized places, in which local residents themselves feel increasingly alienated or detached from these places, subject to dispossession and forgotten by successive governments. As Vogt notes in her chapter on the different interpretations of security and safety that inhabit the transit space, "[m]igrants do not travel in a vacuum, but rather become deeply intertwined in the relations, economies, and social climates of the communities they pass through. The majority of these transit communities are also spaces of insecurity, located in poor rural areas or on the impoverished margins of cities." (179-180).

Juxtaposing these three ethnographies highlights the interplay between simultaneous experiences of displacement and socioeconomic, cultural and political change. Vogt's discussion of the local and transnational activist networks that emerge around migrant routes illuminates the transformative implications that the presence of migrants has for residents' understandings of (and resistance to) violence, impunity and other structural inequalities that mark their own lives. Galemba's account of a peasantry and border population that feels betrayed by formal trade agreements and is faced with limited livelihood opportunities besides smuggling brings out such structural, dislocating inequalities. The combination of large-scale trade interests, an intensifying war on drugs, and increasing securitization of migration has further resulted in selective policing and criminalization that affect the lives of border residents. Brigden also notes the ways in which these developments make residents less secure in their own country. She claims that the 'racial stereotypes and national

tells' that authorities use to detect and detain migrants have become blurred through the sustained presence of these migrants, resulting in insecurities that affect not only those passing through but also those who consider these terrains of transit their home. Although such experiences are not shared equally between the different groups of people present, they point to ways in which migrants and non-migrants may understand and struggle with marginalization in a broader field of unequal mobility.

An evolving sense of place, home and belonging is central to both migration and border studies, and to the people at the core of this scholarship: migrants, their relatives, their hosts, other migration actors, borderlanders. Inspired by the convincing cross-border ethnographies juxtaposed here, it seems time to take our understanding of their different yet interconnected experiences of displacement and the changing local landscapes in which these take place to the next level. Vogt, Brigden and Galemba have made strides toward a recognition of lives and livelihoods that become entangled with the landscape even as they are on the move. Subsequent research should follow this lead to further acknowledge and investigate simultaneous experiences of displacement in the places that have become characterized by transit throughout the Americas, and beyond.

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**Nanneke Winters** is researcher at the Department of Anthropology and African Studies (ifeas), Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (Germany) and affiliated with the Institute of Development Policy (IOB), University of Antwerp (Belgium).

Address: Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Forum universitatis 6, 55099 Mainz, Germany.

Email: nanneke.winters@uni-mainz.de

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