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# Reframing Immigration in the Americas

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The struggle for immigrant rights has been long and tumultuous. The Republican challenge to President Obama's effort to implement executive action for up to five million undocumented immigrants is the latest in a series of frustrations for immigrants and their allies. It is not just the Republicans, however, who are impeding social justice. The frustration is also with President Obama's two terms of criminalizing and deporting millions of people, which speaks louder than his rhetoric and belated attempt at executive action. There is also frustration with the mainstream immigrant rights movement for adopting a narrow strategy that repeatedly pinned hopes on Democrats, only to be disappointed.

Many are now calling for a more inclusive movement that contests xenophobia and the criminalization of immigrants. As part of an overall critique of oppression based on race, class, gender, and sexuality, this approach advocates an end to immigrant exploitation. Moreover, activists are connecting the dots between migration, capitalist globalization, and U.S. hemispheric and global dominance.

This more inclusive approach to immigration intersects with the growth in academic scholarship on contemporary Latina/o migration. This literature has been important for highlighting undocumented students' experiences, detailing struggles for immigrant rights, and complicating theories of immigration. However, traditional discipline-specific scholarship and the organizing priorities of mass movements often elide significant issues and theoretical frameworks. Research on immigration frequently follows the dominant narrative and rarely underscores alternative visions or possibilities. The topics and theories marginalized are at the heart of a critical examination of the hemispheric movement of peoples within and across borders. These issues and perspectives blur the borders of a host of intersectional conditions, bodies and identities.

This special theme centers migration perspectives, testimonials, theories, and pedagogies that have been marginalized in the mainstream immigration scholarship.

Focusing on Queer and Trans migrations, migrant struggles, detention and the politics of immigration courts, race and migration, and undocumented and documented labor, this issue includes a western hemispheric interrogation of migration in the era of globalized capital where the working poor are losing their rights to land, markets and daily survival.<sup>1</sup> While the issue engages primarily with immigration in the U.S., it does not ignore the transnational migration "circuits" in the Americas. To broaden frameworks on immigration and better capture heterogeneous experiences, this focus includes research articles, theoretical conceptualizations, creative pieces, oral histories, and book reviews that speak to the above topics and perspectives.

Part one complicates dominant understanding of the effects of current U.S. immigration policies and immigrant rights movements. The three essays in this section underscore the macro-processes that are generally ignored in mainstream approaches. Gilbert Gonzalez, "Organizations Serving Latino Communities Take Opposing Positions on Senate Bill 744," takes us behind the scenes of the immigrant rights movement to demonstrate how proposals for guest worker provisions divide the immigrant rights movement. This division belies deeper rifts based on the different organizations' relationships to corporations and capitalism. Suyapa G. Portillo Villeda, Eileen J. Ma, Stacy I. Macias, and Carmen Varela also examine the division in the immigrant rights movement in "The 'Good,' the 'Bad' and the Queer Invisible." The authors, all members of the collective May Day Queer Contingent (MDQC), demonstrate that mainstream immigrant rights groups, through practice and policy, shape the immigrant rights' message in ways that marginalize LGBTQ migrants and their stories. The authors show how by using an intersectional analysis to oppression, MDQC struggles for inclusion of queer migrants. In "Branding Guilt: American Apparel Inc. and Latina Labor in Los Angeles," Hannah Noel explores the underside of the ethical consumer movement and illustrates how it perpetuates neoliberalism and immigrant exploitation.

While immigration policies are creating restrictions, imposing sanctions and forcing deportations, the pieces in part two demonstrate migrants' agency and survival. This section is about transgressions, making space in spite of seemingly rigid laws, policies and institutions. Julia Wignall's "Cultural Citizenship and Coming Out on a College Campus" and Bianet Castellanos' "Idealizing Maya Culture" excavate the ways in which communities work against the rigidity of the system to create opportunities for themselves. This often involves "coming out," putting their lives out into the open, as a challenge to institutions and society as a whole. The public exhibition of their struggles, their collective labor, their *undocumentedness*, and their culture has extended a civil rights movement beyond the nation state. Exhibiting their struggles and cultures in traditionally *mestizo* and heteronormative spaces, the Yucatecan Maya community in cities like Los Angeles, for instance, stage their memories of home for present generations so that they may not forget. More importantly, they craft a geography of possibility for future generations to exist courageously and proudly despite the dissonance of their lives in the U.S.

Betsy Dahms' "Queering Citizenship" and Munia Bhaumik's "Humiliation as Technique" focus on the body as a locus for trans and queer people, fighting for the right to exist—to actually live. Dahms calls the undocumented Transmigrants "nepantleras"—the Anzaldúan theory that describes the liminality of existence, a point from where to theorize intersectionality within the lives of undocumented and queer youth. Bhaumik's piece joins in dialogue the accounts of two deaths occurring while under detention by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE): Edwidge Danticat's account of an elderly Haitian man, her uncle, and the oral history of the mother of a transgender woman, Victoria Arellano. The pairing of these deaths under ICE custody effectively conveys the crude lack of humanity that immigrants face at the hands of the guards, private prisons and ultimately the state. These articles problematize the citizen and argue that there are certain bodies that are unwanted and undesirable, facing state discipline including the negation of citizenship.

The above articles remind us that undocumented immigrant queers, indigenous and working poor are not waiting passively for others to acknowledge their rights in legislation. Instead, they are creating, redrafting, transforming space with their bodies, ideas, work, protests and

historical memories. Continuing the interdisciplinarity of this issue, part three conveys the power of testimonials and the importance of critical applications. Here the contributors document *and* create spaces of resistance. As detailed in "Queering Political Economy in Neoliberal Ironbound Newark," Yamil Avivi organized a dialogue circle of Brazilian and non-Brazilian Latina/o gay and queers. By becoming part of the social spaces of several of the undocumented men in this group, Avivi explores the contradictions and complexities of how the men articulate, navigate, and perform their subjectivities in multiple arenas. Sandibel Borges uses oral history as a method to analyze the testimony of an activist and community organizer in "Not Coming Out, But Building Home." Using an intersectional framework that centers the story of a self-identified queer Mexicana migrant, this article disrupts normative constructions of migration and coming out narratives.

Martha E. Gonzalez and Luis-Genaro Garcia provide concrete strategies for creating spaces of critical consciousness and collective resistance. In "Sobreviviendo," Gonzalez, an *artista* (artist/activist) and scholar, shares how community songwriting fosters transnational dialogues between Mexicanas/os in Veracruz, Mexico and Latinas/os in the U.S. In "Empowering Students through Creative Resistance," teacher, artist, and scholar Garcia draws on lessons learned over an eight-year teacher-student relationship with an undocumented student to capture the transformative potential of teacher caring and art-based critical pedagogy.

In "Voices on the Line," we asked six people with extensive involvement in the struggle for migrant rights to briefly address what they believe are the crucial issues in "Reframing Immigration in the Americas." In keeping with our effort to reframe the debate around immigration, we sought voices that are generally marginalized in U.S. policy and academic discussions. The testimonies of Manuela Camus and Esther Portillo illustrate how U.S. immigration policy exerts political and economic dominance. These policies have uprooted millions of people from their countries and further criminalized them wherever they migrate. riKu Matsuda reflects on the exasperation organizers face on the ground at the violent murders of trans\* women, often immigrants, a frustration put into words in Matsuda's piece when he quotes Bamby Salcedo: "They keep killing us and nobody fucking cares." Odilia Romero's essay also underscores how violence is

perpetuated by immigration policies that ignore racial and ethnic diversity. Betty Hung's contribution argues that there would be no gains won by the immigrant rights movement during the Obama administration were it not for the hard and bold leadership of immigrant youth and their allies. Hung concludes, in accordance with the other authors in this section, that if the movement is to grow and win truly just migration policies, it must become more critical, inclusive, hemispheric, feminist, and intersectional.

The captivating art work by Malaquías Montoya and Sandra Fernández visually illustrates this special issue's themes, especially the topics punctuated in part three of the issue about using art for community and critical consciousness. Both Delia Cosentino's interview with Malaquías Montoya, and Tatiana Flores' "Latino Art and the Immigrant Artist," provide crucial context for engaging with and understanding the artists' work.

Audre Lorde theorized that poetry is "illumination" when it makes visible that which is "nameless and formless—about to be birthed but already felt."<sup>2</sup> The poems by Consuelo Hernández, Judith Pérez Soria, Bamby Salcedo and Vickie Vértiz hauntingly tell stories of crossing a broken border, "illuminating" that which is unseen and unsaid. These poets make readers think about that which has been felt and seen but not voiced. The images of working people crossing the border, stopped by the immensity of the "Río Grand" in Vértiz' poem, the plundering of migrants' lands, labor, and dignity in Pérez Soria's "Despojo," and riding *el tren de la muerte*, confronting violence, denial and subjugation in Hernández' trilogy make alive what/who is presumably dead, highlighting the lives of those left behind to bear witness, to remember. Bamby Salcedo's "Aquí Estoy" is a definitive stance for survival, as well as exasperated call to stop the violence against transgender people. The poems invoke many lives, those that often fly under the radar, challenging us to see, to feel, to engage, and to respond.

Finally, the six reviews of ten recent books on Latina/o migration capture some of the latest theoretical and methodological developments in the field. From new thinking on race, nation, activism, and labor to gender and families, these books offer rich comparative, ethnographic, intergenerational, transnational, archival, and textual analyses. What also makes the perspectives of several of the book authors, and the book reviewers themselves, especially unique, are their personal connections to the

subject. As immigrants, scholars, and activists, they use what Dolores Delgado Bernal (1998) characterizes as their "cultural intuition"—personal experiences, existing literature, professional knowledge, and analytical research process—to present an important angle of vision on the structures and struggles they detail.<sup>3</sup>

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Enrique C. Ochoa and Gilda L. Ochoa, "Hacia una perspectiva interseccional y continental de las luchas por los derechos de migrantes en Los Angeles" in Manuela Camus eds. *La fuerza de presencia: En torno de la migración, la pobreza y el género* en (Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 2013).
- 2 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freemont, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984).
- 3 Delgado Bernal, Dolores. "Using a Chicana Feminist Epistemology in Educational Research." *Harvard Educational Review* 68, no. 4: 555-82, 1998.