

Nation, Migration, Mediation

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Forced exits can be created by traumas of environment, economy or national civil war. They produce refugees who are invariably traumatized. Their claims on the hospitality of the nations in which they land are always in a gray zone between hospitality, sanctuary and incarceration, because they are usually in a categorical gray zone, which combines features of the stranger, the victim, the criminal and the undocumented visitor. The trauma of the forced refugee provokes the deepest anxieties of the modern nation-state, which relies on boundaries, censuses, taxes and documentation. The heart of the new traumas of the forced refugee in the new country is that he/she has a plot (a narrative, a story) but no character, identity or name. The challenge of evolving a new form of legal and ethical hospitality is of creating a name to fit the plot, an identity to fit the narrative. The challenge of the modern nation-state is that its key narratives of identity rely on fixed starting points (blood, language, religion, territory) but the forced exit is usually produced precisely by originary traumas of blood, language, religion or location. The purpose of this essay is to open the question of how, in a world of forced exits that lacks an

ethical foundation for seeing traumatic movement as the pivot of a serious identity crisis for its displaced inhabitants, people in modern nation-states can build a new relationship between plot and character.

In my book *Modernity at Large* (1996),¹ I suggested that in the era of globalization, the circulation of media images and the movement of migrants created new disjunctures between location, imagination and identity. More specifically, I suggested that in many social locations throughout the world, especially those characterized by media saturation and migrant populations, “moving images meet mobile audiences”, thus disturbing the stability of many sender-receiver models of mass communication. This has many implications for what I then called “the work of the imagination”, and I particularly stressed the new potentials that this situation created for the proliferation of possible worlds and imagined selves.

Migrants, especially the poorer migrants of this world, are not thriving in a world of free markets, consumer paradise or social liberation. They are struggling to make the best of the

possibilities that are opened to them in the new relationships between migration and mass mediation. There is no doubt that migrants today, like migrants throughout human history, move either to escape horrible lives, to seek better ones, or both. The only new fact in the world of electronic mediation is that the archive of possible lives is now richer and more available to ordinary people than ever before. Thus, there is a greater stock of material from which ordinary people can craft the scripts of possible worlds and imagined selves. This does not mean that the social projects that emerge from these scripts are always liberating or even pleasant. But it is an exercise in what I have called "the capacity to aspire."²

Muslim migrants from North Africa, Syria, Turkey and Iraq sometimes drown in the Mediterranean as they seek to swim to the shores of Italy, Greece or Spain from illegal boats, as do their Haitian counterparts in the Florida waters and others in the containers that cross the English Channel. It is also true that young women from the ex-socialist republics often end up brutalized as sex-workers in the border-zones between the old and new Europe, as do Philippine domestic workers in Milan and Kuwait, and South Asian laborers (both male and female) in Dubai, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Such examples of the brutalizing of migrants can be multiplied: poorer migrants today frequently end up as undocumented citizens, objects of racist laws and sentiments, and sometimes as targets of ethnocidal violence in locations from Rwanda to Indonesia.

But is this suffering the whole story? Does it tell us everything we need to know about how these projects for movement were formed, about what efforts it took to summon the resources to move, of what was made possible by meager remittances, of how the relationship of men and women is often recalibrated under the conditions of migration, of the doors that are opened for migrant children, and, finally, of the value of negotiating for new opportunities, even in harsh circumstances? The work of the imagination,

especially for poorer migrants, is critical for exercising the capacity to aspire. Without developing this capacity, which may also lead to rape, exploitation and death (for migration is a world of risk), poor migrants will always remain captive to the wishes of their more fortunate hosts, to the prison of their own domestic tyrannies and to the self-fulfilling prophecies of those business-class revolutionaries who always know, in advance, how best poor people should exercise their agency and which level of risk is most appropriate to them.

So I insist that the work of the imagination is not a privilege of elites, intellectuals and cosmopolitans but is also being performed by poor people, notably in the worldwide pursuit of their possibilities to migrate, whether to near or far locations. Denuding these proletarian projects of the dimension of fantasy, imagination and aspiration, reducing them to mere reflexes of the labor market or of some other institutional logic, does nothing for the poor other than to deny them the privilege of risk-taking. This is the opposite of what Charles Taylor calls "the politics of recognition."³ In this perspective, what can we say about the place of archives, narratives and memory in the building of migrant identity? Here the idea of the living archive becomes especially useful. Migrants have a complex relationship to the practices of memory and, thus, to the making of archives, for several reasons. First, because memory becomes hyper-valued for many migrants, the practices through which collective memory is constructed are especially subject to cultural contestation and to simplification. Memory, for migrants, is almost always a memory of loss. But since most migrants have been pushed out of the sites of official/national memory in their original homes, there is some anxiety surrounding the status of what is lost, since the memory of the journey to a new place, the memory of one's own life and family world in the old place, and official memory about the nation one has left have to be recombined in a new location. Migration tends to be accompanied by a

confusion about what exactly has been lost, and thus of what needs to be recovered or remembered. This confusion leads to an often deliberate effort to construct a variety of archives, ranging from the most intimate and personal (such as the memory of one's earlier bodily self) to the most public and collective, which usually take the form of shared narratives and practices. Media plays a critical role in the construction of the migrant archive, since circulation, instability and the disjunctures of movement always cast doubt on the reliability of the media images and narratives through which such archives are sometimes assumed to emerge. In the effort to seek resources for the building of archives, migrants thus often turn to the media for images, narratives, models and scripts of their own story, partly because the diasporic story is always understood to be one of breaks and gaps. Nor is this only a consumer relationship, for in the age of the internet, literate migrants have begun to explore social media, chat rooms and other interactive spaces in which to find, debate and consolidate their own memory traces and stories into a more widely plausible narrative. This task, never free of contest and debate, sometimes does take the form of what Benedict Anderson disparagingly called "long-distance nationalism."⁴ But long-distance nationalism is a complex matter, which usually produces many sorts of politics and many sorts of interest. In the age in which electronic mediation has begun to supplement and sometimes even supplant print mediation and older forms of communication, imagined communities are sometimes much more deeply real to migrants than natural ones. Interactive media thus play a special role in the construction of what we may call the diasporic public sphere (an idea I proposed in *Modernity at Large* to extend the insights of Habermas, Anderson and others about national public spheres), for they allow new forms of agency in the building of imagined communities. The act of reading together (which Anderson brilliantly identified in regard to newspapers and novels in

the new nationalisms of the colonial world) is now enriched by the technologies of the web, Facebook, Twitter and Google, creating a world in which the simultaneity of reading is complemented by the interactivity of messaging, searching and posting. Thus, what we may call the diasporic archive, or the migrant archive, is increasingly characterized by the presence of voice, agency and debate, rather than of mere reading, reception and interpellation.

But the migrant archive operates under another constraint, for it has to relate to the presence of one or more narratives of public memory in the new home of the migrant, where the migrant is frequently seen as a person with only one story to tell – the story of abject loss and need. In his or her new society, the migrant has to contend with the minority of the migrant archive, with the embarrassment of its remote references and with the poverty of its claims on the official "places of memory" in the new site. Thus, the electronic archive becomes a doubly valuable space for migrants, for, in this space, some of the indignity of being minor or contemptible in the new society can be compensated, and the vulnerability of the migrant narrative can be protected in the relative safety of cyberspace.

What is more, both new electronic media as well as traditional print media among migrant communities allow complex new debates to occur between the memory of the old home and the demands of public narrative in the new setting. Migrant newspapers in many communities become explicit sites for debate between micro-communities, between generations and between different forms of nationalism. In this sense, the migrant archive is highly active and interactive, as it is the main site of negotiation between collective memory and desire. As the principal resource in which migrants can define the terms of their own identities and identity-building, outside the strictures of their new homes, the diasporic archive is an intensified form of what characterizes all popular archives: it is a place to sort out the meaning of memory in relationship

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to the demands of cultural reproduction. Operating outside the official spheres of both the home society and the new society, the migrant archive cannot afford the illusion that traces are accidents, that documents arrive on their own and that archives are repositories of the luck of material survival. Rather, the migrant archive is a continuous and conscious work of the imagination, seeking in collective memory an ethical basis for the sustainable reproduction of cultural identities in the new society. For migrants, more than for others, the archive is a map. It is a guide to the uncertainties of identity building under adverse conditions. The archive is a search for the memories that count and not a home for memories with a pre-ordained significance. This living, aspirational archive could become a vital source for the challenge of narrativity and identity in contemporary times.

1. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
2. Arjun Appadurai, "The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition," in: Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton (eds.), *Culture and Public Action* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 59–84.
3. See Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).
4. Benedict Anderson, *Long-Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics* (Amsterdam: Centre for Asian Studies, 1992).

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