

## **Review: *Remembering Migration: Oral Histories and Heritage in Australia***

By Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton, eds. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. ISBN: 9783030177539. 376 pp.

**Dawid Aristotelis Fusiek**

*Utrecht University, the Netherlands*

Migration has been a vital element of human histories, cultures, and civilizations. Although it poses a long-standing issue, migration studies have made significant progress only in recent decades. The combination of the progress in interdisciplinary pursuits and the popularization of postmodern thought proved to be enough to establish it as a discipline in the late 1990s (Greenwood and Hunt 2003). Since then, scholars have used different approaches and scopes of analysis to tackle the phenomenon, ranging from ‘geographies of migration’ to ‘diasporas and transnationalism’ (Pisarevskaya et al. 2020). As Alejandro Portes (1997) predicted, the newly emerged pluralism contributed to the shift of focus from issues of governance to themes of families and gender in the twenty-first century. Academia and policymakers began to give more attention to the complexity of migration, thus leading to the increase of work on identity narratives, such as migrants and their descendants’ dual identities (De Fina 2003; Jens and Carbaugh 2001). However, this change did not last long.

Due to the increase of such events as the rise of neo-nationalist right-wing populism, terrorism, and the global increase of migration waves in recent years, the public discourse has returned to the preexisting practice of a collective equation. The narrative has shifted from asking the question of ‘how?’ and ‘why?’ to ‘how can we stop it?’ and ‘where they are from?’. As a result, the migrants have become numbers and their stories irrelevant, the act of compassion has given way to depersonalization, and the popularity of the focus on the individual dimension has decreased. Amid this turn of events, scholars of migration studies have continued to further the field’s progress through the formulation of more innovative and ambitious research. Among these, the publication, *Remembering Migration: Oral Histories and Heritage in Australia*, edited by Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton, has stood out.

The book constitutes one of the most comprehensive studies of diverse migrant memories in Australia since the 1950s, when Jean Martin compiled the life and integration stories of displaced

persons (Martin 1965). In a similar manner, this publication aims to examine ‘how individuals, communities, and the nation have commemorated and recorded the experiences of migration to Australia over the past 70 years’ (Darian-Smith and Hamilton 2020, 4). In other words, the editors’ goal is to demonstrate the changes in migration experiences, while making use of contemporary methods and theoretical frameworks for their comprehension and categorization. The book is divided into two parts: the first part focuses on oral histories and their contribution to the study of memory, and the second investigates issues associated with migration heritage. The different authors in these parts refer to a large range of issues and questions that are in line with the two main themes of the book, namely oral history and memory.

The chapters in the first part show the experience and emotions of individuals and communities through oral histories. A closer investigation reveals the existence of four main themes: sexuality, gender, community, and trauma. Regarding sexuality, Shirleen Robinson sheds light on the distinctive challenges and rewards that the lesbian and gay migrants encountered during their integration in, and migration to, Australia. Karen Agutter and Catherine Kevin discuss instead the impact of gender on migration by presenting the forgotten adventures of widowed and unmarried women. Although it is featured in all chapters, the subject of community is the focal point in the case studies of Madelaine Regan, Andrea Cleland, and Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen. The authors give a closer look into the narratives and challenges of the integration of Italian, Greek, and Vietnamese communities into the Australian lifestyle in the last seventy years. The studies provide findings that are not only widely innovative and applicable but also offer great insight into the impact of trauma on the process of identity-building. For instance, Atem Atem uses the South Sudanese community to examine the trauma of migrants that have lived through or fled civil war, and Denise Philips attempts to foster a more empathetic image of the Hazara refugees from Afghanistan by showing the difficulties of their settlement.

The second part of *Remembering Migration* collects various perspectives and case studies to discuss the art of memory-writing and preservation of multiple migration heritages. In their chapters, scholars of diverse backgrounds present distinct methods that can be used to collect data regarding migrant memory and its place in modern research. For instance, Andrew Jakubowicz explores the utility of oral sources in Australia’s multicultural society, while Andrea Wittcomb demonstrates their usefulness in modern museum exhibitions. Especially interesting is Susannah Radstone’s chapter, which portrays how a researcher can draw from their own experience to illustrate the challenges of memory and migration. Apart from this, the second part provides deeper analyses of texts, images, and places of migrant heritage and commemoration. An excellent example is Felicity Collins’s analysis of the cinematic portrayals of British child

migrants and inter-country adoptees on the big screen, such as *The Leaving of Liverpool* (1992) and *Lion* (2016), and the use of cinematic memoir to create public memory. The remaining chapters tackle similar issues, such as Moya McFadzean's analysis of the idea of 'purposeful memory-making' at the Immigration Museum in Melbourne from 1998 until now, or Sukhmani Khorana's investigation of refugees' narratives in Australian documentary films.

As is often the case in an edited book, the themes of the contributions are not homogenous, and the division might seem dubious at first. In a few instances, the abundance of approaches and topics makes the text dense, while diluting the goals of the book. This issue could be resolved by a clearer overall structure and more comprehensible conceptual foregrounding, which would allow a better grasp of the thematic and methodological direction of the book (Piperoglou 2020, 2). Nonetheless, after digging into the main body of the text, the structure proves to work sufficiently, with each story complementing another or providing an entirely new perspective parallel to the preceding one. In the end, the book rather impressively tackles the phenomenon of migration from a wide range of scholarly angles, while doing justice to the history of migrants themselves. However, this is not the only thing that sets *Remembering Migration* apart from similar undertakings.

Firstly, the book manages to successfully apply both an individualistic and a collective approach to the investigation of migration experiences and heritage. Contrary to many projects offering data solely on national and cultural ethnic groups (for example, 'Chinese' or 'Greeks'), this book reveals the impact of shifting identities and factors such as sexuality, gender, class, or age on migration experiences. Secondly, through the oral documentation of the individual experiences of migrants, the book accomplishes to provide both primary sources and an overview of the elements separating or uniting different individuals and communities within a similar spatial setting. In this manner, it demonstrates the complexity of the phenomenon and confronts the generalizations dominant in the public discourse and the imaginary (such as the growing perception of Asian migrants as invaders in Australia). Thirdly, it offers a broad range of tools and starting points for future research. Numerous chapters show, especially in the second part, how memory and oral histories could be utilized in studies of migration or culture, and the role that modern media and contemporary theoretical frameworks could play in this context.

What initially drew me to this book was its interdisciplinary potential. The idea to gather and use primary sources to investigate both integration and migration experiences does not only have applications in migration and memory studies, but also in many other fields associated either with intersectional or discourse theories. By offering migrants and individuals a communication

platform, the scholars enable them to express their side of the story, thus giving them the chance to create their own speech act (McMahan 1987). The latter is of great significance as it could be utilized by scholars to develop a better comprehension (e.g. political or historical) of the elements that go into multi-dimensional phenomena while providing primary sources for the examination of theories and empirical analyses. Furthermore, this approach allows the migrants, in a truly Nietzschean way (the philosopher considers that memory creates every kind of human community) to preserve their memory consistently through generations (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995), and participate directly in the documentation of their heritage, a role that they have previously been excluded from (Logan and Reeves 2009, 280). Thus, it would be beneficial for research of this phenomenon to initiate similar projects in other states with numerous migration communities.

A place that poses a perfect case study is Europe. Like Australia, it has a long history of migration and is the home to many ethnic and national communities. Yet, there is a lack of literature that compares to the reviewed work, and existing publications are generally outdated in one or more ways. The new migration waves pose a potential opportunity for the investigation of migration and integration, specifically areas where the European states currently face challenges. Oral histories and memory-writing could prove to be useful tools for European states to better understand the needs of migrants and document the phenomenon in a more humanistic manner. Indeed, Jayne Persian's chapter shows that oral histories can both reveal and heal the emotional pain felt by the interviewees, a situation that is especially common among the refugees from Syria and Afghanistan. Finally, this category of publications could play an important role in the fight against racism and prejudices. As research has shown, storytelling manages to convey the trauma and the agony of a migrant to their audience. These agonistic narratives, which recognize the social hardship, conflicts, and cultural difficulties related to the cultural interaction between the main and marginalized migrant groups, tackle both the neo-nationalist discourse representing the migrant as a threat, and the humanitarian discourse representing the migrant as a victim (Hansen 2020). The created connection disrupts the illusion of migrants' anonymity and establishes them as storytellers that have 'borrowed [their] authority from death' to share their oral history (Benjamin and Arendt 2007, 94).

## REFERENCES

- Assmann, Jan, and John Czaplicka. 1995. 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity.' *New German Critique* 65: 125–33.
- Benjamin, Walter, and Hannah Arendt. 2007. *Illuminations*. Reprint edition. London: Pimlico.

- Darian-Smith, Kate, and Paula Hamilton, eds. 2019. *Remembering Migration: Oral Histories and Heritage in Australia*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Greenwood, Michael J., and Gary L. Hunt. 2003. 'The Early History of Migration Research.' *International Regional Science Review* 26 (1): 3–37.
- Hansen, Hans Lauge. 2020. 'On Agonistic Narratives of Migration.' *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 23 (4): 547–63.
- Logan, William Stewart, and Keir Reeves. 2009. *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with 'Difficult Heritage'*. London: Routledge, 263–280.
- Martin, Jean. 1965. *Refugee Settlers: A Study of Displaced Persons in Australia*. Canberra: Australian National University.
- McMahan, Eva M. 1987. 'Speech and Counterspeech: Language-In-Use in Oral History Fieldwork.' *The Oral History Review* 15 (1): 185–207.
- Piperoglou, Andonis. 2020. 'Remembering Migration: Oral Histories and Heritage in Australia.' *Australian Historical Studies* 51 (4): 496–497. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2020.1823589>.
- Pisarevskaya, Asya, Nathan Levy, Peter Scholten, and Joost Jansen. 2020. 'Mapping Migration Studies: An Empirical Analysis of the Coming of Age of a Research Field.' *Migration Studies* 8 (3): 455–81.
- Portes, Alejandro. 1997. *Globalization From Below: The Rise of Transnational Communities*. Working Paper Series / Transnational Communities, Wptc-98-01. Oxford: University of Oxford Transnational Communities Programme.