

# Introduction

## *Interrogating Aspirations through Migratory Mobilities*

While questions focused around social, economic, and physical movement have long been central to human lives, state policies, and economic regimes, the ‘mobility turn’ in academic scholarship has often seen a straightforward association of mobility as an upward trajectory mitigating socioeconomic inequality, as well as equating physical movement emerging from migration with mobility. Here, however, we argue that the relationship between migration and mobility is hardly so automatic, and needs to be considered in its complexities and contradictions.<sup>1</sup> Rather than uncritically celebrating mobility, we consider it as a lens through which disruptions, inequalities, differential access, and the role of identities can be understood.

The complex interrelation between aspiration and desperation constitutes the key entry point for examining migration and im/mobility. Lived experiences show how aspirations are shaped by structures and regimes of mobility on the one hand, and migrant imaginaries on the other. The intention to migrate or to settle down is shaped by both infrastructure and human agency. The tensions between migrants’ aspirations, vested in their migratory imaginaries and endeavors, and the structures and regimes that circumscribe or at least shape the possibilities of their mobilities are the central questions here.<sup>2</sup> To answer these questions, we map the ways in which individuals make sense of migration, framed in terms of mobility and immobility, and relate this framing to migration and sedentarization. Interrogating aspirations through socially shared patterns of meaning that normalize and historicize migration, the contributions to this special section seek to connect micro- and macro-level analyses of aspirational mobilities. Through a contextualization of the concepts of mobilities and migration, immobilities and sedentarization, and aspiration and desperation across a diverse set of situations, the articles examine how aspiration shapes and is shaped by migration, sedentarization, and, in turn, im/mobility and its imaginaries.

The contributions to this volume are all based on ethnographic inquiry. In moving away from a top-down approach to the ways in which mobility regimes shape people’s lives, the resulting insights into experiences and everyday lives allow us not only to map the complexities of how such structures shape and are shaped by everyday interventions, but more crucially to expose the false dichotomies of categories, as human lives are not simply marked by homogeneity or binaries. Through analyzing a range of contexts, from desperate displacement to aspiring migration to desperate immobility on different



national and international scales, the articles in the special section unpack the category of aspiration and problematize its binary, desperation, suggesting that these terms can be better understood as a continuum. Aspiration and desperation can then be embedded in the act of mobility, which is formed during migration, and linked to a desire to settle or sedentarize, to return, or to move on.

This special section makes apparent various aspects of migratory mobilities, both in transnational and in rural-urban contexts, touching upon some common themes and ideas. The first article by Bal, Shewly, and Laila investigates the migration experiences of poor women in Bangladesh who migrate from rural locations to the city. Their ethnography captures how social identities, family and household, and life course shape these women's access to livelihoods and their aspirations of mobility through either migration or sedentarization. The women's experiences show that although it is differently shaped by aspirations of mobility, or just even survival (often termed hope in the women's narratives), migration hardly ever ends desperation. The narrative of migration for the sake of mobility is sharply challenged by their lives, as wishes of sedentarization, usually through domesticity, are contrasted with their inability to bring to an end experiences of migration in order to sustain a livelihood. The article further complicates the picture by proposing gendered aspiration as a power relation that produces certain dispositions and practices (even if limitedly), including ones of spatial mobility or immobility, which cannot simply be located within a binary of constraints and incentives, even though the women often end up in perilous and precarious conditions—indeed, in some cases even worse than they were in previously.

The article by Banerjee looks into women's mobilities in the context of India, focusing on the historical trajectories of generational migration. In her analysis of the migration of women workers from tea plantations in West Bengal to different cities in India, she investigates how women's experiences are shaped by historically specific understandings and aspirations of mobility. Many of the women share an aspiration for socioeconomic mobility and the freedom of city life, which migration might bring, as well as a deep desire for mobility through sedentarization, shaped by an aspiration for belonging. This is articulated as a longing based on inherited experiences of displacement that significantly temper narratives of aspiration. Placed outside the dualities of migration and displacement, the women's lived experiences show how narratives of belonging, labor, and affect are also crucial in their articulation of aspirations.

Moving away from the focus on mobility as migration, Radziwinowiczówna's article seeks to map the narratives around immobilities, both in physical and socioeconomic terms. Beginning at the point at which migration has been curtailed or truncated—that is, the post-deportation period after a forced return from the USA to Mexico—the article shows how physical mo-

bility cannot be the only trajectory through which to understand migration. The life stories demonstrate a constant exercise of waiting and planning a return, and what can be seen as a life in suspension. The article therefore introduces a crucial but often ignored dimension of temporality in migration and examines its role in shaping aspirations. The lived experiences reveal that aspirations are not abstract but very much rooted in place and time. The article also highlights the questions around mobility regimes by showing how reentry restrictions, as practices of governance and types of governmentality, seek to temporarily prevent and criminalize the return of a disposable and surplus workforce.

Experiences of young Paraguayan migrants and returnees, as well as non- and not-yet-migrants, are mapped out in Land's article. The transnational social space of migration between rural Paraguay and urban Argentina is marked by the coexistence of aspiration and desperation in the forms of hope and anxiety, due to the objective conditions of both agrarian crisis in Paraguay and economic crisis in Argentina. The article investigates the narratives of the migrants within this complex and moving terrain by understanding how they evaluate what constitute for them the four dimensions of the good life— aspirations of security, advancement, belonging, and attachment. Migration takes place in “shrinking spaces of possibility,” where the logic of economics determines migration decisions. In this space, aspiration and desperation do not exist as binaries but rather as a continuum.

Together, these articles problematize the ways in which institutions, meanings, and practices of mobility shape and are shaped by the lived experiences of people. Realities, possibilities, and imaginaries of mobility are crucially determined by aspirations and the ways that people understand and live them.

## **Political Economy and the Flexibilization of Labor**

Aspirations around mobility do not just exist in the abstract, but are concretized in the realities of the political economy. It is evident that aspirations connected to mobility are premised on an understanding of working conditions and livelihoods. From the 1970s, with increasing globalization, jobs began to be moved from single to multiple locations. Aihwa Ong<sup>3</sup> notes that “flexibility, migration and relocation” have become the currencies of contemporary labor practices, both for skilled and unskilled work. Experiences show that a highly mobile (physical) labor force that meets the need for flexible labor has no straightforward upward trajectory, and indeed often pushes individuals toward greater precarity, especially in the case of cheap unskilled labor. Salazar and Schiller<sup>4</sup> note that international and national laws are also framed in ways that reinforce the desirability of the new mobilities regime of contract labor, wherein spatial mobility often comes at the cost of occupational mobil-

ity, the denial of rights, and uncertain futures. Bal et al.'s article demonstrates these transformations in the political economy of Bangladesh. The twin phenomena of a reduction of women's livelihood opportunities in the agrarian economy through mechanization and a demand for cheap labor in the ready-made garment factories producing for international brands provoke a flow from villages to the cities.<sup>5</sup> This tale of the feminization of rural-urban migration, however, is not a simplistic exposition of push and pull, but is rather complicated by the ways in which the women's differential access to aspirations shapes their migratory mobilities.

Banerjee's article locates the political economy of India, with its rapid casualization, in the migration trajectories of women from tea plantations. The labor regimes are tracked through the plantations' genesis in mercantilism, its growth and expansion during colonialism, and changes brought about by neoliberalism and globalization. In a period of rapid casualization and retrenchment, the consequent changes to the political economy of skills-training and work regimes remain relevant in shaping future imaginaries of migration and in framing these within the terms of desperate movements.

The ways in which labor regimes are facilitated by border regimes is brought out prominently in Radziwinowiczówna's exploration of cross-border migration, or the suspension of it, between the USA and Mexico. Reentry restrictions, as a governance practice, seek to temporarily prevent and criminalize the return to the USA of a disposable and surplus workforce, usually engaged in unskilled work. This strategy means the de facto creation of immobility as a technology of self for those who fear criminal charges resulting from reentry, accompanied by detention and deportation.

Located in the post-2000s neoliberal expansion of high investment, export-oriented, large-scale agriculture of products such as soy, and the state's increasing withdrawal of support for small land holders, Land sketches how rural livelihoods have become increasingly unsustainable for young Paraguayans. Tracing generational imaginaries, the article shows how the present situation contrasts with earlier generations' relatively easy access to upward socioeconomic mobility via migration to Argentina. The dreams of earning and associated socioeconomic mobility are then influenced by the political-economic realities of two sites with limited opportunities.

With a focus on the contradictions between free and mobile labor produced by capitalism, Nicholas De Genova and Nathalie Peutz<sup>6</sup> reveal the limitations of classical models that are based on an analysis of push and pull factors. Indeed, migration regimes are produced by the needs and effects of global capital, but at the same time are not amenable to total control by capital concerns or the state. The imaginaries of migrants' lives are shaped by socially accessible, shared, and transmitted assemblages, which interact with personal imaginings, creating meanings around migration.<sup>7</sup> Such meaning-making is, however, differentially affected by social identity.

## Mobility, Identity, and Aspiration

It is not just the possibilities of physical movement, but also the entitlement to aspiration that is often the product of one's identity. Gender, class, caste, ethnicity, religion, and other categories frame aspirations of migration, which in turn shape one's lived experiences of migration, forced immobility, or sedentarization. In addition to these factors, the articles explore how aspirations to migrate are shaped by the shared history of a region and its present socio-political situation. The relation between migration and mobility is also crucially determined by what Joya Chatterji<sup>8</sup> calls "mobility capital." The absence of mobility capital results in "involuntary immobility."<sup>9</sup> For example, the privileges of hegemonic masculinity enable aspirations and therefore access to specific forms of mobility, which are in turn denied to those who fall outside its ambit. While touching upon various aspects of identity, in these articles, it is gender and the stage in the life course that become the most prominent definers of access to mobility, as well as the meaning of associated aspirations, and therefore ultimately migration or sedentarization.

Bal et al.'s and Banerjee's contributions specifically place questions of gendered meanings of migration in the foreground. In the context of South Asia, migration has been largely masculinized (as is evident in the subsuming of women's migration within that of marriage migration). The aspirations to generate an income or look after the family fall within the repertoire of masculinity.<sup>10</sup> Women's migrations, then, are differently framed. Aspirations of economic mobility or greater autonomy are also mediated through the family and often framed as household strategies. The articles challenge the automatic assumption that migration brings with it—the transformative potential of economic mobility, female agency, and empowerment, and that sedentarization means a lack of the same. By carefully looking at how migration and mobility are understood and articulated, they highlight gendered dimensions of aspiration, desperation, and mobility. These are usually framed within a distress-driven desperation, or the centrality of familial roles, rather than as a quest for social mobility. Aspiration still emerges as agency in such circumstances, but rather than something predating migration it instead often follows it, for example as the transfer of dreams to the next generation. The aspiration to sedentarize also features prominently in some of the narratives, where we see how migration is often placed in opposition to domesticity, the latter being an aspiration for young unmarried women who speak of staying at home instead of migrating for work as a defining element of appropriate femininity.

While less prominently featured in Radziwinowiczówna's article, it is also evident here that "waiting" is very much shaped by gendered expectations. In highlighting the intersectionalities in the personal disempowerment of one of the respondents, the author illustrates how gender, age, and ethnicity were

all experienced inseparably in shaping the lived realities of this woman's life, and thereby limited her aspirations to be mobile. The forced immobility of men—unable to join their wives and children in the USA, living with their parents, and faced with general economic instability—manifests itself as frustration and speaks to the crisis around stereotypes of masculinity, whereby they find themselves infantilized. The ways in which gender shapes aspirations and possibilities of mobility therefore emerges from macro-, meso-, and microstructures such as legal and state regimes, communities of origin, and family and gendered relations. Meanwhile, focusing on young migrants, Land also shows that their experiences and imaginaries of mobility are far from undifferentiated, shaped as they are by gender, age, and class, which in turn determine differential access to knowledge, norms, resources, and perceived room for maneuver to realize aspirations. Looking at placemaking among Paraguayans in Buenos Aires, it is evident that social norms make this a more accessible process for men to form networks and access spaces invoking memories of Paraguay.

Differential mobility empowerment thus reflects structures and hierarchies of power, which are shaped by social identities of race, gender, age, and class, among others.<sup>11</sup> Feminists like Sara Ahmed<sup>12</sup> caution that the idealization of movement is based on an exclusion of others who are already positioned as not being similarly free. It is evident in all four articles that physical mobility, and the control over whether to move or not, are reflections of unequally held power. Russell King<sup>13</sup> asks whether migration does empower women economically by enabling them to access employment and increase their independence, or whether it reinforces traditional gender roles and inequalities, or expose them to greater precarity? The answer, we will see, often lies not in isolation, but in a complicated continuum wherein mobility, although limited by social norms and economic reality and therefore often precarious, can still be agential and aspirational.

## Family and Households

Debates around migration, displacement, and mobility often tend to ignore the site of social reproduction, that is, the household. For migrants, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, migration away from home to other sites has historically been a common way of sustaining an original home and family.<sup>14</sup> Migration, particularly labor migration, has often been closely tied to seasons, rituals, and family obligations. Even a perceived permanent migration does not mean a clear break from the household that is left behind. Migration, then, is not so much a simple movement from one place to another, but also involves interconnections between multiple sites. These interconnections—for instance, the separation from family or the need

for remittances for survival—determine aspirations and, variously, the realities of mobility that can emanate from migration. Here, too, we can relate to our former point of how gendered meaning-making is firmly located within the hierarchies of households and families.

Most contributions suggest a distinct separation between rural (place of origin) and urban (site of migration) imaginaries, where the former variously emerges as a site of affect, nostalgia, and safety on the one hand, and encumbrance and immobility on the other, while the latter can be both a site of freedom, opportunity, and mobility, as well as alien and precarious. A closer examination of the narratives also shows that they are fundamentally connected, whether in providing a moral framework of desperation to frame migration (e.g., Banerjee), or a reason to send children back to the safety of a village community (e.g., Bal et al.), or even in playing a part in shaping imaginaries of mobility (e.g., Land). Radziwinowiczówna's article, in contrast, locates the pivotal role of the family in shaping the realities of the respondents, as aspirations of reunification with one's family left behind in the USA often become the crux of migration and the resulting desperate attempts at illegal crossings. Separated families are also the reason for forced sedentarization, whereby the "waiting" to be reunited limits the possibilities of alternative constructions of a future life.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the articles illustrate how, in complex and often unintended ways, migrant and settled, or mobile and immobile (in Radziwinowiczówna's case) households continue to work together as units. Mobility, then, is not just about the individual, but rather the individual embedded in the household, family, and larger society.

## **Aspirations and Imaginaries of Mobility**

Aspirations leading to movement are often constructed through imaginaries of other places, better lives, or greater opportunities, all of which, in turn, frame imaginations of social and economic mobility. Similarly, aspirations for mobility through sedentarization need to be viewed through imaginaries of deterrence from other places. Seiger et al.<sup>16</sup> argue that imaginaries are historically laden, socially shared and transmitted, and play a key role in shaping aspirations. The idea of aspiring for mobility through migration is often developed in mainstream narratives of success through stories told by migrants and their kin, or through their evidence of material success in the place of origin. A corollary to this, of course, is the idea of displacement or forced migration, where desperation, not imaginaries of better lives, defines movement. The absence of livelihood opportunities, or life-course disruptions such as death or marriage, may cause people to migrate without any conscious reference to migratory imaginaries, framing their migration in terms of immobility rather than mobility.

The articles in this special section, therefore, illustrate the futility of trying to locate lived experiences in such a mobility–survival dichotomy. Displacement shows that the relationship between migration, mobility, and aspiration can often be nonlinear. Focusing on lives pushed into the cities through household strategies to combat destitution (Bal et al.), or through the closure of livelihood opportunities (Banerjee) on the one hand and considerations of better livelihood opportunities (Land) and general higher living conditions (Radziwinowiczówna) on the other, the articles point to a nexus between the imaginaries vested in mobility and the structural realities that are gradually disrupting it. Mobility, then, is coproduced by migrants’ imaginaries, shaping their subsequent aspirations to move or to stay, and by the structures of mobility regimes, determined by social identity, mobility capital, and images of “desirable and undesirable migrants.”<sup>17</sup> A distinction between forced immobility and chosen sedentarization is often an outcome of aspiration, as is evident in Radziwinowiczówna’s article, which illustrates how respondents continue to build a life while waiting for an opportunity to return to the USA. In a very specific way, this article shows how aspirations of migration through waiting (for reentry bars to expire, often spanning many years) turn into desperation—revealing, once more, temporal trajectories. For others, however, this immobility is re-evaluated as a settledness with the establishing of new family connections and jobs, which relocate the returnees in their place of origin more organically.

This special section demonstrates that mobility is not just about migration from one point to another, but that it develops along migratory routes, involving moments of limited mobility and stuckness. At the same time, new experiences and knowledge, even in the case of undesired migration, recast aspiration as a type of agency, and as something that can also follow migration. Land shows how difficult conditions in Buenos Aires—low wages, long commutes, difficult working conditions, and so on—reshape aspirations of migration into aspirations of returning to the relative security of village society. Migration, then, becomes a means of “bringing forward” some steps in an open-ended process of social upward mobility, which might not end with sedentarization at the migration destination. In contrast, Bal et al. suggest that while hope might indeed fuel migration, the women in the study do not perceive migration as simply a tool that might end desperation. Hope, then, is located in an entanglement between aspiration and desperation, as the women’s life experiences and need to sustain their livelihoods reveal an inability to end migration experiences. Banerjee’s article, starting from similar premises, also shows how aspiration and hope emerge within the rhetoric of desperation as a means through which women look to reassume control of their lives and futures, whether it be by escaping violent domestic spaces or by trying to access limited social mobility.

Built on lived experiences, this special section thus argues that mobility and immobility remain embedded in unequal power relations, with different



implications in different contexts. The articles show how aspirations shaping migration or sedentarization are closely linked to the mobility regimes that influence such migratory movement.

Through rich and nuanced ethnographies, the special section disrupts false dichotomies defining the categories that govern mobility studies. The tensions between migrants' aspirations on the one hand, and the lived realities of their migratory lives on the other, show that while structures such as mobility regimes shape and circumscribe imaginaries, so too are they malleable in the face of aspirants' agency. The special section aims to problematize both sedentarist approaches in mobility studies that treat stability and dwelling as natural and desirable, and deterritorialized approaches that eulogize fluidity and liquidity as essential conditions of progress. Going beyond the "spatial fix,"<sup>18</sup> we thus locate the nuances of mobility in the complexities of people's experiences.

## Notes

1. E.g., Cristiana Bastos, Andre Novoe, and Noel Salazar, "Mobile Labour: An Introduction," *Mobilities* 16, no. 2 (2021): 155–163.
2. Fiona-Katharina Seiger, Christianne Timmerman, Noel B. Salazar, and Johan Wets, eds., *Migration at Work: Aspirations, Imaginaries and Structures of Mobility* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020).
3. Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 19.
4. Noel B. Salazar and Nina Glick Schiller, *Regimes of Mobility: Imaginaries and Relationalities of Power* (London: Routledge, 2014).
5. Petra Dannecker, *Between Conformity and Resistance. Women Garment Workers in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2002).
6. Nicholas De Genova and Nathalie M. Peutz, *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
7. Noel B. Salazar, *Momentous Mobilities: Anthropological Musings on the Meanings of Travel* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2018), 162.
8. Joya Chatterji, "Dispositions and Destinations: Refugee Agency and 'Mobility Capital' in the Bengal Diaspora, 1947–2007," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55, no. 2 (2013): 273–304.
9. Jorgen Carling, "Migration in the Age of Involuntary Immobility: Theoretical Reflections and Cape Verdean Experiences," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28, no. 1 (2022): 5–42.
10. See also M. Hoffman, *The Partial Revolution: Labour, Social Movements and the Invisible Hand of Mao in Western Nepal* (New York: Berghahn, 2018).
11. Mekonnen Tesfahuney, "Mobility, Racism and Geopolitics," *Political Geography* 17, no. 5 (1998): 499–515, here 501.
12. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

13. Russell King, "Afterword: Changing Work, Changing Migrations," in *Migration at Work: Aspirations, Imaginaries and Structures of Mobility*, ed. Fiona-Katharina Seiger, Christiane Timmerman, Noel B. Salazar, and Johan Wets (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020), 191–206, here 197.
14. Nitin Sinha, "Beyond Body and Nation: Household in Times of 'Lockdown,'" *Asiaville*, 24 April 2020, <https://www.asiaville.in/article/beyond-body-and-nation-household-in-times-of-lockdown-41162>.
15. Noel B. Salazar, "Conceptual Notes on the Freedom of Movement and Bounded Mobilities," in *Bounded Mobilities: Ethnographic Perspectives on Social Hierarchies and Global Inequalities*, ed. M. Gutekunst, A. Hackl, S. Leoncini, J. S. Schwarz, and I. Gotz (Bielefeld: Transcript), 283–289.
16. Seiger et al., *Migrations at Work*, 17–18.
17. *Ibid.*, 19–20.
18. David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001).