



Guest Editorial: Interventions in Migration and Activism

Asylum-Network^{1,2}

Migration is an increasingly contested field. As global inequalities widen, and potential global mobilities develop, states are pouring more money into border control than ever before. This has led to the proliferation of new technologies of enforcement that are reconfiguring the border itself: from smart borders that risk-manage flows of people, goods and information (Amoore, 2006), to graduated sovereignty that renders citizenship flexible and selective (Ong, 2000; Salter, 2008), to disparate controls that extend state sovereignty well beyond its territory (Clayton, 2010; Mountz, 2010). Discussion about migration and its control, migration enforcement regimes and border politics has highlighted profound contradictions between liberal democratic espousals of freedom and equality and the reality of exclusionary immigration policies (Bauder, 2003a; Conlon and Gill, 2013). The hypocritical formations of race, patriarchy, and colonialism that underpin immigration law and citizenship regimes and that increasingly associate acts of immigration with criminality have been roundly critiqued (Tyler, 2010; Coleman, 2012; Mains, Gilmartin, Cullen, Mohammad, Tolia-Kelly, Raghuram and Winders 2013; Moran, Gill and Conlon, 2013; Loyd, Mitchelson and Burrige, 2012). Crucial to this discussion, as Bauder points out, is that we continue to fundamentally “question the existing regime of regulating the international movement of people” (2003b: 218).

Yet, in the face of the growth of state-backed border controls and inter-state co-operatives in the area of migration control, those who question them through practices of activism and resistance by, in solidarity with, and on behalf of migrant



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² Deirdre Conlon, University of Leeds (d.conlon@leeds.ac.uk) and Nick Gill, University of Exeter (n.m.gill@exeter.ac.uk) (both authors contributed equally to preparation of this introduction and special issue).

groups must contend with a series of challenges. Practically, the dispersal and intentional churning of migrants in space and time makes mobilizing support as well as opposition difficult to organize and sustain. Symbolically, enforcement logics coupled with the systematic downsizing and outlawing of migrant support activities stifles these efforts (Fekete, 2009). Politically, the co-option of migrant support groups through government contracts and softer forms of co-operation (even as funding is withdrawn) makes political opposition increasingly precarious. Emotionally the relentless criminalization of ‘irregularity’ threatens to sap the energies of progressive groups and oppositional networks.

At the same time, popular and academic understandings of ‘resistance’ and ‘activism’ are contested and in flux. Scholars point out that resistance and neoliberal developments, of which international securitization and migration enforcement regimes are part, are enmeshed from inception (Leitner, Peck and Sheppard, 2007). With this, different groups have become increasingly uncomfortable with the implicit ways in which activism and resistance can shore up existing structures of power while pushing against them (Bondi and Laurie, 2005). On these grounds, some groups eschew established forms of protest. Others flirt with existing power structures in order to change them from within (Gill et al. 2014). Still others mobilize around autonomy, presence, and occupation (Loyd, 2012; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013).

Against the backdrop of these discussions and developments the interventions in this theme issue of *ACME* explore changing practices of resistance and activism as they pertain to migration specifically. With a focus on critical empirical research and engaged activist work in international contexts, this issue on *Migration and Activism* addresses not only the ways in which migrant activism can resist, but also rework (Katz, 2004), disrupt (Ranciere, 2010), or trouble (Butler, 1990) existing discourses and configurations. Drawing upon work with different groups—including asylum seekers, asylees, Palestinian refugees, undocumented migrants and migrant workers—the interventions presented here explore what the practices of migrant activism involve and where they are located, as well as giving consideration to who today’s migrant activists are and what activist practices look like in this arena.

Authors call attention to quotidian, quiet, and recuperative forms of resistance. They detail the formation of alliances, not merely between different groups of migrants but also across labor contexts, social classes, and transnational settings. In doing so, the contributions alert us to the possibilities for ‘amplifying the effects’ (Nicholls, this issue) of localized and specific actions. The interventions also describe innovative conceptions of activism and acts of migration as forms of activism, as well as detailing reflexive approaches to research and methodology. In doing so, contributors implicitly take up important questions about the relationships between theory and activism (see Kramsch, 2012) as well as research and ethics. Following Kramsch, who cites Nieftagodien, this theme issue makes it clear that ‘particular manifestations and meanings [of

activism] ... vary across space and time' (2012: 186). As a whole, the interventions presented here represent a significant contribution to discussion about what constitutes activism in the arena of migration in the current era.

Our interest in migration and activism originates with empirical work conducted by Nick Gill, Deirdre Conlon, Imogen Tyler and Ceri Oeppen from 2010 to 2012, which examined US and UK migrant support organizations within the context of the evermore hostile social and political climate for migrants and activism in support of them, and in the wake of the financial crisis and austerity economics that ensued. A handbook of ideas, strategies and best practice for asylum support groups was published on the basis of our research with these organizations (see Gill et al. 2012)³ Among our aims with this work has been to facilitate dialogue and exchange between differently positioned and geographically located migrant support groups, as well as with academics, that operate within distinct borders yet function in increasingly aligned geopolitical, judicial, and legal spaces of migration enforcement.

This theme issue on Migration and Activism is another instantiation of this aim. The papers included here were originally presented in four lively conference sessions on the relationship between migration and activism, which took place at the *Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting* in New York in 2012. The papers draw upon research conducted in Palestine, Italy, Mexico, the UK, continental Europe and the US. The collection brings together an international group of scholars and researchers, with contributions written in Spanish and English. Several papers come from contributors who are directly engaged in activist work including Júlio da Silveira Moreira's work in international humanitarian law with migrants passing through Mexico and Federico Oliveri's involvement with undocumented migrant protestors in Italy. In addition, contributors who are engaged through professional roles (Smith) and personal practices (Askins) seek to transform how we view migrants, their capacity for action, as well as our roles—within and beyond the academy—in migrant activism.

For us, an imperative of critical geographies involves producing spaces—actual, virtual, activist and academic—where together, amidst the frictions associated with these efforts, we work towards challenging and dismantling the injustices that many migrants today face everywhere they go. We believe the papers presented here contribute to this process. Given the brevity of each paper (a requirement of these interventions), it is important to note that these essays do not necessarily offer definitive arguments or positions. As is the case with all socially produced spaces, dialogue and practice around the issues raised in these contributions is emergent. Thus, it is our intention and our hope—as editors and

³We have also developed a 'research matchmaking' website, based on a participatory research framework, that allows migrant support groups to enter their research needs online so that researchers can ensure that their work will be of value to migrant support groups from the outset and throughout the research process, see: www.asylum-network.com

contributors alike—that, in the spirit of critical geography, this theme issue will spur exchange and further timely and urgent debate about Migration and Activism.

The remainder of this introduction outlines each of the papers and identifies key themes that emerge across the interventions.

The first three interventions—from Maria Holt, Kate Smith, and Kye Askins—focus on refugees and asylum seekers. Maria Holt presents a poignant and powerful account of resistance among refugee women in Lebanon and the West Bank, who, through their recollections and memories of home, refuse efforts to deny Palestinians their identity and homeland. Through the process of recounting women's narratives of home, Holt interrupts mainstream representations of activism by Palestinians, which is often problematically presented as dominated by violent men. According to their own narratives, women lay claim to multiple layers of identity, thus Holt argues that a focus on women's narratives is a rejection of tendencies to homogenize the complexities of Palestinian refugees' understandings of themselves and their cultural and political positions. This intervention makes it clear that women's memories, their voices, and their sensibilities are potent vehicles for activism, not only for Palestinians but also for refugees everywhere.

Like Holt, Kate Smith takes on dominant representations of migrant groups and, as with Askins, Smith's focus is asylum seekers and refugees in the UK. This paper advances a profoundly intimate perspective, which appreciates migrants' narratives as resistance. This intervention operates on multiple levels. Conceptually, it works to dismantle representations of asylum seekers and refugees as passive victims. Politically, it advances a critical understanding of the co-production of knowledge in research. In doing so Smith identifies possibilities for complicity with as well as the disruption of dominant narratives about migrants and their capacity for agency. Of particular significance is the way in which this is a methodological intervention. Inspired by feminist scholarship and drawing on her own research, Smith explains how researchers can work towards developing ethical research practices that manifest many of the characteristics of 'being together' that Kye Askins outlines in her paper.

Kye Askins examines the 'quiet politics' that take hold in the context of a participatory action research project with refugees, asylum seekers and residents living in the Northeast of England who are engaged with an organisation that, as part of its work, runs a befriending scheme. Asylum seekers and refugees are paired with volunteer befrienders, whose role is to informally support new migrants to the area however the individuals in any pairing decide. In this context Askins details the 'small acts' and 'implicit activism' of 'prosaic places' where people discover each other as multi-faceted, complex, and inter-dependent. Askins argues that unpicking 'everyday activities in quotidian spaces [...] part of a broader continuum of movements for change' (Askins, this issue). In addition to calling attention to everyday spaces of migrant activism, this intervention emphasizes reciprocity as a condition for engagement. This, in turn, moves us beyond jaded

and ineffective conceptions of charity and community cohesion, common to discourse and policy about supporting migrants, and evokes the possibility of materializing geographies and politics of care that are mutual.

The next three interventions examine migrant activism within the context of labor. Louise Waite and her collaborators focus on forced labor among asylum seekers, those who have been refused asylum, and refugees. Their intervention pries open the normative definition of forced labor and argues for an approach that takes account of the myriad ways in which precarious migrants are ‘unfree’ as workers. Moving beyond the important task of charting such experiences among asylum seekers and refugees in England, this intervention questions any easy correspondence between subjugation as ‘unfree’ labor and victimhood or passivity. Instead, the authors attend to the subtle as well as more publically visible forms of resistance that are enacted through the webs of coerced choices and involuntary actions that are characteristic of relations of domination and dependency within unfree laboring. The authors alert us to the challenges involved in activism within this realm and, in this process, they assert the agency and dignity of individuals who labor in this way.

Mauro Caraccioli and Bryan Wright draw on a case study of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), a network of migrant farm workers. CIW’s approach to activism is, at once, grounded and embodied by stories of lived, day-to-day struggle that attend with this work, linked across transnational spaces, and increasingly intersectional, addressing questions that affect migrants as well as women’s rights, labor generally, and environmental issues. These authors invite us to think of this approach as ‘im-placement’, which conveys the situated, fluid, immanent and emergent practices that define the CIW’s approach to activism. In doing so the authors call attention to the ways in which migrants and migrant activism “imagines, constructs and disseminates political values” (Caraccioli and Wright, this issue) as a critical corrective to abstract and disembodied renderings of activism in this sphere. Furthermore, echoing perspectives from feminist geographers including Mountz and Hyndman (2007), Caraccioli and Wright emphasize that ‘im-placement’ allows those engaged in critical academic work in this area to better apprehend the global-intimacies of migrant activism.

With a focus on recent widely publicized and popular mobilizations by migrant workers in Northern Italy, involving pickets and the occupation of industrial tower cranes, Federico Oliveri eloquently details how migrant activists engage in ‘acts of citizenship’ that produce spaces where citizenship becomes contested. Here various actors negotiate the conditions of their existence, claim the right to have rights, and continuously modify what it means to be political (Oliveri, this issue). This intervention clearly demonstrates how the occupations and ‘crane struggles’ by migrants resonated with other increasingly contingent laborers by emphasizing working conditions in the context of global crises, labor as a disposable commodity, and legal systems that subordinate rights to market rules. That these issues affect ever-increasing swaths of people contributed to their

popular support and produced alliances that helped to ‘amplify’ their impact (Nicholls, this issue). From this analysis, Oliveri deftly illustrates that ‘we are all on the crane’ and, thus, struggles for solidarity and real democracy are relevant for everyone who is at the mercy of neoliberal citizenship.

Walter Nicholls examines some of the unanticipated consequences for activism that result from the policing of immigration. Drawing on rich examples from the US, France, and the Netherlands, Nicholls charts how activist movements develop. They begin with ‘seeds of doubt’ and debate at local levels among those affected by and charged with the devolution of immigration enforcement. ‘Moral shocks’ compel people to voice dissent, which, in turn serve to validate and substantiate concerns raised by activists. From here alliances with other groups develop. These activist alliances and clusters of resistance serve to ‘amplify’ impacts, producing broader, more extensive and more powerful actions and effects. This intervention is important because it highlights how policing migration has had a perhaps unanticipated ‘upside’ by politicizing migration. In addition, this paper augments several contributions to this theme issue by highlighting the manner in which small scale, ‘quiet’, localized actions that support migrants can beget broader formations of activism that might bring about social change.

Da Silveira Moreira asks if, indeed, broader changes are possible with small scale, local activism, as practiced by numerous groups working with migrants in transit through Mexico to the US. This intervention begins by noting that the material support and humanitarian practices offered by many in this space seem distant from the policy circles and political arenas where structural level change takes place. Yet, drawing from his work as a lawyer and activist as well as interviews with other activists in Mexico City, Da Silveira Moreira explains that social and structural changes are possible in this context. The acts of solidarity, material, practical, and emotional support described in this paper, ranging from conversation and providing food to those in transit, to legal support, produce communities—albeit fleeting and in flux—that eschew dominant individualistic ideologies, change social relations, and enact the form of democracy to which Oliveri alludes.

At least four key themes emerge from these interventions. First, the papers represent a call to attend more closely to migrants’ own stories and voices as they resist, disrupt and interrupt processes of marginalisation: they emphasize the significance and transformative power of listening (Back, 2007). Contributors also ask how we can design methodological approaches that respect migrants and their individuality, rather than collapsing them into discourses around victimhood, strangeness and otherness. These themes run throughout the collection of papers but are taken up in particular in the contributions from Smith, Askins and Holt.

A second theme concerns the relationships between vulnerability, resistance and agency as they are played out among migrant and host communities. In accordance with the recent trend towards a deeper and more critical theoretical

engagement with the notion of resistance, the papers explore ‘narratives of resistance’ as a key practice among migrant women who perform their agency through recounting their life stories (see Smith and Holt). Waite et al. and Oliveri present a lucid account of the possibilities of resistance in situations of subjugation and forced labor. Caraccioli and Wright call attention to how the physically embodied materialities of resistance allow for a richer understanding of the possibilities of migrant activism in the current era.

A third theme examines contemporary places and spaces of migrant activism. The papers offer insights on resistance and activism in a range of geographic locations. Holt elucidates how domestic and imaginary spaces serve as sites of resilience, survival, hope, and activism among displaced Palestinians. Nicholls draws on research in Europe and the US and, in so doing indicates general trends that characterize the development of migrant activist groups. From a different vantage point, Oliveri considers how a struggle by undocumented migrants in the city of Brescia that manifested as the occupation of a mechanical crane expanded the activists reach and literally and symbolically elevated migrant activism in Italy to new heights.

The fourth theme emerging from the papers concerns the relationship between migrants and centers of power such as states. The papers examine the extent to which migrants can tactically utilise elements of the state to their own advantage. Oliveri’s paper, in particular, calls attention to the extent that migrants can successfully use notions of ‘citizenship’ to challenge established configuration of power and control.

It is a reflection of recent developments in human geography including, for instance, interest in emotional geographies (Bondi, 2005; Pain, 2009; Pile, 2010) and feminist geopolitics (Hyndman, 2007; Sziarto and Leitner, 2010) that the contributors to this special interventions issue ‘dig in’ and dwell upon emotional and psychological facets of migration and activism (Holt; Smith; Askins; Waite et al.) in addition to delving into political and practical issues in migration and activism such as building coalitions and developing alliances around intersecting issues (Nicholls; Caraccioli and Wright; Oliveri). While this special issue represents a distinct lens on migration, there is continuity with the previous ACME special issue on borders and immigration (Bauder, 2003a, b) as well as recent papers on immigration and activism (Loyd, 2012) in that contributors take up ongoing questions about the ways borders and immigration control can be confronted and usurped.

Overall, the themes elucidated in these contributions advance three general objectives. First, the contributions expose the strategies that are mobilized in order to control human movement in a variety of different locations. Second, the papers describe and theorize the ways in which these strategies are being, or could be, effectively interrupted by migrants and groups that seek to support them. Finally, in bringing these papers together in this interventions issue on Migration and

Activism, our intention is to generate trans-national dialogue and debate around effective counter-strategies in this increasingly difficult era for migrants and migrant support organisations alike.

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