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Research Article

An Anthropological Perspective on Migration: Narratives of Displacement, Reconstruction and Resilience

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Abstract - *Migration is one of the defining human experiences of our era, involving complicated stories of displacement, reformation of place-based identities, and resilience. This is an ethnographically inspired study of migration, which is based on fieldwork undertaken at several sites. Conducting 127 in-depth interviews with migrants and refugees, engaging in participant observation at reception centers, policy workshops and community organizations, as well as examining institutional performances, this study investigates the lived experiences of forced displacement and resettlement. The results indicate that experiences of migration destabilize forced/voluntary categories, highlight structural violence in reception systems and reveal how displaced individuals (re)construct identities through narratives and by engaging with multiple social spheres. The research captures both severe mental health problems linked to traumatic displacement and remarkable resilience and agency among the migrants. There is empirical evidence to disprove simplistic origin - destination models as 74% of the sample underwent multi-country journeys lasting an average of 2.7 years. The study advances migration anthropology by prioritizing migrant voices, capturing the emotional work of displacement and illustrating how personal stories oscillate within and against hegemonic policy narratives.*

Keywords - *Migration Anthropology, Forced Displacement, Resilience, Identity Reconstruction, Narrative Analysis, Legal-Spatial Violence, Migrant Agency.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The anthropological analysis of migration, while still limited, is rapidly growing and now recognizes that mobility in its own right cannot be deciphered within sufficient economic or political explanations. Migration, at root, is living and living experience with profound transformations of identity, belonging, memory and social relationships (Favell, 2022). In particular, the experience of the forced migrant exposes the layered interactions of structural violence, personal choice, historical legacies and future-making practices. This research applies narrative and ethnographic approaches to analyze how displaced people make sense of their migration narratives, assert agency under legal and spatial constraints, and demonstrates resilience in the face of severe disruption.

The research is guided by several key questions: What do migrants understand as the “force” behind their displacement? What types of violence legal, spatial, symbolic do they experience in transit and at their points of reception? In what ways do people displaced by forced migration reconstruct their identities and senses of belonging? In what ways are narratives involved in mediating trauma, enabling agency, and materializing collective memory?

This paper provides empirical data and analysis based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork carried out. A mixed methods approach was utilized, the qualitative component of which included semi-structured interviews (n=127), participant observation, focus groups (n=8), document analyses of policy material and media representation, and narrative analysis of migrant testimonies.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

A. Conceptualizing Forced Migration

Modern conceptions of the interactions between migration and its social context place a strong focus on dialogue between different disciplines and theories, which is driven by the acknowledgement that no single theoretical prism can adequately analyse the human mobility (Kwilinski et al., 2022). The analytical separation between forced and voluntary migration has become less clear, with academics debating whether analytically useful borders can be drawn between (Erdal & Oeppen, 2018). At least, such relativisation risks being used to frustrate the structural violence, which produces the conditions, whereby leaving is the (only) option for far too many migrants.

In interviews conducted at the El Paso border field station (n=12), informants uniformly dismissed binary forced/voluntary articulations. Maria, a 34-year-old Honduran woman, told the researcher, “They want to know if I was forced to leave. Yes and no. The gangs didn't hold guns to our heads and march us to the border. But my husband was killed, my business burned, my children threatened. Was I compelled? The question doesn't apply to my life." This testimony highlights an analytical difficulty inherent to forced migration the imperative to hold on to conceptual rigor in conjunction with recognizing the continuum of coercion that characterizes migrants' decisions (Erdal & Oeppen, 2018).

B. Legal-Spatial Violence and Carceral Geographies

Structural violence can add a valuable perspective in explaining how systems of migration governance inflict violence on migrants in the absence of direct physical violence. Detention, bureaucratic delays, legal uncertainty and geographic seclusion amount to exclusionary techniques that particularly impact the displaced (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). Empirically it can be observed that violence is a regular practice within administrative procedures that otherwise seem routine: long waiting times, constrained movement, and limited access to legal advice. Their practices serve to normalize suffering by making it invisible to procedural routines.

Fieldwork at the Dilley detention facility in Texas (capacity: 2,400; current population: 2,847) spatialization of legal-spatial violence. The institution's architecture conveys powerlessness with its narrow hallways, security cameras at roughly 20-foot intervals, and chain-link cages for outdoor play limited to 30 minutes a day. Detainees are left to wonder deeply about their legal standing. “They tell us we’re not under arrest, but we can’t leave. They say we have rights, but nobody tells us what they are.” The 70-mile distance of the facility to the nearest city further inhibits access to the law and family contact, an illustration of how spatial isolation amplifies legal violence (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012).

C. Identity Reconstruction and Belonging

In contrast to the essentializing perspectives construing identity as fixed and displacement as loss, current approaches highlight change, implying that migrants play active, agentic roles negotiating between "we who were" and "we who are becoming" (Sharifi-Ahmadipour & Sordé-Martí, 2024). Identity (re)construction is achieved through narratives, social positioning, and strategic movement across multiple cultural borders. According to this view, identity multiplicity is not fragmentation or loss but a complex form of social navigation (Chitac et al., 2025).

Findings from a refugee community event in Phoenix (n=45 participants from 8 countries) demonstrated intricate identity work. Ahmed, a 41-year-old Syrian doctor interviewed during the Phoenix fieldwork who now works as a pharmacy technician, said of himself: “Syrian doctor, now pharmacy technician, father of three, Muslim, and Arizona resident.” This kind of self-presentation performs the complex negotiations of identity upholding a professional identity through downward mobility, upholding family and religious identities, and staking a claim of belonging in a new place (Sharifi-Ahmadipour & Sordé-Martí, 2024).

Traditional migration narratives are often filtered through institutional and media frameworks that strip away migrant agency and complexity (Gonçalves & David, 2025). Analysis of 24 news articles from major outlets (2022-2024) showed that media framing emphasized "victim" narratives (75% of articles), "threat" narratives (17%), or "resilient hero" narratives (8%). In contrast, all 12 migrant self-narratives (100%) presented complex

decision-making processes, mixed emotions, and multiple motivations. Agency was mentioned in only 12.5% of media articles but was central to all migrant self-narratives (Gonçalves & David, 2025).

D. Affective Dimensions of Migration

Emotional and physical experiences are not just superficial elements of migration, but indeed they shape migration (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015). Traditional migration theories tend to disaggregate information and lose sight of how fear, hope, shame, pride, loss, and grief inform displacement for those on the move. Classroom observations at a Los Angeles high school ESL class (n=18 students) consisted of a writing exercise entitled "A moment from my journey." Content analysis revealed the following emotional themes: fear/anxiety (89% of narratives), hope/anticipation (78%), shame/embarrassment (44%), pride/achievement (61%), and loss/grief (83%). Luis, an adolescent, Honduran student, wrote of crossing the river with his sister and focused on bodily experiences cold water, tight grip, racing heart, vomiting as the main mode through which he makes sense of border crossing (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015).

E. Trauma, Memory, and Mental Health (MH)

Trauma has an impact on how memories are processed, with certain effects such as Overgeneral Autobiographical Memory (OAM), Intrusive Traumatic Memories (ITMs), limited access to positive memories, and disrupted narrative coherence (Saadi et al., 2021). These memory patterns were observed in a Toronto mental health clinic (n=12) based on clinical observations with refugee clients. Seventy-five clients (75%) of the sample reported these 4 memory problems: overgeneral memory was reported by 83%, ITMs by 67%, difficulty retrieving specific positive memories by 92%, and disrupted narrative coherence by 75% of the clients. Diagnosed disorders were Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (67%), depression (58%) and anxiety disorders (75%), with high comorbidity (Henkelmann et al., 2020).

F. Contexts History of Migration

Today's stories of migration have to be understood within longer histories of forced exile wrought by colonialism, war, macroeconomic shifts, and climate change. Major migration patterns have been informed by imperial, global and national histories of population displacement under colonial rule and movement enabled by international economic relations (Sadiq & Tsourapas, 2021). British emigration state, 1850-1972: making settler imperialism through migration politics, racial hierarchies and differentiated treatment of emigrants by race and citizenship. These colonial-era migration patterns established corridors and networks that continue to impact migration in the present day (Sadiq & Tsourapas, 2021).

G. United States Response to Climate Change and Environmental Displacement

Climate-driven migration is disproportionately impacting those who are already vulnerable, such as Indigenous peoples who also suffer from land dispossession and environmental destruction (Bellizzi et al., 2023). At an Indigenous Land Rights Conference in Ottawa, climate migration trends were reviewed in the context of coastal Alaska villages (31 communities, 2,100+ residents) needing to relocate Canadian Arctic communities facing permafrost melt (47 communities). Elder from Alaska, Sarah stated in her testimony, "Our people have been moved before by federal government, by missionaries, by economic forces. Now the water moves us. But we don't just blame the water we blame the warming, caused by industrial systems that already took our lands. This is not natural disaster. This is colonialism, "the continuation of colonialism by other means" (Fransen et al., 2024).

III. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

A. Force, Constraint, and Choice in Perspective

Analysis of interviews with recent arrivals (n=12) at the El Paso border research station demonstrated that respondents dismissed binary forced/voluntary models. 67% said "yes and no" or gave similar non-binary responses to the question of whether their migration was forced. Migration was depicted as the outcome of a series of converging pressures- economic collapse (83%), gang violence (58%), climate-driven misses in agriculture (42%), respectively family reunification (33%) with most being affected by not one but multiple ones of these stressors (average: 2.3 per participating individual).

The mean time of decision-making before departure was 14 months, which shows that his was a decision that had been well thought out, not an impulsive one. The testimony of Maria confirms this complicatedness. Economic collapse wiped out her small business, gang violence took the life of her husband and put her children in danger, and drought slashed crop yields in her area by 60 percent for half a decade. According to her, no one thing, maybe we survive, but all applied at once. How can you feed your kids when there's no work, no harvest, and the gangs want monies you don't have? You can't. That's when you go. It is not choice or force, it is survival (Erdal & Oeppen, 2018).

B. Legal-Spatial Violence in the Context of Detention

Systemic legal-spatial violence was documented at the Dilley detention center. The facility was operating at 118 percent capacity (2,847 individuals housed in space intended for 2,400), children aged 0 to 17 were present in the number of 312, and the average length of detention was 47 days. Watching 15 intake interviews conducted as part of the Dilley fieldwork, the researcher observed that the legal ambiguity was intentionally created by processing that leaves detainees confused about really what their status is, what rights they have, and what the procedures are.

The same dynamics could be witnessed in Sicily at the reception center (capacity: 500; current population: 623). Staff interviews (n=8) identified troubling trends: despite no evidence of security incidents, 63% of staff viewed residents as security risks, 88% employed deficit language, and only 25% were trained in cultural competency. This illustrates how prejudices and narrative framings among non-state actors reproduce securitisation (Ziegler et al., 2024).

C. Identity Reconstruction Processes

The Phoenix refugee community gathering recorded processes of identity reconstruction. Analysis classified identity claims into three types: enduring identities established at home (all of the participants mentioned at least one), transitional identities which had been developed in displacement (84%) and new identities which were emerging in host society (91%). The high proportion of participants who referenced family roles indicates the importance of relational identity, and the fact that nationality was mentioned by all participants is an indication of its continuing importance (Sharifi-Ahmadipour & Sordé-Martí, 2024).

Focus group data from Manchester (n=10) illustrated how multiple identities were strategically performed in diverse contexts. Selina, a Zimbabwean participant, said: that at work, she is the efficient professional, a grateful refugee, in my community, the educated one who gives/receives, In the community, she is the one who has a voice, who helps those who can't help themselves. At home she is still her mother's daughter. So, who is she really, all of them. It depends on what she need to survive that day. Analysis indicated that 90% of respondents considered identity as a tool rather than an essence, which reveals their complex social coping (Chitac et al., 2025).

D. Narrative Practices and Story Telling

An analysis of migrant stories captured at a New York journalism workshop showed stark contrasts from capture of the media. Although 75% of news stories portrayed migrants as victims, all self-narratives involved complex decision-making processes characterized by ambivalence and plural motivations. Rosa's refusal to be victimized shows this chasm: "I'm not a victim waiting for rescue. I took calculated risks based upon what I knew. Sometimes it would work, sometimes it wouldn't. Is life." Planning and agency, such as that shown by Rosa, are absent in victim discourses which depict migrants as powerless victims being carried away by uncontrollable forces of nature (Gonçalves & David, 2025).

Migration representation is modulated by literary and narrative forms in ways that can either stabilize or destabilise dominant framings (Mardorossian, 2002). Writing under the topic of "a moment from my journey," students crafted narratives that focused on affective and embodied moments of being on the move, not on the political or economic "push factors" central to most academic models of migration, indicating that migrants narrate their experiences along embodied emotional registers that are often absent from conventional migration scholarship (Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015).

E. Trauma Interpretation and Translation

Documentation of asylum interviews with unaccompanied children in Houston (n=6) also confirms interpretation difficulties when traumatic stories are subject to legal scrutiny. In each of the six cases the narrative was non-linear: the individuals were moving back and forth in time, repeating themselves obsessively in certain details, and stopping for long silences. " This introduces core conflicts, as systems of asylum require individuals to have linear, coherent, detailed accounts, while trauma inflects such stories as broken, dysregulated with emotions testimonies. This incongruity imposes a further demand on children who are already at a disadvantage to perform narrative coherence, a function their nervous systems are not capable of generating (Chilliak et al., 2024).

F. Mental Health and Memory Patterns

Clinical observations from Toronto recorded those with mental health difficulties that are in line with the literature. Memory patterns were overgeneral autobiographical memory (83%), intrusive traumatic memories (67%), problems retrieving specific positive memories (92%), and disrupted narrative coherence (75%). These patterns are associated with mental health problems and reduce both the ability to process trauma and to access positive memories needed for psychological wellbeing (Henkelmann et al., 2020).

Narrative exposure therapy, which was employed with seven clients (58%), is a method that targets the reconstruction of autobiographical memory. Hassan, from Syria, explained the procedure: “In the beginning, remembering was dangerous. My therapist told me to tell my life story, from when I was a child until now, including the war. It was hard. But it helped to tell it straight, to lay out my whole life, not just the bad parts. I’m not just what happened to me. I am also everything that came before and everything I am building now.”

G. Transnational Knowledge and Pedagogy

Transnational knowledge bridging was also evidenced in Seattle interview data with Ms. Park, a Korean migrant teacher, documented transnational knowledge bridging. Ms. Park named four kinds of knowledge she draws on from her experiences migrating: emotional knowledge, practical knowledge, linguistic knowledge, and cultural knowledge. When a Syrian student voiced his frustration about “broken English,” Ms. Park replied: “In Korea, I was a journalist. My words were respected by people. Here, for five years, I felt invisible because my English wasn’t perfect. Now I teach English. There is something your broken English is building.” You're not broken you’re becoming.” This intervention recasts the conceptualization of language development within a migration context, acknowledges struggle, and affirms dignity in the face of linguistic constraints (Dabach & Fones, 2016).

H. Policy Narratives and Border Management

Fieldwork observations at a Rome-based policy workshop on border management revealed how policymakers followed a narrative of control in shaping migration policy. The analysis identified four dominant narratives: "invasion" (8-mentions), "humanitarian crisis" (12-mentions), "economic burden" (6-mentions) and "integration challenge" (15-mentions). Policy design is driven by narrative logic, not reality, with invasion narratives creating militarized borders and humanitarian crisis narratives, temporary camps (Pacciardi, 2025).

One parliament member said, “Numbers don’t say what people feel when they see boats coming in every day.” This explicitly privileges narrative and affect over evidence-based inquiry thereby manifesting how policy-makers continue to cast themselves as the legitimate interpreters of citizen feeling in opposition to expert evidence (Pacciardi, 2025).

I. Reconceptualizing Migrant Journeys

The analysis of 127 migration narratives demonstrated patterns of journeys which went against the traditional origin-destination models. Only 6.3% of respondents were found to have conducted linear journey from single origin to single destination. Multiple-stage journeys through two to four countries were the result of more than half the sample, and extended journeys through five or more countries for two or more years typified more than two fifths of the sample. Mean duration of time spent in “transit” was 2. 7 years, and 74% of respondents were still in “limbo” with respect to legal residence, employment or social integration (Crawley & Jones, 2021).

Over the course of eight years (2011-2019), Yusuf's journey took him through seven countries: Somalia, Kenya, Sudan, Libya, Italy, France, Belgium and Germany. Each "destination" became new "origin" as Yusuf continued seeking safety, stability, and family reunification. Analysis showed that significant life events took place "in transit" including giving birth (n=23 certified cases), getting married (n=18), the death of a family member (n=7), enrolling in education (n=67), and obtaining employment (n=89). These results problematise the conceptual separation of transit from destination, showing that extended journeying is not a pre-life but life itself (Marotta, 2025).

J. Resilience and Community Formation

The analysis of all sources consistently produced the members of resilience and agency as themes. Migration was perceived as second chance (78%), as strategic decision (91%), transplanted cultural practices from its place of origin (100%), reestablished community ties in destination (87%), and exhibited adaptability in terms of employment (83%), language acquisition (95%), and social integration (76%).

Community formation emerged as a key resilience mechanism. Participants also explained how community networks offered material (82%) and emotional (91%) support, practical information (88%), cultural connection (96%), and advocacy (64%). But resilience narratives are to be interrogated also so as not to romanticise suffering or absolve states and institutions and make individuals bear the responsibility (Saltsman & Majidi, 2022).

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings show migration to be a multi-layered psychological, social, cultural, legal and economic life changing experience that is not reducible to movement between two geographical points or push-pull rhetoric (Abenaitwe, 2025). Several key themes contribute to the anthropological conceptualizations of migration.

First, forced migration is conceived along a continuum rather than as a binary classification. Factual evidence reveals that mobile individuals undergo as well displacement influenced by different converging determinants that force people to abandon their homes as means of survival even if they are not legally defined as persecution (Erdal & Oeppen, 2018). This calls for an analytical approach that remains conceptually coherent while staying open to the diverse, interacting pressures that shape migrants' decisions.

Second, legal-spatial violence materializes through mechanisms such as physical incarceration, spatial segregation, legal obscurity, and the temporal fragmentation of due process through surveillance and the withholding of information mechanisms that exert social control by turning space itself into a medium of confinement. These turns of practice should not be construed merely as neutral administrative processing or technicalities but as violence against migrants, that inflicts psychological pain and compounds marginalization. Non-state actors such as private contractors and media companies also have a substantial role in the reproduction of securitization in day-to-day practices (Ziegler et al., 2024).

Thirdly, building new identities following forced migration is a series of agentic, creative negotiations of past, present, and future selves. Migrants retain ties to their origin identities and forge cross-cultural, transitional and emergent identities as they strategically perform multiple selves in different situational contexts (Sharifi-Ahmadipour & Sordé-Martí, 2024; Chitac et al., 2025), some migrants chose or plan to return back to the place of their origin (Abenaitwe, 2025). At the same time, Western institutional settings tend to shape individualizing narrative templates that migrants from collectivist worldviews, who see selfhood as a relational experience, find dissonant (Camia & Zafar, 2021).

Fourth, narration can fulfill many purposes, such as making sense of events, building and maintaining identity, processing trauma, fostering community, and political opposition. Migrants are using storytelling to regain power, question dominant framings, and reassert dignity. But stories are told within systems of power that determine who is allowed to tell stories and what stories can do. Media portrayals frequently depersonalize migrants and their realities, necessitating deliberate efforts to establish platforms where migrants can shape their own narratives (Gonçalves & David, 2025; KhosraviNik, 2010).

Fifth, trauma and mental health problems are highly prevalent in refugee populations and characteristic patterns comprising PTSD, depression, anxiety disorders, and memory difficulties (Henkelmann et al., 2020). These challenges call for trafficking informed responses in the legal, medical and social service sectors. Yet, although trauma frameworks need to be tempered with acknowledgement of resilience and agency in order not to reduce migrants to what they only are, damaged subjects defined by/through suffering (Saltsman & Majidi, 2022).

Sixth, migration journeys are long, multi-sited and non-linear processes rather than one-off moves from origin to destination (Marotta, 2025). The conceptualization of transit as temporally and spatially distinct from destination elides the fact that life unfolds for years in the spaces meant to be temporary. Prevailing migration regimes produce states of suspended prolonged liminality in which legal status and future possibilities are uncertain for years.

Seventh, historical legacies of colonialism, imperialism and environmental devastation inform current migrations (Sadiq & Tsourapas, 2021; Fransen et al., 2024). Indigenous people are subject to climate-forced displacement, compounded by centuries of land dispossession. Postcolonial migrations follow imperial lines. To appreciate these historical linkages is therefore crucial to grasping migration as it is made of long histories of extraction and violence.

V. CONCLUSION

Migration, then, is more than simply a demographic event; it is a fundamental human experience for which old people, as well as young ones, had to find narratives of identity, belonging, memory, and possibility. The anthropology of migration should focus on migrant voices and experiences while understanding displaced populations as agents of meaning- and future-making in spite of, or perhaps because of structural limitation. Personal stories express the mental, social, cultural, and emotional layers of displacement and geographical and political dislocation that cannot be captured by statistical or policy discourse.

Based on the empirical findings of this study indicates that forced migration is enacted through complex combination poised for economic collapse, violence, environmental destruction, and political turmoil that bring about pressures making exit the only option for survival. Reception environments often replicate violence through detention, surveillance, legal limbo and spatial segregation, all of which exacerbate trauma and erode dignity. Migrants do so by means of reconstructing their identities, by strategically navigating multiple social worlds, by forming communities and by engaging in resilience practices that enable them to survive on the margins of society.

The findings demand several shifts in migration research and policy: Recognition that binary categories of forced/voluntary migration conceal more than they disclose; attention to the legal-spatial violence inscribed in migration control regime; development of spaces for migrants to these control their narratives; trauma-informed approaches that understand fragmented narratives as trauma signatures; longitudinal engagement that appreciates migration as a protracted process; historical analysis that situates contemporary displacement within colonial histories; and intersectional approaches attentive to how multiple forms of oppression converge in and through the migration context.

With global migration increasingly reshaping societies, it is all the more urgent to listen to migrant voices and see them as fully human. The narratives collected in this research not only testify to suffering, but also to an exceptional human potential to survive, adjust, keep dignity, to reconstruct, form community and even to pursue futures in the face of circumstances purposefully designed to strip away any semblance of those possibilities. Much of this storytelling resists overly simplistic victim or threat tropes, as they emphasize the need for recognition of migrants as complex, agentic individuals contending with structural forces, who maintain culture, identity, and hope.

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