

INTRODUCTION

WRITERS, scholars, and media pundits have of late been preoccupied with the way in which movement makes our world. Researchers duly chart the direction of flows of capital and goods; governments take into account the reach of global media in shaping political platforms and cultural policies. Yet, in our haste to trace the trajectories of goods, people, or ways of life we may fail to perceive that a specific pattern of mobility may be as critical as culture, language, or national origin in shaping individual subjects and ways of life. At a time when politics might be best studied as a strategic choreography, the production of politically relevant social difference is obviously related to who moves where when. Yet our understanding of how specific experiences of mobility and settlement might lead people whose paths never cross to envision their lives in a similar manner is hazy. We tend to describe different kinds of travelers, figures like the cosmopolitan, the nomad, or the immigrant, rather than attending to specific migratory trails.¹

In this essay in ethnography, I try to understand how ways of moving produce forms of life by following people who like myself have

immigrated once, then moved again to a third homeland. I consider how the path we have taken has made us serial migrants regardless of our origins or destinations.²

To explore how a story of successive dwelling in different countries leads to a form of life is a radical departure from conventional ways of thinking about what makes people alike and why they migrate. Studying people on the move as Chinese or Lebanese, Jewish or Sikh enables researchers and activists to sketch out a space of social or cultural continuity as context. However, to give primacy to ethnicity or culture *a priori* makes it difficult to evaluate the actual importance of these elements. Similarly, in spite of increasing research illustrating the complexity of subjective motivations there is a tendency to assume that most are displaced by the push and pull of market forces. Ethnicity and race, class and cultural dispositions figure in the stories of serial migrants. By first examining how a shared pattern of settlement leads people to use borders to punctuate their life stories and then contemplating how this makes them different from others, the nature of these modes of identification and association becomes clearer.

In working through this object of study that is also the story of my life, it could appear that I fashion myself a native in order to create a people in her own image or imagine myself a prospective ethnographer of a would-be collective that does not even exist in the minds of those who compose it. I make no claim to study any community, however, just as I do not focus on how those I follow might act as agents of change in their adopted homelands, their very foreignness a source of creativity.³ The point of this research is neither to form a group nor to understand the possible impact of the serial migrant on settled societies but to explore how particular patterns of movement shape ways of dwelling that signal emerging forms of social and cultural organization more generally.⁴

Anthropologists have always been concerned with little recognized ways of life and invisible powers that shape social worlds. Serial

migrants are identified by their passages across the most blatant of borders and most basic maps: they cannot be studied “in context.” But are ethnographic truths not discovered by plunging into the waters of shared experience? Isn’t the anthropologist’s legitimacy derived from long familiarity with particular peoples and places and environments? Setting out from my own moves among three continents to follow others to places where I will never set foot and states now erased from the world map by the march of history might seem a sure way to dissolve the scholarly legitimacy of my research. If being there is everything, how might one imagine ethnographic research without a setting? How might one study a way of life that is not passed down through unconscious gestures or traditional practices or beliefs but rather produced by successive displacements across limits set by the crudest maps of international politics?

James Faubion has pointed out that “the ethnographer is able to engage in self-monitoring, a cross-checking, that methodologically more pure research may not allow,” and that ethnography is “a pathetic method and its ‘pathology’ engages (and changes) the fieldworker’s mindful body not merely analytically but intuitively, affectively; it is a way at once of being and feeling (the) human.”⁵ As I encountered serial migrants, followed their paths (pathologies?), and recorded their stories, I sensed a common irritation at being served up remedies for problems reputed to accompany migration. One symptom of our most characteristic infirmities is the restless searching for a narrative form that would join our stories to a collective history. This problem cannot be treated with potions for motion sickness measured in doses of adaptation and integration or medicines concocted to cure immigrants of the pain of uprooting or fitting into their second homeland. Such “remedies” only make matters worse because they obscure the specifics of our journeys. The immigrant is perpetually caught between two places; he is defined by a life in between. But a second migration leads beyond the duality of the immigrant’s situation. It introduces a serial

logic into the life story, opening a horizon of further displacement.⁶ Serial migrants' narratives indicate that they generally feel settling in a third country as a liberation from the double bind of immigration. However, they find it hard to articulate this experience in positive terms because what for them is an essential transformation goes largely unrecognized. Border crossings generate the serial migrant as a specific kind of subject, whatever her content. Yet the efforts she makes to bring her features into focus and establish a coherent line of action can require apparent inconsistencies of expression in the present.

Repeated migration includes the possibility of joining different ways of life, systems of belief, and politics, but it also raises questions: Who am I, in addition to, or in spite of, these differences? One must try to sort out the self amid these collections while becoming increasingly suspicious of how borders are drawn among cultures, political systems, or ethical perspectives. How might one conceive of oneself as a coherent subject when so many forms of self-identification might be so variously linked to practices of day-to-day life? How might one tell one's story in several languages and recognize one's own face according to coexisting principles of vision? Disparities among an individual's diverse social roles have long been the subject of social inquiry, not to mention the stuff from which novels and plays are born. The experience of migration often accentuates discrepancies of how or when or for whom one performs apparently similar roles. The serial migrant is not simply many things to many people; he is shaped by the variations among the systematic ways he is construed in the places of his experience. Some of these systems correspond to divisions between states; others do not. But the way in which modes of identification and rules of performance tend to be associated with particular political, cultural, or linguistic environments could suggest that the serial migrant is a rich collective of remnants of the wholes that make up ordinary social life. His life may appear as a creative amalgam of found objects or a *bricolage* of diverse cultural materials, but this

does not solve the problem of developing a continuous self. The serial migrant's difficulty with difference is thus not simply that of being "other"; her problem with diversity is internal.⁷ The eternal addition of hyphenated identities is the question for her, not an answer. It is not a distance from origins and others but a potential for over-involvement with places and people that characterizes the serial migrant's dilemma. She suffers from over-definition.⁸

The value of motion assumed by this peripatetic form of settlement has little in common with the idea that a boundary-crossing life offers an escape from habits ensconced in inherited social reflexes or traditions. Nor does it jibe with the striving for increased status or income or cultural capital that is often assumed to establish a parallel between physical and social mobility. Instead, it dwells on the possibilities for self-definition presented by confronting the multiplicity of the self in ways that are peculiarly objectified.⁹ The self is made neither as a unique expression of an original culture nor as some heady brew of mixed traditions, but in a process of ongoing consideration of what links the places of one's life (besides oneself) as well as how different institutions and histories distinguish them. Serial migrants' movements may seem unhindered, their lives a symbol of postmodern fluidity, but they are defined by borders at their most fundamental. Borders of belief, language, or cultural practice often fail to follow state lines, but for the serial migrant political boundaries fixed on maps are vital markers of her life.

COMMON DREAMS

No one is born a serial migrant, and anyone might become one. Where might one go to meet people who never congregate, speak no single language, and belong to no particular organization, subjects who can be identified only once one knows something about their story? The common ground of serial migration cannot be visited. Intriguingly, however, many of the serial migrants I spoke with

reported having had essentially the same dream, one in which all of their friends and relations were brought together, just once, in a single place and time. Waking or sleeping, they imagined family and friends coming together for some grand occasion, a voyage or a feast at which they spoke one another's languages. I often have these dreams myself; one was especially vivid, for it was silent. Instead of listening to my mother speak Arabic or my sister speak French, I watched as words flowed soundlessly from the lips of a friend on tiny pieces of paper traced in different scripts.

In the spirit of gathering people together to speak in tongues, I decided that before trying to follow serial migrants I might instead invite some of them to come together. I convened a meeting in 2004 at Georgetown University, limiting participation to those who shared a single homeland, either as a point of origin or as one of their lands of settlement.¹⁰ I chose Morocco as this common framework; it was my third homeland, so I knew many other people who had passed through the kingdom.¹¹ One might have imagined such a seminar leading to exchanges of our different perspectives on Morocco from the point of view of our various origins or native cultures, citizenships, or the historical moment when we each lived in Marrakech or Casablanca. Might we have found evidence of some inchoate national sentiment shared by native-born and immigrant? But instead our conversations focused on the way the country we shared took on meaning in relation to our life stories. It was the process by which each of our homelands was situated in our life narratives that came to dominate our conversations and the texts we later published.¹²

Those who met in 2004 focused on their modes of settlement rather than extolling their mobility. They expressed discomfort at equations of themselves with most images of the cosmopolitan, and spoke of "immigration" as an experience they had passed through instead of a personal or social problem to be solved. These concerns shaped the diagnostics of the next step of study. As I moved beyond the framework

of any specific territory and tried to imagine where serial migrants might tend to settle, if only for a time, I determined to seek out serial migrants in locations where there are many migrants and where there is a high rate of turnover of the population. Washington DC, London, Manama, Paris, Cairo, Doha, Dubai, Montreal, and New York were some of the places where I recorded life stories and carried out fieldwork.¹³ My encounters were enabled by the history of my own displacements: I relied on friends and acquaintances I had known for decades whose lives had led them to move across international borders on several occasions.

In the manner of the serial migrant I am, when faced with an accumulation of habits collected here and there, of objects to be kept or discarded in preparation for an impending move, I have had to move forward not with a full collection of available ideas or texts, or even fully utilizing those I have read, but with a privileging of certain ways of asking questions I developed in the course of living in France, Morocco, England, and the United States, working in Belgium and Tunisia, and staying for extended periods in Cairo, Montreal, and the Arab principalities of the Persian Gulf. In developing this research I chose to focus on those who had moved of their own volition rather than in the tow of global corporations, missionary networks, or diplomatic corps.¹⁴ Similarly, in my interviews I did not include household servants who travel the world following one employer. Those who move in the context of jobs with a single employer or as workers in international agencies share some experiences with those I followed. But those who follow their jobs have less at stake than those who move without the protection of a continuous organizational or social milieu, which enables them to maintain a stable measure of their career, for instance. Some of those whose stories I tell in the following pages grew up in diplomatic households, were military brats, or followed a parent's job from place to place, but they appear here because of the direction they took once they were adults. A few of the individuals

I introduce took on huge responsibilities before they reached legal adulthood: some as child migrants or refugees, others as the children of refugees and immigrants who helped their parents learn to cope in their new country. I include those experiences in their stories, but I did not seek out minors who are at present in such circumstances. Although I recount household interactions I witnessed and was part of, the youngest person I interviewed individually was twenty-two, the eldest seventy-three. A certain number of years had to elapse before the story of a serial migrant could unfold. It was through these individual stories that I came to explore the way the family or groups of friends might become entangled to form a collective migratory subject. Two of the people you will meet in this book chose to be represented by a pseudonym. I elected to add three more to this list given the evolution of migration policies since these meetings. For most I use their real first names as they requested when they were interviewed.¹⁵

IDENTIFICATIONS

To search for serial migrants was to elicit commentary on the object of research. When I inquired about possible interviewees, some found it presumptuous of me to carry out a study of people who formed no group with recognizable traits. Others suggested that the lifestyle of serial migrants was made possible by their wealth, education, and cosmopolitan outlook. Shouldn't poor refugees or exiles be the object of my study? While some in the audiences who listened to me explain this work imagined my project as focused on footloose elites, others recognized figures of the refugee, the exile, or the migrant worker pushed to move to a third nation by an inhospitable regime, violent militia, or market forces as its potential protagonists. In our unjust and unequal world, some people wondered how I could fail to define the object of research in terms of the intersection of nationality, ethnicity, gender, and class. To some my approach seemed to ignore the importance of cultural bonds. For others, to focus on the path rather than the

function of the migratory subject as a cog in the machine of the neo-liberal economy was a political *faux pas*. Others were unabashedly enthusiastic about this research, but their excitement was often the result of a misunderstanding. Several encouraged me to revise the definition of serial migrants to include them in my sample; hadn't they traveled widely or spent a "year abroad"?¹⁶ Why not include those who were fluent in several languages? These interlocutors tended to assume that I was trying to study the value of "international experience" for developing a critical distance, the kind of intellectual *dépaysement* that is in fact classically associated with travel as well as anthropological field methods, and more recently revived in discussions about cosmopolitanism.

Some colleagues urged me to admit that I was really working out a specific angle on the "cosmopolitan perspective."¹⁷ Others thought I would gain more from comparing serial migrants to nomads: perhaps these serial migrants were avatars of a drifting population of a future time when roots and origins would be severed for everyone. In the first two chapters, I do my best to take their suggestions. It would, however, require a book—or two or several—to enumerate the debates currently circling around the cosmopolitan and the nomad. The features of each are so general that to define them fully would be to engage in a polemic that would lead me off the path I seek to follow. Instead, I draw up portraits of both, then use them as backgrounds against which to project stories of serial migrants, leading me to suggest that they are complementary and that each is too broadly construed to explain how movement makes subjects through particular forms of experience.

Cosmopolitans take shape in a flight away from or across some settled place, whether it is conceived as a culture, a nation, an opinion, or a state's hold on its territory. This conceptual move gives rise to an expectation that modes of subjectivity might be altered, new forms of politics devised as a result of a critical departure from taken-for-granted habits and modes of thought. Some link the process of

critical self-reflection to the experience of learning of other ways of life through travel and migration. This type of person, however, is defined not by a particular pattern of physical mobility but by a peculiarly detached relationship to places and, one would imagine, other people. Everywhere, the cosmopolitan inhabits a space of distanced deliberation and comparison. Even while remaining a patriot, the measure of her politics is the world at large. In contrast, the serial migrant tends not to envision a cosmopolitics that arises from the move away from the earth, from the local to the global or the planetary. This particular form of mobile experience actually produces an increased awareness of frontiers and limits, whether these are political, linguistic, or religious.

In contrast to the cosmopolitan, who seems tolerant and open and willing to go everywhere, remote as she is from taken-for-granted cultural and social ties, the serial migrant uses ordinary maps and common cultural labels to strategically work on himself by submitting himself to different social and political arrangements. Although a few of the serial migrants I met tried very hard to develop something like a “cosmopolitan perspective” in order to compare the places of their lives with equanimity, most firmly rejected the idea that they might be perceived as exemplars of this worldly figure because it was too abstract, too intellectual, and often too self-conscious in its pretension to take part in global political discussions.

Nomads and wanderers may appear romantic because, like business travelers or the very rich, they manage to take their habits along with them wherever they travel. Indeed, those who can do this with minimal means signal most clearly that their wanderlust arises from some purely internal, intrinsic motivation. Their ease of displacement appears to be a sign of some authentic internal value. Might one turn to Deleuze and Guattari’s elaboration of the figure of the nomad to develop a more embodied, more practically oriented, less discursive understanding of mobile lives? I entertain this possibility in the second chapter but quickly run into problems assimilating the serial migrant

to this peripatetic figure, portrayed by the philosophers as moving so smoothly that he does not even register the existence of the borders he crosses. Serial migrants may dream of such a graceful dance across the earth, but ultimately borders are what defines them. Indeed, one might say they repeatedly seek them out in a process of self-definition. Unlike the nomad, they are generally willing to submit themselves to the most various ways of being identified by government agencies and their neighbors. To see in them an incarnation of the celebrated concept of the nomad is to ignore how repeated settlement shapes them. Yet, to focus on their settlement rather than their motion leads to another way of misrecognizing their experience. Once they are perceived from this angle, they appear simply as people from somewhere else; they are classified as immigrants.

In contrast to the cosmopolitan, whose motion is from the particular to the general, and to the nomad, who may travel unhindered across landscapes unmarked by borders, the immigrant always moves from one place to another. His life unfolds between two countries. To be of two nations, configured by two political systems and confused by speaking two languages, makes him a figure characterized by a fundamental cleavage.¹⁸ What happens when someone steps beyond the duality of immigration? Does she enter a hybrid realm of the imagination or entertain a more complex and ambivalent relationship with the immigrant's Janus-faced reality? An embodied being can travel from one place to another only at any given time; to move, then, is to be caught between two locations. Although the doppelgangers of one's market presence, one's multiple identifications by self and others in the clouds of the Internet, and indeed the life one continues to live in places of previous settlement, in the time lag of statistics and postal addresses and in the form of institutions one participated in, the living subject must contend with the limits of the body.¹⁹ While migrating to a third homeland introduces a logically infinite set of places one might move on to, the simple truth is that anybody can settle in only

a few places in the course of a lifetime. Each displacement serves as a reminder of those homes where one does not dwell at present.

Setting the serial migrant against the image of the immigrant leads to a more fruitful direction of analysis than does reflection on cosmopolitan ideals or engagement in nomadic modes of action. Most often migration is supposed to be a once-in-a-lifetime ordeal, a rite of passage that enables the migrant to occupy a new status as an immigrant. In the third chapter I suggest that when this rite of passage is reiterated, migration takes on certain ritual aspects. The reiteration of the migration story goes unnoticed, however; there is no public acknowledgment of this repetition or what it entails for the subject. It was only through years of listening to stories of serial migration and being drawn to articulate my own experience that I came to see what a fundamental shift this repetition entailed. The move from a second homeland to a third country introduces an open-ended logic to the immigrant story and leads people to use borders as a way of structuring their life story. I analyze how the experience of repeat migration encourages a particular way of transforming homelands into signposts of the periods of one's life.²⁰ A path of serial migration leads to a form of life "emplotment."²¹ The places, states, societies, or contexts that are assumed to produce peoples and cultures and national feeling, the communities where immigrants appear as foreign bodies, become the material from which to shape a form of life that engages multiplicity not in general, not all at once, but in succession. This leads to specific ways of problematizing the self, the state, and social relationships.

The immigrant may suffer from being perceived as a stranger, but the serial migrant struggles with an accumulation of ways of being "other." He thus points to the limits of the additive logic of hyphenation and the syncretic urges of the hybrid that have inspired a politics of difference made of the building blocks of culture, suggesting new forms of commonality. What serial migrants share is neither a perspective nor an ideology, and certainly not an aversion to settlement, but a

way of making themselves of their several homelands by repeating and moving past migration's duality.²²

Serial migration is not an outsourcing of the self with the aim of developing a less costly or more refined product through the shifting of an object to a location where certain operations and techniques have been perfected or can be had at a lower rate of investment.²³ The decision to change homelands may arise as a strategy for accumulating new outlooks or resources, whether economic or linguistic or social. But making a life of several homelands leads to complex problems that cannot be reduced to an accounting of capital or accumulated experiences. One must progressively engage the various selves that one is, has been, or might yet become. Even under restrictive economic or political conditions, moments of experimentation characterize this process.

In the fourth chapter, I examine how, in a world in which economic logics are often seen as providing global continuity, the serial migrant inscribes her story in political terms. Far from seeking significance in the free flow of media or objects, the migrant bears the border within herself; she is made of the "old maps" that liberal circulation and free exchange would do without. While history marches forward, the migrant might return to where she lived previously, allowing a measure of suppleness in a single life. But this flexibility comes at a price. One's life history may appear disconnected from the chronicle of any public world. Tying together a life across successive homes might seem an interesting exercise, but its full significance might be obscured even to the serial migrant because it seems so idiosyncratic.

Serial migrants rarely voice concerns about how settling in a new homeland might require them to choose to assimilate, integrate, or otherwise set aside their inherited dispositions. Instead, they speak of being haunted by the absence of the measures that have made them in the minds of those among whom they live at present. Anyone might feel nostalgic for the past, regret earlier decisions, or think with longing (or

the opposite) of times when alternative measures of worth prevailed, but these feelings take on special salience for those of us who weave our lives of several homelands because the distinct systems of value that lead to such questions have not been foisted upon us by history but rather have come to us, at least to some extent, through our own actions. In the fifth chapter I note how this sense of absence relates to issues of misrecognition. The experience of repeated migration leads the subject to seek continuity both by coming to terms with changes and by willfully challenging herself to take them on. Skills learned and professions practiced are often shed when one shifts from one set of institutional or cultural guidelines to another.

Serial migrants engage some of the most persistent myths of the modern world by using borders to make themselves and to tell the story of their lives. They “redirect” these in tropes that may have tragic as often as ironic implications.²⁴ But while they insist on the importance of the lines between states to their self-making, and employ essentialized notions of culture as a means of self-clarification, patterns of social interaction that cross borders enable serial migrants to find some comfort not only in particular kinds of “hangouts” but among what one interviewee called “like-minded people.” Although they highlight systematic differences in their homelands, they also speak about how certain kinds of places everywhere make them feel immediately at home. In chapter five, I draw on my own previous research to argue that this sense of ease arises because of regularities of social interaction that traverse borders.

The way that shared languages and cultural references enable communication and a sense of familiarity, fostering networks or the development of transnational social formations, is easy to observe. In trying to account for “global” culture it is reasonable to seek out similarly tangible indications of the worldwide adoption or adaption of habits of consumption or tastes: the spread of Starbucks, for instance, or the way a global style is interpreted by local fashion houses. The

homogenization of culture, and the arrangements, appropriations, and frictions between the global and the local, have been the focus of research on this subject. My study of beauty salons in Casablanca, Paris, and Cairo departed from these models because it focused on the salon as a site of socialization. I identified three types of salon, each with a distinct pattern of social interaction that fostered specific ways of evaluating fashion, other people, and one's own actions. In the salon one learned how to be with others at the same time one learned to reflect on oneself and the world. But even in a single city, depending on which salon one enters, one learns to be oneself and see the world differently. To enter a proximate, fast, or celebrity salon is to learn to be a part of an entire world. Since these types of salons (and schoolrooms, cafés, offices, and the like) co-exist in a single city and in different measures across countries, serial migrants who do not speak the language of a new country might easily find a home in such social settings; their familiarity with these transnational modes of interaction make it easy to fit in. They might select a place of residence because one of these "worlds" is dominant in the new place, indicating a conception of society or politics that is incipient in ideological debates. In chapter five, I use this "three-world" model to examine continuities in the social life of serial migrants.

Far from turning serial migrants into the disloyal drifters some might imagine inveterate travelers to be, a lifetime of moving on often leads to the formation of especially strong attachments to particular things and other people. In the final chapter I turn Bachelard away from his solitary fixation on walls and drawers and shells toward a poetics of attachment. I decipher words of love and friendship in life stories. I disentangle family ties among those with whom I have worked for many years to notice how serial migration leads to new ways of knotting those ties together. I examine how places and life stages are sewn together and how families and groups of friends who become like kin make collaborative decisions about points of settlement.

I listen to serial migrants not because they are statistically significant or because they represent the wave of the future (although I would wager that their numbers are increasing); rather, I follow them—or us—at first simply to point out that we exist, and subsequently because I believe that our lives, fashioned of some of the basic materials with which the world shapes the big picture of itself, provide a special slant on certain political conundrums.²⁵ By using bordered territories to set out the evolving backgrounds of lives, serial migrants do more than remind us that, like all images, our maps of the world are made of motion.²⁶ Their efforts to develop evolving life locations illuminate the fact that although states are increasingly detached from the idea that their sphere of operation is limited to a bounded territory, their sovereignty over certain lands remains vital to their survival. Increasingly, they conceive of their territories both as places of permanent settlement by nationals and as spaces that can be used to carry out projects involving the temporary importation of industries and people for precise intervals.

In focusing on a particular form of settlement punctuated by borders, I hope this book will contribute in some small way to a better understanding of this evolving dance of social life. Anthropologists are perhaps uniquely poised to explore this unfolding politics because to pursue such trails of investigation requires patience of the kind that ethnography encourages. Nonetheless, in the coming pages the reader will find little of the “thick description” that has become the trademark of ethnographic writing; in this exploration of an evolving location I myself inhabit, biographical revelation is conspicuously absent. This “try” at delineating a trail for which there is no map, no sign, no frame, this account of a way of life with no content except the form, may seem to have little to do with the task of disentangling the webs of cultures we might appreciate as outsiders. It dwells instead on how a shared experience might result from using a common compass rather than inhabiting a common space or speaking a shared language. Neither the naked eye nor the geneticist will come up with traits these people have

in common. I might myself feel nostalgic for that delicate attention to the intricacies of symbolic exchange that leads the participant observer to notice each slight variation in a tone of voice, turn each ritual gesture into a sign, make each aside in a conversation a reminder of the deep significance of a shared belief or a subtle indication of divergent opinion. Yet in this work about lives so full of significant details that one might easily be overwhelmed, a paucity of illustration is consonant with the subject matter. This “path-ology” requires an emphasis on form at the expense of content.