

## FOCUS: 'DE-MIGRANTICIZE' MIGRATION

# Approaching Migration and (In)Mobility Analysis Through Rhizomatic Thinking, Feminist Epistemes and The Embodied Experience of Migration

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**Abstract.** International migration analysis frequently addresses mobility phenomena through state-centric macrolevel descriptions. This “top down” approach is helpful to portray general patterns and highlight structural issues that contribute to mobility, but often omits “the figure of the migrant”. Feminist phenomenology demonstrates the importance of articulating “the body” as social constructions of expressions of biopolitical relations that structure ontological positioning in the world. Heeding to the plea to de-migrantize migration analysis, I argue that it is imperative to redress international migration analysis “through the body” by reframing migrancy through feminist phenomenology and reflexivity. Through rhizomatic thinking, illustrated with narratives on the Mexico-United States borderlands, I propose a re-conceptualization of migrancy that *embodies positionality* argued through feminist narratives as imperative to the center of migration and (in)mobility research.

**Keywords.** *de-migrantization, embodiment, feminist phenomenology, heterophenomenology, migrancy, ontopological, reflexivity, rhizomatic thinking*

### Introduction

Despite the widely accepted argument to abandon methodological nationalism in international migration analysis (Wimmer and Schiller 2003), much of the analysis that prime migration policies around the world still *speak through* the Nation-State (Bommes and Thränhardt 2012; Dahinden 2016). By maintaining discourses that do not “descend” from the lenses of the Nation-State and its legal body, narratives *hover* above the “migrant body” with the effect of *naturalizing* approaches to analyses, that reproduces hegemonic world-system views of migration and mobility. These analyses tend to portray the “national” state of mobility “because the modes of presenting problems and questions are politically constituted by the nation state

The conceptual distance of the Nation-State from the migrant, centers migration and mobility phenomena around the structure of migration and mobility regimes through narratives that sway away from the experience of migration, from the body of the migrant, and from the *figure of the migrant* (Nail 2015). This “tyranny of the national” approach<sup>1</sup> frequently dismisses issues of agency in favor of structure, and is prone to what Alex Sager has called “descriptive and explanatory inadequacy” (Sager 2014). It is also a testament to the perseverance of methodological frameworks that have, as Sager (2014) argues, become *naturalized* in migration research. Discourses that keep a “safe distance” from the migrant body are non-reflexive stances that are often moving within the boundaries of what Michael Shapiro (1997: 16) calls “moral geography”, that is, “a set of silent ethical assertions that preorganized explicit ethicopolitical discourses”.

Significant efforts at the end of last century were made to decenter state-centrism from international migration discourse, notably by working through analytical frameworks such as transnationalism and its theoretical tributaries (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007). Nevertheless, as Pessar and Mahler (2003) suggest, it still falters in addressing substantive aspects of the intersectional constitution of the “migrant body” such as gender and ethnicity, among others aspects highlighted by feminist epistemologies and methodologies, that structure the phenomenological positioning of “being-in-the-world” (Schües 2018). In a similar tone to the call to “open up social sciences” in late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Wallerstein et al. 1996), a growing number of migration research scholars have increasingly called for a greater appraisal of reflexivity in migration research in order to “tilt the frame”<sup>2</sup> of prevailing discourse (Shinozaki 2021)<sup>3</sup>.

Pushing through the “reflexive turn” in migration studies (Shinozaki 2021)<sup>4</sup>, a recent prominent voice in this discussion has been Janine Dahinden’s “plea” to *de-migrantize* migration research. Attending to the historical foundation of migration research, pioneered in mid-XIX notably through two distinct approaches: the census-based, “from above” works of geographer Ernst G. Ravenstein and the magnum opus research “from below” on polish migration by William I. Thomas and Florian

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<sup>1</sup> See Donna R. Gabaccia (1999: 1123) discussion on the need to “reject the tyranny of the national by seeking alternative concepts and alternative scales for writing history above, below, within, or outside individual nation”.

<sup>2</sup> See Steinberg (1998).

<sup>3</sup> See Schües (2018).

<sup>4</sup> See Maccarini, A. M. and Prandini, R. (2009) for an in-depth discussion on reflexivity.

Znaniecki, Janine Dahinden echoes a growing grumble to re-vest staple categories of migration research analysis -such as “migration”, “culture” and “society”- through critical semiotic denotations and connotations that seek to decouple a historical dragging of *dominated* concepts. She proposes breaking out of the self-producing “migration container” to redress migration analysis through reflexive positionality and sensitivity. To this end, the Swiss researcher pushes for a *de-migranticization* of migration research, to replenish migration research with new epistemic and methodological considerations across disciplines. To de-naturalize migration research implies, as feminist researchers have argued for many decades, “thinking through the body”.

### **Feminist phenomenology and thinking through the body**

The extended interest in mobility during the second half of last century is symptomatic of a renewed interest and analytical approach to the configurations of global politics, accelerated by advances in transportation and communication systems that frame migration under the socio-political contexts of umbrella concepts such as the “global village” (McLuhan 1964), “global ecumene” (Hannerz 1996), alongside “transnationalism” -arguably one of the most representative descriptors of migration relations and configuration of late twentieth century- giving rise to concepts such as “transnational migrant circuits” (Rouse 1991), “transnational community” (Goldring 1996), “transnational social space” (Faist 2000), all of which reframe certain aspects of migration within the transnational migrancy expressions of “transmigrants” (Basch et al. 1994). These umbrella concepts are powerful containers of meaning and substance that enrich migration and mobility realities that seek to re-engage with “the body” of the migrant by addressing further the ontological impact of migration on social and individual realities through the lenses of intersectional, gender-studies and critical feminist approaches (Leinonen 2021). This redressing makes important headway in addressing the explicit impact and role of intersectional complexities of the *embodiment* of migration that fundamentally structure migration patterns, forms, shapes and interpretations. Nevertheless, despite critical engagement with conceptual configurations of migration and (in)mobility patterns that shape the experiences and forms of phenomena, categorizing experience has still proven a difficult task.

It is precisely the intersectional complexity of experiences of migration -its

*phenomenological properties*<sup>5</sup>- that has eluded its encapsulation in a semantic articulation that can, effectively, denote key aspects of experiencing the experience of migration (Coole and Frost 2010). One way to engage with the experience of migration, and bring the analytical value of experience to migration and mobility studies, is to take key from feminist phenomenology and think “through the body”. Phenomenological consideration from feminist critical thought is crucial to rethink, de-naturalize and de-migranticize migration research. Linda Fisher (2000a: 15) echoes this stance by stating that “the intertwining of feminist and phenomenological ideas has rich possibilities for a wide variety of fields and discussions, offering the potential of a suggestive, salutary, and radical analysis for future inquiry”.

Within a discussion on the politics of technological subjugation in gender, Haraway (1997) alludes to the attachment necessary to situate the body as an embodied body, and does so -in part- through a creative usage of the theoretical consideration of *prosthesis*<sup>6</sup>. By seeking a political and epistemological positioning of the body as “always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body” as opposed to “the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity” she is calling for an increase in the complexity of the subject, and ultimately placing the notions of gendered bodies as an intersecting social fact. Ultimately, Haraway is expressing the *ontopological* property of migrancy. An *ontopology*, argues Jacques Derrida (1994: 103) is the axiomatics linking indissociably the ontological value of present-being [*on*] to its *situation*, to the stable and presentable determination of a locality, the *topos* of territory, native soil, city, body in general.

Then, the experience of migration is a *situated experience within the experience of migration* mediated, precisely, due to its social construction and characteristics, determined by its *ontopological character*. To think of migrancy as *ontopologically* constituted is to make the body *visible* (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). Guillaumin (1995) highlights how expressions and perceptions of gender, ethnicity, and class become *social facts*<sup>7</sup> as they impose by its *ontopologically* constitution

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<sup>5</sup> See Coole and Frost (2010).

<sup>6</sup> In Donna Haraway’s discussion on the politics of technological subjugation in gender, she alludes to the attachment necessary to situate the body as an embodied body, and does so -in part- through a creative usage of the theoretical consideration of *prosthesis*. To this, she concludes that, “prosthesis is semiosis, the making of meanings and bodies, not for transcendence but for power-charged communication” (Haraway, 1997: 293).

<sup>7</sup> A *social fact*, argues Durkheim, are representations and actions that are culturally transmitted and engaged with and conformed by them.

through world-system positionality and systemic organization on the politics of the body (Fisher 2014). The body becomes another form of the *body politic* (Gatens 1997). The experience of migration becomes part of the body, as an embodied social fact, that simultaneously shapes and is shaped by the ontological positioning of the *figure of the migrant*. The dialectical constitution of the forms of experience places the Other as Self within the body of experience (de Beauvoir, 1956) and so, experience, then, becomes an embodied aspect of the Self.

Approaching migration and (in)mobility studies through feminist phenomenological perspectives, incites the explicit acknowledgment of structural patriarchal heteronormative biopolitical practices that *define* substantial conditions, configurations, and considerations that shape social realities. Addressing this discourse of the overarching moral and biopolitical structures of migration can better position how structuring factors -such as economic position and disposition, cultural affinity, religious creeds, ethnic membership, social perception, and political motivation, among others- shape the fundamental possibilities of agency and experience of migration. By engaging in reflexivity, discourses can move beyond dominated categories of analysis that serve as primers for regulation, liberation and alteration of pathways of (in)mobility and incorporate the “senses of the body” to address the fundamental ontological constitution of reality that emanates from the social construction and perception of the body<sup>8</sup>. As Edward Said (1994: xiii) put forth, “nations themselves are narrations”.

By moving between the spaces that structure and articulate the “body of the migrant”, it becomes possible to not only highlight the practices that constrict and facilitate mobility but also highlight systems of values, moral and identity politics - *biopolitics*- that filter through the multiple levels of “the body” of the migrant. Addressing what Sam Binkley (2018) has fashioned as the “biopolitical metaphor”<sup>9</sup> to migration phenomena, is a recognition of the historical situatedness of structural experiences that embody the means and modes of experiences and being in reality.

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<sup>8</sup> See “Embodied metaphors: nerves as lived experience” on the social positioning of the senses, in this case, the nerve (*nervios*), by Setha Low (1994).

<sup>9</sup> Building upon the discussions raised through Foucault’s assessment of the embodiment and *incorporealization* of power (bio-power), Sam Binkley (2018: 2) fashions the “biopolitical metaphor” as an embodied aspect of biopower to address and demonstrate how biopower touches not just upon the body’s present and future actions, but acts upon the very basis of those actions in the body’s felt past, in the accumulated residue of repeated and habitualized actions that shapes embodiment demonstrate how.

In the words of Claire Blencowe (2012: 1), biopolitics should be understood as a historically specific formulation of experience and embodiment – a formulation or ‘framing’ that constitutes life as an immanent ground of meaning, truth games, ethics and political reason.

It becomes imperative, then, to head to the sustained cry to readdress the complexities of the social construction of the body, as Pessar and Mahler (2013) argue, and “bring gender” into migration and mobility studies, as well as de-naturalizing ethnicity (Dahinden 2016; Leinonen 2021). One way to “embody” the intersectional makeup of the migrant in analytical considerations of (in)mobility, is to recapture the essence of *migrancy*.

### **Embodying migrancy**

Migrancy has frequently been reduced to convey something akin to the movement of migration as a lexical verb, commonly fashioned as a *naturalized* aspect of addressing facets of migration and mobility. This naturalized notion of migrancy, however, fails to attend to the necessary complexity embedded -and embodied- in migrancy. Taking Dahinden’s “plea” to de-migrantize migration analysis seriously, a turn to Ian Chambers’ (1994) seminal work on migrancy can recenter migrancy “through the body”. By capturing the transformative agency of theoretical analysis and formulation in the post-1968 “revolutionary” moment (Wallerstein 1989), taking notice of critical deconstructionist, post-structuralist and feminist epistemes surrounding the narratives of social construction of reality, Chambers insists that terminology in migration and mobility studies are missing *something*, as “there is clearly also something else occurring here”. By shifting the focus of migration discourse, narrative and forms of “seeing” migration phenomena from the “top” to “down” -from voices from “above” to voices from “below”- Chambers is bringing the difference of migration experience to the forefront of migrancy - the essence of the movement and mobility- of *the experience of the experience* of migration. It is precisely “the third view” applied to gather the entanglements of embodied migrancy that suggests a heterophenomenological approach.

Moreover, than the constitution of the phenomenological expressions of “being a body”, to see another “body in motion” requires a double hermeneutic approach that recognizes the positionality of interpretation embedded in the observation of the observed. It is here that Daniel Dennett’s heterophenomenological approach can be useful. Building off phenomenological

theorization, Denet (1991) recognizes that an observation of an observation requires reflexive positionality, much in tune with the feminist position of “situated knowledges” as purported of a “feminist objectivity” (Haraway 1988). This explicit recognition is “the third view” serves as an epistemic mechanism to recognize embodied positionality within the object observed and its constitutive aspect on the lenses of the observer. Thus, heterophenomenology implies adopting an intentional stance in which one observes a subject invested with agency, beliefs, and rationality, and interprets his or her actions and the events that traverse the subject as socially positioned in a social field that refers to and composes individual (as well as social) biographical narratives.

Assuming a heterophenomenological stance allows us to treat narratives as stories that make sense of the world, and to take subjects “seriously”<sup>10</sup>. Considering the ontological position and heterophenomenological condition of narrating migration and (in)mobility phenomena is a recognition of dialectics of identity as common denominators in the process of “seeing and describing” (social) reality (Kohl and McCutcheon 2014). The explicit recognition of differentiation -the differences in “structural other-ness” that shape identity politics (Braidotti 2006) - allows migration discourse to highlight the heterogeneity of the plights of migrants and pry away from normalization and naturalization discourses that “hover” above the migration field. By recognizing the socio-political configuration in historical-situatedness of migration populations through the *embodied body*, as Merleau-Ponty might suggest<sup>11</sup>, migrancy inescapably addresses the issues of situatedness in social reality that speaks “through the body”, by bringing to the forefront of narrative consideration, articulating and presentation, the implications and politics of gender, ethnicity, status -as a *minimum*. Given this, I propose understanding migrancy, with and through its reflexive and positionality properties, as the “*the (unfinished) social product of the social process of the experience of migration, heterophenomenologically expressed and ontologically situated.*”

Through this de-migrantization, migrancy no longer lends to be a creative synonym to the movement of migration, but can correctly revert the “marginalization” of migration reflexivity<sup>12</sup> by addressing the embedded and embodied complexities of, as Thomas Nail has argued, “the figure of the migrant”.

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<sup>10</sup> See chapter 4. “A Method for Phenomenology” in Denet (1991).

<sup>11</sup> See Seamon (2018) for further discussion.

<sup>12</sup> See Dahinden (2016).

By indulging in the process of migration itself, Thomas Nail centers on the communality of risk in all forms and degrees of migration. By placing mobility within the gains and losses of the *senses* of place, Nail is effectively retributing the “movement” of migration, through the “experience” of migration as part of the *regime of social motion*. By focusing the regimes of social motion of migrants “from below”, Nail asserts the possibility of registering the “minor history” of migration forms, shapes, and patterns that challenges the push to generalize, homogenize and distil differentiation in narratives that describe the migrant as a non-agentic member of the story being told and described. The “figure of the migrant” is, in essence, *the embodiment of migrancy*. As Russel Ferguson (1990: 10) stated over three decades ago, “no longer can whiteness, maleness or heterosexuality be taken as the ubiquitous paradigm, simultaneously center and boundary”. Narratives are political<sup>13</sup>. The body is political<sup>14</sup>. *What we say, matter. How we say it, matters.*

De-migrantizing migrancy makes attainable the social dimensions of the “figure of the migrant”. Adding an embodied migrancy approach to migration, mobility and transnational analysis aids in breaching the gap between the different scalar levels of analysis and adds a necessary dimension to understanding migration and (in)mobility by recognizing agency, situatedness, and intersectional composition and positionality that shape the means, modes and forms of engaging with “the body” of the “figure of the migrant”. Narratives that engage with embodied migrancy address the underlying issues that structure the “bodies” of migrants, by acknowledging how regimes of identity politics facilitate some forms of mobilities while hindering others (Leinonen 2021)<sup>15</sup>. Adding to this framework, is the disruptive penetration of new facets of Information and Communications Technology that have reshaped the modes of “being” in the world in. The growing access to the digital sphere adds new layers of complexity that are necessary to address when considering the shapes of experiences of migrancy<sup>16</sup>. Embodied migrancy at the beginning of the second decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century find itself at the cusp of being, simultaneously “a body without organs” while being a “body with organs”<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> See de Fina (2017).

<sup>14</sup> See Synnott (1993).

<sup>15</sup> Notably by making visible how racially-motivated and gender-exclusive structures of mobility are imperative in conditioning the forms of (in)mobilities and the experiences of the experiences of (in)mobilities.

<sup>16</sup> See Casas-Cortes et al. (2015).

<sup>17</sup> Taking inspiration from Antonin Artaud surrealist play “To Have Done with the Judgment of God” (1995), Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize “the body without organs” as the culmination of thinking in



De-migrantizing migrancy brings the patriarchal heteronormative domestication of alternative forms and systems of being, into the dominated relation it occurs in. By addressing the “minor histories” of the “figure of the migrant”, it becomes possible to tackle this issue with more candor, authenticity and clarity. Nonetheless, what does articulating embodied migrancy look like in analytical narratives within migration and mobility frameworks? Here deleuzian rhizomatic reasoning can shine a light on the instrumentalization of migrancy as embodied experience. By “thinking through the body” of “the figure of the migrant”, coupled with narratives from the borderlands of Mexico-United States borderscapes, I attempt to illustrate the “binding” property of migrancy, and how it can breach the “voices” from above as below and move through the haze of the Nation-State gaze. One way to approach this is to engage with *rhizomatic thinking*, which decouples the hierarchical approach of knowledge production that can benefit migration and mobilities frameworks by approaching phenomena through “any point of the rhizome”<sup>18</sup>.

### **Rhizomatic thinking and embodied migrancy: Thinking in multiplicity**

The organization of knowledge tends to be structured, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) point out, as a genealogical scheme of relations and connections, subordinated and folded to other instances that, in many cases, culminates in an arborescent archetype of thinking. The image of the tree -sustain these authors- “is already the image of the world”, structuring relationships in power valences, denoting the subjugation and levelling of thought. Thaae arborescent structure of the genealogy of *normative* epistemic expressions stems from a center - from a point

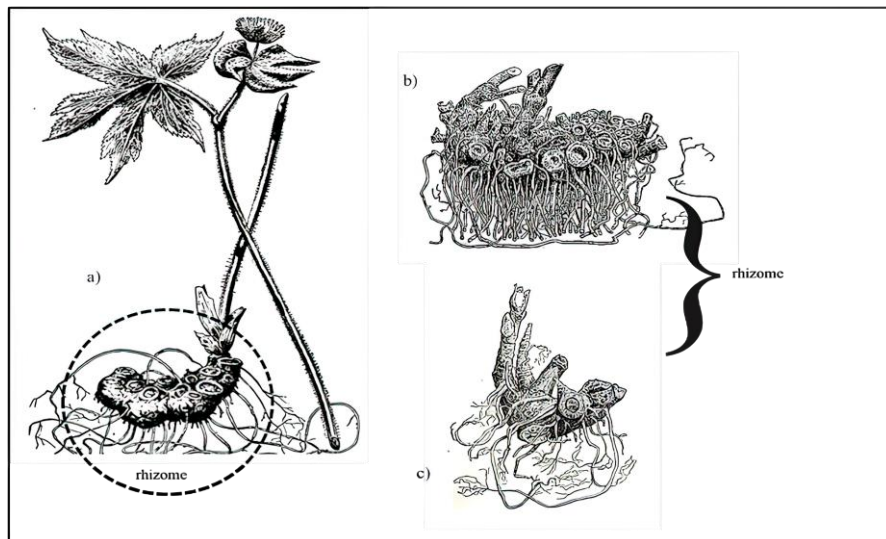
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anti-essentialist terms in which concepts are portrayed as bodies. These bodies, argue the authors, can be understood as territories and cartographical manifestations. A body, then, is territorialized through the occupation and dependency of its organs, which inscribe certain pathways and forms of knowing. This suggests predictability and genealogy. On the other hand, a body without organs is creative in thinking, is the anti-genealogical process of creativity as the deterritorialization of the body (with organs). Without its substantive parts, the body -then- is a body without organs. In their own words, “a body without organs is not an empty body stripped of organs, but a body upon which that which serves as organs... is distributed according to crowd phenomena... in the form of molecular multiplicities” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 30).

<sup>18</sup> “The rhizome connects any point to any other point [...] It is comprised not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overflows. ... It has multiple entranceways and exits and its own lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 21).

of origin- that denies the multiplicity of beginnings<sup>19</sup>. To re-rethink from different centers -to *re-center epistemic origins*- is one of the methodological premises of critical feminist thought, and the precursor to engage reflexively on and through positionality. It is a demand to escape the mimesis of thought and engage in a “radical” -as the return to the *root*- mode of thinking.

Seeking to reverse the arborescent epistemological model - *to turn the world upside down* - Deleuze and Guattari propose an “inverse” methodological perspective, which seeks to divert the “upwards” *naturalized gaze* – from the trunk of a tree, its foliage and canopy- “downwards”, through the soil toward the radicle-system of the *rhizome*. By seeking to engage with the potential of each bulbous rhizome present in the decentralized formation of root structure of the arborescent world-view, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari are suggesting a rupture to the order of subjugation of implicit hierarchies of thinking. This gives rise to *rhizomatic thinking*.



**Caption: Illustrations (intervened) of selected rhizomes by Lloyd and Lloyd (1885): (a) *Hydrastis canadensis* (p. 77); (b) *Cimicifuga racemosa* (p. 256); (c) *Actae alba* (p. 241).]**

Rhizomes, argue the authors, are non-subjugated ways of engaging with ideas; it is, inherently, a path toward non-linear movement in engaging with thought,

<sup>19</sup> “Unlike the tree, the rhizome is not the object of reproduction: neither external reproduction as image-tree nor internal reproduction as tree-structure. The rhizome is an *antigenealogy*” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 21).

whereby the product of creation is not the sum of its properties but the *state of its multiplicity*<sup>20</sup>. And so, Gilles and Felix (1987: 7) state that,

A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles. A semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive.

A *radicle-system* positions the multiple as its potential beginnings, by recognizing the multiplicity inherent in any approach related to describing the social world. By emphasizing the multiplicity of beginnings, Deleuze and Guattari are favoring the reflexive engagement of social realities, an important consideration and the basis for *rhizomatic thinking*. This, in effect, is the process of assemblage, whereby

There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author). Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders, so that a book has no sequel (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 23).

Through the arborescent beginnings, the potential of multiplicity as multiply entries and modes of access are denied to contain hermeneutic descriptors subordinated to origins of common-place, and possibly, complacency. In essence, “a multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 8). Thus, to think schematically “through the tree” is to deny the potential for “other-ness” in thinking, and is -as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987: 8) provocatively state- “not a method for the people”. To consider multiplicity is to acknowledge the non-static positioning and dissolve any “concrete” aspect of position if not couple with the reflexive expressions of positionalities<sup>21</sup>. Succinctly, rhizomatic thinking can be understood, as Carol A. Taylor (2013: 43) clearly sums up, as “a form of thinking which is centered, connective, heterogeneous, non-hierarchical and multiple”.

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<sup>20</sup> “Multiplicities are defined by the outside: by the abstract line, the line of flight or deterritorialization according to which they change in nature and connect with other multiplicities” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 9).

<sup>21</sup> Here, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987: 8) state that A method of the rhizome type, on the contrary, can analyze language only by decentering it onto other dimensions and other registers. A language is never closed upon itself, except as a function of impotence.

Given such, a “point in the rhizome” is precisely the explicit recognition of a selected entry based upon the potential of one-in-many, putting recognition of selectivity and reflexivity at the forefront of argumentation, delimitation and narration. And this is precisely how rhizomatic thinking ties to the plea to de-migrantize migration studies. By shedding the constraints of naturalized condition of “thinking migration” by rhizomatic thinking, it becomes possible to “enter” the objects of analysis through reflexive recognition of situatedness paths that, also, think “through the body”. As John Wylie (2007: 148) points out, “human being is being embodied”.

Rhizomatic thinking is the essence of innovation and renovation of the forms of approaching an object of analysis, of importance to the state of migration and mobilities research as pointed out through the discussion on “thinking through the body”, the importance of embodied migrancy and articulating “the figure of the migrant”. Rosi Braidotti has called rhizomatic thinking as *nomadic style* to reference the itinerant movement between the positionality of the enunciation and interpretation, as forms of interpreting and observing. In her own words, Rosi Braidotti (1997: 60) states that a nomadic style, as in the case with rhizomatic thinking, “implies the simultaneous dislocation not only of my place of enunciation as a feminist intellectual but also accordingly of the position of my readers”.

Taking, as an example, the *borderscapes*<sup>22</sup> of Tijuana as a crux for migration politics of the Mexico-United States migration field, I demonstrate how applying rhizomatic thinking to “the figure of the migrant”, through embodied migrancy, can create counter-narratives that seek to de-migrantize discourse and position itself as an important technique and tool for narration of migration and (in)mobility phenomena.

### **Narrating Mexico-United States borderlands: A place called Tijuana**

Tijuana has figured prominently, and constantly, a pivotal place and space in the history of the development of the migration field between Mexico and the United States<sup>23</sup>. Its geopolitical borderscapes places itself at the forefront of biopolitical politics between the interests and power tensions of world-system positionality; as the popular saying in Mexico goes: “*Pobre México, tan lejos de Dios*

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<sup>22</sup> I use the term *borderscapes* in a similar vein as do Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr (2008: x), to reference the “complexity and vitality of, and at, the border”.

<sup>23</sup> See Minian (2018) for a rich analysis of the historical presence of migration and migrants in and through Tijuana.

*y tan cerca de Estados Unidos*"<sup>24</sup>. To approach the rich history and intricacies of the borderscapes that intersect embodied migrancy of Tijuana merits its own space, suffice to say I shall attempt to highlight certain salient properties of Tijuana -as a borderscape- that create particular social realities of embodied migrancy for Mexican deported men. Douglas Massey and colleagues (1987), retrace how places like Tijuana become representative of seminal aspects of the Mexico-United States border, notably through the degree in which Tijuana figures as a point of entry and point of return. On this latter matter, the authors demonstrate how some migrants began consolidating a livelihood in these borderscapes, seeking to overturn their itinerancy and temporality by "sticking" to the border. In addition, Jason de León (2015) brings to the forefront the many realities that face migrants, either in transit, returned, deported or separated, in and through the border, in places such as Tijuana. By addressing hardships faced by migrants, Jason de León manages to articulate the emotional toil of traumatic experiences as part of socio-biographic narratives, enmeshed in an affective embodiment of hybrid relationality (with human and non-human agents), which are dynamically processed in the *in-becoming* of the migrant. His riveting account of first-person narratives of decisions, intentions, objectives and strategies to negotiate the vast array of options and decision to migrate, highlights the complexity and intensity of being a migrant. To hover over the migrant body, as narrative, is to seek refuge from emotive connection; it is, in many ways, *to be less human*.

Thinking with rhizomes, and taking cue from de Casas-Cortes and colleagues (2015), I propose to enter the field through border research, as means to engage with the circumventing administration of the body politic of the figure of the migrant in migration and (in)mobility studies. Introducing the arterial border to address the "vast and complex migration infrastructure that spans frontiers, transportation routes and local communities" (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015: 54), Wendy Vogt (2018) presents a masterful discussion that "moves through the body" of the figure of the migrant, addressing affective and somatic examples of the ways ontological constitution is confronted through embodied migrancy; through the *experience of the experience* of migration. First-person accounts and re-telling of events, couples with critical analysis of macro and meso levels, portray an embodied and

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<sup>24</sup> *Trans.*- "Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States". Expression commonly attributed to Mexican statesman and military general Porfirio Díaz, who assumed the presidency of Mexico under authoritarian rule during 1876-1911.

consolidated narrative that defines a positionality and “*performs*” migrancy (Butler 1993). Its performance is done through the emotional engagement it expresses and stirs because it “speaks through the body”<sup>25</sup>. The writer and the narrator begin to share an experience that seeks to reach understanding, comprehension, maybe even attribute a sense of *compassion* (Thrift and Dewsbury, 2000). Here, a dialectical process of creation is forged through the *intent* of writing on the *perception* of the reader. Here, the affective turn of social sciences becomes *performed* through engaged and embodied writing. This is the case, for example, of many Chicano feminist writers that address the complexities of the *borderland*, such as Gloria Anzaldúa.

The critical feminist Chicana, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987: 3) suggests thinking the borderland as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary”. In this foray of *in-between-ness* live “the prohibited and forbidden... the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the *mulato*, the half-breed, the half dead”. Gloria Anzaldúa’s brilliant account of the phenomenological experience of engaging in and through borderscapes, is a key example of how narratives can produce embodied notions of migrancy. Within her accounts of the construction of migration and (in)mobility phenomena, she intertwines the “feelings” associated with “living through” scales of migration-related analysis. By effectively bringing to the foreground what Nail (2015) called “minor theories” of engaging with and through migration and mobility expressions. Her narrative simultaneously moves “through the body” of borderlands, as well as above it. By simultaneously providing a “view from the bottom” attached to a view “from the top”, Anzaldúa addresses the experience of embodied migrancy by the stories of a people whose affective ontological expressions are key modes of engagement, including herself. Speaking as a Chicano feminist, she clearly positions herself as a political agent, indivisibly incrusting in the politics of her writing and, thus, speaks embodied in reflexivity. By taking “rhizomatic thinking” seriously, her accounts are rich examples of how narratives of migration and (in)mobility phenomena can benefit when committing to “bring in” embodied migrancy. *Writing, again, is a political act.*

Another example is Ana Raquel Minian’s recompilation of the experiences of undocumented migrants, a key source of narratives that shines a bright light on the impacts of migration policies that are blinded by State and, therefore, sees “no

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<sup>25</sup> See Judith Butler’s discussion on performativity.

bodies". One such narrative is about a young man how, having sought repeatedly to cross into the United States, only to be apprehended and "thrown back" into the streets of Tijuana. In her retelling of the story of the man named Gardoño, she details how he finds himself in a strange place where "didn't know anyone". He begins, as do all migrants in Tijuana, to walk the streets of Tijuana until he finds *coyotes* - smugglers- who were leading a "group of migrants across the border the same day". He quickly decides to join the group and begins his endless attempt to cross the border. Her narrative *embodies* the notion of undocumented migration and gives a human dimension to the affective practices experienced in and through the body of migrants. By addressing the state of migration through the stories of migration, this narrative *humanizes* migrant and mobility research by placing the *issue* in and through the *body*.

By de-centralizing the border within the mimesis for movement, mobility and migration (Soguk 2008), Tijuana is a social construction made with and through the border. As Thomas Nail (2019: 194-195) states, "borders are not static. They are open kinetic systems. They are always made and remade according to a host of shifting material variables". Such deterritorialization of the border is precisely the nature of existing through and with border; its malleability in hybridity.

### **Final remarks (and the absence of the digital)**

As a borderscape, a border town, a frontier, a limit, an in-between space, a transnational social space, Tijuana becomes a "place" where migrants not only arrive in search of entering the United States, but also return to. One of the historical compositions of embodied migrancy that finds itself in Tijuana comes through the lives of deported migrant men who are lodged in temporary migrant shelters. As Ana Raquel Minian (2018: 3) recalls, there is still "the assumption that "illegal migrants" have full inclusion in Mexico...that assumption is not always correct". Consequently, deportation figures prominently in the lives that cross the Tijuana landscape of *emotional* ties, tries and cries, as Karen Till (2005: 11) reminds us that "central to the ways that people create meaning about themselves and their pasts is how they expect places to work emotionally, socially, culturally, and politically".

Writing through the body is a sensory expression; it involves emotions; it involved bodies full of emotions (Bond 2018). To recognize the affective constitution of migration research and (in)mobility studies is to render narrative more "human" (Graafland and Sohn 2012). Underlying to this discussion are the latent questions of



objectivity, but also of intentionality: *Who are we writing for? What are we writing for?* To remind oneself of the purpose may seem pretentious on my behalf, but is a fundamental aspect of engaging, reflexivity, with the construction of social reality. Writing, then, is part of political and identity politics, and when engaged reflexively, critically and “through the body”, can provide sharp approximations to issues surrounding migration and (in)mobility studies that may escape when discourse “hovers” over the State.

Much has been said about the committed perspective in migration and (in)mobility studies, and a lot of work has been done to remediate the naturalization of migration research. Nonetheless, Dahinden (2016) is sharp to recall that while her plea to de-migrantize migration research, she also recognizes that social sciences, as a whole, would benefit from a push toward “migrantization”, and include migration -and mobility- as cornerstones of human condition (in clear opposition of the naturalized discourses that promote stasis as the *de facto* state of social configuration). This “decoupling” of normative forms of descriptive engagement presents novel forms of “seeing” migration phenomena that can, adequately, convey issues and descriptions, and maybe better than most. Stories, as narratives, are powerful engagers with our sensibilities, for they “humanize” an object that can -as has historically been the case with “the figure of migration”- be treated abstractly and detached “from the body”. Re-telling phenomena from the body invites us to consider how our bodies engage with the body politic and attach a “sense and sensibility” to the politics of place and mobility. To recover the forms of presenting issues of migration and (in)mobility is to heed to the plea to de-migrantize migration research, and “humanize” discourse. Of course, missing from this discussion is the contemporary network of engagement with digital and off-site spaces and locations that add several layers of increased complexity that goes beyond the scope of this article. Addressing the new configuration of denizens, and the multiplication of “lived experiences” in diametrically infused temporalities is important, addresses important issues to “bring migration” into the contemporary composition, but must -also- recognize the colossal size of digital access inequality and the perseverance of migration within the “dialectics of the concrete” (Kosik 1976).

My recent insertion in Tijuana to carry out fieldwork on research of the phenomenology of migrancy, spanning close to 200 days from 2021 to 2022 was significant to corroborate the penetration of migrancy in the landscape of the city



itself. Migration, as a prominent figure of this borderland, was expressed through the replete and perpetual presence of migrants -many of them men -who found themselves either in shelters -many of which are male-centric- or on the streets. My engagement, as part of a sociosemiotic ethnographic approach<sup>26</sup>, with deported migrant men in Tijuana highlighted how embodied migrancy shaped the forms of engaging with the social processes of the borderland. Not only is the vehicle-centric mobility driven structure of Tijuana a baseline for the ways to engage with the semiotic landscape of being, but also the constant negotiations faced to simply “be” in Tijuana, as a member of a social tribe of embodied migrancy. Deported migrants face a constant discrimination, not only from the institutional actors that make up Tijuana, but from their own selves. Meaning, and consequently the forms and expressions of embodied migrancy, are affectively constituted, as emotions are structuring fundamental drivers for phenomenological engagement and interpretation (Veltri, 2016). The feeling of being isolated, deflated, detached, removed, refused, abandoned, and non-recognize makes this particular “figure of the migrant” a dominated figure of embodied migrancy. The deported Mexican migrant -as a shared characteristic of embodied migrancy- is inescapably expressed through his/her conceptualization of the past, positioning of the present, and idealization of the future. The ways I present this “figure of the migrant” encourages me to seek “the body” in analysis and seek to attribute the necessary consideration of positionality, affectivity, and intersectionality. To de-migranticize migration is also to “feel” migration, to bring the *heart* into migrancy.

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<sup>26</sup> See Phillip Vannini (2007).

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