

The New Nomadic Age: Preface

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It can be said that we are currently living in a new nomadic age, an age of global movement and migration. This observation is not meant to designate yet another “evolutionary” stage, a move that would elicit objections not only for its arbitrary nature but also because of the associations of “backwardness” the term may evoke: nomads are still seen by many as preceding “civilized”, settled life. Rather, the term is used here because of its potency in a volume situated within the field of archaeology: the chapters that follow show how undocumented border crossing and migration in general are material, embodied, and sensorial phenomena first and foremost, structured by and structuring a distinct temporality. As such, they do and must concern archaeology, as the discipline or the craft that engages with materiality and with time.

Official data on global migration show that between 1990 and 2017 more than 100 million people were added to the category that the United Nations defines as “international migrant stock”, referring to the segment of a country’s permanent population that is foreign-born. In relative terms, and taking into account world population growth overall, this is a modest increase, from 2.9% to 3.4%. Yet such statistics underplay the significance of the phenomenon, not only because they do not accurately report undocumented border crossing, but because they flatten a highly diverse picture. They obscure the dramatic impact of global mobility and migration for certain countries, regions, routes, and entry points, especially from the Global South to the Global North, and they fail to reflect on the extent to which global mobility – and especially undocumented border crossing – is also a media event that has entered public consciousness in the Global North. Furthermore, they conceal the fact that migration is an affective, embodied, and sensorial experience of becoming, a process of place making, self making, and world making, which cannot be understood by statistics alone. And as is discussed in the introduction to this book and in several of the chapters, global mobility is a process that will intensify in the coming decades, due to warfare and permanent low-intensity conflict, structural inequalities and poverty, and climate change.

The choice of title thus signals the great extent to which migration, including undocumented migration, shapes our world, our cities, our material and embodied daily lives, in ways that are rarely acknowledged. It not just people who move, but things too. The contributors to this volume thus turn their attention to the things and artefacts which move with people – the objects that cross borders and accumulate in borderlands and entry points. They also investigate how forced and undocumented migration produce new materialities, resulting in new assemblages, new edifices, and new architectural and material complexes that demand to be taken seriously.

But the mention of nomads and of nomadic age serves an additional role. It evokes nomadism as a mode of becoming, as a way of making, unmaking, and remaking subjectivities, as a state of thinking and practice. The nomadic figure of the migrant today constitutes a novel social and political subject that places into doubt the certainties and fixities of western modernity, including the colonial and national order. It invites societies in the Global North to reflect on their own identity. It shows that what we have called a “migration crisis” is, in fact, a reception crisis in the Global North, a crisis that points to broader and deeper identity crises, and a crisis with the national-cum-colonial genealogical charter of these societies. Finally, the nomadic figure challenges both scholars and various publics to rethink their own modes of imagining, their categories and conceptual tools, and their ethical and political stances. As the Deleuzian and Spinozean philosopher Rosi Braidotti has pointed out time and again (and also emphasized by one of our commentators after the main chapters), our nomadic times require new, nomadic ethics (e.g. Braidotti 2006).

These are immense challenges, of course, and well beyond the remit and scope of any one discipline, let alone of a single volume. But the implicit message of this book is that given the material, sensorial, and temporal dimensions of the phenomenon, contemporary archaeology can make a significant contribution to its understanding. The chapters that follow explore the diverse intellectual, methodological, ethical, and political frameworks for an archaeology of forced and undocumented migration in the present. Matters of historical depth, theory, method, ethics, and politics, as well as heritage value and public representation, are investigated and analysed, adopting a variety of perspectives. The book contains both short reflections and more substantive treatments and case studies from around the world, from the Mexico–USA border to the Mediterranean, the Indian subcontinent, and Australia, and it utilizes a diversity of narrative formats, including several photographic essays.

Most of the chapters in this book were first published in 2016 as part of a forum in the *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* (3 [2]). As such, they maintain their urgent, debating, and exploratory character, which is essential in a field that is in the process of being constituted. In addition to the printed content, the on line-only chapters from that journal forum are also included here. Furthermore, three new and previously unpublished chapters (Chapters 17 to 19) are included. They serve here as commentaries to the volume but also as reflections on the challenges ahead and the prospects of the diverse archaeologies of undocumented migration. Their authors come from different fields, from contemporary archaeology to the historical archaeology of South America and to socio-cultural anthropology, and their insights point toward the open, cross-disciplinary, and cross-cultural nature of this endeavour.

I am grateful to all the contributors for their dedication to this project and their patience. I am also grateful to Rodney Harrison, who oversaw the publication of the initial journal issue, and supported the endeavour in many ways (including in serving as one of the commentators to this volume), and to the staff at Equinox for working tirelessly to facilitate the production of both the journal issue and this book. Any editor royalties from this book will be donated to migrant solidarity initiatives.

Reference

Braidotti, R. 2006. *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*. Cambridge: Polity.