

CONCEPTS, THEORIES, & INTRODUCTIONS

Migration, Discourse, and Water-Place

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Keywords: migration, securitisation theory, immigration, immigrants, water-place, discourse, security

<https://doi.org/10.24043/001c.126938>

Folk, Knowledge, Place

Vol. 1, Issue 2, 2024

Discussions of migration are often dominated by negative discourses, focusing on issues such as security, threats, and governance, while ignoring the function of migration in renewing and creating local cultures, knowledges, and place itself. This article uses securitisation theory to analyse the causes and operation strategies of these negative discourses. The article first discusses the role of migration research in the journal *Folk, Knowledge, Place*, then explores the securitisation of migration and the collusion between discourse and politics of migration. It advocates a bottom-up perspective, rooted in ethnography, to study the politics of scale in migration. Finally, the paper uses migration to expand the concept of place beyond terrestriality and toward an understanding of water-place.

Introduction

Human migration has a long history and is complex in nature, but in recent times, it has been increasingly perceived as a negative phenomenon, frequently described as a ‘burden’, ‘crisis’, or ‘emergency’. Current policies and discourses on migration tend to be negatively tinted, focusing on issues such as political interests and national security, but rarely considering migration from the perspective of cultural formation or human-place relationships.

It is nevertheless central to the understanding of the journal *Folk, Knowledge, Place* that knowledge is generated and refreshed through mobility and that homogeneous and fixed perspectives will always have limitations (Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2024). As a result, it is necessary to explore the phenomenon of mobility, to study the groups that are mobile, and to investigate their active roles in renewing local knowledge. The present paper takes a securitisation theory approach to considering how the political issue of migration has served to discursively narrow and harden place—even though ethnographically informed studies of migration suggest that this is a process that creates culture and expands conceptions of space through the experience of water-place.

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Migration research in *Folk, Knowledge, Place*

Already in its first year of publication, *Folk, Knowledge, Place* has attracted a variety of articles concerning migration.

Baldacchino et al. (2024) discuss why immigration continues to be a negative policy issue in the public eye, related to anti-immigrant rhetoric; inefficient government policy; and discourses of identity, patriotism, and a proto-ethnic sense of ‘the nation’. The authors use Canada and Malta as examples to illustrate migration governance strategies and outcomes that differ from those of the continental USA and Europe.

In a further paper, Gawronska Pettersson (2024) selects German, Polish, and Kashubian literary works set in Pomerania during the years surrounding World War II, focusing on dramatic events depicted from a child’s perspective. By delving into collective memories, she explores how migrant individuals and groups, living through turbulent times, shaped their perceptions and emotional connections to various places. The study also examines how migration experiences, culture, and sense of place and identity interact and influence one another during this process.

Podgorelec et al. (2024) consider the case of the Croatian island of Dugi Otok to shed light on diverse motivations for and understandings of migration, home, and away in a small community in which it is common for islanders to leave and then return—permanently, temporarily, or somehow in-between—later in life.

Marco Casagrande (2024) takes the example of Lampedusa, Italy to illustrate how the island, a transit spot for global migrants and refugees entering Europe, has become an ethnically and culturally hybrid place that is shaped *as place* by migration. Considering how this case affects the overall migration policies of Italy and Europe, he argues that the complex local, migrant, tourist, and third-sector approaches to migration open up a space for reconceptualising Lampedusa as an open and vibrant island space, holding potential for changes national and European attitudes.

Finally, Ghezal’s (2024) study of Tuvaluan migrants in Aotearoa New Zealand illustrates the role that performances of culture and place play in the preservation of culture and the construction of diaspora community.

These five articles demonstrate rich and diverse perspectives on migration. Importantly, all of them diverge from mainstream political discourses regarding this topic. Consideration of these papers serves as an important starting point for the next section’s overview of the securitisation of migration.

The securitisation of migration

Migration is today a major topic of media and political attention, often focusing on the perceived negative impacts of migration. In many parts of the world, migration policies are growing more stringent and restrictive. For example, European countries have further tightened their immigration policies, while Donald Trump won a second term as USA president with

an emphasis on immigration crackdowns, mass deportation, and further construction of a USA-Mexico border wall. Even as human migration continues and in some cases increases, national boundaries in many parts of the world seem to have become increasingly hard and distinct.

Mobility is an important aspect of the age of globalization. In early 2020, the world's fluidity and mobility was foregrounded by its sudden disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to "curfews and lockdowns, closed airports and ports, cancelled public events, and obliged the cancellation of flights and ferry trips" (Baldacchino, 2021, p. 77), impacting economic and cultural development, not to mention people's daily lives. Lockdowns and border closures due to the virus prompted broader reconsiderations of the ways in which people and place are located in a densely networked world (Grydehøj et al., 2020; Kearns, 2021) as well as prompted both innovative and traditional cultural responses that helped make sense of the abrupt break in social conventions (Hiimäe et al., 2021; Radchenko, 2022). The pandemic fostered new kinds of appreciation of movement between places.

However, when it comes to immigration, mobility is often denied and demonised in the mainstream discourse, especially in what might be termed 'Western' countries or the 'Global North'. Migrants are often regarded as dangerous outsiders, 'the Other', threats racial purity, sources of violence and instability (Chávez, 2021; Dempsey, 2020; Ehrkamp, 2019; Kaminsky, 2012; Meder, 2009). How did this approach to migration arise? What cultural and spatial positions do migrant groups hold? How does migration impact the production and renewal of local knowledge? This guest editorial for the special section on 'A world of mobility: Discourses, policies, and placemaking in global migration' explores perspectives and voices that have been ignored or obscured by the dominant political discourse and to (re)interpret migration issues from these different perspectives.

By drawing upon the theoretical framework of securitisation, developed within the so-called Copenhagen School of IR, this essay considers the collusion between the prevailing 'securitization' discourses and policymaking processes centring on migration issues. It argues that the securitisation approach was developed not primarily in order to solve the actual problems faced by developed countries but as a linguistic or discursive strategy for dealing with internal contradictions within these societies (Vaughan-Williams & Pisani, 2020). Migration is often labelled as a risk and presented as a matter requiring a response, prompting performative displays of administrative capacity by governments (Brown, 2010).

In contrast to the mainstream political discourse of migration risks to host societies, we turn to ethnographic approaches within migration studies. We believe that ethnographic reflections on the politics of scale, focused on individual experiences and examining the phenomenon of migration from a bottom-up perspective, offer alternative ways of knowing migration. By investigating the close connections between migration and water, we

furthermore argue that migration activities challenge terrestrial understandings of ‘place’, highlighting the need to consider water-places and their roles in shaping translocal cultures and knowledges.

Collusion between discourse and politics

Migration has become a prominent issue on the international security agenda. Policymakers increasingly create links between migration policy and national security (Pagogna & Sakdapolrak, 2021). Governments and mainstream media continue to exaggerate the direct or potential threats posed by migrants to national security, connecting them with international terrorism, and then vigorously advocate taking measures to deal with these threats (Nussio et al., 2019). While the securitisation of migration provides an opportunity for strong government intervention, it does not address the underlying challenges migration poses to a country.

The trap of securitising migration issues has been widely discussed (e.g., Prokkola, 2020; Scheel, 2022; Tesfahuney, 1998). Securitisation theory is associated particularly with the Copenhagen School of IR, represented by scholars such as Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, who argue that security is a linguistic or discursive phenomenon, “a self-referential practice, because it is in this practice that the issue becomes a security issue—not necessarily because a real existential threat exists but because the issue is presented as such a threat” (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 24). From their perspective, “securitization combines the radicalization of a conceptualization of ‘security’ understood as *ragione di stato* with the claim that security is a ‘speech act’” (Stritzel, 2014, p. 13). Security’s performative nature allows its easy integration into politics and its use as a tool for political manipulation. Securitisation is thus defined “as a process where, through a speech act, the securitising actor labels something as an existential threat to the referent object and argues for the use of extraordinary measures to counter the threat” (Kabata & Jacobs, 2023, p. 1224).

When such statements are accepted by an audience, the strategy of securitization is successful. In other words, security is performative: Anything that is labelled as a security issue is constructed as such. Similarly, the weaponisation of migrants suggests that by tapping into often understandable fears in communities, migration can be used as a political tool (McAuliffe & Khadria, 2020, p. 7). Therefore, even if security threats may not exist, migrants can be labelled as ‘unsafe’, prompting countermeasures and shows of administrative capability by the state. By this means, discourse and politics are complicit in jointly promoting the development of migration policies and management in the direction of unilateralism and conservatism.

Reflections on the politics of scale from an ethnographic perspective

Migration plays a significant role in shaping the world order, the globalisation process, and the development of local cultures and knowledges. However, most existing studies consider it within a top-down framework,

focusing on law, politics, economics, international relations, and global governance (Aubry et al., 2016; Gammeltoft-Hansen & Sørensen, 2012; Geiger & Pécoud, 2010; Walia, 2021). In such studies, the migrant groups themselves are often passive objects waiting for interpretation.

Discussions of migration have entered the realm of the politics of scale, which explores the power relations, competition, and interaction between actors at different scales, and how scale itself affects the allocation of resources. Scale, an important concept in human geography, is usually discussed at the conceptual level; it is “not socially or politically neutral, but embodies and expresses power relationships” (Swyngedouw, 1997, p. 140). Scale is entangled in what Massey (1999, p. 28) calls the “power geometries of time-space,” within which the imagining of globalisation unfolds. It is “presumably desirable to have some consistent connection between a hierarchy of geographical scales as produced and reproduced in the landscapes of capitalism and the conceptual abstractions through which we understand socio-spatial events and processes” (Smith, 1992, p. 74).

Under this hierarchical structure, power may be concentrated at certain levels. In order to compete for more discourse and governance power, those at higher levels of scale tend to ‘upgrade’ some issues—for example, the securitisation of migration on a national or global scale. Migration has thus been escalated into a ‘national crisis’ or even a ‘global crisis’, so as to limit and deprive local and lower-level autonomy over the issue. In this section, it is argued that migrants are not negative actors of passive migrations as portrayed in the dominant discourse but are instead active actors in the process of globalisation, playing an important role in shaping local cultures and knowledge, challenging and renegotiating established borders, and communicating the relations between the local and the global. Since the purpose of this section is to resist the erasure of individual diversity by grand narratives and to scrutinise from the bottom up the cross-influence between individuals, cultures, places, and societies in the context of migration, ethnographic research can provide an insightful reference.

Migration is an important topic in ethnographic disciplines such as folklore studies, ethnology, anthropology, and some segments of human geography. Spatially sensitive disciplines may perceive migration with respect to place, focusing on issues such as cultural transformation, migration process, immigrant community construction, belonging and identity negotiation, integration and citizenship, and the role of the state in the context of migration (Gao, 2021, p. 74). Ethnographic studies of migration are not top-down grand narratives but begin from individual cases, paying attention to ethnic diversity and personal experiences of the migrants and members of host communities, and explaining, from the bottom up, the impact of the individual on the collective, place, and the world.

Ethnographic approaches to migration may depart from the centre-periphery binary framework that dominates political discourse by taking into account migration both in so-called developed countries and developing

countries (Koh & Malecki, 2016; Mathews et al., 2017) and exploring how common and general concepts such as culture, globalisation, and transnationalism are produced locally. In this process, migrants become the basic medium of global connections. The understanding of migration through the lens of ethnography has evolved from “the unconventional factor affecting the community’s stability, or a sign of disintegrating social structures” to “the subject or organisation facilitating the redefinition of ‘place’ in the process of globalisation” (Gao, 2021, pp. 74–75; translation our own). Reflections on the politics of scale from an ethnographic perspective reveal voices that have long been suppressed and concealed by grand narratives, redirecting attention to the individual experiences of the migrants and migrant groups. They thereby piece together another picture of the world under the influence of global migration. It demonstrates the significant contribution of migrants in shaping cultural practice and knowledge production, challenging conventional boundaries, and linking local contexts with global networks.

World culture seems to be developing from singularity to pluralism. The drive for the ‘upward movement’ of migrants and the fluid nature of the world suggests that migration will continue to be a common and important phenomenon in the future. Learning to accept, understand, and get along with migrants from different cultural backgrounds is of great significance not only to maintaining national stability but also to building an open, interconnected, inclusive, and pluralistic world order.

Considering water-place through migration

Migration flows have the potential to reshape local cultures and knowledges, which can be reflected in its expansion of the concept of ‘place’. Within dominant continental cultures, place is usually associated primarily with terrestrial areas. Nevertheless, the meaning of place has never been limited to the category of land. Even dictionary definitions allow for place to refer to “a region or part of the earth’s surface” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2024). Discussion of water-place, however, is relatively lacking. Theoretical and conceptual advances concerning water-place have been made in fields such as ocean studies and island studies. This is evident in Philip Hayward’s (2012; P. R. Hayward & Joseph, 2024) concept of the ‘aquapelago’, which has been deployed to study human-nonhuman interactions involving both terrestrial and water spaces (e.g., Bremner, 2016; Dutton, 2018; Hayfield & Pristed Nielsen, 2022). May Joseph (2019) and Yaso Nadarajah (2021), two critical figures in these fields, have written evocatively about histories and experiences of transoceanic migration and how these have influenced culture and place. It is more broadly evident in the ethnographically and geographically rooted research into cross-ocean movements, flows, and exchanges (e.g., Mahajan, 2021; Peters, 2016; Sen & Joseph, 2022; Srinivas et al., 2020; Steinberg, 2022).

Maritime routes have historically played important roles in international migration (Baldacchino et al., 2024). Even today, when modes of transportation are increasingly diverse, progressively more stringent land border controls means that large numbers of migrants still choose to enter their destination countries by water. Global migration has prompted various political entities to rethink concepts such as place and boundary. The contraction of current migration policies is accompanied by the further hardening and narrowing of the meanings of place in various countries, where the attribute of division by terrestrial borders and boundaries becomes increasingly obvious.

In order to prevent migrants and refugees from entering continental and mainland territories, some countries have used their territorial waters and islands as buffer zones to temporarily accommodate offshore entry persons (Inder, 2010; Mountz, 2011; Watkins, 2017), a practice that became increasingly complex during the COVID-19 pandemic and its replications of quarantine protocols (Baldacchino, 2020). At the legislative level, waters and islands have become suspended and intervening grey areas in opposition to the continent. Migration—traversing and inhabiting these grey areas—expands the concept of place, challenging legal and policy determinations. The water-places in which offshore entry persons stay further construct and enrich the place attributes of waters, prompting us to reflect upon and resist the land-centrism underlying so many conceptualisations of place. Migrants do not simply enter fixed cultures and places; their presences and agencies form and transform cultures and places (Nimführ & Otto, 2020).

In the Chinese context, migration is often closely related to water-place. For example, terms such as *liu yang* 留洋 (to study abroad; literally, staying in the ocean or on the other side of the ocean) and *hai gui* 海归 (overseas returnee; literally, those returning from the sea) collectively refer to the behaviour of crossing the ocean during the migration process. Although in most cases today, the destination for migration is a continent, the water-place represented by the ocean surface is not omitted in this context but is instead highlighted in pragmatics.

The Dan 疍民 people, who live on boats in inland river and offshore areas of China, are representative figures whose fluid lifestyle has expanded the land-cantered concept of place. ‘Dan’ refers to a special group of boat people whose boats “often anchored in lines along the rivers or coasts, with a larger part of the clusters being stationary, forming a unique community and island-like space on water, close to, yet separate from, the land” creates the scene of a floating town (Lin & Su, 2024, p. 240). Water serves here as more than just a connection between lands; it is also a space that can generate community, culture, and a sense of home. Although Dan are not migrants and very much possess settled communities on and with the water, it is telling that continental Chinese culture has traditionally treated Dan as outsiders and unsettled people, denying the potential for homes in water-place (Grydehøj &

Ou, 2017; Lin & Su, 2024). It is valuable to undertake more water-sensitive explorations of place and place-based meaning, to reorient and de-terrestrialise our understandings of how culture and knowledge are created through place (Ou et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Studies of migration can help us better understand the ways in which culture and place are formed and knowledge is created. Migration exemplifies the fluidity of the world and the complexities of globalisation, but it also increasingly marks out the ambiguity of the water within the concept of place. This is helpful for expanding established boundaries and borders that seek to contain and control culture physical space within securitised discourses. Renewed attention to ethnographies of migration can help challenge problematic discourses and direct our attention to water-place.

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Funding

This work was supported by the Guangdong Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Science under Grant No. GD24LN11 and the National Social Science Fund of China under Grant No. 21&ZD274 and 23&ZD304.

Submitted: November 01, 2024 CST. Accepted: December 05, 2024 CST. Published: December 31, 2024 CST.



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