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Sandra King-Savic

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Paper Trails: Migrants, Documents, and Legal Insecurity

Sandra King-Savic

BOOK REVIEW

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Paper Trails: Migrants, Documents, and Legal Insecurity (2020) is an edited volume that traces how migrants conceptualize borders and the process of bordering by way of legal inscription practices within states, specifically high-income, traditionally migrant-receiving countries located in the Global North. Seeing documentation as a prism for understanding how migrants comply, co-operate, interact, and resist governmental authorities, the authors demonstrate the shifting power dynamics between states and migrants by way of eight contributions, an introduction by Sarah B. Horton, and a conclusion by Josiah Heyman.

The chapters are subdivided into three sections. The first conceptualizes how legal documentation, or lack thereof, influences perceptions of time and space among migrants. The second section traces hyperdocumentation practices and the subsequent production of migrant categories as racial-

ized and/or undesirable. Migrant agency, and the right to exercise mobility despite the state-centered administrative monopolies that govern movement, is central in the volume's third section.

The authors discuss inscription processes from a *longue durée* perspective, the inception of documentation procedures, as well as migration law and practice. Nandita Sharma, for instance, examines how the end of slave labour led to the establishment of documentary practices among imperial subjects during the nineteenth century in Chapter 1. Her contribution is especially pertinent in relation to the production of migrant categories that rendered labour migrants, those without permanent residency status, as replaceable and unequal, in terms of accessing social rights and public services. Sharma further illustrates the triad legacy of forced labour, the regulation of mobility, and the categorization of people into un/desirable

CONTACT

^a  sandra.king-savic@unisg.ch
University of St. Gallen, Switzerland

migrants. Recruiting labour migrants from British India was considered indispensable to (re)supply the slave labour force. And yet, labour migrants from the subcontinent were “negatively racialized” as unassimilable (44) and thus unwanted.

Sharma’s research on the need for labour migrants and simultaneous inclination to regulate and constrict movement among un/desirable migrants is fruitful in thinking through other cases in which labour-intensive industries relied on labour migrants, while governing authorities, politicians, and/or society resisted the incorporation of migrants into the fabric of national host societies. For example, the regulatory Rotationsmodell in post-Second World War Switzerland or Germany serves as a case in point here. While Turkish and Yugoslav labour migrants did not travel to Switzerland and Germany as (post-)imperial subjects, they were subject to inequality in terms of unequal access to citizenship and access to rights, especially when compared to the intra-European Union migration regime. Time and temporality, as identified by Bridget Anderson in Chapter 2, is thus a critical factor in this equation. Framed in Anderson’s words: “We can start to connect the control of the movement and labour relations of contemporary migrants ... with the movement and labour relations of the labouring poor of the past” (67).

Authors of the volume highlight the nexus between the act of drafting legislature, cultural/temporal proclivities, and how ordinary people enact the state’s roles in compliance with the law. In Chapter 6, Cecilia Menjivar illustrates the extent to which hyper-documentary practices shape everyday experiences of migrants in Phoenix, Arizona. Routine activities, including, for example, opening bank accounts, renting property, or purchasing goods with a credit card, require

documentation, which renders salespeople, bank tellers, and realtors appendices within the executive power of the state. As a result, the law, as one learns from the chapters by way of informants, does not reflect objective criteria. Instead, as illustrated by Susan Bibler Coutin in Chapter 4, legislation appears as a form of “legal craft.”

With the burgeoning of bureaucratic inscription practices, belonging to a state is tied to the papers one carries. As such, the reader learns that interviewees live in a hyperaware state of the law. Menjivar illuminates this hyperawareness poignantly by way of quoting Adriana, a Latina immigrant interlocutor: “I used to be able to show without embarrassment my Mexican documents at the bank, at a store, anywhere. And now? If I do that, people immediately think I’m undocumented. Why? Because I’m Mexican” (166). This includes individuals who reside in the state on a temporary protected status visa, or else on a permanent/legal basis.

Yet migrants also resist classification. Juan Thomas Ordóñez identifies, in Chapter 8, how migrants not only reject bureaucratic taxonomies but also make use of their ethnicity to move “unnoticed” across borders. Travelling as musicians and/or merchants from Ecuador and Colombia to places such as Russia, Georgia, or Italy, interviewees in Chapter 8 disclose that, for instance, “police, immigration officers, and even bank tellers really do not check” the identity of “indigenous persons” (223). As such, migrants move within networks to trade identity documents that enable and facilitate mobility. This is a very welcoming perspective as one learns that migrants utilize their racialization and/or ethnicization to navigate travel across international borders, as opposed to merely submitting to hyper-documentation practices.

Overall, the longitudinal analysis imparts on the reader how documentary practices

changed over time, and how migrants co-operate and resist the ways in which hyper-documentation shapes one's sense of belonging. Finally, the synthesis prefacing each of the three sections provides the audience with critical insight about how the eight chapters speak to each other. **Paper Trails** is an important contribution for students and researchers in migration studies, as well as practitioners in the field.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandra King-Savic is a Postdoc and Lecturer on Migration and Cultural Studies at the University of St. Gallen

in Switzerland. She can be reached at sandra.king-savic@unisg.ch.

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