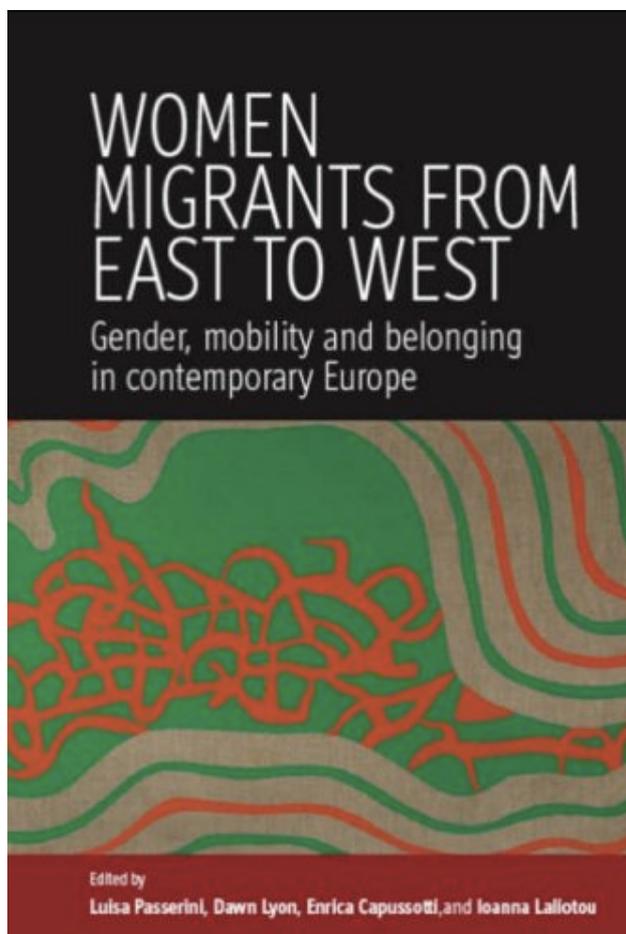


BOOK REVIEW

*Women Migrants
from East to West.
Gender, Mobility and
Belonging in
Contemporary Europe*
*Laura Passerini, Dawn Lyon,
Erica Capussotti and Ioanna
Laliotou*

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The collapse of the Soviet Union and the new economic system of capitalism not only reformed the geographical map of Europe and lead to political, financial and social changes but also caused an unstoppable migration flow from East to West that has been only enhanced by the Schengen Agreement and the idea of a united Europe. Now, after more than twenty years of the breakup of the Soviet Union, a multi-ethnic society is taking over national borders and the topic of migration and cross-border identities has been the focus of new theoretical approaches and political discussions.

The investigation of the phenomenon of migration by cultural studies has resulted in several monographs written on the situation of Eastern migrants and diasporas, discussing the concept of transnational activity, cross-border labour mobility and cosmopolitanism as well as analysing new forms of subjectivity.¹ Insofar as *Woman Migrants from East to West* continues the investigation on trans-cultural subjectivities, Laura Passerini, Dawn Lyon, Erica Capussotti and Ioanna Laliotou's work fits in with the contemporary debate on migrant policies, but goes a step further when focusing exclusively on women migrants and the feminisation of migration. By giving an insight into the perspectives of both migrant and native women, this collection positions the debate of Eastern migrants into a wider gender/subjectivity/Europe context and gives a two-sided explanation of the phenomenon of mobility, while – dealing with two diverse trajectories of communism – it also modifies the very notion of migrant and migratory identity. Accordingly, the anthology focuses on three Western countries – the Netherlands, Italy and Denmark – and explores the situation of Bulgarian and Hungarian female migrants, dealing both with refugees from the former communist satellite states and migrants from post-communist times who settled down in these countries.

In order “to identify new forms of subjectivity that are part of the contemporary history of Europe, and to explore how the movement of people across Europe is changing the cultural and social landscape with implications for how we think about what Europe means” (1), the editors decided to divide the book into three main parts, consisting of thirteen studies and three sets of narrations ('intermezzi') followed by two appendices of the interviewees' biography. The structure of the collection is conducive to a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of Eastern migration, since it offers a way of identification with women migrants, their personal

¹ See Fonseca (2004); Andrew (2003), Ziemer and Roberts (2012).

narratives and memories, while forwarding an innovative methodological background of subjective histories.

In the first chapter (23-45), Rosi Braidotti draws out a number of theoretical connections between different elements and themes of the book, thus analysing the interrelations between subject positions, identities and citizenship. Doing so, Braidotti emphasises “the progressive potential of the EU” (23) and calls for the epistemological revision of identity. Her meta-methodological approach relies on materialist cartographic practice in order to map out interactions among subjects and focuses on the cluster of gender/subjectivity/Europe. Braidotti’s argument is about the “becoming minor of Europe, in the sense of post-nationalist European space” (25) and rests on a historio-political argument. According to the political one, the expansion of European boundaries complies with the rebirth of micro-nationalist borders in Europe and, despite the resolution of uniting nations, a new, post-nationalist identity is being born that coexists with the return of racism and xenophobia and causes fragmentation and regionalism in the area. Braidotti argues that “the European Union (...) means a site of possible political resistance against nationalism, xenophobia and racism” (26) while new, alternative, trans-cultural subjectivities have appeared and social categories like marginals, migrants and minorities have emerged. As a feminist, post-Eurocentric thinker, the author claims that this transformation not only influences the margins but dislocates the position of the former centre as well, thus a new kind of subjectivity, namely “transit identity-formations” (34) and social relations are dawning. In order to understand these ‘hybrid’, ‘nomad’ and ‘cyborg’- positions, the old discourse on gender and Europe must be replaced by “a post-nationalist vision of European subjectivity based on the critique of Eurocentrism and (...) the multiple visions of the subject-as-process which stem from the rejection of feminine essentialism within feminism” (31). Accordingly, the writer argues for the need to rethink whiteness and to re-locate the nomadic European identity within the frame of the European Union, since, as she states, the post-nationalist foundation of European citizenship lies in nomadic European subjects.

In the second chapter (45-68), Ioanna Laliotou investigates conceptualisations of migrant subjectivity and analyses transnational migration within the framework of mobility that encompasses physical, cultural, political, subjective and conceptual forms of movement. By evoking the interviewees’ vision of mobility, Laliotou scrutinises the subject’s intention of moving and highlights the importance of the key elements of desire and will that motivate women to leave their home country. A crucial point is that, as Laliotou remarks, the interviewees do not consider their

migration as a life left behind and, therefore, “the narration of migration does not borrow elements of rhetoric of loss and of death that we find in the study of other cases of migrant cultures” (54).

After looking into state feminism as a tool of political transition and “the promoter of Western values of liberal democracy and capitalist re-organization of society” (56), Laliotou calls for new concepts of analysis of European identity. She argues that queer diaspora studies might help with re-theorising the connection between subjectivity and migration. In addition, she suggests the re-conceptualisation of a political space marked by a mobility that she calls ‘curved space’ (58). The curved political space accentuates the de-territorialised relation between East and West, being re-determined by physical and subjective, cultural movements of actors and affective mobility of course.

Similar to Laliotou and Braidotti, Hanne Petersen, in the book’s third chapter (68-84), emphasises the importance of subjectivity as a core concept. As she pinpoints, women interviewees and their individual stories are sources of oral history and help to orientate the person’s legal situation in European member states. When examining the history of different rights, Petersen comes to a provocative, but engaging conclusion when she predicts the continuation of socio-legal diversity and states that “the actual legal position of the millions of individuals who feel they belong to Europe and the European Union will most likely not become equal in any near future” (75).

In chapter four (95-111), Nadejda Alexandrova and Dawn Lyon analyse women migrants’ sense of belonging to home and recall their memories of border crossing, and the first impression of the host country. Through these intimate, personal confessions and narratives of refugees of communist systems and post-1989 migrants, one gets a close insight into economic, political, and cultural changes and of touching personal struggles.

Miglena Nikolchina, in chapter five (111-122), edges along the personal narratives and the question of home, invoking the Bulgarian word ‘*obshtuvane*’ (‘spontaneous togetherness’) to examine the native society’s attitude to communicative capacities. Nikolchina stresses the cultural and ethnic barriers between migrants and local citizens and highlights the spontaneity of Eastern Europeans that are, as the interviewees argue, strongly opposed to the values that the West represents. However, diversity in social boundaries and behaviour are not the only aspects of everyday life that might be unusual for Eastern residents. Despite their high qualification, migrants from the post-communist bloc are often exploited as objects of low-paid jobs and cheap labour, a subject that Enrica Capussotti, Ioanna

Laliotou and Dawn Lyon scrutinise in chapter six (122-138). The authors examine the discrimination against Eastern European migrants and look into their professional identities, social relations and recognition in the host country.

The third part of the book deals with processes of identification: Esther Vonk (chapter nine, 177-195) discusses the integration policy in the Netherlands and by examining the host country's discourse of resistance, draws attention to the importance of feminist analysis in this debate. In addition, she points out the necessity of making alliances within women's movements. In her essay, Vonk distinguishes three discursive strategies deduced from the interviews: the first category ('the one exception') is built on the existing stereotypes about immigrants and underlines the singularity of Eastern ones in correlation to other migrants in the country. The second discursive strategy, the 'denial of dominant images', refers to the representations of migrants in the media, emphasising the represented person's otherness, while the third category ('political and historical knowledge and consciousness') applies to the "consciousness of the different positions that migrant women have in Dutch society which are not caused by cultural differences, but precisely by the system that qualifies them as migrant, as different" (192).

In the next two chapters (10; 195-212 and 11; 212-228), Enrica Capussotti and Dawn Lyon examine the migrants' social context in the host country and analyse the representation of Eastern European migrants among Italian and Dutch women, while accentuating their lack of knowledge about post-communist countries. Capussotti's essay leads to a fascinating conclusion whereby Italians identify Eastern women with their historical period and place them in their own past. As the interviewees argue, the poverty of Eastern countries, women's approach to men and the authoritarian relationship between generations bridge Italy's past and the very present of Eastern European migrants.

The last chapter of the book (12; 228-243) discusses matrimonial law and immigration from a judicial point of view and examines Europe's most radical legal systems. Inger Marie Conradsen and Anette Kronborg give an insight into Danish regulations and re-draft the ideas about marriage by concluding that the Danish legal system is rather about controlling national borders than uniting people: "marriage is no longer seen as the formal frame of family life but (...) it has been differentiated into sub-categories such as pro-form marriage, forced marriage and love marriage putting the legal protection of women and love in a new context" (239).

The closing remarks of Luisa Passerini dwell on the model of constellation, "the cluster of three concepts: gender, subjectivity and Europe" (253), whose elements are in continuous change. Because of constant transformations, Passerini rejects the

notion of identity and proposes instead “identification, belonging and allegiance” (265), since, as she argues, these notions contribute to the idea of Europeanness whereby “women (...) can be seen as contributing to the construction of feelings rather than seen as negotiating objectified identities” (265). In order to build up a new subject position, as Passerini – and the collection – concludes, one should single out the importance of the experience of inter-subjective change, in the sense that “one cannot feel European unless she has encountered the Eastern and Central dimensions of Europe” (267).

By working with multiple personal voices and histories, *Women Migrants from East to West* pursues a comparative analysis of old and new practices of mobility, reflecting a theoretical reorientation of the field by giving prominence to the problematical concepts of migration. For instance, the interviewees depict diverse motivations and forms of migration, encouraged by personal driving forces and/or economic reasons, thus encouraging us to re-think the universalised notion of migration and re-work the stereotypes connected to Eastern European female migratory movements.

Within its multidisciplinary context, the book stresses the importance of Eastern positionality and feminist approaches in the investigations of gender relations and subjectivity that provide a different portrayal of Eastern migrancy and the phenomenon’s connection to native citizens. In this manner, the anthology fulfils its aim of exploring migration and its connection to new forms of subjectivity; and by creating an affective dimension, it introduces the personal struggles of Eastern women migrants. In addition, the study draws attention to the crucial role of oral history and subjective narratives in research practices.

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