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INTRODUCTION

Special Issue Introduction: Race and Migration

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Abstract

This Special Issue (SI) explores the enduring relationship between race and migration, arguing that race remains a central—yet often underexamined—analytical category in migration studies. Although overtly racialized migration policies have declined since the mid-20th century, racial dynamics continue to shape mobility regimes, access to rights, and perceptions of migrants across global contexts. This SI highlights how contemporary migration is structured by a "global mobility divide," where racial hierarchies influence who can move, how they move, and how they are received. With interdisciplinary contributions, the SI examines several migration experiences, including forced displacement and labor migration across diverse geographical contexts; and methodologies, from participatory research to media analysis, uncovering how racialization operates at interpersonal, institutional, and structural levels. Collectively, the contributions challenge fragmented approaches within migration studies and call for a more integrated framework that centers race, advancing scholarship by demonstrating how racial politics shape migrants' lived experiences.

Keywords: Ethnicity; migration; race; refugeehood; special issue

Race has historically been a key factor in policy decisions regarding migration. From the very creation of the first mechanisms to regulate transborder movement to the overt prohibition of Black and Asian people across the Americas at the end of the 19th and 20th centuries and beyond, race has been a central feature in policy decisions (Cintra et al. 2022; Mongia et al. 2018; Takai et al. 2009). Nonetheless, ever since the end of the two World Wars, overt racialized policies have slowly disappeared from most international and domestic normative frameworks, particularly after the internationalization of a human rights grammar. Such overt racial neutrality, however, has not translated to a "post-racial" reality. In fact, increasingly, scholars such as Bonilla-Silva (2014), Crenshaw (1991), and Delgado and Stefancic (2023) demonstrate how race persists as a sociopolitical category that explains continuous socioeconomic inequalities, interpersonal violence, and

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widespread discrimination and stigmatization, all of which impact access to basic human rights and inform corresponding racialized identities.

Mobilities, particularly transborder displacement, remain an important site from which to understand the contextual social significance of racial identities, their plastic and changeable nature, and the effects of racialized and racializing policies at various governance levels (local, national, regional, international). Not only are movements a result of racial inequalities, but the way people move is also determined by a racialized "global mobility divide" (Cintra and Martuscelli, 2025; Mau et al. 2015). Race influences how migrants are welcomed as more or less desirable newcomers in a new national community, and the kinds of barriers they will face in accessing rights as a result. As Fine (2016, 130) asserts, migration control has "become a version of racial segregation on an international scale," compounded by a complex regime of "racial borders" (Achiume et al. 2021).

This Special Issue (SI) dialogues with these realities. Whilst race is an important analytical category for understanding different forms of migration and mobilities, the literature on the topic remains "niche" and scattered across the various categories of "migration studies," which do not fully communicate with one another, ranging from labor to forced migration. Indeed, race remains largely peripheral and not a central analytical feature in understanding migration. The SI on Race and Migration envisaged the engagement across the various areas of migration studies, racial studies, and citizenship studies, in order to highlight the racial politics that cut across these areas and the lives and rights of those on the move, and further encourage scholars to engage with race as a key sociopolitical category that informs all migration and migrants' experiences.

To do so, this SI makes an important contribution to the themes of race and migration. It covers a wide range of articles that consider different methodologies, migration categories, and destinations. Studies adopt different methods ranging from participatory methods on race and displacement (Little et al) to media analysis to understand how racialized migration discourses are constructed and reproduced (Diab; Ogude-Chambert). Concerning destinations, articles include South-North movements (Prieto Flores; Ott et al.; Yasin et al.; Jung et al.; Orellana; Diab; ElBahlawan and Mohamed; Ogude-Chambert; Shriyan); South-South movements (Çevik); and movements from the South *through* Southeastern European countries (such as Serbia) (Bracic). The SI also focuses on maritime migration (Prieto-Flores; Ogude-Chambert); migrant children and children of migrants (Little et al); forced return (Shriyan); refugees (Diab; Bracic; Çevik); labor migrants and migrant entrepreneurs (Shriyan; Yasin et al); integration (Ott et al; Jung et al); migrant deaths (Prieto Flores; Ogude-Chambert); and migrant resistance and political participation (Ott et al; Orellana); as well as time and temporalities (Ogude-Chambert; Shriyan). It equally problematizes different conceptions of race and ethnicity, such as in-group ethnic differences (Orellana; ElBahlawan and Mohamed; Yasin et al); external racial discrimination (Çevik; Bracic); Blackness (Ogude-Chambert); Anti-Asian racism (Little et al); Whiteness (Diab); and anti-Muslim racism (Diab; ElBahlawan and Mohamed; Ott et al).

Specifically, the SI starts with the article by **Oscar Prieto-Flores**. The article focuses on maritime migrant deaths in the Mediterranean and the Spanish response to rescue missions. Using the conceptual and analytical framework of Achille

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Mbembe's necropolitics, the author examines how migrant deaths along the Spanish southern border have increased since 2017, not as a result of "smuggling," but because of more restrictive border controls by the European Union following its agreements with Morocco in 2018. Prieto-Flores thus highlights the fatal consequence of externalization of the European borders—that the author identifies a technological iron curtain—and the *color* of the concurrent deaths it has caused. Notably, Prieto-Flores demonstrates how the increase in these racialized deaths happens regardless of the political party in power, considering that the establishment and consolidation of militarized oversight of maritime rescue operations has not been lifted, despite changes in government.

Relatedly, **Helidah Ogude-Chambert** takes a poignant onto-epistemological approach to the produced social and political meanings of the "migrant" category in the United Kingdom (UK) through the lens of affect theory. As the author found, the emotions used to describe migrants in the UK—panic, resentment, disgust—are not just cultural expressions "but structuring forces embedded in histories of governance." By focusing on media accounts of migrants crossing—and dying in the English Channel, the author discusses how these deaths—of overwhelmingly men from Africa and the Middle East—are seldom confronted; they are rather normalized, or, as she asserts, "made normative," as part of an overarching structure that makes some people *death-worthy*. Her conceptualization of Blackness as both a political and an epistemological tool cuts across her analysis, framing it as a category created to separate the human from the non-human subject.

If Ogude-Chambert's article examined the UK's media portrayal of migrants crossing the English Channel, **Jasmin Lilian Diab's** contribution focuses more broadly on Western media and political narratives, particularly their portrayal of Ukrainian refugees compared with those from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The author's questions revolve around (1) whether political agendas influence media narratives, and vice versa; (2) differences in media and political approaches to Ukrainian and MENA refugees; and (3) their racial undertone. Importantly, Diab analyses Western views of victimhood and their social, legal, and political consequences, which are rooted in whiteness. By looking specifically at media and political responses to Ukrainians in direct opposition to MENA refugees, the author demonstrates how the former are seen as deserving victims, while the latter face negative stereotypes, making evident that "racial considerations heavily influence the perception of who is deemed worthy of refuge and support." Paradoxically, whilst the author contends that constructions of refugeehood in Europe have thus far been built as the essential (racialized) other, and therefore as a threat, Ukrainians challenge this view and soften the underlying symbolic system of meanings related to the idea of the "typical refugee."

Ana Bracic's piece directly connects to the above article by asking about one's limits in altruistic actions and empathetic responses toward those in a situation of refugeehood. By focusing on the case of Serbia, Bracic asks whether people are more or less inclined to help strangers if they have experienced similar hardships themselves. The case of Serbia is particularly interesting, she argues, because of people's memory of wartime violence and displacement. However, she demonstrates how this is the only similarity displaced ethnic Serbs have with the majority of refugees traveling along the Balkan route at the time of her study, i.e., Syrians. Her

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participants were separated into two groups: one was reminded of their experience of forced displacement, and the other of the meanings of their Serbian ethnic identity. Impressively, the author found that participants who were reminded of their displacement were less generous toward displaced Syrians than those primed about their ethnic identity, which revolved around social understandings of Serbian altruism.

While social and political perceptions of national Serbian identity pointed to greater solidarity with Syrian refugees, **Haci Çevik** demonstrates that Turkish people's sense of Turkishness was one of the main causes of discrimination against Syrian refugees. Çevik's work is one of the few in the SI that has a strong focus on the historical aspect of the construction of national identities and their continuities. In the case of Turkish identity, the author explains how it was established in contrast to the created "Others," "perpetuating racial superiority under the guise of national unity." And this was particularly the case with Arab populations, historically vilified in Turkish national memory, fuelling a nationalistic ideology with internalized Orientalist views that unfold systemic roots of the everyday discrimination suffered by Syrians today. Initial "open door policies" and government-sponsored solidarity campaigns rooted in common identities between Turkish people and Syrians, such as religion, did not last long. Ongoing daily discrimination, compounded by increasingly stricter political views on migration, only strengthened the historical roots of anti-Arab discrimination and solidified the experience of Syrian refugees in the country.

Whilst Çevik focuses on the national population's responses to newcomers, **Seyoung Jung, Allison Harell, Karen Nielsen Breidahl, and Laura Stephenson** compare the experiences of white and non-white non-citizens with those of white and non-white third-generation citizens in their interactions with the Canadian state. The added element of racial background and citizenship status adds a layer of complexity and muddies simplistic analysis about structural and institutional racism, and their different lived experiences and perceptions across the various civic statuses. The article also privileges observing interactions with what they frame as "government in action," which gives abstract political concepts practical meaning and shows how different individuals encounter the state in these situations and the quality of these encounters. Among the respondents in this study, the authors found an impressive result. Whilst white participants had similar encounters regardless of their citizenship status, non-white and non-citizen participants varied significantly from non-white third-generation citizens. In the case of the former, they were most likely to evaluate their contact as fast and helpful; as for the latter, there was a higher rate of documented experiences of worse treatment. The data points to the need for a more complex approach to racialized experiences with the state, which also accounts for the lens of citizenship.

Direct experiences with the state can be daunting, but much more so in the case of racialized and undocumented migrants. This is the analysis brought forward by **Julio Orellana**, which looks at the political-economic forces that shape forced international migration from Guatemala to the United States; the differences in drivers of migration and settlement experiences between indigenous and non-indigenous Guatemalan migrants; and how political groups are formed by Guatemalan diaspora based on their ethnic and racial differences. The author

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demonstrates how the irregular status of most migrants requires an intermediary party to broker their interests with the US state. This is also due to linguistic needs, particularly among indigenous Guatemalans who do not speak Spanish. By focusing on in-group racial and ethnic differences, the author de-homogenizes the displacement and settlement experience and demonstrates the need for nuanced responses and analysis of complex issues. In doing so, the author also muddies the concepts of "economic" and "forced" migration and demonstrates how drivers of movement are interconnected with migrants' experiences, which are informed by their ethnic and racial identities, opening avenues for broader discussions and bridging many areas of migration studies.

Similarly, experiences of discrimination and anti-Muslim racism in Germany impact the experiences in educational institutions of migrants from the SWANA (Southwest Asia and North Africa) region. This is what **Priscilla Krachum Ott, Jaël In't Veld, Maja Schachner, Linda Juang,** and **Ursula Moffitt** uncover in their study. Notably, the authors focus on experiences of discrimination by examining how different migrants responded to, resisted, or "accommodated" it. In situations where their status is still in limbo via asylum applications, the resistance to oppression becomes harder. However, these migrants do not passively accept experiences of discrimination but have to find ways to resist, given their limited or restricted sense of agency, and to strike a balance between what was most useful in specific contexts. Interestingly, the authors find that class differences affect their agency and produce in-group disparities that privilege those with higher financial status. As such, their study highlights the interconnections between race and class and the (in)ability to resist institutional discrimination.

Different groups face discrimination in educational environments and other settings. **Sabine Little, Yue Zhou, Sophie Heathcote, Cristal Lee, and Haochen Shi**, in their article co-authored by two adult academics and three young researchers aged 11 to 16, collectively reflect on experiences of racism and migration, especially anti-Asian racism, among multilingual children with Chinese heritage and migration backgrounds. While the article problematizes the invisibility of Anti-Asian racism in racial studies rather than racism studies, the methodological paper advocates co-construction and collective reflection with children with co-authorship as a way to approach contested realities. Their work makes an important contribution by taking participatory methodologies seriously, recognizing children as research co-constructors and key actors in collectively reflecting on complex emotions and experiences linked to racism and identity.

While Sabine et al. call attention to the invisibility of anti-Asian racism, **Eslam ElBahlawan and Mawa Mohamed** bring religion (another invisibilized issue) into the discussion of Egyptian ethnicity by analyzing the everyday experiences of the Egyptian minority in Milan, Italy. While the Italian state guarantees them the freedom of religion, the authors using urban analysis and interviews with Egyptians show how both Muslims and Coptic Orthodox Christians face barriers due to the lack of formal recognition of their religious affiliations in Milan, which impacts their lack of funding and support, as well as recognized places to exercise their religion. Religion is not only important as a spiritual anchor for these migrants, but it is also a key marker of their ethnic identity. The authors conclude that this religious exclusion leads to ethnic marginalization, which is an important dimension to

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reflect on race, ethnicity, migration, and discrimination in the everyday lives of people.

Naveed Yasin, Muhibul Haq, Khalid Hafeez, and Nadia Zahoor also discuss ethnic origins to understand how immigrant communities have different access to financial resources and support across destination countries. The authors show how first-generation Punjabi-Pakistani immigrant entrepreneurs in the precious metals industries in Manchester (UK) and Dubai (UAE) access financial capital through their ethnic resources. By showing that Khandani status involves prestige, credibility, legitimacy, and access to financial capital, whereas Biraderi status is based on communal networks, the authors demonstrate how ethnic differences affect immigrant entrepreneurs' prospects differently, even among people of the same nationality and region. Their contribution to unpacking ethnic discrimination helps us think about race and migration beyond the fixed category of nationality.

Reflecting on race, ethnicity and migration in the different dimensions of the labor market is necessary to understand the dynamics of capitalism in several different countries. While Yasin et al. bring the perspective of immigrant entrepreneurs from different ethnic backgrounds, **Diksha Shriyan** analyses the case of Thai migrant workers who work seasonally on berry farms in Sweden. Adopting racialization theory, the author reflects on Thai workers' role "against the backdrop of enforcing return, fragmented labour management, upward capital concentration and downward labour outsourcing." The article contributes to seeing how time and racialized ideas of "ideal workers" create a situation of perpetual temporariness and vulnerability experienced by these workers, where their deportability is an intrinsic part of the cycle of labor migration regimes.

These SI articles make innovative and important contributions to the discussion of race, ethnicity, and migration, moving beyond traditional perspectives on mobility and nationality. The authors do so by using different methods (case studies, interviews, participatory methods, theoretical reflections, media analysis) and bringing perspectives from different countries and migration movements, as well as new elements such as religion and ethnic origins, to problematize identity. Future studies can be inspired by these contributions to continue reflecting on the complex relations among race, ethnicity, and migration.

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