

# Book Review

*A Shipload of Women's Memories. Narratives across Borders.* By Ann-Dorte Christensen and Marit Benthe Norheim. Aalborg: Aalborg University Press, 2017. 159 pages. ISBN 978 87 712 600 6.

The inspiration for *A Shipload of Women's Memories. Narratives across Borders* was 'Life-boats', an art project by Marit Benthe Norheim consisting of three sailing sculptures symbolizing stages in women's lives. This engaging and beautifully produced book emerged from a collaboration between the artist and Ann-Dorte Christensen, a sociologist who is well-known for her work on gender, migration and biographical research. The book focusses primarily on the third boat that was devoted to the memories of ageing women. This boat, which has the form of a woman floating on her stomach, carries 19 sculptured figureheads, symbols of protection against danger, that were inspired by the real life stories of women, all over the age of 70. The women come from 27 different countries from across the globe and differ in terms of class, ethnicity and religious background. However, all of them have had experiences of moving across national borders and each has had to build a new life for herself and her family in a new place. Some were elite women who left home for love or adventure, while others were working class women with little education looking for a better life. Still others were refugees forced to flee their homeland because of war or conflict. Each woman belonged to a generation whose voices have seldom been heard and yet they have all experienced some of the most significant and dramatic events of the 20th century.

The book opens with an accessible sociological introduction by Christensen in which she sets out the main themes: the absence of elderly women's voices in narratives on displacement and war; the meanings of belonging with respect to routes and roots as well as inclusion and exclusion; the importance of doing biographical analysis in order to retrieve memories that are missing from academic debates about migration and its effects on women's lives; and the significance of figureheads as feminine symbols of protection. Christensen engagingly describes the ins and outs of this unique collaboration and provides a convincing case for the benefits of combining academic research and art production. Her introduction provides a lens for understanding the biographical stories that are the heart of the book. These stories provide portraits of the interviewed women and are interspersed with photographs, sketches, and the artist's reflections on how she transformed their narratives into sculptural figureheads. Following a conclusion in which Christensen pulls together the collective voice of the project Norheim takes over with a riveting description of the Life-boats project, replete with photographs of the process of constructing the boats and making the figureheads as well as an account of some of the voyages which took place in 2015 and 2016.

This book has much to recommend it.

First, the stories show how globalization affects the lives of ordinary women and how they negotiate the hardships of mobility. Their lives are full of difficulties and obstacles. Many moved because their lives were disrupted by war (from World War II to conflicts in Syria,

Somalia, Vietnam, Bosnia and more). One woman described sending her 13 children by boat out of Vietnam during the war and only being able to reunite with them many years later when she and her husband managed to escape to Denmark. Another woman from a Muslim community in Bosnia-Herzegovina recounted the horrors of ethnic cleansing, massacres and evacuation and of escaping with her children, all of whom disappeared to different parts of the globe. Still another told about emigrating from Denmark to South Africa as a child and how torn she felt living as a white woman under Apartheid. These are just a few examples of the stories which span different wars, different countries, and different trajectories. While the stories are full of adversity and suffering, at the same time they inspire hope because they illustrate the resourcefulness and resilience of ordinary women trying to build sustainable lives for themselves and their families. While much contemporary research on migration and displacement focusses on the problems encountered by people on the move, the overall message of this book is more positive. The book shows how traveling across borders can also be enriching as long as connections are maintained with families and cultures. More generally, the stories of the interviewed women indicate how mobility can promote an understanding of differences and help develop tolerance within cultures, more generally.

Second, the book offers important insights into the—by now—over-theorized subject of belonging. The narratives show that the affective experience of belonging is not attached to a particular place, culture or religion. The women portrayed in this book seemed remarkably capable of putting down roots in different places without losing their sense of who they are and from where they have come. Several of the women indicated that they often felt that they *both* belonged *and* were a stranger and yet they seemed to have little difficulty managing these seemingly contradictory identities in their everyday lives. ‘Roots’ and ‘routes’ are not incommensurable, but rather are inextricably linked in women’s biographical narratives. Or, as Christensen notes, citing the author Gertrud Stein: ‘What good are roots if you can’t take them with you?’ (p. 15). Some of the women forgot their roots, only to return to them as a solace in later life, while others demonstrated that new roots can be planted throughout life, even while moving from place to place. This book is a good illustration of what contemporary social theory on mobility might gain from a biographical perspective. We clearly need theoretical frameworks that attend to the ways migrants, often with great creativity, manage the apparent contradictions of belonging and not belonging, while finding ways to live viable lives ‘in-between’ cultures.

And, finally, the addition of Norheim’s reflections as an artist on the women’s stories provides insight into the emotional dimension of belonging in ways that a straightforward sociological analysis cannot. She used her impressions of the interviewed women to create a figurehead that would capture the essence of their life story (‘In meeting with Houneih Aziz, I see the television as her window to the world . . . I have carved a piece that is missing—which the television fills out in relations to her country and her world’, p. 93). She went beyond the chronological narrative of what happened and what happened next by intuitively imagining what it might feel like to be this particular person. The book is, therefore, an example of how the use of imagination, empathy, and creativity necessary for producing an artwork that can enhance the narrative approach favored by biographical researchers.

*A Shipload of Women's Memories. Narratives across Borders* is a 'must-read' for anyone interested in migration, mobility and displacement; gender and its intersections of age, class, ethnicity, and national belonging; and life-stories as methodology. It offers a memorable journey into the lives of some extraordinary women. And, last but not least, it will leave readers longing to see the Life-boats for themselves, as they continue on their voyages throughout Europe.

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