

Afterword: Rooted in Motion

Reimagining Migration through Human–Plant Intimacies

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Abstract

This commentary engages with the theoretical implications of human–plant intimacies for migration and mobility studies. Departing from anthropocentric paradigms, it draws on the special issue's ethnographic accounts to foreground the relational, affective, and political dimensions of human–plant entanglements in contexts of displacement. Plants emerge here not as passive background elements but as co-constitutive agents in processes of emplacement, memory production, and resistance. Drawing on concepts from multispecies ethnography, feminist political ecology, and affect theory, the commentary reflects on how plant care, cultivation, and loss reconfigure dominant understandings of home, movement, and belonging. In centering more-than-human agencies, it argues for a reorientation of migration studies that accounts for the material and affective infrastructures of life forged across human and vegetal worlds.

Keywords: care and resistance, dis- and emplacement, human–plant intimacies, memory and home-making, migration, more-than-human relations, multispecies ethnography

This special issue (SI), *Making Place with Plants: Intimacy, Mobility and Displacement*, curated by Hilal Alkan and Sandra J. Calkins, introduces a timely and generative intervention by placing plant and multispecies studies in dialogue with anthropological debates on emplacement, displacement, mobilities and migration. From the vantage point of a scholar studying processes of (de)migrantisation and mobilities, this issue offers compelling ethnographic insights that challenge the enduring anthropocentrism of migration studies. Through richly textured multispecies ethnographies, the six contributions foreground how people and plants—often under conditions of dislocation and structural precarity—forge entangled paths of place-making, memory work, and resistance.



The SI advances a relational ontology of place by treating plants not as mere metaphors but as co-actors in processes of emplacement. These vegetal cohabitants, often overlooked in social science, are shown to shape affective and material landscapes of belonging. In doing so, the contributions to this SI open up a conversation across three bodies of literature—migration and mobility studies, multispecies anthropology, and feminist/queer scholarship on intimacy and care. Framing this convergence are key theoretical currents that have shaped recent anthropological debates: Donna Haraway's (2008) concept of 'becoming-with', which calls attention to the constitutive entanglement of species; Anna Tsing's (2015) 'art of noticing' and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) work on care and more-than-human ethics, which foregrounds the affective and political dimensions of multispecies interdependence. These theoretical touchstones reverberate throughout the SI, where ethnographic cases foreground both the promise and the fragility of human–plant alliances under duress. The result is a fertile terrain for rethinking displacement and emplacement as inherently multispecies processes. Importantly, the theoretical commitments of this SI gesture toward a broader anthropology of crisis, healing, and relational repair.

Expanding the Lexicon: Vegetal Metaphors and Migrant Realities

For a long time, migration studies have relied on plant metaphors. Migrants are considered uprooted, transplanted, naturalised, or expected to blossom in new soils. Yet these metaphors have rarely been interrogated for their capacity to describe embodied, affective, and multispecies experiences. In her article, 'Plantifying Emplacement: Intimate Care and Human–Plant Relations in Migration', Hilal Alkan offers a theoretical framework for this endeavour by proposing the concept of '*yerini sevmek*' (liking your place) as a vegetal theory of emplacement. This phrase, used by Turkish-speaking migrants to describe both plant care and human adaptation, becomes a powerful lens to understand migrant lives beyond institutional integration or economic assimilation. The expanded vegetal lexicon of migration includes both comforting and coercive metaphors. While 'blossoming' and 'taking root' evoke continuity and belonging, other terms—such as 'invasive species', 'naturalised', 'weeds', or 'alien'—carry heavy connotations of exclusion, control, and domestication. As also Katharine Dow shows in her article 'Squished Strawberries: Saving Seeds and Growing Community in a Hostile Environment', which elaborates on the perspectives of seed-savers and seed activists in London, these metaphors frame some mobilities as threatening and others as desirable, echoing the taxonomic and biopolitical logics of border regimes, reinforcing racialised hierarchies and colonial imaginaries. It aligns human populations with ecological typologies that have historically justified domination, land dispossession, and forced removal. Recognising these ambivalences allows us to move beyond idealised notions of plant–human harmony and to critically interrogate the rhetorical operations that render certain forms of mobility undesirable, even criminal.

As the SI shows, these metaphors are not static; they are actively reappropriated and re-signified through practices of care. This reframing asks us to think of emplacement as a shared struggle across species lines, a process of mutual adjustment where humans and plants seek conditions of thriving in often hostile or uncertain environments. In doing so, the SI challenges the anthropocentrism of conventional migration studies and opens a space for recognising more-than-human cohabitants in trajectories of mobility and displacement. This expanded lexicon—attuned to sensory, embodied, and multispecies engagements—can deepen our understanding of how displaced lives are both uprooted and regrounded (Ahmed et al. 2003) through acts of care and improvisation. Importantly, it invites us to trace how metaphors migrate too, shaping both policy and perception.

Migration, Mobilities, and Multispecies Emplacement

Migration is not always a linear, cross-border movement; it often involves complex trajectories, pauses, returns, and forms of internal displacement (Drotbohm and Winters 2025). The SI captures this diversity by situating plant–human intimacies in settings ranging from refugee camps and urban balconies to elite gardens and memoryscapes of war. What unites these contexts is the effort to make place through collaboration with plants. In ‘Making Home with Plants: Pandemic Edition’, Giulia Carabelli examines urban migrants whose houseplants become companions in solitude and instability. Here, mobility is not only spatial but also existential—a condition of precarity shaped by pandemic restrictions, housing insecurity, and emotional dislocation. Houseplants offer a form of sensory and temporal anchoring, a living presence to care for and be cared by. Such relationships unfold through sight, touch, smell, and routine acts of tending, all of which contribute to creating a liveable environment within a fragmented urban landscape. In her already mentioned contribution, Dow turns to community gardening and seed saving as collective practices of resistance against systemic exclusion and racial capitalism. Following Sara Ahmed et al. (2003), migrants and racialised residents in hostile urban environments allow us to rethink how homes are formed in relationship to movement. Home and belonging may involve attachment and movement, fixation and loss, and the transgression and enforcement of boundaries through the intimate, tactile engagements with plants. As also Dow’s article on seed activists in London makes clear, the act of saving seeds and sharing them becomes a form of counter-mobility, resisting the uprooting logics of gentrification, surveillance, and institutional violence. Plants, here, are not merely passive objects but allies in the struggle for urban belonging. Multispecies emplacement, as explored across these contributions, foregrounds the situatedness of migrant life in more-than-human assemblages. For many migrants, identifying with their plants through what Alkan terms ‘phytomorphic self-understanding’—the recognition of shared vulnerabilities, resilience, and adaptive strategies—offers a reparative counter-narrative to the hostility experienced through migration. It is the theoretical work by Puig de

la Bellacasa that reminds us that care is always situated and materially embedded—what she calls ‘thinking with care’—and this is exemplified by the practices of migrant gardeners who craft liveable spaces in the interstices of social and political exclusion. These gestures of attention, nourishment, and improvisation can also be understood as practices of repair—the active reknitting of damaged or disrupted lifeworlds.

Plants as witnesses, victims, and agents of repair

In several contributions, plants are not only helpers in making place but also themselves displaced. In ‘The Taste of Absence: “Kurdish Oil”, Loss, and Memory among Immigrants from Afrin (Syria) to Germany’, Katharina Lange documents the painful rupture experienced by Syrian Kurdish migrants who had to leave behind their olive orchards during war and resettlement. Their connection to the land, mediated through the taste and texture of olives, survives across distance, but it is not unaltered. The trees, subject to new caretakers and military occupation, change, and with them the memories and intimacies they held. This story powerfully illustrates how displacement fractures multispecies relationships and how memory can travel while emplacement cannot always be recovered.

Similarly, in ‘Look but Don’t Touch: Plant Intimacies for an Oligarch and His Publics’, Paul Manning and Anne Meneley detail the journey of centuries-old trees forcibly uprooted and transplanted into the private park of a Georgian oligarch. The spectacle of botanical transplantation, performed for status and control, contrasts sharply with the relational ethics of plant care described all through other parts of the SI. Trees, like people, can be forcibly relocated, stripped of context, and alienated from their ecological and social lifeworlds. This case exemplifies how plant mobilities are entangled with class, capital, and extractive violence. Here, the concept of the *Plantationocene*—coined by Haraway to name the historical regimes of monoculture and forced displacement—offers a powerful analytic for moving ‘care beyond repair’ (Drotbohm 2022), that is, the understanding that practices labelled as care-ful can conceal their damaging or even violent characteristics. The *Plantationocene* illuminates the continuities between ecological extraction and colonial logics of human uprooting, making visible how both plants and people are subjected to displacement in service of capital accumulation and domination. In both cases, plants become witnesses and victims of displacement, their altered states echoing the disorientation and longing of their human companions. Yet, these contributions also hint at another layer: that plants may themselves be agents of repair. The slow resilience of olive trees, the persistent adaptation of garden weeds, and the intimate rituals of touch and memory performed through plant care point to the reparative potential of multispecies relations. In the wake of rupture, plants offer not resolution, but continuity—an anchor to recompose what Haraway calls ‘response-ability’ in a damaged world.

Feminist and Queer Intimacies: Plants as Comrades and Kin

One of the most powerful contributions of the SI is its feminist and queer approach to intimacy. Rejecting dominant models of kinship and care, the authors foreground alternative forms of attachment and companionship that flourish in more-than-human constellations. Plants, in these accounts, are not decorative or therapeutic accessories but intimate others, with whom people form relationships of love, friendship, and mutual recognition. Alkan, in her reflection on migrants who greet their plants every morning, talk to them, and read their responses in subtle changes of colour and posture, shows how these interactions are affectively dense, anchored in routines of care that generate both comfort and reflection. They also reveal a reconfiguration of intimacy under conditions of displacement and solitude, where normative relationships may be absent or inaccessible. In their introduction to this SI, Alkan and Calkins elaborate on the idea of anthropomorphism and ‘phytomorphism’, considered as reciprocal practices of identification. Migrants not only treat plants as persons; they also see themselves in their plants. A cactus that fails to take root in a cold Berlin apartment becomes a mirror for a migrant’s struggle with recognition and employment. This mutual becoming undermines hierarchical models of human-nature relations and aligns with feminist theories that view intimacy as a site of political and epistemic possibility. Such perspectives are especially valuable for migration and mobility studies, which have often privileged household and kinship structures defined by heteronormative and state-recognised ties. By tracing alternative intimacies—between migrants and houseplants, seed-savers and community gardens, exiles and memory trees—the SI expands the terrain of migration beyond policy categories and into the affective ecologies of everyday life. Moreover, they remind us that queer, multispecies intimacies can be sources of healing, agency, and social imagination. In moments of rupture, such as exile or loss, it is often in these overlooked relations that seeds of repair begin to take root.

Towards a Convergence of Migration and Multispecies Studies

The SI makes a compelling case for integrating human–plant and more broadly multispecies intimacies into the study of migration, mobility, and displacement. This is not simply an intellectual provocation but a methodological invitation. Ethnography, with its attention to the everyday, the relational, and the sensory, is uniquely suited to capture the entangled trajectories of plants and people. Future research might build on this convergence by exploring transnational gardening practices, the role of food plants in diasporic memory, or the ecological dimensions of refugee camps. It could also investigate how climate change, biodiversity loss, and land dispossession intersect with patterns of human mobility. Importantly, such studies must remain attentive to power, recognising that not all human–plant relationships are emancipatory or equitable. What this SI offers, above all, is a reminder that migration is never purely human. It is always already entangled with other forms of life, other ways of being rooted and mobile, emplaced and displaced.

By bringing multispecies life into the frame, we can begin to see migration not only as a movement through space but as a multispecies process of survival, adaptation, and co-becoming. In doing so, we also open ourselves to thinking about what multispecies repair might look like in an era of ecological breakdown and forced displacement.

Conclusion

Making Place with Plants challenges us to rethink migration, displacement, and mobility through the relational and affective lens of multispecies entanglements. The contributions to this SI illuminate how people use and think of plants not only to create home and process loss but also to reflect on social rupture, recompose life in uncertain conditions, and make claims to urban and ecological belonging. These are not merely metaphoric gestures but deeply embodied practices of care, intimacy, and resistance. The volume offers a powerful corrective to the persistent anthropocentrism of migration studies, urging us to account for the companion species, vegetal practices, and sensory modalities that co-produce place. It invites us to follow the traces of migration not only in documents, borders, and policies but also in leaves, seeds, soil, and stories. Through its theoretical engagement with thinkers such as Haraway, Tsing and Puig de la Bellacasa, and through its ethnographic commitment to the grounded and the situated, the SI enacts what might be called a 'plant-human ethnography of mobilities'. This perspective not only enriches our conceptual vocabulary but also compels us to imagine more inclusive, ecologically adapted, and ethically responsive approaches to migration and displacement. In sum, the SI is an invitation to cultivate new forms of scholarly and political attention—an attention attuned to the slow, resilient, and sometimes broken growth of rooted lives in motion. It also asks what it would mean to approach displacement and emplacement as opportunities for 'multispecies repair'—to engage not only in care but also in the shared labour of healing damaged worlds. In a time of planetary crisis, such a vision is not only timely but also urgently necessary.

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