



Kateri, Noelle. (2018).  
*The Migrant Passage:  
Clandestine Journeys from  
Central America*. Ithaca:  
Cornell University Press.  
Paperback: \$24.95.

**BOOK REVIEW**

JESSICA AUCHTER 



**ABSTRACT**

Noelle Kateri Brigden's *The Migrant Passage* offers a masterful interweaving of rich ethnographic story-telling and theory-building. The book is the result of more than two years of field work in El Salvador and Mexico, along key routes for border crossers. Brigden draws on an anthropological orientation to theorize crossing itself, focusing on how migrants' journeys are characterized by improvisations, and how these improvisations shift and alter the political and material landscapes of Mexico.

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KEYWORDS:

borders; migrants;  
improvisation; underground  
globalization; embodiment

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Auchter, Jessica. "Kateri, Noelle. (2018). *The Migrant Passage: Clandestine Journeys from Central America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. Paperback: \$24.95." *SPECTRA* 8, no. 1 (2021): pp. 52–55. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/spectra.v8i1.167>

Following on the other contributions to this special issue, which seek to examine the legacy of Francois Debrix's contributions to critical world order studies,<sup>1</sup> this review reads Brigden's book through three main themes that emerge from Debrix's legacy. First, I focus on the shifts over time in the material and ideological conditions of international relations (IR) scholarly production, with Brigden's book as a key example of contemporary contributions that draw on this legacy. Second, I focus on Debrix's contributions to micropolitics in Critical IR, and how Brigden's book rethinks what it means to focus on everyday practices. Lastly, I consider the dynamics of the demand for international order in a landscape of neoliberal globalization, and focus on how Brigden's book sheds light on international borders and their constitution, enforcement, transgression, and reworking from the ground up in a way that offers important insights for how we think about world order and resistances to neoliberalism.

One of the hallmarks of the book is the way it re-envisioning what it means to produce scholarly knowledge. The writing is a form of scholarly storytelling, emphasizing the significance of narrative work. Brigden anchors us in the lived experiences of migrants by stitching together their stories. In this sense, while the book offers an excellent discussion of crossing and its larger politics, one of its most interesting contributions is in how it does so: the way it weaves together rich ethnography and deep theoretical work. In terms of the former, Brigden even rode a freight train for sixteen hours with migrants to engage in an embodied way with their crossings. This ethnographic work allows her to garner insights beyond traditional sites often presumed to be the key sites of global politics. Instead, by attending to these sites unseen by most scholars, she elucidates a discourse of movement that "knits places together with a shared imaginary and material reality of migration,"<sup>2</sup> with crossing not about a journey with a defined beginning or end, as it is often characterized by US narratives, but instead a complex multilayering of movements, some characterized by multiple crossing attempts, some failed, some successful, some deportations, some movements illicitly across intermediary countries such as Mexico, etc. In this sense, she can get beyond the binaries that often characterize scholarship on borders.

One of the things she asks many of her migrant interviewees to do is draw a map of their crossing experience. She starts the book with Karla's story and map (this is threaded throughout the book) with the visuals being shared as figures within the text. These maps depict the politics of migration in the context of everyday experiences, including how migrants themselves perceive the institutional structures they encounter, such as state authorities, smugglers, criminal elements, wildlife, and borders. In this sense, the book offers us new ways of conceiving of territory and its crossing by bringing the written stories of migrants, but also the visual grammar of crossings.

Brigden uses a film metaphor to structure the organization of the book, which allows her to focus on the very production of the border as a scene, with material and political landscapes, and on how various actors navigate the complexities and unpredictability of the border through improvisation. She argues that such improvisation involves migrants leveraging known information about crossing routes, humanitarian assistance, and threats, while not adopting previous knowledge uncritically. Our only access to the processes and dynamics of such improvisation are by paying attention to the lived experiences of migrants themselves. In this sense, she draws deeply from anthropology's focus on everyday material practices and the way they shape how we view the world around us.<sup>3</sup>

By focusing on everyday practices and individuals who are not political leaders, Brigden allows "a more humble, speculative position" to emerge.<sup>4</sup> As she points out, the grand theories and strategies that IR scholars typically study have direct impact on the lives of border crossers, and thus their perspectives and experiences are worth exploring. This also allows her to draw attention to some under-explored dimensions of border politics. One of the key contributions of

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1 This book review is part of SPECTRA 8 no. 1, a special issue examining new interventions into François Debrix's *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping: The United Nations and the Mobilization of Ideology*. *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping: The United Nations and the Mobilization of Ideology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

2 Brigden, Noelle Kateri. *The Migrant Passage: Clandestine Journeys from Central America*. *Re-Envisioning Peacekeeping: The United Nations and the Mobilization of Ideology*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018, 32.

3 Ibid, 18.

4 Ibid, 9.

the book is in demonstrating that crossing takes place, not only at the border juncture, but also in the journey across states en route to the border itself, something which has been ignored in a US and security-centric view, which conflates the journey of migration with the act of illegal crossing itself.

While border zones are often portrayed as lawless, Brigden's careful theoretical work allows us to see that states themselves have at times encouraged the violence in these areas as a mechanism of deterrence to crossers, as in the Mexican security program *Plan Sur*, which receives US funding, that channels crossers to zones of Mexico that are more prone to drug cartel violence and kidnappings. Both Mexico and the US also intentionally dislocate relationships that underpin the informal crossing economy.<sup>5</sup> As a result, this produces a "brown area" in which uncertainty is the norm, and rules and processes must be constantly renegotiated.<sup>6</sup> As the book demonstrates, even the various actors encountered along the route are not certain.

This is best illustrated in the exploration of how the word Zeta, first used to describe the Mexican gang by that name, became a general word used to describe those who preyed on vulnerable migrants along their route: perhaps Mexican police, perhaps Zetas or MS-13 gang members, perhaps smugglers who decide to change the terms of the deal, perhaps local kidnappers, or even other migrants who are forced to assist these bad actors for their own survival or to facilitate their own crossing. In this sense, actors are all engaged in performances in which their roles may change over time or depending on circumstances. A trusted smuggler who assisted a migrant to cross last time could now be in league with the Zetas. A Mexican police officer could be there to assist migrants, or to demand ransom or bribes or hand them over to gang members. A migrant may be forced by their own vulnerabilities to become a human smuggler or a kidnapper. In Brigden's words, "A gang member might be a migrant, a Central American by birth, an adopted member of a Mexican community, a man, a friend, a boyfriend, husband, a Catholic, a father, an occasional kidnapper or bandit, and a part-time coyote. Pulled in many directions, these conflicted souls might collaborate with one another one day, and combat the next."<sup>7</sup> In this sense, "smuggler," "kidnapper," and even "migrant" are not immutable social categories, Brigden argues, but rather roles and sets of practices that overlap with other social practices and are inherently transient in nature.<sup>8</sup>

The focus on everyday practices is also intimately connected to the book's theorization of globalization. Brigden views crossing as "embodied deconstruction of the nation-state at the level of everyday practice."<sup>9</sup> Migrants cross not in spite of the state, but because of it, and this process is often an iterative one that involves a return from a failed border crossing or a deportation, and then another attempt at crossing again.

One of the key contributions of Debrix's book some twenty years ago was his emphasis on the inherent discontinuities of UN Peacekeeping, particularly the way in which visual technologies produced particular narratives of humanitarian intervention and framed UN Peacekeeping missions in a wider discourse of neoliberal ideologies of governance. He frames this as a failing simulation, and indeed, similar language could be used to describe the way Brigden frames the border itself. She argues that the border is a performance in which various actors play parts, even as states may want to frame them in the context of sovereign power and securing, in a material and political sense. They are re-shaped by the process of crossing and the crossers themselves, who have a significant impact on demonstrating to us the failing performance of the border itself.

Brigden's focus is on how information flows in the context of border crossing, particularly drawn from the way crossers interact with the physical border sites themselves, and with other crossers and strangers they meet along their journey. As she notes, "in this setting, information is both a resource and a curse; migrants must learn past practices and protocols for negotiating the journey, but the very availability of this information renders it suspect. The spread of information about how and where to go may lead migrants north, but it may also lead police and

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5 Ibid, 13.

6 Ibid, 13-14.

7 Ibid, 98.

8 Ibid, 94.

9 Ibid, 18.

criminal predators to migrants.”<sup>10</sup> Because the crossing is dangerous and uncertain, migrants’ relation to the terrain and to information about it must be necessarily improvisational, with the terrain itself being a source of information about their journey, even as they undertake it. By demonstrating the way in which the relationship between humans and the border is co-constituted by the very practice of crossing, Brigden demonstrates that the performance of bordering is always an incomplete one, and that the picture of the border as a security site is incomplete. Rather, borders are not either porous or secured, but rather a complex set of everyday practices in which migrants participate by their crossing. Their navigation of these webs of meaning, and the way in which Brigden analyses these interconnections, rethinks the very idea of borders not as security landscapes but as networks.

In this vein, her focus on the way migrants impact and revision the landscapes by their very acts of crossing has important implications for the state itself and state authority, and the purported essential nature of borders to the envisioning of state power. As she notes, the book is a “portrait of underground globalization in action.”<sup>11</sup> She demonstrates how a top-down collectivist approach to resistances to globalization leave out part of the picture, a key part in which the embodied dimension of border crossers and the materiality of border crossing itself as an act “reshape the physical and socioeconomic terrain of the nation-state.”<sup>12</sup>

In sum, Noelle Kateri Brigden offers us new ways of thinking about the project of Critical IR, particularly who the subjects of IR are and who is excluded by traditional frameworks and approaches. She rethinks what it means to consider borders, security, migration, and territoriality, noting that attending to the lived experiences of migrants can shed light on how these topics of IR are deeply troubled and multiple. For example, borders are material, embodied, social, and also inherently incomplete and unfinished projects of state authority, constantly being recrafted and re-envisioned, not only by state authorities but by the many actors who make up the borderscape, including migrants themselves. This book will certainly be of interest to those looking to envision new ways of thinking and writing IR.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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## REFERENCE

Brigden, Noelle Kateri. *The Migrant Passage: Clandestine Journeys from Central America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501730566>

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Submitted: 26 April 2021  
Accepted: 26 April 2021  
Published: 14 June 2021

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10 Ibid, 6.

11 Ibid, 8.

12 Ibid, 9.