



# Narratives of Resistance: Space, Place, and Identity in Latino Migrant Activism

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## Introduction: Making Stories Matter

In the August 2013 edition of *ACME*, Andy Walter offers a geographic analysis of scholarly work on the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), describing the movement as a ‘cartographic project’ aimed at ‘up-scaling’ local disputes to national and global attention (Walter 2013). Spatial changes in the CIW’s politics, Walter argues, can be interpreted as “a commitment to a relational sense of space that involved, but went beyond, the jump in scale observed in the academic literature on the CIW” (2013, 399). Contemporary popular accounts of migrant activism also showcase the CIW’s rise to prominence as a ‘bottom-up’ representation of the confluence of economic, cultural, and global concerns that Walter highlights.<sup>2</sup> Yet in both scholarly and popular conceptions, little attention has been given to why the CIW’s example is equally compelling to academics, activists, and political commentators alike. In our paper, we position ourselves as a critical supplement to Walter’s analysis by asking what it means to ‘go beyond



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<sup>2</sup> See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/19/us/19farm.html>

scale' as a political and spatial strategy. We find that the CIW's example is especially vibrant due to its ability to draw on the experiences of migrant laborers as *narratives of resistance*, linking affect and discourse to the political re-configuration of labor-space.

Notable in the CIW's story of resistance is an emphasis on its multi-layered composition. Mayan, Haitian, and Mexican men, women, and children have come together to convey a larger tapestry of legal persecution, economic migration, labor, gender, and the geopolitics of food production (Bowe 2007; Drainville 2008; Williams et al. 2009). In this spirit, the CIW has given local voices access to global audiences, making individual stories of economic, religious, and cultural hardship part of a co-implicated drama of collective action. As immigration reform continues to capture the attention of political and social media in the United States, critical geographers can contribute to these debates with a closer look at the ways that migrant stories are told by activists, and represented by academics, in an effort to generate mutual understanding.

In this intervention, we employ an experiential-narrative lens to interpret the CIW's actions. We argue that an emphasis on stories about space, place, and identity generated by migrant activist organizations complements the social, economic, and structural analysis of state-space-activist interaction currently found in the scholarly literature (Nelson & Hiemstra 2008; Gill 2010). Yet looking beyond critical and biopolitical explanations, we consider how acts of place-making are strengthened when migrant stories of dislocation, persecution, and political mobilization are popularly narrated and diffused (Ahmed 1999; Eastmond 2007).

In what follows, we call for a sustained focus on the *means* through which the everyday lives and place-based actions of migrant activists are deployed, highlighting the narrative moorings that anchor their acts of mobility, place-making, and resistance. We specifically argue that place-making – the 'sense of place' that is derived, produced, and performed from the activities of migrant activists – is conceived through the CIW's descriptive accounts of their struggle, where members and audiences can embed themselves in intersecting transnational, economic, political, and cultural values.<sup>3</sup> Through our narrative inquiry, we find that lived-experience and embodiment help re-write the demands of migrant labor advocates for new places-to-be. We conclude by claiming that activism, as embraced by the CIW, can become more than just a cartographic project, but can also become a space of opportunity and hope.

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<sup>3</sup>Following political theorist Leslie Paul Thiele, we define narratives as "banisters for ethical life," acknowledging that "[metaphor] and mythology have always played, and will continue to play, a greater role than axioms and argument in the generation and transformation of moral selves" (2006, 231).

## Migrant Space, Social Capital, and Narrative Power

Critical geographers have long recognized that migrant activism emerges only after years of adjustment. Studies have focused on how racism, gender discrimination, safe working conditions, and cultural integration/assimilation have helped consolidate advocacy networks for migrants and refugees (Theodore & Martin 2007). Religious and non-profit institutions have become the most recent locus of analysis for migrant advocacy (Allen 2010), particularly as political scientists (Putnam 1993) and geographers (Mohan and Mohan 2002) have embraced the concept of ‘social capital’. According to Mohan and Mohan, for example, geographers should pay special attention to social capital as “a form of revisionist neoliberalism, a political response to the alleged constraints imposed by globalization and the consequent reduction in scope for state intervention” (2002, 203). Marginal communities, the story goes, need only identify the proper attributes to employ against the ills of uneven development – be it bowling leagues or inter-faith gatherings – empowering communities for greater civic and economic growth.

As James DeFilippis (2010) points out, however, most of this process assumes that communities can actually ‘possess’ things to begin with. While DeFilippis rejects the idea that communities can “possess anything” or be described as “actors that exhibit any form of agency” (789), we use his injunction to take seriously the “complex set of power-laden relationships – both internally, within the communities, and externally, between actors in the communities and the rest of the world” (789) to promote our own claim: migrant communities in fact do hold – and are ‘held by’ – narratives that imagine, construct, and disseminate their own brands of political values (Azaryahu & Foote 2008; Leitner et al. 2008).

Migrant activist work takes place within this complex climate of multiple advocacy networks, contentious capitalist exclusion, and a larger geopolitics of dislocation. As Staeheli, Mitchell, and Nagel (2009, 33) have argued, activists seek to establish a sense of place in such times of crisis by ‘making public’ the conditions of their everyday life and the demands to improve them. They engage in acts, practices, negotiations, and struggles of *place-making*, “gaining visibility in public space, addressing people who do not hold similar views, and laying claims to public space...[transcending] the specific sites of contestation.” As Sziarto and Leitner have argued, the efforts of migrant activists can hence be framed as constructing a ‘counterpublic’: “not merely spaces for the marginalized and/or oppressed to speak in their ‘own’ voices and be heard, but spaces for developing oppositional or alternative politics, with active participation in economic and political decision-making and social change as larger goals” (2010, 383).<sup>4</sup> For

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<sup>4</sup>Conversely, much migrant advocacy work has recently taken place in the shadows of detention centers, where activists have fought for family reunification, stays of deportations, and human rights protection for detained women and children. See: <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/just-facts/understanding-prosecutorial-discretion-immigration-law>; see also: Moran et al. 2013.

geographers to meet migrant activists on this agonistic terrain, further elaboration of the style and causal presuppositions behind their calls to action is indispensable.

We propose a conceptual framework that focuses on the story-telling experiences of migrant activists, recognizing that such humanistic approaches are not without controversy in academic geography. In looking at the CIW's efforts as one such narrative of resistance, however, we follow Tim Cresswell's call for greater attention to the stories constructed around mobility (2010, 21). Through public practices that emphasize visual media, cross-cultural assemblages, and grassroots organization, the CIW offers an important example of how activists work through and move beyond homogenizing discourses (Sparke 2008). As interdisciplinary scholars at the intersection of Political Theory, Urban Politics, and Critical Geopolitics, we also seek to wrestle with the question of how to speak about activists without reinforcing normative assumptions about their struggles that we aspire to challenge. In response, we offer the tactic of *narrative im-placement* as one alternative for critical geographers to engage with.

### **The Spatial Politics of Narrative Im-Placement**

In the rest of this essay, we deploy a three-pronged outline to unpack the CIW's tactics of narrative place-making in one of their most recent public actions: the "New Day for Women Farmworkers" walk in March 2013. First, we highlight the role of lived-experience in the construction of gender identity and just labor-spaces. Second, borrowing from feminist and phenomenological methodologies, we emphasize narrative place-making as a dynamic mode of immersion employed by the CIW. Through an attitude akin to what philosopher Edward Casey has called 'im-placement', CIW activists invite audiences to make personal and 'make public' the immediate spaces, challenges, and objectives they seek to overcome. Third, and most broadly, we discuss the CIW's efforts as an exercise in intersectionality: bringing together stories of labor, violence, and justice to reconstitute migrant identities.

We begin by looking at the role of gender in the CIW's efforts, as highlighted by the organization's emphasis on the lived-experience of migrant women laborers. On March 8, 2013, the CIW released a video on YouTube documenting a 200-mile march to Lakeland, Florida home of the Publix Super Markets, Inc. headquarters.<sup>5</sup> The video was released on International Women's Day in an effort to raise awareness to how, as a female voice-over points out,

Years ago, women won the right to vote. Now, we want to win the right of women to have respect, to have dignity. It's important that all women move forward together, these hardworking women who are fighting every day for a better future – not just for themselves, but for the whole family.

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<sup>5</sup>See: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=j001A-rQwtY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=j001A-rQwtY)

The video shows men, women, and children marchers under a blazing sun, carrying signs in the shape of tomatoes, banners with spiritual slogans, and yellow flags blazoned with the words ‘*Freedom*’ and ‘*Libertad*’. As a soundtrack, audiences hear a modern version of the gospel spiritual, “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around”, a song that portrays walking and marching as acts of verbal resistance. The marchers are shown leading the camera forward as song lyrics proclaim: “I’m gonna keep on a-walkin’, keep on a-talkin’, Marchin’ up to freedom land.” While we do not have the space to offer a thorough analysis of the march’s shifting components, below we unpack how our framework helps depict the campaign’s video narrative.

1. *Lived-Experience*: The “New Day” campaign highlights women’s experiences of gender discrimination and dislocation in the workplace. According to one protestor, the CIW’s demands are not simply economic, but rather call for better protection of women’s rights, “so that as women, we have greater respect at work and the elimination of sexual harassment.” The march uses lived-experience as a call for women to reclaim their spaces in the workplace. Women, we are told, can also establish a place for themselves within the space of the march by identifying as both laborers and evident stakeholders of the campaign’s objectives.

2. *Narrative Im-Placement*: Through the CIW’s material and discursive inclusion, the women of the march rewrite narratives of labor and activism by telling a different kind story, a story of inclusion that begins with their dislocation. As women of different ages, races, faiths, and occupations are shown speaking of their motivations, they invite the public to partake in their stories. Connecting family-life and working-life as part of the activist campaign, the CIW narrative of resistance is rendered public and intimate. As a woman deacon notes proudly,

This International Women’s Day we give thanks for the incredible advances made possible by farmworker women and consumer women, especially women of faith, standing shoulder to shoulder together to bring about some of the most comprehensive and sustainable changes we’ve seen in women’s rights in the field. We give thanks for farmworker women. We give thanks for mothers. We give thanks for the girls that are coming up in this movement. And we give thanks that together as women and men we are moving forward toward a fuller version of what God intends for every man, woman, and child.

Such immersed story-telling highlights the intimate, personal, and layered nature of the workplace, often bracketed from activism analysis. The CIW campaign here ‘makes-place’ in two ways: disclosing the role of women and the intimate, helping to rethink notions of work; and second, injecting gendered bodies into advocacy for domestic and transnational rights.

3. *Intersectionality of Identity*: Gender in the “New Day” campaign is not viewed in isolation, but as part of a larger assemblage of discourses and practices. Gender, labor, migration, and activism are exhibited here as experiential categories,

where women of different origins, education, classes, and ethnic complexions are shown united in their walk against sexual and racial discrimination. Farm labor, moreover, is presented as a source of livelihood and popular resistance without being reduced to a single motivating factor (e.g., class, legal status, or gender).

Key in these endeavors is the practice of immediate placement, or *im*-placement: a critical awareness of place that employs a phenomenological conception of the body. Joining place-making to embodiment portrays the interaction of human beings and place as *in communion*, where according to Edward Casey (1993, xiii), the “*im-* of *im-placement* stresses the action of getting-in or into, and it carries connotations of immanence that are appropriate to the inhabitation of places.” CIW activists illustrate a desire and search for this inhabitation in the face of labor injustice and migratory displacement. Their call to arms is not one of strictly political militancy, but also the existential call of migrants in search for new homes. As Mountz and Hyndman have argued, scholarly interventions too must “reclaim the intimate” and inhabit the interpersonal dynamics that inform contemporary migrant and labor advocacy. By drawing attention to the embodied character of one such activist campaign, our framework follows a “sustained attention to key sites where the intimate and the global are pronounced” (Mountz & Hyndman 2006: 460). The CIW’s efforts thus convey an inter-personal narrative of social justice across labor-spaces, as well as the intersection of the intimate and the global. Elaborating these connections seems to us a vital area of future research for critical scholars to partake in.

### **Conclusion: Making Stories Vibrant**

To summarize, our paper argues in favor of the concerns raised by critical geographers to pay more attention to the shifting scales at which space, place, and identity are forged in a globalized world. Judiciously, we acknowledge these debates but maintain that scales “are discrete categories best understood as constitutive of one another...as embodied social relations that include mobility, emotion, materiality, belonging, alienation” (Mountz & Hyndman 2006: 447). We do not dismiss the centrality of large-scale discourses (such as those emanating from the state or the global economy) in the construction of migrant identities and their modes of resistance; however, we suspend disbelief in the moral autonomy of communities in order to emphasize their contingency and capacity to appropriate better and more compelling stories.

Our brief portrait of the CIW suggests that the broader constellation of place-making forces at work in migrant activism does not disappear when communities are forced to redefine themselves. Instead, innovative tactics for place-based resistance have increasingly emerged, demanding equally multi-layered forms of inquiry. The CIW’s movement from dislocation towards *im*-placement also points to the strong influence of narratives in contemporary laborer and activist place-making. Greater attention to these narrative processes of redefinition may, we feel, give scholars robust opportunities for engaging with new forms of action taking

place in the struggle of migrant activists. Indeed, we trust the critical geography community will find these are stories worth re-telling; their goal is not merely to ‘up-scale’ local struggles to global attention, but also to ‘make personal’ their existential character across multiple spaces.

### **Acknowledgements**

We wish to thank the Coalition of Immokalee Workers for their tireless work. We also thank the guest editors of this issue for their guidance and patience, the participants at the ‘Migration and Activism’ sessions during the 2012 meeting of the AAG, and the two reviewers from ACME for their insightful comments and recommendations. The initial research that informs this essay was supported by the Department of Political Science at the University of Florida.

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