



## The road less travelled: Autobiographical expressive writings of North-South migrants to Guanajuato, Mexico

### El camino menos transitado: Escritura expresiva autobiográfica con migrantes Norte-Sur a Guanajuato, México

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#### ABSTRACT

This article parts from the assumption that some common notions about migration are “narrative” in nature - both half-fictions and socially constructed “realities”. It looks at a trend frequently neglected by hegemonic narratives of human movement, namely North-South migration. More specifically, it focuses on some migrants to the state of Guanajuato, Mexico and their writings produced during two intercultural expressive and autobiographical writing workshops. The study draws from an interdisciplinary methodology, including migration studies with a sociological, anthropological, economic and psychological outlook, expressive writing studies, and narrative analysis of texts created. The workshop writings revealed both an emergent sense of a “common humanity” among participant movers, and the significant complexity of individual migrant experiences. Many of the tales told indeed questioned common “migration narratives” like neat nation-state to nation-state movement and North-South divisions, thus opening spaces for re-imagining migration in its full human universality, diversity and complexity.

#### RESUMEN

El presente artículo parte de la suposición que algunas ideas comunes acerca de la migración son de índole “narrativa” – casi ficciones y “realidades” socialmente construidas. Se enfoca en una tendencia poco considerada por parte de narrativas hegemónicas sobre los movimientos humanos – la migración del Norte al Sur. Más específicamente, se centra en algunos migrantes al estado de Guanajuato y sus textos producidos durante dos talleres interculturales de escritura expresiva, autobiográfica. La investigación se basa en una metodología interdisciplinaria, combinando estudios de migración con enfoques sociológicos, antropológicos, económicos y psicológicos, estudios de escritura expresiva y el análisis narrativo de textos creados. Los escritos revelaron una noción emergente de “humanidad compartida” entre migrantes participantes, así como la complejidad significativa de experiencias individuales de migración. Muchos de las historias deconstruyeron narrativas comunes, tales como el movimiento de estado-nación a estado-nación y la división entre Norte y Sur, abriendo espacios para re-imaginar migraciones en su plena universalidad, diversidad y complejidad humana.



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## INTRODUCTION

### Imagined migrations

This article aims to contribute to the notion that much current thinking about migration and related issues is narrative (e.g. Boswell, Geddes and Scholten, 2011) in nature. In a work on the value of a narrative focus in (forced) migration research, Eastmond defines the latter as “a form in which activities and events are described as having a meaningful and coherent order, imposing on reality a unity which it does not inherently possess” (2007, p. 250). Presently, the use of the term includes but goes beyond the creation of a somewhat false “coherent order” and “unity”, to include half-truths and imagined and then socially constructed phenomena, as well as narrative-oriented thinking.

The article is indebted to several voices that have emphasized the narrative or “imagined” nature of migration-related phenomena. One may not only mention Anderson with his famous definition of the nation-state as an “imagined community” (1993), but also Mignolo with his work *The Idea of Latin America*. Here, the scholar talks, among other issues, about the constructed nature of continental and South-North divisions, reminding his readers that “a god” did not “create the planet earth and divide it” (2005, pos. 17, 18). Furthermore, the present work owes much to García Canclini’s *Imagined Globalization* and his notion that globalization “needs to take into account the imaginaries with which it operates and the interculturality that it mobilizes” (García Canclini, 2014, p.14). In many ways similar to the present understanding of narratives as “partially fictional” and “socially constructed”, he furthermore stresses the necessity “to distinguish what is real and how much is imaginary” (García Canclini, 2014, p.15), as well as clarifying that he is nevertheless “not equating the imaginary with falsehood” (García Canclini, 2014, p.16). Although different in emphasis and outlook, García Canclini’s “imagined globalizations” are evidently also tied up with “imagined migrations” and common migration narratives.

Looking at the “narrative nature” of migration is an ambitious objective that calls for much further research. However, it presently takes the simple form of research based on movers often neglected by more common “migration” narratives, namely North-South migrants. More

specifically, it contains an interdisciplinary, qualitative study of intercultural expressive writing workshops with a focus on North-South migrants conducted in the State of Guanajuato, Mexico and the narrative analysis (Maines, Pierce, and Laslett, 2012) of some of the writings produced. As will be described, this is intended as a “counter-narrative” to hegemonic analyses focusing on South-North movements, with the 2,000 border (U.S. Department of State, 2018) between the US and Mexico establishing an ideologically loaded separation line between the world’s “South” and its “North”.

The discussion is placed against a backdrop of an ongoing migration crisis (Blair, 2016). The latter may be regarded as partially related to a frequent de-humanization of migrants (e.g. Taylor, 2015) and a re-enforcement of nation-state oriented and predominant “us-we thinking” that turns migrants into non-belonging “others” (e.g. Volpicelli, 2015); into strangers who force or cheat their way into richer lands (Sassen, 1996, pos. 98). For if this migrant crisis is to be adequately faced, it seems crucial not only to keep on confronting some of the fictional or half-true thinking about the topic which skews public and policy debate (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2013, p.36), but also to re-imagine it in ways that can lead to more peaceful crisis solutions on a micro, meso and macro level.

### A tale of many migrants

To contextualize the present work on individual narratives of North-South migrants, it is necessary to draw a tentative outline of common, often hegemonic migrant “tales”. In its deliberate generality, it strives to contribute to discussions of pre-conceived notions of migrants (Sassen, 1996, pos. 96), relying only on aspects already well-researched<sup>1</sup> and particularly relevant to the present analysis.<sup>2</sup> One may add that - given that many of the

<sup>1</sup> There is, for instance, a considerable amount of literature that recognizes and responds to the gender bias inherent in many migration studies (e.g. Donato and Gabaccia, 2015; Espin, 1999; George, 2005; Palmary, Burman, Chantler and Kighuwa, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> As said, this description is highly generalized, drawing from sources about migration stemming from different disciplines. Nevertheless, a brief search of “migrant” on Google Images seems to support the notion that migrants are frequently imagined as male, non-white and – as will be mentioned – “plural”, with many arising images revealing non-white men (and occasionally women) in groups (Google Images, 2018).

simplified notions to be presented and later questioned have been long undermined by different scholars - it is noteworthy how resistant some of these narrative ideas surrounding migration appear to be.

A “reverse-lens” focus (Croucher, 2009, p. 1) on North-South migrants, then, is here regarded as a way of nuancing hegemonic narratives frequently told from the point of view of “Northern” voices (Croucher, 2009, p.1). Underlying these discussions is a notion of a world divided into a developed North and developing South (e.g. IOM, 2013), and further subdivided into individual nation states. Typically, migrants are perceived as moving from poor Southern nation states to rich Northern ones (IOM, p.36; IOM, 2017; Cohen and Sirkeci 2011, p.1), where “the North” at times envisions itself as being exploited by migrants who give nothing back (see Trump’s comment that “Mexico, by the way, is doing nothing for us” [as cited in Fritze, 2018] as a rather extreme example of this). Migrant figures are frequently conceived of as male (e.g. Kofman *et al.*, 2000, pos.132) and “‘immigrants,’ in the minds of U.S. politicians, academics, media, and public at large, are not ‘white’” (Croucher, 2009, p. 7). Women are often seen as playing a “supporting role”, such as that of the accompanying spouse (Koser, 2016, p. 8). With regard to the question why people migrate, there is a tendency to focus on a wish for financial improvement. The famous Todaro-Smith model of migration – although originally based on rural to urban movement - is based on:

the assumption that migration is primarily an economic phenomenon, which for the individual migrant can be a quite rational decision...The fundamental premise is that migrants consider the various labor market opportunities available to them ...and choose the one that maximizes their expected gains from migration. (Todaro and Smith, 2015; pp. 358-359).<sup>3</sup>

These “rational” migration motivators are sometimes gendered with women, for instance, described as seeking liberation from oppressive gender norms and overall improved economic and social status in their more developed host nations (e.g. Guarnizo, Chaudhary and Nyberg Sørensen, 2017). Furthermore, it has been observed that migrants are at times no longer imagined as individuals

but as a “collective”, “swarming” (Taylor, 2015) into a country and creating a “mass invasion” (Sassen, 1996, pos. 118).

### The story of the present work

Before analysing these general migration narratives, it is time to provide a more detailed description of the present research. Firstly, it forms part of a larger project that conducts qualitative research through expressive writing workshops with different migrants to the state of Guanajuato, Mexico. The project includes works focused on women migrants from different backgrounds (Chibici-Revneanu, 2016), Central American migrants (Chibici-Revneanu, 2018) and internal indigenous migrants (in progress).

The project is ideologically related to the *World Migration Report 2013* which stresses a need to depart from predominantly economy-based approaches to migration and focus instead on the critical issue of migrant development and well-being (IOM, 2013, p. 21). This is coupled with an urge to place more emphasis on individual, human-oriented and hence humanizing accounts of movers as “the impact of migration on the lives of individual migrants can easily be overlooked” (IOM, 2013 p. 24). It is one of the key recommendations of the report that “instead of being the passive subjects of enquiry, migrants should be given the opportunity to tell their stories” (IOM, 2013). Furthermore, the project aims to conduct an ethical form of research that ideally “gives something back” to the participant “research subjects”. As such, it strives to see if expressive writing workshops cannot only provide insight into individual migration experiences, but also have a positive influence on participants’ well-being (Chibici-Revneanu, 2016).

Differently from other works of this project, this article – although focused on relatively privileged North-South migrants – takes a deliberately intercultural approach. Albeit migrant “typologies” and “nation-state” origins will be referred to, it does not focus on a single migrant group (such as, for instance, US retirement migrants or Japanese business movers). Rather, it shifts its focus onto the notion that, within a limited space (in this case the state of Guanajuato) a vast variety of different migrants and non-migrants co-exist and interact, thus creating a rich, intercultural tapestry. For, as García Canclini argues

<sup>3</sup> This seemingly “rational” approach to migration also contains an implicitly imaginary element, referring to “expected” gains, which need not necessarily be realistic but can be quite dream-like in nature.

in *Hybrid Cultures*, it may be helpful to “shift the object of study from identity to cross-cultural heterogeneity”, as “in a world so fluidly interconnected, identitarian sedimentations organized into more or less stable historical groups (ethnicities, nations, classes) restructure themselves in the midst of interethnic, transclass, and transnational groupings” (1995, p. xxviii).

The methodology of the present work was designed to fulfil its specific research objectives. It is interdisciplinary, chiefly focusing on migration studies with a sociological, anthropological, economic and psychological outlook, as well as expressive writing studies. This interdisciplinary approach is motivated by the perceived need to reunite disciplines that, when kept too rigidly separate, can at times end up distorting complex socio-cultural phenomena (see, for instance Wallerstein, 2013<sup>4</sup>). This need for “nomad social sciences” (García Canclini, 1995, p. 2) seems particularly appropriate when trying to approach complex issue of migration in a holistic and humanizing fashion.

The present research is entirely qualitative in its orientation. Although it would certainly be revealing to conduct future quantitative studies on North-South migration to Guanajuato, it aims to capture individual voices. As such, it contains no claim either towards the generalizability or indeed “representative” nature of results. Rather, it strives to point towards the subtleties and many individual exceptions that may not be captured by dividing multi-faceted humans with multiple belongings into neat (research) categories.<sup>5</sup> Given the qualitative and narrative focus of the present research, individual writings were – as briefly mentioned – interpreted through narrative analysis (Maines *et al.*, 2012).

Expressive writing was regarded as particularly suitable for this article’s basic research aims. It is a form of literary production which – differently from creative writing - does not require correct spelling or make any

aesthetic demands. As the name implies, its core interest lies in self-expression and – often - engagement with personal thoughts, experiences and feelings. The perhaps most well-known method of expressive writing has been developed by Pennebaker (e.g. Pennebaker and Sexton, 2009; Pennebaker and Evans, 2014). Here, individuals are told to write about their worst personal trauma(s) for twenty minutes, usually over four consecutive days. This intervention has been tested for its psychological and physical benefits numerous times and correlated with a great number of positive effects on people’s physical and psychological well-being (see, for instance, Baikie and Wilhelm, 2005; Chibici-Revneanu, 2016). It is advised that texts produced remain entirely private to obtain these effects.

The expressive writing workshops this research is based on were conducted in the State of Guanajuato during the first half of 2017, one on-line (in Spanish and English) and one on-line and face-to-face (in English) in San Miguel de Allende. Participants were self-selected, in the sense that – even though the workshop advertised its North-South migration focus – everyone interested could join. While this led to some methodological limitations to be mentioned, it also created the rich interculturality of voices that characterizes the results obtained. The workshops – as well as their specific outline and methods – will also be discussed in more detail later on.

## Previous stories

The present research is related to existing research on the psychology of migration. A growing number of authors (e.g. Grinberg, L., and Grinberg, R., 1989; Losi, 2006; Sayed-Ahmad, 2009; Akhtar, 2014) have helped to illustrate that migration tends to involve many serious psychological challenges for displaced individuals. This “humanizing” approach to migration has shown that the process of displacement typically leads to multiple, many-layered and frequently interrelated tangible and intangible losses. These range from the loss of material possessions (e.g. Akhtar, 2014, p. 7), familiar customs, landscapes and language(s) (e.g. Martín, 2011, p. 131; Losi, 2006, pp. 18-19), to loved ones and one’s previous social status and sense of identity (e.g. Grinberg and Grinberg, 1989, p. 129). Added to these often very painful experiences, there is the common issue of discrimination

<sup>4</sup> Even though this work does not explicitly adhere to Wallerstein’s comprehension of world systems analysis (e.g. 2013), it is nevertheless an underlying assumption that, in the case of such a complex, and multifaceted phenomenon as migration, “existing modes of organizing knowledge and the categories that were being used” can act as “major obstacles to the kinds of transformation they hoped to achieve” (p. 4).

<sup>5</sup> It is indebted to a qualitative orientation associated with scholars such as Becker, where depth and a profound focus on specific research questions is regarded as far more significant than numbers. For, in the words of Becker “one interview is sometimes quite sufficient to establish that something is possible” and – of particular relevance to the present aim to question dominant migration narratives: “it may not take many interviews to show that something people have not thought about as taking a variety of forms in fact does take such a variety of forms” (as cited in Baker and Edwards, 2012, p. 15).



experienced in host (and transit) communities, which has already been alluded to in the beginning (e.g. Volpicelli, 2015).

Even though these studies have done much to re-humanize migrants, many of them also seem to contain at least an implicit South-North bias, often explaining what many movers from the South experience on arriving in the North. To name only one of many possible examples, Akhtar, in his work *Immigration and Acculturation* comments on how migrants often struggle with the stricter use of time in many Northern societies, hence implicitly imagining his “typical” migrants as movers to the North (e.g. Akhtar, 2014, p.11). Nevertheless, it may be argued that they have been able to capture some more general, internal aspects of migration. As is claimed in Tabori’s *The Anatomy of Exile*:

It makes no difference [...] whether you left because a new political order made you an outcast in your native land; whether hunger drove you to far lands, or whether it was a rainbow that lured you with promises of better vistas (Tabori, 1972, p. 33).

Given that we are all human, some psychological aspects of migration take on highly individualized shapes, while others may remain comparable or even essentially the same.

Returning to a North-South bias, this – as stated – seems to be a pronounced feature of much migration research, with other tendencies, such as North-South movement, remaining understudied. There are notable exceptions to this, such as Laczko and Brian’s “North-South migration: A different look at the migration and development debate” (2013). This work provides a tentative typology of common North-South migrant groups, such as “returnees”, student and retirement migrants, and those driven South by the global economic crisis or the expansion of global companies (2013).

Some of these groups have also provided the focus for specifically Mexico-oriented studies of North-South migrants. To name only some works relevant for the present context, some complexities of return migration to Mexico have, for example, been addressed in Dustmann, Fadlon and Weiss’s “Return Migration, Human Capital Accumulation and the Brain Drain” (2011) and Arenas *et al.*’s “Return Migration to Mexico: Does Health Matter?”

(2015). One of the most interesting works on US (retirement) migration is provided by Croucher in *The Other Side of the Fence – American Migrants in Mexico* (2009), where she looks primarily at US migrants to the popular communities of Ajijic in the State of Jalisco and San Miguel de Allende in Guanajuato, largely motivating the decision to base one of the workshops in the latter. North-South migration caused by the global economic crisis seems to lie, partly, behind European movement to Mexico. Here, Spanish migrants to Mexico (in an inversion of migration trends where citizens of ex-colonies move to former “colonial centers” [e.g. Sassen, 1996]) appear to have received particular attention (see, for instance Ortiz and Mendoza, 2008; Mendoza and Ortiz, 2016). Finally, a typical migrant group driven by the expansion of global companies are many Japanese movers to Mexico. This has been partly addressed by Méndez Rodríguez in “Migración de talentos como estrategia de desarrollo: México-Japón” (2017). While these group specific analyses are important, they often betray a “nation-state” to “nation-state” bias. While useful for neatly separated research findings, this may end up obscuring the complex, multi-national and highly intercultural reality of all these migrant groups – and more – currently living in Mexico.

As to existing research on expressive writing and migration, there are already several studies (e.g. Avila and Domínguez-Mujica, 2014, Baraitser, 2014, Bernstein *et al.*, 2012). Other than my own work previously mentioned, there is to my knowledge no research into expressive writing and migration within a Mexican context.

### The tales not told

There are several limitations to the present work. Expressive writing is an activity that requires much personalised attention. Hence, and as will be discussed, there were only relatively few workshop participants. This, combined with the qualitative orientation of the present research does – as said – not allow for any claims that can be generalized. Also, the small number of participants raised remarkably “large” issues, many of which can only be looked at briefly. Another considerable limitation can be found in the intensely personal nature of expressive writing. As a result, the research was conducted under a strict privacy policy and basic data that could help identify participants such as age, educational

level or sometimes even national origin largely had to be eliminated from the discussion. Given the intercultural and heterogeneous make-up of the writings groups, these aspects could easily be perceived by participants as potentially revealing their identity.

On the other hand, it was partly the private intensity and reduced size of the workshops which manifested how quickly “imagined borders” and “world” divisions fall apart when looking closely at individual migrants’ stories.

## THE CONTEXT

### Shaking imagined migrations

Towards this article’s beginning, a tentative account of hegemonic migration narratives has been provided. This section, in an equally succinct and generalized manner, aims to address some of those ideas and their partially fictional and constructed nature.

Firstly, many of the elements mentioned are, of course, at least partially true. North-South divisions are not arbitrary and indicate complex historical differences in relation to roles played in colonialization processes, access to economic development and connection to global inequalities, among many other factors. Nation-state divisions, though they keep on shifting, have been constructed in such a powerful and thorough manner that one cannot argue for their present lack of reality. As Khosravi observes in his “The ‘illegal’ traveller: an auto-ethnography of borders”, “Borders of nation-states have come to be a natural order in human lives” (2007, p. 321). Also, an enormous amount of people do move from Southern to Northern nation-states, with current migration flows in this direction consisting of a total of 85.3 million people (IOM 2017, Data 2015). Furthermore, the majority of migrants are indeed male (IOM 2017, Data 2015), and economic reasons are certainly important motivating factors for displacement (e.g. Mihai, 2016).

Nonetheless, many of these “facts” are more fragile than one might at first expect. As to the North-South division, it is well known that this is largely based on a distinction between a “developed” North and a “developing” South, with “development” usually understood in economic terms, indicating high levels of industrializa-

tion and a high gross national income (GNI) per capita (United Nations [UN], 2014). However, as also occurs through the stories of individual lives to be presented, this concept of development is highly questionable. It has, for example, been argued that a high GNI does not necessarily correlate with high levels of happiness (Helliwell, Layard and Sachs, 2017), as “the increase of material wealth does not necessarily lead to greater wellbeing, let alone to human dignity” (Castells and Himanen, 2014, p. 2). In his foreword to *Hybrid Cultures*, Rosaldo also observes how this “absolute ideological divide between North and South” (1995, p. xiii), can obscure serious “development” issues - such as infant mortality rates among African Americans in the US - in the “developed” North (Rosaldo, 1995, pp. xiii-xiv).

The “imagined” nature of the nation-state has been so well discussed (and re-discussed by participant migrants, to be shown), one needs to simply refer one more time to Anderson’s notion of imagined communities (1993), as well as perhaps Hobsbawm and Ranger’s (1992) outline of the way in which *invented* traditions have attempted to give legitimacy to the *invented* reality of nation-states. In his previously mentioned auto-ethnography of (illegal) migration, Khosravi furthermore implies that the inherent fragility of nation-state borders turns movers into the symbolic representation of these borders. Indeed: “they are forced to *be* border” (2007, p. 333). Migrants’ bodies become the spaces where nation-state limits become negotiated, constructed, and defined.

In addition to these “conceptual complications”, the ways migrants move between nation-states are also complex. Scholars of transnationalism have long illustrated how in times of globalization, constant technological advances, cheaper travel etc., “migration is a global, multidirectional process that involves multiple origins and destinations” (Guarnizo *et al.*, 2017, p. 2). There appear to be ever increasing trends of transmigration (e.g. Guarnizo, 1997) and multiple migration (Bhachu, 2015). What is more, people’s cultural, ethnical and national affiliations have often become so complicated that many end up constituting “an ethnic minority of one” (Brayfield, 2009, p. 205).

Turning towards more tangible “migration facts”, the world’s biggest migration flow is not actually from the global South to the global North, but within the South, with an estimated total of 90.2 million “members” (IOM

2017, Data 2015). As to North-South migration, it amounts to an estimated total of 13.7 million North-South migrants (UN, 2017, p. 1). Also, male movers only form a slight majority, according to recent figures accounting for 52 % of all migrants (United Nations, 2017). It is also not true that migrants “flood” countries – they tend to move in stable and hence manageable patterns (Sassen, 1996, pos. 114). As to the previously outlined focus on economically motivated displacement, this notion often obscures the fact that:

an increasing number of migrants are forced to leave their homes for a complex combination of reasons, including poverty, lack of access to healthcare, education, water, food, housing, and the consequences of environmental degradation and climate change, as well as the more “traditional” drivers of forced displacement such as persecution and conflict (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner [OHCHR], 2018).

Finally, among those who do move to increase their opportunities, the subsequent analysis of workshop writings will show that they do by no means always move from the “rich” North to the “poor” South in order to achieve these – and many other – objectives.

### **Mexico, Guanajuato, San Miguel de Allende: The present setting of migrants’ writing**

Before turning to detailed discussion of the workshop data obtained, however, it is important to briefly glance at the setting(s) of the workshop conducted.

In their writings about new migration trends, Castles and Miller – much in harmony with complexities previously outlined – explain how the “old dichotomy between migrant-sending and migrant-receiving states is being eroded. Most countries experience both emigration and immigration (although one or the other often predominates) while some countries have taken an important role as transit zones” (2009, p. 7). This is certainly the case for Mexico. Although most (in)famous for its mass expulsion of movers,<sup>6</sup> it also plays an increasingly important role

as a country of transit<sup>7</sup> and immigration.

It is difficult to obtain exact and recent figures of migration to Mexico. A 2012 report on foreigners in Mexico (based on data from 2009) lists US citizens as the biggest migration group, followed – in this order – by Spain, Argentina, Colombia and Canada (Chávez and Cobo, 2012, p. 25). In fact, US migrants continue to form the largest migration group to Mexico.<sup>8</sup> Many US citizens in Mexico are retirees, as are many of the growing number of Canadians residing in the country. However, as mentioned with regard to previous research conducted, the intercultural tapestry of migrants to Mexico is also made up of the rapidly rising number of (often US) returnees,<sup>9</sup> European movers (many of them from Spain, with figures estimated to have risen to about 131 thousand in 2017 [Zuñiga, 2017]) and – as has not as yet been captured by the previously provided figures – migrants from Japan. With regard to the latter, it has been possible to obtain more recent numbers only with regard to the region of Guanajuato which this work focuses on.

The state of Guanajuato in Central Mexico, then, may not be the home to the largest number of immigrants to Mexico, but is certainly an intercultural centre of many relevant migration trends taking place. One of the most important aspects is indeed the rapidly increasing presence of Japanese within the State. This is partly due to Guanajuato forming part of the Mexican Bajío region which, sometimes referred to as “a Mexican diamond” (Peniche and Mireles, 2015), is a crucial place for many industries attracting foreign – including Japanese – investment (Olvera, 2015). Hence, the number of Japanese in the area is supposed to have quadrupled within the past couple of years (Hernández, 2017), now forming the second largest migrant groups within the state after US Americans (Hernández, 2015).

What is, furthermore, interesting, is the place Guanajuato seems to have obtained in celebratory North-South migrant narratives (Croucher, 2009). Even a brief glance at some of the many sites – often dedicated to (aspiring)

<sup>6</sup> Almost 12 million Mexicans live abroad, the vast majority of which resides in the United States (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> This is a highly important problematic issue in its own right that cannot be discussed within the limited scope of this article.

<sup>8</sup> The U.S. Department of State (2018) speaks of 1.5 million US residents in Mexico; however other sources mention as many as two million (Sandoval Díaz, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Estimated at over 1.4 million in 2015 (Masferrer, 2017).

“expats”<sup>10</sup> – shows a portrayal of the state as an ideal “setting” for this counter movement. As such, Guanajuato not only allegedly “lives and breathes music” (Haskins and Prescher, 2017), but also apparently enchants migrants because of its “spring-like weather year-round” (Nelson, 2017). The praise intensifies around the town of San Miguel de Allende, a small city in the east central part of the State (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018) with about 70.000 thousand inhabitants (Calzada, 2016). In fact, San Miguel de Allende is not only closely associated with the arts (Calzada, 2016) but has received interesting praise such as being elected as the “friendliest city in the world” for the second consecutive year by Condé Nast in a “Readers’ Choice Award” (Condé Nast Traveler [CNT] editors, 2018). The same source describes San Miguel as a “dynamic Spanish Colonial town”, with a “storybook-like setting—complete with colorful facades and jacaranda blossoms” (CNT, 2018). Despite the city’s association with US and Canadian retirement migrants, it also attracts a number of younger migrants (CNT, 2018), as well as movers from around 74 different nations (Calzada, 2016), with foreigners making up around 17 % of the city’s population (Calzada, 2016).

It is chiefly for these reasons that the State of Guanajuato in general and the city of San Miguel in particular have been chosen as sites for the writing workshops conducted. And after this outline of the theoretical and geographical context, it is time to move onto a detailed discussion of workshops, including their basic methodology and results.

## THE WORKSHOPS: MANY STORIES TOLD

### An outline

As said, a total of two workshops were conducted during the first half of 2017, one for the entire State of Guanajuato on-line (in Spanish and English), the other one on-line and face-to-face (in English) in San Miguel de Allende. They were based on a mixed expressive writing methodology, combining reflexive and expressive auto-

biographical writing tasks, following by evaluations of individual sessions and the workshops as a whole.

Reflexive writing exercises mainly elicited participants’ responses to questions about their individual migration experience, including their reasons for movement and its personally positive as well as negative aspects. The expressive autobiographical writing was based on a personal adaptation of the Pennebaker method which, as outlined, invites participants to write about personal trauma in four consecutive sessions. This was changed to a model where participants were asked to divide their life stories so far into five sections and write fast about one part during each session. This method has been created as a response to the perceived “heaviness” of Pennebaker’s trauma-oriented scheme (see Chibici-Revneanu, 2016), as well as, the impossibility of trauma-based writing to be revealed to others (e.g. Pennebaker and Evans, 2014). Following the previously described ideal to conduct research that “gives something back”, the growing literature on the therapeutic function of working with personal narrative among migrants was also taken into consideration (e.g. Losi, 2006).

The evaluation process was chiefly based on questionnaires to be answered by participants after each session. These too were inspired by Pennebaker’s model on how to evaluate individual expressive writing experiences (2014). However, differently from Pennebaker’s quantitative focus where participants assign numerical values regarding the effects produced by their literary experience, they were now asked to create elaborate written responses which enabled further narrative analysis.

The face-to-face and on-line workshop in San Miguel consisted of a total of six sessions, spread out over six weeks. There were eight participants, three men and five women. The on-line workshop was held over five consecutive days, and also had eight participants<sup>11</sup>. Writers narrated the following migratory trajectories: Spain-Mexico (1), Rumania-Spain-Mexico (1), Japan-US-Mexico (1), US-Mexico (2), Canada-Mexico (3), Mexico-US-Mexico (2, return migration). Given the nature of the workshop, there were also a few Mexican participants (3) - one of which had lived in Spain for a while<sup>12</sup> - as well three migrants from the “South”. These were multiple migrants and two

<sup>10</sup> Several scholars, including Croucher (2009), provide a detailed analysis of the word “expat” and its ideological and political implications of privileged movers (pp. 23-24), which arguably obscure the fact that ex-patriates are also, inherently, “migrants”.

<sup>11</sup> As some participants dropped out due to time difficulties, only those who made significant research contributions are mentioned here.

<sup>12</sup> However, the stay was arguably not long enough to justify a categorization as a return migration.



had lived in “the North” before moving to Mexico. As such, their trajectories were Chile-Venezuela-Mexico (1); Venezuela-Spain-Mexico (1) and Mexico-Spain-Brazil (1). This in itself seems to act as a reminder of the increasing complexity of the migration process and how it cannot be defined by neat categories.<sup>13</sup>

## Individual tales

### *Why did participants move from the North to the South?*

One of the issues focused on during the workshops, then, was the motivation behind participants’ decision to come to Mexico. It was interesting quite how consistent the key motivators of participating North-South migrants were with those of more thoroughly studied movers from South to North (see also Croucher, 2009). At the same time, individual accounts also began to question some of the common “migration narrative” assumptions. As such, while economic motivators were – for instance – part of their stories, they were clearly not the only ones.

On the whole, workshop members moved to Mexico in order to accompany their spouses, to increase their financial and/or professional status, improve their health, seek higher levels of well-being and to escape cultural norms experienced as oppressive. Often, many of these reasons were combined. As to the North-South participants who came to Mexico to accompany their spouses, among the three, two were men, hence not adhering to the previously mentioned “migrant role” of women as typical accompanying spouses.

As to direct economic reasons and a drive towards professional improvement, two participating migrants respectively left Spain because “In Mexico, I found a good job” (L.S.<sup>14</sup>) and because “the economic situation (in Spain) got increasingly worse...so we decided to try our luck in Mexico” (Z.Q.). This is in harmony with Laczko and Brian’s point that many North-South migrants are driven out of their home countries because of the economic crisis (2013) and is a notable reversal of “migration to ex-colonies” tendencies (Sassen, 1996). North-South movement due to work in multinational companies was

another important factor mentioned by Laczko and Brian (2013) and this indeed lay behind a Japanese participant’s migrant “decision” – she followed her husband who was sent to work in Guanajuato. Interestingly, she does not regard this as an entirely voluntary form of migration. As she explains: “there are many things which I cannot ‘chose’ like natural disaster and orders of a company” (H.M.). Her migration can almost be regarded as a kind of company driven “exile”, showing how even privileged migrants may experience subtle forms of “forced migration” in a capitalist system (note the equivalent power given to “natural disaster” and “orders of a company”).

A search for economic and professional development also partially motivated two return migrants to re-cross the Mexican border. They had both arrived in the US as small children and by now identified strongly with the US (especially in the case of M.S.). Nevertheless, the latter:

decided to return to Mexico it was 2006. I was under a lot of pressure because...I was trying to go to college under a student number and not a social security number like everyone else. I knew that after I completed all of my credits I still would not get my degree and I would still be working in a restaurant while all of my friends were working in great places (M.S.).

Evidently, in the United States, this workshop assistant’s status as an illegal immigrant marginalized him with regard to his professional development. It was by becoming a “foreigner” in a nation his passport belonged to that he could boost his education and career. The other participating return-migrant recounts a similar situation, emphasizing how: “In Mexico, I am living what most Mexicans who migrate to the States refer to as the American Dream” (X.L.). What seems particularly relevant here is X.L.’s reference to “the American Dream”, incidentally drawing attention to another imaginary and narrative (“dream”) aspect commonly associated with migration. However, for both X.L. and M.S. the “setting” of this narrative has now been reversed (“to Mexico”, M.S.; “in Mexico”, X.L.).

A frequent impoverishment of US retirees, as well as many US and Canadian pensioners’ general opportunity to lead more affluent life-styles by crossing the Mexican border southwards, are other common financial motivators for North-South migration (e.g. Croucher, 2009;

<sup>13</sup> Of course, the prevalence of Spain in multiple migrant trajectories stands out but is not further analyzed due to the small number of participants which does, as said, not allow for generalizations on growing migration trends.

<sup>14</sup> All initials are false, to protect participants’ privacy.

Scherber, 2011). However, this was not explicitly mentioned by any of the participant US or Canadian movers. Whereas one US and three Canadian workshop members were pensioners, they referred to other reasons for moving, with health issues being a rather prominent one. One Canadian came to the State of Guanajuato after a health scare and because she was “really clear that I want to be in the place I love the most when there is a danger” (S.W.). Another Canadian found her health radically improved when she came to Mexico on a vacation, which is why she decided to permanently move there. Whereas, in her words “in Toronto my quality of life was really, really bad”, in Mexico “my symptoms got a lot better...The difference in my health is so huge here” (L.M.).<sup>15</sup> Although this is a complex issue, this woman’s individual experience arguably not only once more questions assumptions surrounding “voluntary” and “forced”, but also “privileged” and “non-privileged” migration. Indeed, the health struggles she narrated are so profound, they beg the question whether basic financial security (although it does commonly correlate with better health care) is the chief privilege to be considered.

Another common denominator among participant North-South migrants – arguably interlinked with the health aspect just mentioned – was that of moving to Mexico for increased psychological well-being, partly by escaping cultural norms that were experienced as oppressive. The return migrant M.S. stated that he also wanted “to come back to reside in Mexico in order to pursue my well-being as a matter of fact. Life in the US was very stressful at that time.” A young woman from the United States came to Mexico to regain her balance after a traumatic break-up. Another US migrant to Mexico movingly explained how: “I am here to sort of be melted. To be molded or...sort of get some cracks and let the light in me so that I could become more loving, more kind and more generous...” (S.B.).

More specifically with regard to cultural norms, S.B. also commented on the way in which living in Mexico helped her side-step discriminative gender norms – especially the, according to her, negative treatment given

to elderly women in the US. As such, she explained that she felt older in the United States and wrote in an autobiographical poem (excerpt):

no rush/ Leaving behind schedule and deadlines/  
Ease, respect for the *mujeres mayores* who line the  
streets...*Música* that permeates the city/bringing joy,  
reminders of a way of being (S.B.).

Clearly, she highlights respect for elderly women (“*mujeres mayores*”) as something she appreciates in Mexico<sup>16</sup> – a fact which reverses the previously mentioned notion that women only travel from the South to the North to escape limiting gender norms.

As some previous quotes already imply, other perceived “cultural norms” that several North-South migrants tried to escape from are those frequently associated with economically developed nations. M.S. felt life in “the North” was “too stressful”, S.B. happily emigrated to a place where she felt “no rush/ Leaving behind schedule and deadlines” and R.Z. commented on that “I have so much time here”. Another North-South migrant – a Canadian – quite explicitly referred to her nation of origin as “the North” and stated how, in Mexico: “I feel free to enjoy life in a way that my rational pursuits and activism in the north seem to interfere with” (S.W.).

Of course, participant migrants who celebrated a less stressful life in Guanajuato had also chosen life-circumstances and homes from amongst Mexico’s hyper-diversity<sup>17</sup> that most suited this particular aspiration. If there are, however – as other scholars such as Hall (1977) have argued – some generalized differences between the use of time in different societies, North-South migrants may well have been attracted to a “Mexican” time model. Albeit I make such observations only tentatively, this nevertheless implies that some movers might actively flee from a usage of time also described by Akhtar as a key struggle for many South-North migrants (2014, p. 11).

On the whole, then, many North-South participants found more space for personal development in officially less developed countries. What also stood out was – as

<sup>15</sup> Migration to Mexico due to health reasons is more common than may be expected. As Croucher analyzes, a large amount of US citizens come to Mexico because they experience better and more affordable health care South of their border. Among other examples, Croucher cites an US American who comments: “I had become too sick to live in America. Even with private insurance, even with Medicare, we wouldn’t keep up with our medical bills. So we found a country where we could and we left” (Doug Bower as cited in Croucher 2009, p. 57).

<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, trying to get away from negative gender stereotypes emerged as a rather common push factor for women pensioners from the United States, as analyzed in Croucher’s study of migrants to Mexico (2009). As one of her interviewees stated: “Older women are respected here (...). It is horrible being an older woman in the US” (woman in San Miguel as cited in Croucher, 2009, p.60).

<sup>17</sup> Note that the OECD actually lists Mexico as the country with the highest average amount of working hours per week. See, for instance, Snyder and Jones (2015).

said - that many participants were not driven by one, but several, often interconnected motives. As such, a North-South migrant explained that although he overtly came to Mexico for improved professional opportunities, this was the “formal but not the profound” reason (G.P.), which was much more closely related to an emotional need to get away and to change his environment (G.P.). Similarly, the Canadian who was driven to Mexico by health issues emphasized that she also came because she had always loved Latin culture, its vibrancy and sense of family, wherefore Mexico “feels like home for me” (L.M). Similarly, a previously cited migrant who left Spain partially for better job opportunities, also came to Mexico to accompany his spouse (Z.Q.).

Furthermore, it was striking that migration motivators were not only mixed and sometimes manifold; they also sometimes departed from strict “rational” calculations. Although this may be partially correlated to the self-selection process which evidently attracted migrants interested in writing and possibly story-telling, some of their motivators – like the reverse American dream mentioned - were indeed strikingly “narrative” and non-rational (see the Todaro-Smith model previously referred to) in nature.

This sense of “narrative” drivers, for instance, emerged from a return migrant’s explanation that he moved to Mexico after reading Paulo Coelho’s bestselling novel:

*The Alchemist*...it really motivated me to leave the place where I was. I wanted adventure, I wanted to find my place...I wanted the mysticism that surrounds the meaning of life. Therefore...I came to Mexico (M.S.).

Another US migrant related one of the reasons for her happiness in San Miguel de Allende to a somewhat mystical story she had heard about crystals underlying and protecting the city: “There is this positive energy that has always been in this area...If you can let yourself go enough to sort of take that in” (S.B).

Also, some migrants alluded to other, somewhat “mysterious” driving forces such as luck and coincidence. The migrant who left Spain and accompanied his wife, for instance, not only came to “try his luck” in Mexico, he also wrote about how “a coincidence made me find out” that someone with his characteristics was needed

in the city where he currently lives. This, according to him, was “another big opportunity which life has given me in a moment where I didn’t quite know where to go” (Z.Q.).<sup>18</sup> Therefore, his migration decision was not associated with personal agency only, but rather arose in an interaction with life as a greater, not entirely controllable force (“life has given me”).

Other studies on North-South migrants also contain implicit references to such “narrative” motivators. Scherber (2011), for instance, presents an interview with a US migrant to Mexico who explains that “The reason I came here is because I had a dream...my best friend...said to me, in the dream, what would you have to do to move to San Miguel?” (Vandiver as cited in Scherber, 2011, pp. 1-2). Although only very briefly presented here, I believe more research is needed on such “narrative” push-pull factors, generally (e.g. the importance of the American dream) and with specific regard to North-South migration. It may well be that there is a more common trend for citizens from “developed” nations to seek more “spiritual” depth (e.g. “wanted the mysticism that surrounds the meaning of life”, M.S.) and story-like adventures in “developing” ones (see, for instance, Korpela 2017 on North-South migration to India). Indeed, as another return migrant mentioned regarding his new life in Mexico: “I found my spiritual side, the love of my life...all my dreams have come true thus far” (X.L.).

### *Tales of darkness and light*

As has been said, the existent literature on the psychology of migration – often implicitly focused on South-North migrants (e.g. Akhtar, 2014, p. 11) - highlights many losses usually involved in the process of migration. Despite the fact that participating movers were all now in a position of relative privilege, they referred to many of these “common” struggles as well.

One difficulty for many North-South participants was the separation from loved ones. Although I have cut references to countries of origin to further save-guard participants’ privacy in this matter, there were several

<sup>18</sup> Incidentally, two “South-South” migrants (from Venezuela) expressed their “decisions” to migrate in comparable terms. While the on-going political struggles in their home country formed the backdrop for their departures, one came to Mexico following “this part inside of us that drives us and pushes us towards something...it is our intuition (C.A., my translation). Another explained how “Mexico brought me here to teach me how to live” (J.L., my translation).

tales of unhappiness due to (grown-up) children and small grand-children “left behind”. Also, there were accounts of guilt. As this North-South migrant reports: “Deep inside of me, I still have to liberate myself from this sensation of sadness and guilt...[caused] by leaving my country”. A painful separation from family and friends was also repeatedly evoked by participating South-South and internal migrants, indicating this as a struggle for movers from across different groups.<sup>19</sup>

Other common problems mentioned by North-South participants were language issues, missing familiar customs and landscapes, and – more specifically with regard to their host country – a preoccupation with Mexico’s vast social inequalities and lack of security. A migrant from Canada states that “a PS on all this loving Mexico has to be a huge hesitation about the violence that has erupted here in recent years and the poverty that affects people no matter how hard they work” (S.W.). Or, as a migrant from Japan comments: “In Mexico, there are many car-break-in, robbers, kidnaps, and even car accidents. Japan is said [to be a] super safe country” (H.M.).

On a lighter note, this same migrant also alludes to experiencing “many difficulties” due to her “little above basic level” Spanish. However, in an interesting twist, she explains some unexpected benefits of this problem: “I don’t know why but I like being a minority...And sometimes I hear some gossip which I don’t want to hear. In those situations, I sometimes pretend I don’t understand anything” (H.M.). Again, this arguably questions the assumption – which, as will be shown in a moment clearly remains accurate in many cases – that being a member of a “minority” group is always a “negative” experience. Rather, the migrant makes active use of her role as a foreigner and even related stereotypes to escape from uncomfortable social situations (“gossip which I don’t want to hear”).

Nevertheless, whereas this North-South migrant has a very positive outlook not only on her language difficulties, but even her minority status, others did report problems with the latter. As one mover from Europe mentions, he struggled to “break already pre-formed and deeply anchored stereotypes” (Z.Q.). A migrant from Canada confesses that in her adopted home town: “I feel

the division between gringos and Mexicans is deep. And I walk the streets feeling like the other” (S.W.). A return migrant recounts how he was once told off on the bus for speaking English, because: “Spanish is spoken in Mexico” (M.S.). Clearly, North-South migrants are also not exempt from suffering discrimination and exclusion in their host countries.

Still, many of the North-South (as well as South-South) participants did *not* recount any negative experiences with the host society but felt very well received.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, to represent the majority of participant migrants as deeply suffering individuals would miss the clear mixture of light and dark of their experience. This ambivalence was, for instance, beautifully expressed by the same North-South migrant who felt like “the other”. As she explained:

I’m not sure what all to include in the general concept of well-being but I’m sure I have more of it here in Mexico. It has to be an impressive amount to convince me to live so far away from my wonderful sons and grandchildren in Canada (S.W.).

Others also celebrated the mind-opening potential of migration (e.g. “learning about other cultures enriches the soul and makes one more open, more tolerant” Z.Q.), and included many declarations of love for their host country, Mexico. Migration, for some participants – and perhaps many other migrants from and to multiple places – thus seems to involve a complex combination of suffering and joy.

### *Imagined divisions*

Another important aspect that arose from the workshops was the way in which participating migrants’ life stories and reflections indeed revealed the “constructed” na-

<sup>19</sup> Even though she “only” moved from one city to another, one participant, for instance, reported how: “The distance from your family doesn’t weigh on you at first...then you understand that having left is not something that ends with this action, but that eternally leaves you as if divided in two” (R.S., my translation).

<sup>20</sup> There is – of course – also criticism directed at North-South migrants, especially those living in cultural enclaves such as San Miguel de Allende. According to Croucher (2009) these movements can also be interpreted as a form of Neo-colonialism that have in part had a negative effect on the host community by driving up property prices to an extent that some locals now find them unaffordable. If I have not addressed these issues further in this article, it is because they did not seem overly relevant with regard to the highly respectful North-South movers who participated in the workshops. More importantly, however, this is based on an ideological conviction that even though arguably all migration movements cause problems, they ultimately benefit host societies – no matter their direction. In the case of Mexican migrant communities, they have, for instance, also significantly boosted the local economy and many movers have been very actively involved in the battle for improved social justice (Croucher, 2009).



ture of neat nation-state and North-South divisions. To begin with, one multiple migrant (North-North-South), for instance, wrote when asked about his experience of being “a foreigner”:

Personally, I find the word “foreigner” very strong, let’s not forget that this term mainly describes a person’s legal status and does not necessarily match with who this person really is. Borders are a human invention (Z.Q.).

Here, he clearly points towards the constructed nature of nation-states and their borders (“Borders are a human invention”), a perception possibly shaped or strengthened by his personal life experiences.

As to the North-South division into a “developed” and a “developing” world, this already started to be questioned by the fact that many workshop participants found greater opportunities for development in a “developing” nation. However, the potential vagueness of this separation was perhaps made most evident by the participant return migrants from the US. It has been mentioned that both “returnees” arrived in the United States as small children, in one case due to extreme poverty (in the other for reasons not mentioned in his writing). As the former recounts, his father died while his mother was pregnant with him, wherefore he, as well as his mother and older brother, experienced “a very difficult time...all we had to eat were flour tortillas with mayonnaise and water with lime juice” (M.S.). Soon, they left for the United States:

I remember crossing the Rio Bravo on the inner tube of a tractor or trailer tire. Now that I think about it, I could’ve died if anything had happened...We were both being tugged by polleros. These dudes looked tough and the water went up to their chests. I remember that the section where we crossed did not have a strong current, but it did have one and if anything had happened, we would have drowned because none of us knew how to swim (M.S.).

What M.S. vividly describes here is, evidently, a moving tale of undocumented migration to the United States, with two boys and their mother risking their lives to survive.

Years later, the participant somewhat paradoxically returns to Mexico to improve his life situation yet again. While this aspect has already been looked at, I would like to stress the way in which he now approaches Mexico, enchanted by the country yet having to “accept that living in a third world country is very different than where we were” (M.S.).

In some ways, M.S. was an almost stereotypical South-North migrant as a child, yet later became a North-South migrant, the borders crossed and re-crossed, as well as united in one person. Also, in his tale, the mover’s cultural affiliations shift alongside his changing “categories”. For if he initially uses the first person plural (arguably highlighting a sense of collective belonging) to describe his and his brother’s “illegal” displacement (“we were both being tugged by polleros...we would have drowned”), it later resurfaces to distance himself and an undefined group from Mexico (“very different from where we were), now somewhat disparagingly described as “a third world country...”. This arguable unity of intermingled North-South affinities was also matched by the other return migrant, who repeatedly pledged his allegiance to both and neither the US and Mexico (e.g. “I was born in Mexico but, as I was raised in the States, I kind of feel as a foreigner to both countries (the US and Mexico)” (X.L). Here, it can be argued that the very choice of words of feeling “as” instead of “like” a foreigner can be seen as a potential influence of the Spanish language (“me siento como”), further highlighting the writer’s ambiguous cultural and linguistic affiliations. Also, his feeling “as” a foreigner could be interpreted as a subtle indication that his experiences are continually filtered and affected by his double and at the same time not-belonging.

Finally, the partly “fictitious” nature of neat North-South separations was emphasized by some internal migrants. Not only were their tales strikingly similar to those reported by international migrants from all directions (e.g. they also recounted leaving their homes due to factors such as health, well-being and security); but one participant seemed to have her own tale of a temporary “North-South” migration *within* the Mexican nation-state. Before relocating to the State of Guanajuato, she had already moved to a particularly poor area of Mexico – where in her own words: “death harvests from the poorest” (R.S.) - to live with a resident indigenous group, the rarámuri:

Soon I noticed that I will be the apprentice and that I was receiving things from the rarámuri, their culture, their language, their way of life, their cheerfulness, from the way they are united with nature and their closeness to god (R.S., my translation).

Due to the immense cultural diversity of Mexico, this internal migrant thus temporarily moved from her own more privileged place of residence to a less privileged one. While she came face to face with extreme poverty, she also experienced personal “development” (“I was receiving things”) in an apparently “less” developed place. This is by no means to idealize poverty. Still, it implies that for many of the participant workshop members apparently “less developed” cultures were perceived as very significantly developed in “other” (often non-economic) aspects of life (“Their way of life, their cheerfulness etc.”) which they considered crucial. In many ways, and as highlighted earlier with reference to Rosaldo, the “absolute ideological divide between North and South” (1995, xiii) can indeed obscure the immense inequality (as well as, of course, cultural diversity) existing within many nation states. In other words, many countries contain their own “developing South” and “developed North”.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, given the internal complexity of all places of departure and arrival – and as shown by participants’ statements – one person’s place of liberation and development can be another person’s home they desperately need to escape.

### Benefits of the writing workshops

Before moving onto the conclusion, I would like to add some benefits participants claimed to have obtained by the method of autobiographical expressive writing deployed. After all, it has – as said – been one of the basic research objectives of this article to produce research in a way that would “give something back” to participants.

Apart from many participants’ enthusiastic engagement with expressive writing (e.g. “writing is better than

talking, it relieves the soul”, R.N.), then, many of them (and no matter their origin) talked about cathartic experiences. One South-South migrant recounted how she “cried a lot while writing, I think it was a way of letting go” (M.J.). A return migrant, similarly, reported a growing sense of peace: “Remembering and putting it down in writing made me feel very at ease and at peace with the world” (M.S.). Often, these reactions were linked to a realization through writing that even the hardship all participants had been through in life had made them the person they were now. As a result, even thankfulness for past suffering emerged, as well as repeated allusions to the notion that: “I don’t think I would let go of anything because without the whole of it, I would not be the person I am today” (M.S.).

Engaging with their own narratives of crossing borders, participants hence not only helped to hopefully enlighten others with their experiences but also at least partially used their stories for a more positive vision of themselves and their lives.

### CONCLUSION

This article has been based on the assumption that many aspects commonly related to migration are “narrative” in nature, in the sense that they create a simplified coherence that is only partially true and rely on concepts that are socially constructed at their core. In order to question these notions, it turned towards a migration trend that is often over-looked in hegemonic narratives’ over-emphasis on South-North movement; namely from the North to the South. More specifically, the research focused on two intercultural, expressive and autobiographical writing workshops within the state of Guanajuato, Mexico.

Participants’ life stories contained rich and nuanced material which revealed both a notable diversity and underlying unity of narrated experiences. On the one hand, participant North-South migrants manifested many problems such as missing loved ones, struggling with language issues and discrimination that have also been studied more extensively with regard to South-North migrants. This, as Croucher highlights in her study of North-South movers, significantly points towards a “common humanity” of migration experiences (2009; p. ix). On the

<sup>21</sup> . . . . In fact, more recent studies confirm Rosaldo’s view on the matter. Therborn (2016), for instance, argues how in the United States differences of educational level and “race” lead to such varying opportunities for “development” as are, on a nation-state level, associated with the United States and Bolivia (p. 15).

other, the very individuality of participants' tales tentatively undermined a surprising number of assumptions about common migration narratives that went far beyond their reversal of usual accounts of South-North movement. The small number of participants happened to contain men as "accompanying spouses"; a woman who enjoyed her minority status and yet somewhat regarded herself as a "forced" (business) migrant; a woman whose health issues questioned the economical focus of common notions of "privilege" and many whose life stories did by no means match neat North-South or nation-state categories. In fact, their experiences come to somewhat question and undermine both.

Also – and this is a point of particular interest for future investigations – the motivators revealed were often a far cry from "rational" calculations frequently associated with migration decisions. Although movers wrote about many such motives, such as a wish for economic and professional improvement, they also appeared to be pushed by their own and other stories, coincidences and dreams. Perhaps studying these individual stories can go beyond humanizing the migration phenomenon, and also shed some light onto how to better handle other aspects of the migration crisis, including the continuing need to understand why many people move and where they decide to go.

Finally, the workshops also indicated that telling their stories was regarded as very helpful by most workshop participants, leading to reported experiences of catharsis, sense making, peace and gratitude. As said, I have also found this to be the case in previous studies on expressive writing workshops with migrants conducted (e.g. Chibici-Revneanu 2016, 2018), wherefore getting more migrants to write may also make for a simple and significant intervention to both improve their well-being and making their voices heard.

Indeed, looking at "privileged" migrants can help to clarify that people from many different contexts need or want to move; and if nothing else, I hope this can enhance an empathic approach to suffering migrants, those who ultimately need most attention. There are no "aliens" among the human species; only many who are driven to move, in all kinds of directions. In many ways, then, "migration is dynamic, multi-locational, and circular as well as a natural part of human culture" (Cohen and Sirkeci, 2011, p.8). Sometimes we move towards sur-

vival and safety; sometimes we simply need to change contexts to "shake things up". Ultimately, many crave to lead a more dignified life. Somewhere else.

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