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Review: Moving Matters: Paths of Serial Migration.
Susan Ossman. Stanford: Stanford University Press,
2013.

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Moving Matters: Paths of Serial Migration. *Susan Ossman.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013. 186 pp.

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Moving Matters is an anthropological text on how patterns of mobility shape individual subjects and ways of life, particularly for those who have lived in several different countries. Susan Ossman uses the term *serial migration*, to describe the pathways of people who have immigrated once to a new homeland, and later moved again to settle in a third. Identifying herself as a serial migrant, Ossman draws connections between her own experiences and those of her friends and interviewees who have made successive homes in three (or more) countries.

Unlike immigrants, who may feel suspended between two places and two oppositional ways of life, serial migrants have transcended this “in between” status in a process that Ossman claims her interlocutors experience as “liberation from the double bind of immigration” (p. 4). In moving beyond immigration’s duality, serial migrants perceive more possibilities in the world. Not merely traveling the globe but also settling in successive “homelands,” they form bonds of attachment in each place. They also confront complex questions regarding the significance of their life experiences in how they define themselves.

In the book’s initial chapters, Ossman develops the concept of the “serial migrant” by contrasting it with existing categories of mobile persons in social science scholarship. Chapter 1 focuses on the “cosmopolitan,” whose overriding characteristic Ossman presents as “disengagement.” Whereas the cosmopolitan is supposed to be aloof and unattached, however,

the serial migrant becomes practiced at settling and making social connections in different places during different eras of life. In chapter 2, Ossman considers the serial migrant in relation to the “nomad,” as depicted by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Here, one of the primary distinctions involves the nature of an individual’s relationship with the nation-state. Nomads ignore national boundaries, moving across them indifferently. Serial migrants, however, find meaning in cultural and national essentialisms, using each new set of borders they cross to mark the phases of their lives.

Chapter 3 brings serial migration into direct comparison with immigration itself, and here is where some of the book’s most salient points come to the fore. More than *cosmopolitan* or *nomad*, *immigrant* is a term that serial migrants often find applied to themselves in their third homelands. Many sense that they are being misrecognized, and some articulate how their experiences distinguish them from “regular immigrants”: one woman speaks of her serial mobility as part of her personal life plan, and a refugee man characterizes his as a matter of survival. Ossman argues that in these and other cases, having moved beyond the initial immigration and, thus, no longer being pulled between two countries, cultures, or communities, allows serial migrants to “subordinate”—this word recurs a few times in this chapter—place to time, to the individual’s own life story.

Chapters 4 and 5 continue in this vein, explicating issues of self and subject making for serial migrants. Chapter 4 reflects on how serial migrants rely on traditional nation-state boundaries and old-fashioned notions of holistic cultures to divide their life histories into chapters. Drawing on static political categories allows serial migrants to order their experiences, transforming successive intervals of life in different places into coherent stories of who they have become. Chapter 5 ponders how serial migrants achieve “self-continuity” through what might

seem like distinct life chapters. They may find that “different places bring out the self differently,” but in these differences they also find potential for social relationships in various contexts (p. 113). Connecting to others through social formations that transcend national boundaries allows serial migrants to maintain continuity through different homelands over time.

Chapter 6 describes a “poetics of attachment” in serial migration, explaining that although they may move on their own, serial migrants desire intimacy and cultivate social ties as they settle in each new homeland. Romance comes into play here as one of the factors that can persuade a serial migrant to settle in a new place—although what often follows is a subsequent move that the serial migrant and the (previously) nonmigrant spouse undertake together, perhaps growing closer through their shared migration experience. Likewise, resettling in a new homeland allows serial migrants to “test” their social attachments, which may adjust to new circumstances or be allowed to dissolve.

A central tenet of Ossman’s argument throughout the book and revisited in the brief Conclusion is that anyone can become a serial migrant, regardless of world region and of traditional categories of difference such as class, race, and gender. It is the experience of this particular pattern of mobility that produces serial migrants as subjects; they share the pattern, but no common association with a place and no common language. This is an intriguing proposition that calls for further research. One wonders if the notions of “settlement” and “homeland” have the same significance for the refugee and the domestic servant who appear in the book as they do for the other interviewees, who appear to be more economically and politically secure. Scholars of migration both within and beyond anthropology will find much to consider here, not least in how the “serial migrant” concept might refocus existing perspectives on the role of mobility in subject formation. *Moving Matters* also raises timely and provocative questions about doing

meaningful ethnographic fieldwork in a mobile world. Anthropologists are accustomed to studying their subjects “in context,” but Ossman maintains that the role of serial migrant defies contextualization, rendering traditional ethnographic methods inadequate. She makes a point of stating from the outset that the book contains little of the “thick description” for which anthropologists have become known. All the same, each chapter contains interview excerpts and ethnographic vignettes that not only illuminate her arguments but also provide a sense of her having “been there”—even if “there” in this case is many different places, and the only common thread between the individuals who appear is the fact of their having moved homelands at least twice.