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Oral Histories of Migration

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Introduction

This book grew from a simple premise: when people move, they carry worlds with them. Oral histories let those worlds speak in their own cadences—through pauses and laughter, through fragments of memory that tether the past to the present. In the pages that follow, readers will encounter migrants who traverse mountains and borders, who leave rural homelands for sprawling cities, and who weave new lives across oceans. Their narratives do more than recount destinations; they reveal how movement reshapes kinship, work, faith, and the substance of everyday life.

The project is both narrative and methodological. It compiles interviews gathered across neighborhoods, border towns, transit hubs, and diaspora communities, tracing rural-to-urban migration, transnational labor flows, and the formation of diasporas from and within South America. Alongside these lived testimonies, the book offers guidance for designing and conducting ethical oral-history projects. Each chapter pairs voices from the field with practical notes on approach—how to prepare, how to listen, and how to honor stories that are at once intimate and entangled with larger structures.

Ethics sit at the heart of this work. Interviews were approached as collaborations rather than extractions. Consent was not a one-time form but a continuing conversation; narrators were invited to review transcripts, suggest edits, choose pseudonyms, and decide what to keep private. We discuss power dynamics between interviewer and narrator, the risks of re-traumatization, and the responsibilities that come with archiving. Throughout, readers will find reflections on compensation, reciprocity, and the long afterlives of recorded stories.

Methodologically, the book is anchored in practices of careful listening and contextualization. We consider how translation shapes meaning, how memory is prompted by objects and places, and how silence can be as revealing as speech. Field notes, maps, and timelines help situate personal recollections within broader histories of land tenure, commodity booms, urbanization, and policy shifts. We also examine the logistics of research—building trust with community partners, training interview teams, protecting data, and managing the ethics of photography and audio in precarious settings.

The chapters are organized to move from context to corridors to communities. Early chapters sketch regional histories and internal migrations that have transformed cities and peripheries. Middle chapters follow labor routes—agriculture to factories, domestic work, construction—and the faith, music, and networks that sustain mobility. Later chapters consider diaspora life beyond the continent and return journeys that

complicate neat endings. Woven through are narratives that foreground gender, age, ethnicity, and sexuality, acknowledging that no single story can stand in for the many.

Ultimately, *Oral Histories of Migration* is an invitation. It invites readers to dwell with testimony, to recognize migrants as historians of their own lives, and to use oral history as a tool for both knowledge and care. For practitioners—students, community researchers, journalists, and scholars—it offers a toolkit for ethical practice; for general readers, it offers the intimacy of voice. We hope these pages serve as a bridge: between research and responsibility, between the here and elsewhere, and between the stories we record and the futures they help us imagine.

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CHAPTER ONE: Mapping Journeys: South American Migrations in Context

To understand migration in South America, you first need a map, but not just any map. You need one that shows rivers that become roads, mountains that double as borders, and cities that have grown like tides against the edges of older settlements. The continent's geography is a choreographer of movement. The Andes spine, stretching from the south to the north, has always been both a barrier and a corridor. It blocks easy passage and channels it through high-altitude passes where traders, herders, and families have crossed for centuries. The Amazon basin, vast and dense, has demanded different kinds of navigation—by boat, by foot, by following the logic of water rather than pavement. Coastal plains, meanwhile, have invited outward gaze, drawing people toward ports that link to global currents.

Movement here is layered. Some journeys are economic, some political, some existential. A farmer in the Peruvian highlands may move to Lima because drought has thinned his crops, while a professional in Buenos Aires might leave for Spain because of economic stagnation at home. A teenager from Quito may depart for Madrid not just for wages but for the chance to study, while an artisan from Medellín might travel to Santiago to join a partner and build a new workshop. These patterns do not fit neatly into categories of “push” and “pull.” They overlap and interact, producing routes that are circular, seasonal, and sometimes simultaneous. On a given day, someone is arriving as another is leaving, and the city hums with this crosscurrent.

Within South America, there are three broad types of movement that shape the narratives in this book. The first is internal migration, the steady flow from rural areas to cities, and from smaller towns to larger regional hubs. This has transformed national landscapes—expanding urban peripheries, thinning out countryside villages, and creating new neighborhoods where identities mix and clash. The second is cross-border migration within the continent, often driven by labor markets, proximity, and shared cultural histories. These are journeys that may be short in distance but complex in terms of legal status and social belonging. The third is transnational migration beyond South America, toward North America, Europe, and Asia. These routes carry different stakes—longer distances, more expensive and dangerous paths, and interactions with distant immigration regimes.

History casts a long shadow over these routes. The legacies of colonialism established extractive economies and patterns of land concentration that still influence who moves and why. The twentieth century's cycles of boom and bust—copper, coffee, oil,

soy, and more recently lithium—have drawn workers across regions and then displaced them when prices fall. Military dictatorships and civil conflicts in the 1970s and 1980s forced many into exile, creating diasporas that remain active today. The early 2000s saw waves of migration from Argentina and neighboring countries during economic crises, while the last decade has been marked by the Venezuelan exodus and movements sparked by governance collapse, environmental stress, and shifting labor demands. None of these is a clean historical chapter; they bleed into the present.

Countries function as both destinations and transit points, sometimes simultaneously. Argentina has long been a magnet for migrants from Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru, as well as for Chileans and Uruguayans during periods of instability. It is also a transit country for those heading to Chile or crossing toward Brazil and beyond. Colombia absorbs internal displacement due to conflict and economic pressures, and also serves as a corridor for Venezuelans moving southward. Ecuador has shifted from a country of emigration to one of immigration, particularly after dollarization in the late 1990s and again during the Venezuelan crisis. Chile's mining economy has attracted workers from across the Andes, while Brazil's megacities and agricultural frontiers draw internal migrants and neighbors alike. Uruguay and Paraguay, smaller and often overlooked, play vital roles as places of return, seasonal work, and family reunification.

Urbanization is the dominant context for internal migration. Santiago, São Paulo, Lima, Bogotá, and Buenos Aires have absorbed millions, creating dense peripheries where housing, services, and informality collide. The rhythm of city life is shaped by those who arrive—early morning street vendors from the provinces, domestic workers who commute long hours, construction crews built from Andean labor. Peri-urban settlements, often irregularly planned, become spaces of improvisation and community-building. Public transportation links neighborhoods and, in doing so, links generations. A bus ride from a peripheral district to the city center is a daily reminder of the distances people cross to make a living and a life.

Cross-border flows in the southern cone are shaped by labor and proximity. The Andean borderlands between Chile, Peru, and Bolivia are active corridors for seasonal agriculture and mining work. Families often split time between hometowns and work destinations, maintaining houses and relationships across both. The triple border region of Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina is another dynamic zone, with trade, informal markets, and service work weaving through towns like Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad del Este. Language shifts across these borders—Spanish, Portuguese, Guaraní—creating bilingual households and mixed identities. Legal status can change quickly depending on shifting policies and local enforcement, meaning that a worker's belonging might be recognized differently on opposite sides of the same street.

A significant portion of migration from South America is transnational, heading to

Spain, Italy, the United States, Portugal, and more recently Japan and the United Arab Emirates. Spain, with its historical and linguistic ties, has been a major destination for Ecuadorians, Colombians, Venezuelans, Argentines, and Peruvians. Italy's connections, particularly to Argentina and Peru, have shaped flows through family and community networks. The United States attracts migrants from multiple countries, often via complex routes through Central America and Mexico. Portugal has become an important destination for Brazilians and, more recently, Venezuelans and Africans moving via Brazil. Japan's technical training programs have drawn Brazilian workers of Japanese descent. These diasporas are not static; they evolve with visa regimes, labor demands, and family decisions.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted and redirected these flows. Border closures halted seasonal migration, while lockdowns intensified the vulnerabilities of informal workers. Remittances, a lifeline for many families, fluctuated as economies contracted. At the same time, digital tools—messaging apps, video calls, and social media—helped maintain connections across borders, reshaping how families communicate and plan. Migration routes adapted to health checkpoints, quarantine protocols, and new forms of documentation. The pandemic highlighted the interdependence between migrants and host economies, as well as the fragility of legal status when workplaces shut down and public services strained.

Maps and numbers provide a skeleton, but they rarely capture the emotional and material textures of migration. To appreciate how journeys are made, it helps to understand key terms and concepts that narrators themselves use. Terms like *transit*, *settlement*, and *return* describe not only physical movement but also phases of life and identity. *Circular migration* refers to the pattern of moving back and forth between places, often tied to seasonal work or family obligations. *Transit migration* involves crossing a country without staying long, sometimes to reach a destination further away. *Diaspora* describes communities that maintain ties to a homeland while building new lives elsewhere, often across generations. These concepts frame the stories that follow.

To illustrate the intersection of geography, history, and personal movement, consider five routes that recur in the narratives collected for this book. These are not exhaustive but help ground the analysis in everyday paths. They show how diverse the reasons for migration are and how they converge in particular corridors.

| Route | Primary Drivers | Key Hubs | Common Challenges |
|---|----------------------------------|------------------------------|--|
| Andean Mining Corridor (Bolivia–Chile–Peru) | Seasonal labor, commodity demand | Oruro, Antofagasta, Arequipa | Altitude, health risks, irregular status |
| Amazon River Routes (Brazil–Peru–Colombia) | Extractive economies, trade | Manaus, Iquitos, Leticia | Distance, infrastructure gaps |
| Southern Cone | Urban Industrial jobs, | Buenos Aires, | Documentation, |

| | | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Axis (Argentina–Chile services –Uruguay) | | Santiago, Montevideo | housing costs |
| Transatlantic Route to Spain | Diaspora networks, visas | Madrid, Barcelona, Lima, Bogotá | Asylum backlog, employment gaps |
| Northbound to the U.S. (via Central America) | Higher wages, family reunification | Panama, Mexico City, border zones | Dangerous crossings, detention |

Each of these routes is visible in the lived experiences that fill later chapters. The Andean corridor appears in stories of miners who work in high-altitude sites and return home for festivals and family events. The Amazon river routes echo in testimonies of traders moving goods between river towns and the challenges of long, isolated journeys. The southern urban axis features in narratives of domestic workers and construction crews building cities that are also homes. The transatlantic route carries the voices of professionals and students adapting to life in Madrid or Barcelona, maintaining ties through calls and remittances. The northbound corridor to the United States appears in accounts of arduous travel, detention, and the determination to reunite with family.

Several themes cut across these routes and recur in the interviews presented here. Labor is central—people move for work, but work conditions shape where and how they live. Family is a constant motivator and complicator; migration often expands the definition of family, creating networks of care that stretch across borders. Legal status is a daily reality, affecting access to healthcare, education, and safe housing. Gender influences opportunities and risks; women’s mobility is frequently tied to care work, and men’s to manual labor, though these patterns are shifting. Age matters—youth seek education and freedom, older migrants often move to follow children or retire. Ethnicity and race shape experiences of belonging and discrimination; Afro-descendant and Indigenous migrants navigate distinct challenges. Environmental pressures—floods, droughts, and extractive projects—push and pull people, especially in rural areas and peripheries.

The documentary record of migration is vast and varied. National censuses and household surveys provide numbers that can reveal broad trends but often miss irregular migrants and short-term movements. Administrative data from immigration authorities shows visa categories, asylum applications, and deportations but not the daily strategies people use to survive. NGO reports document conditions in shelters and border areas, capturing the humanitarian dimension. News archives highlight crises and policy debates. Satellite imagery and mapping projects visualize the spatial patterns of movement, from urban sprawl to shifting agricultural frontiers. Oral history complements these sources by centering voice and memory, explaining not only where people moved but why, how, and with what consequences.

Interpreting these sources requires caution. Migration statistics depend on definitions—who counts as a migrant, what legal categories apply, who is included in a

survey. Some movements are seasonal or short-term and may not be captured in annual data. Fear of deportation or mistrust of authorities can lead to underreporting. Data quality varies across countries and over time. Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches helps triangulate patterns and verify findings. Maps can show routes, but narrators explain detours, pauses, and unexpected stops. Timelines can mark policy changes, but oral histories reveal how those changes were felt—in wages, in family separation, in the ability to send a child to school.

Asking how many migrants there are requires a snapshot and a moving picture. The United Nations estimated in the early 2020s that more than seven million Venezuelans had left the country since 2015, with many staying within South America. Colombia and Peru host the largest numbers, followed by Chile, Ecuador, and Brazil. Argentina also receives significant flows, especially from Venezuela, Paraguay, and Bolivia. Emigration from South America to destinations outside the continent is harder to quantify precisely, but Spain and the United States host large communities from multiple countries. Brazil's internal migration is massive, with millions moving toward São Paulo and other states. These numbers shift with political and economic changes, and they are best seen as indicators rather than exact counts.

The legal frameworks governing movement are as varied as the countries themselves. Andean Community agreements facilitate some cross-border labor rights, while Mercosur arrangements offer limited regional mobility for certain nationalities. Bilateral agreements between neighboring countries often govern seasonal work and border crossing. Asylum laws vary widely; some countries have expanded protections for Venezuelans, while others have tightened entry requirements. Visa regimes for study and work shift frequently, influenced by domestic politics and international relations. Regularization programs have appeared in several countries, offering temporary or permanent status to migrants who meet certain criteria. Enforcement practices, from raids to checkpoints, shape daily life and movement patterns. Understanding these legal contexts is crucial to interpreting personal narratives of status and belonging.

To listen well to migration stories, you need a framework that situates personal experience within these broader structures. That framework includes geography, history, policy, and economy. It also includes the social fabric—neighborhoods, religious communities, labor unions, and informal networks that help people find jobs, housing, and support. A map of routes is incomplete without recognizing the people and institutions that guide, hinder, or accompany movement. Oral history is the method that links these layers, giving space for narrators to explain their decisions, their strategies, and their meanings. It is also a responsibility—to listen carefully, to ask ethical questions, and to protect privacy.

As readers move through the chapters, it helps to keep a few guiding questions in mind. Where do people start, and where do they hope to go? What obstacles appear

along the way—legal, economic, social, environmental? Who helps, who hinders, and who is left behind? How do identities shift with distance and time? What role do technology, money, and memory play in keeping connections alive? These questions are not meant to pin down answers but to open conversations. They invite readers to trace journeys with curiosity and care, and to see migration as a process rather than a single event.

This chapter has laid a foundation by sketching the geography of migration, the historical forces behind it, and the broad patterns across internal, regional, and transnational routes. It has outlined key terms and introduced the tools needed to map and interpret movement. It has also set up the structure of the book—moving from context to corridors to communities—and signaled how oral history will bring these frameworks to life. In the chapters that follow, you will encounter voices that traverse mountains and seas, cities and borderlands, and you will find methodological notes on how to listen, record, and learn from them. The map is ready; the journeys begin.

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