Telling stories: Migrant journeys and precarious work

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Abstract
According to the United Nations over 3 percent of the global population or 232 million people currently live outside their country of birth. Their significance as a growing proportion of the labour force in many European countries is widely known. It is also evident that women – many of them young - are increasingly represented among economic migrants and asylum seekers. However, the longer term contribution of women, as migrants and as workers, is less well recorded. Here, I explore the connections between migration and employment, through the lens of oral histories undertaken with women who moved to the UK. Their life stories illustrate the growing diversity among female migrants as well as the changing nature of women's employment. My key focus is, however, not on the work these women migrants undertook in the UK, but on precarious forms of waged work engaged in during the migration journey itself. I also reflect on oral history as a method and the problems of writing difference for feminist scholars working with and on women migrants.

Key words
Transit migration, women, narratives, UK, precarious work

Introduction

My aim here is to tell the stories of women's migrant journeys and to reflect on the implications of doing oral history. It is also a story of my own research trajectory. Over the last decade, the focus of my research has shifted from a general understanding of the gender divisions of labour in the UK to analyses of the contributions made to the British economy by women migrant workers across what, adapting Hobsbawm's (1994) definition of the twentieth century as a whole, might be termed 'a long half century', that is the years between the end of World War II and the expansion of the European Union in 2004 and again in 2010. My aim is to demonstrate the connections between mobility and labour market participation and segmentation, focusing on women who moved across national borders and who worked in a range of jobs and occupations in the UK over these sixty or so years (McDowell 2013, 2016). In these six decades, migrant origins changed. Women displaced by war in Europe countries were among the early post-war entrants to the UK, followed by post imperial migrants – from the Caribbean, East Africa and South Asia, in the decades between the last 1940s and the end of the 1970s - to an increasingly diverse group of women from a wide range of 'exporting' countries (Ruhs and Anderson 2010, Paul 1997, Vertovec 2007). At the same time, the UK labour marker was transformed from one largely dependent on manufacturing employment to a service dominated economy. British and non-British born women became an increasingly significant part of the labour force (Connolly and Gregory 2007), often employed in female-dominated jobs, and, typically for women migrants, in low paid, temporary or precarious work under conditions of uncertainty (Anderson et al 2006; Boulton and Houlihan 2009; Ciscel et al 2003; Datta et al 2007; MacKenzie and Forde 2007; Waite and Lewis 2017).

As I have argued elsewhere (McDowell 2009, 2013), if women workers, and migrant women workers in particular, are the focus of the analysis of post-war labour market change a different story than that of a radical transformation emerges. The conventional story of labour market change in economic geography and the social sciences more generally is of a binary shift. On the one hand, it is a story suffused by regret or nostalgia for a lost world of male camaraderie; one the other, a more heroic, celebratory narrative of the power of new technologies as the basis for a brave new world dominated by the exchange of weightless knowledge (Amin 1994, Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, Carnoy 2000, Sennett 2006). What these rhetorical devices ignore is key work by feminist labour theorists about jobs typically undertaken by women, especially in the arena of social reproduction (Mitchell et al 2003). As caterers, cleaners and carers, working class women perform 'feminised' tasks, often replacing former types of 'work' undertaken in the home for love by women in a different class position, advantaged by socio-economic change. This labour is also racialised and often globalised as the work closest in, looking after the bodies of others, is frequently performed by migrant women (Dyer et al 2008; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Kofman 2015).

The story of women's employment is one of change and continuity – changes in who is employed, on what basis, from which parts of the world, and continuities in the types of work women undertake as well as in its undervaluing and a resultant gender wage gap. The working lives of women who were born abroad bring the advantage of a clearer explanation of the bases of segmentation in the UK labour market (and elsewhere) (Brah 1996; Herbert 2009; Parutis 2011; Wills et al. 2010). Their migration and labour market histories reveal how the combination of stereotypical assumptions about gender and nationality disadvantage migrant women, showing how the intersection of class, gender, skin colour and nationality operates to disadvantage women migrants, particularly in commodified caring labour, where embodiment is crucial (Wolkowitz 2006). Further, a comparison of the changing nature of in-migration over a long time period reveals assumptions about the significance of racialisation, especially important in post-colonial migration into the UK (Paul 1997), but also permitting a new understanding of the social construction of whiteness as a multiple category and not solely a marker of privilege (Bonnett 2000; McDowell 2005, 2007; Roediger 1999).

My main source for this exploration of Britain's post-war labour market was oral history interviews carried with 98 women who entered the UK between 1946 and 2010. These women came from Europe (Latvia, Poland, Russia, Romania, Kosovo, France, Italy, Eire), from Africa (Eritrea, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa), the Americas (Canada, USA, Caribbean) and Asia (China, Malaysia, Philippines). They came as economic migrants and as refugees and asylum seekers, displaced by war, political unrest, marriage, and violence against the person. Some intended a temporary stay, others to remain in the UK; some came with a job offer but most without; some had been employed previously, in skilled and in unskilled work.

I have told their stories already in a variety of forms, including in articles and books (McDowell 2005, 2013, 2016) but also at conferences and at a literary festival. I want to turn

to some of the issues raised by this type of historical geography of migration journeys in the second part of this argument. First, however, I want to add a different, and more global, element to their histories, as well as to the scholarship on the connections between migration and labour market change. As I re-read these interviews more recently I realised that I had neglected one important aspect of these connections – the types of waged work done by women migrants during the journey from their countries of birth to the UK. As new work on transit migration (Collyer et al 2012; Duvell 2012) makes clear, migrants are commodities, their bodies are labour power, not just on arrival in the country where they settle, but also during their journey to it (Bredeloup 2012; Busse and Luque 2016;Fargues 2009; Schapendonk and Steel 2014). Furthermore migrant journeys are often protracted, spread across several national boundaries and sometimes over months or years, not hours or days. Increasingly migration is neither a single and permanent move from home to host nation, nor a single pattern in which the journey is followed by a search for work. Many women migrants to the UK no longer have a one- way ticket (Phizacklea 1983, 2003), but move across and between several countries, affected by war, famine, civil unrest, domestic violence as well as the more general condition of being a stranger. During these journeys across borders, they may intentionally search for work or find themselves precarious and exploited under a range of types of formal or informal contracts and conditions that may more closely approximate indentured rather than free labour. An analysis of their engagement in waged labour allows depth to be added to understandings of precarious work under different conditions.

To illustrate the diversity of twentieth century migration to the UK, the impetus to leaving home and the types of work women find or find themselves in *during* their journeys, as well as the potential of oral histories for understanding spatial flows and connections across space, I want here to retell part of the stories of just three women – Elvira, Hana and Fitore. This may seem a rather heroic claim but my aim is to show how detailed in-depth qualitative research methods and the inclusion of longer than typical interview transcripts, only lightly edited, in published material, is key to understanding the lives of transnational women migrants. A similar strategy was adopted by Janet Bowstead (2017) in her analysis of the journeys undertaken by three women migrants fleeing domestic violence.

The narratives included here are just three of those I had the privilege of hearing and recording. I selected these three stories as their lives illustrate some of the key moments in post second world war history and geography, as well as capture many of the reasons why women leave their country of birth. Their histories show the specificity of women migrants' lives, the connections between national and global events, the local effects of international systems of regulation and exclusion as well as the mechanisms of exploitation in formal and informal labour markets that position women as exploitable and un- or under-rewarded labour power.

Elvira (born in 1920), Hana and Fitore (both born in 1970) have been affected by some of the major events of the 20th century: by war and displacement, by civil unrest and internal disputes, by independence movements as well as by male violence, personal danger and by the loss of life of close family members. They were the subjects of border controls and of

various forms of imprisonment. They have been affected by religious intolerance and cultural misunderstanding. They have also worked in a range of typically feminised jobs across borders in Africa and in Europe. They differ, however, in their national origins and in the nature of their journey to the UK, although each of them lived for periods of between several months and some years in countries other than that of their birth and the UK, their final destination and permanent residence. In the following section, I briefly outline the key periods in the migration history of the UK both to place the stories of the three women in context and why the stories of women from the Caribbean and East Africa have not been included here.

Migration into the UK: a short history

The earliest post-war migrants, among them Elvira, was a group that is often omitted from histories on the UK. Between 1946 and the end of the forties, several thousand women refugees from parts of north-east Europe, including Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, entered the UK. These women, who were war-time refugees, fleeing their country as the Russian front moved west, had been housed temporarily, although for periods of up to five years, in displaced persons camps in Germany. From there they were recruited in the British sector as economic migrants and waged workers. They were to replace British women who had been employed during the first half of the 1940s, taking over previously male-dominated jobs as part of the war effort (Tannahill 1958). At the end of the war, not only were men returning to reclaim their jobs, but women were encouraged to replenish the depleted population. A version of domestic and maternal femininity was to be reinstated for UK-born women. Nevertheless, female-dominated parts of the economy as well as the new welfare services needed labour and so the state had to look elsewhere for workers. Perhaps surprisingly, one of the key places identified was the camps for displaced persons in Germany.

When these women arrived in the UK, they were redefined as 'European Volunteer Workers' (EVWs) rather than as refugees. In their own view they were asylum seekers but by a government edict in 1946 they were turned into economic migrants (McDowell 2005). They were allocated employment – usually as domestic workers in hospitals or in the textile industry in Lancashire and Yorkshire (Kay and Miles1992) – and were not permitted to move, either to a new job or a different part of the country for a specified period, typically of three years.

As the 1940s progressed, however, the British state began to look to its (former) colonial possessions for workers. The first site was the Caribbean as numbers rose in the 1950s and 1960s. Young Caribbean women answered the call from the British Government for workers to fill 'female' jobs, responding to recruitment drives by hospitals looking for nurses, or young women prepared to train as nurses (Bach 2007), and by London Transport officials seeking women workers. From the mid-1960s onwards, women from South Asia and of South Asian origins from East Africa entered the UK. These women were not looking for work initially, nor were they allocated employment by the state, but were instead more representative of a commonly-held view of women migrants as 'trailing wives', accompanying or following their husbands or other family members (Puwar and Raghuram

2003). Many of the women from South Asia and East Africa had not worked before, but economic necessity ensured that they had to find jobs soon after arriving in the UK. I have excluded these women and those from the Caribbean from the analysis that follows as, unlike many migrants, including Elvira, Hana and Fitore, neither group was employed during their journey to the UK which was accomplished in a few days by sea or a few hours by air.

In later decades migrant origins became more diverse. Newer migrants, as the half century progressed, included both economic migrants and asylum seekers whose lives were disrupted by war and internal unrest, by independence movements or by forms of personal violence, including sexual abuse. Hana, from Eritrea and Fitore from Kosovo, like Elvira, fled worn-torn states and Fitore also fled an abusive husband. Some women had papers, other did not. Fitore, as we shall see, entered the UK illegally. Across the six decades, but more commonly as the century drew towards a close, migration involved movement across several borders and a temporary stay in more than one country. And among these transnational migrants, some form of income-generating work was common, raising the question: what are the forms of temporary work done by women on the move under what circumstances?

To answer this question, I turn to the narratives of Elvira, Hana and Fitore. Through their own words their decision to leave home, the nature of the journey and how they survived, often through involvement in precarious forms of employment, is documented. My aim is to add greater complexity to research exploring the relationship between migration and employment and to partially address the relative absence of studies of women's work during transit.

Mobility, displacement and employment

The three stories are from different decades – the 1940s, 1980s and 1990s, capturing key moments of intense violence in Europe and in northern Africa: the Second World War, Eritrea's struggle for independence and the ethnic violence and armed conflict in the Balkans. The stories that follow are in the women's own voices, largely un-edited rather than, as is more usual in feminist geography so far, edited extracts used to illustrate more general lines of argument. Oral histories are, however, a now relatively common method among feminist scholars and there have been a number of interesting recent publications of based on women's direct voices (see for example the stories of Russian women soldiers during World War II (Alexievich 2017) and of men and women workers in the UK (Biggs 2015). The journalist, Studs Terkel, was an early advocate of this method and his book, *Working* (1974) remains a superb example for later exponents to try to match in depth and subtlety.

The first narrative is Elvira's. She left Latvia in 1944, as the Soviet army advanced westwards, travelling across Germany by train and cart before she was accepted by a camp in the British sector. She worked in a paper mill, on a farm and in informal domestic service during her journey across occupied Poland and in Germany, entering the UK in 1947 as an EVW to work in the textile industry, despite being a qualified teacher. The second story – Hana's - exemplifies post-war transnational journeys and shows how the asylum process

works. The third - Fitore's - is also an asylum narrative, one of irregular migration across several borders.

The narratives are extracts from longer conversations, largely reported verbatim. I have added comments at different points for clarification and to indicate similarities and differences in the three women's experiences. Following these narratives I address some of the issues raised both by adopting this method.

Elvira's story

I was born in the country, on my grandfather's farm. We lived there while I was going to school and I finished when I was 19. My dream was to be a teacher but I was ... too late to put in any applications anywhere. So I found a job in a factory, in the office, typewriting and that sort of thing. That was 39/40 and everything changed. All the dreams had to be scrapped because the Russians came in June 1940. It was a very frightening time. We didn't know what to expect.

And then the deportations happened in June 1941[1]. The phone rang and my boss answered ... said "you know what has happened tonight? Some people have been taken away". And so he said "Elvira, go and get some things together because it may be for us". What do you get together? It was the middle of summer but if it was for a long time you need winter clothes and so I just got some things together. We just waited but they didn't come for us.

The war didn't really affect us til 1941 when the Germans came in.... We had no real say in our lives when the Germans came. They made the rules and we had to obey. We were occupied and we had to obey. [But] things quietened down in a way, I thought "well, I could go to the teachers' training college now". There were some entrance exams but I passed and that was marvellous. ... I made it just in time. I went in 1942. And then in 1944 it all happened again.

We could hear the bombing and see the lights. We knew we had to go. We all decided we would go to Germany but later on my parents changed their mind. ... I didn't want to leave my parents but I decided to go with friends. ... I never saw them again.

Elvira sailed from Leipaj, Latvia's main port, to Danzig in occupied Poland.

From Danzig we were sent to Colberg [in Germany], to work in a paper mill. It wasn't all that hard really but we had to walk a long way from the camp which was in a factory. We had to walk and sometimes I did night shifts. We were Latvians together.

Many of the women leaving the Baltic States were recruited into the German war effort, often working with but regarded as superior to the forced labourers from Poland and elsewhere[2] who were a significant component of the labour force in Nazi Germany. The range of jobs varied. I interviewed women who had worked in factories making what they termed 'fog' - camouflage to set off to disguise buildings etc, on farms, sorting coal on the face of mines and very menial work such as clearing streets of snow. While the conditions were extremely poor, it seems that these women from Latvia, many of whom had connections through family in Germany, were treated less harshly than, for example, Polish prisoners. They were, however, housed in and confined to camps and barracks and marched to and from the site of their labours on a daily basis.

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[1] 15,000 Latvians were deported to Siberia, including over 5,000 women and just over 3000 children.

[2] These forced labourers were not Jews incarcerated in concentration camps, but super-exploited residents/prisoners in Germany regarded as inferior to the ethnically German population.

This form of labour by displaced people, some of whom had left their country by what might approximate choice, raises difficult questions of definition (Herbert 1997). It is not quite slave labour, but it is forced or unfree labour, part of a war effort on behalf of enemies. As the conversation reveals, there are some similarities between these jobs for the Third Reich and the work undertaken by Elvira and other Baltic refugees both in the displaced persons camps in the British Zone in post-war Germany and directed labour in the UK at the end of the 1940s, in the second two cases this time on behalf of allies. In all three cases, the labour contract was not freely entered into, nor was Elvira free to leave of her own volition. The point here is about the contract between labourer and overseer/employer and is neither to diminish the bodily violence of unfree labour in war time, nor the atrocities of the Third Reich. These difficult questions about types of forced labour are now being addressed, in different circumstances, by feminist scholars and geographers interested in the changing nature of waged work (Dwyer et al 2016; Fudge and Strauss 2013).

> The Russian front was coming closer and closer, so one day we decided we must go, go somewhere away. So we started going on the train, not really a train, just a goods train with only two wagons. It was all open flat trucks and two closed: one for mothers and children. There were bales of straw to sit on and it was March.

After a journey and employment lasting for a year, Elvira entered a displaced persons' camp in the British sector in Berlin. In these camps, able-bodied men and women (the latter numerically dominant) were employed in a range of jobs, gender-segregated and often menial. Typical women's work included cooking, working in laundries in the camps or in clinics and hospitals, hard and heavy work, but also in offices if they spoke German. The camps became well-organised – Elvira talked about kitchen gardens round the huts, classes for children, orchestras, drama and other cultural activities and she began to attend classes in a local university. However, Elvira and other young women were neither free to leave Germany, nor to travel internally other than for specified and agreed purposes.

> I was there a year and a half and then the chance came to come to England. Someone came from England to recruit, just single people. I came in 1947. Before I came people were taken only to work in hospitals. I was still hesitating then, when those people came. I was offered work, weaving in Bradford and so I said yes. I arrived in August and started work in September.

EVWs had to register at the local police station as aliens and stay in the job to which they were allocated for three years and so remained in a type of indentured labour. Women were allocated to one of three categories of work – textiles, domestic work in hospitals and private domestic service. In all cases they were also allocated tied accommodation, whether hospital or factory dormitories or lodgings with local families arranged by the employer. Their wages were low and their domestic lives subject to different degrees of surveillance depending on whether they lived in the homes of their employers or in employer-owned accommodation. The question therefore arises again about how to classify these forms of work. In general the work was less onerous and not under such strict conditions of surveillance as forced labour in Germany, although working as a factory hand was not easy for these young women, many of whom had grown up in middle class families.

After three years, Elvira was released from the requirement to register as an alien. She moved to a different part of the UK and worked as a low-paid assistant in a primary school.

She later managed to have her Latvian teaching qualifications recognised and taught until retirement in 1980.

Hana's story

Hana's journey to the UK was also complicated, both in space and time. Like Elvira's, it took several years – indeed decades in her case, and also involved waged work at different stages during transit. A further similarity is that neither Elvira nor Hana made a conscious decision initially to enter the UK. Their reason for flight was simply to escape from violent conflict. Elvira's journey was in the company of other (unrelated) Latvian refugees and payment was not involved. For Hana and Fitore, however, payment to agents or middlemen was part of the process of escape. Hana's journey began as a child, whereas Fitore was already a mother.

> I'm born in Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea in 1970. And there was actually war in Eritrea, between Ethiopia and Eritrea[3] and we have to flee war, me and my family. I have four sisters and one brother. And my father been taken to prison while I was four year old and when we left Eritrea I was six I think. He was in prison because he was a politician. He was involved with the revolution and since that time we didn't see him. We fled. My mother fled first with my elder sister to Sudan and then she send us that we should leave the country.
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> There was a person who was guiding us because he had been given some money and we just walk for many, many days and we didn't know where we were going. He's from Eritrea who's like smuggling people, because it's not allowed; you have to stay where you are. ... So we leave and we walked until our legs, our feet can't walk anymore .... but I think we were lucky. We survived.
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> [In Sudan], I go and look for whatever job.

Hana was then only ten years old.

> So I was all the time working, cleaning or washing in anybody's house, whatever I find. Then the money they gave me, I give it to my mum and my mum had the money to keep us together. And she always in the evening ask us are we okay and say "is there anyone who have touched us or somebody who molest us or anything?" She used to tell us that there are parts of our body that we have to be careful with. She say people shouldn't come more closer than this and she tried really in her way to tell us but at that time I didn't understand what she was talking about.

There is a rich literature about the exploitation of women migrant domestic workers, the poor conditions under which they often labour, exacerbated by sexual harassment by male employers and exploitation by women employers. The continuities across time and space from the 18th to the 21st century in the UK (Cox 2013; McGregor 2007; Steedman 2009) to the contemporary Middle East (Anderson 2007) are noticeable.

> And then life got actually better and better and people started to come from the Eritrean force. They were pushed to go to Sudan, so there were more people coming from my country. I was able to, there was teachers who used to teach the Eritrean Revolution Front and so I started to go and ask them if they can help me. I don't know, it was some kind of target that I want to study and to know what all this planet is about.

By this time, Hana's mother had moved to Saudi Arabia and some of her siblings to Sweden and Hana lived with an unrelated older Eritrean refugee until she was 19 years old.

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[3] Eritrea became independent in 1991 after a war with Ethiopia between 1961 and 1991.

Then in 1990, no 1989, I decided to leave Sudan[4]. I didn't have a passport, I didn't have anything. I didn't have any identity or anything so there have to be a way which is the smuggling and my sister she have to pay. She sold everything she have and I was smuggled. ... And I chose to go to Somalia. In Somalia they directly put me in prison because they say I am one of Ethiopian spy and at that time they really had very big issues going on. That was going to be the end of me if I am not lucky enough to escape or to find somebody who would be responsible, who will say that I am from Eritrea. .

Hana managed to escape and return to Sudan where she sought asylum in Europe.

I am supposed to go to Sweden but I had a KLM ticket and usually you have transit in Amsterdam so when I went off transit and they asked me what am I doing, I said "I'm going to Sweden to my family to ask asylum" and they said "the rule of asylum is whenever peaceful country you go first that's the country you apply for asylum". So I was pushed, I had no other choices, only to ask asylum in Holland. And that's what I did.

Hana then lived in the Netherlands for 14 years, during which time she lived with a partner who was also Muslim, and started a family. She worked first as a retail assistant and then in an accountancy firm as a secretary until 2005 when discrimination on the grounds of religious observance made her working life difficult.

I started to put a scarf on and I was more deepened in my religion so at that time I was kicked off my job. And things got really, really tough. ... They didn't accept that I put on a scarf and I'm different, so that was my experience in Holland. So I decided ... to leave the country and to leave it forever. And so it was the decision that I have to make, to go to Sudan, and I had been away for 14, 15 years and it was very difficult then. Eritrea? I left it when I was a child, I have nothing there, and then to go to Sweden? I am now above 30 and I don't think I am capable of learning another language. So the idea came that I come to England. ... I have to leave everything behind and then begin again. And now I've started my life again here in England since 2005.

In the UK, Hana initially found employment on a casual hourly contract as a care worker in a home for the elderly and later worked in a large retail outlet before eventually training as a nurse. Her labour history, like that of Elvira's, is a mix of unskilled, feminised work and more skilled employment, as she managed a degree of occupational and social mobility in the UK. Both women initially experienced downward social mobility in the UK, but eventually recaptured their middle class familial origins. As numerous case studies have documented downward class mobility is a common consequence of migration (Cederberg 2017; Kelly 2010; Kofman 2015).

Fitore's story

The third narrative is Fitore's. She was born in 1970 like Hana, but unlike Hana, did not leave her country until she was in her late twenties. She grew up in Kosovo, during an era of conflict between the Serbian and Albanian populations in the Balkans in late 1990s and through the 2000s. Like Hana, Fitore earned a small income from that most traditional of female employment - domestic labour - during her journey to the UK, which also, like Hana's, involved exploitation by traffickers. Her key and immediate reason for leaving home, however, was to escape domestic abuse.

My marriage was an arranged marriage. ... and I was being violated from the beginning. So I've been raped by my husband. I was being beaten up. And I have three children from that marriage. I was 18 and a half

when I had my daughter. And three years after I had another daughter and after that I had a son, so it was seven years gap. But I had loads of abortions after my daughter because every time he was getting drunk, just hit me. I had to, so there was no way.

Then my daughter she was about ten, and war came and we have to climb the mountains and we stayed there for two or three months. When we came back everything was gone. So then we moved across to Albania and so we stayed there for some time. It was beginning of '99. Then after that, what I did, I took my children on a plastic boat from south of Albania to Italy. Just a private boat, we have to pay the money. But I didn't have money so I asked someone to pay the money after when I had the money. So I stayed for one week in the south [of Albania] with my three children. Then at night we came across ... it was two hours journey and it was 23 people in the boat and everyone was squeezing them [the children] and finally we got on the side and when we got there, it was rocks, very slippery rocks and very deep water in there, and I fell in the water ... But I was lucky; I came out... I was bruised and everything. I just felt dizzy, but I remember I've got my children with me. I just shake myself. I said "okay that's it, I have to keep going".

Fitore then lived for three years in Italy where she and her elder daughter found work cleaning for an Italian woman. They managed to avoid unwanted sexual attentions but the work was hard and poorly paid, with irregular hours and no formal contract, although her employer housed them. Tied accommodation, however, strengthens the power of employers and deepens the exploitation of domestic workers.

It [the work] was not good; we did not like it. Money, it was low and my daughter was unhappy. But she [her employer] let us live free, in rooms in an old empty building. We managed.

But her husband found her only a short time after she arrived in Italy and he moved into the old warehouse with the family. He began to drink and ill-treat her and the children and so she decided to leave him again. After travelling though France by train, hiding in the toilets when the guards checked tickets, she managed to find someone prepared to smuggle her and her children across the Channel and into the UK.

And then we got this guy who came and took us to the lorry. And he got us in a lorry one o'clock in the morning. It was freezing, and the lorry was a lorry with wine. Five o'clock the driver came out and he went around. He was coughing, we can hear everything. He checked; everything was just fine. He didn't open the door ... . And he went around and off he went at five o'clock and we can hear like stairs, chut, chut, chut, that was the train express. The lorry went into the train so we came out to England .... We didn't know where we were, on the hills and four guys, like the older guys, jump from the lorry. I could not jump with my children. And then lorry stopped. I think he stopped for a break. We just jump with the suitcases down. He (the driver) just came out and he was just looking. He was shocked when he saw us jumping.

Fitore and her family arrived in 2002 and she started to look for work. Through a chance meeting with an Italian woman in a shop, Fitore found a casual job looking after a child in a private home. It was poorly paid in cash and so both semi-legal and uncertain. After a year, Fitore found part-time work on a zero hours contract in the retail sector, despite her spoken English still being hesitant. She also worked in a bar in the evenings and managed financially thorough what is now an increasingly common combination of several precarious jobs (Reimer 1996; Nolan and Wood 2003) to provide for herself and her children. Her life, however, was difficult and at the time of our conversation in 2010, unlike Elvira and Hana, she saw no possibility of change in the near future and the notion of obtaining skilled or

professional work impossible to think about as she had had very little formal schooling as a young girl.

Writing difference across time and space

Reversing the conventional order, I now want to discuss methodological and ethical issues raised by an historical analysis based on oral narratives.

The first problem is to decide how much context is essential to interpreting the decisions, actions and opinions of migrants. How much information about wider local, national and international circumstances that influence migration is necessary for you, the reader, to understand Elvira, Hana and Fitore's narratives? These women's lives straddle some of the major events in world history in the second half of the twentieth century and yet the immediacy of the events and reactions evident in their narratives evokes a visceral and emotional response. Is a detailed knowledge of the histories of post-war Latvia and Germany, of the long struggle in Eritrea and the end of the century conflict in Kosovo essential to an analysis of women's participation in forms of precarious work as they search for a new life?

Similar questions arise when thinking about the similarities and differences in their lives in the UK, lives marked by class, ethnicity, gender, age and other measures of embodiment, and so part of their construction as inferior or less suitable employees. This labelling seems consistent across the decades even though the structure of the labour market has changed. Are the similarities that link these women significant or are economic changes so marked that differences are more important? Is a theoretical understanding of feminist scholars' changing understanding of the connections between different dimensions of identity necessary to interpret these changes? Are contemporary notions about intersectionality rather than, for example, the earlier theoretical claims about the additive burdens of gender, class and ethnicity applicable to an interpretation of all three women's lives? And what about new work on theories of whiteness as a variable and visible marker that now are part of the explanation of white European migrant women's position?

A more general issue of working with oral histories is that of the status of memory and recall. For some women their initial migration was not only in the distant past, but also entailed recalling traumatic events. Elvira had left her home in Latvia 60 years before our conversations. Since then she had moved several times, raised children and returned 'home' – in itself a source of unhappiness as Latvia had changed profoundly during the years of the Soviet occupation. All three women had learnt at least two new languages, and experienced numerous life events, while at the same the UK changed significantly. Public attitudes to migration changed, not always positively, and a series of reforms improved women's control over their own lives. Changes in social and economic circumstances, as well as the possibilities of reflection, alter how memories are constructed and retold.

As the expanding scholarship about memory has made clear, the past is unpredictable, never settled, nor over, but instead reconstructed in the present (Connerton 1989; Bell 2003). It is difficult to know whether Elvira, Hana and Fitore would have told a different version of

their journeys to the UK, if we had talked at a different time, or indeed, if I had been a different person: a man rather than a women, younger or older than I was at the time. Some of the Latvian women whom I met felt able to tell me about experiences of sexual harassment that they had never revealed before. Perhaps women are now more willing to reveal traumatic events, such as rape, than they were in earlier decades, or as they age, experiences perhaps lose some of their immediacy and so sharing them with a stranger becomes possible (see for example Hiller's (2003) account of rapes by Russian soldiers in Berlin). But narratives may also have solidified through repetition, as retelling stories fixes them in the mind in a singular form, despite new 'events' and time for reflection.

A third question is about representation. Like most researchers drawn to qualitative methods, I wanted to present a faithful version of women migrants' lives, allowing them to speak for themselves. But this hope is naive. We all undertake research through the filter of academic arguments that structure not only what we present to readers, but more fundamentally the decisions of whom to interview and what to ask (Gluck and Patai 1991). We make the initial contacts, decide who to include or exclude; we orchestrate the exchanges, although not always on the terms we decide nor in the location we might chose; and we re-present the lives of the women who are kind enough to talk to us to conform to a particular style of argument. Nevertheless, I hope that the accents and opinions of three courageous women whose stories are told here can be heard loudly and clearly. I hope to have presented their vernacular speech, their sentence structure, accents and expressions without in any way tending to condescension. I can hear the women speak – the Germanic sentence structure of Elvira, the hesitations of Hana and Fitore as I reread their words.

This leads to a fourth anxiety - the responsibility of writing difference and speaking on behalf of other women. These voices and stories are not mine. I am a white British 'native', with no personal experience of displacement and loss. All the women whom I have interviewed over the years gave permission for their words to be used, but, although I gave everyone an agreed pseudonym, the details of their lives may mean they are identifiable. In most cases I also sent them the published versions of anything I wrote. But some were unhappy – a woman born in Latvia disliked the title of a book: *Hard Labour* (McDowell 2005), she complained, sounds as if we were in Soviet labour camps. And have I the right to tell these stories in front of a live audience? Is it permissible to speak to students but not to the wider public? Are anxieties about oral performances, when I have fewer doubts about the value of the written record, warranted? But then, my hope is that the telling and retelling of these inspiring stories of 'ordinary' but exceptional lives might help to challenge negative preconceptions about the impact of migration into the UK, showing in detail the enormous contributions made by migrant women to the British economy since the end of World War II.

Conclusions

The three stories presented here are part of a wider study in which I argued that women migrants are ranked in a hierarchy of desirability for different types of employment.
The production of difference based on the intersection of categorical inequalities and personal attributes is a key mechanism of discrimination in the labour market (Roediger and Esch

2012). For migrant workers in the UK this difference is produced through the intersection of global and national changes, systems that regulate cross-border movements, the rights to citizenship, labour market structures and attitudes and stereotypical beliefs on the part of employers, co-workers, customers and clients, as well as the general public. Through this intersection, different social groups, typically differentiated on the basis of the categorical inequalities (class, gender, ethnicity, national origin, as well as age and sexual orientation) and their embodiment (accent, use of language, weight etc), are regarded as more or less eligible for particular types of employment. Thus, women of different nationalities, ethnicities, skin colours and class backgrounds who enter the UK as potential workers and citizens are constructed as the Other. These structures of inequality work out in similar ways as migrants are in transit, and are often exacerbated by greater insecurity, sometimes imprisonment, vulnerability to criminal gangs and others seeking to make money by facilitating onward passage, deepened by the temporary status of those hoping for asylum and more permanent residence and employment elsewhere.

Here, I have told just a part of the story of how migration and employment were connected, during transit rather than on arrival, and at different times and in different continents across a sixty year period. I have shown how women who move across national borders become involved in forms of waged work on a casual or temporary basis as they migrate. This challenges the dominant emphasis in many studies of migration, assuming that women do not become waged workers until they reach their final destination, although this work has clearly challenged earlier tendencies to focus on migrant women's familial and domestic lives and their significance in the social or cultural arena rather than on employment. Like other scholars interested in transit rather than origins or arrival, I suggest attention to the journey itself is important. Analyses of the ways in which participation in different forms of formal and informal labour (which may be rewarded in cash or by benefits in kind) add to an understanding of geographical variations in the production and reproduction of migrant women as labouring subjects, as well as how gendered identities are transformed by migration. A focus on the working lives of migrant women as they cross multiple spaces and boundaries also provides empirical evidence to add to the arguments of feminist scholars engaged in re-thinking the nature of the employment contact.

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