



Emotional diasporas: sensing places, feeling belongings and embodying identities in transnational spaces

Cangbai Wang & Saskia Huc-Hepher

To cite this article: Cangbai Wang & Saskia Huc-Hepher (2026) Emotional diasporas: sensing places, feeling belongings and embodying identities in transnational spaces, National Identities, 28:3, 361-367, DOI: [10.1080/14608944.2026.2694629](https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2026.2694629)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2026.2694629>



Published online: 09 Aug 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Emotional diasporas: sensing places, feeling belongings and embodying identities in transnational spaces

Cangbai Wang  and Saskia Huc-Hepher 

School of Humanities, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Westminster, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This article introduces a Special Issue exploring the ‘emotional turn’ in migration studies, focusing on how transnational movement shapes and is shaped by human emotion. Moving beyond traditional, politically or economically driven frameworks that favour abstraction and rationalization, the authors conceptualise ‘emotional diasporas’ to highlight how identities and senses of belonging are dynamically constructed in transnational spaces. Derived from a doctoral symposium at the University of Westminster’s HOMELandS Research Centre, this collection brings together nine articles that utilise ‘emotional ethnography’ – including lifeworld histories, material culture, and creative practice-based methods – across diverse migrant communities. By incorporating multilingual and multicultural perspectives, the volume challenges Eurocentric narratives and dismantles rigid nation-state paradigms. Ultimately, the text argues for the critical value of emotional knowledge in understanding social justice, exclusion, and inclusion, offering a nuanced alternative framework for analysing the complex everyday lived realities of contemporary mobile subjectivities.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 June 2026
Accepted 15 June 2026

KEYWORDS

Emotional turn; transnational migration; diaspora; identity and belonging; language-based research

Conceptualising the ‘emotional turn’ in migration studies

The past two decades have witnessed a profound ‘emotional turn’ in Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts, manifested in the burgeoning research on this topic in Sociology (Bendelow & Williams, 1997), Anthropology (Good, 2004; Leavitt, 1996; Milton, 2005), Geography (Anderson & Smith, 2001; Bondi, 2005) and multidisciplinary fields such as critical heritage studies (Smith, 2021). There has been a gradual yet decisive shift away from focusing on abstraction and rationalisation in scholarly inquiry to addressing the matter of emotions and affect as vital ways of knowing, being and doing, asking fundamental questions of how the human world is lived through emotions and how emotional relations construct society and space (Anderson & Smith, 2001, pp. 7–9).

Earlier works inspired by this approach primarily examined emotion through a temporal dimension, focusing on the formation and development of emotional relations during challenging circumstances or at some critical moments of one’s life cycle (Bondi et al., 2006). It was not until more recently that scholars started to rigorously examine emotions provoked by spatial movement in a transnational context. This emerging

scholarship focused on issues of long-distance care, transnational households, forced migration, and desires associated with professional mobility (e.g. Boccagni & Baldassar, 2015; Chamberlain & Leydesdorff, 2004; Conradson & McKay, 2007; Yeoh et al., 2005).

Building upon this growing body of literature, this Special Issue is aimed at bringing to the fore the intimate and often overlooked relationship between identities and emotions in 'migrant worlds' (Basu & Coleman, 2008). The emotions accompanying mobility constitute a vital dimension of subjectivities and identities of people on the move. Simultaneously, the very nature of transnational movement – with its inherent dynamics of departure, circulation, and trans-local social networks – provides fertile ground from which new forms of subjectivity and emotion emerge (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Indeed, emotions are both shaped by and shape the wider political and social contexts in which they are embedded. Emotions, such as desires, excitement, anxiety, isolation, fear and trauma, are at the centre of migrants' everyday lives. These emotions underpin their relation to roots, place, space, identities, and their overarching sense of belonging and wellbeing.

Furthermore, a conceptual focus on emotion has the potential to dismantle the long-existing artificial divide in Western epistemology between subject and object, mind and body, private and public, local and global (Bendelow & Williams, 1997; Huc-Hepher, 2021; Wang, 2016). By breaking these binaries, emotion offers a useful lens through which to re-conceptualise diasporic identities, inclusion, and social justice beyond the familiar narratives of oppression or surveillance typically produced by economically and politically oriented perspectives. In the twenty-first century, where conventional concepts of society and nation have become problematic due to accelerated border crossings (Urry, 2000), emotion serves as a critical alternative conceptual approach to studying identities on the move built around categories of tangible and intangible transnational connections rather than the rigid structures of nation-states.

Institutional origins and collaborative vision

This Special Issue is built upon the foundation of the inaugural 'Doctoral Researcher Symposium on Migration and Diaspora' held at the University of Westminster in May 2023. The event was organised by the Hub on Migration, Exile, Languages and Spaces (HOMELandS) Research Centre in collaboration with the Graduate School of the University of Westminster. This initiative was specifically designed to form a partnership that supports doctoral researchers whose projects focus on migration-related issues, a key research interest shared by academics and researchers across various Schools and Colleges within the University. Rather than an isolated output, this Special Issue represents a vital new contribution to the ongoing, long-term research and knowledge exchange strategy of the HOMELandS Research Centre. This collection showcases the enduring value of empirically based, theoretically informed, and interdisciplinary research – the core philosophy consistently promoted by the Centre through its research activities and publication projects (e.g. Wang & Lamb, 2024).

In particular, the symposium sought to support doctoral researchers in the final year of their studies, helping them master the skills required to transform a thesis into a formal publication through participation in a concrete project. The publication of this Special Issue represents the realisation of that vision and the fruition of cross-institutional

collaboration and committed mentorship. We are grateful to all the speakers for their stimulating papers, panel chairs for facilitating presentations and all participants for their contribution to productive discussions. Out of the nine articles included in this collection, six were selected directly from contributions to the Symposium. To further enrich the volume, we later invited three early-career researchers to contribute articles, believing their research would make valuable contributions to the exploration of migration and emotion and broaden the geographic, linguistic and cultural scope of the themes.

Drawing on in-depth case studies of diverse migrant groups in the UK and beyond, the articles presented in the Special Issue discuss poignantly and powerfully the role of emotion in identity construction at various scales and across a broad range of social, cultural and political contexts. Collectively, they contribute to addressing the central question of the Special Issue: how to study migration and diasporas emotionally from diverse empirical, methodological and theoretical perspectives.

Navigating the emotional landscapes of migration

The collection begins with an article by **Linda Mannheim** on the collective memory of Britain's refugee history. Through extensive interviews and archival research, Mannheim examines how historical events, such as the imprisonment of Second World War refugees and the 1970s expulsion of Ugandan Asians, are emotionally reconstructed in the present. Methodologically, her work utilises 'memory-work' to bridge the gap between public history and private experience, uncovering the emotional remnants of past traumas. Her study demonstrates that while state-sanctioned narratives often sanitise refugee history, individual memories serve as vital sites of resistance that challenge the mono-cultural idea of the British nation.

Continuing this exploration of historical and archival tools, **Mary Martins** investigates the use of animated documentary as a representational vehicle for recording the migration and settlement of African and Caribbean communities in Thamesmead, London. Prompted by the absence of diverse voices in local archives, Martins utilises a practice-based research methodology that intersects personal testimonies with experimental animation. This approach effectively brings to light invisible histories, providing a blanket of anonymity for participants sharing sensitive emotional journeys of racism and trauma. Her work serves as a 'living archive' intended to challenge racist social imaginaries and preserve marginalised histories for future generations.

In a pioneering study of the Tunisian diaspora in London, **Monia Channoufi** explores the spatio-temporal complexities of home within transnational spaces. Her research uncovers how migrants negotiate 'split lives' across multiple habitats. Drawing on experience-centred life histories, Channoufi reveals the emotional immediacy of nostalgia, providing a depth of insight that formal documentary sources often miss. The study illuminates how cognitive-emotive constructs and material habits allow individuals to create a home away from home while navigating the constant feeling of absence in both the host society and the homeland.

The experiences and dilemmas encountered by people with mixed heritage are the focus of **Hussein Boon's** article. Boon employs autoethnography and songwriting to navigate the 'paradox of choice' facing mixed-heritage individuals in the UK. By documenting experiences of racialised framings and symbolic violence through his song *'Not From*

Round Here, Boon exposes the profound emotional toll of perpetual displacement. His work contributes a vital lens on how visible cues like skin tone can weaponise belonging, even when such framing is contradicted by deep-rooted family histories of national service and cultural contribution.

Furthering the exploration of transnational identities, **María José González Domínguez** explores the emotional landscapes of the African diaspora within the Global Hispanophone through 'affective cartographies'. By mapping sensory and emotional migration experiences in Spanish-speaking African narratives, the study highlights literature's role in reconstructing identities and claiming belonging. Employing a decolonial framework, she demonstrates how these 'mappings' function as resistance, allowing individuals to navigate 'in-betweenness' by creating symbolic spaces that honour ancestral roots while forging transnational connections.

The intersection of artmaking, mobility, and emotion is further investigated by **Jing Wang**, who explores how Black British artists employ moving-image practice as a form of 'place-making'. These artists reflect on and reimagine their identities within transnational spaces, using artistic interventions to deconstruct the myth of a white, homogeneous Britain. This practice makes space for reclaiming Black British history and reimagining Black Britishness within contemporary UK society.

Khaoula Zitouni explores a different emotional landscape: that of forced im-mobility in Australia's border spectacle as a result of the zero-tolerance government policy towards 'boat migrants'. Through a critical analysis of Behrouz Boochani's digitally enabled autobiographical prison narrative, she examines how state-sponsored anti-migrant media narratives are used to systematically dismantle their sense of self in transnational carceral spaces. Zitouni reads Boochani's text as an 'emo-scope' that links the intimate, private emotional world of the prisoner with global political structures of oppression. The prison narrative serves as a counter-narrative to Australia's racialised border regimes.

The intense emotional impact of political shifts is captured in **Ophélie Castellani's** article on the effects of Brexit on French migrants in England. Utilising questionnaires and focus groups, she highlights a profound identity crisis where the referendum triggered a 'dis-embedding' of security and belonging. Methodologically, she identifies 'corporeal metaphors' – such as the 'gut-wrenching' pain of naturalisation – to illustrate how national identity is experienced physically in a hostile post-migration field. Her study reveals a 'privilege hierarchy' where French nationals reluctantly sought citizenship as a 'necessary sacrifice' to safeguard their family rights.

In the final article of the collection, **Souhila Belabbas** explores the construction of Kabyle transnational identity in the UK through materiality and emotion. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and life story interviews, she investigates how domestic objects like traditional pottery, jewellery, and textiles serve as affective anchors. These everyday objects offer access to the emotional worlds of migrants, linking the local dwelling to global diasporic networks and allowing individuals to navigate a mixture of fragility, nostalgia, love, and regret by embedding ancestral memories into their everyday British lives.

Conclusion: synthesising emotional ethnography

Despite varying in disciplinary approaches and empirical contexts, the research presented in this Special Issue has consistently addressed the relationship between emotion, identity

and belonging in the ‘travelling-in-dwelling and dwelling-in-travelling’ (Clifford, 1992) processes in the twenty-first century. These original and in-depth case studies of diverse migrant communities are firmly grounded in what can be termed ‘emotional ethnography’, the study of which is characterised by an analytical sensitivity to the everydayness of embodied practices as an entry point to the inner world of migrants.

By documenting and analysing the experiences of diverse migrant groups and exploring how research can methodologically access the emotional world of migrants, these articles offer a more critical understanding of the social and cultural practices of remembering/forgetting, dis/replacement, homemaking, soul-searching and border crossings. This collective work advances migration, place and identity studies, which conventionally have been dominated by abstraction and rationalisation. Furthermore, by curating studies from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds – encompassing Arabic, Chinese, Spanish, French, and Kabyle – and utilising the native languages of migrants for ethnographic fieldwork and life-story interviews, this Special Issue contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the emotional landscapes of transnational migrants. This approach captures experiences that often transcend the ‘emotion-words available in the English lexicon’ (Wierzbicka, 2004, p. 80). Such language-based research serves to decolonise Eurocentric migration scholarship, which has long been dominated by English or European languages and Western political and racial discourses. Indeed, a noteworthy feature shared by almost all articles in this collection is their critical engagement with the politics and poetics of inclusion, equality, and diversity. This remains a central concern for those researching or working with migrants and refugees globally. Collectively, these works make a compelling case for the significance of emotional knowledge in conducting impactful research, transforming our worldview, and striving towards a more just society.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the support received from the School of Humanities at the University of Westminster, where the HOMELandS Research Centre is based. We wish to thank Andrew Linn for his support of interdisciplinary research into migration, languages, and spaces and for his inspirational opening speech at the Symposium. We also express our special thanks to Margherita Sprio for her contribution to the success of the Symposium and the support of the publication project, and to Pippa Catterall for the patience and editorial support which allowed us to complete this project. Finally, we wish to thank sincerely all the contributors for their enthusiasm for the research theme and their commitment to the project, without which this Special Issue would not have been possible.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Cangbai Wang is Professor of Migration, Heritage and Language and the founder and the co-director of HOMELandS (Hub on Migration, Exile, Languages and Spaces) Research Centre at the University of Westminster. His research interests fall in the areas of transnational migration, Chinese diaspora and migration-related museums and cultural heritage studies. He has published

widely in peer-reviewed international journals including *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, *China Information* and *Modern China*. He is the author of *Museum Representations of Chinese Diasporas: Migration Histories and the Cultural Heritage of the Homeland* (Routledge, 2020) and the Co-editor, Routledge Research on Museums and Heritage in Asia.

Saskia Huc-Hepher is Reader in Transdisciplinary French Studies at the University of Westminster, where she is Assistant Head of the School of Humanities and leads the undergraduate Modern Languages programmes. Huc-Hepher's research focuses on questions of identity, belonging, home-making and wellbeing among London's French diaspora in online and offline, contemporary and historic contexts. She is the author of *French London: A blended ethnography of a migrant city* (2021), co-editor of *Digital Modern Languages (Modern Languages Open)* and curator of the London French Special Collection in the UK Web Archive (British Library).

ORCID

Cangbai Wang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7246-5999>

Saskia Huc-Hepher  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1561-6898>

References

- Anderson, K., & Smith, S. J. (2001). Editorial: Emotional geographies. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 26(1), 7–10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-5661.00002>
- Basu, P., & Coleman, S. (2008). Introduction: Migrant worlds, material cultures. *Mobilities*, 3(3), 313–330. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450100802376753>
- Bendelow, G., & Williams, S. J. (1997). *Emotions in social life: Critical themes and contemporary issues*. Routledge.
- Boccagni, P., & Baldassar, L. (2015). Emotions on the move: Mapping the emergent field of emotion and migration. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 16, 73–80. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2015.06.009>
- Bondi, L. (2005). Making connections and thinking through emotions: Between geography and psychotherapy. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30(4), 433–448. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2005.00183.x>
- Bondi, L., Davidson, J., & Smith, M. (2006). Introduction: Geography's 'emotional turn'. In J. Davidson, L. Bondi, & M. Smith (Eds.), *Emotional geographies* (pp. 1–18). Routledge.
- Chamberlain, M., & Leydesdorff, S. (2004). Transnational families: Memories and narratives. *Global Networks*, 4(3), 227–241. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2004.00090.x>
- Clifford, J. (1992). Travelling cultures. In L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, & P. Treichler (Eds.), *Cultural studies* (pp. 96–116). Routledge.
- Conradson, D., & McKay, D. (2007). Translocal subjectivities: Mobility, connection, emotion. *Mobilities*, 2(2), 167–174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450100701381524>
- Good, B. J. (2004). Rethinking 'emotions' in Southeast Asia. *Ethnos*, 69(4), 529–533. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0014184042000302344>
- Huc-Hepher, S. (2021). *French London: A blended ethnography of a migrant city*. Manchester University Press.
- Leavitt, J. (1996). Meaning and feeling in the anthropology of emotions. *American Ethnologist*, 23(3), 514–539. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1996.23.3.02a00040>
- Milton, K. (2005). Meanings, feelings and human ecology. In K. Milton, & M. Svasek (Eds.), *Mixed emotions: Anthropological studies of feeling* (pp. 25–42). Berg.
- Sheller, M., & Urry, J. (2006). The new mobilities paradigm. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 38(2), 207–226. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a37268>
- Smith, L. (2021). *Emotional heritage: Visitor engagement at museums and heritage sites*. Routledge.
- Urry, J. (2000). *Sociology beyond societies: Mobilities for the twenty-first century*. Routledge.

- Wang, C. (2016). Introduction: The 'material turn' in migration studies. *Modern Languages Open*. <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.88>.
- Wang, C., & Lamb, T. (2024). *Negotiating identities, language and migration in global London: Bridging borders, creating spaces*. Multilingual Matters.
- Wierzbicka, A. (2003). Emotion and culture: Arguing with Martha Nussbaum. *Ethos*, 31(4), 577–600. <https://doi.org/10.1525/eth.2003.31.4.577>
- Yeoh, B. S. A., Huang, S., & Lam, T. (2005). Transnationalizing the 'Asian' family: Imaginaries, intimacies and strategic intents. *Global Networks*, 5(4), 307–315. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2005.00121.x>