

'We are all refugees struggling for a more just world'

Nina Glick Schiller

Acceptance speech for Honorary Doctorate, Dies Natalis Erasmus University Rotterdam,
8 November 2018

I am deeply honored to be awarded this honorary doctorate and I wish to thank Rector Inge Hutter, Rector Magnificus Rutger Engels, Dean Dymph van dee Boom, Dean Victor Bekkers, Mary Louise Gambon, Ada Noorlander, Inez Haddoudi, and all other members of the administration of Erasmus University who made this celebration possible and my visit so wonderful.

First of all, I accept this honor in the name of my grandmother and great-grandmother, who fled from Tsarist Russia-Poland to search in for religious and political freedom in New York City. And having worked for years with Haitian migrants, I accept this honor in their name, thinking of those who drowned in the Caribbean seeking a life and thinking of those who survived, settled and built a new life. This honor is also for those who are drowning in the Mediterranean, the people trapped hopelessly in the concentration camps we call refugee centers, and those who having managed to file an asylum claim struggle for a chance to start anew.

But if we are thinking about refugees, then perhaps I should also accept this honor in the name of all those in this audience whose ancestors fled from the countryside to the city or from one country to another to escape hunger, poverty, violence, war or oppression. And what of the young people at this university who are also seeking a type of refuge and safe harbor? They look for safety from the growing precarity of unstable employment, of student debt, and from the uncertainties caused by the reduction of state supports and public services.

They have no easy way to flee the future of environment crisis, including massive flooding and other climate changes.

In other words, as I see it, this honor is about all of us because in one way or another, we are all refugees. When I say we are all refugees, I build on the writings of Hanna Arendt. In her historic 1943 essay "we refugees" Arendt stressed that when governments remove the rights of the most vulnerable, everyone is at risk. Let me explain on the basis of my research and life experience how the various histories and futures I have mentioned intertwine and connect us and how, if we understand these connections, we refugees can join together to resist dispossession and displacement and build for a more equitable safer world.

My grandmother and her mother fled Russia Poland because they wanted a decent life and for them that meant escaping racist anti-Semitic attacks by armed murdering and raping gangs. When I began working with Haitian migrants in New York City in the 1970s and 80s, I recognized similarities between my research and my own family's experiences. Tens of thousands of Haitians fled Haiti by small boat, with hundreds of people drowning and with many others held in camps and or forced to return to brutal government repression. My grandmother and her mother almost drowned on the escape from Russia. It was then illegal to leave, rather than arrive. They fell through the ice of a not quite frozen lake and were saved, sheltered, hidden, and nursed back to health by the kindness of strangers, Polish peasants, who recognized a common humanity in the courage and desperation of my foremothers.

My research with Haitian migrants revealed another resemblance to my family history. My grandparents kept their ties back home, sending letters and packages until the day all the Jews of the village were herded into the synagogue and burned alive by the Nazis. Haitian migrants

also both settled in New York and simultaneously struggled to keep their family and villages alive by sending money and goods back home. Writing with various colleagues including my Haitian colleague, Georges Fouron, my research on globalization and identity has theorized transnational networks of support. In *Georges Woke Up Laughing*, Georges and I explained why and how people can settle into a new life --- and still feel obligated to support those left behind. The people we interviewed in Haiti insisted that taking responsibility for others is what separates humans from all other animals. So, when I accept this award in the name of Haitian migrants, I pay honor to those who taught me about what it means to be human.

When they arrived in New York City, my mother's and father's family made life sustaining city-making relationships with people who did not share their religion and background as well as with those who did. With the people around them of various backgrounds ---German, Irish, Italian---they built the social fabric of the apartment building and the street on which they lived and where their small businesses or daily activities were located. Therefore, in our new book, *Migrants and City Making. Dispossession, Displacement and Urban Regeneration*, Ayse Caglar and I document the multiple ways that migrants become city makers. In three seemingly different cities we studied, Halle/Salle in eastern Germany, Manchester New Hampshire in the northeastern United States, and Mardin on the Syrian-Iraqi border of Turkey, government officials told us that "migrants are part of us" and "the city needs migrants and minorities". Ayse and I found that city leaders and developers needed migrants within their regeneration strategies. They needed to be able to say to the world, "see, we are a city open to the world, open to business, open to tourists. Everyone will be welcome here."

We found that migrants also contributed to these cities in ways that weren't acknowledged by city officials and glossy city planning brochures. For example, when the city centers were rebuilt, it was migrant businesses that often occupied the empty storefronts. Migrants

businesses served a varying population: They not only met the needs of the new urban gentry who wanted diverse restaurants but also provided inexpensive foods and goods for the non-migrant local population who were becoming marginalized in the wake of gentrification.

Our research also highlighted many other ways that migrants joined with non-migrants to build the social fabric of urban life in the face of regeneration processes that pushed them out of their neighborhoods and jobs. City making between migrants and non-migrants included relations to neighbors and co-workers, and participation in city institutions including local political parties, schools, and social movements. That is to say, what we found was that just as my grandparents made a life for themselves in a new place and, as they did, transformed themselves and helped grow and develop the city that became their home, the migrants in our research made themselves at home and in so doing helped renew the city.

This is important to stress in a world in which politicians declare that migrants are the problem and that “they” are taking or threatening something that “we” have. This was wrong when said in the past about my grandparents and it is wrong at this moment of history, when we are all more than ever before connected by a global economy so that whatever people have in one place ---let’s say our cell phones--- is a product of labor and resources of people elsewhere. But we are interconnected in unequal ways in a global economy in which a very small handful of people are becoming rich beyond imagination, while increasing numbers of people find their futures so uncertain that they are forced to flee home or find that they feel like refugees in a land they are told is their own. My research found that the fundamental problem we face is the contemporary distorted system of profit making with its destruction of the redistributive economy and its multiple forms of dispossessive capital accumulation including unequal urban regeneration, mining by enslaved child labor in Africa, and war and violence in the Middle East, Africa, and Central America fueled by US and European arms industries. The

problem is not the migrants who, together with all others dispossessed of their future, are struggling for a decent life in a more just world.

So, I also accept this honor in the name of all people struggling for a more just world.

Thank you.