

Council Member Spotlight

Hajar Yazdiha

My parents left their homeland on foot then horseback, in the dead of night, over the mountains from Iran to Turkey, then eventually into Germany. My maman was pregnant with me all that time, until I came screaming into the world in a Berlin hospital. They named me Hajar, loosely translated as, “one who has journeyed a long way from home.” I guess it is not at all surprising that I am fascinated by journeys, that my research is taken up with questions about migration between times and places and identities, about our changing ideas about where we hope to arrive.

I grew up in a mostly white community in Northern Virginia, the brown girl who was most certainly not “from here,” though I had been *here* since I was a toddler. “But where are you *really* from?” it always goes.

When the planes hit the Twin Towers, I was in the second week of my first year in college at the University of Virginia. My parents asked me if I would like to change my name. I didn’t. But the name was a liability, and I remember the way furrowed eyebrows would lift upon hearing it, connecting my ambiguous brownness to the more clearly-situated name. Aha! They knew what I was now. So many of us have stories like these about learning the limits of belonging in the United States, some experiences more violent and consequential than others.

But—*of all things*—social theory saved me. I was an English major at UVA, drawn to postcolonial theory—Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon—the idea that identity was a political project, that it could take interstitial forms. I was jarred by the recognition that I did not exist outside systems of power. I was constituted by them. But it was Edward Said then W.E.B Du Bois who carried me toward sociology where I found solid ground with the analytic tools to make sense of racism and xenophobia.

After a lengthy detour (six joyfully meandering post-college years in New York City), I journeyed back to academia, first with a Sociology M.A. at Brooklyn College then to the doctoral program in Sociology at UNC Chapel Hill. I was captivated by research that uncovered systems of power, situated immigrant experiences among other long-racialized groups, and demonstrated their interconnection and mutuality. I grappled with the revelation that my perceptions of exclusion were complicated by the undeniable anti-Black racism propagated by Middle Eastern communities like my own.



These are some of the puzzles, the complex “yes, ands” that drive my research. I focus largely on making sense of the mechanisms underlying the politics of inclusion and exclusion, but at its core, my research is concerned with what it means to belong and how groups imagine getting there. How do we come to understand who we are, relative to one another? How do we negotiate these limits and strategize to remake them?

I have a forthcoming article at *Social Problems*—“Toward a Du Boisian Framework of Immigrant Incorporation”—that applies Du Bois’ original insights on racialized systems to think through some of these questions. As I write in the article, these are ideas that “build upon growing research that questions whether the quest for societal inclusion is necessarily a process of integration into the dominant category.” Relatedly, I have been working on a new research project that examines coalition-building among immigrant—mostly Asian, Latinx, Muslim—groups and Black Americans, and I am so inspired by the ways these groups are reimagining forms of belonging beyond law and the state and notably, beyond whiteness. These questions are also central to my current book project, tentatively titled, *The Kingmakers: Making and Mobilizing the Collective Memory of the Civil Rights Movement in American Politics*.

This hellscape of a pandemic year has had me thinking all the more about the connection between journeys of time and place in shaping social action (or inaction)—how do our past experiences shape our capacity to imagine and pursue an alternative reality? As I have buckled under the pressure of having two small children at home full time, my parents more breezily remind me that, “It is not like you are living through a war.” And I think about the reserves of emotional strength and perseverance so many immigrants and refugees bring to this experience in a moment that may feel exceptional to many of us. Immigrant journeys—painful memories of leaving loved ones behind without any certainty of seeing them again, long periods of isolation, scarcity, and uncertainty—these are also powerful resources to be leveraged in an unsettled time.

As we approach a major presidential election, what many are calling “the election of our lifetimes,” we have an opportunity to think not only as migration scholars or sociologists, but also as humans who care about other humans, about who we want to be as a society. How can our work on migration—these perennial questions about inclusion, incorporation, belonging—help us reimagine who we *could* be, where our collective journey *could* go?

Hajar Yazdiha is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Southern California and affiliate of the USC Equity Research Institute. She received her Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her research bridges immigration, race and ethnicity, social movements, culture, and law using mixed methods including interview, survey, historical, and computational text analysis. A former recipient of the Aristide Zolberg Award from ASA’s Migration Section, her research has been published or is forthcoming in scholarly journals including Ethnic and Racial Studies, Mobilization, Social Problems, Sociology of Race and Ethnicity, and Socius. You can also follow her on Twitter @HajYazdiha.