International Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences Studies
Volume 11 Issue 5 ǁ May 2026
ISSN: 2582-1601
www.ijahss.com

Ethnicity and Migration in Global Modernity: Borders, Diasporas, and Reconfigurations of Belonging

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Abstract: This article analyzes the relationships between ethnicity and migration in global modernity, based on an interdisciplinary approach that articulates anthropology, sociology, and political philosophy. It argues that ethnicity does not constitute an essence prior to mobility but is continuously reconfigured by migratory processes. Drawing on authors such as Barth (1969), Weber (1978), and Bourdieu (1989), the relational character of identity is discussed; with Cardoso de Oliveira (2000), the centrality of borders is emphasized; and with Dufoix (2008), Gilroy (2001), and Chivallon (2002), diaspora is examined as a historical and political category. The article also addresses transnationalism (Basch, Glick Schiller, & Szanton Blanc, 1994), the biopolitics of migrations (Foucault, 2008), and contemporary transformations of citizenship (Habermas, 1998), incorporating an analysis of recent migration crises — including the civil war in Sudan, the policies of the Trump 2 administration, and their policy echoes in South America. It concludes that human mobility is not an exception but a constitutive condition of modernity.
Keywords: Ethnicity; Migration; Borders; Diaspora; Biopolitics; Citizenship.

I. Introduction

"Oh and when all is lost
When all is lost we find out what remains
Oh the same oceans crossed
The suns pleasure
The sun it's pink".
(Summer of Love. U2. 2017).

The articulation between ethnicity and migration occupies a central position in contemporary anthropological agendas, not only as a recurring empirical object but as a privileged field for problematizing the analytical categories that structure the discipline itself. In a context marked by the intensification of mobilities, the reconfiguration of border regimes, and the growing centrality of population control policies, it becomes insufficient to treat ethnicity as a stable cultural attribute or migration as a conjunctural phenomenon. This article starts from the premise that both constitute co-constitutive dimensions of global modernity.

The hypothesis guiding the analysis argues that ethnicity does not precede migration as an identity substrate but is continuously produced, intensified, and reconfigured within the very processes of mobility. In other words, ethnic difference is not merely transported across borders; it is performed, negotiated, and politically mobilized in contexts of displacement. This approach shifts the focus from an ontology of identity to a pragmatics of classifications, allowing us to understand how belongings are constructed in specific historical situations.

By mobilizing classic contributions — especially Barth's (1969) relational perspective, Bourdieu's (1989) analysis of symbolic power, and Foucault's (2008) problematization of governmentality — the article critically engages with contemporary approaches in the anthropology of migration, particularly those emphasizing the differential production of mobility (De Genova, 2017), the moral economy of borders (Fassin, 2011), and the multiplication of citizenship regimes (Ong, 2006; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). The argument developed here seeks to advance this debate by proposing that ethnicity and migration should be thought of not merely as correlated analytical categories but as mutually implicated devices in the production of global hierarchies.

In this sense, the article articulates three main analytical axes. First, it examines ethnicity as a situated relational construction, emphasizing its performativity in migratory contexts. Next, it analyzes borders — not only as territorial lines but as mobile devices for producing difference — and their relationship with contemporary biopolitics. Finally, it discusses the transformations of forms of belonging, highlighting the role of diasporas, transnationalism, and the reconfigurations of citizenship.

Instead of offering an exhaustive review of the literature, the text proposes a critical reading that tensions different theoretical traditions, bringing into dialogue authors who are not always mobilized together.

This strategy allows us to highlight not only convergences but also conceptual frictions that illuminate the limits and possibilities of the categories used to think about human mobility. Thus, the article aims to contribute to the field by shifting the debate from a descriptive approach to migrations toward a critical analysis of the regimes of difference production that cut across them.

It is within this framework that ethnicity must be understood not as a fixed attribute but as a relational effect intensified by displacements, which requires a more detailed examination of its production mechanisms.

II. Ethnicity as a Relational Construction

The relational perspective on ethnicity, inaugurated by Barth (1969), breaks with essentialist conceptions that associated identity with fixed cultural traits. Instead, ethnicity is understood as the result of social interactions that produce and maintain symbolic boundaries.

This approach implies recognizing that identity is continuously negotiated (Barth, 1969). In migratory contexts, this negotiation becomes more intense, as individuals are confronted with new systems of classification that redefine their social positions.

Weber's (1978) contribution reinforces this dimension by indicating that the belief in a common origin is socially constructed. Thus, ethnicity does not depend on an objective basis but on the symbolic efficacy of this belief in social organization.

Bourdieu (1989), in turn, demonstrates that such classifications are forms of power. Ethnic belonging can be converted into symbolic capital, being mobilized both for inclusion and exclusion. In the migratory context, this dynamic reveals structural inequalities and disputes over recognition.

Crucially, the relational construction of ethnicity implies that ethnic identity is not something one "has," but something one "does" in social interaction (Brubaker, 2013). This ethnic performativity becomes particularly evident when migrants need to publicly claim certain origins to access benefits, avoid stigmas, or build political alliances.

Furthermore, relational ethnicity operates on multiple scales. At the micro level, it manifests in everyday interactions marked by stereotypes and reciprocal expectations; at the macro level, it is produced and reproduced by state policies, media discourses, and census classifications that naturalize originally contingent differences.

This relational approach also allows us to overcome the false opposition between "assimilation" and "cultural difference." Instead of thinking that migrants either fully integrate into the host society or preserve their culture of origin intact, we must observe how they constantly negotiate hybrid belongings, adapting selectively to different situational contexts.

Processes of racialization are frequently articulated with relational ethnicity. Certain ethnic groups, due to phenotypic characteristics or marked cultural practices, become targets of stigmatization processes that fix them in subaltern positions, regardless of their social mobility or length of residence in the host country.

Relational ethnicity also operates internally within migrant communities. Ethnic leaders dispute the right to speak on behalf of the group, imposing legitimate definitions of belonging that often exclude women, youth, LGBTQ+ individuals, or members considered "less authentic." These internal disputes reveal that the ethnic community is not a homogeneous bloc but a field of forces.

Finally, the relational approach requires attention to the material conditions in which ethnicity is mobilized. In contexts of resource scarcity, competition for jobs, housing, or public services, ethnic boundaries tend to strengthen, converting cultural differences into instruments of exclusion and justifications for structural inequalities. If ethnicity is produced in interaction, it is at borders — understood in an expanded sense — that these processes become particularly visible and politically operative.

III. Borders and the Production of Difference

Borders constitute privileged analytical spaces for understanding the production of difference. Far from being fixed lines, they are dynamic zones where identities are constantly renegotiated.

Cardoso de Oliveira (2000) highlights that borders function as spaces of social friction, where different cultural and political systems come into contact. This interaction intensifies the perception of difference.

In these contexts, nationality becomes a central category of classification. National belonging comes to operate as a marker of distinction, frequently articulated with ethnicity.

Moreover, borders reveal the active role of the state in producing difference. Through administrative and legal devices, the state defines who belongs and who is excluded, reinforcing social hierarchies (Fassin, 2016).

Contemporary borders are no longer reduced to land lines between states. They have multiplied and shifted: today, there are borders at airports, consulates, shared databases, and even in the control of financial transactions (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). This "diffuse border" makes surveillance more capillary and harder to contest.

Furthermore, the production of difference at borders operates through specific technologies: biometrics, credibility interviews, lists of safe countries, and point systems that assign differentiated value to different migratory profiles. These technologies are not neutral; they encode racial and economic hierarchies under the guise of objective criteria (Walters, 2015).

Borders also produce specific subjectivities. The migrant who crosses them is doubly transformed: from national to foreigner, and often from a rights-bearing subject to a mere object of administrative procedures (De Genova, 2017). This subjective dispossession is a constitutive part of the border experience.

Yet borders are also spaces of resistance and creativity. Migrant movements, human rights activists, and civil society organizations develop practices of "non-obedience" to immigration laws, creating humanitarian corridors, denouncing violations, and producing counter-hegemonic narratives about mobility (Isin & Nyers, 2014).

The securitization of migrations in recent decades has transformed borders into spaces of permanent exception. The "fight against irregular immigration" has justified the militarization of border zones, the externalization of controls to neighboring countries, and the suspension of basic procedural guarantees (Jones, 2016).

Finally, borders produce deaths. The Mediterranean, the Arizona desert, and the Darien Gap are just a few of the scenarios where walls, deterrence policies, and the absence of legal pathways convert mobility into tragedy. These deaths are not mere accidents but predictable and systematic effects of border regimes that prioritize exclusion over life. In 2025 alone, the International Organization for Migration recorded at least 7,667 migrants dead or missing on migratory routes worldwide — a number that, although lower than the nearly 9,200 in 2024, mainly reflects a decrease in crossings on dangerous routes rather than safety advances (El País, 2025). The centrality of borders in producing difference leads, in turn, to the ways in which displacements are historically narrated and politically organized, especially through the notion of diaspora.

IV. Diaspora: A Historical and Political Category

The notion of diaspora has undergone profound transformations over time. Initially associated with forced exile, it came to designate multiple forms of population dispersal.

Dufoix (2008) proposes that the concept be analyzed in its historicity, avoiding generalizations. The contemporary diaspora involves both traumatic experiences and voluntary mobilities.

Chivallon (2002) warns of the risks of homogenization, especially in the case of Black diasporas. Diasporic experiences are multiple and marked by specific historical contexts.

Gilroy (2001) expands this analysis by demonstrating that diaspora constitutes a central element of modernity. The Black Atlantic shows that Western modernity is the result of transnational circulations and colonial experiences.

The concept of diaspora has been the subject of intense theoretical debate. Some authors advocate for a restrictive use, reserving it for forced dispersions with a strong traumatic dimension (such as the Jewish exile or the Atlantic slave trade). Others propose a broader meaning, encompassing any transnational community that maintains ties with an imagined land of origin (Brubaker, 2013).

Regardless of the definition adopted, diaspora involves three central elements: dispersion from an original center; collective memory of this origin; and a project, however latent, of return or maintenance of significant ties with the ancestral land (Dufoix, 2008). These elements are mobilized selectively according to interests and contexts.

Contemporary diasporas are profoundly marked by new communication technologies. The internet, social media, and video calls allow the maintenance of affective and political ties at a distance, creating "imagined communities" that transcend national borders in an unprecedented way.

Nation-states have learned to relate to "their" diasporas. Many countries have created ministries or secretariats dedicated to nationals abroad, promoting investments, external voting, and even the extension of social rights. The diaspora thus becomes a resource to be managed by the state of origin (Basch et al., 1994).

The political instrumentalization of diaspora can, however, produce ambivalent effects. Diasporic leaders often claim to speak on behalf of entire communities, but they are not always representative. Furthermore, the nostalgic emphasis on the land of origin can obscure the inequalities and conflicts that mark migrants' concrete experiences.

Finally, the notion of diaspora should not obscure the power asymmetries that cut across these flows. African, Asian, or Latin American diasporas do not occupy the same position in the global hierarchy as European diasporas. Racialization and social class profoundly condition the capacity to convert diasporic belonging into symbolic or political capital (Gilroy, 2001). However, contemporary diasporas cannot be fully understood without considering the simultaneous ties that connect multiple social spaces, which leads us to the debate on transnationalism.

V. Transnationalism and the Extended Social Field

Transnationalism challenges the idea that social life is contained within national borders. Migrants maintain simultaneous ties with different territories, creating extended social fields (Basch et al., 1994).

These ties include economic, political, and cultural relations. Financial remittances, political participation from afar, and family networks are central elements of this dynamic.

This perspective implies a revision of methodological nationalism, which assumes a coincidence between society and the nation-state. Contemporary reality demonstrates that this coincidence is increasingly less evident (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002, as cited in Basch et al., 1994).

Furthermore, transnationalism reveals the importance of social networks in organizing migrations. Mobility is not just the result of individual decisions but of collective relationships that structure migratory trajectories.

The concept of transnationalism differs from simple internationalism by emphasizing the multiplicity of ties that migrants simultaneously maintain with different societies (Basch et al., 1994). The transnational migrant does not break with their country of origin upon arriving at their destination; on the contrary, they operate in a social field that encompasses both contexts.

Transnational activities are extremely varied. They range from regularly sending financial remittances and building homes in the land of origin to participating in migrant associations, consuming transnational media, and exercising external voting rights. These practices challenge the notion that integration would be a linear process of substituting one belonging for another.

Transnationalism is not equally accessible to all migrants. Its viability depends on economic resources, cultural capital, visa regimes, and host country policies. Undocumented migrants, for example, face enormous difficulties in maintaining regular transnational ties due to the risk of deportation (De Genova, 2017).

Second and third generations often develop forms of derived transnationalism, maintaining affective and symbolic ties with the country of origin of their parents or grandparents, even if they have never lived there. These ties can be as significant as those based on direct experience.

Transnationalism also affects host countries, which are transformed by the presence of migrant communities. Festivals, cuisine, religious practices, and even vocabularies are incorporated into social life, producing hybridisms that redefine what it means to be “local” or “national” (Bhabha, 1998).

Finally, transnationalism has important normative implications. If social life is not exhausted within the national territory, then democratic theories that restrict political participation to permanent residents become untenable. The question arises: who has the right to participate in decisions affecting transnational communities (Habermas, 1998)? These extended social fields are, however, crossed by differentiated control regimes, indicating that mobility is always governed by power devices.

VI. Biopolitics and the Government of Mobilities

Migration management constitutes one of the main fields of action of biopolitical power. The modern state regulates mobility through devices that classify, control, and monitor populations.

Foucault (2008) demonstrates that modern power operates through the administration of life. In this sense, migration control is a form of governmentality.

Agamben (2002) deepens this analysis by showing that the irregular migrant occupies a liminal position, where rights can be suspended. Exception becomes the rule.

Borders, in this context, function as spaces for the exercise of sovereignty. They materialize the state's capacity to decide on the circulation and permanence of individuals (Agamben, 2002).

Migratory biopolitics operates through categories that distinguish “lives that matter” from “lives that can be abandoned” (Fassin, 2011). The qualified refugee, the investor, or the highly skilled professional are treated as resources to be attracted; the poor economic migrant or the “economically motivated” asylum seeker are seen as threats to be contained.

Refugee camps and migrant detention centers constitute laboratories of contemporary biopolitics. In these spaces, life is reduced to mere biological existence, suspended between expulsion and integration, often for years or decades (Agamben, 2002). The management of these spaces reveals the rawest face of migratory governmentality.

Contemporary migratory biopolitics has externalized its mechanisms. The European Union finances Turkey, Libya, and Niger to intercept migrants before they reach its borders; the United States maintains agreements with Mexico and Central American countries for the same purpose (Jones, 2016). Migration control increasingly takes place far from the territory where rights would be enforceable.

This externalization produces zones of legal indeterminacy. Migrants intercepted on the high seas or in third countries are subjected to summary procedures, without access to lawyers, interpreters, or effective appeals. International refugee law, in these contexts, is systematically emptied.

Migratory biopolitics also operates from within states, through immigration policies that condition access to health, education, housing, and work on documentary regularity. These policies produce a diffuse "deportability" that makes life precarious even for long-established migrants (De Genova, 2017).

Finally, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic further intensified these mechanisms. Travel restrictions, mandatory quarantines, and suspension of asylum processes were justified in the name of public health but often concealed securitizing and xenophobic objectives (Walters, 2015). Migratory biopolitics has shown its capacity for adaptation and expansion in crisis contexts. Nevertheless, such regimes do not exhaust the migrant experience, which also expresses itself in creative forms of identity negotiation.

VII. Hybridity and Migrant Identity

The notion of hybridity proposed by Bhabha (1998) allows us to understand migrant identity as a dynamic process. The "third space" is a site of cultural negotiation.

In this space, identities are neither simply preserved nor abandoned but transformed. Culture emerges as a process of translation (Bhabha, 1998).

This perspective breaks with binary views that oppose tradition and modernity. The migrant is not a bearer of fixed culture but an agent of cultural transformation.

Furthermore, hybridity reveals the creativity of migratory experiences. New cultural forms emerge from the interaction between different contexts.

The concept of hybridity should not be mistaken for harmonious fusion or balanced synthesis. It is often marked by contradictions, tensions, and power asymmetries. The "third space" is not a post-identity paradise but a territory of struggle for recognition and self-definition (Bhabha, 1998).

Hybridity challenges purist notions of cultural authenticity. All culture, to some extent, is hybrid, the result of centuries of exchanges, migrations, and appropriations. What the migratory context does is make this constitutively hybrid character visible, denaturalizing claims of cultural purity.

The migrant experience often produces forms of double consciousness or double absence (Gilroy, 2001). The migrant feels completely at home neither in the host country nor in the country of origin, and this non-belonging can be a source of both suffering and critical creativity.

Hybridity expresses itself particularly richly in migrants' cultural practices: music, literature, cinema, fashion, cuisine. Migrant artists or children of migrants often produce works that cannot be reduced to a single national tradition, creating innovative languages that dialogue with multiple references.

Hybridity is not equally valued socially. While forms of hybridity associated with global elites (cosmopolitanism, bilingualism, international mobility) are celebrated as signs of sophistication, forms of hybridity associated with poor migrants (linguistic mixing, syncretic religious practices) are often stigmatized as impure or backward.

Finally, hybridity has generational consequences. Children of migrants often develop hybrid identities more radically than their parents, as they grow up immersed in two cultural universes simultaneously. However, this condition also exposes them to contradictory expectations: they are seen as "foreigners" in their country of birth and as "deculturalized" in their parents' country of origin (Bhabha, 1998). These hybrid forms of belonging call into question the territorial foundations of modern citizenship.

VIII. Citizenship and Post-Nationality

Contemporary migrations challenge the classic model of citizenship, based on the coincidence of territory, people, and sovereignty.

Habermas (1998) argues that democratic legitimacy requires discursive inclusion. However, migrants often participate in economic life without full access to political rights.

This dissociation reveals the limits of the national model of citizenship. The emergence of forms of transnational belonging demands new normative approaches.

At the same time, citizenship remains an instrument of exclusion. Access to rights remains conditioned on national membership, reinforcing global inequalities (Ong, 2006).

The territorial citizenship model (*jus soli*) and the blood citizenship model (*jus sanguinis*) prove insufficient to deal with the complexity of contemporary migratory trajectories. Many migrants spend decades in a country without acquiring nationality, while their children, born in the territory, may face obstacles to having their citizenship recognized.

The figure of the "long-term resident foreigner" occupies an ambiguous position in democratic states. They contribute taxes, respect the laws, and participate in social life, but often cannot vote, be voted for, or hold certain public offices. This political exclusion is difficult to justify in democratic terms (Habermas, 1998).

Some countries have experimented with forms of local citizenship or political participation extended to immigrants, even without full nationality. The right to vote in municipal elections for foreign residents, adopted in several European countries and some Brazilian cities, represents a step in this direction (Isin & Nyers, 2014).

Transnational or multiple citizenship was viewed with suspicion by nation-states but is now increasingly accepted and even encouraged. Dual nationality allows migrants to maintain political ties with their country of origin while acquiring rights in the host country, attenuating the exclusionary character of exclusive citizenship.

The European Union represents an unprecedented experiment in post-national citizenship. European citizenship, derived from the nationality of a member state, confers rights of movement, residence, and political participation at the European level, creating a model that transcends the nation-state without, however, abolishing it completely.

Finally, it is necessary to recognize that the rhetoric of the "migration crisis" has been systematically used to restrict access to citizenship, imposing increasingly stringent requirements of language proficiency, cultural integration, and length of residence (Fassin, 2011). These barriers reveal that citizenship remains a powerful instrument of exclusion, and that the path to post-nationality is long and full of setbacks. The tensions between mobility, belonging, and exclusion thus highlight the need to critically rethink the categories that structure the analysis of contemporary migrations.

IX. Final Considerations

The articulation between ethnicity and migration reveals the relational character of identity and the centrality of social classifications in organizing contemporary life.

Human mobility shows that borders are not only geographical but also symbolic and political. They structure inequalities and define regimes of belonging.

Diaspora and transnationalism demonstrate that the social field extends beyond national territory. Global modernity is marked by connections and displacements.

Finally, understanding these dynamics requires an interdisciplinary and critical approach. Ethnicity and migration are not merely objects of study but fundamental interpretive keys for understanding the transformations of contemporary society.

It is necessary to reaffirm that human mobility, far from being an anomaly or an exception, is constitutive of modernity itself. Contemporary societies are what they are — with their inequalities, hierarchies, and diversities — because they have been shaped by centuries of forced and voluntary displacements.

Furthermore, the analysis developed here points to the need to overcome both methodological nationalism and cultural essentialism. The former makes us ignore transnationalism; the latter prevents us from seeing the fluidity and constant negotiation of ethnic identities (Brubaker, 2013).

The analytical categories used — relational ethnicity, symbolic borders, diaspora, transnationalism, biopolitics, hybridity — are not merely descriptive. They carry normative implications, as they help us identify forms of domination and imagine fairer alternatives.

Contemporary migratory regimes produce suffering on a massive scale. Walls, detentions, deportations, and deaths are not undesirable side effects but predictable results of policies that prioritize exclusion (Jones, 2016). A critical approach cannot shy away from denouncing this structural violence. A paradigmatic case is the Trump 2 administration (starting in 2025), which drastically expanded the powers of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), resulting in over 400,000 deportations in the first 18 months of its term, in addition to deaths in custody and riots in migrant communities (The New York Times, 2026). Policies included eliminating protections for "dreamers," suspending asylum at the southern border, and militarizing the border with Mexico. This model generated emulation in countries like Chile — where José Antonio Kast's far-right government (elected in 2025) tightened the Migration Law and created a border police force inspired by ICE — and Argentina, where Javier Milei, under the influence of Trumpist advisors, proposed the criminalization of irregular immigration and the summary expulsion of Venezuelans and Senegalese (El País, 2026; Folha de S.Paulo, 2026).

Alternatives are conceivable. Sanctuary cities, humanitarian corridors, massive regularizations, humanitarian visas, and migrant political participation are concrete experiments that point toward fairer forms of mobility management (Isin & Nyers, 2014). They demonstrate that another migratory regime is possible.

Finally, this article concludes that the articulation between ethnicity and migration will remain a central field of research and political intervention in the 21st century. In a world marked by climate crises, wars (such as those in Syria, Ukraine, Sudan, the Gaza Strip, and Myanmar), extreme inequalities, and new forms of control,

understanding how ethnic difference is produced, mobilized, and contested in displacements is a condition for any project of global justice.

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