



Navigating Cultural Crossroads with Intersectional Narratives in Reyna Grande and Sonia Guiñansaca's *Somewhere We Are Human: Authentic Voices on Migration, Survival, and New Beginnings*

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Abstract

The anthology *Somewhere We Are Human: Authentic Voices on Migration, Survival, and New Beginnings*, edited by Reyna Grande and Sonia Guiñansaca, seeks to shift the often-polarized immigration debate by focusing on concrete personal stories rather than on abstractions and stereotypes. The book shows us that migrants are not mere statistics but flesh-and-blood individuals, each harboring their own hopes, fears, and dreams. Featuring contributions ranging from essays, poetry, and artworks, the book illuminates the multifaceted experiences of people charting complexities of migration and identity in the United States, while revealing how identity shapes the migration experience and how societal perceptions often complicate it.

Keywords Immigration · Diversity · Inclusion · Ethnicity and race · International business

Readers of this journal's Special Issue on Migration who find that issue valuable for their research, teaching, or business purposes will discover a kindred spirit in *Somewhere We Are Human: Authentic Voices on Migration, Survival, and New Beginnings*. Articles in the *JBE*'s Special Issue (August 2024) highlight the intersection of immigration and ethics to deepen understanding of immigration with an eye to informing policies, promoting inclusive societal and organizational frameworks, and addressing the ethical challenges organizations face regarding immigrants. The articles also seek to inspire new research tackling the unique challenges immigrants encounter. Just as the *JBE*'s Editorial Essay stresses how it is of "paramount importance to keep individuals as the main focus of the discussions" (Segarra et al., 2024, p. 748), the quest to be attentive to real people lies at the very heart of Grande and Guiñansaca's book. Being attentive to real people in business ethics—whether in responses to refugees or in broader ethical decision-making—is crucial because ethical obligations are not just abstract principles but lived responsibilities toward others. Business decisions impact individuals with agency, dignity,

and vulnerability, and recognizing this fact is foundational. At its core, business is about people—workers, consumers, shareholders, and communities. Ethical obligations emerge not only in abstract policy frameworks but in human encounters where the consequences of decisions are felt. Migrant encounters serve as a stark reminder that business choices affect real lives, in ways often unseen by decision-makers in boardrooms.

In line with this standpoint, the anthology is structured around a collection of personal narratives, reflecting a staggering diversity of immigrant experiences. Contributors hail from a wide range of countries, including Argentina, Brazil Mexico, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Iran, and the Philippines, among others. Many of the contributors are, variously, nonbinary, queer, disabled, lesbian, gay, trans, and/or POC. This expansive geographical scope, coupled with the diversity of personal intersectional identities, enriches the narrative tapestry, showcasing how migration often intersects in complex ways with issues of race, gender, sexuality, and identity. The introduction, penned by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Viet Thanh Nguyen, sets a poignant tone for the captivating discussions that follow. Nguyen cautions that "we have not heard as much as we need to from the undocumented and previously undocumented who comprise this analogy" (p. xiii). The book has garnered acclaim from reviewers in the general press, including Gabino Iglesias of *The San Francisco Chronicle*,

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who characterizes it as “a powerful collection” that “celebrates the plurality of migrant voices in America” (Iglesias, 2022). Several pieces in the collection employ innovative formats that buck traditional storytelling methods. Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas argues that ethical responsibility begins with recognizing the *Other*—seeing another person as fully human, not as an economic input or problem to be solved (Peperzak, 1997; Critchley, 1992). For business ethics, this means acknowledging refugees and other marginalized groups not as mere labor or market segments but as real people with histories and aspirations. Businesses are not merely called to acknowledge migrants or marginalized groups but to confront their ethical responsibility in ways that transcend utility, contracts, and reciprocity. This entails fundamentally rethinking economic and managerial responsibilities in light of the vulnerability and humanity of the Other (Rhodes, 2020). Some contributions use visual art, poetry, or experimental writing styles to express their messages. This artistic approach enhances reader engagement, simultaneously pointing toward such an ethics of radical responsibility, while underscoring the creativity that can emerge from adversity.

By showcasing stories from writers representing a variety of intersectionalities who share their unique immigrant experiences, the anthology bears a semblance to other titles in the literature such as *Asylum*, a memoir in which Ede Okefor, a gay man, recounts a harrowing escape from Nigeria fleeing persecution for his sexual orientation (Okefor, 2022). Paralleling Okefor’s narrative of challenges faced by LGBTQ immigrants, stories in the instant anthology, such as that of Lois-Soto Lane—themselves a trans lesbian relocating to the U.S. from Nigeria—highlight the perils of being an intersectional undocumented immigrant. “I was ashamed of myself and of my father and of the place that we came from. I learned this shame from other people much like I learned I was Black. I learned this shame from the image of Nigeria that exists in the West, the image of the entirety of Africa as this backwards, uncivilized, ‘third-world’ place. An image frozen in time with no context or grace” (pp. 44–45).

Lane’s story, like others, depicts a myriad of systemic barriers of injustice faced by people in demographics of overlapping identities—especially employment vulnerability, fear of deportation, discrimination, violence, social isolation, and community tensions. As Lane laments: “to be Black and an immigrant [in America] is to be in a perpetual state of emergency” (p. 48). Likewise, such a plight of intersectional discrimination is analyzed in the Special Issue selection, “‘Migration Under the Glow of Privilege’—Unpacking Privilege and Its Effect on the Migration Experience,” which points out how inequality exists not just between immigrants and natives but also between different groups of immigrants, showing the need for firms to have varied responses to diverse types of immigrants (Gupta

Bapuji, 2024). In Lane’s case, the group known as “marginalized immigrants” includes people such as themselves, who are Black, “low-caste,” and hailing from the Global South. Considering that Lane is also trans, the result, according to Gupta and Bapuji’s theoretical framework, is a pronounced low level of both locational privilege and historical privilege, resulting in heightened vulnerability to employment biases (Id. at p. 756–757, 765).

Many stories reflect themes of buoyancy amidst difficulty, illustrating how immigrants navigate cultural adaptation and financial struggles, while striving for a sense of belonging in a strange new land. The book’s contributors express their hopes and dreams against a backdrop of hardship, emphasizing the human spirit’s unyielding nature.

Significance for Business

All told, the stories in *Somewhere We Are Human* carry important implications for business.

The anthology emphasizes the shared humanity among immigrants, regardless of their country of origin, documentation status, or background. This message is crucial for business leaders to internalize, remaining mindful of immigrants’ human rights, while dealing with increasingly diverse and global workforces.

As businesses expand internationally, they often face dilemmas of whether to adhere to established cultural norms of their home developed country or rather to seek ways of adapting to divergent norms of developing countries (Donaldson, 1989). In highlighting the multitude of struggles immigrants face when trying to assimilate to a new culture, the stories in *Somewhere We Are Human* show how quandaries arise even when businesses do not extend operations abroad. Predicaments can appear squarely within the domestic context—when immigrants’ cultural roots clash with local customs and attitudes that may be infused with privilege and superiority. In Julissa Arce’s story, she laments how, as an undocumented Mexican immigrant coming to the U.S. at age eleven and growing up poor, she finds it tough fitting in with her rich, white, elitist, Aspen-skiing Wall Street colleagues while working at Goldman Sachs. Frustratingly, she recounts how her associates remain oblivious to the cultural clash. “As time passed, as I grew closer to my roots, I realized that no matter how hard I worked, how much success I achieved, or how many dollars I amassed in my bank account, belonging to a white world was not a dividend that came along with it. Each time I thought I had done what I needed to become one of them, I was reminded that dressing the part wasn’t enough” (p. 136).

The narratives in the book provide a revealing window into subjective immigrant experiences. By reading these stories, business leaders can develop a deeper empathy

and understanding for the struggles faced by immigrant employees and communities alike. This empathy can, in turn, inform more compassionate policies and initiatives to support these groups.

The anthology celebrates the strengths, creativity, and contributions of immigrants to society. Many in business operate with implicit biases about who is “qualified” for leadership. The book’s narratives help to counterbalance misunderstandings by showcasing nontraditional leadership journeys, highlighting how displaced and marginalized individuals often develop exceptional problem-solving skills, adaptability, and cross-cultural competencies—qualities valuable in business. Perusing it may help heighten corporate leaders’ awareness of the immense talent and leadership potential within immigrant communities. By actively recruiting and supporting immigrant employees, businesses can tap into a rich pool of diverse perspectives and skills that drive innovation and success. Not only that, given immigration’s creation of economic benefits and potential to reduce global poverty (Powell Brennan, 2021), it is reasonable to think that corporations have a *prima facie* obligation to support more open immigration, including helping to endorse reforms on immigration restrictions.¹

Inclusive Workplace Practices

The stories in *Somewhere We Are Human* highlight challenges faced in plotting a course through an often intimidating and dehumanizing maze of immigration laws as well as through unfamiliar workplaces and cultures. The book shows how a thicket of Kafkaesque immigration laws, language barriers, and cultural differences can hinder immigrants’ ability to thrive in the workplace and beyond. Indonesian writer and activist Angel Sutjipto’s story, set in the CBP inspection station of JFK Airport, graphically details how undocumented immigrants—facing capricious decision-making from bureaucrats concerning their asylum petitions—live in persistent fear and dread of deportation, fueling feelings of isolation. Sutjipto portrays how cultural norms and expectations differ, causing confusion and discomfort as immigrants try to assimilate. Inclusive workplaces can counter such trauma by fostering an environment that celebrates diversity and helps bridge cultural divides.

The personal narratives in *Somewhere We Are Human* suggest the need to move beyond mere tolerance to genuine empathy and active support. Inclusive workplaces can help immigrants feel welcomed, valued, and empowered to bring out their authentic selves. This may involve creating mentorship programs, support groups, and cultural organizations to help immigrants navigate challenges and achieve their aspirations (Reeves, 2017).

Pathways for Change

Many will welcome the way that the book implicitly endorses a call to action for policy changes and societal transformation creating a more openhearted environment for immigrants. Overall, the stories in *Somewhere We Are Human* can inspire business leaders to cultivate more ethical, inclusive, and compassionate practices in an increasingly interconnected world. By recognizing the shared humanity, adapting thoughtfully to nonlocal norms, and advocating for change, businesses can play a vital role in creating a society that truly embraces the diversity and contributions of immigrants.

Practically speaking, corporate leaders can consider how their policies and practices affect diverse employee groups. This involves actively listening to employees’ experiences and ensuring their voices are included in discussions (Leigh, 2013). Further, encouraging participation from a diverse range of employees can lead to more innovative solutions. By fostering an inclusive workplace where all employees feel valued and heard, leaders can enhance team dynamics and improve overall organizational performance (Id.).

It is noteworthy that the narratives emphasize the ethical dimensions of migration and survival. Business leaders might use these insights to shape their CSR strategies, focusing on initiatives that support immigrant communities, advocate for fair labor practices, support legal reform, and promote diversity throughout their organizations (Kotler Lee, 2005). Moreover, understanding the multifaceted experiences of immigrants can help leaders prioritize decisions that reflect a commitment to social justice and equity, aligning and giving voice to their corporate values with broader societal needs (Gentile, 2010).

Throughout the book one finds stories shedding light on why resisting unfair impacts on marginalized groups and challenging the status quo for the sake of progress and inclusivity matters. Consider, for instance, Azul Uribe’s vexing tale. Uribe, a queer, bicultural writer, fighting a three-year court battle, is eventually deported to México, with a ten-year reentry ban, from a Mormon community in Utah, having lived in the U.S. for fifteen years. She recounts the injustice and indignity of being placed in handcuffs and leg irons, strip-searched, jailed, and severed from her family on her

¹ Immigration creates economic gains from two main sources: (i) International trade in labor driven by comparative advantage; (ii) Productivity differences between countries, owing to institutional and geographical factors (Powell and Brennan 2021, p. 3). Studies show that eliminating immigration restrictions could lead to significant increases in global economic output, ranging from 67% up to 150% (Id. at p. 6).

birthday, all for a mere misdemeanor charge stemming from a misunderstanding. Uribe intimates to Father Jose that, having “thought of my ban every day for the past decade of my life” she “feels like I am dying.” Keeping her rage bottled up for many years, she is finally emboldened to confide in the priest about her ordeals after hearing him quote James Baldwin in a sermon: “It is easy to proclaim all souls equal in the sight of God; it is hard to make men equal on earth in the sight of men” (p. 83).

Many of the stories can be seen to reflect the need for building trust with those battling adversity. Leaders can foster a culture of trust within their organizations by being transparent in their decision-making processes and encouraging open dialogue. Leaders inspired by the book might seek to prioritize cultural competence training to better understand their workforce’s dynamics, which can inform more sensitive decision-making (Mendenhall et al., 2018).

The personal narrativistic way in which the anthology’s stories are delivered may inspire recasting organizational norms and discourses about immigration, for instance, around a feminist ethics of care and awareness of embodied vulnerabilities (Fotaki, 2023), including alternative voicings for immigration ethics (De Fina, 2023; van Dijk, 2018). Correspondingly, the theme of treating migrants as intersectional subjects of inclusion has been examined in management and ethics literature (Atewologun et al., 2016; Healy et al., 2011; Kangas-Müller, 2024; Rodriguez et al., 2016; Ruiz Castro Holvino, 2016; Villesseche et al., 2018).

Significance for Teaching and Researching Business Ethics

Beyond expanding corporate understandings, digesting this book’s first-person narratives can round out analysis of business ethics immigration issues, acquainting academics with true-to-life concrete encounters. Giving attention to self-narratives can be valuable for both researchers and educators, helping them write on and teach about the lived experiences behind migration and integration—something that matters for humanity’s shared belongingness (Atalay Korkut, 2022).

By presenting individual real-live encounters, these narratives show the human face of suffering occasioned by thorny issues, making them at once relatable and emotionally resonant. A story by an South Asian immigration attorney, Razeen Zaman, recounts the humiliation and indignity endured by her clients going through removal proceedings who, devoid of a legal presumption of innocence, “must admit guilt to even ask for many forms of immigration relief” as they find themselves “kneeling before the government in some kind of a hybrid between a very high-stakes college admission essay and a confessional” (p. 201).

Many of the stories highlight real-world impacts of policies and business practices on people’s day-to-day lives, revealing nuances and intricacies easily glossed over in broader theoretical discussions. A case in point is Elías Roldán’s sobering account of losing his first hard-earned costume design business because, even though he diligently paid quarterly income taxes, as an undocumented immigrant, no bank would extend a loan to him to help get through a temporary period of financial distress.

Conclusion

Beyond its sheer literary merit, *Somewhere We Are Human* provides invaluable insights into first-hand immigrant experiences. While no single compilation can capture every immigrant experience, this anthology arguably comes closer than most. It is a vital contribution to contemporary discussions, both about immigration in general and in connection with intersectionality in particular, offering perspectives at once deeply personal and universally relevant. *Somewhere We Are Human* is highly recommended for business leaders seeking to understand the complexities of migration in today’s interlinked world and to better appreciate the resolve of those who must endure its tribulations. Perhaps it can serve as a heart-rending reminder for researchers in business ethics, who are often caught up in the abstract theoretical dimensions of the field, of the humanity woven into migration issues, encouraging empathy toward those who often remain voiceless in public discourse. Similarly, those engaged in teaching business ethics and related subjects may welcome this volume as an innovative addition to their course materials. The personal narratives can serve to transform abstract principles into lived experiences, grounding classroom discussions about topics such as corporate social responsibility, fair labor practices, and economic justice in real-life consequences. Reading personal stories may allow students to emotionally connect with individuals who bear the brunt of business decisions. This engagement can help students to see the world from the perspective of those affected by corporate policies. Instead of discussing “migrants” as an abstract group, students reading the narratives can encounter real people with aspirations, struggles, and dignity, deepening their ethical reflection.

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