Memories, identities, and new translocal meanings: Discussing migration on Facebook and face-to-face among former fellow refugees

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This paper presents data from an ongoing project on narratives of migration (Meinhof and Galasiński 2005) among six Polish women (myself included) who met as teenagers in 1987 in an Italian refugee camp. Subsequently, they each moved on with their families to the United States, Canada, and Australia, where they continue to live, and reconnected on Facebook in 2008. The paper examines their Facebook discussions about immigration, identity and heritage during 18 months in 2012-2013, and recordings of their subsequent face-to-face reunion in 2013.

Drawing on Bucholtz and Hall’s (2004) tactics of intersubjectivity, and Meinhof and Galasiński’s (2005) language of belonging, the paper explores the shifting positions and stances that the women take with respect to nationality, language, religion, tradition, education, and family (cf. De Fina 2005, Weldeyesus 2007), and the employment of Polish, English and Italian translanguaging practices (Li Wei 2011) in accomplishing these ongoing realignments. Individual narratives emerge in response to questions or to others’ stories, and intertwine with narratives jointly co-produced by two or more participants. Within one Facebook conversation, spanning several days or weeks, the participants align and realign themselves with different categories of belonging, highlighting the dynamic, ongoing, and negotiated nature of identity work.

The Facebook narratives draw on transnational migration histories and work to negotiate the six friends’ participation in their small online community, which itself becomes a transnational space. The women invoke and reinterpret shared memories of life in Italy and subsequent experiences of immigration to the United States, Canada, and Australia, but this shared history becomes a resource in the joint endeavor of producing new, translocal meanings and a new group identity. The paper emphasizes language, memories, and places as resources in constructing new meanings, and concludes with an analysis of the face-to-face meeting in the context of the preceding online discussions.

Keywords: translanguaging, translocal, migration.