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## Q&A Tanya Sheehan: On Photography, Human Migration, and What Their Intersection Does and Doesn't Tell Us

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# Q&A

## TANYA SHEEHAN

## ON PHOTOGRAPHY, HUMAN MIGRATION, AND WHAT THEIR INTERSECTION DOES AND DOESN'T TELL US

William R. Kenan Jr. Associate Professor of Art Tanya Sheehan is the editor of *Photography and Migration*, a timely collection of essays about photography and its role in portraying this ongoing humanitarian crisis (See P. 38). At Colby she launched the Photography and Migration Project, which draws connections between global migration and Waterville's history as a destination for immigrants. She spoke to *Colby Magazine* Managing Editor Gerry Boyle '78 about the ways photographs shape our perception of migration.



### **Q: Why is the subject of photography and migration important to explore now, in Waterville and beyond?**

At the end of 2016, there were 65.6 million displaced people on the planet—the highest number ever recorded. Immigration is constantly in the international news, and people around the world are debating who has the right to cross a national border. Photography finds itself on both sides of that debate. That's what motivates the contributors to the book.

The activities of the Photography and Migration Project, including this book, draw connections between global migration and our own local context. Maine has a rich history of migration, especially from Canada and Europe. We are now seeing new Mainers from Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia, just as Waterville is undergoing huge physical and economic changes. How will the “old” and “new” immigrant communities work together to redefine cultural heritage in Waterville? What role will their migration stories play in the city's downtown revitalization project? How can

we represent and preserve the diversity of those stories? Photography helps us address these pressing questions.

### **Q: The ongoing human migration situation has been chronicled extensively by global media and yet you describe photographic coverage as “highly circumscribed.” What are we missing?**

When the international press portrays global migration, it tends to publish the same kinds of photographs. Those images focus on dislocated people, presenting them as anonymous victims deserving of sympathy rather than as complex individuals who control their own lives. I'm thinking of the countless photos of faceless numbers—in overcrowded boats or detained at borders. These are important images to circulate, for sure, but they overshadow other ways of picturing migration. When do we see the many photographs taken by migrants themselves making front-page news? The book introduces readers to many modes of representation

while encouraging them to think more critically about the images of migration they consume every day.

**Q: You organized the book around four keywords: mobility (and immobility), border, refugee, and diaspora. Why?**

I taught my first course at Colby on photography and migration in the spring of 2015. We read entries from *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, and used them to frame our discussions each week. Keywords proved to be an enormously helpful teaching tool, and so I adopted it to *Photography and Migration*. The four I selected to organize the book are concepts in migration studies that have significant implications for photography. We are flooded with photographs of refugees attempting to cross geographical and political borders. Many of them identify as part of a dispersed community, or diaspora.

**Q: Could you say more about the book's genesis at Colby?**

It all began with the campus-wide theme of migrations in 2014-15 sponsored by the Center for the Arts and Humanities. As I was co-organizing the theme with Natasha Zelensky, assistant professor of music, I launched the Photography and Migration Project. The project aims to bring together scholars, artists, students, and the central Maine community. It hosted its first events in the spring of 2015, which included a student-curated photo exhibition at Special Collections in Miller Library and an international scholarly conference. These events stimulated conversations among the conference participants, my students, and families from the Waterville area. It was deeply moving to see the barriers between these different groups begin to break down at Colby. Their interactions inspired me to edit the book—and shaped my discussion of diaspora in the opening chapter.



**Q: Your work with the Photography and Migration Project at Colby has elicited hundreds of historic family photographs from people who migrated to Maine in the 19th and 20th centuries. What did that teach you?**

The 2015 exhibition in Special Collections attracted the attention of the local press. This led several Waterville area families to donate their personal photograph collections to Colby—the very first collections of their kind at the College. In the spring of 2017, another group of students conducted research on those collections and presented it to the public. They also helped run a large-scale community event at the Waterville Public Library where local residents digitized their family photographs and shared their migration stories on video.

I've been reminded through this work that preserving the histories of local families is a privilege and a responsibility. It requires collaboration between Colby and the Waterville

community. My students learn that the family photographs at Special Collections are most meaningful when they are connected to personal narratives. People from the Waterville area have been tremendously positive about the Photography and Migration Project and have wanted to be involved, either by donating their own photos or offering information on the pictures at Special Collections. They want to tell their stories and see them preserved for future generations.

Read more about the project at [web.colby.edu/photomigration](http://web.colby.edu/photomigration).

Opposite page: Unknown photographer, portrait of Georgiana, Vitaline, Eugenie, and Ophelia Poulain, ca. 1894, tintype. Picher-LaVerdiere Family Photograph Collection, Colby College Special Collections, Waterville, Maine.