

Special Focus Introduction: Migration Narratives in Europe

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While the twenty-first century may seem obsessed with borders, walls, and national self-identification, migration narratives are not new. The relationship between migratory movements and literature has been conspicuous for a long time, take the writings by Russians who left their homeland after the Bolshevik Revolution for example, or dissidents of all stripes who fled Nazi Germany. What we mean to suggest in this special focus section of *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature*, called “Migration Narratives in Europe,” is how to approach the relationship between the postmodern and postcolonial displacements and literature, and more important, how the in (“in Europe”) truly works from preposition to presupposition. In is indeed grammatically defined, but it also implies a place of authority, of competence, where bodies of knowledge eventually are summoned for interpretation. We see for instance how museums in Europe hold a competence valence, including with artifacts that hail from Africa or Asia. In other words, Europe occupies the place of subject, the migratory paradigm that of object, which is challenged to fit in.

As Edward Said famously postulated, it is not just people who move across countries and continents; theories travel, too, including from one period to another, and from one situation to another (226). One may then wonder: What does theory leave behind? Perhaps not much, as theory is, by definition, cumulative. Or is it that theory paints in new colors something already known or speculated upon suggested by its Greek root *theoros* (θεωρός), meaning “spectator”? The migratory paradigm brings along some epistemological uncertainty: What is original in the new literary incarnation once it is penned and published in Europe? Is the meaning embedded in the text, or does interpretation do violence to what we actually read in European national languages? And at the same time, the historical referent rests very much in the center. For better or worse, history always singles out a given and accounted for situation, but rarely intentions or potentialities. For example, how can something experienced, leaving behind one’s homeland, be fittingly represented as historical process or on aesthetic grounds? The aesthetic self-positioning through literature sets itself against forms of erasure, or what, for example, the old colonial terminology dubbed assimilation.

This is what migratory narratives are attempting to do: fight for acknowledgment in the face of one-sided recognition, against the Hegelian terms where the slave serves the desire of the master. To some extent, western or European literary prizes serve that purpose of self-congratulatory competence that

grants recognition to the postcolonial voice. Thereby, just when we are tempted to yield to the power of writing, with the recent, manifold migratory narratives, we must recall that aesthetics, probably postcolonial in nature, defies discursive control. The much-vaunted postcolonial concepts coined in western academia (hybridity, métissage multiculturalism, multilingualism, oral tradition, and so forth) first of all speak to aesthetic and ideological strategies that postcolonial individuals ascribe to themselves. This approach shapes the core argument of our special volume.

Since the 2000s, European migration narratives have come in many guises: political rhetoric, media stories, online personal accounts, graphic novels, to name just a few. They can address themes of knowledge, ideology, history, faith, and ethnic identity. They also invoke public policies and preferences, as well as the added, albeit ambivalent, value of human rights. Across the European Union, as nations face migratory influxes, we witness France's postcolonial guilt, Germany's obsession with human resources, Poland's nationalistic stand, Italy's mobility paradox of legal rights and economic exclusion, or Sweden's selective definition of "refugee" since 2016. What about individual experiences? How does the cultural negotiation between migrant and host proceed from here? Whose "paradise lost" is it?

Within the broader context of migration narratives, this volume focuses on the novel and the alienated consciousness that proves, after all, to be an invaluable tool for formulating the problematics of European literature outside the native or self-imposed structures of language, history, cultural frameworks, and memory. The rootedness of ideas and autobiographical texts accounts for many novels' contents; these also occupy a particular space in the transnational citizenship community. They go through a reconstruction process within new cultural settings, with the timeless effort of reconciling aesthetics and action. In his 2018 essay "The Idea of a Borderless World," Achille Mbembe hints at a dialectics of opening and closure, not simply around national borders but most importantly around the imagination. He challenges a more idealized concept of borders as the control and distribution of land and rights, and asks whether that renders a coherent story of human migration, or a fragmented neoliberal account. Subaltern narratives of women and young adults also subvert the totalizing statements around south-to-north migrations. As a matter of self-representation, Europe's discourse around nation and security informs its anxiety around race and gender, and seeks to confirm that capital travels better than human beings. The black man or the Muslim male? Not so much. The borderless, yet very much shielded, world laid out in the globalized economy poses urgent questions about our contemporary postcolonial-migratory understanding.

As an example, works of fiction, notably novels and feature films, can offer new perspectives beyond the layers of historical circumstances, geopolitical

challenges, and demographics. If one can pinpoint social relevance in aesthetic productions (including music, videos, and graffiti, for example), the true question revolves around a reimagined European cosmopolitanism as it is experienced or scrutinized by the migrant subject. The *visa*—literally, what has been seen—too often instantiates post-national invisibility. To come into existence once again, transformations of identity and narratives happen within the global process of migration. The visa is the focal hallmark throughout words, whether shared or untranslatable, with, for instance, the application process that comes close to an autobiographical narrative. In this context, one may suggest that a novel is indeed a by-product of the visa as it is a figurative passage between different cultures, while at the same time it discloses something about one's identity. Literature makes it seen to the European reader.

This special focus section of *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature* brings to the fore and questions the diverse narratives that map twenty-first-century migrations to Europe. While the broader topic has been under scholarly investigation for several decades (with much published since the 1990s about Latin America and the United States), writing about migration narratives in Europe feels like reporting from the trenches. Europeans, including academics, tend to oversimplify the complexities of migrants' experiences, mainly around economic assessments or governance and legal preoccupations. It is as though European cultures remain blindsided by their coded, or not so coded, colonial legacies. As for the alleged humanitarian counter-narratives, it appears they cannot escape the patronizing overtones of "migrant victimhood" that conveniently shirk the migrant's own agency. If there is one unmistakable message, it is that writing is a key dimension of reclaiming subjectivity. Just as was the case for Francophone literature until the late 1990s in France, today's migrant narratives find themselves striving for legitimacy. However, the ambition of our special focus section does not revolve around the question of whether the narratives are somehow an unwanted cultural hitch, it considers how they are going to settle in.

The volume puts forward four articles that discuss the configuration of a critical field where literature intersects with many social sciences topics, and not just as yet another interdisciplinary endeavor, but, rather, with true intellectual curiosity about new literary "European" voices. Each of the essays illustrates aspects of migrant narratives in specific national contexts, as well as how we witness the rise of decolonized intellectuals in a world where post-hegemony no longer holds any longer in fortress Europe. Contributors were given space limitations, but they were at liberty to address any aspect of narratives of migration throughout Europe since the dawn of the new century.

Anna Tybinko writes as a junior academic in Hispanic Studies in the United States. In her piece, "Decolonizing the Metropole: The Born-Translated Works of Najat El Hachmi and Agnès Agboton as Literary Activism," the author revisits the

expansive ideals of a new identity as a female migrant writer, and the power of languages, native (Benin and Morocco) and borrowed Castilian. Tybinko also goes so far as to challenge the concept of “narratives of migration,” while she puts back in the core of her argument the positionality of the host country, mostly in terms of cultural politics, rather than the migratory process. The author discusses the burden of alterity for women, so often associated with western feminism.

In “The Spirit of Migrancy: Mati Diop’s *Atlantique*,” Gigi Adair, a junior faculty in postcolonial and gender studies in Germany, discusses the modes of living and thinking of native communities in West Africa, upstream of the migration process to Europe. The author contends that cinematic aesthetics is at variance in representing culture as a living artifact, while it may be engrossed in forms of spirituality set against the material burden of neoliberalism in the postcolonial world. The article also contains an anthropological element around the sortition of leaving one’s own land or staying behind, thereby broadening the very idea of migration within two journey markers.

Lilla Balint, an Assistant Professor of German at UC Berkeley, and, Ph.D. candidate in the same department, Landon Reitz’s piece focuses on a best-selling literary work by author Jenny Erpenbeck, a German, non-postcolonial voice. The article, “Migration Meets Bildung: Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Go, Went, Gone*,” evokes and parses the narrative of migration from the point of view of a privileged German white male who gets to meet and befriend migrants from Africa and the Middle East. What is, of course, interesting about this non-traveling perspective is the awakening of the main character not as a young hero, but as an old man who proves unable to shake off the Eurocentric thought-system and power structure. Balint and Reitz cast critical eyes over the ambiguities of the novel and the aim of the author, whose narrative navigates between irony, empathy, and consecrated European cultural hegemony. Their sustained overview of Erpenbeck’s novel is particularly on point with questions around the ethics of literature in contemporary Germany.

“African and Asian 21st Century Migration to Europe and the Rise of the Ethno-Topographical Novel” offers a survey of narratives (six novels in five different languages) of migration across Europe, attempting to foreground questions about the epistemology and taxonomy of the literary genre. From their vantage point in Hispanic and English Studies, authors Nelson González Ortega and Olga Michael take a concise approach that seeks to challenge canonical views of literature published in Europe and alludes to the possibility of opening up alternative ways of thinking about what constitutes today’s European literature and why it matters. Even the word “migrant” is deemed a misnomer that exhibits a range of patronizing attitudes. The critical approach taken in this article exemplifies the importance of space/topography with respect to the greatly different experiences lived and represented in fiction works.

In a forceful, and maybe symptomatic fashion, this journal focus section is

also a dramatization, a theoretical acting out of the conditions and places we are all speaking from, with or without confinement.

Works Cited

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