Special Focus Introduction: Refugee Voices in Contemporary Literature

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In his 2017 novel *Ohrfeige* (*A Slap in the Face*), Abbas Khider tells the story of a group of refugees navigating the asylum process in Germany. The novel's protagonist, an Iraqi refugee, is quickly initiated by other refugees in the home where he is placed. They advise him on the kind of narrative he will need to strategically craft for the judge deciding his case. This scene reveals the pressures put upon refugees to conform to certain narrative norms in order to successfully navigate the system and gain legal residence in the European Union. The novel's frame narrative, on the other hand, provides a different kind of story: in an extended revenge fantasy, the narrator has strapped his listener, a German bureaucrat, to a chair, and holds nothing back in his retelling of persecution, flight, and arrival in Germany. Importantly, although the novel is written in German, the protagonist tells us he is speaking Arabic—a narrative conceit that plays with the very possibilities of communicating and telling one's story. Khider thus employs a humorous adaptation of the Scheherazade frame narrative to continuously center the role of storytelling for refugees. This groundbreaking novel thematizes what it means for refugee authors to have a voice, to be heard, and the various scenarios that prompt narratives of flight and survival in the first place. The book thus contrasts bureaucratic contexts for crafting life narratives, and other opportunities for disclosing and telling one's story. This special focus section of *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature* highlights works by contemporary refugee authors writing and publishing in French, Spanish, and German. These novelists and memoirists engage in complex ways with what it means to be forcibly displaced, and to tell one's story. Ultimately, they all demonstrate the power of storytelling, often asking us to question traditional, conventionalized narratives of flight and rescue.

In the twenty-first century, the numbers of displaced persons around the globe have reached all-time highs. As we have seen in the "super election year" 2024, immigration and asylum rights continue to be hot-button issues in elections both in the United States and in the European Union. While discourses around refugees continue to take shape in political, economic, and social contexts, such discourses often preclude the participation of refugees in the conversation. Refugees and migrants are objectified as objects of concern, treated in the abstract by using numerical data, or even dehumanized as a threat to safety and security. In

short, “the formula of refugee identity remains escape, despair, and rescue” (Critical Refugee Studies Collective 147). Scholars and activists have sought to critique such prevailing narratives about refugees by challenging these discourses and centering refugee storytelling and refugee forms of knowledge production. In response to the “problem-oriented approach to refugees,” the growing interdisciplinary field of critical refugee studies (CRS) aims to highlight the resilience and creativity of refugee communities “by focusing on the imaginative ways that refugees re-create in their stories the formative ideas of community and collective justice. With the stories they tell, refugees instruct us on what it means to be human and humane in the best and worst of times” (Espiritu et al. 6-7). By taking storytelling seriously, scholars can also shift from an objectifying discourse about refugees to the creative potential inherent in narrative. Scholars in this field have worked to highlight creative work as an important mode of being and creating through displacement and beyond: “A focus on refugee narratives—whether literary or visual, fictive or factual, conventional or experimental—enables a view of refugees as ontological and epistemological *subjects* shaped by and shaping history” (Gandhi and Nguyen 4).

Contemporary discourse about modern refugeeness has its origins in human rights discussions from the Second World War, as the first legislation concerning refugees was being drafted. In her 1943 essay “We Refugees,” Hannah Arendt writes of a “new meaning of the term ‘refugee’” that arose during the war: a “new kind of human beings—the kind that are put in concentration camps by their foes and in internment camps by their friends” (265). Arendt, herself a Jewish refugee from Nazism who had been interned in Gurs, wrote about the lack of understanding for this new category of stateless persons, lacking foundational protections to their security and human dignity. As Lyndsey Stonebridge argues in *Placeless People: Writing, Rights, and Refugees*, “the changed meanings of exile at mid-century demanded new forms of political thought, creative imagination, and moral courage” (8). Like political theorists, writers have engaged with the problems of modern statelessness, the changed meaning of exile in the age of imperialism, and the ethics of rightlessness.

This topic remains increasingly urgent. While the so-called Syrian “refugee crisis” of 2015 was a significant moment in renewed discussion on refugees, forced migration, and displacement, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 displaced millions of refugees fleeing war internally, as well as into member-states of the European Union. The Mediterranean continues to be a dangerous and contested site of crossing, as does the United States-Mexico border. An estimated 122.6 million people are currently forcibly displaced, which includes 37.9 million refugees, as well as asylum seekers and internally displaced people (UNHCR). In 2024, 65% of these displaced persons originate from four countries: Syria, Venezuela, Ukraine, and Afghanistan. In 2015, “Refugees Welcome” was a

ubiquitous slogan in media headlines and photographs, representing German "Willkommenskultur" 'welcome culture,' as seen on placards at German train stations, and in images that went viral as crowds of Germans welcomed refugees into their cities. Famously, then-Chancellor Angela Merkel took a selfie with a Syrian refugee, just months after she optimistically proclaimed to the German public "Wir schaffen das!" 'We can do it!', committing humanitarian aid to nearly one million refugees. However, as the past few years have shown, German society remains divided on issues of immigration and asylum, and in recent elections the anti-migrant party Alternative for Germany (AfD) has continued to gain voters, and xenophobic incidents and hate speech have also become more prevalent (ZDF). In 2024, when journalists uncovered a secret meeting of right-wing groups discussing "Remigration," or mass deportations, public outrage ensued, and German citizens took to the streets in large numbers, appalled by the resurgence of Nazi rhetoric. Donald Trump picked up the term "remigration" in a tweet from September 2024, as his campaign repeatedly dehumanized migrants as violent criminals who take public benefits and jobs from American citizens. Among their many ongoing initiatives, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is working to shift the narrative surrounding immigration to instead center dignity, respect, and the rule of law, citing polls that show most Americans do not want to ban asylum or separate families (ACLU). Political discourse that dehumanizes refugees has the power to shape public opinion, ultimately endangering legal protections to the right to seek asylum. Advocates argue that such discourse may also be disrupted, as High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi emphasized in a 2020 speech: "refugees, like migrants and others on the move in this era of extraordinary human mobility, are not just vulnerable people in need of help—they are also strong, effective, courageous contributors to communities hosting them, and to societies as a whole. [...] This is important, as it counters the toxic and unproductive narrative depicting them as a threat and a burden" (Grandi cited in Espiritu et al. 148).

By centering the writing of refugees in this special focus section, we do not mean to discount the work of non-refugee authors, nor to make claims about who can or should tell the stories of refugee lives. However, we acknowledge that much of the literature featuring refugee stories gains its power from a "testimonial pact" by which readers understand refugee stories written by refugee authors to draw from their lived experience (Sánchez Prado 379). The controversy surrounding the 2018 publication of *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins incited productive discussion about author positionality, claims to authenticity, and the commodification of immigrant stories. As a non-immigrant author, Cummins was criticized for stereotypical portrayals of her Mexican characters. As Parul Sehgal wrote in his review for the *New York Times*, "The real failures of the book [...] have little to do with the writer's identity and everything to do with her abilities as a novelist": simple characters, "tortured sentences," and an apolitical stance that does

not challenge the reader to think about the "deep roots" of forced displacement (Sehgal). As Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado argues in his critique of the novel (and its marketing), the book capitalizes on a discourse of authenticity, while "commodif[ying] Mexico, as well as the political issue of immigration" (378). Sánchez Prado focuses his analysis on the way the book industry focuses on emotional appeal to (female) white readers: "the novel's marketability becomes grounded on deliberately avoiding the affective register that locates the undocumented migrant at the center of the narrative, opting instead for a character of a socioeconomic background that seems likelier to match the reader's than it does the illegal border crosser's" (379). This analysis identifies a crucial feature of much writing about migrants by non-migrant authors seeking to elicit sympathy, yet running the risk of merely becoming a "fetish for readers and writers," as Viet Thanh Nguyen puts it, "allowing them to think that they are hearing the voiceless when they are really only hearing the writer's individual voice" (12).

Displaced writers and intellectuals have themselves been grappling with the challenges of narrative representation at least since Arendt's famous essay, "We Refugees." As Hadji Bakara writes, "refugee writers have always been special witnesses to the shifting grounds of political life," and "acts of witnessing have been present from the very beginning of modern refugee writing" (289). Viet Thanh Nguyen writes of the invisibility and hypervisibility of refugees in the introduction to the anthology *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives,* warning that refugees are often ignored entirely or perceived as an omnipresent threat. For many years, refugee narratives have been predominantly "sad stories" to be consumed by non-immigrant authors (Espiritu et al. 146). In this vein, Nguyen comments on the role of literature: "Readers and writers should not deceive themselves that literature changes the world. Literature changes the world of readers and writers, but literature does not change the world until people get out of their chairs, go out in the world, and do something to transform the conditions of which the literature speaks" (20). This relationship between storytelling and (political) action is an underlying theme in many of the contributions that follow. Olga Grjasnowa, herself a so-called *Kontingentflüchtling* 'quota refugee' from the Soviet Union to Germany, writes in her 2019 essay, entitled "Privilegien" ("Privileges"), of the racialized "hierarchy of (im)migrants" (64): "The good ones are those whose skin is pale and who claim allegiance to not-so-foreign cultural groups. There are even 'good' languages and 'problematic' ones" (64). Grjasnowa highlights in this essay her privilege to not automatically be perceived as non-German based on her outward appearance since "in public discourse, this place is now occupied by another supposed 'group': 'refugees'" with "thick, black hair" (64).

Soon after the aforementioned wave of "welcoming" in 2015, German writers also began to publish novels about refugees in Germany, two of which are taken up in this *STTCL* special focus by Carol Anne Costabile-Heming in her essay

"Hospitality and Tolerance: Portrayals of Migrant Communities in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015) and Saša Stanišić's *Herkunft* (2019)." By pairing the concepts of hospitality and tolerance, Constabile-Heming asks us to think about the way stories about displacement are framed, how host communities interact with newcomers, and how the precarity of migrant experiences might be represented in fiction. Erpenbeck's novel is focalized through a retired white German professor, who aims to do good in the community, whereas Stanišić's semi-autobiographical *Herkunft* (*Where you come from*) presents readers with first-person narration from the migrant's point of view. Thus, the pairing of these novels also raises questions about narrative perspective and readerly positionality, identification, empathy, as well as the possibilities and limits of narrative fiction to enter into contemporary discourse about hospitality towards refugees.

In her analysis of the epistolary novel *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen* (*Before the Increase of Signs*) by Senthuran Varatharajah, Irene Kuo analyzes what she calls the "testimonial 'we,'" and the way the novel's two protagonists share their personal family stories of forced migration. The Sri Lankan Civil War and the Kosovo War provide the geopolitical background for flight to Germany, and for the long-distance friendship for the two characters, now living in Germany. Varatharajah's novel "reflects on the possibility of shared postmemorial witnessing," as Kuo argues (2), and that "retrospective and collective memory can serve as a form of political recognition for diasporic stories of conflict" (2). Her analysis of the novel convincingly argues that the text works to disrupt notions of a "single story," and that the dialogic narration offers a creative way for the author to interweave disparate refugee experiences.

The contribution by Marda Messay, "Migration and Diasporic Identity in Scholastique Mukasonga's *Un si beau diplôme!*" (*Such a Beautiful Diploma*), centers the gendered experience of exile for a Tutsi woman forced out of her Rwandan homeland. Messay's analysis of Mukasonga's memoir underscores the ongoing legacies of colonialism that continue to shape African migratory experiences, both in various African countries of refuge, and in the French metropole. In her treatment of the memoir, Messay highlights how the author repeatedly adopts the rhetoric of "refugee refusal," "the refusal of being categorized as a refugee, a Tutsi, or a victim," instead emphasizing the way her identity as a female professional (social worker) offered opportunities based in her own agentic decisions (6). The author's migration to Burundi and later Djibouti challenges neat, linear narratives of refugee flight and rescue, as Mukasonga "draws attention to the breadth and complexities of the refugee and exile experiences by tackling issues of power, privilege, gender imbalances, agency, division, exclusion, and solidarity" (8). As Messay shows, the diploma certificate is a "magic paper," an act of resistance that represents Mukasonga's own agentic negotiation of identity.

The essay by Ana Patricia Rodríguez centers our attention on migration from the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), by focusing on the issue of unaccompanied child migration from this region and the potential for literature to respond to political discussions with high humanitarian stakes. Rodríguez first provides an overview of an emerging corpus in English and Spanish centering the experiences of child migrants; she then analyzes key texts by Jorge Argueta and Javier Zamora, both authors who draw on their own migratory experiences from El Salvador to the United States in their creative works. The analysis of children's literature provides a welcome addition to this section, as it shows the range of narrative fiction on the market today. Drawing on Glenda Carpio's concept of the "migrant aesthetic," Rodríguez interrogates our position as readers, whether literature has the potential to cultivate empathy, and how writers work strategically to produce a critical reader response. This contribution thus also reflects most explicitly on the engaged nature of much refugee writing, and literature's ability to gesture toward causes of migration, asking readers to take action after reading.

Although the articles each address very different political contexts for flight and refuge, certain common themes emerge: language and (mis)communication, narrative authenticity, voice and voicelessness, the politics of refuge and humanitarianism, and the paradigms of victimhood and rescue. The plurality of stories presented here invite us to not only think about the common themes, but also what makes each case unique: where the protagonists flee and their precarious journey, and whether the host country is Germany, the United States, France, or Burundi. Importantly, all of the refugee writers featured here write in the language of their new home country, clearly hoping to reach readers in their communities to share new perspectives on displacement. B. Venkat Mani's work on the "languages of refuge," as distinct from the languages refugees speak, offers theoretical possibilities to considering the role of language in the construction of refugee narratives (912-15). According to Mani, "Under languages of refuge, we can also understand the registers of affective dimensions in the afterlives of moments of seeking refuge—that is, modes in which refugee subjecthoods are expressed beyond departures and arrivals, in narratives that grant aesthetic expression to thoughts, feelings, and ways of being in the geographic place and the cultural space [...] from what was once called home" (915). This special focus section thus offers a contribution to the growing and ongoing work centering refugees and their subjectivities. These authors all acknowledge the powerful potential that lies in storytelling: "narratives are imaginative acts that envision alternatives to the present that has failed to meaningfully reckon with refugee migrations" (Gandhi and Nguyen 5). And as we look ahead to a contemporary era that continues to be dominated by discourses *about* refugees, it will continue to be important to center

their own stories, focusing on respect, human dignity, courage, and optimism for a better future.

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