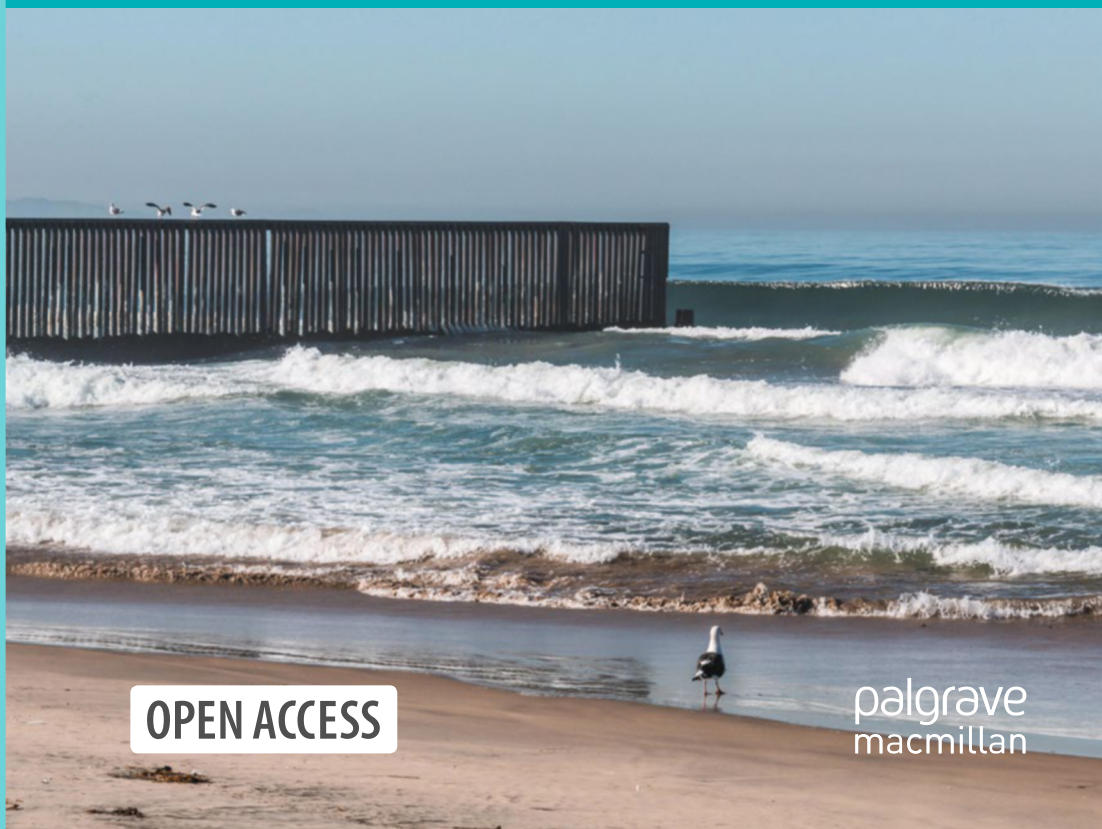




Storying Contemporary Migration

Representation, Aspirations, Advocacy

Lena Englund



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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Migration as a social and political phenomenon is a force that shapes and transforms societies. Historically, it goes back to the formation of diasporas of people fleeing persecution and genocide, and it continues in the present moment in a variety of contexts and for multiple reasons. Recent years have seen migration become increasingly contested and debated, in Europe particularly since the so-called migrant crisis of 2015–2016, and in the United States in relation to the Trump administration 2017–2021. This book is a reaction to the aftermath and ongoing negotiation of both periods, focusing on contemporary writing that examines and addresses experiences of migration in European and American contexts. The primary material ranges from accounts of personal experiences of migration for professional purposes, to perspectives on what it means to be undocumented without access to citizenship, to novels that provide fictional representations of migrants and their complex lives. Multiple literary forms feature as well, such as non-fiction, memoir, novel, and essay. The events mentioned, primarily the recent migrant crisis in 2015 and 2016, the border wall controversy and migration politics of the Trump administration, plus the Brexit vote in 2016, form a temporal framework for this study. They have all been transformational in terms of attitudes towards migration and people who migrate. Therefore, all of the texts examined here have been published from 2016 onwards.

Migration as a human experience is both permanent and fluid, existing and evolving in connection to political events and historical developments. Stories of migration, both fictional and nonfictional, represent this

permanence and fluidity, offering personal and political commentary on societal developments, as migration arguably continues to be one of the most debated and contested global phenomena in the contemporary world. The texts selected for analysis explore what futures there are for migrants and surrounding societies in a social and political climate that often involves increasingly fortified borders and limited access to citizenship. Much of the primary material embarks from a position of criticism against receiving societies, in this case, countries in Europe, including Britain, and the United States. This is a central difference when compared to previous studies of migration which are often preoccupied with postcolonialism and diasporic identities (cf. Fongang 2018; Nyman 2009; Dawson 2007). The personal, societal, and political consequences of migration are addressed in the material examined, with particular focus on discrimination and inhumane practices in receiving countries. Sending countries are rarely held accountable, nor is the journey itself in much focus.

The five chapters address topics relating to representing migration and who can write stories of migration, to aspirations and expectations among migrants, people with undocumented status, open borders, and the migrant crisis. These themes emerge in the primary material in multiple ways. In addition, this book also investigates political narratives that the selected material addresses and in the context of which the stories emerge. Different political narratives, or discourses surrounding migration, also appear in media reviews and reports about the selected texts. In what ways are writers themselves calling for a more responsible approach to migration in receiving countries in particular, and what does that responsibility entail? The migrant crisis in 2015 further exacerbated societal debate when more than a million people arrived in Europe, causing deepening rifts between countries as people clashed over the new arrivals and whether they should be welcomed or shown out. The waves of terrorist attacks that plagued Europe particularly before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic have also been much debated (see for example Kaunert et al. (2022)). In an American context, the Trump administration caused controversy with its proposed border wall between the US and Mexico. Despite often being solely attributed to President Donald Trump, the wall project has in fact continued during Joe Biden's presidency (see for example Taladrid 2022; Devereaux 2022). At the time of writing, the United States is going towards its presidential elections of 2024, and it remains to be seen whether Donald Trump is elected for another term. On his campaign website, it is stated that his mission is to "have our country back", as many problems plague the nation: "terrorists are invading our southern

border” (“Our Mission to Make America Great Again” n.d.). Irregular migration is once more a central focus of his campaign.

Other measures that have been in the headlines in recent years concern the American 2018 policy to separate children from their parents who crossed the border through irregular means. In South Africa, recent decades have seen xenophobic attacks against immigrants from other African countries, and the autumn of 2021 saw a border crisis erupt between Poland and Belarus when migrants were used by the Belarusian side in a political game with high stakes. Similar events began to happen on the border between Finland and Russia in late 2023. At the time of writing (2024), the war in Ukraine sees no signs of abating. Millions of Ukrainians have been forced to leave their homes and many have travelled to neighbouring countries or elsewhere in Europe to seek refuge. In the Mediterranean, the European Union has yet to find a sustainable solution in terms of how to handle migrants arriving by boat from Turkey or North Africa, not to mention the millions of people living in precarious conditions in various camps outside Europe.

The list could go on. Australia and its strict border control was not mentioned, nor for example the riots that took place in Sweden in 2022 or the Quran burnings in both Sweden and Denmark in the summer of 2023 that caused an uproar in Muslim countries across the world. The unpredictable consequences of climate change have not been addressed, which may force potentially hundreds of millions of people to relocate. Hardly a day goes by that migration in some form or other is not in the headlines. It is possibly the most urgent topic of our time, concerning uncountable numbers of people who, at this very moment, find themselves on the move, or who are currently contemplating migration. It also concerns people who already have moved and now find themselves in new countries, sometimes living lives of their choosing and sometimes not, and it concerns those living in both sending and receiving countries without migrant backgrounds.

Migration is therefore a topic that requires urgent attention and examination from as many angles as possible. In all its shapes and forms, voluntary or forced, regular or irregular and everything in between, for reasons of personal safety, or for relational, social, or economic reasons, or all of the above, migration is increasingly represented and addressed in works of fiction and nonfiction across the Anglophone world. Representations of migration have also been discussed widely in both social and traditional media in recent years and this speaks to the role such writing can have and

its effect on the migration debate itself. A demand for just representation is increasingly vocalized in the material examined in this book. My study embarks from, but also goes beyond, concepts that have been widely applied in recent research of migration narratives, thinking particularly about notions of cosmopolitanism, postnationalism, and postmigration. These three concepts will be outlined in more detailed in this introductory chapter and have been central for academic migration discourse. The argument is that we need a new way of thinking about migration narratives, one which takes into account the balancing between personal stories of migration on the one hand and political and ideological narratives on the other. Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan et al. (2021) write in their publication “How We Talk about Migration”, published for the Migration Policy Institute, that “stories told about migration and migrants can paint a rich picture of how people view the opportunities and challenges associated with the movement of people, and through what lenses” (p. 1). This book aims to examine these questions posed, while bearing in mind the political nature of the topic.

The difference between story and narrative is central, although the two terms are to some extent used in overlapping contexts in this study, nor does this study draw on narrative theory in any detail. Banulescu-Bogdan et al. (ibid.) address the “competing narratives” of migration, arguing that they can be used for multiple purposes for law and policy making, in media, and among ordinary people. They make an important distinction between narrative and story which is also to some extent relevant for this book. Narratives can be seen as widely circulated viewpoints that impact how people think about the world and “what they see as normative” (ibid., 2). Stories, on the other hand, help build such narratives (ibid.). The material examined here addresses narratives of migration such as the idea of the “good immigrant” in the two essay collections with that exact title. The material itself, however, consists of stories of individuals, or fictional characters, that go about their lives as migrants in a variety of contexts. Representation is key to the accounts, and this of course also involves the question as to who is writing these stories. More often than not, the authors themselves have migrant backgrounds.

Narrative has a somewhat different meaning in literary contexts, often used interchangeably with *story*. Corinne Squire et al. (2014: 1) explain that “narrative” is used widely in numerous different disciplines. They define it as “accounts of temporally ordered events, or as developing and expressing personal identity, or telling about the past, or making sense of

mental states or emotions, or having particular social effects, or demonstrating formal linguistic properties” (p. 6). Ann Rigney (2019: 159) offers the following statement in more specifically literary contexts: “[S]tories are conveyed through narratives”. The book by Squire et al. (2014) focuses explicitly on social sciences, and Rigney (ibid.) explains that narrative research is commonly used within such fields in which “people are asked to tell their own stories, which are then analysed as a source of insight into dominant ideas and values”. This study does something slightly similar, albeit not in ethnological terms. The primary material examined consists of stories of people, real or fictional, that provide insight into dominant discourses and policies surrounding migration and immigrant status. To that extent, while staying within the realm of the literary, this study has a social dimension as well.

Rigney (2019: 161), too, addresses the difference in meaning between narrative and story. Narrative is defined as “the use of a medium and of narrative techniques”, whereas story centres on “the characters and actions represented”. The approach proposed here in this book entails seeing the stories narrated, fictionally or nonfictionally, as valuable and worthy on their own but also as carrying deeper significance for societal narratives of migration and their social and political ramifications. Seeing literary texts as political may take away from their aesthetic, from being pieces of art in their own right, but this study hopes that the two may not be mutually exclusive. Everything is eventually political, and few topics more so than contemporary migration. Thus, narrative and story are seen as two building blocks where personal and individual stories influence narratives and conceptions of migration, and the other way around.

Several of the primary texts examined argue for a change in how migration is depicted, for greater political and social responsibility particularly in terms of the treatment of asylum seekers and undocumented people, and some openly advocate for an open borders policy. Personal experiences as well as fictional characters and their lives shed light on these issues. The narratives examined; the ideological approaches to migration as well as the individual stories presented in various shapes and forms, indicate the need to address this contemporary conundrum and to find sustainable ways of going forward. The literature examined is thus often explicitly advocating change and pointing a finger at policies and practices for example within asylum processes, demanding accountability from receiving countries.

Bringing all these different perspectives together in this book and providing space for a multitude of voices, albeit often privileged, can hopefully shed light on contemporary discourses and debates.

STORYING MIGRATION

The title of this book, *Storying Contemporary Migration: Representation, Aspirations, Advocacy*, refers to the stories of migration examined, but also to the societal discourses and political ideologies addressed by researchers, writers and reviewers. *Storying* also addresses the published nature of the primary material, and that many of the texts in focus have become bestsellers. Their reach and appeal are significant. The subtitle, *Representation, Aspirations, Advocacy*, reflects some of the key aspects of the texts. Experiences of migration are represented here in a variety of genres and forms, and through different characters, events, and relational perspectives. Aspirations relate to the hopes and dreams of migrants, to expectations of receiving and sending countries, and to the many societal narratives and discourses of migration that aim to achieve certain goals. Authors, too, may have particular aspirations with their texts, here examined in terms of advocacy for humane and fair treatment of migrants and access to citizenship. The advocacy dimension is present in many of the elected texts, as the authors aim for change and hope to enlist readers in the process.

This study takes into consideration the varied experiences depicted in novels and nonfictional texts about migration and the multiple contexts from which they have emerged. A central question concerns the author and their background, giving rise to the question as to whether a true (as in authentic, legitimate) story of migration is written by a person who has migrated themselves. In many instances, this is the case for the primary material. However, the category migration story is also problematic. As Parul Sehgal (2016) writes for *The New York Times*, “the idea of a literature of migration seems to have fallen out of fashion—not with readers but with writers, some of whom chafe at being narrowly categorized, consigned to an ethnic beat, their work treated as sociology instead of art”. He cites Jhumpa Lahiri who is critical of the term immigrant fiction, as it sets certain texts apart from other writing. Sehgal agrees with these notions: “There’s a feeling that the designation edges writers to the margins—they are forever hyphenated and their work sapped of its universality”.

Thus, labelling the particular texts studied here as narratives or stories of migration needs to be done with care. Arguably, the universality of the material examined lies within that label: movement need not always take place in a disruptive manner or be international in scope. The examples of movement and migration examined here do to a significant degree speak of more extreme experiences, such as living without citizenship in the United States, or in Europe without papers in the aftermath of the migrant crisis. The stories recounted reveal details about indefinite detention in the UK, about lives in asylum limbo, and about the long-term effects of permanently leaving one's country of origin. On the other hand, these experiences have been and continue to be reality for millions of people and can thus not be said to be that marginal. They represent another kind of universal experience of migration. "Literature has often been effective in voicing uncomfortable, marginalized truths", writes Kate Rose (2020: 2), and it is a central statement for this study as well. Migration is a paradoxical phenomenon in the sense that many people who have migrated continue to occupy the margins and to be dispossessed, while migration as a global occurrence is the reality of so many millions of people. It is thus a phenomenon that simultaneously resides in the margins and at the centre and must be examined as such.

From a scholarly perspective, interest in migration writing seems to be on the increase. Recent publications such as Lucinda Newns's (2020) *Domestic Intersections in Contemporary Migration Fiction* deals with the concept of home from a domestic perspective, addressing and critiquing ideas of immigrant homes as "embracing insularity and segregation" (2020, 4). Newns sees the construction of these domestic spaces as "a political act" (ibid.). Thus, the role of politics and the politicization of domestic spaces also speak to the contestation and controversies connected with migration. *Migration: Changing Concepts, Critical Approaches*, edited by Doris Bachmann-Medick and Jens Kugele (2018), engages with how migration is framed, termed and conceptualized. The editors argue in the introduction that the "framing of migration is never innocent" (2018, 3). They connect this with how we perceive of immigration and its political dimensions (p. 4). Thus, politics emerges again in explicit ways.

Kate Rose (2020) for her part states in the introduction to the volume *Displaced: Literature of Indigeneity, Migration, and Trauma* that the focus is on the healing aspects of literature (p. 2), particularly with regard to historical injustices and traumas inflicted on indigenous populations. Jopi Nyman's *Displacement, Memory, and Travel in Contemporary Migrant*

Writing (2017) also touches upon the explicitly political in its examination of “the ways in which migration and relocation are experienced, given their frequent rootedness in long-standing discourses of race, nationalism, and xenophobia”. These phenomena with regard to literary representations of border-crossing and cultural encounters are as urgent as ever, to which the present study also contributes with particular focus not only on the primary texts but also on the scholarly and journalist discourses that surround them. It is a dimension that needs attention. Through the stories presented in scholarly and journalistic writing, political and ideological narratives of migration evolve and transform. A more recent study is offered by Glenda R. Carpio in her book *Migrant Aesthetics: Contemporary Fiction, Global Migration, and the Limits of Empathy*, in which she argues that fictional texts about migration need to be read in a “historicized and global context” (2023: 4). Her focus is on texts that do not rely on empathy in order to engage with readers, and she argues that this is achieved partly via engagement with other modes of writing than the purely autobiographical narrative (ibid., 13). The autobiographical is central to this study, as it is the chosen narrative mode of many writers, and because of the political importance of the personal story.

The power of literary texts to inspire social change has been emphasized in several studies. For example, Bill Ashcroft (2001: 21), postcolonial studies expert, makes the following statement: “Political and social change only occur because they occur in the minds of those who imagine a different kind of world”. Yet, the ability of literature to actually push for change is still debatable and this concerns migration narratives as well. Similar to Ashcroft’s idealistic views of literature, Jane Kilby and Anthony Rowland (2014, 6) state the following in their edited work on testimony and witnessing: “Imagination in an absolute sense makes the world real, and real with endless possibilities; without it, there is no possibility of change”. Again, there is an ideological undertone included with regard to using imagination for positive change (positive according to whom is the central question here). Bartels et al. (2019, 173) confirm these notions: “[F]orms of cultural expression help to push the limits of what is thinkable and unthinkable, possible and impossible”. The transformational nature of literature, at least in postcolonial contexts, is thus still seen as significant.

A completely opposite view is presented by Richard Santos (2020) in his review of *American Dirt*, a novel examined later in this book, where he presents the idea that an instructive or educational purpose of fictional writing may actually be futile: “We simply don’t live in a society any more in which novels change the world”. The question is if we ever did. The

controversy surrounding the novel in question, outlined in more detail in a subsequent chapter, seems to testify to the opposite to what Santos is claiming. The novel may not have changed the world, but it did inspire a heated debate about how migration should be narrated and by whom. That may be the most important task of politically sensitive literature: to inspire debate and invite discussion about the ethics of storytelling. When working with published texts, it is also always a question of whose stories get published and circulated.

To return to the question of narrative vs. story briefly addressed in the previous section, it also connects with ethics of storytelling. This for its part connects with advocacy, which is a significant aspect of several texts examined in this book, for some more explicitly than others, but many of the autobiographical texts in particular express desires to bring about change in terms of how migrants are treated and talked about. Francesca Polletta (2023: 107) examines advocacy writing and states that the relationship between “personal stories” and “dominant stories” is not necessarily about simply presenting personal stories in opposition to the dominant ones, or to replace them with another dominant story. Instead, stories are more complex and perhaps also more interweaving, as also shown in this study. Polletta (2023: 109) further argues that writing with advocacy purposes does need to rest on personal stories being tied to “the larger conditions behind it”. The comment rings true for all of the material examined here, fictional or nonfictional. Advocacy is relevant also from a marketing perspective, as such writing can be seen as “both popular and professionalized” (ibid.). Yet, the transformational effects may be minor despite engagement with important societal topics (Polletta 2023: 113). Stories can be disregarded due to views that mainly emphasize their unique nature (ibid.). The collective dimension of advocacy writing is thus significant.

The dominant story, or narrative, is politically relevant, as outlined by Paul Dawson and Maria Mäkelä (2023: 1): “In political debate and news media, phrases such as ‘control the narrative’ have become ubiquitous reflex slogans for rhetorical persuasion that have positioned the word ‘narrative’ to mean not just a different perspective on an event but a battleground for competing world views”. This “battleground” is central to this book as well, particularly for sections that offer competing or opposing views of migration and how related social challenges should be addressed. Mäkelä and Björninen (2023: 14) confirm these views, asserting that the political dimension of contested narratives is “prevalent today, especially, it seems, as many Western cultures are going through a period marked by a strong polarization of the political spectrum”. This polarization relates

most explicitly to migration and the many competing views presented in media and political discourse.

The connection between story and narrative in terms of migration experiences can therefore be seen as using personal stories to counteract or reinforce dominant stories, not only in order to understand the world, but in order to *transform* how migration is debated. Seeing the difference between personal stories and ideological narratives may mean having to walk a very fine line, and the two do intersect in the material examined. More important than being able to distinguish between the two is “recognizing the rhetorical and ideological traffic between grassroots storytelling (‘stories’) and cultural ‘narratives’ shaping communities and institutions” as it can “provide crucial insight into the often tacit notions of ‘story’ and ‘narrative’ embedded in our collective and political imagination” (Mäkelä and Björninen 2023: 21). This “rhetorical and ideological traffic” is important for this book, in relation to the primary material examined and in terms of the critical debate surrounding much of the material.

While a distinction between personal stories and political/ideological narratives and discourses may be to some extent artificial and arbitrary, as both inevitably inform one another and overlap, similar distinctions have been made in other studies too. Carolin Gebauer and Roy Sommer (2023) examine “stories of migration and narratives on migration” and define the former as the “inside (emic) perspective” and the latter as the “outside (etic) perspective” (p. 3). They observe that migration stories “tend to be retrospective accounts, memoirs, or novels written after the arrival in a new, safe country” (p. 4). Some of the material examined in this study conforms to their definition, but some of it presents a perspective that is less retrospective. Memoirs that recount experiences of being undocumented are written with an urgency that is not present to the same degree in other stories. Criticism against receiving countries is particularly prominent in such texts, and the receiving country is not necessarily seen as providing the safety expected and needed. Stories of migration have been examined before in the context of creative writing, as outlined in the volume *Migration and Identity through Creative Writing Stories: Strangers to Ourselves* (2023, eds. Kumar and Triandafyllidou). The stories included have been written for the volume itself, and it is not an examination of previously published stories such as this one.

The importance of stories in any politically contested situation is considerable, but as Francesca Polletta (2008: 28) notes, they should not be too overt about the point they hope to make: “Readers resist being beaten

over the head with the moral. They want the events to yield their own meaning. But events in a story never yield their own meaning. We evaluate, even understand, what's happening by reference to stories we've heard before". Several of the texts examined in this study have a message they want to emphasize, regarding human rights of migrants and the precarity that often defines their lives, as well as the shortcomings and unwillingness of Europe and the United States to be welcoming and accommodating towards those in need. The stories of migration in focus in this book largely hope to change discourses on migration in two different ways: either by employing a didactic approach or an advocacy perspective, and sometimes through a combination of both. The didactic approach aims to educate readers who have little knowledge of the lives of migrants, particularly those arriving by irregular means. The advocacy perspective hopes to inspire real change, to urge those who are already informed to take action.

Gebauer and Sommer (2023: 5) note the awareness-raising efforts of many "migrant testimonials" with regard to what they term narratives on migration, the outside perspective. They call such storytelling "vicarious", identifying four varieties of which two are noteworthy for this study as well: "ambassadorial" and "allied" storytelling. The former involves recounting stories of individual migrants for certain purposes, and the latter is "collaborative" (p. 6). Several texts examined here could be defined as ambassadorial, in terms of who is telling the story and how it is told, as well as other people potentially involved with it. This study goes beyond examining who is telling whose stories, but also asks how and why. The separation between personal and political stories cannot be done in any simple way, as ideology may not be easily detected (Polletta 2006: 7). However, much of the material examined tries to make this distinction explicit. Arguably, our personal stories, too, become political the moment they take public shape and form. Ideology is no less true or real than other forces that influence the personal story. As Polletta (2006: 2) argues, "stories—particular, local, claiming only verisimilitude, never absolute truth—may be all that we trust". Verisimilitude, that which makes something appear real or true, is essential for the material in this book, too. In a literary context, Lawrence R. Schehr (2009: 2) asserts that "realism is a kind of narrative that sees itself and is viewed by others as taking, insofar as possible, a verisimilar approach to the world it describes. The reader believes what s/he is reading to be very much like the real world depicted in the narrative". The material in focus in this study draws on

verisimilitude in different ways, and some of the authors, for example Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, outright rejects it in her text in relation to some of the stories she relays. Polletta (2006: 14) observes that we connect stories we hear or read with stories we know from before, confirming a kind of meta-dimension of verisimilitude. What is presented to us as real, as a depiction of reality, connects with previous stories and their realness. Verisimilitude, or the perceived lack thereof, becomes a problem particularly in Chap. 2, in which the novel examined has been criticized for not being real enough in its depiction of migration. It represents a familiar story, yet the way it is told and the teller herself are deemed inadequate.

Telling stories is always a public act, where a narrative is passed on from one person to another or to an entire group. Published stories, such as the ones examined here, are more calculatedly public than many others, as they have been produced for a general readership, free to make their own interpretations. Michael Jackson (2013: 112) refers to “two spheres of governance in our lives”, of which one is formed by our closeknit connections and relationships, and the other by the outside world in which every person is eventually relatively insignificant, merely a small part of a greater whole. Jackson argues that stories enable balancing between these two spheres, the private, personal one, and the wider, more indifferent one. Tying this in with migration and changing discourses on migration is relevant as the personal story of migration can be seen as belonging to the first sphere, and the societal, ideological narratives of migration as belonging to the second one, the one in which the individual largely becomes more insignificant. The material examined in this book attempts to bridge these categories and make the individual relevant also for the wider sphere. Further, Jackson (2013: 31) refers to Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* and argues that storytelling always draws on a combination of “private and public interests”. The statement connects with what Polletta (2006: 14) observed about new stories resonating with stories we have heard before, creating a continuum of storytelling that connects across generations, eras, and places.

When depicting experiences of something as contentious as migration, writers inevitably place themselves politically within the story. Patricia DeRocher (2018) examines *testimonio*, originally a term for Latin American writing that can be seen as “resistance in textual form” (p. 16) which carries “activist intentions” (p. 8). She asks some pertinent questions: “Whose knowledge counts as knowledge? Whose truths are believed and whose truths are discounted, and why? Is it possible for readers and

writers with conflicting experiences, perspectives, and worldviews to ever bridge such epistemic divides?” The last question is particularly important for this study, and for irregular migration to Europe and the United States in more societal terms as well. Is there a consensus to be found on migration, and if there is, are there any possibilities for the West to find it? Philip Seargeant (2020: 77), who studies storytelling in political contexts, notes that narratives “help us view certain value systems as normal or natural, thus contributing to the ideologies embedded in society and culture”. Stories can therefore both reinforce existing societal discourses as well as function as a counterforce. That makes stories and storytelling a tool with which to perform political work in terms of how migration is debated and portrayed.

Human rights discourse, another form of political or advocacy work, relates intimately to many of the texts examined in this book. Lyndsey Stonebridge (2018, 2021) examines human rights in literary contexts and argues that human rights as a concept may have suffered from certain inflation in recent years (2021: 8), and also criticizes the “literary humanitarianism” that hopes to invoke “empathy, and pity for the less fortunate”, stating that it is similar to the sentiments that saw colonialism as beneficial to the people it subjugated (2021: 13). Advocating for rights of migrants and asylum seekers in particular, which many of the selected texts do quite explicitly, therefore comes with its own complications. Stonebridge (*ibid.*) makes an important observation about the hierarchies among writers when stating that the act of including the stories of others, “giving voice”, in a personal account may also be inherently problematic: “At its best, this kind of writing forces us to reflect on the moral hall of mirrors we enter when we engage seriously with one another’s lives. At its worst, it’s simply bad writing, a punishment from the gods for thinking that we have the divine authority to be giving or taking away any other mortal’s voice”. Several of the texts examined in this study balance between these two extremes and it is a significant aspect of migration narratives that needs to be taken into account. In an earlier study, Stonebridge notes that stories are at the heart of the path of asylum seekers, as “the process of gaining political and juridical recognition is essentially testimonial, as indeed, is the case for many victims of human atrocity struggling to find historical, legal, and political recognition” (2018: 18). This, too, emerges as central in the primary material, making complex connections between story, political narrative, humanitarian efforts, and true recognition which may be impossible to obtain.

THEORIZING MIGRATION IN CULTURAL CONTEXTS

Stories of migration have received considerable scholarly attention in multiple contexts and interest in them seems not to be abating any time soon. A number of concepts have aided previous analysis, with diaspora and diasporic experiences, transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, afropolitanism, and more recently, postmigration, emerging as central. These theoretical directions and developments inform the present study as well, and necessarily so as much ground-breaking work with regard to migration and the narratives that spring from it has been carried out in terms of these concepts. The fluid nature of migration as a societal and personal phenomenon also requires going beyond categorisation.

This book draws to a significant degree on research on various phenomena related to migration, but also on journalistic reviews, columns, and reportage. Josef Schmied (2019: 5) examines credibility in academic and journalistic writing, and states that where academic writing relies on sources, journalistic writing is based in “scrutiny”. Journalistic writing also easily takes on a life of its own in social media (Schmied 2019: 6), which may significantly change the original message. However, Mustafa K. Anuar (2015: 88) makes a case for increased academic respect for journalistic pieces which often emerge out of “rigorous research”. Further, Anuar argues that journalism reaches a broader audience (*ibid.*). Certain contention can also be detected between the two fields, as Andrew Duffy (2015: 5) asserts that practitioners of journalism may see academia as “fusty, dry and often irrelevant”, while fearing that it is “smarter, more respected and more credible”. On the other hand, academia may see journalism in terms of lacking “intellectual rigour” and being incorrect, while fearing that journalism in fact is “more relevant, more immediate and [...] more popular” (p. 5–6). Duffy suggests more cooperation between the two fields, as journalism can have a significant social impact (2015: 11). Drawing on both academic and journalistic texts in the context of this book acknowledges the rigour of scholarly research and the need for it when addressing a topic as contested as migration, as well as the considerable influence of journalism engaging with the texts examined here, including topics beyond.

A somewhat controversial starting point is that the diasporic moment has passed in literary contexts. This does not render the concept useless or arbitrary, but sees it as less well positioned to categorise current writing. Jopi Nyman (2009: 10) defines diasporic writing as engaged with “the

globalized world of transnationalism, hybridity, and mobile identities". As much of the material examined in this book testifies to, migration may often lead to lessened mobility due to lack of citizenship or extended periods of detention. Any positive notions of transnationalism and hybridity may be hard to find. Contemporary migration narratives as examined here have largely moved beyond earlier depictions and representations of diasporic communities that build on a shared sense of displacement and belonging (Grossman 2019: 1263), and a continued psychological and cultural bond to countries of origin left behind (Sheffer 2003: 3). Instead, contemporary texts of migration are moving towards much more multi-faceted approaches that not only emphasize the difficulties in receiving countries to respond to the arrival of migrants in humane ways, but which also allow for more complex storylines in which past experiences and feelings of belonging take on new meanings. The experiences recounted and fictionalised are also more fragmented than what the term diaspora generally allows for, as it often indicates certain continuity and permanence.

A diasporic position implies some form of power and agency, which are ambiguous in the texts examined in this book. Some of them indicate agency, for example the essay collections *The Good Immigrant* and *The Good Immigrant USA*, but many address the lack of power and self-determination for migrants in precarious situations. Diaspora suggests ties to former homes and to adopted homes, communities that enable retaining these ties and nurturing a shared identity. Some stories testify to a lack of ties to any community, as ties have been severed in terms of places left behind, but new bonds have not been allowed to form with new homes for a variety of reasons. The idea of citizenship also emerges in this context, as the material examined indicates that the need for citizenship takes precedence over any global world membership or potential diasporic belonging. Arguably, diasporas are formed by citizens, people who have relocated from their countries of origin to new places where they have, eventually, obtained citizenship. Do asylum seekers and those who receive refugee status form diasporas? What about undocumented migrants, can they be seen as belonging to diasporas? The answer is not a simple yes or no, nor is it the task of this study to categorize and label migrants any more than is already being done, but the temporal perspective is significant. The texts in focus here speak of migration in urgent contexts, of asylum seeking and undocumented status, of clandestine border crossings and precarity. Life remains somewhat unsettled in many of the stories examined. Diaspora requires certain completeness in terms of arrival,

whereas some of the lives recounted and depicted in the texts analysed have not yet fully arrived.

However, Sheffer (2003: 243) also observes differences between historical and more contemporary diasporas, listing recent migration of a more voluntary nature. Further, he explains that “assimilation is less appealing today”, meaning that migrants may live for long periods of time in their new home countries before deciding whether to stay permanently or not. Again, these notions indicate choice and having the power to decide whether to stay or not. A relevant statement is made by Amitava Chowdhury (2016: xii–xiii), who argues that diaspora “resides in the process through which dispersion becomes belonging”. Many of the texts examined here never reach the state of belonging and are thus written as representations of an unfinished process. Dispersion may never become belonging for multiple reasons, relating to policies in receiving societies. The desire for belonging, a much-examined topic in migration writing, still remains at the core of many of the contemporary stories investigated.

Recent research has introduced the concept of post-diaspora, with Amber Lascelles (2020: 228) arguing that it “attempts to reimagine diaspora in light of the increased velocity of globalisation, acknowledging the transnational connections forming across borders and our sense of the world as constantly in motion”. Some of the texts examined here depict experiences of being in motion, but existence is often presented as uncertain, unfinished. To that extent, post-diaspora, too, seems to be a concept about empowerment and agency. Yet, the historical continuity of diasporas is not insignificant for contemporary migration flows, and this has also been discussed in research, for example by Kim Knott and Seán McLoughlin (2010: 6), who explain that “existing diasporas have a very significant impact on future movements of migrants, suggesting that it may be possible to predict—while recognizing local, national and global factors that may inhibit, increase or alter flows—patterns of future migration in terms of sending and receiving societies”. Existing diasporas are thus seen as a factor that may increase migration and direct people from similar backgrounds and locations to relocate to similar areas. Contemporary migration narratives give evidence of this but also indicate that new bonds and allegiances are formed that transgress diasporic borders and communities. All of these perspectives relate to the complicated notion of home. David Shneer and Caryn Aviv (2010: 263) make the following noteworthy statement: “To call a place home is a statement of power. [...] Home is a place where people practice identity and intimacy, where they make claims about

who belongs and who doesn't". This indicates that home carries significant political power, as a centre of exclusion and belonging.

A relevant viewpoint on home is provided by author Aminatta Forna, who resists the idea of permanence in terms of the places of home and presents the idea as in need of reconsideration: "Twelve thousand years ago human being settled and farmed and felt the need to defend what they had claimed for themselves from the claims of others. And so they started to tell stories, stories that staked their rights to the place they lived and tied their sons and daughters to the soil" (2021: 138–139). This point of view can be seen in contrast to the movement of people across national borders. Narratives and stories can entrench belonging, roots, and being tied to the soil. Telling your story publicly is a way of leaving a mark on the world, even if that story does not ultimately lead to any concrete change. A question that emerges in this study is whether that is in effect what stories of migration also try to do, cement belonging even when no belonging can be had. Is the story of migration, particularly in autobiographical terms, becoming a replacement for gaining (citizenship) rights to a place? That would emphasize the massive importance of literature in multiple social, societal, and personal contexts and settings. Contemporary narratives of migration, both personal stories recounted, and political discourses presented, speak particularly well to this paradox: the notion of home, as well as that of the nation-state, are both presented as becoming obsolete, yet their roles have not lost any of their meaning and importance to people on the move. Home remains a human necessity in the material examined, and life without belonging is often depicted as temporary and unmoored.

Postnationalism

A recurring theme in much writing about migration, be it fictional, autobiographical, or scholarly, is the desire for a postnational world in which borders become obsolete and nations take on new meanings. As both Andreas Wimmer (2021: 310) and Yael Tamir (2020: ix) observe, the Covid pandemic reinforced the importance of the nation-state with borders closing and nations turning inwards in order to protect their own people first. The pandemic has brought to light the protective and restrictive measures implemented in order to protect nation-states against a virus which could not be stopped by border controls. Anna Triandafyllidou (2020: 793) connects nationalism with globalisation and the pandemic and offers an opposing interpretation:

The global pandemic crisis of Covid19 is but the latest and most dramatic expression of how interconnected the world is. Nation-states have seen their sovereign powers eroded, transforming into postnational states as the political space they govern is no longer congruent with the socio-economic space, which transcends the national borders.

The concept of a borderless, border-free world can be seen in this statement too, yet the realities of the pandemic have resulted in the exact opposite, also noted by Triandafyllidou. Borders closed, sovereign states turned inward taking care of their own citizens first, and the scramble for vaccines further manifested these developments (Boffey 2021; Deutsch 2021).

Looking beyond the pandemic, a variety of views have been presented about the current state of the nation-state and its futures. Wimmer (2021) offers an analysis of a world without nation-states, providing five possible scenarios of which one involves a class-less, meritocratic anarchy in which people organise themselves in “associational networks” (p. 316–317), “mini-states” formed according to “local patriotism or ethnic nationalism” (p. 317), the re-emergence of empires (p. 318), which is a terrifying yet not entirely unlikely prospect considering the current war in Europe, “mega-states” resembling that of the European Union (p. 319), and eventually what Zimmer terms a “global state” which would be “truly universal” and thus have no need for borders or armies (p. 320). Despite this view, Zimmer (*ibid.*) admits that in a world without borders, migration would probably still be controlled in some way, “perhaps by periodically redistributing location rights (regulating who is allowed to live where) on the basis of merit or a lottery—the dream of today’s political philosophers who abhor the exclusionary nature of nation-states”. It is not stated outright as to why “today’s political philosophers” would think that a world order based on merit or luck is preferable to the one currently in place, but Zimmer does touch upon problems of “migrations pressures” and argues that if a global state would form, it “would have to promote the gradual equalization of life chances across its various province” (*ibid.*). A world of equal opportunity would possibly generate far fewer migrants, as people would have the same possibilities of pursuing a life of their choice wherever they decide to live. Another scenario is that people would move around to an unprecedented level, but these are mere speculations.

The Covid pandemic emerges in Farida Fozdar’s (2021: 150) article as well, which argues that “a postnational world is the next natural step in