



# Introduction

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## SITUATING TRANSNATIONAL NARRATIVES

In recent years, issues of migration and exile have increasingly come to public attention. News and official reports document and problematize the meanings and effects of migration in a world where globalization and nationalization seem to both be on the rise. Experiences of exile and belonging, dislocating or relocating, are also to a great extent documented and represented in the form of literary and artistic expressions, such as texts, films, and visual art projects like installations and photographs. As such, literary, audio and visual productions offer visibility to migrant and exilic situations and the issues that resonate with them. While these representations are interesting aesthetic documents in their own right, they also offer an important insight into understanding the transnational experience of migration and exile as they allow for a more nuanced perspective of contemporary discourses on these topics. Furthermore, they offer spaces of working through and of reconceptualizing what migratory subjectivity might be. Playing with language, images or offering new linguistic interpretations transforms established scripts of migration and presents new narratives to build on.

The interest in transnational narratives as documents of the experience of migration and exile intersects with a renewed scholarly interest in the aesthetics of these expressions, in the form of *migratory aesthetics* (e.g., Bal & Hernández-Navarro, 2011; Chérel & Dumont, 2016; Durrant & Lord, 2015/2007; Petersen, 2017; Petersen & Schramm, 2017) and *border aesthetics* (Schimanski & Wolfe, 2017). In addition, transnational perspectives on aesthetic documents have been important in the field of cultural memory studies, which highlights the role of these documents in practices that contribute to the circulation and interaction of *transnational cultural memory* (Erlil, 2011; Erlil & Rigney, 2018), thus emphasizing the social role of transnational narratives.

This book adds to the literature on aesthetic documents in transnational and diasporic contexts by arguing that such documents can fruitfully be read through the lens of *transnational narratives*. The transnational paradigm originates in the 1990s social sciences and cultural studies (e.g., Appadurai, 1996; Glick Schiller et

al., 1995; Hannerz, 1992; Risager, 2016), and is closely tied to perspectives represented in theories of postcolonialism, globalization, multiculturalism, mobilities, and diaspora. Transnationalism implies a weakening of the importance of nation-states and a critical engagement with the nation as such, bringing into question “the centrality and the uniqueness of national institutions and experiences” (Stovall, 2015, p. 1). The analytical approach, linked to the notion of transnationalism, implies a way of studying the complex networks and relationships of identity, belonging, culture and territory as one navigates beyond the notions of borders and nationalities. As a consequence, the transnational perspective is adopted in a range of different fields of study such as literary or film studies, political science, anthropology, psychology, historiography and human geography, and both methodological approaches and objects of study thereto are manifold. The contributions in this anthology offer an insight into transnational perspectives in the humanities, and, in particular, the *transnational narrative* as a means of critically engaging with today’s world of mobility.

We understand transnational narratives in terms of content: as documents that represent and debate, or tell the story of, transnational life experiences and journeys, independently of genre or media. In its most elementary form, the narrative may be defined simply as someone telling a story to someone else, in the form of any particular medium (Bal, 1985/2009, p. 5). However, the narrative is not identical to the story, but rather its representation in the form of a novel, a film, a photo, a sculpture or a song. By focusing our attention on the transnational narrative, the chapters in this volume analyze and discuss the aesthetic, linguistic and material aspects of these documents, drawing together both content and form. As a consequence, this book is interested in both the social, aesthetic and the media-specific aspects of the narrative, and it explores the various forms it may take on in a number of media ranging from novels to the visual arts as they relate to the transnational experience.

The book’s main purpose is to show how the analysis of transnational narratives can expand and nuance our understanding of migration and transnational existence, and to provide new readings that investigate the formal and thematic characteristics of these narratives. Through an analytical focus on the exilic voices that are represented in both literary, audio and visual formats, the analyses presented in the book shed light on new imaginaries of migration and exile, and the critical potential of the narrative form in this context. The chapters in this volume represent an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of transnational narratives, bringing together various disciplines within the humanities ranging from linguistics and literary studies to art history and semiotics, as well as displaying how

theories of *borderities* (Amilhat Szary & Giraut, 2015), *translanguaging* (Blackledge & Creese, 2017; Guilherme, 2019), *translingual practice* (Canagarajah, 2017), *untranslatability* (Apter, 2013), *narrativity* (Ryan, 2005), and *transcultural memory* (Erll, 2011) can be used to examine issues such as migration and transnational existence. The present contributions focus on different aspects of the transnational narrative, but even so there is a recurrent theme in all of them: their emphasis on the issues that are central to the experience of transnational migration, such as belonging, displacement, fluidity, and on how language becomes a *carrier of* or a *means to expressing* subjectivity, agency and identity in exilic settings.

The transnational perspective of this book is primarily related to the thematic orientation of the narratives that are studied, as the contributions all analyze aesthetic documents that thematically focus on migration and exile. The chapters study narrative representations of the experience of transnational subjects across space (including France, Italy, Mexico, and U.S.A.) and across time, with a focus on present-day transnational migration. As such, the novels, films and works of art that are analyzed in this volume represent and problematize the experiences of transnational subjects, such as the movement from the country of origin to the country of arrival via spaces of transit. By studying narratives belonging to different genres and media but sharing a thematic orientation, this volume presents and discusses different aspects of the transnational experience, thus contributing to the understanding of the representation of this phenomenon in narrative forms. In addition, the transnational orientation is visible in the conditions of production and circulation of the documents analyzed in this book. This reflects the increasingly transnational character of the production and distribution of diasporic and exilic literature, art, music, and film, which in the case of film may involve international co-productions as well as alternative types of distribution (see Ponzanesi, 2016, p. 164).

## **THE LANGUAGE OF TRANSNATIONAL NARRATIVES: TRANSLINGUAL PRACTICE, SUBJECTIVITY AND BELONGING**

In addition to the shared thematic focus, the attention to formal features and aesthetics of the documents is recurrent in the chapters of this book. A focus on language use is recurrent in several of the contributions, and points to the increasing interest in the heterogeneity of linguistic practices in transnational narratives. These contributions also share an interest in recent sociolinguistic theory, which underlines the role of agency in language practice, and the chapters present new

insights into the potential contribution of translingual practice to the aesthetics of transnational narratives.

Theories of translingualism (Kellman, 2000), code-meshing and translanguaging (Canagarajah, 2011) were originally developed to describe spoken discourse and interaction, but the use of multilingualism has also been studied in literary texts (e.g., Davies & Bentahila, 2008; Gardner-Chloros & Weston, 2015; Jaworski, 2014; N’Zengou-Tayo, 1996). However, recent sociolinguistic research on translingual practice has also come under criticism for the focus on individual agency, which may excessively underplay the power structures underlying translingual practice, as well as for essentializing this practice as inherently and radically different (Canut & Guellouz, 2018). Therefore, analyses of translingual practice should consider its ethical and political implications.

The chapters in this anthology focus on translingual practice, and show how language use in multilingual contexts might be adopted to express and examine notions such as identity, gender and sexuality, subjectivity, and belonging. In this perspective, translingual practice may function as a device for the representation of complex concepts related to the migrant experience such as the aforementioned notions of gender, identity, and belonging (see also Skalle & Gjesdal, 2018), thus contributing to the overall discursive representation of migration and exile.

In addition to the recurring emphasis on translingual practice, many of the present contributions discuss the notions of *border* and *border crossings*. Notions such as journey, home, and belonging associated with border crossings could imply and foreground a neat movement from one place to another, and potentially contribute to the cultural appropriation of the experiences of the migrant (Skalle & Gjesdal, 2018). The contributions in this volume rather show how complex these crossings might be, and how transnational identities seem to often be unstable and fluid, as they develop and change in the intersectional encounter between categories such as gender, sexuality, class, and race.

Through the emphasis on the aesthetic qualities and the thematic focus on transnational migration, the contributions in this volume also share a critical potential as they may challenge and decenter dominating discourses on migration and exile. Several of the contributions examine the representation of voice, agency and subjectivity in transnational narratives, thus deconstructing stereotypical narratives of the migrant, female refugees in particular, as passive and lacking in agency (see Gatt et al., 2016). While acknowledging that the study of transnational narratives of migration and exile always poses the risk of appropriating the voice of the transnational and exilic subject, of “speaking in their place” (Galitzine-Loumpet & Saglio-Yatzimirsky, 2018), the contributions in this book nevertheless

aim to provide a critical rethinking of the literary and aesthetic representation of migration in the form of transnational narratives.

## TRANSNATIONAL READINGS

In order to illuminate how readings of transnational narratives might expand our understanding of migration, this interdisciplinary anthology contains a range of different theoretical and methodological approaches from the humanistic disciplines that consider materials ranging from novels and feature films to performance art. The book opens with an introductory essay written by Cécile Canut. The objective of this text is to provide a unifying framework for the entire volume, as it analyzes the ethical and theoretical challenges of research on transnational narratives, as well as the unique contribution to knowledge on migration and exile provided by such material. How can the voices of migrants, refugees, and exiles be analyzed in their diversity, and with respect to their agency, without falling victim to paternalism, reductionism or commodification? These are questions that apply to all the texts in this volume, and Canut's opening text is an invitation to read this volume as a critical reflection on the potential and risks of research on transnational narratives.

In Canut's text, she uses the case of ethnographic documentary films as an entry-point to a discussion of the ethical and theoretical pitfalls associated with the analysis of narratives of migration and exile. Canut argues that migration is a historically situated process of becoming, and that it is crucial to recognize the heterogeneity of the migrant or exilic subject in these settings, as well as the role of language practices in this process. Analyzing narratives that let migrants and exiles come to voice is critical to avoid reproducing neocolonial and stereotypical visions of both migration and linguistic practice. This also involves a new perspective on knowledge-production, as it recognizes the role of migrants themselves as important producers of knowledge of migration, and, by extension, the role of transnational sources of knowledge on these processes. These sources also allow for the nuancing of dominating discourses on migration and exile.

In the following chapter, Camilla Erichsen Skalle shows in her essay "Subjectivity through translanguaging practice in *Oltre Babilonia* by Igiaba Scego" how the translanguaging protagonist of the novel *Oltre Babilonia* (Scego, 2008) adopts a heteroglossic language practice in order to show both resistance to prejudices based on her skin color as well as belonging to the linguistic landscapes surrounding her. Skalle thus claims that the novel's protagonist uses her translanguaging resources to explore identity and express subjectivity.

“We found love in a hopeless place: Exilic agency and translingual practice in Jonas Carpignano’s *Mediterranea*” analyzes translingual practice in Jonas Carpignano’s (2015) feature film *Mediterranea*, which describes the journey of two young men from Burkina Faso to Italy, as well as their precarious life in Europe. Anje Müller Gjesdal argues that translingual practice in the film interacts with the socio-political and spatial context, including artifacts and in particular communication technology devices that are used to keep in touch with family back home. This interaction results in a nuanced portrayal of exilic agency that contributes to a questioning of dominating discourses on migration, and thus to the critical potential of the film.

The book’s next chapters further explore the relationship between translingual practice, identity, gender, and sexuality in migratory and exilic settings.

Sigrid Thomsen’s contribution “Capturing Berserkería and Amor. Untranslatability and migrant belonging in Junot Díaz’s *This Is How You Lose Her*”, considers Díaz’s 2012 collection of short stories alongside Emily Apter’s concept of the *untranslatable* (Apter, 2013). In these short stories, Díaz has not, contrary to previous publications, provided his readers with translations, footnotes or glossaries. This leads Thomsen to suggest that the untranslated and the untranslatable in Díaz’s novels are signs of a geographically dislocated belonging.

In the following chapter, Charikleia Magdalini Kefalidou offers a reading of translingual literary identity in the Armenian diasporic writer Shahan Shahnour’s (1929) novel *Retreat Without Song*. Kefalidou’s essay exemplifies both the literary and aesthetic production of the Armenian diaspora, as well as the literary production of other diasporic communities in Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century. Kefalidou examines the contribution of translingual practice to the literary representation of identity, as well as the candid representation of sexuality in the novel. Reworking and deconstructing the traditional bildungsroman, Shahnour’s novel examines the Armenian protagonist’s coming of age in exile, and Kefalidou shows how this text is affected by trauma and exile, complicating the pattern of the *bildungsroman*.

In Guglielmo Scafirimuto’s contribution on the transnational artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña, translingual practice is transferred onto contemporary performance art. Scafirimuto sees Gomez-Peña as a border crosser in a political as well as in an aesthetic sense as he crosses linguistic, national, bodily, and identity borders with his *performance-activism*, thus questioning concepts such as authenticity, unity of identity, stability, and belonging.

The border, a central theoretical as well as thematic concept within Gomez-Peña’s art, is also essential in Inge Lanslot’s comparative analysis of graphic narra-

tives situated at the U.S.-Mexican border. In “Migration: Crossing borders in graphic enactments” Lanslot shows how contemporary graphic narratives represent traumatic aspects of migration and border crossing. Analyzing Peter Kuper’s (2015) *Ruins*, Shaun Tan’s (2006) *The Arrival*, and *Feeding Ground* by Swifty Lang, Michael Lapinski and Chris Mangun (2011), she shows how these recent graphic novels put forth the permeability of the U.S.-Mexican border.

The book’s two closing chapters have as a backdrop the Mediterranean Sea and the people who set out to cross it.

Based on readings of Davide Enia’s (2019) *Notes on a Shipwreck: A Story of Refugees, Borders, and Hope*, Josué Guébo’s (2017) *Think of Lampedusa*, and Anders Lustgarten’s (2015) *Lampedusa*, Khalil Hammoudi argues in his essay “‘Shadows’ of modernity” that the sacrificing of the black body did not stop at the 18th century Caribbean naval graveyards, but shows, through the concept of *co-designation*, that it is still subject to death at sea.

Giovanna Faleschini Lerner’s contribution “Migrant stories between the archive and the garbage dump in the Mediterranean” turns to the island of Lampedusa. In close readings of the Porto M – an anti-museal museum – artistic stagings, and archival orderings of residual objects, we are confronted with the ethical aspects of reusing abandoned objects as well as the possible new meanings that can stem from these objects, representing thus heterogenous counter-narratives to traditional ideas of migration and displacement.

In sum, the contributions in this volume provide insights into the contemporary literary and aesthetic representation of migration and exile. Through a focus on linguistic heterogeneity in the form of translingual practice, as well as the heterogeneity of the migrant and exilic subject through a thematic focus on identity, subjectivity and belonging, the contributions examine central facets of the experience of migration and exile. The chapters share an orientation to the agency of the migrant, adventurer, refugee and exile, and bring out the critical potential of transnational narratives of migration and exile. However, as illustrated by the chapters, particularly the opening chapter “Can migrants speak?” and the closing chapter “Migrant stories between the archive and the garbage dump in the Mediterranean”, the notion of transnational narrative that the volume seeks to examine also includes material that is not strictly literary or aesthetic. Rather, the overarching focus is on the narrative form, and of the experience of transnational subjects. We state that the analysis of such documents may give access to new modes of knowledge, as well as being able to challenge dominating discourses on migration and exile and hierarchies of knowledge.

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