

The politics and poetics of migrant narratives

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Abstract

Serving as the introduction to the special issue on ‘Migrant narratives’, this article proposes a multi-perspectival and multi-stakeholder analysis of how migration is narrated in the media in the last decade. This research agenda is developed by focussing on groups of actors that are commonly studied in isolation from each other: (1) migrants, (2) media professionals such as journalists and spokespersons from humanitarian organizations, (3) governments and corporations and (4) artists and activists. We take a relational approach to recognize how media power is articulated alongside a spectrum of more top-down and more bottom-up perspectives, through specific formats, genres and styles within and against larger frameworks of governmentality. Taken together, the poetics and politics of migrant narratives demand attention respectively for how stakeholders variously aesthetically present and politically represent migration. The opportunities, challenges, problems and commitments observed among the four groups of actors also provide the means to rethink our practice and responsibilities as media and migration scholars contributing to decentring media technologies and re-humanizing migrants.

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there are a thousand multifarious refugee experiences and a thousand refugee figures whose meanings and identities are negotiated in the process of displacement in time and place

–Nevzat Soguk (1999: 4).

For every person who is forced to start their migratory journey, whether on foot, on a boat, hidden in cargo trucks or in cars, the fear of what is left behind is greater than what lies ahead of them. The journeys of forced migrants are increasingly mediatized, both as they appear on TV screens and newspapers as spectacles, as in the way they appear on the screens of migrants' smartphones, for example, through GPS navigation. The recent death of Salvadoran Oscar Alberto Martínez who drowned in the Rio Grande with his 2-year-old daughter Valeria, trying to cross the river that separates Mexico from the United States, recalled other powerful and disturbing photographs that activated public attention about the horrors of war and the deep suffering of refugees and migrants. These personal stories, however, are often overshadowed by major so-called 'crises' situations. Iconic photographs, such as of 'ambulance boy', Omran Daqneesh, who was rescued from the rubble in Aleppo covered in blood after an air attack, or the story of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian toddler drowned on a Turkish beach in September 2015, presented viewers with child figures as 'archetypal digital witnesses' (Al-Ghazzi, 2019, p. 3225). Felt as authentic, unmediated, and not muddled by geopolitics, these witness accounts do have the potential to raise public awareness. Such images put faces to crises and the human consequences of overly stringent border policies. They are a deeply moving demonstration of the dangerous journey that precarious migrants face on their way to North America or Europe. However, as Omar Al-Ghazzi demonstrates, in their social media virality and inclusion in news media, these child testimonies are commonly quickly co-opted or de-politicized (2019). As a result, the tragic consequences of these journeys often, to our collective shame, pass invisibly in the debate about border policy. This same policy, for example, allows particularly white people from the Global north, who are commonly labelled as expats or tourists, to cross borders with ease.

Apart from a small number of highly mediatized events that individualize specific migration flows, dominant media and political representations tend to reduce migration experiences to singular stereotypical frames and stories (Eberl et al., 2018). The violence inherent in making complex geopolitical processes discursively legible to larger audiences was particularly evident during the 'long summer of migration' (Hess et al., 2016) also known as the so-called 'European refugee crisis' in 2015. In political and news media sentiment, the arrival of over 1 million forced migrants from Syria was framed as a crisis. News coverage showed anxiety over pending Islamization and what Rashad Baadqir (2003) called the possible 'browning of Europe'; this number was felt to be 'too much for Europe to handle'. The crisis trope resulted in increasingly narrow depictions

of incoming migrants as unmanageable, intolerant, dispossessed, voiceless and faceless masses, triggering fear and anxiety (Chouliaraki and Zaborowski, 2017). The crisis frame reflects the ‘active process of forgetting’ through repression of histories. Through this process, an incoming non-white presence in Europe is constructed as always happening for the first time (El-Tayeb, 2011: xxiv).

Journalists who frame and politicians who use populist rhetoric are only two of the many actors who mediate migration in distinctive ways. To expand the scope of actors making narratives, and move beyond the crisis frame, we propose the term ‘migrant narratives’. We suggest it as an analytic lens to address how migration is mediated by a variety of stakeholders and through a variety of media forms, genres, objects and outlets. Here we take cues from media scholars Leen d’Haenens and Willem Joris (2020) who recently called for scholars to address ‘representational strategies on migration from a multi-stakeholder perspective’ (p. 437). The lens of stakeholders allows for the identification and scrutiny of how various relevant actors perpetuate or contest media power in representing migration:

possible distortions can be identified thanks to the ‘weighing’ of multiple viewpoints from relevant actors. It is then the task of the researcher to bring these different, divergent or at times colliding viewpoints together in a meaningful way, making evidence-based recommendations for change. (d’Haenens and Joris, 2020: 438)

The group of actors narrating migration explored in this special issue include diaspora and migrant journalists (Kirk, 2019; Voronova, 2019), government officials and policy makers (Madörin, 2019), migrants and refugees (Dhoest, 2019; Greene, 2019; Løland, 2019), diasporas (Almenara-Niebla and Ascanio-Sánchez, 2019) and social media publics (Bozdağ, 2019). The narration of migration happens through anti-migrant social media memes, visual surveillance, digital fingerprints, asylum interviews, smartphone use, refugee selfies and news accounts. Together, these actors create different symbolic figurations of migrants, for example, as victims, or as deserving or undeserving refugees, their circulations find their place in hierarchical power relations (Sigona, 2014). While some of the narratives studied confirm mainstream stereotyping and racialization, others offer counter narratives. Although mainstream media commonly racialize particular migrants, we are certainly also living in a time with unprecedented possibilities to challenge racializing narratives (Titley, 2019).

This article contributes to the expanding research focus on media and migration (see, for example, Karim and Al-Rawi, 2018; Morley, 2017; Retis and Tsagarousianou, 2019; Smets et al., 2020). In particular, we focus here on the different ways in which various actors and stakeholders produce migrant narratives and distinctively represent specific types of migration. The postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak (1990) argues representation functions through both ‘Darstellung’ and ‘Vertretung’: the former is ‘speaking for’ and ‘to tread in someone’s shoes’, whereas the latter considers re-representation as a form of ‘portraying’ (p. 108). Feminist theorists similarly urge that attention is paid to the ethics of representation as always ‘operative at the level of ‘what’ (making present what is absent) as well as at the level of “how” (the manner in which the absent should be made present)’ (Buikema, 2018: 93). We take the twin concepts of politics and poetics to tease out further how the two interrelated analytic levels of aesthetic presentation and symbolic

representation shape migrant narratives. This distinction builds on several parallel discussions. On the level of methodology, the anthropologists James Clifford and George Marcus (1986) in their anthology *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* proposed the conceptual pair of poetics and politics to reflect on how writing up data from ethnographic fieldwork involves a negotiation of stylistic writing techniques, genre conventions and authorship practices which are tied to struggles over power and knowledge. The cultural studies scholar Henrietta Lidchi proposed to study ethnographic museums by attending to the ‘poetics of exhibiting’, which is focussed on analysing how presentational semiotics and language construct difference, in relation to the ‘politics of exhibiting’, which addresses the relationship between knowledge and power by addressing how collecting and curating are representational and thus operate as instrumental ways of knowing, domination and possession (Lidchi, 2013: 121). The anthropologist Brian Larkin distinguishes between the ‘politics and poetics of infrastructure’ to understand how infrastructures – like sanitation, transportation, bordering, and so on involve built environments and materiality and reflect also a political rationality (Larkin, 2013). Infrastructures serve as a form of governmentality through inclusion/exclusion mechanisms, as they are facilitating/accessible for some and exclude others. Infrastructures also build on an aesthetics of signs; they are a language to be read and demand a set of cultural competencies for people to be able to access them (Lidchi, 2013).

We thus take a relational approach to migrant narratives as both presenting and representing migration, through specific formats, genres, styles, aesthetics, which are inseparable from larger frameworks of power and governmentality. Taken together, the poetics and politics of migrant narratives reflect how migration is mediated through aesthetic presentation and political representation: ‘Media forms and mediated environments define the terms, conditions and context in which migration is experienced, lived and contested’ (Hegde, 2020: 3). This article seeks to challenge/disrupt and multiply commonly narrow migration narratives in two ways: (1) we map stakeholders involved in their respective contexts – combining emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives and (2) we explore in tandem the poetics and politics of mediated migrant narratives by considering how signification takes place and addressing how these representations are discursively embedded in power relations.

The politics and poetics of naming mobile populations is a first starting point and we are wary of the ‘categorical fetishization’ of mobile populations: ‘it is important to scrutinize categories “refugee” and “migrant” as if they simply exist, out there, as empty vessels into which people can be placed in some neutral ordering process’ (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018: 49). In sharp contrast, these labels narrating migration are shaped by a hegemonic politics of definition, with specific sets of linked connotations they serve as racialized inclusion and exclusion mechanisms. As Ola Ogunyemi (2019) reminds us in this issue, in his book review of *The Handbook of Diaspora, Media and Culture* edited by Jessica Retis and Roza Tsagarousianou:

Instead of using arbitrary labels and imposing preconceived categories/processes that do not resonate with migrants, scholars should adopt an ‘ethnography of communication approach’ which empowers migrants to perceive and structure their personal experiences. (Ogunyemi, 2019: 846)

In this article, we use the term migrants as it is more encompassing and ambiguous over limited categories such as refugees or asylum seekers or expatriates. The limited governmental category of ‘forced migration’ seeks to distinguish so-called bogus ‘economic’ from ‘legitimate’ refugees, but such categories narrate migration through a poetics and politics that ignore the complex and interrelated political, economic, social and cultural drivers of migration.

This article is limited in scope, and addresses in particular migrant narratives produced in the context of Fortress Europe (and its proliferation of external borders) in the last decade, and we also seek to engage with relevant insights and examples from beyond. Developing further a multi-stakeholder and multi-perspectival research agenda on media and migration, we distinguish in the subsequent sections four groups of stakeholders: (1) migrants, (2) media professionals, (3) governments and corporations and (4) artists. It is important to emphasize the process of narrating migration is inherently messy, as these (and possible additional stakeholders we do not cover here) in their everyday practices sometimes simultaneously do so in convergent and divergent ways within a continuum of top-down and bottom-up manifestations. Below we discuss how these different actors narrate migration and discuss patterns emerging from previous research pertaining to how each speak for and portray migration. In the conclusion, we take cues from this overview to reflexively engage with how academics narrate migration.

Migrants’ narratives

Scholarship on migrant literature and literature of migration (e.g. Sievers and Vlasta, 2018) and migrant documentary, film and cinema (e.g. Ponzanesi and Waller, 2012) is established – offering rich insights on key questions including who can speak for whom – are migrants the sole legitimate producers of their own experiences or can they be ethically represented by outsiders? Ingrid Løland (2019) in this special issue, for example, analyses how Syrian refugees narrate a ‘Paradise Lost’ to theorize ambivalent memory-making of a homeland destroyed by civil war. Related discussions concern questions of cultural identification, belonging and also meta-reflections on the co-optation, canonization, recognition, professionalization and institutionalization of migrant narratives. Building on these insights, we focus here particularly on the specific politics and poetics of migrants’ narratives in the digital era. Notwithstanding persistent digital divides in access, ownership and participation (Leung, 2018), in recent years, access to social media and smartphones has become more widespread among transnationally mobile populations, a dynamic that scholars have addressed through concepts including ‘connected migrants’ (Diminescu, 2020: 74) and ‘digital diasporas’ (Gajjala, 2019).

In this section, we zoom in on migrants’ digital self-representation practices. Several scholars have focussed on how migrants’ digital self-representations might seek to intervene in public discourse. On the level of the politics and poetics of claiming voice, Lilie Chouliaraki studied how refugees’ smartphone practices are depicted in Western news media, and found that their selfies, which can be seen as ‘digital testimonies’ are not commonly included directly in news accounts. These practices are usually remediated (photographs are printed that depict refugees taking selfies) which in turn functions as ‘symbolic bordering’ (Chouliaraki, 2017: 78). Myria Georgiou in her assessment of digital migrant voices in Europe also finds that ‘voice does not guarantee recognition’. She

argues on the basis of an analysis of two institutional and two grassroots migrant digital initiatives that while some are ‘challenging hegemonic structures’, most are ‘digitally reaffirming bordering power’ (Georgiou, 2018: 45). In her quantitative analysis of news on refugees in the United Kingdom and the United States, Roopika Risam (2018) found that refugees’ selfies (not news photographs of refugees taking selfies) allow subjects to ‘avoid co-optation’ in stereotypical one-sided narratives (p. 58). Kaarina Nikunen (2019), in the Finnish context, analysed the #onceIwasarefugee campaign and also argued that the space of appearance might be expanded through these selfies; the case also highlights ‘how difficult it is to speak from a refugee position without being drawn into the discourse of deservingness’ (p. 154).

Besides scrutinizing how refugees portray themselves and are portrayed in remediations, the political implications of digital self-representations are also attracting scholarly attention. ‘How and why are young undocumented activists in New York choosing to use their stories as activism?’ (Bishop, 2019: 5) is the overarching question Sarah Bishop explores in her book *Undocumented Storytellers*. With the notion of ‘reclaimant narratives’, she conceptualizes the storytelling potential of ‘immigrant-produced mediated narratives’ (Bishop, 2019). She draws on oral history interviews and ethnography and argues this potential includes the mitigation of isolation, communal coping, as well as a potential for developing a public activist voice and getting recognition, at the risk of surveillance and deportation. In their study on the media practices of the ‘Latin@’ immigrant rights movement on the US west coast, Sasha Costanza-Chock (2014) proposed the notion of ‘transmedia organizing’ to combine how migration activists engage in non-hierarchical, horizontal and digitally networked movements. The ethics of representation are a growing concern: while professionals and street-activists together fight battles over ‘media attention and framing’, simultaneously ‘professional movement organizations face growing pressure to shift from speaking for the movement to amplifying the voices of an increasingly media-literate base’ (Costanza-Chock, 2014: 15). In their work on the Congolese diaspora, Marie Godin and Giorgia Doná (2016) argue that social media are used to ‘promote counter-hegemonic narratives of violence in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo’ (p. 60). Maria Rae et al. (2018) developed the concept of ‘self-represented witnessing’ (p. 479) to capture how asylum seekers placed on Manus and Nauru (Australian-managed offshore detention centres) expose human rights abuse through social media. An acute example is *No friend but the mountains: Writings from Manus Prison*, the award-winning non-fiction book by Behrouz Boochani (2018), written on smuggled smartphones and shared through WhatsApp text and voice messages. The author, an Iranian Kurdish journalist, scholar and author who recently obtained refugee status in New Zealand, reflects on the book by stating:

I avoid using their language [the Australian government] as much as I can when writing journalism, and through literature I can do whatever I like. I create my own discourse and do not succumb to the language of oppressive power. I create my own language for critically analysing the phenomenon of Manus Prison. (Boochani, 2018: 264)

Research on digital refugee activism in/at the borders of Europe is also emerging. Disrupting the ‘figure of the mute refugee’, Ludek Stavinoha (2019) draws on fieldwork

on the Greek island of Chios to discuss how refugees themselves engage in digital practices to quest claim political rights and question the ‘border regime’ (p. 1212).

Besides influencing public discourse, digital media also play a significant role within private circles of migrant households, families and friendship networks to construct a sense of ‘connected presence’ across distance (Diminescu, 2020: 74). Indeed, ‘in migrants’ lives, technologies provide the abilities to engage in different forms of globalisation-from-below’ as Mirjam Twigt (2019: 3) argues in this special issue in her book review of *Diaspora and Media in Europe: Migration, Identity and Integration* by Karim H. Karim and Ahmad Al-Rawi (2018).

Earvin Charles B. Cabalquinto, for example, studied the exchange of mobile phone photos in transnational Filipino families living in Australia and the Philippines. He observed paradoxical digital mediation of co-presence, including practical exchange of information, casual sharing as a form of banter, curated co-presence through family photos used as screen savers and strategic exchange to maintain cultural norms and expectations (Cabalquinto, 2019). Alexandra Greene (2019) in this issue describes how refugee women draw on smartphone use as tactics of self-care. However, digital self-representations might also exacerbate internal tensions within migrant communities. Focussing on generational and gendered tensions in the Sahrawi refugee diasporas, Silvia Almenara-Niebla and Carmen Ascanio-Sánchez (2019) in this special issue demonstrate how posting on social media results in young Sahrawi women becoming the target of gendered gossip. To avoid transnational homophobic surveillance and policing, the informants in Alexander Dhoest’s (2019 in this special issue) study – forced migrants with non-normative sexual orientations – prioritize disconnectivity over connectivity.

For this purpose, we champion non-media-centric analysis to avoid fetishizing digital practices as disembodied and immaterial, and to attend to material contexts and power imbalances (Morley, 2017; Smets, 2018). Refugee waste is a poignant example of an alternative form of re-embodying narration: focussed on the distinctive context of the municipal dump which became known as the ‘Life Vest Graveyard’ on the Greek island Lesbos, Marie Gillespie (2018) offers a ‘cultural biography of life jackets’. These vests were either left behind by those who managed the sea-crossing, as well as washed-up ashore, either with or without drowned bodies: ‘each one of the life jackets that have piled up in the dump represents an individual story, a personal journey, a unique biography’ (Gillespie, 2018: 150). Ingrid Løland (2019), in this special issue, describes how Syrian refugees shape memories of pre-war Syria and argues that ‘finding ways to listen to and portray Syrian refugee voices allows for a plural reading of shared and contested stories and memories of the past’ (p. 14). In many instances, however, migrants’ and refugees’ voices depend on the mediation of professionals like journalists and humanitarian actors, a second group of stakeholders we turn to in our next section.

The narratives of media professionals

A vast number of professionals produce migrant narratives for a living. Journalists and other reporting professionals play a key role in mediating tensions between the invisibility and hypervisibility of migrants, between homogenizing or individualizing migrants, between the anecdotal and the geopolitical and historical power structures behind many

migration flows. In their study with 221 journalists, media professionals and sources from nine European countries, Robert McNeil and Eric Karstens (2018) found that roles, conditions and impact play out very differently across countries and across media outlets. It shows that studying local/national/transnational/international contexts and particular media environments and media systems is vital. One recurring observation is that narratives tend to be structured according to events rather than long-term developments. The narratives crafted by media professionals, notably in the news media, have significant consequences. In their overview of the dichotomous visual grammar of European news media depicting the so-called European refugee crisis, Rafal Zaborowski and Myria Georgiou (2019) notice that through visual 'refugee massification', refugees are made into threatening 'zombies', requiring nation-states to take firm action, not unlike players of video games (p. 92). It is important also to attend to the transformative potential of how migrant media professionals narrate migration (Ogunyemi, 2015). The experiences discussed in this special issue of migrant and displaced journalists (Voronova, 2019) and diaspora journalism (Kirk, 2019) provide strong evidence. Liudmila Voronova (2019) describes how migrant journalists in Ukraine actively seek to include migrant and other 'fragmented communities into a media nation' (p. 1) and Niamh Kirk (2019) articulates how Irish diaspora journalists 'reinforce and challenge traditional conceptions of Irish culture' (p. 2). Furthermore, journalism is not homogeneous: besides reporting on news, politics and debates, which commonly stereotype migrants; cultural and entertainment journalism, as shown in a study of the Swedish context 'provides alternative perspectives on immigration and integration' (Riegert and Hovden, 2019: 171). News reports also trigger debate on social media circuits. In this special issue, Çiğdem Bozdağ (2019) explores how people in Turkey circulate social media representations of Syrian refugees on Twitter as a form of bottom-up nationalism, which 'contributes to the trivialization and normalization of discrimination' (p. 1).

The lines between journalists and other professional stakeholders who narrate migration are of course not always clear-cut. Humanitarian organizations are major actors in the public communication on migration, and they have significant agenda setting possibilities. Based on their analysis of press releases and communication strategies of major international refugee organizations, David Ongenaert and Stijn Joye (2019), however, conclude that through their 'marketisation', they often de-humanize displaced people, subordinating them to the 'Western self' and state interests (p. 478). As elaborated by Bimbisar Irom (2018), virtual reality (VR) has gained traction in humanitarian communication, spurred by its promises of co-presence, experiential immediacy and transcendence. Recent examples of immersive VR and role-playing accounts of the horrors faced by immigrants and refugees include *Clouds over Sidra*, the first ever VR commissioned by the UN (Arora and Milk, 2015).

The tagline of this 'documentary experience' is 'Meet Sidra. This charming 12 year-old girl will guide you through her temporary home: The Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jorda' (Arora and Milk, 2015). Through what can be called 'humanitarian sponsoring' (Hoijer, 2004: 514), Samsung partnered in its production, reflecting broader tendencies of international corporations engaging with corporate social responsibility aiming to be perceived as benefactors. As Irom (2018) argues, this VR account offers audiences 'a more comprehensive picture of the Syrian refugee experience', however, the alluring promise

of transcendence and proximity risks a fetishization and further marginalization of the distant other (Duszak, 2002). Without reflection on its workings as a framing device, and structural inequalities, VR too, 'will remain trapped within the minefields of hegemonic humanitarianism' (Irom, 2018, p. 4287). Critical reflections on representation in humanitarian communication, including by those being represented thus remain necessary (Warrington and Crombie, 2017). Karina Horsti (2020) importantly pleads to 'refract our analytical gaze' as media and migration researchers, and advocates conducting collaborative research with migrants to listen and learn how they see migrant representations (p. 142). Focussing on representations of migrants as victims, Kevin Smets et al. (2019) studied with Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis how they 'experience and react to the way they are being represented' (p. 177), from their refugee- and voice-centred participatory study, they found their collaborators 'are above all individuals with capabilities, dreams, and future plans' (p. 193). There thus remains a pressing need for more realistic, re-humanizing migrant narratives that account for individual trajectories and complex histories.

Governmental and corporate narratives

Looking at governments and corporations together is essential to think about how the securitization of migration and borders has taken place in recent years. There is a particular configuration of flexibility and flow that neoliberal governments enable, which is tied to the needs of corporations for free flow and beneficial trade agreements, as well as to the need to facilitate movement of certain kinds of migrants who are beneficial in terms of capital. For example, after the EU-Turkey deal of March 2016, Turkey closed its border, which resulted in a sharp numerical decrease of refugees arriving in Greece. Judging on what European news media cover, it seems the so-called migration 'crisis' has been solved. However, over time, we have seen that Europe has remained the deadliest migration destiny of the world, as a proportionally growing number of people trying to reach Europe parish *en route*. From 1993 until 20 June 2019, World Refugee Day, 36,570 migrants are known to have died reaching Europe (United, 2019). The privatization of migration crisis infrastructures, 'contemporary tech-driven interventions developed to disrupt forced migration crises-situations' (Leurs, 2020: 91) is another reason why media narratives about the plight of migrants have fallen off the radar. The management and control of the mobility of certain privileged migrant subjects and the immobility of certain others are increasingly shaped through public-private partnerships (Bigo, 2002; Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2015). As in other sectors of public governance, privatizing migration management has been presented as an efficiency-driven policy.

First, we have to bear in mind that these are costs that have been created, in other words, when an area of corporate subcontracting is created, market conditions are being brought into an area where the market was not previously operating. Thus, it is very hard to compare public and private expenditure. Second, it is widely known that the (migrant) detention industry in many countries is enormously profitable for a very small number of companies, and that huge amounts of money are spent. There is no doubt that if those amounts of money were put in other forms of accommodation, provision or supporting other forms of independent living, the same amount of money would have far better and far more human results than the horrendous conditions in which people are kept.

Conditions in migration detention camps in the US borderlands and refugee camps in the Greek borderlands demonstrate precarious migrants are kept in the 21st-century concentration camps.

In addition, cutting expenditure (e.g. on migration services) is always inevitably a political decision, as it appeals to the minds of only a certain part of the electorate. Thus, as a neoliberal logic, privatization reduces everything to the idea that there are processes, which can be counted, and there are costs, which can be reduced. This immediately reduces so many dimensions of life to things that can be costed and counted, and neglects or bars those aspects of life which cannot be costed and counted. It would be more accurate to treat these aspects not so much as an empirical claim but as a political claim. In this issue, Alexandra Greene (2019) documents how refugee women stranded in a precarious mainland Greece refugee camp use their smartphones to develop tactics to 'make do' affectively with the hardship of protracted displacement: self-representational practices include digitally mediating 'family practices as a tactic of hope' as well as 'nature photography as a tactic of creativity' (p. 15). It is through these practices that marginalized mobile people find ways to survive the harsh conditions of increasingly privatized migration management.

Ideologically driven public-private partnerships have rapidly increased their investments in technologically mediated solutions to control migrants that are promoted as efficient and operate beyond public gaze. For migrants, this particularly means their identities are increasingly digitally established and controlled through biometrical data narratives (including fingerprint, iris scans, dialect, medical records; for example, Latonero et al., 2019). Mirca Madianou convincingly demonstrates the high-tech surveillance sector profits from public-private partnerships with UNHCR. UNHCR has embraced initiatives involving blockchain, artificial intelligence and aims to have a centralized database with biometrical data on all refugees registered with them by the end of 2019. Through these partnerships, refugee bodies are narrated as 'biometric assemblages' (Madianou, 2019: 1), which risk exacerbating hierarchies resulting from bias, ethical concerns, data sharing and breaches as part of a larger turn towards experimenting new technologies on vulnerable populations who cannot opt-out (Leurs, 2020). In this special issue, Anouk Madörin (2019) analyses Europe's maritime borders, showing technological innovations do not prioritize search and rescue, but reinforce historical 'racial securitization' through 'visual-digital' means (p. 3). Steeply growing expenditure on surveillance and border control technologies in the European context is strongly at odds with the parallel situation of increasing numbers of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean Sea.

There is a simultaneous hypervisibility of different categories of mobile populations as well as an apparent post-human design of migration control and surveillance devices. Madörin (2019) in particular scrutinizes the racialized workings of 'post-visual' securitization from above, through advanced technologies including 'aerial vehicles or drones, remotely piloted aircraft, and satellite remote sensing devices' that narrate migrants as data doubles, which subsequently 'become a key locus for financialization and generate a surplus for the security and defence industries' (p. 3). Besides the public-private partnerships that govern migration and enable free flow for some bodies, the political economy of the migration industry also increasingly revolves around commodifying migrant

connectivity and migrant labour. The notion of the ‘migration industry of connectivity services’ (Gordano Peile, 2014: 57) draws attention to how corporations seek to monetize untapped consumers with transnational SIM cards and remittance services. The infrastructures of receiving societies are increasingly subject to a hierarchical ‘digital order’, demanding a particular ‘performed refugeeness’ which includes, for example, successful integration through refugee participation in hackathons and computer code schools (Georgiou, 2019: 600). The way in which refugees are expected to perform is not only constructed through aesthetic and political practices of narration, but also embodies and personifies the aesthetics and politics of infrastructures.

Artistic and activist narratives

Thought-provoking and powerful narratives about migration have also emerged at the intersection of art and activism. Artists and activists seeking to symbolically present and represent the massive loss of life at the Mediterranean have, for example, also taken up the lifejacket as a migrant narrative. Think of the ‘lifejacket graveyard’ action, which revolved around the display of 2500 life jackets in Parliament Square, London by the NGO International Rescue Committee (IRC; Gillespie, 2018: 151). As part of the 2016 Cinema for Peace, the internationally renowned artist Ai Weiwei wrapped the five columns of the German Konzerthaus in 14,000 salvaged refugee life vests (Sierzputowski, 2016). The social and political orientation of engaged art practice has been well documented in the literature (e.g. Buikema, 2018; Ring Petersen, 2017). When it comes to arts and migration, in recent years, we can identify at least three types of narratives. They tend to exist in tension or conflict with many of the more institutional or mainstreamed narratives outlined above, often offering alternative lenses to think of crisis, solidarity and responsibility.

First, there are the satirical or humoristic responses to particular events or developments, inviting the public to reconsider the narrative and its protagonists. Satire and humour, and cartoons in particular, are used, as social critique has a long history in public culture. Recent years also saw several cases that demonstrated the (geo)political importance of the genre (e.g. Ridanpää, 2009). Don Waisanen (2018) has noted the emergence of comic activism or advocacy satire, that is, ‘the use of political humour to take action on behalf of disadvantaged individuals or groups, lending force to their voices by making a direct intervention into public affairs’ (p. 11). The influx of Syrian refugees following the civil war in 2011 into neighbouring countries and Europe has garnered many satirical and comic reactions that criticize lack of political action, lack of empathy or lack of a historical contextualization of the so-called refugee crisis. Looking at the genre of comics specifically, the iconic image of Alan Kurdi gave occasion to many re-appropriations and references (see Mortensen, 2017). The hypocritical and inept policies and responses in the EU and the United States have been widely criticized using cartoons. Despite the critical potential, cartoons also strengthen stereotypes or reinforce particular power relations and representations. Özlem Özdemir and Emrah Özdemir (2017), for instance, demonstrate how the use of visual metaphors confirms refugees as lonely, unwanted and weak. Criticism prevails, while constructive solutions are scarce in this genre, and thus the potential to overwrite dominant narratives seems limited.

Another strategy is the use of different art media, such as poetry, installation, performance, film and murals to deliver critiques on border politics and imaginations. Borders are understood not only as the technologized and militarized regimes of power, but also as the imagined and symbolic fault lines of cultures and nations. Filippo Menozzi (2019) offers a fascinating reading of the poet Imtiaz Dharker's work *Leaving Fingerprints* (2009), which is seen as a poetic resistance against the politics of identity produced by technologies of recognition. The *Schengen Border Art* blog (<http://www.schengenborderart.com>), for example, collects a wide range of artistic expressions that take issue with Europe's borderlands, addressing the powerful imaginations and contestations of borders and Fortress Europe.

A final and partly overlapping strategy is aimed at bringing out narratives of migrants themselves, often through participatory or co-creation artistic, activist and research projects. Works that seek to collect, annotate and re-circulate migrant archives are considered to have micro-political and poetical potential, based on the main premise that 'archives are not only records of the past but are also maps for the future' (Appadurai, 2019: 558). Following a longer historical lineage of works such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus, A survivor's tale* (1986) about the Holocaust and Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (2001) recent graphic novels come to mind, including Kate Evans' *Threads from the Refugee Crisis* (2017) and Sarah Glidden's *Rolling Blackouts. Dispatches from Turkey, Syria and Iraq* (2016). Pramod Nayar (2009) argues that such graphic novels, which are often based on firsthand accounts, have the capacity to make previously inexpressible experiences expressible.

There is also a lot of exchange with research, as the number of art-based migration research projects has increased (see notably the special issue of *Crossings* edited by Laura Jeffery et al., 2019). For example, Koen Leurs (2017) in his work with young refugees and expats focusses on their smartphones as 'personal pocket archives' which allow youth to articulate their perspectives on their everyday lives on the basis of how they have used their smartphones and documented it through messages, videos, selfies and audio recordings. Although it is hard to make any generalizations due to the diversity of expression forms and types of projects, such works seem connected by a desire to show the complexities of pain, suffering, hope, agency. Creating awareness and increasing solidarity is often a major aim (see also Horsti, 2019). Jonathan Corpus Ong and Maria Rovisco (2019) also refer to such art projects as practices of 'conviviality for empathy' that intend to stimulate empathy. Isobel Blomfield and Caroline Lenette (2018) highlight that the ethical considerations of such projects should avoid the perpetuation of existing tropes.

Even from this briefest overview of artistic or creative interventions, it becomes clear that artists and activism play a key role in deconstructing dominant migrant narratives, and proposing alternative ones. The fact that these interventions increasingly seem to speak to/against decision-makers, large media companies and tech corporations is an encouraging development. Yet, we have also mentioned the looming risk for stereotyping, co-optation or instrumentalization. Probably, in no other field, we can see so clearly the productive articulations between poetics and politics, the former confronting the latter and the latter nourishing the former.

Conclusion

migrants, especially refugees, in the contemporary globalized world are inevitably second-class citizens because their stories do not fit the narrative requirements of modern nation-states

–Arjun Appadurai (2019, p. 558)

Taking cues from Arjun Appadurai (2019), who urges a ‘renewed attention to the relationship between migrants and mediation’ (p. 558) in this article, we have offered a multi-stakeholder analysis of how migration is narrated, centring on the poetics of aesthetic presentation and politics of representation. The dialectics of migrant narratives, following Gayatri Spivak (1990) can be understood as those political acts of ‘speaking for/speaking in the name of’ (p. 107) migrants, whereas the poetics of migrant narratives refer to migration narratives as ‘proxy and portrait’ and the act of ‘portraying’ (p. 109) migrants through narratives. From stakeholders who narrate migration from below, we can see how digital media is employed to create and circulate self-representations that function as counter narrations in the broader context of essentialist discourses that try to essentialize and de-humanize migrants. In addition, artists and activists alongside seek to expand the discourse by contributing to their cause in powerful and creative ways. From stakeholders who narrate migration top-down, we see how various political and economic actors (as well as media professionals/journalists) still hold the power and position to construct and represent the migrants. Despite their different motivations, agendas and positionalities, these stakeholders are the main actors who shape the contemporary struggle of representing, recognizing or de-humanizing the ‘migrant’ in the media. Bottom-up and top-down stakeholders’ accounts do not necessarily meet; on the contrary, they largely stand in opposition: mediated migrant narratives simultaneously become the arena of consent and resistance. Yet, all these accounts should be recognized and examined together in order to understand how migrant narratives are produced, reinforced and circulated through the media in a fully fledged framework.

Our overview of different actors, which is explorative and necessarily limited in scope, reveals the messiness of migrant narratives: narrative strategies, categories used and objectives sometimes overlap but oftentimes differ significantly, commonly establishing and reinforcing hierarchies between various groups of mobile populations, commonly along axes of difference including race, nationality, religion, gender, sexuality and ability. Through self-reflexive engagement, there are several opportunities, challenges and commitments to rethink our responsibilities as media and migration scholars. We do not stand outside the migration industry (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorensen, 2013), and our research, expertise and insights can also lead to reinforcing border regimes, informing border policies. The field in particular remains shaped by an over-emphasis on policy-driven research, which does not necessarily have a social justice or progressive politics orientation. Furthermore, media and migration research commonly foregrounds media as a driver of change, whereas the structural conditions and everyday experiences of mobile people demand greater attention (cf. Morley, 2017; Scheel, 2019; Smets, 2018). As Jeffrey Patterson rightly signals in this special issue in his book review of David Morley’s *Communication and Mobility: The Mobile Phone, the Migrant and the*

Container box media and migration scholarship lacks attention for ‘mobility infrastructures outside of WEIRD (white, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic) societies’ (Patterson, 2019: xx).

The question arises of how we can work towards de-centring media and the Global North and re-humanizing academic research. Is critical media theory necessarily detached and therefore de-humanizing? Is qualitative data more socially just and responsive in contrast with extractive quantitative aggregation? Or are there alternative creative modalities? There is a risk to get trapped into our own conceptual or field categories in research, which requires awareness and reflection. Categories have material consequences for mobile populations, therefore, scholars are required to unpack them and if needed call in to being alternative categories, descriptions, emerging also from self-identifications of research participants. Academics can question or go beyond established migration narratives by: (1) focussing on people that are less visible; (2) employing non-oppressive and participatory methodologies (e.g. co-creative methods, mobile methods, co-production of knowledge, co-analysis of data); (3) claiming a critical voice in public debate and policy through petitions and campaigns; and (4) outreach and communicating research to diverse audiences. Scholars are not isolated here, and knowledge transfer often depends or can be amplified through collaborations with NGOs, artists and activists. To avoid the risks of fetishizing media, migration, refugee-ness and marginalization, we need to be open to being held accountable and involve communities under study in knowledge production.


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