Storying Contemporary Migration

Representation, Aspirations, Advocacy

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palgrave
macmillan

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ISBN 978-3-031-62002-7 ISBN 978-3-031-62003-4 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-62003-4

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

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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 nonfiction, 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

L. Englund, *Storying Contemporary Migration*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-62003-4_1

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 connect 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 multifaceted 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 turnings 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

political, economic and social evolution". Fozdar interestingly uses the terms postnationalism and cosmopolitanism interchangeably, asking whether there is any real distinction (p. 151). Her study of what constitutes Australian identity (p. 154) presents findings that suggest it is the idea of the nation itself that prohibits people from imagining other ways of organizing the state (p. 160–161):

> In recruiting the nation as the logical formation within which belonging, fellow feeling and responsibility lie, both politicians and the common person reinforce borders, perpetuate difference and close off, rather than opening up, engagement. This necessarily means that those outside this formation remain 'other'.

Borders thus take on a more abstract dimension here, being reinforced by people who express their support of the nation-state. The idea put forward is that a world without nation-states would be more open and would stop othering people based on origins.

A more comprehensive study of nationalism is provided by Yael Tamir (2020), whose book *Why Nationalism* addresses the role of nationalism today, connecting it to migration in multiple contexts. Tamir (2020: xxiv) argues that "entry grants privileges" in states that have a welfare system, and hence immigration control becomes a necessity. This topic is further addressed in several of the sections of this book, particularly in Chaps. 5 and 6. According to Tamir (2020: 3), nationalism has made a comeback in recent years and must be taken seriously instead of simply being seen as "an expression of a populist state of mind" (2020: 29). Populism is, as defined by Tamir, "a political ploy to mobilize 'ordinary people' by echoing their demands" (p. 29–30). This is an important statement particularly in relation to a discussion of migration. Tamir (2020: 31) sees nationalism in the present era as "a distinct anti-elitist voice" that should be taken seriously. Tamir makes a case for the nation-state, arguing that it so far has the best track record in offering protection and opportunities for people (ibid.).

An even more noteworthy argument is offered by Tamir in terms of borders, as a policy of open borders or no borders is promoted by a significant number of the texts examined in this book. It is also promoted by scholars (see for example Hayter 2004; Anderson et al. 2009; Sager 2017; Huemer 2018; Jones 2018; Leuenberger 2018) and examined in more detail in Chap. 5. Tamir states that borders and nationalism are not to be

straightforwardly connected, as democracy relies on distinctions relating to who is part of the state and who is not (2020: 35). Further, she calls open borders an "oxymoron", arguing that borders are by default closed, discouraging movement across them. Thus, borders are unlikely to disappear, and the same goes for people's desire to belong in national contexts (Tamir 2020: 48), a topic addressed for example in the chapter on undocumented migration. Eventually, Tamir offers a solution that is relevant for this study as well: instead of focusing on the role of borders, emphasis should be placed on inequality and injustice and efforts to eradicate them (2020: 51). The book by Tamir thus offers a viewpoint that goes beyond many of the arguments discussed in this book, presented by writers and scholars alike.

In the context of this study, a relevant question is whether contemporary migration narratives express nationalist sentiments, and if so, in what context and setting. Ghia Nodia (2017: 9) explores postnationalism in her article and outlines that nationalism gained its notoriety after the world wars and the devastation they caused. Nodia (p. 5) observes the point of view "that general progress will move us into a future where nations and nationalism will become insignificant or at least far less significant than they have been and still are". This is particularly the view with which this study also takes issue, seeing that the world is not necessarily moving in any such direction. Further, she (p. 8) argues that "nationalism is usually considered bad and dangerous—something to be overcome, not celebrated". Nationalism to some extent becomes a privilege for those who occupy a space within a nation-state, but a desire to belong is also expressed by those in the margins.

Current negative views of nationalism, according to Nodia (2017: 7), connect "with what various people call the recession, decline, backsliding, or crisis of liberal democracy". Liberal democracy is yet another concept that requires brief definition. Max Meyer (2020: 8) explains it in terms of balancing the effects of capitalism in order to keep power from being only in the hands of a wealthy elite: "If every citizen has a vote, the laws ensure that everyone shares in prosperity". Such a society also needs "freedom of press and freedom of information" (ibid.). The crisis of liberal democracy is further investigated by William A. Galston (2018), who argues that it is "fragile, constantly threatened, always in need of repair" but that "[h]istory is not a linear movement toward a liberal democratic world" (p. 1). Galston (2018: 3) connects contemporary migration with the crisis of liberal democracy, arguing that the US, the UK and the EU "all failed to deal

with waves of immigration in ways that commanded public support". This is a valuable comment and another central topic for examination in this study, particularly in relation to the works *The Strange Death of Europe* (2018) by Douglas Murray and *Against Borders: The Case for Abolition* (2022) by Gracie Mae Bradley and Luke de Noronha. The problems connected with migration are presented in widely different ways in the two texts, and their relationship with the crisis of liberal democracy is a relevant issue. Nationalism, particularly in a time of war, needs to be redefined and brought centre stage once more as also put forward by Tamir, in less polemic and provocative terms. Engaging with stories of migration is one way forward.

Postmigration and Cosmopolitanism

Migration for the most part remains an incomplete process, where individuals and entire societies are always going toward something. This process is mirrored in the concept of postmigration which offers insights about minority versus majority society and takes issue with the othering and alienation of migrants. Postmigration, largely European in its origins and developments, emerged in the 1990s in British contexts (Gaonkar et al. 2021: 16). Three different strands of postmigrant discourse can be detected, relating to people who are descendants of migrants but did not move themselves. Another focal point is society as postmigrant, with all the "conflicts, obsessions and negotiations taking place in societies shaped by migration" (ibid., 20). The third strand sees postmigration as an "analytical perspective" (ibid., 22). As Moslund and Petersen (2019: 67) state in their chapter on postmigration, it "refers to a recognition of what has already happened (post-) as well as to a process of ongoing change". The aim of the concept of postmigration is thus to go beyond previous meanings of migrant and migration, to question the reasons for othering migrants and to criticize the gap between margins and majority society (Römhild 2017). It also attempts to focus explicitly on trajectories relating to the future.

Thus, there seems to be an ideological positioning behind the concept. This has been noted by Bromley (2017), who argues that postmigration is not as a concept solely tied to temporal distinctions, but also ideological in its attempts to construct "a new set of emergent spaces of plurality" (p. 39). This indicates that postmigration as a concept sees migration as inherent to societies instead of a separate phenomenon to be dealt with,

and that it actively seeks to alter the ways in which migration is seen and theorized. This is further reinforced by Marsha Meskimmon (2017: 33), who actually claims that "[a]ll of us are postmigrants". It is therefore less about actually migrating, and more about what comes after, as migration affects more or less all societies and nation-states.

The focus on encounters is explicitly outlined in postmigrant discourses as well in terms of its notion of bridging and eventually erasing the gap between minority and majority society. Postmigration does not shy away from the fact that societies and people who constitute them remain wary, suspicious, and sometimes even outright hostile toward those who come from elsewhere. We tend to see openness and tolerance (which as a term is ambiguous at best and not with entirely positive connotations) towards others as a value to be reinforced in society and passed on to children. Can postmigration as a condition where migration is seen as an inherent part of society, if all of us are postmigrants as stated by Meskimmon (2017), have room for opposing views?

Another concept that implies a collective identity is cosmopolitanism, and César Domínguez (2015: 3) argues that "[s]ome scholars—implicitly or explicitly—have made of cosmopolitanism and postnationalism equivalent concepts". Hence, the two are discussed here together as they to some extent overlap, or at least exist in tandem. Cosmopolitanism as a concept and way of seeing the world continues to be debated, with a variety of critical voices emerging in the past decade. Catherine Lejeune et al. (2021: 4) explains the following about the concept: "Used, overused and misused across disciplines and times, its semantic trajectory has gone from fame to shame." The critique is justified, as the cosmopolitan can hardly be seen as a citizen of the world no longer, if this was ever the case. These notions are identified by Torill Strand (2010: 232) who states that "the metaphor of cosmopolitanism seems to be advocating a rather superior way of life as well as an ethos nurtured among those privileged that have access to such a lifestyle. A cosmopolitan is said to be 'a stranger nowhere in the world.'" Contrary to these perceptions, "increasingly more people are now strangers no matter where in the world" (ibid.). Rosi Braidotti et al. (2013: 1) ask whether cosmopolitanism as an idea "is still useful," and Strand (2010: 232) argues that it is important "to question the motives behind the common and current call for a cosmopolitan ethos: Is this call motivated by a sense of global connectedness and genuine solidarity?" The question rings true for postnationalism and postmigration, as well as for calls for open borders.

Scholars often distinguish between the old cosmopolitanism, a somewhat utopian idea of world citizenship, and the new cosmopolitanism. Bruce Robbins and Paulo Lemos Horta (2017: 1) explain that "the new cosmopolitanism merely assumes that wherever and whenever history has set people in transnational motion, sometimes very forcibly, it is to be expected that many of them and their descendants will show signs of hybrid identity and interestingly divided loyalty". This is true for several of texts examined here. Further, as Craig Calhoun (2017: 191) explains, "[c]osmopolitanism reminds us that we engage the larger world through our specific localities, nations, religions, and cultures, not by escaping them". This connects with the "interestingly divided loyalty". In addition, Thomas Bender (2017: 117) argues the following in this context: "The cosmopolitan is open to the unease of forming a new understanding of both one's self and of the world when invited by the confrontation of difference". Thus, a cosmopolitan identity in the contemporary world is seen as someone whose multiple loyalties move in two directions: from the personal experience to the surrounding society but also the other way around. The "confrontation of difference" relates to this second form of interaction, from the outside in.

Migration narratives, particularly autobiographical ones, generally move from the inside out, revolving around and recounting personal experiences of living in new homes and the clashes that come with it. Taking into account the other perspective, the migrant being confronted with difference and not always being the one that is the difference confronting others, is thus a relevant perspective to bear in mind in the subsequent analysis in this study. This thought is to some extent echoed in Peter Nyers's (2017: 284) statement: "Negative cosmopolitanism is a cosmopolitanism of disenfranchisement, exclusion, and abjection. But it is also at the same time the cosmopolitanism of contestation, rupture, and resistance". The three aspects mentioned by Nyers; contestation, rupture, and resistance, are of central importance for the migration narratives analysed. All of them emerge both within and outside the migration experience: as occurrences in interaction with people and institutions that question migrant status and belonging, as well as in transformations taking place in surrounding society. In this book, these concerns emerge particularly in relation to experiences of refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented people.

If cosmopolitanism is excluding and postmigration all-encompassing, can either concept truly pave the way forward? If cosmopolitanism

suggests being a citizen of the world and the postmigrant condition is reflected in society and its treatment of inhabitants from a variety of backgrounds, the two concepts definitely do connect but explore migration and transcultural identities and lives from separate viewpoints. Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006: xvii) examines the nature and role of cosmopolitanism in his critically acclaimed work on the concept and argues the following: "it begins with the simple idea that in the human community, as in national communities, we need to develop habits of coexistence". This coexistence is analysed in terms of conversation by Appiah, and he also further defines cosmopolitanism as "intelligence and curiosity as well as engagement" (2006: 168). These conversations and encounters upon which cosmopolitanism builds do not "have to leas to consensus about anything, especially not values; it's enough that it helps people get used to one another" (Appiah 2006: 85). Such perspectives connect with postmigration in multiple ways and with the idea that everyone is a postmigrant. There is thus a universality to both concepts, a desire to see the world as united and connected even in terms of deeply polarizing socio-political phenomena such as migration. Perhaps the polarization is the connection, the lack of consensus that needs to be discussed and debated.

The balance between the local and the global is of significance here. As Calhoun states, our specific, individual cultural backgrounds are in constant interaction with the outside world and they largely define how we approach it. Again, this goes the other way around as well. People in receiving societies also engage with migrants through their own cultural specificities. Braidotti, Blaagaard and Hanafin (2013: 3–4) write the following:

> [C]osmopolitanism should be concerned with specificity rather than generality, groundedness rather than abstractness, engagement rather than distance, and interaction rather than reflection. It becomes a *cosmopolitics*, by adopting embedded and embodied perspectives that take our actual situated location as starting point, rather than a timeless and placeless perspective. We need to engage, both individually and collectively, with the real-life problems that the global world confronts us with.

Instead of seeing cosmopolitanism as some kind of utopian ideal of a world in which people become world citizens, transcending nationality and borders through their interaction with one another, it should be seen as something far more concrete, existing in the "contestation, rupture,

and resistance", and addressing "the real-life problems" attached not only to migration but societies at large. In these statements, a connection with postmigration emerges particularly clearly.

The link between postmigration and cosmopolitanism can be further explored in relation to Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt's (2018) article, but in their study the categorisation which inevitably emerges with cosmopolitan identities is also highlighted: "Accomplishing a cosmopolitan identity involves establishing both the otherness that is embraced and the otherness in contrast to which you can conceive yourself as cosmopolitan" (Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt 2018: 147). They also talk of "collective identification" (p. 145) among those who deem themselves cosmopolitan, which emphasizes the creation of new groups that may not be labelled migrant but exhibit other characteristics. Someone is always inevitably left on the outside. This is highlighted in Glick Schiller and Meinhof's (2011: 24) study: "We note that the relationships and contexts within which even the most mobile and transnational artists constantly find themselves, involve processes of creating self- and other identifications that reinforce ethnic and/or national labeling". The primary material examined in this study addresses many of the issues briefly discussed in this chapter. Fluidity seems to be a defining feature of most concepts related to migration such as diaspora, transnationalism, cosmopolitanism and now also postmigration. Migration and being on the move in various contexts and for numerous reasons is of course a fluid experience in itself at least as seen from the outside. From a personal perspective it is immensely concrete and tangible. This means that migration narratives can provide a way to examine both the fluid nature and the sometimes unbearably real and solid experience of migration. To a significant extent, migration stories also mediate between these two dimensions, one as seen from the outside and the other as experienced within.

Structure of the Book

This book examines very contemporary representations of migration in American, European and British contexts, yet migration remains a phenomenon entrenched in local history, while being inherently global. The texts examined here span continents, with authors originating from Iran, the Philippines, Ecuador, Pakistan, Haiti, Nigeria, and many more countries of origin. A thorough examination of contemporary stories of migration would require delving deep into national contexts of all the nations

above, and still the human factor might be overlooked. Migration is arguably not all about wars, conflicts, dissolving empires, or other upheavals. To look for it only within the greater historical shifts across time would be to ignore the personal dimension which is at the centre of this book. However, certain broad strokes are necessary, particularly in terms of the receiving nations and continents addressed in the primary material. Migration is also not always about the underprivileged and the dispossessed. This book tries to accommodate stories of those who lack privileges but also of those who have built successful professional lives.

Storying Contemporary Migration: Representation, Aspirations, Advocacy is organized around five main chapters that address migration from a particular angle: representations of migration, aspirations and expectations of both migrants themselves as well as families and surrounding societies, undocumented migration, debating open borders and current attitudes to migration in Europe, and eventually the migrant crisis which refers both to 2015–2016 but also to migration in crisis in sociopolitical terms, as well as individual migrants in crisis. Each chapter analyses two to three primary texts that cover a wide range in terms of form and content. In order to address the debate on migration from as many perspectives as possible, this book is not geographically limited to particular nations or areas in terms of sending countries. The main limitation imposed on the selected material, as stated in the first section of this introductory chapter, is temporal, with all analysed texts having been published since 2016. Geographically, the experiences recounted concern Europe, Britain, and the United States.

The material examined not only covers multiple different national and local settings, but also different literary forms. Two of the sections analyse essay collections, with contributions by a number of people recounting their migration experiences. Four of the texts are memoirs, by two male and two female writers, and two are perhaps most accurately defined as nonfiction, not written in personal contexts but outlining the futures of Europe or the world in terms of migration and border control, among other topics. Three sections focus on novels written by two female and one male authors. Thus, gender representation is fairly equal, and the texts represent backgrounds that are both privileged and deprived.

Chapter 2 is titled "Representing Migration", and that is of course what all primary material analysed does from various personal or fictional perspectives. What this chapter centres on are contestations with regard to representations of migration experiences, and the first section examines

the novel *American Dirt* (2019) by American writer Jeanine Cummins, which has received considerable backlash due to its representations of migrants travelling by irregular means towards the border between Mexico and the US. The novel has been criticized not only for its fictional portrayal of the precarious lives of those hoping to reach the US border, but also for its privileged position in terms of bias of publishers and the literary marketplace. A question that arises in this context is who can write stories of migration and whether it requires having migrated oneself. Another text is analysed in this chapter as a counterpoint to the outsider position of Cummins. Roberto Lovato's memoir *Unforgetting: A Memoir of Family, Migration, Gangs, and Revolution in the Americas* (2020) offers personal experiences of being a migrant and working with Salvadoran gangs in the United States. Lovato's memoir tries to understand the violent history of El Salvador and its connection with the United States. The book thus represents migration from an opposite perspective as compared to *American Dirt:* it is autobiographical and derives from the author's own experiences. Lovato has also vocally criticized Cummins's novel as member of the literary movement #DignidadLiteraria, introducing one more connection between the two texts.

Chapter 3 addresses aspirations and expectations in stories of migration, examining two essay collections, *The Good Immigrant* (2017) and *The Good Immigrant USA* (2020), and a novel, *Behold the Dreamers* (2016) by Imbolo Mbue. Arguably, aspirations and expectations connect with most stories of migration, constituting central drivers for the personal experiences recounted as in the two essay collections, or for the fictional narrative as in the case of the novel. Aspirations and expectations gain multifaceted meanings, as they are not only expressed by the authors or main characters themselves, but also in relational settings or from the point of view of receiving society. In its essence, the act of migration involves a certain level of hope for something better, and the stories examined in this chapter do not derive from the least privileged of positions. The two essay collections contain stories of people who possess considerable cultural capital, working as professional writers, journalists, film makers or actors. *Behold the Dreamers* is set in 2008 at the cusp of the recession, recounting the lives of a Cameroonian couple trying to make ends meet in New York. Aspirations and expectations also gain meaning in terms of what migrants expect from their new home to which they have relocated, further complicating the relationship between the two.

The fourth chapter is entitled "Undocumented Migration" and divided into two sections, each analysing a memoir by an author that explores the position of being undocumented. Jose Antonio Vargas's *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen* (2018) centres on the author's own experience of living in America without citizenship, having arrived there as a boy without papers and finding out about his status some years later. The memoir emerges from an advocacy purpose, working to bring attention to the situation of people such as Vargas, whose chances of acquiring citizenship remain elusive. Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's memoir *The Undocumented Americans* (2021) is also the product of a so-called Dreamer, someone who arrived undocumented in the United States as a child, but Cornejo Villavicencio explicitly sets out to portray experiences in addition to her own, aspiring to tell the stories of undocumented migrants whose voices are often silenced or overlooked. This text, too, performs advocacy writing through its explicit criticism of political inability or unwillingness to support those who have remained in the United States for a long time as undocumented.

Chapter 5 addresses the statements and ideological narratives presented in two nonfictional texts: *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam* (2018) by Douglas Murray and *Against Borders: The Case for Abolition* (2022) by Gracie May Bradley and Luke de Noronha. The two texts are paired together in this chapter in separate sections as they address the topic of migration from two widely different perspectives. Murray offers a critical look at the migration policies of Europe in the last few decades, lamenting the lack of appreciation for European values and ways of life. Bradley and de Noronha write for a world without borders, arguing that the inhumane practices in receiving societies could be made away with once and for all if there were no border controls enforcing such practices. The chapter draws on a significant number of scholarly works on migration as well as statistics in order to critically assess the two texts.

The final main chapter is titled "Migrant Crisis" and examines migration stories that address experiences of refugees and asylum seekers, both nonfictional and fictional. The first section analyses *Refugee Tales III*, a compilation of stories told to writers as part of the project *Refugee Tales* that advocates for an end to indefinite detention of asylum seekers in the UK. The collection is thus activist in its purpose, hoping to bring attention to practices that some participants describe as worse than prison. The second section addresses Dina Nayeri's memoir *The Ungrateful Refugee: What Immigrants Never Tell You* (2020), which, not unlike Lovato, sets out to recount a childhood in Iran which is eventually left behind, and

then growing up in the US as a refugee, becoming American. The memoir embarks upon a journey to come to terms with that past. Nayeri visits camps for asylum seekers in Greece and ponders not just her own views and attitudes in terms of her past but those of societies in which she has lived. The memoir vocally criticizes asylum policies in Europe.

The third and last section in the chapter focuses on Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West* (2017), which has received considerable scholarly attention due to its creative portrayal of travel and migration. In Hamid's novel, magic portal doors start appearing across the world, enabling instantaneous travel and giving the chance to people to flee political upheaval and leave lives of danger and struggle behind. While the novel has been read by many in explicitly ideological terms, as advocating an open world with no border controls, previous analysis seems to have largely overlooked the novel's insights about persisting inequalities and exclusionary practices in receiving societies.

The final chapter offers a concluding discussion of the main findings in the book. The chapter addresses topics that have been raised throughout the book, such as the moral responsibility of readers, the question of who can write about migration, and what these stories should look like. The lack of happy endings is addressed in relation to the topic of redemption, which has become a popular feature in much writing that deals with human tragedy and suffering. The topic of gratitude is further discussed here, as it connects with many of the texts examined and is addressed in several chapters. Open borders and current asylum policies are central to this final discussion, as they, too, emerge in many texts in various ways. In terms of societal and political narratives perpetuated in relation to migration, findings suggest that the autobiographical text in the form of memoir or essay as examined here is essential. Many of the writers take an active stance in the face of discrimination and mistreatment, producing their texts with an advocacy purpose and writing against societal narratives they deem harmful and discriminatory.

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CHAPTER 2

Representing Migration

All texts analysed in this study represent migration, and the book itself offers its own representation through the selected works and topics. This chapter addresses representation from a perspective of contestation. Some years ago, controversy ensued in relation to a novel that represents fictionalized experiences of migration: Jeanine Cummins's *American Dirt* (2019), which offers the story of a woman who flees Mexico with her son after her husband and extended family have been murdered by a cartel. The novel will be examined in more detail in this chapter and functions as the focal point. The demands on representation the novel was met with are central to the discussion, as well as the novel's reception, which was largely negative and critical after its initial success, most notably in relation to being picked up by Oprah Winfrey's Book Club. Central questions concern who can and should write stories of migration and in what contexts, and the controversy surrounding the novel also raises concerns about the biases of the publishing industry and the limited representation of authors from various ethnic and racial backgrounds, in this case, writers who define themselves as Latin American/Latinx.

Representations of migration in *American Dirt* are contrasted against another text, Roberto Lovato's memoir *Unforgetting: A Memoir of Family, Migration, Gangs, and Revolution in the Americas* (2020). Lovato's memoir is relevant as it seems to tick several boxes in terms of representation: the author has personal experience of living in the United States with family origins elsewhere, although he did not migrate himself, and the text itself is

L. Englund, *Storying Contemporary Migration*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-62003-4_2

autobiographical, drawing on personal experiences. These criteria are not met in relation to Cummins's novel and form a central part of the criticism directed against her writing. Further, Lovato is co-founder of #DignidadLiteraria, a movement that originated as a response to Cummins's novel and the exclusionary policies of major publishing houses. The two authors thus have a connection that is significant for an analysis of migration narratives, in both personal and political terms. This chapter deals with the delicate question of *who* can write a story of migration and what characters it can represent. Several other chapters, if not all, in this book deal with the intricate matter of representation, and it remains a central topic throughout this book. Hence, it is an important place to start.

The chapter sets out to explore Cummins's *American Dirt* and focuses particularly on the critical reception of the novel and the problem of representation that has emerged in reviews, media outlets, and articles due to the author's own background and lack of first-hand experience of the lives fictionalized in the story. It then goes on to examine Lovato's *Unforgetting* which is autobiographical and takes an explicit personal perspective on migration while also performing reportage. The chapter asks whether and to what degree Lovato's memoir fares better in terms of representing the migrant experience, and to what extent such a question is useful. The literary market and its power to promote certain texts and writers is a central aspect of the criticism surrounding *American Dirt*, and the experiences represented are seen as streamlined and marketed for particular audiences, further deepening the conflict. Arguably, the intended readership for *Unforgetting* is markedly different, having been produced with overt advocacy purposes, whereas *American Dirt* is perhaps written for a somewhat less informed audience and with a different educational objective. These observations emerge as central in the subsequent sections and have ramifications for demands on representation of migration experiences.

Contested Representation: *American Dirt*

Jeanine Cummins, author of bestselling novel *American Dirt*, has published four novels to date according to her website, and writes that she travelled in Mexico and "the borderlands" when working on the novel in focus, encouraging people to do what they can to help those trying to cross the border ("A Note from Jeanine" n.d.). The novel is thus framed as having an advocacy purpose, urging people, presumably readers, to become aware of the difficulties of people hoping to reach the US border. In an interview conducted by Rachel Martin (2020) for *NPR*, the

interviewer shares some of the criticism with which the novel has been met, quoting Esmeralda Bermudez, introduced as a writer at *LA Times* and "an immigrant herself", who is reported as having tweeted that Cummins's novel is "a textbook example of nearly everything we should avoid when writing about immigrants. It is hollow, harmful, an adrenaline-packed cartoon" (Martin 2020). Cummins responds in the interview that she did research for five years when working on the novel and tried to "examine the humanity of the people involved". Cummins also asserts having been aware of her "cultural blind spots", when asked about them by the interviewer, who points out that Cummins is not a migrant herself.

Cummin's earlier novels focus on Ireland, the first set in the 1950s and centring on an Irish traveller (*The Outside Boy*, 2010), and the second on family histories in connection with migration from Ireland during the potato famine to America (*The Crooked Branch*, 2013). Her first book, *A Rip in Heaven* (2004), is an autobiographical account of events in the author's youth when her brother and cousins were assaulted, and the cousins eventually killed. *American Dirt* is a different text compared to the earlier ones, telling a story farther away from the author's own life and background. However, Cummins states in an interview that the topic of immigration "is the story of our time", and that she herself married "an Irishman who was an undocumented immigrant for many years" (Conroy 2020). Cummins claims to have anticipated the backlash, having been worried about "accusations of cultural appropriation" when working on the book. She also calls it a "dangerous sort of slippery fascist slope" if writers are told what they can or cannot write about (Conroy 2020). As this section shows, the debate that emerged concerning *American Dirt* was not solely about who can write what stories, but also about the kind of stories that get published.

This brief introduction to the author behind the novel at the centre sets the tone for this section, which examines the response with which *American Dirt* was met and the controversy it caused particularly among Latinx writers. The content of the novel is also analysed. *American Dirt* was published in 2019 and became an instant success, particularly after getting picked up by Oprah's Book Club (Alter 2020). The book soon became the focus of much criticism, leading to Flatiron Books, the publishing company behind Cummins's novel, to cancel a planned book tour (ibid.). The controversy surrounding the novel prompted Oprah Winfrey to invite Latinx writers to a joint conversation with Jeanine Cummins about the novel on *Apple TV+* (Vandenburgh 2020; de León 2020). de León reports that the three Latina writers invited, Julisse Arce, Esther

Cepeda, and Reyna Grande, observed that the publishing industry does not take a similar interest in stories by Latinx writers, and that there is often an expectation on writers belonging to such communities to focus on matters such as migration. This raises several questions about representation, about who holds a position in which it is possible to write stories of migration, and who is outright expected to do so. The comment also points to a paradox: while Cummins faced backlash for not being a migrant herself, yet writing a story of migration, Latinx writers express feelings of being pigeonholed when expected to depict experiences of migration.

Julisse Arce (2020) has written a piece on the episode in which she participated, asserting that her decision to take part emerged from a desire to "push the conversation, advocate for my community, and highlight how the publishing industry […] could be doing so much more to support and highlight Latinx authors". Arce (2020) emphasizes the role of Latinx writers for the controversy that ensued, stating that they were the ones who so vocally criticized the novel and the publishing industry behind it. The comment implies the importance of claiming centre stage, not only in terms of voicing migrant experiences, but also in terms of literary space itself. *American Dirt* is presented as having revealed the bias of publishing companies and their exclusionary practices. Arce (2020) recounts that Oprah asked her about her feelings when reading *American Dirt*, to which Arce responds that she "was thinking about the real-life immigrants whose lives are in limbo, the immigrants whom this book fails". Eventually, Arce argues that "we deserve better books than *American Dirt*. Books that do not rely on, and benefit from, our pain and trauma". The problem that emerges in these lines is the demand on fair and accurate representation, which *American Dirt* is seen as failing to meet, and that the book should perhaps not even have been written due to its lack of proper representation of Mexican immigrants to the United States. This indicates that there is no space for fictions such as the one presented in the novel in question, that not anyone can fictionalize stories of border crossings between Mexico and the US, and that there are clear demands on which stories can and should be told.

While the book has not yet received much scholarly attention despite the massive backlash it faced, a few articles have emerged. Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado (2021: 378) analyses the novel and the scandal it gave rise to, arguing that the manner in which it was "developed, acquired, and marketed also raises questions regarding *American Dirt*'s representational

politics". There is thus a direct explicit connection between the representation of migration and migrants provided by the novel and how it was presented to potential audiences. Prado then goes on to assert that a significant deal of narratives of migration are written from autobiographical perspectives, drawing on personal experiences, whereas Cummins

> […] cannibalizes this mode of narrative, whitewashing key racial and political elements, instead arousing her intended readers' empathy with a completely fictionalized story of a whitened migrant, which then elicits forms of readerly investment to match how the novel operates in a field of cultural production. Empathy is a central marketing feature in contemporary literature, and the fraught experiences of immigration in the contemporary US are a frequent source to be exploited. (Prado 2021: 378)

Not only is the story composed perceived of as the result of "cannibalism", but it is also seen as generating empathy in the wrong way and for the wrong purposes. Cummins is seen as using the fictional story in exploitative ways. Mäkelä and Björninen (2023: 14) make a noteworthy point that can be applied in this context, stating that even though storytelling is often perceived of as something that can be of use in a variety of ways, it also risks "being criticized as ideological supports to a harmful 'narrative'". The harmful narrative in this case is not the original story, that of the plight of migrants trying to cross the border into the US, but instead, critics seem to suggest that Cummins takes the original narrative and turns it into something "harmful". Prado's statement about *American Dirt* offering the portrayal of a "whitened migrant" emphasizes racial complexities at play.

There is an endless supply of critical review articles, but one that needs to be mentioned here is Myriam Gurba's piece from 2019 which was one of the first to critically examine *American Dirt* in very explicit terms. Gurba argues that the book "sucks", and states that it appropriates work by people of colour and reconfigures the story so as to make it more agreeable to readers. Gurba recounts that when she received the novel for review, she was also sent a letter from the publisher that confirmed Cummins's aims to provide visibility to Mexican migrants. In contrast, the edition of *American Dirt* used for this book features a number of excerpts on the back cover by various famous writers who give raving reviews of the novel, including, among others, Julia Alvarez who states that "Jeanine Cummins makes all *live* and *breathe* the refugee story" (italics in the

original). John Grisham reportedly states that the book "is rich in authenticity", and Sandra Cisneros calls it the "international story of our times". Combining such praise with the massive negative criticism with which the book has been met creates a complex space in which to attempt any scholarly analysis of the novel. The discourses surrounding the book and Jeanine Cummins as the author persona completely override the literary aspects of the story itself. The novel offers a relatively simple story arc, a thriller-like account of the escape of Lydia and her son Luca from Mexico to the United States, fleeing a Mexican drug cartel who murdered her husband Sebastián and several family members in retaliation for her husband's reporting on the cartel (Cummins 2019: 8).

Lydia is a bookstore keeper, who develops a friendship of sorts with the cartel leader, Javier Crespo Fuentes, who then, later, goes after her and her son as they escape the massacre of Sebastián and several family members. Lydia and Javier's love of literature is outlined in chapter four, and it is at the centre of the flirtatious, unconventional, and highly unlikely friendship they develop. The novel opens with the massacre from which Lydia soon flees with her son, becoming aware of the fact that they are in grave danger. During their flight from Acapulco where the murders took place, Lydia and Luca seek help from her husband's friend and his wife who happens to be American. When discussing the option that Lydia and Luca would travel to Mexico City with a church shuttle bringing American missionaries to the airport, Meredith, the wife is opposed to the idea due to the danger it would pose to the others on the shuttle. Carlos, Meredith's husband, explains that what happened to Lydia's family was out of the ordinary: "This is not the kind of thing that happens, ever. Not even here. Do you know anyone else who's lost sixteen family members in one day?" (Cummins 2019: 64). The passage is significant for two reasons. First, Cummins addresses outside views of Mexico as lawless and dangerous where mass murders supposedly might happen just like that. Second, the passage emphasizes the extraordinary nature of the killings, out of place and unprecedented "even here". The passage reads as a subtle note to readers to be mindful of their own prejudices and fears. The passage indicates a readership that is not Mexican.

After having made it to Mexico City, Lydia is unable to buy a plane ticket for Luca due to not having his birth certificate with her, something which Prado (2021: 373) points out as a detail that caused debate, since birth certificates, according to him, are easy to obtain in Mexico. It is thus possible that the plot twist has been added for narrative purposes only, not in order to be as realistic as possible. The verisimilitude of the story is put

to the test through details such as this, and they are details only the very informed reader will notice. An international, or perhaps American, reader with little to no knowledge of Mexican birth certificates will not react. While entering an internet café to search for other options, Lydia comes to the realisation that she and her son "are actual migrants" (Cummins 2019: 94). Lydia is described as having previously felt pity for migrants, people who "would leave their homes, their cultures, their families, even their languages, and venture into tremendous peril, risking their very lives, all for the chance to get to the dream of some faraway country that doesn't even want them" (ibid.). The passage indicates a life lived in relative safety and prosperity, far away from the realities of many Mexicans and people from other locations in Central America. To some extent, Lydia's ignorance is surprising as her husband was a journalist, supposedly knowledgeable about such issues.

The passage about Lydia's realization with regard to her status can be connected with Gurba's (2019) criticism of the novel, which partly focuses on Lydia as a character. Gurba argues that she is not "a credible Mexican. In fact, she perceives her own country through the eyes of a pearl-clutching American tourist". The lines where Lydia ponders the reasons for Mexicans to leave their homes may to some extent reveal an outsider's perspective but can here be connected with the intended audience of the novel. Prado criticizes the novel for exploitation of migrant experiences in an effort to generate empathy which sells, yet the potential naivety of the lines about Lydia and her earlier perceptions of Mexican migrants may still reflect genuine concerns among real "pearl-clutching" American tourists. To this extent, Lydia's identity is somewhat obscure and muddled, providing a mirror for the American or international reader in which to see themselves, perhaps far more so than for any Mexican bookstore keeper, not to mention migrant.

Lydia decides to try La Bestia in order to get out of Mexico, which refers to cargo or freight trains that are used as modes of transport on the way north, a journey of many dangers (Buiza 2018: 416). The authorial decision to complicate Lydia's escape from Mexico to the extent that she feels forced to try the perilous option provided by the trains can be seen as educational to some extent. Through Lydia, the reader is offered a glimpse of the actual options available to a person attempting to leave Mexico through irregular means. When waiting for the train with Luca, Lydia encounters other migrants facing the same journey, from various countries in Central America (Cummins 2019: 103–104). At a shelter for migrants,

Lydia meets other women on the move who reveal the prevalence of rape, something that shocks her: "Both women look at her blankly. They cannot believe this is news to her. Has she been living under a rock before?" (Cummins 2019: 128). This ignorance on the part of Lydia can be connected with Gurba's critique of her tourist mannerisms, even Prado's comment about a "whitened migrant", yet the passage reads as a didactic piece for, presumably American, readers having little to no information about the actual plight of migrants hoping to enter the United States. Lydia may not be believable as a Mexican on the move, but she becomes a vessel for the questions, concerns, and prejudices that Americans and other English-speaking audiences may have. Through Lydia's ignorance, the suffering of Mexican and other Central and South American migrants, are revealed to the less informed reader.

This suffering is multiplied in relation to the experiences of Soledad and Rebeca, two girls who have travelled to Mexico from Honduras, escaping troubles of their own. With them, Lydia and Luca are later captured by la migra, Mexican border patrol, who rape the girls and extort money from Lydia (Cummins 2019: 222–225). The empathy generated by the novel is brought to the reader particularly in terms of the encounters Lydia, Luca and the girls have throughout their journeys. A doctor helps them after they escape la migra (Cummins 2019: 244), and a woman hides them when they are running from the border patrol in another location (Cummins 2019: 255–258). Eventually all four of them end up in Nogales where they enlist the services of a coyote, a smuggler, called El Chacal (Cummins 2019: 280). In the bank, Lydia meets a nice clerk who helps her withdraw money from her mother's account, enough to pay the coyote. Again, the encounter is one of lucky chance, as it turns out that the clerk herself has lost a family member to gruesome violence (Cummins 2019: 287). The fantastical elements of the story include the luck and good fortune Lydia has, particularly in meeting people willing to help her and the children. The novel attempts to offer a sense of reassurance to the reader, implying that things may end well after all despite the hardship and suffering during the travels.

When they are all eventually on the road, trailing across the desert behind El Chacal, Luca makes the sombre observation that "being a *migrante* means you spend more time stopping than in motion" (Cummins 2019: 328; italics in the original). The line is symbolic not only of the arduous journey of the migrants crossing the border into the United States, at the mercy of various smugglers, but also of people waiting for

uncertain futures in detention centres or to reunite with long lost relatives on either side of the border. A lack of motion and movement symbolizes the migrant condition far more than the actual journey itself. Many of the texts examined in this book testify to this in various contexts. Lydia, too, has an epiphany during the long trek into the desert, pondering the flexibility required of migrants: "They must change their minds every day, every hour. They must be stubborn about one thing only: survival" (Cummins 2019: 353). Again, the comment can be seen as a reference not only to the life-threatening conditions migrants face when riding La Bestia, or walking through the desert, but in societies that are reluctant to receive them. The book ends with Lydia and Luca reaching safety and settling in Maryland (Cummins 2019: 377). Several companions are lost during the desert trek with El Chacal, but the novel ends with an expected, somewhat happy, ending for the two protagonists and also for Rebeca and Soledad who are attempting to rebuild their lives. Again, kindness towards the irregular migrant emerges in the form of a librarian who informs Lydia that she can obtain a library card even without citizenship (Cummins 2019: 375), as well as the principal at Luca's school who offers to put Lydia in touch with lawyers working with undocumented migrants (p. 377).

The literary qualities, or lack thereof, of the story revolve around the character portrayal, not necessarily Lydia herself, but the people she meets during her flight. The profoundly fictional nature of the story is part of its strength and its weakness. León Krauze (2020) calls the novel a "failure" in his review, arguing that Cummins's main characters are not authentic enough, echoing Gurba's critique. Lydia is accused of being "far from a worthy emblem of immigrant women", and Javier, the cartel leader, is "not an accurate representation of Mexico's criminals". Gabriel Panuco-Mercado (2020: 218) touches upon similar issues in his article on the novel, arguing that the question concerning who should be the author of a text such as this gives the "reasonable answer, based on this book's flaws" which "seems to be: not Jeanine Cummins. Who should write such a novel is someone who has lived through this crisis—a survivor whose narrative is based on their own experiences, the most indelible form of research". Krauze's critique centres on inaccuracy in the representations of migrants provided in the novel, whereas Panudo-Mercado sees the lack of an autobiographical backdrop as a significant flaw. To call personal experiences "the most indelible form of research" indicates that there is no place for fiction in this context.

The answer to the controversy, therefore, seems to be that not everything can be fictionalized by anyone, that there are experiences that need an autobiographical background in order to be something that *American Dirt* at present is not, due to its author not having experienced the fictionalized events herself. The informative and perhaps even educational expectations on such a novel, to be as truthful as possible in its *fictive* rendition of Mexico-US cross-border migration, are therefore prominent. This raises questions as to whether the anxiety about truth that has haunted autobiographical writing (cf. Gilmore 2001; Wright 2006; Eakin 2014) is now also afflicting writing that is labelled fiction and which does not set out to depict any real experiences and lives. The inherent political aspect of such novels, not only in relation to the themes and topics they explore but also in reviews and criticism, create a delicate balancing act for the author. This is further reflected in Virginia Isaad's (2020) article for the website *HipLatina* titled "10 Authentic Books About the Real Immigrant Experience", beginning with some severe criticism directed at Jeanine Cummins "who wrote about the experience of crossing the border without any first-hand knowledge". Isaad deems the process "doubly offensive" when Cummins's book became a massive financial success, gaining the attention of Oprah Winfrey's book club. Isaad proceeds to give a list of works by Latinx authors, "real stories" of immigration. Texts by Julia Alvarez, Javier Zamora, and Yuri Herrera are included. Most of the works listed, though not all, are autobiographical.

Sometimes an autobiographical account is not enough either. The well-known and celebrated memoir *Angela's Ashes* by Frank McCourt, published in 1996 and detailing the author's experiences of growing up in poverty in Limerick in the western part of Ireland, was also met with some criticism upon publication, despite its massive success and critical acclaim. James B. Mitchell (2003: 620) addresses some of the responses in his article examining the memoir, stating that there were people in Limerick who felt that the portrayal of the city and its people were not entirely fair. Tara Mack (2000) reports that "[a]t one local book signing, Paddy Malone, a former classmate of McCourt's, tore a copy of the book to shreds in front of the author". According to Mack, Malone stated that McCourt had been insulting in his memoir toward people whose families have to live with the reputation. Mack argues that older residents of Limerick feel that McCourt's narrative contains errors and misrepresentations. While the story may have never claimed to present a full and verifiable truth, the expectations thereof caused backlash.

Further, Mitchell (2003: 619) argues that "the book provides contemporary Americans with the unspoken guilty pleasure of slumming in mid-twentieth century Limerick without ever having to leave the comfort of their clean, well-plumbed country". Without making any further comparisons between *American Dirt* and *Angela's Ashes*, the comment by Mitchell can shed some light on Cummins's novel as well. With its didactic tone in places, brought to the reader through Lydia's shock and surprise at various aspects of migrant life in Mexico, *American Dirt*, too, gives the reader, presumably a "pearl-clutching" (Gurba 2019) American with little to no personal experience of migration or understanding of the reality of migrants in the United States, the chance to live through the experience of illegally crossing the border, without having to actually get involved or leave their "clean, well-plumbed country "(Mitchell 2003: 619). An urgent question in this context, raised time and again by critics and reviewers, is whether Cummins is the right guide into this (fictional) trek, the right teacher to provide readers with these lessons.

Yet another reviewer, Richard Z. Santos (2020), claims that the novel ignored the large part of the population who are deeply aware of the problems with migration in the USA, having been produced merely for an ignorant and supposedly white audience: "We want stories about ourselves that aren't written for someone else. We want to be taken seriously by the major publishers and the media. We want stories about our experiences that aren't the equivalent of tear-jerking after-school specials". Fair representation emerges as urgent in these lines, relating to the need to take centre stage in stories about migrants but also to gain proper visibility and recognition. The notion of appropriation emerges between the lines, and it is explicitly addressed by Prado (2021: 389; 391), who argues that the novel appropriates Mexican culture and experiences, the "social, political, and economic concerns and struggles of the Latinx community" (p. 376), and the experiences of undocumented migrants (p. 379). The critique by both Santos and Prado offers a sense of "us" and "them". In this case, the two categories become muddled, where the "us" is still white Americans reading about inconceivable migration experiences in a fictional novel by another white American, but the "us" also constitutes people who feel misrepresented by a novel that uses their experiences and communities, in their view, for exploitation and profit.

Not only do migration narratives need to be careful in their depictions of migrants but also in terms of how they address their intended audience. Writing a book with an informative purpose, such as *American Dirt*, is

therefore put under more scrutiny. In addition, Santos (2020) also puts forward the idea that any instructive or educational purpose may actually be futile: "We simply don't live in a society any more in which novels change the world". This goes directly against other views of literature as very much transformational and even prophetic. Santos's comment begs the question as to what kind of literature the world currently needs. The debate surrounding *American Dirt* can be seen as having slightly changed the world in its own way, bringing more attention to Latinx writers and to the lives of undocumented migrants. To that extent, the novel can be seen as having had a major impact, even if not in the ways intended by the author and the publishing company.

Other reviews of *American Dirt* have offered more criticism, also addressing the role of publishers. Randy Boyagoda (2020) writes that the novel offers little new in terms of making people think differently about migration and that it does not cause enough controversy, or the right kind of controversy. Instead, the success of the novel merely emphasizes the role of publishers and which writers have access to them. The claim in Boyagoda's review seems to be that the novel's politics are off, engaging with the wrong issues and in unacceptable ways. Constance Grady (2020) connects the novel with the term "trauma porn", calling it a "failure in empathy", and essentially criticizing the text for being voyeuristic and potentially even indulgent in its portrayal of the challenges and pains of those who migrate. These comments point again to the various expectations on literature that deals with particularly sensitive and politically charged topics to be ethical, perhaps more ethical than other writing. Writers thus seem to be given great responsibility to do justice to migrants who have been displaced for a variety of reasons and who may be living in great danger and hardship because of this.

However, the dangers and hardships need to be treated in an acceptable way too, so that the text does not revel too much in trauma and suffering. The demand thus seems to be that fictional representations of people on the move need to give their characters some level of agency and self-determination. Krauze argues that the main character in Cummins's novel is perhaps too self-sufficient, being part of the middle class as a bookstore owner and therefore not able to properly represent women who migrate and often come from much less privileged backgrounds. The demands on accurate representations of trauma and suffering, not too indulgent but not too hopeful either, seem near impossible to meet. Stories of migration must offer the right kind of representation and be truthful, or at least

verisimilar, in their depiction of migrants, and they must attempt to be controversial and cause debate in order to inspire social change. *American Dirt* certainly caused debate considering the backlash against the novel, but according to reviewers it was not the kind of debate that would bring anything new to discourses of migration. It was the wrong debate, simply, instead of perhaps focusing on the real lives of those who have migrated and their challenges. As Panuco-Mercado (2020: 217) states, Cummins "cannot personally recount the migrant experience of which she writes. And much less does such a story belong to Cummins's sphere of wealthy white authors".

The position of Cummins as a white writer outside experiences of migration herself also requires some insight into the positions of researchers and critics. Prado (2021: 372) states that he is "a Mexican reader and Mexicanist scholar", placing him more on the inside than Cummins could ever be. He (ibid.). asserts that this position "helps me to see the myriad failures of *American Dirt* with special clarity". The indication is, then, that this book on storying migration cannot see the situation nor the novel itself with any clarity, having no such experience that provides legitimacy for an analysis of *American Dirt* or any of the other texts examined in subsequent chapters. Prado (ibid.) even goes as far as indicating that *American Dirt* exemplifies the "new voices and new texts" introduced by "US multinational corporate publishers in their bid to diversify their domestic readership and reach new, international markets". However, this "bid" has also resulted in "racist and xenophobic fantasies that pass themselves off as authentic". This is the key problem: authenticity and representation. *American Dirt* cannot possibly represent migration due to the author's own lack of such experiences and it will never be authentic enough. Another sensitive question is whether fictional writing needs to be, and if so, to what degree.

Krauze (2020) offers some leniency here, despite his criticism of the novel:

> There is no reason, literary or otherwise, to challenge an author's legitimacy to tackle any topic, much less based on her ethnicity or nationality. […] If she wants to write about Mexico, so be it—Mexico and the Mexican immigrant experience are terrific subjects for a novel that deserves many outstanding books, perhaps even a definitive one that could surely be written from the United States by an American writer. At least for now, not

> many in Mexico seem to really care that a woman named Jeanine Cummins has dared to write about us.

Krauze positions himself within the debate through the comment, by stating that he is one of "us" with real connections to Mexico. The comment also indicates that the novel may not have created much of a stir in Mexico, despite the controversy in the United States and other English-speaking contexts. The comment about a "definitive" migration novel potentially emerging from an American context is intriguing, as it indicates that what is needed is perhaps just that one particularly well-written and politically engaging story.

An opposing view of the novel and the debate is offered by Pamela Paul (2023), in her article for *The Irish Times*, in which she argues that the controversy surrounding the novel changed publishing, that "the publishing world lost its confidence and ceded moral authority to the worst impulses of its detractors". The statement stands in direct opposition to the views presented earlier, from writers and critics who emphasize the biases of publishing houses and the importance of writing what you know. Paul (2023) reports that she talked to Guillermo Arriaga, known for novels and screenplays, who said that no one in Mexico "raises the concept of cultural appropriation" in relation to Cummins's novel. One person cannot represent an entire nation, naturally, nor is the meaning of the term cultural appropriation entirely unambiguous. In ethical terms, Mathias Siems argues that there is no "obligation only to write about topics related to one's own group identity or life experience" (2019: 418). However, he also acknowledges power imbalances as a significant factor (p. 419), and eventually he concludes that a debate may ensue when cultural appropriation remains a question of "disrespect", and that both parties can express their opinion (p. 421). *American Dirt* as the focus of such debate is seen as having had more far-reaching consequences than being just a controversial piece of fiction, with Christine Rosen (2020: 9) arguing that the introduction of "identitarian politics" into publishing risks laying ruin to "literature itself". The consequences are therefore seen as dire, by the few voices that defend Cummins and her novel. Rosen even goes as far as indicating that Reyna Grande's critique of the novel emerged out of "professional envy" (2020: 8), as Cummins received a considerable sum for the novel.

The debate has been harsh, on both sides, and the literary aesthetic of *American Dirt* has also come under fire, with Panuco-Mercado (2020:

217) arguing that the novel "sells at the expense of real human strife. It romanticizes and aestheticizes struggle"'. A complex question would be whether or not fictional, and nonfictional too, writing always to some extent aestheticizes struggle and suffering. A novel is by default an aesthetic work. It is a rendition of human experience and emotion, a depiction, an invention, and a creation; a "theatre, which implies epic" according to Thomas Larson (2007: 105). The impact of *American Dirt* has less to do with its subject area and is more related to the reception it received.

Autobiographical Advocacy in *Unforgetting: A Memoir of Family, Migration, Gangs, and Revolution in the Americas*

In contrast to *American Dirt*, this section looks briefly at another text, a memoir, of migration that has been received far more favourably and which draws on the author's own personal experiences. This is not to juxtapose the different texts more than is already being done, but to highlight the different discourses surrounding the novel and to address some of the comments by reviewers and journalists discussed in the section on *American Dirt*, particularly relating to who can write such stories. The acclaimed memoir *Unforgetting: A Memoir of Family, Migration, Gangs, and Revolution in the Americas* (2020) by Roberto Lovato ticks many of the boxes required of a migration narrative. As Ignacio M. Sánchez-Prado (2021: 378) argues, a lot of "books about migration are developed formally and commercially through emotional appeal, mostly in the form of an autobiographical narrative". This statement is made in contrast to Cummins's novel, which "aptly cannibalizes this mode of narrative, whitewashing key racial and political elements" (ibid.).

Remembering Gabriel Panuco-Mercado's (2020: 218) words are also central, as he states that Jeanine Cummins is not the right person to write the story at hand. Instead, he suggests that such texts should be written by "someone who has lived through this crisis—a survivor whose narrative is based on their own experiences, the most indelible form of research". Therefore, Lovato's memoir works as a worthwhile counterpoint to Cummins's novel, although any explicit comparison between the texts is bound to be unfair to some extent. Due to the representational demands on migration stories, this is still a topic that needs to be addressed, and Lovato's memoir is based on personal experiences and travels, as well as

meetings with migrants from various layers of society. Further, where *American Dirt* was met with criticism, *Unforgetting* has received considerable praise for its portrayal of migration and gangs in a Salvadoran context in particular.

Daniel Hernandez (2020) calls the memoir a "panoptic personal narrative" and defines Lovato as a "justice-driven journalist and organizer" whose writing expresses "reportorial care and a soul-stabbing sense of scrutiny". Hernandez also reports that there is an explicit connection between *American Dirt* and Lovato, as Lovato is co-founder of #DignidadLiteraria (n.d.) (another founder is Myriam Gurba; "#DignidadLiteraria Press Conference") which is defined as a "coalition that forms in response to the controversy around the new novel *American Dirt*" (Aratani 2020). Aratani (2020) cotes Lovato, who states that he knows "what it is like to see children fleeing terror have their tender skin shredded by barbed wire". Lovato is thus reported as emphasizing his own personal experience, and the marketing of *American Dirt* is seen as insensitive.

In another piece written by Gwen Aviles (2020) about the coalition's meeting with the publisher of the novel *American Dirt*, Lovato is reported as having said the following:

> "The Latinx community is on its way to entering the national conversation of the United States. Not just in publishing, but in media, in Sunday talk shows, in all the venues in Hollywood that we're excluded from systematically by racism," writer and journalist Roberto Lovato said. "This is not about Jeanine Cummins; this is about us."

The statement underlines the importance of having lived through the experiences one writes about, and about being allowed to represent one's own community in a wider sense. The educational purpose of Lovato's memoir is also touched upon, a topic which gained attention in the context of Cummins's novel as well, as Hernandez (2020) argues that the book is "a desperately needed corrective" in terms of how Salvadoran migrants are often represented. Further, the book also has a political purpose according to Freddy Jesse Izaguirre (2021): "Immigrant rights activists have already expressed their disappointment with the incoming Biden administration announcing it would not roll back Trump-era immigration policy as previously promised. Lovato has seen it all before". Thus, Cummins is seen as appropriating the suffering and struggle of migrants, the lives of people with whom she has no personal connection, whereas

Lovato is seen as offering a representation of El Salvador and its migrants in the USA that brings redemption and recognition. Izaguirre (2021), of Salvadoran origin himself according to the piece he has written, goes even further: "Is it possible for one book to hold the heartache of a whole people? Probably not. But through *Unforgetting*, Lovato achieves something far more noble: he illuminates our path towards healing". The words are relevant, as Cummins is seen as merely deepening the plight of Latinx migrants, not having produced any definitive story of migration, whereas Lovato may potentially have written a memoir that captures the pain of a people.

Lovato's memoir *Unforgetting* is here read as a portrayal and representation of migration, and the section asks what makes it authentic and how this impacts the narrative. *American Dirt* is fictional and does not claim to be anything else, yet this memoir is seen as partly attempting reportage by its reviewers. The two texts thus belong to different genres, but where the novel was met with severe backlash for its representation of migration and perceived appropriation of the struggle, Lovato is seen as redeeming his nation of origin, bringing justice and scrutiny not only to how El Salvador has been portrayed in the USA but also to American politics of migration.

A brief recap of the history of El Salvador and the country's relationship with the United States does not do justice to the complex entanglements between the two nations, yet some form of introduction and background to Lovato's memoir may be necessary, although Lovato himself also fills in a lot of the gaps. Sonja Wolf (2017: 1) writes that "El Salvador's democracy remains fragile", whereas Erik Ching (2016: 24) argues that Salvadorans themselves are trying "to make sense of their civil war". The comments indicate a nation still in the process of finding its bearings, particularly due to difficult decades in recent history. Ching (2016: 28) outlines Salvadoran economic history and the importance of coffee, becoming a country "typified by authoritarian politics and a highly exclusive economy" (ibid., 31).

Amelia Hoover Green (2018: 66) explains that by the time the civil war began in 1981, "state violence had already killed thousands of noncombatants". A counterforce to state forces was FMLN, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, "a coalition of five armed organizations" with a background in Communism. Ching (2016: 44) reports that until 1983, the guerrilla forces were somewhat successful in their efforts, but then the American government under Reagan increased its support for the state forces. The war carried on into the early 1990s, when other world political

events interfered, such as the ending of the Cold War and the Sandinistas of Nicaragua losing elections, leading to a peace deal with the help of the United Nations in 1992 (Ching 2016: 48). Patrick J. McNamara (2017) addresses the situation and prevalence of gangs in El Salvador, arguing that the civil war enabled gangs to gain more influence (p. 4). In terms of migration, Susan Bibler (2007: 7) asserts that large numbers of Salvadorans moved to the United States during the civil war, and that the US took a strict stance against them, many of whom moved through irregular means (ibid., p. 8).

Migration emerges in other research as well, and Ching (2016: 50) writes that since the war, there has been pessimism in El Salvador, for example due to high crime rates and a major presence of gangs, leaving young men in particular with few other options than leaving the country or becoming a gang member. The comment connects directly with Lovato's memoir as well, to which the section will soon turn. Wolf (2017: 2) confirms these points, stating that "large-scale out-migration" provides massive economic support for Salvadorans at home, "rather than government policies", and that crime is a major issue. She also refers to street gangs, so-called pandillas or maras, the culture of which transferred to the United States as a result of migration. Eventually many of these were returned to El Salvador, as reported by McNamara (2017: 4–5). These deported gang members who arrived back in El Salvador, some of whom had lived in the United States since early childhood, were then left to their own devices (ibid.).

Lovato, too, opens his memoir with a comment on gangs, and states that their story "remains hidden, buried in half-truths and myth in a labyrinth of intersecting underworlds—criminal and political, revolutionary and reactionary, psychological and cultural" (2020: xviii). Their history is thus, according to Lovato, hitherto unexamined and ignored. He advocates a view of El Salvador that stretches beyond the current moment, and one which is entrenched in local connections, but which remains firmly embedded in American contexts as well (2020: xxii). Further, Lovato makes the struggle for recognition personal: "I'm the son of Salvadorans, so the ongoing humanitarian crisis of violence, perpetual war, and mass migration is, before anything else, personal" (ibid.). The problem he addresses seems to be connected with stories, with those that are told and, more importantly, with those that are not. Lovato outlines the purpose of his book, attempting to put together "intimate histories" (ibid.) during his travels throughout El Salvador and the US, meeting people who have

fled various locations in Central America, and examining American migration policies in order to uncover the "unstoried" (2020: xxiii). This relates to the title of the memoir, "unforgetting", which Lovato discusses in personal terms as an act of reversing and counteracting the "silent dismemberment" (xxiv) he, too, has undergone. The people he meets and whose stories he pieces together are told in tandem with autobiographical accounts of his own life, a pattern that is present in several of the memoirs examined in this book. The autobiographical is used to provide legitimacy and to create a framework for the stories of other people that weave together. This kind of personal journalism brings together bearing witness and advocacy writing with the autobiographical. As David W. Hill (2019: 28) observes, "bearing witness must do more moral work than mere observation or recognition if we are to say that contemporary media have brought about any sort of useful change in the way that we exist in relation to suffering". This moral work is manifested in Lovato's memoir and in many other of the texts examined in this book. Lovato even explicitly states that his purpose is to weave together "parts of our collective story with my individual one" in order to make an impact on how migrants are treated (2020: 46). The advocacy dimension is thus made explicit.

One of Lovato's trips takes him to a detention centre in Texas in 2015, "a place the US government takes young noncitizen souls to be forgotten" (2020: 14). Lovato recounts meeting Elena and David, a mother and her young son, who travelled on La Bestia to get to the US (2020: 18). Lovato recounts returning to El Salvador in order to "understand violence" in the country (ibid.), blaming some of it on the so-called "mano dura" policy which clamped down hard on crime, profiling people based on tattoos and other visible markers, "increasing incarceration and distrust of the police" according to Lovato (2020: 48). Wolf (2017: 3) confirms this policy, writing that it was implemented in 2003, evoking criticism of the "abuses it sanctioned" as well as the lack of measures to provide alternatives for those involved with gangs, calling the policy a "punitive, populist move" (2017: 4). Wolf argues that the only tangible way to address gang activity is to solve "the social marginalization that leads youth into gangs" (ibid.). Lovato seems to be in agreement with Wolf, stating that the actual root cause is "poverty and marginalization" (Lovato 2020: 48). The indication is therefore that gangs fill a void, but the gender issue is not discussed in detail. Lovato's exploration of violence in his country of origin remains further entrenched in masculinity as he states that the real culprits, "the most destructive gangsters", are men "in suits" who acquire

protection "by even more violent gangsters in military uniforms" (2020: 55).

The brutal violence of both past and present is revisited in a chapter in which Lovato travels with a convoy to do forensic recovery of bodies dumped in mass a grave (2020: 136–139). Eventually, the forensic unit leaves, and Lovato is left with the police forces who provided protection for the trip. The lawyer from the attorney general's office suddenly asks Lovato to erase all photos and notes he made during the trip, causing Lovato to feel shocked and angry: "Like absent or abusive fathers, the political parties, governments, and countries we grew up with, and even loved, often end up hurting and forsaking us" (2020: 141). The forensic unit IML, Instituto de Medicina Legal, is revisited in a later chapter where Lovato reports its role for migration, writing that the unit works together with American colleagues to "investigate the horrific desert dehydration deaths and the drownings of migrants in the Río Grande and other rivers crossing the migration journey" (2020: 172–173). Upon vising the so-called "bone room" where the remains of people are kept, Lovato (2020: 177) observes that there are boxes side by side in the room with remains of people killed in a mass killing in 1981, victims of gang violence from 2015, as well as of those who died trying to cross into the United States; "those left behind and then returned from the great journey to El Norte. Hundreds of thousands of bones lie waiting to speak". In these passages, Lovato weaves together violence of the civil war with gang violence in more contemporary times, as well as with the plight of migrants attempting to travel to the United States.

The importance of speaking thus attaches not only to Lovato's personal history and the brutal history of El Salvador, but also to the bones themselves, the remains of the dead. Shari Eppel (2014: 406), whose work involves exhumations and reburials of people killed in Matabeleland in Zimbabwe in the 1980s, argues that "[i]n order for the bones to 'speak,' to reclaim historical memory of the massacres at the local level, the exhumations needed to be done expertly so that events at the time of death could be established, as well as the identity of the deceased". While Eppel speaks from a context far removed from El Salvador, she also observes that in the last few decades, "reburials for humanitarian and justice purposes have been carried out in more than 30 postconflict countries" (p. 405). The "unstoried" in Lovato's memoir come to encompass the remains of people whose fates are still to be uncovered and documented. Lovato makes a connection between politics and the private when stating that in

order to figure out the "fragments of Salvadoran death and its effects", people will have to get involved beyond politics, on a personal level (2020: 179). Lovato's memoir in itself represents such personal investment, not just in the reporting it does for the purpose of "unforgetting" Salvadoran history, but also in terms of his own family.

The memoir contains chapters that recount the childhood of Lovato's father, as well as glimpses from Lovato's youth and the complex relationship he had with his father. Lovato's father was born to a wealthy man who did not acknowledge him as his son (2020: 37), a topic which could not be openly addressed in his childhood (2020: 197). The story of Ramón is told over the course of several chapters, moving first to Mexico, and then to the US in his late twenties (2020: 229) where he reconnected with the woman who was to become Lovato's mother (p. 231). Lovato's travels to find out more about his own family eventually takes him to his father's hometown where he finds out that his grandfather, who made his father illegitimate, took part in La Matanza (2020: 257), which is outlined in more detail by Ching (2016: 29), who writes that the massacre occurred in 1932, affecting also the hometown of Lovato's father. There was a rebellion by peasants, who "gained control over six towns, killed approximately one hundred people, and caused varying amounts of economic damage". The actual massacre took place when the military responded to the events, killing thousands of people (ibid.). Eventually asking his father about the massacre in 2000, Ramón tells him what he remembers, having witnessed some of the mass killings himself (2020: 270).

The moment Lovato's father opens up to the author becomes pivotal, tying together personal and collective history, personal and collective silencing (2020: 272). In the epilogue, Lovato further ponders these connections, noting that his father's memories "were lost for decades", like "the many Salvadoran skeletons lying scattered and unstoried all over the south-western part of the North American continent" (2020: 297). The memoir can therefore be seen as an attempt to story personal life, the life of his immediate family, as well as to bring to light the lives of all those people whose stories remain untold. Herein lies a central difference when compared to Cummins's novel, and it is one which may explain some of the criticism against it: *Unforgetting* speaks of the stories still buried, often along with bones, sometimes on a personal level within families, and sometimes on a collective level within national histories, whereas the fictional novel by Cummins introduces a fictional family, a fictional tragedy, and a fictional trek across the Mexico-US border. The novel does not

bring secrets into light, nor does it voice silences. In contexts where painful pasts still have not been fully recognized and acknowledged, the excavation in time and memory performed by Lovato is given precedence over the purely fictional, educational, or simply entertaining.

Conclusion: Politics of Representation

The conflicting views presented with regard to *American Dirt* and *Unforgetting*, two very different representations of migration that also represent different literary forms and genres, highlight some of the challenges involved with analysing such writing. The question of readership inevitably arises in this context and for whom such advocacy is intended, by writers and scholars alike. Where *American Dirt* has been criticized for its educational efforts, *Unforgetting* is unlikely to be met with similar backlash and remains protected by the real-life connection between the stories told and the author himself. It bears keeping in mind in this context that the debate and controversy that arose with regard to *American Dirt* is not just about migrants being seen as misrepresented in Cummins's fictional story, but also about Latinx writers not being represented enough by international publishing houses, as also argued by the movement #DignidadLiteraria of which Lovato is a founding member. The problem with representation that stretches beyond characters of individual stories is undoubtedly a massive problem Cummins cannot be held personally responsible for, although she of course comes to represent the problem with her enormously successful novel, a success that is not bestowed on all writers. The allegations and accusations about appropriation of migrants' suffering and of drawing on the writing of Latinx writers who have not received considerable international attention for their texts is a more complicated issue to deal with, as is the question of empathy of the wrong kind.

Literature with a specific political purpose would often be writing that advocates for something, and in the case of the material in this book, for example for humane treatment of migrants and for recognition of their struggles. The political purpose can also go the other way, encouraging readers to look at themselves and their societies. In order for literature to generate empathy, it need not be explicitly political. It need not be advocacy writing, but can exist on a level of story, emotion, and identification. Of all the characters in *American Dirt*, it is probably not Lydia herself who generates the most empathy. The two sisters who join Lydia and Luca in their journey through Mexico and across the border represent the

atrocities particularly young women may face, the sexual harassment and outright assault that forms a part of undocumented experience for countless people of all genders. Their ride on La Bestia is more believable than Lydia's travels as a Mexican woman. Children on the move without their parents also get their share of attention in Cummins's story. Empathy is "slippery", argues Glenda R. Carpio (2023: 11), who observes that contemporary "immigrant fiction […] tends to rely on empathy to represent immigrants as people worthy of allyship" (ibid., 12). *American Dirt* presents an example of such writing, and also of the potential shortcomings of educational and transformational purposes in literary texts.

Unforgetting, too, reveals a complex relationship with empathy as the author addresses his own troubled youth, and through complex characters such as Isaias, his driver in El Salvador who turns out to have been in the special forces (2020: 241). The memoir addresses the layers of hidden secrets and silences that permeate Salvadoran society, both in El Salvador and elsewhere. Instead of asking for empathy in any explicit way, Lovato seems to be advocating for truth, for visibility, and recognition of the atrocities that have taken place throughout decades, almost an entire century, if taking the massacre in 1932 as some kind of starting point. None of the characters introduced in the memoir are simple or straightforward, and many appear to have a number of layers that sometimes compete with one another, perhaps excluding the people he meets at the detention centre at the very beginning of the text. The innocence of children is depicted as ruined, as represented in the story of Daniel as well as in relation to Ramón, Lovato's own father, who became eyewitness to the killings in 1932.

Empathy gains a more urgent meaning in *Unforgetting*, particularly in terms of its descriptions of violence and silencing, as well as the detention centres Lovato visits. He was born in the United States and is thus not representing a personal migrant experience, but he is of Salvadoran origin and deeply embedded in that community, also through his work with gangs according to the memoir. His authority and first-hand knowledge are considerable, and he can be seen as exactly the kind of writer several of the reviewers and critics cited in the context of *American Dirt* called for: someone who has personal experience of the events recounted and is involved in questions of migration. It bears keeping in mind that the primary issue here in relation to Cummins's novel seems to be that the problem is not just connected to the actual story produced and fictionalized, but to how it is received and represented by publishing companies,

megastars such as Oprah Winfrey, and critics, reviewers, and other authors. The characters represented in *American Dirt* may not be the main issue, but the way the novel itself is represented in a wider context. There are thousands of novels, short stories, and autobiographical accounts out there that have not received the attention they deserve. The question still is whether they should be given attention for their advocacy purposes or their aesthetic qualities.

Millions of people have bought and read the novel by Cummins, which is indicative of the impact it has had, whether or not it is political or aesthetic or neither. *Unforgetting* has received far more positive attention, representing the kind of writing of migration that critics call for. The literary market is not fair, nor do publishing companies work solely from an advocacy perspective. Books inevitably need to sell in order to be profitable, preferably in great numbers. Where *American Dirt* fails in the advocacy department, it is a department in which *Unforgetting* excels. The role of Oprah Winfrey remerges, as a massively important and influential person with the power to direct readers to certain works. The backlash against *American Dirt* suggests that more diversity and variety is urgently called for, and that fair and just representation remains at the core of these issues.

The role of literature in political contexts resurfaces throughout the chapters in this book. Who gets to write on what topics is a question that cannot be given a straightforward answer, but which still needs to be addressed. Eventually, a careful conclusion can be made that books such as Lovato's partly personal, partly political, excavation of the histories and memories of violence fills in the gaps of history, of the "unstoried" and of the silences that countless people live with, unable or unwilling to disclose what they have seen and lived through. In such contexts, no fictional novel can ever reach the same importance or accolade that Lovato's memoir does, investigating decades of Salvadoran violence and trying to fit together pieces of the past. Nonfiction comes before fiction, and insider perspectives before any interpretations or representations from the outside. The playing field is not levelled, not all (hi)stories gain the same kind of attention, and not all writers the same kind of fame and recognition. This is an observation that is relevant for all chapters in this book. Stories of migration do not only need to be examined in terms of the experiences and realities, fictional or not, they represent, but also with regard to forces behind them.

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CHAPTER 3

Aspirations and Expectations

Hopes and dreams attach to the migrant condition in multiple ways, and not just to the experiences of migrants but to human existence as a whole. This chapter looks at texts that address the aspirations and expectations of migrants in a variety of contexts, in both autobiographical and fictional registers. The aspirations of migrants give rise to multiple narratives, for example the idea of the deserving migrant who has carried out the work and toil required in order to earn their place in society: learned the language, got an education and a job, become taxpayers, and adapted to local traditions and practices. Expectations in this chapter come to encompass not just the expectations of migrants relocating to new homes but also of receiving societies. Aspirations also refer to migrants who seek better prospects elsewhere. The chapter examines what efforts and sacrifices are required of the migrant in order to achieve their dreams, and also what limitations and restrictions emerge due to expectations of surrounding societies and extended families.

This chapter first looks at two essay collections consisting of autobiographical accounts of migration: *The Good Immigrant* (2017; originally published in 2016) and *The Good Immigrant USA* (2020; originally published in 2019). The first includes texts produced in British contexts and the other, as the title suggests, in an American setting. The essays reveal multifaceted experiences of inclusion and exclusion, of hard work and ambitions, sometimes fulfilled and sometimes causing disappointment. The titles of the collections reveal complex forces at play: the 'good'

L. Englund, *Storying Contemporary Migration*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-62003-4_3

immigrant is represented as encountering prejudice and stereotyping along the way, caught between aspirations and expectations on all sides, many of which are more limiting than encouraging. The essays have been written by writers, journalists, actors, film directors, and other people in the cultural sphere. The essays can thus be seen as having been produced by people of certain privilege, who have the cultural capital to process and write down their experiences of living as the "other" in the UK or the United States. The essays provide views of the so-called glass ceiling, the more or less invisible barriers to career development and personal ambitions. They also touch upon the topic of being pigeonholed for example as actors or writers and expected to address certain experiences from particular perspectives.

The second part of this chapter examines the novel *Behold the Dreamers* (2017; originally published in 2016) by Imbolo Mbue, which tells the story of Neni and Jende, a Cameroonian couple who have relocated to New York and work hard to make ends meet and to gain more permanent immigrant status. The novel was selected for Oprah's Book Club (Mzezeva 2017), just like *American Dirt*, and, therefore, provides an interesting counterpoint in this chapter as a celebrated novel that has received positive reviews, as opposed to the discussion in the previous chapter which dealt with the backlash *American Dirt* has faced. The lives of Jende and Neni become intertwined with those of Clark and Cindy, who are very wealthy, living in an apartment in New York and spending vacations in the Hamptons. Clark works for the Lehman Brothers, a firm that came apart during the recession that began in 2008. Aspirations and expectations thus concern primarily the lives of Jende and Neni, who work hard to get by and provide for their children, but also in relation to Clark and Cindy, whose attitudes towards Jende and Neni often reveal prejudice and condescension.

All three texts address identity construction in multiple ways, particularly from a perspective of performativity. Several of the authors in the two essay collections address the performance that comes with ethnic or racial identity, giving it an intergenerational dimension as many writers address visiting extended families or trying to live up to parental demands. Mbue's novel offers more of a stereotypical dichotomy, of the struggling African migrant without legal residence permit, versus his wealthy, somewhat ignorant employer. Judith Butler, famous for her seminal work *Gender Trouble*, originally published in 1990, developed her theory of performativity based on the idea that what we are, our bodies and identities, need to be understood in terms of the culture in which we act, and which norms impact our lives. James Loxley (2007: 118), in his examination of

performativity in Butlerian terms, argues that the things we do "are not expressions of some prior identity, or the things done by an agent that is what it is prior to its actions, but the very means by which we come to be what we are". Reading *Behold the Dreamers* from such a perspective is relevant as the novel is obviously fictional, but it becomes a representation of the performance of ethnicity, class, and financial status. As Bettina Hofmann and Monika Mueller (2017: 4) argue, "identity is non-essential and culturally constructed by the discourses that a society uses to make sense of itself and the world at large". This chapter examines how expectations and aspirations in the essay collections as well as the novel relate to identity performed by the writers, characters, and other people surrounding them in the stories told.

Breaking the Glass Ceiling in *the Good Immigrant* and *the Good Immigrant USA*

The two essay collections in focus present experiences of migration and the immigrant condition from British and American contexts in essays written by a number of different writers. Several of the essays build on notions of defiance, as they not only speak against racism and discrimination but also criticize any celebratory or simplistic ideals of cosmopolitanism. In Kwame Anthony Appiah's (2006) terms, cosmopolitanism emerges from coexistence and engagement but does not necessarily require consensus. These ideas are represented in many of the essays in the two collections, for example in terms of seeing immigration as retribution. Some essays focus on the notion of living unapologetically, or on the experience of having nothing to lose. The undercurrent of defiance present in many essays speaks to the need for dialogue between individuals, institutions, and societies as a whole, and is noteworthy from a perspective of performativity as well. As Kay Deux (2018: 40) argues, ethnic and racial identity shift over time and become entrenched in "the norms and practices of a society, as well as internalized in those who reside in the society". Several of the essays in the two collections indicate that identities tend to be require conscious efforts in order to shift.

The Good Immigrant consists of 21 essays written by people with immigrant backgrounds living in the UK. Most of the contributors are professional writers in some capacity. The stories revolve around experiences of racialization and minoritization, and family histories of migration. Nikesh Shukla (2017: n.p.), author and screenwriter, is the editor of the collection

and he explains in the Editor's Note that "For while I and the 20 other writers included in this book don't want to just write about race, nor do we only write about race, it felt imperative […] that we create this document: a document of what it means to be a person of colour now. Because we're done justifying our place at the table." He calls the essays "beautiful, powerful, unapologetic."

In the second collection, *The Good Immigrant USA*, the editors Nikesh Shukla and Chimene Suleyman (2020: n.p.) explain that the title of first collection from the British context was "a response to the narrative that immigrants are 'bad' by default until they prove themselves otherwise. […] We wanted to humanize immigrants, let them tell their own stories and finally be in charge of their own narrative." The second collection therefore speaks to similar aims, focusing more explicitly on the immigrant condition in USA and bringing attention to "a whole world of experience that is too often hidden from view. The time has come to reclaim the narrative" (Suleyman and Shukla 2020: n.p.). The expectations and aspirations addressed in the two essay collections thus have to do with claiming centre stage as migrants or individuals whose parents or relatives migrated, from myriad backgrounds and with varied, complex lives. The expectations narrated emerge not only from the people themselves whose lives are in focus in the essays, but also from those surrounding them. Parents, extended families, communities in new and old homes, may have expectations on the essayists. A lot of the expectations and aspirations have to do with upward mobility, with educational and financial success, but sometimes more subtle desires are emphasized.

"The Chinese in the UK have been called the 'hidden' or 'invisible' community, given that we are perceived as ostensibly successful, assimilated into British society and self-reliant. In America, we're called 'the model minority'", writes Wei Ming Kam (2017: 84–85) in her essay titled "Beyond 'Good' Immigrants". The passage reveals expectations imposed on Chinese immigrants, confirmed in research for example by Min Zhou (2014: 1172), who explains that assimilation has traditionally meant that immigrants "become more or less the same as those in the society's mainstream". Asian Americans, according to Zhou (2014: 1173), have "done as well at school and work as whites, and some members have achieved full assimilation by marrying whites". Yet, Chinese Americans remain racialized (ibid.). These problems are identified by Kam, who asserts that people of Chinese origin in the UK do not have a high level of engagement in politics (2017: 87).

Kam interviews British people of Chinese origin who talk of their experiences living in the UK and the expectations they encounter, but also the restricted spaces in which they are supposed to exist. One person she talks to states that she is expected to be a "good worker" due to stereotypes about people of Chinese origin (Kam 2017: 92), and the idea of a "model minority" emerges in these lines, clashing with limited opportunities, which are explicitly dealt with in another interview with Paul Courtenay Hyu, a British actor: "'We pay our taxes, we deserve something, it's only fair. We pay our fucking BBC licence, we deserve to see somebody on *EastEnders*!" (Kam 2017: 94). The passage addresses representation and what kind of families are portrayed for example on TV, yet it is not just about being represented but also how such representation is performed, in this case, quite literally on TV. Kam states that Hyu's comment is familiar and addresses the lack of representation that is not based in stereotypes (Kam 2017: 95). The lack of representation on British TV has been noted in research as well (see Malik and Newton 2017). Stereotyping involves expectations imposed from the outside, with Kam arguing that "we never get to be complex individuals. Our defining characteristic is generally our foreignness. […] Being a model minority is code for being on perpetual probation" (ibid.). Thus, the indication is that acceptance is only partial and conditional, as long as expectations about the supposed hardworking nature of people of Chinese origin are met. John Clammer (2017: 30) observes that ethnic identity is "an aspect of 'performed' behaviour" as it is represented in multiple ways "from clothes, through music to jokes". The comment speaks of how identity is performed by a person to reinforce identity, yet the essays examined testify to experiences that exclude and discriminate.

A more sinister note on exclusion and expectations is presented by Riz Ahmed in his essay "Airports and Auditions", in which he recounts experiences relating to his profession as actor and the obstacles with which he is confronted, sometimes literally when travelling, in terms of his Pakistani background. Ahmed (2017: 160) describes the various stages of the ways in which ethnic minorities are depicted, starting with "the two-dimensional stereotype—the minicab driver/terrorist/cornershop owner", speaking to negative expectations among people he encounters. Kam's model minority is juxtaposed here, emphasizing different expectations placed on different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. The third stage is a space where "I'm not a terror suspect, nor a victim of forced marriage. In the Promised Land, my name might even be Dave" (ibid.). This promised land indicates

a space free from categorisation and stands in contrast to the profiling at airports, carried out by security officials. Ahmed states that reaching such a level of inclusion is difficult if not impossible in the UK. He observes that British society is essentially a place of "vibrant multi-culturalism", yet "the myth we export is an all-white world of Lords and Ladies" (2017: 162), whereas the United States create a myth of the country as being a "racial melting pot", while the reality is "pretty segregated" (ibid.). These "myths", narratives that are circulated and reinforced, also observed by researchers (about the myth of Americanism, see Dorsey 2007; about the continued white status quo in Britain, see Jackson 2017), reveal two nations in which realities clash with constructs of the melting pot or multiculturalism. The difference perceived by Ahmed is that Britain is diverse yet still promotes (wealthy) whiteness as the norm, whereas the US promotes diversity while remaining racially and ethnically divided. Eventually, Ahmed recounts relocating to the United States, thinking it may be easier for someone with his ethnic background, yet here too he faces obstacles with regard to obtaining a visa (Ahmed 2017: 166), as well as being continuously stopped at airports (ibid., 167–168). Kam's interviews touch upon the same issue, as she argues that there is a "steady stream of British black actors honing their potential in America" (Kam 2017: 93). The indication by both Kam and Ahmed is that for professional people such as themselves, the United States offer more opportunities.

Eventually, the travels to America involve extensive screening and interviews at airports, with "the experience of being typecast, and when that happens enough, you internalise the role written for you by others" (Ahmed 2017: 166). Being "Dave" is thus not possible due to the stereotyping to which Ahmed is subjected, revealing the exclusionary side of the so-called good immigrant category. Ahmed states that even though he eventually got an American visa and was hired for roles, many people like him were still held back at airports (p. 167). He recounts travelling frequently from Heathrow and, during one trip, being searched by "a young Muslim boy" who mentioned that he, too, was searched every time he travelled: "It was the perfect encapsulation of the minority's shifting and divided self, forced to internalise the limitations imposed on us just to get by, on the wrong side of the velvet rope even when (maybe *especially* when) you're on the right side of it" (Ahmed 2017: 168; italics in the original). The comment thus seems to indicate that outside expectations imposed on people with immigrant backgrounds or belonging to ethnic

minorities are in fact limitations, as expressed by Ahmed, intended to rein people in. The obstacles presented by outside expectations are outlined here by both Kam and Ahmed in two separate contexts. The airport security officer embodies the paradox of the velvet rope, perpetually on the wrong side even when working to serve and protect a community that continues to differentiate between its citizens, despite keeping up appearances in terms of diversity.

Another essay deals with similar issues as Ahmed's, written by Miss L, whose essay is titled "The Wife of a Terrorist" and addresses the problems and perils of typecasting and the different stages that Ahmed refers to. The essay begins with a session at drama school, where "we are now going to be told how the world would be seeing us" (Miss L 2017: 198). The drama instructor tells Miss L that her profile is suitable for "terrorist", and then makes it more specific: "The wife of a terrorist" (p. 199). Miss L laments the lack of versatility in terms of how she is seen, and then concludes that the verdict by the drama instructor "is down to the colour of my skin and my slightly unpronounceable name" (p. 201). The characterization by the instructor is represented as having little to do with Miss L's actual acting skills, but merely her appearance. Performance and performativity intertwine here in interesting ways as acting involves performing a character to audiences, yet the performance expected of Miss L as an actor connects with how she is categorized due to her ethnic background. Lisa Bode (2017: 76) observes in her study of popular cinema that many white actors have received praise and even awards for performing characters that somehow differ from their own personas, whereas actors "defined by their otherness" have not been recognized to the same degree, and when it rarely happens, "they are generally perceived as playing a version of themselves". Bode (2017: 77) acknowledges that performers of colour are often limited to playing roles that reflect their ethnicity.

Miss L, too, mentions the pull of the United States where "ethnic actors […] have a chance of not being elbowed out by corsets and fancy hats" (p. 202). America is thus again presented as a place of more versatility and opportunities, as opposed to Britain which Riz Ahmed defined in terms of "an all-white world of Lords and Ladies" (2017: 162), which is echoed in Miss L's statement about "corsets and fancy hats". Miss L goes on to recount experiences of being typecast. The essay collection was first published in 2016, when Black Lives Matter had already gained momentum in the United States, raising awareness and working for justice for

people of colour. Contrasts between British and American histories of race and racism are here relevant, as British colonial history has shaped the nation in terms of its demography, whereas American society was transformed by the civil rights struggle in the mid-twentieth century. Views of Britain as the "old" country and America as the "new" emerge to some extent in the essays so far examined that see America as providing more opportunities for people of varied backgrounds. As David Michael Smith (2012: 388) notes, national myths "provide an idealized representation of the nation—its membership, its defining features, its fundamental values and principles". Smith connects such representations with elite groups who perpetuate them, and Britain as a place of lords and ladies, hats and corsets, indicates that class divides still exist, and that immigration to Britain has complicated national identity in ways that have yet to be fully recognized.

To return to typecasting and pigeonholing, experiences recounted by Miss L involve being cast for roles of women in arranged marriages (p. 204), or other subservient positions, to which Miss L comments that many roles concern portraying women from the Middle East in precarious situations from which they may be trying to escape (ibid.). However, despite the stereotypes and prejudices attached to such roles, Miss L ends her essay with the statement that representation does not only involve actors but the people who are being characterised, "making sure their stories are told" (p. 207). To that extent, pigeonholing or typecasting serves a purpose as well, bringing visibility to people whose stories may have gone unnoticed before. Being on the right side of the velvet rope, as expressed by Ahmed, is exemplified in Miss L's essay as well, albeit on different terms. The velvet rope, as divider and connector, brings people from certain ethnic groups and immigrant backgrounds together, and their precarious lives are brought to light by actors such as Ahmed and Miss L who sometimes may be expected to perform not only stereotypical and prejudiced ideas of said groups, but also society as a whole. Through typecasting and pigeonholing, representation becomes limited, performances narrow, and the "Promised Land" a mere utopia. Expectations of surrounding society of what roles people from certain backgrounds can and should perform clash with aspirations of actors themselves, who may be hoping to break free from constricting boundaries.

Boundaries are present in other ways in Musa Okwonga's essay "The Ungrateful Country", in which the author begins with the statement that as a young boy growing up in Britain, his childhood and youth were all

about being grateful (Okwonga 2017: 224). This need to be grateful involved "an eagerness to please" Britain (ibid.), suggesting expectations at play. Okwonga recounts his experiences at prep school, being one of four sons of his widowed doctor mother who expected him to be "smart, dutiful and responsible" (Okwonga 2017: 225). Expectations thus emerge both from within the family and from the outside. Okwonga writes about setting out to be successful in his studies, in order to "help erode some of our society's firmest prejudices" (ibid.). The comment indicates taking personal responsibility for counteracting prejudice, for performing ethnic identity in ways that work to change how a particular group is seen. Eventually, Okwonga attended Eton with great ambitions and aspirations. During his time at school, Stephen Lawrence was killed (Okwonga 2017: 227), exposing "the lies we told ourselves—that if we were just good little black boys and girls, that if we stayed away from the bad crowds, no harm would come to us". Lawrence, a young man of colour, was killed in a racist attack in London in 1993, but his killers were sentenced as late as nearly a decade later due to "official incompetence and denial" (Burnett 2012: 91–92). The unprovoked attack is thus seen as having brought to light the illusion that being a "good" immigrant, or "good" person of colour, does not matter in the face of profound racism, and that any labelling of migrants as good is also a discriminatory act. Further, Okwonga observes that his years at Eton made him realise that he was not able to change what his friends and others thought of people of colour. He merely "became the exception that proved the rule" (Okwonga 2017: 228). The symbolical velvet rope emerges again, dividing migrants into those who are deserving and those who are not, and the separation becomes entrenched in race.

Okwonga expresses that his mother, too, had great expectations for him and his siblings, and parental expectations relate to ethnic identity in many ways. Rami M. K. Aly (2015: 203) examines Arab identities in London and states that parents often "reproduce idealised forms of ethnic womanhood and manhood in their children through an array of disciplines, discourses, bodily regulations and injunctions". This leads to certain heteronormative and ethnonormative expectations. While Okwonga's mother wanted her children to be clever and conscientious, the clash between expectations and aspirations within family contexts have more serious consequences in Nicole Dennis-Benn's essay "Swimmer". Dennis-Benn (2020: 17) writes about her father leaving Jamaica behind for the United States, and the author herself joined him

in her late teens: "I had left home for more or less the same reasons as he did—the ability to thrive, the desire for upward mobility—and though unlike him I didn't have children to support, I knew deep down that I'd want them with a woman". The essay thus indicates expectations and aspirations that go beyond professional and educational ones and enter a more private sphere, having to do with sexual identity and expectations thereof. More traditional expectations also emerge in the essay, having to do with education. Dennis-Benn attended community college before university, where her fellow students "were pursuing dreams of careers in nursing, physical therapy, radiology, teaching, as the head sales associate at a department store" (Dennis-Benn 2020: 18). Dennis-Benn (ibid.) calls them "sensible jobs", that enabled helping family members who were living in countries of origin and notes that she, too, was aware of the demands on immigrants to support those left behind and that this narrowed her options. Personal aspirations are thus restricted from the beginning, by the needs of those who have not migrated but remain at home, and by social and familial bonds and expectations that in this case are perhaps less culturally bound but more connected with the migrant condition in a more general sense. The connection between migration and educational choices have been studied extensively before, and one significant finding is that there tends to be a preference for science among students with migrant backgrounds, potentially in order to "circumvent potential discrimination as well as neutralizing the lack of cultural competencies that facilitate entry into creative fields or politics" (Sikora and Pokropek 2021: 5). However, Sikora and Pokropek (2021: 22) conclude in their own study that certain stereotypes relating to "science as a more merit-based achievement field" may occur, and that this may be important to families who have migrated.

The professional direction Dennis-Benn selected, or that had been selected for her, was not what she wanted. Eventually, she tells her study group that she is thinking about switching from pre-medical school to English, prompting a woman of Nigerian origin to ask what she was doing there. This serves as a reminder of her position as migrant and the expectations attached, "that any first-generation immigrant with the weight of her family on her back would kill to take my spot" (ibid.). The need to be grateful is implied in these lines, as already explicitly discussed by Okwonga. Dennis-Benn (p. 22) directly mentions parental expectations, the need to "stay afloat on our parents' dreams—the American dream. We were, after all, good immigrants". The sentiment is similar to Okwonga's essay and

addresses the aspirations of immigrants such as Dennis-Benn and others in her study circle to study certain subjects in order to meet expectations of their parents and communities in countries of origins. Not only parents and communities, but in fact their countries as a whole: "For we were supposed to be little ambassadors in training. We were supposed to make our country proud. Be good immigrants. Be great" (Dennis-Benn 2020: 23). The expression "our country" can be seen as referring to countries of origin, in terms of being "ambassadors", which indicates cultural diplomacy of sorts, building bridges between culture of origin and new societies. The term "immigrant" on the other hand can be read more in reference to the place relocated to, which is presented as expecting new citizens to be "good" and "great". The migrant is thus caught in the middle of demands from all sides.

Eventually, Dennis-Benn writes about coming out to her mother about being in a relationship with a woman, after which she was no longer welcome in her home (p. 22). The essay thus deals with the detrimental effect of expectations from within immigrant communities on individuals to "be great", and to live lives according to certain social rules, to perform not just ethnic identity but immigrant identity. Yet, it also implies certain freedom, leaving studies behind that did not feel right and choosing a life that goes against cultural traditions. When Dennis-Been became a published author, she states that even her former college friends admired her success, claiming that she was living the American dream (p. 25): "They still believed in being good immigrants, avoiding mention of me being married to a woman, focusing only on how I'd made a name for myself in America" (p. 26). The marriage to a woman is presented as not fitting into the expectations and aspirations of an immigrant, whereas writing a book does. Dennis-Benn's essay therefore speaks not only of parental expectations but of communal ones as well. These are further addressed by Priya Minhas in her essay "How not to be" (2020). She begins her essay with a list of "women who broke the rules" in various ways and eventually found themselves outside their original communities, no longer welcome (p. 52): "This is how I was raised—how *not* to be" (italics in the original). Therefore, aspirations and expectations are represented as much in terms of what is not acceptable as with regard to what is actually hoped for. Performing the "good" immigrant in Minhas's essay is tied to both ethnic identity and gender.

Minhas (2020: 53) asserts that the guideline "How Not to Be" was entrenched in the idea that she would have a life that was better than that

of her parents: "My sisters and I were supposed to be the 2.0, the reason it was all worth it. Every school photo and each certificate placed on the mantelpiece was a step toward fulfilling this promise". Whereas Okwonga indicated certain need to be grateful in his essay, Minhas's account goes further when referring to the need to meet expectations as a promise. The dreams of those who migrated before are addressed in Minhas's essay, who recounts that her grandparents migrated to Britain "with only the dream of opportunity" (p. 54). For Minhas herself and her sisters, the dream is defined as somewhat different, having more to do with "equality and assimilation" (ibid.), leading to a desire to fit into British culture. Gender emerges here as significant. The previously mentioned promises that needed to be fulfilled were not only of a merit-based nature but more gender-specific as well. Minhas writes that their bodies were the focus of scrutiny and expectations as well, as "a large part of our cultural identity rested entirely on how we used them" (p. 53). This refers to the heteronormativity mentioned by Aly (2015: 203), particularly the "bodily regulations and injunctions". These rules and regulations embarked from that which was not acceptable, such as "no sleepovers, no revealing clothes, and no boyfriends" (p. 54). Expectations from the outside enter the private sphere in terms of bodies and sexualities.

The body is met with expectations in other contexts than sexuality as well, as Minhas remembers a photo of her grandmother taken when she had recently arrived in Britain, and it shows her in short hair. Minhas writes that she initially thought the photo proved how far her grandmother had come relating to expectations put on her as a woman, but then explains that she had her hair cut "during the year she spent in transit to England in order to make her look more westernized upon arrival" (p. 59). Performing ethnic identity takes on a different dimension here, as Minhas's mother cut her hair short in order to seem more like she belonged. The passage indicates a generational continuity of cultural rules and traditions that dictate the lives of migrants spanning decades and potentially centuries. Minhas lists things she did in younger years in order to fit in, such as pierce her ears (p. 60), and trying to get rid of her accent when already living in the United States (p. 61). Being immigrant in the right way is emphasized here, and attempting to live according to perceived cultural norms of the receiving society in order to fit in. The essay thus speaks to the multiple expectations from within a person's own community, and expectations which emerge in more subtle ways such as the desire to dress and act like peers, desires which may in fact clash with

expectations of said communities. The individual is presented as caught in the crossfire between these demands and rules, even changing the way they look in order to be less of an outsider.

Living up to perceived expectations in the new home may lead to not living up to expectations connected with cultures of origin, as addressed in Walé Oyéjidé's "After migration: The once and future kings" (2020). Oyéjidé, like Minhas, lists things that would be unacceptable for a Nigerian immigrant, for example leaving one's Nigerian family behind and starting another in another country, "with a blond sweetheart and blue-eyed children who will never learn to speak your native tongue" (p. 67). The worst offense, however, would be to confess "that instead of continuing your preordained life as a doctor, lawyer, or prosperity-preaching charlatan you would rather become a stay-at-home dad, designer, and writer" (ibid.). The lines resonate with Dennis-Benn's desire to switch direction from medical school to English. Performing the Nigerian immigrant takes on a gendered dimension. This position is further explored by Oyéjidé', as he addresses the kind of man an immigrant like him is supposed to be: "For centuries, men from our hometowns strode from compound to compound—surveying their lands, their multiple wives, and the many sons whose diapers they had never even considered changing" (p. 68–69). Oyéjidé speaks of the realities that force men to change their ways but argues that mothers may still be disappointed: "Because we have no other choice, and because we would have it no other way, we nod respectfully at the pious whims of these mothers who have loved us at our very worst. Still, we defy them at every turn" (p. 70). The defiance expressed against expectations reinforces what Minhas wrote about subtle resistance against cultural norms and indicates that the change brought on by migration and living in another culture brings with it freedoms and responsibilities that need to be claimed.

The realities of undocumented migrants emerge in Oyéjidé's essay, as he recounts the stories of men he meets in Italy who have arrived from various African and Middle Eastern countries, often with the help of smugglers, travelling via dangerous routes (p. 73). To them, Oyéjidé himself becomes an embodiment of their hopes and dreams: "'How the hell did someone with your skin tone get in here… and how can we be next?!'" (p. 72). Ethnicity and race are presented as obstacles to residence permit or citizenship. Oyéjidé returns to the plight of migrants from a variety of backgrounds at the end of his essay, writing the following: "Through desert sands, we have migrated. Through neck-high waters, we have migrated.

Through invasive custom searches, and through pinhole eyelets of legalese that ensnared the millions of cousins we left behind, we have migrated" (p. 80). Eventually, these arduous travels and experiences have led to an existence in the United States that is less precarious in Oyéjidé's terms, who states that the promises made to people who migrated will be held "to account" (ibid.). The re-emergence of the word "promise" is noteworthy, as Minhas wrote about promises to parents to do better, to succeed and live lives according to parental and cultural expectations. Here, promise is attached to receiving countries, the United States in this case. A so-called second generation immigrant, the child, is therefore indebted to their parent, the one who was the first to migrate, to whom they have, metaphorically speaking, promised to succeed. On the other hand, by being accepted by a receiving country, the migrant or descendant of migrants has been promised "equality and all men breathing free" (ibid.). The comment can be connected with Ahmed's statement about the US being essentially segregated despite upholding the myth of being a melting pot and this indicates that national myths can no longer be perpetuated and controlled by elite groups alone (Smith 2012), but must become more democratic.

Whereas several of the essays examined so far speak of certain privilege, a more deprived reality is presented in Jim St. Germain's essay "Shithole Nation", where the author recounts a childhood in Haiti and growing up in Brooklyn, United States. This reality affected St. Germain, as he "transformed into whatever I needed to be to survive; I was amorphous" (p. 128). The immigrant existence becomes one of survival, less mired in expectations and aspirations from parents and more entrenched in adaptation, in becoming one with the surroundings, performing whatever aspects of ethnic and cultural identity, or stereotypes, that are needed for survival. This includes missing lunch in order to play football for social acceptance purposes: "I came from a place where a piece of bread was a luxury, but eating the free lunch now came with a social price, so I stayed hungry" (p. 129). Aspirations, in this case to be accepted by peers, thus come at a cost. Sometimes the cost is measured in actual money, as when St. Germain recounts his hustling to make money together with other young people in a similar position, stating that "we used an affinity for materialism to mask our sense of powerlessness" (p. 130–131). This lack of power is repeated in the following lines: "We were downtrodden young men, full of hopes and dreams but with no access to social capital, therefore no access to any capital" (p. 131). The lack of prospects thus becomes a catch-22, where social rules and expectations guide and inspire aspirations that are

impossible due to other social barriers. In St Germain's description of his youth, ethnicity combines with being part of a certain age group as well as male, and with class. According to Clammer (2017: 31), performance studies "identifies the ways in which ethnicity is 'performed' or expressed through various recognisable behaviours", and it also observes how identities "are in fact situational, historically varied and unstable". The situational, and temporal, perspective is here particularly important.

St. Germain compares children of more affluent backgrounds with his own and those of his peers, describing a neighbourhood not far away from his home where "many of the kids' paths were already carved out for them too. […] It was nearly impossible for the kids here to fuck it up. The streets were cleaner, and the police didn't feel like an occupying force. The 'American Dream' was the floor here, not the ceiling" (p. 136). The lines reveal the prospects available to the children growing up in more affluent areas and indicates that the level St. Germain and his peers could reach at their most successful was a mere starting point for those of better prospects. Aspirations thus become connected to origins and are seen as separate from a person's own hopes and dreams, enabled by those who provide a support system, and this is realised in St. Germain's own life, when he ends up in a group home where he finally receives support: "So many pitched in to become the vessel I desperately needed in troubled water. They believed in my potential. They invested in me" (p. 137). The passage emphasizes the relational and connected nature of ambitions and being successful, and also shatters the myth of self-madeness that attaches itself to the American dream (Cantor 2019: 1). Despite the focus on deprived backgrounds and harsh living conditions, as well as emphasizing the importance of outside help and support, St. Germain (2020: 137) acknowledges personal accountability: "The responsibility to change was mine, and I embraced it". The line, paradoxically, reconnects with self-madeness, indicating that even though help may be offered and possible to obtain, the ultimate effort must be made by the person in question. Swati Rana (2020: 30) examines the American dream in ethnic literature and argues that the dream "represents outsized personalities to whose life stories we look to enrich our own". While autobiographical writing tells the story of a real-life person, the person represented can still be seen to some extent as a character separated from the author. St Germain's American dream is all the more powerful due to the realization that he did not rise above deprivation entirely on his own, yet he needed to recognize the opportunity when it presented itself and hold on to it.

The two essay collections present expectations and aspirations from perspectives of personal hopes and dreams, societal and communal rules and traditions, as well as demands from surrounding society. As examined in the essays briefly discussed in this section, these different categories often clash and sometimes require breaking free, resisting rules that go against personal desires. As represented by the multiple writers, sometimes this resistance comes at a great cost. The dream of social upward mobility emerges in several essays as not just attached to what one can and should be, but to what one should avoid being, at all cost. Many of these obstacles presented connect to parents and those who arrived before, still guided by rules and traditions themselves as presented by Minhas. The resistance to expectations is particularly explicit in Dennis-Benn's and Oyéjidé's essays, where personal achievements and fulfilment require breaking with social rules and expectations.

The United States is presented even in the stories about Britain as the place to be for people from a variety of backgrounds, a country where possibilities exist in greater abundance and become available more widely to people with origins elsewhere. The American dream figures in more subtle ways for example in St Germain's essay about a deprived and violent youth, eventually finding the help he needed to move forward in life. In contrast, Britain is represented as excluding and stereotyping, for example by Ahmed and Miss L who both address the problem of being typecast, in drama schools, role auditions, and airports alike. They reveal some of the more sinister and deep-seated problems with racial profiling, and the smaller spaces available for those with the "wrong" looks and the "wrong" name. The good immigrant, the title of the two collections, becomes a creation of these same profiling forces, a performance with the power to provide people from various minority groups with promising careers, and the power to keep placing them in boxes and categories that limit their prospects and aspirations. The glass ceiling becomes an insurmountable obstacle, yet it never breaks spirits entirely in the essays examined, perhaps because the authors of the essays can in many ways be seen as successful, having become for example published authors, journalists, actors, or screen writers. To that extent, the ceiling has already been broken long before they embarked upon their careers. The following section offers an interesting contrast in this context, examining expectations and aspirations in a fictional, less privileged setting that juxtaposes wealth and opportunities with hopes for a better future.

Pursuing Dreams in Behold the Dreamers

Behold the Dreamers was selected for Oprah's Book Club in 2017, and in an interview conducted by Oprah Winfrey, it is revealed that the author Imbolo Mbue left Cameroon at the age of 17, from the same town from which her fictional characters originate, with a number of hopes and dreams of her own: "When I arrived, all I knew was I wanted to attend college and study hard. Beyond that I didn't really have goals. Like Jende and Neni, I wanted to make a new life in a place where there were different opportunities". Mbue lost her job during the recession, just like Jende, one of the main characters in her novel (Winfrey 2017). The novel is thus presented as having a significant real-life background, despite not being framed as autobiographical. The personal dream of making a life for oneself emerges as central in the novel, and it connects with Mbue's own life, emphasizing her authority as a writer with a migrant experience of her own. In another interview with Jeff Vasishta (2016), Mbue explains how she found inspiration for the novel after having lost her job in New York, having gone for a walk in Manhattan and seeing chauffeurs waiting for their employers, some of whom "looked like they could be African immigrants". The recession looms in the background of the novel, becoming something almost ominous as from the very beginning when Lehman Brothers is mentioned (Mbue 2017: 4). Things take a dire turn as Jende goes there for a job interview, pursuing dreams of his own. Thus, *Dreamers* is set in a specific time and place, yet its theme of migration also portrays status without proper documentation in more general terms, providing a fictional perspective on being undocumented, a theme further explored later in this book.

Mbue's novel *Behold the Dreamers* has received some scholarly attention before, with John Masterson (2020) examining it from a Marxist viewpoint, focusing on the "capitalist pressure points" (Masterson 2020: 21) that emerge in the novel, which Masterson (ibid.) sees from a perspective of economic considerations in Africa as well, concerning for example corruption. At the centre of Masterson's analysis is the financial crisis and how it was dealt with, and the fictional representation provided by Mbue. Economic realities also emerge in Naomi Nkealah's (2020) examination of women's labour in *Behold the Dreamers*, alongside other representations of migration, whereas Elizabeth Toohey (2020: 387) concentrates on the novel as a post-9/11 text, where dreams are eventually destroyed in a society that is far more racially oriented than it gives reason to believe in

the era of Barack Obama. Sara Wyman (2021: 82), for her part, examines food in the novel, arguing that Mbue "negotiates the relative value and necessity of both truth and illusion when it comes to survival for the displaced African immigrant subject". Augusta Atinuke Irele (2020: 8) offers an analysis in somewhat similar terms, arguing that the novel "calls attention to the largely ignored narratives of African migrants for whom New York, in metonymy for the country as a whole, figures as a dystopic space from which they must ultimately escape". Previous studies have thus seen the novel as a relatively bleak representation of gender-related, economic, and racial struggles for migrants in New York. Irele's observation about "largely ignored narratives of African migrants" seems misplaced, considering the enormous success of writers of African descent, most notably, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novels. Teju Cole, Taiye Selasi, Uwem Akpan and Yaa Gyasi, among many others, have also received praise and attention for their fictional writing. Imbolo Mbue can be said to belong to the same group of contemporary celebrated writers of African descent. The African migrant in America is no longer an ignored narrative but one which reaches millions of readers, wins prizes, and ultimately gets selected for Winfrey's book club. It can even be said to have become *the* narrative of writers of African origin, a literary performance of the migrant condition in its own way.

In contrast to earlier studies of the novel, this section of the chapter focuses on the aspirations and expectations of Jende and Neni, and of the people and society that surround them. Sometimes they clash, sometimes they help propel the Cameroonian immigrant couple forward, and sometimes they form an obstacle to their happiness and continued existence in New York. The novel begins with Jende Jonga attending a job interview with Clark Edwards at Lehman Brothers, and it is revealed from the start that Jende's presence in the United States is unsettled. He has applied for asylum, during the process of which he is allowed to drive and to work, having arrived in 2004, three years before the novel is set (Mbue 2017: 8). Neni, on the other hand, arrived later, only a year and a half earlier before the present moment of the novel (p. 10). Neni's friend Fatou makes fun of Neni for being so exact about her time spent in the United States, saying that "[w]hen you in America *vingt-quatre ans*, and you still poor, you no gonno count no more" (p. 11; italics in the original). The comment indicates that success in America must come within a reasonable timeframe, and that counting years in the beginning when hopes and dreams are still within reach is reasonable, but that this will no longer be the case

when time goes by, and dreams are no closer to being realised. Success does, according to Fatou, not have to be achieved in a year or two, but twenty-five with little to no progress indicates failure. Expectations and aspirations therefore come with a deadline, a best before date, potentially even an expiration date. This gives the novel a sense of urgency, something which attaches itself to the time of events as well. Nauja Kleist (2017: 10) writes in the introduction to *Hope and Uncertainty in Contemporary African Migration* that hope connects with the future. While hope, expectations and aspirations may not semantically, or more concretely as part of human life, mean the exact same things, they do relate to one another. Aspirations can be seen as including some measure of hope, a wish that things will turn out as planned.

The strict timeframe for success emerges in the context of Jende's visa situation, too. The undocumented status of the couple is a constant source of stress throughout the novel, with Jende lying at the American embassy in Yaoundé in order to secure a visa: "Who travelled to America only to return to a future of nothingness in Cameroon after a mere three months? […] They got there and stayed there until they could return home as conquerors—as green card—or American passport-bearing conquerors with pockets full of dollars and photos of a happy life" (p. 19). The lines speak explicitly of a "future of nothingness", emphasizing the difference between the futures attaching themselves to a life in America and in Cameroon. The three months allocated by the visa are not sufficient in order to fulfil aspirations, and it is presented as a given that the migrant will overstay it in order to achieve their dreams. The passage also highlights three important aspects of life in the United States as an immigrant: getting citizenship, making money, and being happy. These three dimensions of migrant expectations and aspirations are at the core of Mbue's novel and the lives of Jende and Neni, and the pillars around which the story is built.

When Jende starts his new job as chauffeur to Clark, Neni makes a calculation of how much money they will be able to save each month, ending up at "five thousand a year. Ten years, we could have enough money for down payment for a two-bedroom in Mount Vernon or Yonkers" (p. 30). The long-term plans for the future and the good fortune attached to the new job inspire Neni to sing of happiness (p. 31). The expression of joy also carries a more symbolic meaning for the novel: "Even when she sang during her chores, she was mindful of the next chore. And the one after that. Life in America had made her into someone who was always thinking and planning the next step" (p. 54). The lines are significant for two

reasons. They foreshadow events later in the novel when Neni becomes the more determined and to some extent ruthless of the two, not ready to give up on the dream to stay in New York even when it is becoming more and more unrealistic. Second, the passages indicate that the aspirations and expectations require foregoing needs and desires of the present in order to plan for the future. To that extent, Kleist's observation about hope being future-oriented is significant also for aspirations and expectations.

After Jende starts working for Clark, Clark asks him to tell him about Limbe, the city in Cameroon from which Jende and Neni moved. Jende describes it as "the best town in Africa" (p. 38). Clark asks him why he came to the United States if Limbe was so great, to which Jende responds that America offers possibilities that are not available to people like him in Limbe (p. 39). Clark reacts to the statement with the following comment: "'I'm glad you understand what an opportunity you've been given'" (p. 46). The relationship between the two men is one of great power imbalance, where Clark hires Jende not knowing the full extent of his undocumented status. Clark's comment further underlines the difference between Jende and himself in terms of financial and professional status. However, agency is represented as more complex in the novel, with the act of overstaying visas presented as a deliberate decision, a prerequisite even, in order to pursue a better life. Neni, too, represents agency, with her plans for the future and the money she and Jende are going to save. Clark's comment about the couple having been "given" an opportunity recreates expectations on migrants addressed in several sections of this book: that they must show proper humility and gratitude for having been taken in and thus "given" the chance to improve their lives. The balancing act between giving and taking is central in Mbue's novel, and Jende and Neni are not depicted as mere victims of inequality in economic and racial terms.

Despite certain agency, Jende's precarious status in terms of citizenship inevitably puts him in an inferior position, receiving notice early on in the novel that his asylum application has not been approved (p. 56): "His days in America were numbered, and there was nothing salty water running out of his eyes could do" (p. 59). The temporal dimension inserts itself again into the story, indicating from the start that it is, paradoxically, the beginning of an inevitable end. Irele (2020: 7–8) observes that migration has become an increasingly popular phenomenon in contemporary African writing, and that the narratives provide "nuance to academic and popular discourse about the West as desirable migrant utopia". The material

examined in this book agrees with such a statement, as one of the central starting points is that contemporary narratives of migration often focus their critique on the West and its shortcomings in terms of migrants and how they are treated. None of the texts in focus here see the West as a utopia, and neither do the characters in Mbue's novel. Jende's precarious sojourn in New York coincides with the Great Recession, an event which eventually upends his life too. The most difficult part of the news that he would not be allowed to stay in the US has to do with telling people at home why the family would have to return without the expected wealth (p. 60). Expectations arise not only in relation to the personal hopes and dreams of Jende himself, but also in relation to the community at home. The failed asylum application is an important backstory to the novel, and Jende's comment about his days "being numbered" clashes temporally with Neni's ten-year plan. The aspirations for the future cannot coexist with the expectation that they will be forced to leave soon. Neni comes to represent the forward-moving force, whereas Jende represents a somewhat looser attachment to their new home and the lives they have imagined for themselves.

A third person whose hopes and dreams play yet another role for the story, if only in a small way, is Liomi, Jende and Neni's son. After some trouble at school, Neni gives him a stern lecture about the expectations placed on him to do well so that he can "become somebody one day" (p. 67). Liomi's own aspirations are somewhat more modest. When Neni asks him if he wants to be a doctor or a lawyer, he tells her he wants to be a chauffeur. Neni responds by stating how important school is "for people like us. We don't do well in school, we don't have any chance in this world" (p. 68). The phrase "people like us" may refer to several things: to their status as migrants, to their status as migrants without papers, or to their ethnic identities. The narrative follows similar patterns as the essays examined in the previous section, where several authors address burdens placed on migrants to study certain subjects in order to become gainfully employed and able to help those back home, reinforcing parental and cultural expectations. Neni performs both roles, having arrived recently herself yet already making her expectations known to her son.

Race is dealt with in other contexts as well, for example when Jende discusses his situation with his lawyer, only to be reassured that the process to remove him from the United States might take a long time (p. 72–73). Temporally, the novel gains yet another dimension: the end indicated at the beginning is here mediated, and Jende is promised more time.

Eventually, Bubakar, the lawyer, advises Jende to stay away from places where he might run into the police: "The police is for the protection of white people, my brother. Maybe black women and children sometimes, but not black men. Never black men" (p. 74). The status of Jende is here attached to the lives of African Americans, going beyond his immigrant position. Mbue makes a subtle reference to police violence against people of colour, indicating that as a migrant, Jende remains unprotected in this regard as well. Bubakar's comment thus both separates and connects Jende with American society. He is a part of it on some level as a person of colour, but not of the more privileged layer. The "people like us" in Neni's comment resurfaces, emphasizing hierarchies between groups.

Jende and Neni's expectations for the future do not only encompass their son, but come, by extension, to involve their extended family as well. A clash between the expectations of relatives in Limbe and the reality of Jende in New York takes place when his brother calls him and asks for money for his children's school fees. Cindy, Clark's wife, happens to be in the car when the call comes in, and she generously provides Jende with a check of five hundred dollars (p. 84–85). The requests from home are described as constant, as "some relatives had no consideration for those who sent them money because they thought the streets of America were paved with dollar bills" (p. 86). Primus M. Tazanau (2015: 23) confirms in his research article that Cameroonians who leave their country of origin often do so for economic reasons, people who then "aspire and engage in a struggle for personal advancement while simultaneously aiming to share their successes with those who stay behind". Tazanau (p. 25) notes in interviews with migrants that those who stay behind in Cameroon expect remittances to be forthcoming from those who have left and are supposedly living better lives elsewhere. The comment by Jende about relatives at home thinking that streets are "paved with dollar bills" represents this experience, but his attitude is one of reluctance.

The generosity, or charity, of Cindy, stretches beyond the five hundred dollars she gives Jende, as Neni, now pregnant, is asked to work for Cindy during the summer in their Hamptons house. While working in the Hamptons, Neni accidentally discovers that Cindy has a problem with drugs (p. 117–119), triggering a conversation about Cindy's poor childhood. She tells Neni that Neni cannot possibly understand that experience since "[b]eing poor for you in Africa is fine. Most of you are poor over there" (p. 123). The statement reveals prejudice about Africa as one big entity, and about Africans living in perpetually deprived conditions. The

expectation of Cindy is that Neni would be from a poor family, while her childhood is in fact depicted as having been relatively well off, at least in the beginning (p. 110). *Dreamers* offers a lesson to readers, not unlike *American Dirt* although in a different context, on the hierarchical nature of American society and the prejudices that exist towards people with migrant backgrounds. In this case, the discrimination and prejudice are given a racialized and localized dimension. The distinction made between Neni and Cindy also indicates that life in "Africa" is less complex, whereas life in the United States is more demanding, requiring a certain level of wealth and comfort.

Toohey (2020: 395) acknowledges the presence of white saviours in the novel, focusing on Natasha, a pastor who later attempts to help Neni when deportation is a fact, and Clark, whose help and generosity is in fact far more pragmatic. Cindy, too, takes a pragmatic approach when bribing Neni in order to make her keep the drug use secret, and donates used designer clothes (p. 125). The imbalanced relationship between Cindy and Neni is exemplified in these passages, emphasizing the wealth and power of the former and the subservient position of the latter. Neni's position is further reinforced when Jende demands that she quit working and take a break from her studies in order to focus on herself and the pregnancy. Neni reacts with anger and discontent, but eventually relents: "[T]here was nothing she could do. He had brought her to America. He paid her tuition. He was her protector and advocate. He made decisions for the family" (p. 172). Neni's dreams and aspirations are depicted as reliant on Jende's generosity and benevolence, having few possibilities to make decisions for herself. Jende's position is precarious as well, which is further reinforced when Neni hears news about Lehman Brothers being in trouble (p. 174). She calls Jende who calls Clark and Cindy, who tells him not to worry: "How would he take care of a wife and two children? How many restaurant dishwashing jobs would he have to do for cash?" (p. 175). Both Neni and Jende are in a position of dependence, and they are the ones whose lives are most profoundly affected by the economic crisis in 2008. Uncertain citizenship status converges with uncertain economic futures.

Different future prospects also come together in the novel, when Neni gives birth to a daughter (p. 223), which coincides with a notification that Jende is "subject to removal from the United States" (p. 224). The letter causes concern and further establishes the fact that they are dependent on others if they wish to stay (p. 226), encompassing lawyers, immigration

officers, and judges who make decisions about asylum applications and appeals. The birth of Monyengi, a name that means happiness (p. 223), symbolizes continuity, life that carries on, whereas the impending deportation represents abrupt endings. As the residence permit recedes from grasp, cracks begin to appear between Jende and Neni, where Neni eventually proclaims that she will do whatever it takes to stay in the United States. Jende emphasizes that he does not want to be in such an inferior position forever (p. 230–231). The passage speaks of the humiliation of doing menial jobs with little job security and benefits, only to save up money for an immigration lawyer to help them find ways to stay. Jende's response connects with his background, which is elaborated on in more detail in the second half of the novel, outlining how his American dream was always reliant on the help and generosity of others, indicating a subservient position on his part.

Eventually, Jende is let go from his job as chauffeur (p. 251) and finds work at restaurants, further emphasizing his humiliating situation: "To once have driven a Lexus to executive meetings, only to now stand in a corner cleaning silverware" (p. 257). The demeaning reality is further exacerbated by a court appearance, during which the judge postpones Jende's case. The outcome brings no relief: "He would much rather be truly free" (p. 259). The decision places Jende in a limbo, a temporal dimension often connected with seeking asylum and the waiting it involves. Robin A. Harper and Hani Zubida (2017: 108) examine the role of time and argue that migration for those that receive refugee status may mean that the clock is reset, as times and places left behind can no longer be revisited. However, for the asylum seeker, limbo is inevitable, and the migrant therefore experiences "timelessness, pursuing a future that may never transpire" (ibid.). *Dreamers* offers a somewhat different interpretation of time, and migration time in particular, as both Jende and Neni work hard for a future in the United States while being aware from the outset of the novel that it is unlikely to materialize.

Before the inevitable return happens, Neni endeavours in her own way to help her family stay in the United States, resorting to extortion with the help of a picture she took in the Hamptons of Cindy who had passed out from drug and alcohol abuse (p. 266). Cindy pays her ten thousand dollars (p. 270), and Jende is appalled when finding out what Neni has done. Neni goes even further than that when talking to Natasha, the pastor, suggesting that she divorce Jende and marry a friend's cousin in order to get papers (p. 283). The breaking point for Jende comes with his back problems, forcing him to stop working in restaurants. He tells Neni that he

wants to return to Limbe (p. 305): "The suffering in Limbe was bad, but this one here, right now … it's more than I can take" (p. 306). The "migrant utopia" mentioned earlier by Irele (2020: 8) is completely erased in these lines, revealing the disillusioned reality of Jende and Neni. Arguably, this is not a unique topic in diasporic African novels, with for example NoViolet Bulawayo's acclaimed novel *We Need New Names* fictionalizing lives of undocumented migrants in America. Josephine Olufunmilayo Alexander (2023: 119) observes that Bulawayo's novel revolves around whether migrants' efforts are worth it, considering "their unrealised dreams and the distance created between themselves and those back home who somehow go on with their lives". The distance to home is not an issue in Mbue's novel, apart from the potential humiliation of returning empty-handed, but giving up on unrealized dreams forms the real obstacle, especially for Neni.

When Neni questions his decision, Jende explains that he is unhappy and that Americans, too, suffer with the economic crisis, having come to the realisation that citizenship does not solve all problems (p. 307) and wanting to return to Limbe (p. 320). The migrant dystopia reaches its peak when Neni discusses the possibility of giving up Liomi for adoption with Natasha (p. 326–327). Toohey (2020: 397) observes that America grants Neni more freedoms than Jende, compared to their existence in Limbe, yet Neni's actions to make sure the family can stay in the United States also indicate a desire to break free from being subservient to Jende. The return to Limbe is a fact when Jende is informed that the voluntary departure has been granted (p. 347). The couple has managed to save up enough money during their years in New York to make them wealthy in Cameroon, with enough money to "restart their life in a beautiful rental with a garage for his car and a maid so his wife would feel like a queen" (p. 352). The living standards the family was unable to secure for themselves in the United States will become reality in Cameroon. A friend even offers Jende a job in Limbe, which he declines: "All his life it had been yes sir, yes madam. A time had come for him to stand above others and hear yes, Mr. Jonga" (p. 353). Returning to Cameroon therefore provides not only better prospects than staying in America, but also the independence and self-madeness that has hitherto eluded Jende. Ironically, the idea of the United States as a land of hope and dreams, where everyone can become whatever and whoever they like if the only work hard enough, is made possible only upon return to Cameroon. Yet, it is the money earned and saved in New York which ultimately enables a less humiliating

homecoming. To that extent, the stay in New York has been successful, at least if viewed from the outside where Jende and Neni's struggles and sacrifices are not visible. Temporally, Jende and Neni's migration experience reflects not the limbo of the asylum seeker but the "delimited tenure as a means to (a better) life at home" (Harper and Zubida 2017: 108).

The sojourn was perhaps never meant to be anything but temporary, yet Neni is devastated by the impending return, contemplating her future life and the life of her children: "They would lose the opportunity to grow up in a magnificent land of uninhibited dreamers" (p. 361). This line, too, stands in stark contrast to the notion of America as the land of hopes and dreams. In the representation of migration through Jende and Neni's experience, mirroring that of countless other migrants without papers, America is not the land of dreams, of expectations and aspirations, but of *dreamers*. The difference is significant, pointing toward something profound about migration as a social phenomenon. To migrate means being an "uninhibited dreamer" in Neni's words, while those dreams so rarely come true as exemplified in the material examined in this book. The first part of this chapter stands as a counterpoint to some extent, telling the stories of people who have made it, at least on some level. The fictionalized experience presented by Mbue revolves around the degrading experience, not necessarily of migration itself, but of its by-products, such as charity, subservience, and dependency. The resourcefulness of Neni when faced with the possibility of having to repatriate is not depicted as based in desperation but determination.

Conclusion: Dependency, Adaptation, and Survival

Arguably, all migration involves some form of aspirations and expectations, even when the departure is a necessity for survival. The texts examined in this chapter revolve around migration as a choice, often in search of better prospects. The essay collections examined speak to the difficulties that emerge both in receiving countries and communities of origin. These communities exist both in old and new homes. United States is represented in both essay collections as well as in Mbue's novel as the land of hopes and dreams, the place to go in search of better prospects. Both the essay collections as well as *Behold the Dreamers* offer accounts of migration that are built around expectations and aspirations, sometimes of the migrants themselves and sometimes of those around them. The promises addressed even go beyond those of Britain, which in *The Good Immigrant*

becomes a place of restricted movement, both physically as well as socially. Neni and Jende, too, perceive of America as the place of dreams, and both work hard to stay so that they can keep moving towards their goals. To that extent and in the context of the texts examined in this chapter, the American dream is depicted as being alive and well.

Independence and the desire to make decisions for oneself emerge as significant themes in the essay collections as well as *Behold the Dreamers*. Jende decides to go back home to Limbe in order to become self-made in ways which were not possible in New York, where he was left working for others in jobs that gave little satisfaction or possibility for upward mobility. Being in the right place at the right time emerges as significant, tying the migration experience to sheer luck. The arrival of Neni and Jende in America a few years before the economic recession is proven to be bad timing, with Jende first being selected by Clark as his driver and then getting fired when Lehman Brothers collapses. In the essay collections, self-madeness appears in most of the stories discussed here, for example in Dennis-Benn's and Oyéjidé's essays about the necessity of choosing one's own path and living a life that may go against the wishes of one's community.

Being in charge of one's life and fortunes emerges in different terms in St. Germain's story about growing up in a neighbourhood that required adaptation in order to survive. Eventually, St. Germain was helped by people who pushed him forward, but he admits at the end of the essay that he himself had to take responsibility for the change that was necessary. This connects with Jende in multiple ways, whose life is partly one of dependency, on his friend Winston who has "made it" in America, and on the lawyer who is eventually unable to help him stay, and on Clark who provides him a job and states that he is happy to meet someone who understands to be grateful. Where the two essay collections exude a sense of defiance as discussed in the earlier section, in terms of the "velvet rope" (Ahmed 2017: 168) explored, where typecasting and pigeonholing take place due to racist or other exclusionary practices, *Behold the Dreamers* builds on Neni's resourcefulness versus Jende's pragmatism and desire to be his own boss. Neni extorting Cindy for money and suggesting that she marry her friend's cousin or give up their son so that he can have an American future become acts of defiance in the face of the inevitable, whereas Jende's decision to voluntarily return to Cameroon before being officially expelled embodies a need for independence and agency.

The migrant condition as presented and represented in the autobiographical essays as well as in the novel becomes a combination of dependency, adaptation, and survival, built on the expectations and aspirations of the protagonists and essay writers. In the end, it is impossible to entirely separate between the different aspects of what it means to be living at the edges of society, where the door is not fully opened but slightly left ajar. It is a door that can close at any time, as happens to Neni and Jende, and which is dealt with in multiple contexts in the essays examined. Ahmed and Miss L spoke of the struggles connected to being typecast, and Ahmed's story of airport checks reveals some the arbitrariness attached to the migrant condition. Expectations and aspirations can take an individual only so far, and both essay collections as well as Mbue's novel indicate that much is up to the support and efforts of others, as well as being in the right place at the right time. The gamble that is contemporary migration is therefore a game with high stakes. This is particularly true for undocumented migrants, whose experiences are further examined in the following chapter.

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CHAPTER 4

Undocumented Migration

Much research on so-called illegality and undocumented migration embarks from accounts of people's experiences, here for example as seen in *Illegal Encounters: The Effect of Detention and Deportation on Young People*, edited by Deborah A. Boehm and Susan J. Terrio (2019), in which the introductory chapter begins with stories of a mother and son travelling from Honduras to the United States to apply for asylum, but are sent to a detention centre. There is the story of a young man deported despite having DACA status,[1] as well as of a woman deported to Mexico without her husband and family, after having lived for more than twenty years in the US (Boehm and Terrio 2019: 1). Another work, *Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America* by Roberto G. Gonzales (2016), starts with a foreword by Jose Antonio Vargas, whose memoir is examined here, in which he briefly mentions the details of his arrival in the US and subsequent illegal status. Further, Katja Franko's *The Crimmigrant Other: Migration and Penal Power* (2020) begins with the story of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian boy, only three years old, whose body washed up on a

[1] DACA refers to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, an American policy implemented since 2015 which means that some migrants who arrived in the US as minors could ask for deferred action, effectively postponing their deportation, along with gaining permission to work ("Consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals" 2022). However, this deferred action "does not provide lawful status" (ibid). DACA's future may be uncertain due to an ongoing case against it by the District Court for the Southern District of Texas ("Deferred Actions for Childhood Arrivals" 2023).

L. Englund, *Storying Contemporary Migration*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-62003-4_4

shore in Turkey in 2015, the pictures of whom caused an outcry across Europe (Franko 2020: 1). The personal account thus plays a significant role in research on undocumented migration, drawn upon in the examples listed here in order to emphasize policies and legislation that are seen as unjust and unfair. The examples listed contribute to the approach to irregular migration that sees receiving countries as responsible for suffering and hardship.

This chapter looks at two texts that describe experiences of being undocumented in the United States, starting with an analysis of *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen* (2018) by Jose Antonio Vargas, who recounts life after finding out as a teenager that he is undocumented without legal status in the US, having moved there at a young age from the Philippines. The second text is *The Undocumented Americans* (2021) by Karla Cornejo Villavicencio. Cornejo Villavicencio's account recounts the author's autobiographical narrative of being undocumented, but also involves stories about others who are living precariously in the US. This chapter investigates how this particular migration experience is narrated, specifically from a perspective of being "illegal", which is a contested term. The main question in this chapter is not so much about those who move and for what reasons, but about who gets to stay and on what grounds. Both authors are so-called Dreamers,[2] having arrived as undocumented children. The discussion of the United States being a land of dreamers that began in the previous chapter therefore continues here.

Abby Budiman (2020) writes for Pew Research Center that almost one fourth of immigrants in the United States are "unauthorized", amounting to about 10.5 million in 2017. The Migration Policy Institute ("Profile of the Unauthorized Population: United States" n.d.) offers data from 2019 which gives a total number of eleven million unauthorized people living in the United States. Of these, the estimate suggests that the large part is from Mexico, with El Salvador and Guatemala following suit. Years of residence vary between less than five to twenty or more, with each category consisting of almost equal numbers. More than half are reportedly uninsured, whereas more than a fourth are homeowners, providing an interesting contrast. Marta Caminero-Santangelo (2016: 7) outlines hardened attitudes towards immigrants in the United States over the last few decades, and notes that these developments have contributed to the

[2] A new bill was proposed in 2023, which would provide those with DACA status conditional permanent resident status. Upon completing studies, military service or having worked for a minimum of three years, they could gain status as lawful permanent resident (Ijaz 2023).

writing that emerged particularly by Latinx writers. Further, she observes that while the border has often been mediated in transnational terms by researchers, there is also a body of texts about undocumented lives that focus on the current locations in which they reside (Caminero-Santangelo 2016: 14). It is precisely the latter that is at the centre of the two memoirs examined here.

Research on the condition of being undocumented states for example that "[i]llegality is a sociopolitical condition" (Delgado 2022: 1429), and that "illegality can only be understood in relation to citizenship and belonging" (Menjívar and Kanstroom 2014: 9). Put simply, illegality can be contrasted with legality, with having citizenship status and being allowed to be a full member of society in a specific nation. Vanessa Delgado (2022: 1428) reports that there are millions of people living with undocumented family members in the United States, and that many of these are children some of whose family members may be undocumented. She also asserts that DACA "broadened the ways undocumented youth help their undocumented parents manage the consequences of illegality" (p. 1431). However, in the case of Vargas, he was himself the undocumented person in his family, stating the following in the foreword to *Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America*:

> The truth of the matter is that children don't aspire to live lives circumscribed by illegality. But failure to fully understand how America is shaping the lives of immigrant children means we risk losing more generations of young people to the shadows of illegality. These young people are American—they are just waiting for their own country to recognize them. (Vargas 2016: xiv)

The statement highlights a few issues that are central to this chapter. First, that undocumented children such as Vargas do not choose their status and become trapped in a position that may be impossible to change, yet it is one they did not have any power over in the first place. Second, the statement that those children and young people are in fact American, that the US is "their own country", is significant. It indicates that belonging and personal identity go well beyond citizenship and legal status. The same can be said for Cornejo Villavicencio's memoir, which suggests in its very title that the undocumented are Americans, too. Hence, this is a topic that warrants further examination.

"Lying, Passing, and Hiding": *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen*

Jose Antonio Vargas (2018: xi) begins his memoir *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen* with a Prologue in which he states that "I do not know where I will be when you read this book". From the outset, Vargas's undocumented status is a fact to contend with, and one which never escapes the narrative. Vargas then goes on to discuss contemporary politics at the time of writing, stating that then American President Donald Trump "is closing America's doors to the world's refugees", as well as tweeting about the so-called Dreamers, "young undocumented immigrants who like me arrived in the country as children", and comparing undocumented migrants to "violent MS-13 gang members" (Vargas 2018: xii). MS-13 refers to gangs that formed in Los Angeles in the 1980s by Salvadoran migrants. Despite this prologue, Vargas states that the purpose with his memoir is not to be political, but about "lying and being forced to lie to get by; about passing as an American and as a contributing citizen […] about constantly hiding from the government and, in the process, hiding from ourselves" (p. xiii). Although Vargas refutes explicit politics, they are undoubtedly part of his book and part of this chapter.

Referring to the politics of President Trump is something of a trope by now in terms of migration studies, also mentioned in the introduction to this book. Trump's politics with regard to immigration have been widely examined and recorded, for example relating to his statements about Mexicans arriving in the US (Scribner 2017: 263), prohibiting citizens of certain Muslim countries from entering the US (Joppke 2020: 2), as well as the by now infamous wall (Martin 2019). During the time of writing this book, Trump won the Iowa caucuses in January 2024, moving one step closer to becoming the Republican candidate in the November elections (Collinson 2024). Vargas's politics stretch beyond his personal story not just in relation to actual American policies, but also in connection with what he states in his "Note to Readers", that he has met hundreds of people without proper legal status. The book is thus autobiographical but moving beyond the simply personal, taking on an advocacy dimension. The same rings true for Cornejo Villavicencio's memoir, examined in the following section.

The impact of autobiographical writing with an advocacy agenda cannot be understated, as expressed by Katja Kurz (2015: 3), who examines autobiographical texts that are part of human rights campaigns and argues

that a lot of the time, "people developed an interest in the concomitant campaigns after reading a leading figure's autobiography". Kurz emphasizes form as part of the success of said stories (ibid.), and states in the conclusion to her book that her study shows that "life narratives in the context of rights campaigns negotiate between the aesthetics of framing and the ethics of discursive representation for a cosmopolitan readership that is a potential donor base" (p. 243). While Vargas and Cornejo Villavicencio may not be writing explicitly for particular campaigns, and Vargas even states in his memoir that he does not define himself as an activist (p. 155), he does see himself as a "relative newcomer to the immigrant rights movement" (p. 165). The memoir can thus be seen as part of this movement, advocating the rights of undocumented migrants in particular. Vargas is aware of the criticism with which advocacy journalism is often met, writing later in the memoir that the two are often seen as "mutually exclusive" (p. 138). This chapter, and this entire book, does not see the two as mutually exclusive or that advocacy purposes by any means lessen the effect of the personal or fictional story, yet it is important to acknowledge that much of the material examined in this book, including Vargas's memoir, works to promote more humane migration policies.

Dear America begins with an outline of how Vargas ended up living in the US as an undocumented migrant. Vargas recounts how his mother woke him up early in the morning in order for him to catch his flight, and that she was supposed to follow him soon (p. 3). At the time in 1993, Vargas was twelve years old (p. 5). The first chapter reveals that Vargas's mother did not follow him to the US as planned, and this separation is embodied in descriptions of the ocean between Vargas's country of origin and new home: "I've avoided stepping into any body of water in the country I now call home: the Rio Grande in Texas, not too far from where I was arrested, Lake Michigan […], and the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans" (p. 4). Vargas observes that "borders and walls" are usually connected with land in people's minds, yet for him, water is the most significant element: "It's painful to think that the same water that connects us all also divides us, dividing Mama and me" (p. 4–5). The border provided by the water between the Philippines and the United States has thus become an insurmountable barrier, to the extent that Vargas avoids bodies of water in all shapes and forms.

Vargas recounts living with his grandparents, called Lolo and Lola according to tradition, and his uncle Rolan. His grandfather Lolo had become a naturalized citizen when Vargas arrived to live with him and his

other relatives in California (p. 8). Settling in into his new life is presented as relatively straightforward (p. 12–13): "America was an entire experience, and I wanted to do all of it" (p. 14). The enthusiasm to do well in America is contrasted against the separation from his mother, which "buries emotion, buries it so far down you can't touch it" (p. 16). The migrant experience is represented in terms of ambition and excitement about the new home but overshadowed by separation. Race also comes into the equation as Vargas ponders the categories into which he was placed, asking "[w]here do you go if you are multiracial and multiethnic" (p. 19), and stating that he "wasn't sure how a Filipino was supposed to look, or where a Filipino was supposed to fit" (p. 20). A sense of in-betweenness permeates the memoir from the start, in geographical, racial, and emotional terms, further reinforced by Vargas's name, which causes confusion as it implies origins in Latin America.

The in-betweenness is further emphasized when Vargas outlines his family history and the history of Filipinos in the US, observing that before he moved to the US himself, he believed his grandparents to be extremely wealthy as they regularly sent his mother money and commodities (p. 25). The comment is worthwhile in combination with Jende's statement in Mbue's novel about relatives in Limbe thinking that anyone who has relocated to America is immediately rich. Migration as a means to pursue a better life is emphasized as it comes to encompass those left behind as well. Vargas also reveals that his mother had two more children with her boyfriend, one of whom Vargas is "yet to meet in person" (p. 26). Familial and relational contexts from a migration perspective thus embark from separation in the memoir, and Vargas's experience is presented as being somewhat disconnected from his original family. In terms of his grandparents and new life in America, Vargas writes that he "was their introduction to America" despite their having lived there for quite some time before he himself arrived (ibid.). His home in the US was "decidedly Filipino", in which his family and others like it watched Filipino TV channels for "news of home, not the homes they're living in but the homes they left behind" (p. 27). The paradox connected with Vargas's life in the US rests on him becoming the cultural translator, despite being a newly arrived migrant himself, for his grandparents who live in their own state of in-betweenness despite having become citizens. Generational conflicts and gaps come into play as well, with his grandparents having continued with their Filipino lifestyle, remaining to some extent on the margins of American society.

Elena Genova and Elisabetta Zontini (2020: 51) examine liminality in relation to migrants in their study and connect it with in-betweenness, defining it in Arnold van Gennep's terms as "experiencing change and dealing with its consequences; it is a state of in-betweenness, of crossing a threshold (physical, cognitive or emotive), which redefines and reformulates a person's existence". In migration contexts, the concept has often been applied in terms of describing conditions and experiences that are "destructive and marginalising" (ibid., 52). The threshold, too, is relevant, as Vargas's grandparents have crossed the legal threshold into America when gaining citizenship, yet they remain culturally on the outside. Vargas himself, who lives as undocumented, attempts to cross the cultural threshold into America as he cannot break through the legal barrier.

Vargas recounts becoming aware of the meaning of the green card from a fellow pupil at school who was of Mexican origin (p. 29). The real revelation about his own undocumented status is recounted in the following chapter in which Vargas goes to the local DMV to apply for his driver's permit (p. 30). The clerk informs Vargas that his green card is fake and asks him not to return. Vargas confronts his grandfather who tells him that he "is not supposed to be here" (p. 32–33). Vargas contemplates returning to the Philippines, but his grandfather tells him that his passport is fake, too: "I couldn't stay legally. I couldn't leave legally, either. I was trapped. A legal no-boy's land" (p. 35). The statement is significant for the memoir and is reflected in the fragmentation and lack of chronology that mark the personal story. After confronting his mother, Vargas is told that the person who flew to the US with him was not a relative but a smuggler, and that his grandfather had petitioned for his mother to be allowed to join him in the US, but that he had lied and listed her as single (ibid.). Eventually, his grandfather withdrew the petition, becoming worried that the lie would cause problems. Vargas recounts that his mother could not receive a tourist visa either. Eventually, she did not manage to secure passage to the US to join him (p. 36). Further reinforcing his in-betweenness and separation, Vargas notes that his grandfather had planned that Vargas would work illegally and eventually marry a US citizen in order to get legal status. The fundamental shock of finding out all these details about his undocumented status "was not only the beginning of the lies I had to tell and what I had to do to 'pass' as 'American,' but the beginning of the way I hid myself from Lolo, Lola, and Mama" (p. 37). The truth about his status therefore leads to an existence that requires concealing parts of the self from others, including close family members.

Separation is reinforced in the lines above, also emotionally as the truth about his status in the United States becomes overwhelming for Vargas (p. 34). The experiences described manifest the moment Vargas became undocumented, although his status had not changed but he was unaware of the scheming that had taken place in order for him to travel to the United States. Earlier in the book, Vargas refers to himself as a "Dreamer" (p. xii), a young migrant who arrived in the United States as a child, and it is, according to research, a group of migrants that is seen more favourably than many others. Ala Sirriyeh (2020: 2) argues that the Dreamer is often seen in terms of "the good/bad immigrant dichotomy" which comes to represent "a highly individualised articulation of migrant trajectories, transitions to adulthood, and narratives of deservingness and belonging". The comment is relevant in connection to Vargas's memoir, which can be seen as "a highly individualised articulation" of his life and migrant experience, while it also comes to serve greater advocacy purposes as stated earlier. Further, Sirriyeh (ibid.) argues that some of those who have been defined as Dreamers have been conflicted by the label, as they have been seen as "idealised sole protagonists rather than as more complex and socially embedded selves". The complexity is here profound, also in connection with Cornejo Villavicencio's memoir which contains stories of other undocumented migrants. The problem raised by Sirriyeh becomes one of "you are all right for a migrant/undocumented person/black/person of colour/Hispanic/other category that often faces discrimination and prejudice". A "good" individual is raised above the group to which significantly more negative connotations and attributes are attached.

The undocumented status of Vargas is juxtaposed with sexual identity, and Vargas writes that while being illegal was impossible to fully grasp and comprehend, "embracing the gay part kept me alive" (p. 40). Vargas even goes as far as telling his class that he was gay, becoming the only student at his school who was open about his sexuality (p. 41–42). Eventually, it becomes a problem with his grandparents who proceed to throw him out of the house (p. 42). Vargas stays with another man for a month and then returns to his grandparents (p. 54), although the co-existence remains uneasy. His interest in journalism and writing becomes a protest against his grandparents' views (p. 57), but more importantly, it provides him with a sense of freedom: "Reporting, interviewing, and writing felt like the safest, surest place in my everyday reality. If I was not considered an American because I didn't have the right papers, then practicing journalism […] was my way of writing myself into America" (p. 58). Writing thus

bridges the divide between illegality and outsiderness on the one hand and being part of American society on the other.

The idea of being American warrants some further examination, as it was already raised in relation to Vargas's grandparents and their position as "decidedly Filipino" (Vargas 2018: 27). Raul S. Casarez (2022: 115) examines Americanness among immigrants and observes that there seems to be a "possible symbiotic relationship between race and national identity that is expressed in the formation of attitudes about immigrants". He defines characteristics of being American, what he terms *ascripted Americanness*, i.e. factors such as "having ancestry in the USA, being born in the USA, and living in the USA for most of one's life" (ibid.). For Vargas, the latter is true, and to some extent the first characteristic as well, although his relatives are immigrants, too. Another study conducted by Emily R. Cabaniss and Jeffrey A. Gardner (2021) notes that the participants', all so-called Dreamers, attitudes to Americanness rested partly on the idea of the model minority, that through their achievements and endeavours they could eventually be seen as "model *Americans*" (117; emphasis in the original). Their study also found that in their efforts to become model citizens, migrants unintentionally reinforced barriers between groups and further strengthened often harmful categorization of immigrants.

Vargas becomes something of a model American through the many school activities and endeavours in which he participates, being "probably the busiest student at school who did not drive" (p. 60) and depending on teachers and parents to drive him to practice and pay for various excursions and trips (p. 61). Vargas explains that he easily befriended adults because he grew up fast (p. 62) and that without the community of people who supported and helped him, he would have struggled (p. 61). A teacher, after finding out that Vargas did not have papers with which to travel abroad, even changed the destination of the choir tour from Japan to Hawaii (p. 64). Liminality emerges in these passages, being offered the chance to participate in a trip abroad yet lacking the means that make travel possible.

Eventually, Vargas tells his friends and benefactors about the situation with his green card, emphasizing that this was an era before any "Dreamers" and the DREAM Act (p. 65), proposed in 2001 as a measure to "create a path to citizenship for certain undocumented immigrants who entered the United States as minors" (de la Torre and Germano 2014: 450). Some of the adults involved with Vargas's life and paperless status even propose

adopting him, something which his grandparents could have done earlier had they been less "wary of lawyers and fearful of the U.S. legal system" (p. 65). Despite the shame expressed by Vargas due to the situation he is in, he also finds compassion for his mother and grandparents who had planned a life for him "dictated by their own realities, by their own sense of limitations. The America they dreamed for me was not the America I was creating for myself" (p. 66). The networks built and acquaintances acquired particularly by attending a "relatively wealthy school in a community of privilege" (Vargas 2018: 61) thus enable different dreams and aspirations for Vargas, yet they remain overshadowed by the lack of documentation. Interestingly, the memoir addresses aspirations and expectations of family members, but in Vargas's case it is not about living up to them or not, but about managing the impossible situation his relatives have created.

Eventually, Vargas is offered a job at a youth magazine, forcing him to lie on the employment form: "Lolo's lies were now my lies" (p. 69–71). The moment becomes pivotal, as Vargas is no longer uninformed about his situation, but a young adult "making a difficult and necessary choice to survive" (p. 71). Vargas then asks, either rhetorically or directed at the reader, the following questions: "What would you have done? […] Which box would you check? What have you done to earn your box? Besides being born at a certain place in a certain time, did you have to do anything?" (p. 71–72). The questions indicate that citizenship and birthright are connected with luck, randomly and arbitrarily assigned, and they point to a larger issue of accessing citizenship.

The questions can also be tied to the advocacy aspect of the memoir, and it is here relevant to return to Francesca Polletta's words about personal and dominant stories (2023: 107). This is particularly significant in connection with a chapter titled "Playing a Role", in which Vargas outlines his passion for American culture, and explains how this desire to be as American as possible "felt like a role I had to play" after becoming aware of his undocumented status (p. 47). Vargas recounts how he would watch TV, borrow music from the library, as well as get acquainted with magazines available at the library (p. 48). In Vargas's words, "throughout American history, legality had forever been a construct of power" (ibid.). This is then connected with constructions of race in American history, which Vargas addresses in relation to his illegal status and calls it a master narrative, that white is the "norm" as opposed to black, and that the "centrality of whiteness" created not just "white versus black" but also "legal

versus illegal" (p. 78). Dreamers often emphasize how American they are, instead of highlighting ties to countries of origin (Caminero-Santangelo 2016: 229). Despite seeing themselves as American, Caminero- Santangelo (2016: 231) observes that they are not seen by others as part of any American community.

The memoir seems to indicate that not only is race a construction, but that the construction of legal and illegal are connected to the same discourses and ideologies, placing people with ambiguous racial and legal status in precarious situations. The lines connect to some extent with Cabaniss and Gardner's (2021) study, which found that migrants seeking to become model Americans may inadvertently reinforce barriers between groups. The master narrative in Vargas's words, or dominant story to borrow Polletta's term, gains far greater consequences as it becomes a question of who gets the right to reside in the United States. The law emerges in other contexts as well, for example when Vargas eventually meets up with an immigration lawyer, who advises him to travel back to the Philippines and stay there throughout the ten-year ban before attempting to return through legal means to the United States (p. 82). Vargas decides to stay, after someone close to him asserts that "'[y]ou're not going anywhere. You're already here'" (p. 83). In terms of migration and some of the problems and questions raised in this book, particularly in the chapter that follows on open borders versus fortress Europe, the matter of staying or leaving is at the core. For Vargas, who travelled with fake papers to the United States, completely unaware of it and too young to understand the circumstances, the issue emphasizes the legal limbo in which he finds himself.

Vargas eventually secures an internship at the *Washington Post*, which requires a driver's licence (ibid.). His team of supportive people set out to help him acquire it without a green card or valid passport, and he obtains one in Oregon where proof of residence is needed. It is provided by people around him who help create proof that he was living in Oregon (p. 85). When reflecting on these events, Vargas observes that it is surprising that none of the people who helped him secure a driver's licence expressed any doubts about what they were doing (p. 86). A similar experience happens at the *Post* where Vargas began working, feeling the weight of his status: "I walked around the newsroom like I had the word 'ILLEGAL' tattooed on my forehead" (p. 91). To relieve the burden, Vargas decides to tell a co-worker about his situation and the steps taken to get the job (p. 92). The person does not report him, and eventually Vargas is offered a job as

a foreign correspondent, a position he cannot accept due to his status, so his then proceeds to pursue a career as a political reporter (p. 99–100). The memoir thus moves between Vargas's aspirations and career ambitions, always marred and to some extent inhibited by his status, yet always expressing resourcefulness. This creates another dimension of in betweenness: the reality of his status never escapes the author, yet his life is paradoxically presented as moving forward at great speed.

This paradox is exemplified when being pulled over by a police officer for speeding, who then proceeds to ask for Vargas's driver's licence. Only by lucky chance does Vargas manage to get out of the situation, as the officer is called away on more urgent business. The price is high, as Vargas recounts peeing himself in the car due to the stress and anxiety caused (p. 103–104). This experience is contrasted against being part of the team winning the Pulitzer Price for a reportage, which causes Vargas to break down in tears: "The lies, I remember thinking that day, had to stop. I didn't exactly know how to stop them or when to stop them or what I would do after I stopped them. I just knew they had to stop" (p. 106). This is further expressed by Vargas in terms of not being able to "be present for my own life" (ibid.). The separation discussed earlier is once more reinforced through these experiences, as Vargas's memoir indicates separation even from his own life. Illegality thus becomes a space of disconnect, from family, friends, society, law, and self.

The revelation about the need to stop the lies culminates in making his story public: "I could no longer live with my lies. Passing was no longer enough. […] To free myself—in fact, to face myself—I had to write my story" (p. 113). This is where the memoir takes on a more explicit advocacy dimension, becoming a story written not only for the writer himself, but in order to "complicate the narrative. To take immigration, especially unauthorized, 'illegal' immigration, out of the merit-based,' 'good immigrant v. bad immigrant,' 'less deserving v. more deserving' framework" (p. 116). The two essay collections examined earlier in this book, *The Good Immigrant* and *The Good Immigrant USA*, speak to the same complexity, although the experiences recounted in those essays do not concern undocumented migrants but people with relative privilege. Privilege emerges in Vargas's determination to be open about his legal status: "Many of us hold some kind of privilege" (ibid.). Here, he refers to the people who help him through school and his career as journalist, continuously supporting his endeavours to stay in the United States. Storytelling in undocumented contexts carries great risk, as observed by Emily R. Cabaniss and Heather

Shay (2020: 293), and may lead to "arrest, detention, or even deportation", becoming an act of courage and bravery. *Dear America*, therefore, occupies a liminal position itself, being a highly personal narrative that emphasizes the solitary existence of its author, becoming a so-called model American yet having no access to citizenship. It also participates in advocacy work, risking the consequences listed by Cabaniss and Shay, consequences which would eventually affect Vargas alone.

The need to stop passing culminates at a party Vargas arranged for his thirtieth birthday, telling friends and family about his undocumented status (p. 117). Then Vargas proceeds to publish an essay in the *New York Times Magazine* in June 2011, telling openly about his status (p. 121). The publication of the piece leads to the foundation of Define American, an organisation "unlike anything else in the immigrant rights space" (ibid.). The difference, as outlined by Vargas, between this movement and others is that it focuses on stories both by documented and undocumented immigrants (p. 122). The organisation is discussed in an interview with Vargas from 2015, in which he states that he sees the conversation about immigration in the United States is "myopic, simplistic, and frankly, bigoted" (Anonymous 2015: 268). Vargas draws on yet another paradox, that he can have access to the entire world via platforms such as "Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram", yet he "cannot be a citizen of the country that I call my home" (ibid.). Undocumented status thus prevents full participation in the country of one's choosing, or where one has ended up, and any kind of world membership does not compare or mean much without citizenship. The cosmopolitan idea of being a world citizen falls short on the reality that world citizenship means nothing without secure belonging to the nation-state.

In 2012, DACA was implemented by the Obama administration according to Vargas (p. 145), but he could not apply due to being a few months too old. In 2017, Vargas participated in an interview on Fox News, in which the presenter told him that people without documentation who are illegally in the United States have no "entitlement to be here" (p. 151). He goes on to recall messages on social media and encounters in public spaces with people who are supportive of him or who want to see him deported. On a flight during which Vargas was upgraded to first class due to being such a frequent flyer, a man walks past him, grabs his shoulder and tells him "I didn't know illegals fly first class" (p. 158). Vargas decides to confront the man and waits for him after landing and disembarking the plane. The man tells Vargas that he felt Vargas was

"bragging" about his illegal status, to which Vargas responds that if he could get legal status, he would (p. 159–160). A similar incident takes place at a symposium Vargas attends as a speaker, during which an immigration lawyer emphasizes the difference between legal and illegal immigrants and questions his status: "She was condemning me for not following a process that didn't exist" (p. 162). The in-betweenness emerges again in these lines, in being undocumented while Vargas's family members in the US have documentation (ibid.), and being unable to find a way to legalise his status. After becoming something of a celebrity on matters related to immigration and the state of being undocumented, Vargas reveals ignorance on part of people who interview him, stating that many journalists in fact have limited insights about immigration (p. 130). He recalls Bill Maher asking him in 2017 why he "can't just fix this thing" (p. 131). Throughout his memoir, Vargas provides history on various immigration acts and legislation in recent times. Vargas also engages with the question of borders and whether nation-states have the right to decide for themselves who they accept as members of society.

The separation between those with papers and those without is emphasized in the encounters above, and Vargas is met with criticism for not making sure his status is changed. The memoir indicates that prejudices attached to undocumented status, even in relation to someone professionally successful such as Vargas, have to do with the person *voluntarily* remaining "illegal". The comment by Maher and by the man Vargas met on the plane imply that he has chosen to stay undocumented and not seek to legalize his status, possibly for advocacy or attention-seeking purposes. The comment about "bragging" about his status is particularly revealing. The societal narrative embedded labels undocumented migrants as trying to benefit from their situation instead of doing the right thing, which would be making sure that they gain citizenship as soon as possible. Another narrative implied concerns the belief that proper documentation and residency are actually rather easily obtained, that there is a clear road to follow if the person only chooses to do so.

What Vargas states as his task with the work for Define American, coming out with his own story, and bringing visibility to other undocumented migrants, is to participate in the rewriting of "the master narrative of immigration" (p. 168). He gives an example of a meeting with an undocumented man who expressed discontent with Vargas's efforts due to his success: "You're too successful to represent us" (ibid.). Vargas thus falls in between in terms of legal and illegal immigrants as recounted in the

previous section, but also in relation to other people with undocumented status. Representation is explicitly raised in this context, with the man stating that Vargas cannot represent "us" due to his professional success. The advocacy work of the memoir follows to some extent the pattern of other similar texts, as Caminero-Santangelo (2016: 23) acknowledges the advocacy dimension of many texts by Latinx writers, in terms of an "ethical and communal response". She connects this with testimony, bearing witness, and the Spanish equivalent *testimonio* which has a political appeal (ibid.). Stacey Alex (2020: 110) explains that the genre of testimonio is a specifically Latin American form of writing, "to expose and challenge human rights violations". A significant collective dimension is part of testimonio. This is more visible in Cornejo Villavicencio's account in the following section, but also in Vargas's efforts to transform how those undocumented are seen and spoken about.

This master narrative includes the problem of race, to which Vargas returns towards the end of his memoir. He writes the following in relation to his work and travels for Define American: "I came to the realization that everyone feels excluded from America, even the very people whose ancestors created systems of exclusion and oppression" (p. 172). Rewriting the master narrative of immigration thus seems to need to encompass not just immigrants, legal or illegal, but all groups. Further, Vargas discusses the meaning of being American and the complexities involved, stating that "I wish I could say that being a global citizen is enough, but I haven't been able to see the world" (p. 174). The paradox is evident in the lines, reinforcing what was stated earlier that having no citizenship means that global citizenship is an impossibility as well. The limbo caused by lack of documentation impedes all movement. Paradoxically, Vargas travels constantly in America, "my life is in a packed suitcase" (p. 183) but "I cannot travel outside the United States. If I leave, there's no guarantee that I'd be allowed back" (p. 185). Citizenship is presented as inevitable, essential for belonging, for leaving and returning and being a full member of society. Being left outside it creates an impossible space in which past, present and future lose their meanings.

The final section of *Dear America* is titled "Hiding", in which Vargas recounts being detained in Texas in 2014. The aim with the trip "was to organize a vigil welcoming arriving Central American refugees, most of whom were children fleeing for their lives" (p. 214). Vargas writes about having some worries about travelling so close to the southern border with rigorous border control and law enforcement presence. When supposed to

fly back from McAllen where Vargas had been visiting, he is detained by a Border Patrol Agent who asks him if he is illegal to which he answers yes (p. 218). Vargas writes that while in detention, he is questioned by a Border Patrol agent but soon released (p. 225). Vargas eventually finds out that a lot of things happened behind the scenes to get him released, with friends for example contacting the Philippine embassy (p. 229), and even the White House (230). The book thus ends the way it started, with Vargas in limbo, still undocumented, reliant on powerful and well-connected friends to help him remain in the United States. An interview conducted by Sally Strong (2022) confirms that Vargas's "own path to U.S. citizenship remains elusive", indicating that he is still undocumented, as does a magazine article for *The Miami Student* from 2023 (Stumbaugh 2023).

The enormous task Jose Antonio Vargas sets out to accomplish, or at least address, with his memoir, to change the master narrative of immigration, is exemplified by the many questions he asks in the text, relating to race, citizenship, and deservingness. The somewhat disjointed narrative reflects the disjointed existence of Vargas, the lies he has been forced to live with and the lack of choice and self-determination due to decisions made by others in his childhood. The most tragic example of in betweenness as discussed throughout this section is represented by Vargas's experience of always being slightly too late. Too late for him to be adopted by generous and caring friends, too late for him to apply for DACA, too late to leave and too late to stay. Not only does Vargas's narrative speak of in-betweenness, but of constant belatedness, of running to catch up in a situation where the mirage of belonging and continuity keeps moving farther and farther away.

"They Want Us Dead": *The Undocumented Americans*

The time of writing is significant for personal narratives of migration, as they inevitably draw on contemporary politics and shifts in attitudes towards migrants. Any examination of migration narratives, both personal and dominant, can only occur in a specific time and place. Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's nonfictional text *The Undocumented Americans* (2021) offers a somewhat different trajectory when compared to Vargas's account, but there are also similarities. The political context is given from the

outset, as Cornejo Villavicencio, too, opens the book with the presidential election in 2016 which Donald Trump won (2021: xiii), becoming inaugurated in 2017. She comments on the elections with the following statement: "I understood that night would be my end, but I would not be ushered to an internment camp in sweatpants" (ibid.). Cornejo Villavicencio's father calls her, saying it is "the end times", and the author reveals that her father is undocumented. The introduction to the memoir recounts that Cornejo Villavicencio wrote an essay while at Harvard, opening up about her undocumented status, although the essay was anonymous which is a significant difference when compared to Vargas's account. The era during which the memoir emerged is thus presented as one of despair and apocalypse, at least for people with migrant backgrounds or unsettled legal status.

It is noteworthy that Cornejo Villavicencio, too, refers to discourses of undocumented migrants in an interview by *Rumpus* (Stochl 2020), in which she states that the "narrative" of being undocumented partly lacks respect, as it depicts people as "living underground" or using similar figures of speech. Villavicencio mentions *American Dirt*, stating that it was a book she would not write, and that she chose to be authentically herself in order to support other undocumented people: "I write because I want to change the discourse around undocumented immigrants" (Stochl 2020). The aim is therefore similar to that of Vargas as discussed in the previous section. *American Dirt* is mentioned in another interview conducted by Tina Vásquez (2020), in which the interviewer observes the lack of media attention surrounding Cornejo Villavicencio's memoir and asks why her book is overlooked "after the clusterfuck that was *American Dirt*". Cornejo Villavicencio responds that the lack of attention indicates that her memoir is seen as "not being literature" and instead categorized "under 'social science' by Google Books" (Vásquez 2020). A quick search on *Google Books* reveals that the memoir is, in fact, classified under social science, but also under "Biography & Autobiography" ("The Undocumented Americans"). The comment addresses the problem raised in the introduction to this book, that works about migration need to be read and appreciated for their aesthetic qualities as well. Stacey Alex (2020) has analysed the memoir from a perspective of testimonio, collective witnessing and documentation, with focus on resistance to oppressive measures against undocumented people, and notes that the text, as well as others by undocumented writers, have an educational purpose in order to counteract "apolitical and celebratory" readings of such literature. Does

Vargas's memoir, too, fall into the category of such celebratory Dreamer storytelling, and at what point does the counter story become the "apolitical and celebratory" version?

Cornejo Villavicencio writes that she was prompted to write her memoir but was adamant that she did not want to write like so many others with whom she did not identify: "I saw my parents as more than laborers, as more than sufferers and dreamers" (2021: xv). The memoir thus takes a step back from other migrant memoirs, not wanting "to write anything inspirational", hence the exclusion of so-called Dreamers (Cornejo Villavicencio 2021: xvi). Cornejo Villavicencio argues that Dreamers "occupy outsize attention in our politics" (ibid.). The indication seems to be that Dreamer narratives have become a dominant story themselves, and this is partly confirmed in Cabaniss and Shay's study (2020). The question as to who gets to tell their stories, what kind of stories gain attention, and which stories fall into the margins and oblivion, emerges yet again as in previous chapters. The battle for attention and recognition is thus explicitly addressed, indicating that in terms of migration experiences and stories, there is limited space in the public arena. A migration memoir such as Cornejo Villavicencio's is therefore as much about what it gives attention to, as well as to what it chooses to exclude.

The aim of Cornejo Villavicencio's book of nonfiction, "creative nonfiction" as she defines it herself (ibid.), is to "tell the stories of people who work as day laborers, housekeepers, construction workers, dog walkers, deliverymen, people who don't inspire hashtags or T-shirts" (ibid.). These people, as defined by Cornejo Villavicencio, are the ones "underground. Not heroes. Randoms. People. Characters" (2021: xvii). The division into people who receive too much attention, who "occupy outsize attention", presumably the likes of Vargas who are educated, and he is even something of a celebrity, and has created an impressive career in journalism, and those who are not "heroes", reinforces narratives of migration in multiple ways. It works to highlight the predicament of those who often remain invisible, the workers listed by Cornejo Villavicencio, but simultaneously indicates that some are more deserving of attention than others, that the plight of migrants is different depending on whether you are categorized as a Dreamer or as something less marketable and identifiable. Cornejo Villavicencio defines herself as a Dreamer, admitting to feeling "guilty" about it, and also to having DACA status (2021: 8). The comment connects with Sirriyeh's (2020: 2) statement about some so-called Dreamers being uncomfortable with the label.

Adolfo Béjar Lara (2022: 184) examines narratives by undocumented migrants in his article and argues that they express the "political and representational deadlock" in terms of migration to the US, which he defines as connected to economic considerations, evoking the term "depoliticized". Of the two memoirs examined in this chapter, at least one can be seen as engaging in explicit politics, relating to labour markets. Cornejo Villavicencio's writing exemplifies the struggles of undocumented migrants in a market that is eager to make use of their labour and skills yet is not willing to acknowledge their rights as workers. In Chapter 1 titled "Staten Island", Cornejo Villavicencio discusses her Ecuadorian background, but states that her parents are "New Yorkers to the core" (2021: 4). They moved to the United States in order to repay a debt to the author's father's family, leaving Cornejo Villavicencio behind, who was then brought to the United States a few years later (2021: 5). The situation was almost the opposite to Vargas's own migration experience, travelling alone with a man he believed to be a relative to join grandparents in California, expecting his mother to follow him soon. Cornejo Villavicencio, on the other hand, was the one left behind, first for just a year which then stretched into a few more. Eventually, she narrates that she was brought to join her parents due to being "a gifted girl" (ibid.).

Another similarity to Vargas emerges here, as Cornejo Villavicencio's tuition was covered by a rich benefactor (2021: 5–6). Later, she writes about receiving financial help while at Harvard from "a very successful Wall Street man" she had become acquainted with through a nongovernmental organisation (2021: 6). The experiences recounted in both Vargas's and Cornejo Villavicencio's memoirs emphasize the important role of benefactors and support from those with citizenship and means, highlighting in the process a multi-tiered American society in which social advancement on personal merits alone may be impossible, questioning the existence of any American dream. The model American or model migrant is therefore reliant upon others and never entirely self-made. The economic realities of Cornejo Villavicencio's parents connect with Vargas's grandparents and their distrust in American legal practices. However, the belatedness present throughout Vargas's memoir is not present in Cornejo Villavicencio's to the same degree.

The chapter then goes on to outline meetings with labourers on Staten Island, in the aftermath of the election in 2016 when Trump is inaugurated the following January. Cornejo Villavicencio decides to meet and talk to undocumented day labourers, "a parasitic blight" in the eyes of

"legislators and immigration advocates" (2021: 9). Juan Thomas Ordóñez (2015: 1–2) confirms these negative stereotypes in his book on day labourers, arguing that they are seen as "undesirable" migrants of Mexican origin, having arrived by irregular means, often remain "unassimilated" and work jobs off the record in ways that are seen as harming the official economy and job market. Although Ordóñez does not state explicitly whose views he is citing, they do correlate with Cornejo Villavicencio's words about a "parasitic blight". She recounts visiting a collective for day labourers on Staten Island, comparing the men she sees and meets to her father, remarking on this as something inevitable: "I see my father's face in their every one, […] the light will always fall this way" (2021: 13). She discusses a law in Arizona that enabled officials to ask anyone they deemed potentially undocumented for papers, essentially relying on looks and who seemed undocumented by appearance alone (ibid.). Cornejo Villavicencio admits that certain features are a giveaway, particularly among those themselves undocumented, and that her father's backpack "was a red flag" (2021: 14).

The father reappears when Cornejo Villavicencio outlines some of the work she has done for the book, spending time with labourers in streets, at coffee shops, lunch restaurants, even gone to parties and to the City Hall to attend testimonials (ibid.). Further, she writes about associating "acrylic blankets" with the loneliness of day labourers "alone in their rented single rooms" and associating her father's "missing teeth and swollen hands" with the labourers (2021: 16). The purpose of the book thus seems deeply personal, despite the fairly thin autobiographical introduction. The stories of the people the author meets intertwine with her personal life and family members, and the work of nonfiction takes on a dimension that is neither entirely journalistic nor autobiographical. This is a recurring form for many of the migration stories examined in this book: they balance between the autobiographical, the journalistic and the advocacy dimension.

The chapter goes on to recount stories of migrants Cornejo Villavicencio meets on Staten Island, and she weaves their accounts together with recent tragedies in the United States. One of the people interviewed is named Joaquín, who arrived in the United States with the help of a coyote, crossing the desert at night (2021: 20). Eventually, he became involved with the clean-up after 9/11, working in Ground Zero: "He feels proud of the work he did there" (2021: 22). Joaquín also took part as a volunteer in the efforts to help residents after Hurricane Sandy struck Staten Island in

2014. Cornejo Villavicencio outlines in detail the work he did, helping residents, for example providing to elderly women with inflatable beds: "It is one of the most prized memories of his life" (2021: 27). The stories of Joaquín work to emphasize the selflessness and community spirit of undocumented migrants, whose existence remains precarious and uncertain. Their service for people and for society itself is highlighted and offered in contrast to the comparison to them being seen as a "parasitic blight" Cornejo Villavicencio mentioned at the beginning of the memoir.

In contrast to the hardworking men providing community service, Cornejo Villavicencio ends the chapter on a more sinister note, providing the story of Ubaldo, a homeless, alcoholised man who drowned in a basement during the hurricane, having attempted to rescue a squirrel and eventually staying in the basement even though he could have made it out (2021: 29). More remarkable and noteworthy than the story about Ubaldo are the questions Cornejo Villavicencio asks: "Did this happen? Are we in gangs? Do we steal Social Security numbers? Do we traffic our own children across the border? Is this book nonfiction?" (2021: 30). The questions function as a reminder for the reader to stay alert not only about the life stories recounted in the book, but also about the dominant narratives internalized about migrants. Cornejo Villavicencio weaves the two together, blurring the lines between them, between fact and fiction, and even between the people she meets and the stories she narrates. She asserts at the beginning of the book that "[n]ames of persons have all been changed. Names of places have all been changed. Physical descriptions have all been changed. Or have they?" (2021: xv). From the outset, Cornejo Villavicencio challenges the reader to revisit their assumptions and prejudices and to be open to the complexities of the lives of the undocumented, depicting them "as the weirdos we all are outside of our jobs" (2021: xvi). Not only does she attempt to revise the narrative of undocumented migrants, but also to challenge the facts that we take for granted even when reading a memoir such as this.

The story of Ubaldo and the questions asked also place the verisimilitude of the memoir in a different light. As Sonia Werner (2020: 38) explains, verisimilitude "signifies conventions of representation that make a given discourse seem 'true' or consonant with a reality conceived of as historical". Ubaldo may or may not have been a real person, and the details Cornejo Villavicencio's recounts about his life may be accurate or not, but the central message is that societal assumptions and narratives about migrants need to be questioned and scrutinized. When suggesting that

names of people and descriptions may not have been changed, Cornejo Villavicencio proposes that nothing is as it seems, that conventions of autobiographical writing or journalistic reportage do not apply to her nonfictional book, and that any clear-cut categories or literary genres cannot adequately represent experiences of undocumented migrants.

The Undocumented Americans is anchored in real-life events, despite its creative take on autobiographical truths. An entire chapter is dedicated to Ground Zero, in which Cornejo Villavicencio reports in more detail about the people who participated in the efforts to clean up the area, many of whom were undocumented according to Cornejo Villavicencio and became seriously ill due to the work at Ground Zero (2021: 32–33). The detrimental effects of the cleanup on people who worked in the area have been well documented (see for example Luft et al. 2011; Perlman et al. 2011; Vanderlinden 2011). One of them is Paloma, who suffers from "sleep apnea, PTSD, depression, anxiety, gastrointestinal issues. She also has breast cancer" (2021: 45). According to Paloma, the migrants brought to work at Ground Zero did not know about the threats to their health, otherwise "we wouldn't have gone in" (ibid.). The comment indicates exploitation, something to which other migrants interviewed by Cornejo Villavicencio also attest. Enrique, another worker who was part of the cleanup efforts, recounts how the contracting companies were owned by white Americans, who hired Hispanic subcontractors, who in in their turn hired labourers (2021: 36). The hierarchy is thus made clear, with day labourers, undocumented migrants, at the bottom of the ladder, doing the most dangerous and arduous work.

The chapter also deals with the situation for immigrants post-9/11, an event which "changed the immigration landscape forever" (2021: 40). Cornejo Villavicencio's father comes into the narrative again, as she observes the changes in legislature brought on by a stricter approach to immigrants, including withdrawing the right to a driver's licence for undocumented people (2021: 41). Cornejo Villavicencio sees this change as the point when "my dad started dying" (ibid.). She recounts that he lost his job as a taxi driver due to losing his licence and started working as a deliveryman for a restaurant instead (2021: 50). In a chapter titled "Miami", Cornejo Villavicencio opens up about her mother as well, writing that she was at home first, and then, later, starting to work outside the home, becoming "this whole new woman, emancipated and bold, and it caused problems at home" (2021: 58). The changed immigration landscape intersects with her family and the losses suffered due to it, and her

own experiences of being left behind by her parents further complicate the narrative.

Cornejo Villavicencio examines her response to her parents leaving her, to the effect it may or may not have had on her life and mental health, but she also examines how her life as an undocumented migrant has affected her (2021: 59), "watching my parents pursue their dream in this country and then having to deal with its carcass". The comment indicates that the so-called American dream may once have been real and something worth pursuing, and possible to achieve, but that this is no longer the case. The precarious existence connected with being undocumented is described as feeling like a "hologram", without a sense of safety and continuity (2021: 60). She refers to "the white supremacist state" which would "slowly kill my father and break my family apart" (ibid.). The personal fear and calamity caused by immigration legislation is juxtaposed and to some extent equated with the experience of being left behind as a baby.

The American dream is refuted by Cornejo Villavicencio, who states that she tried to argue that it did not exist but that it only led to "some all-star immigrants" telling "a different story and Americans ate that up" (2021: 60–61). The statement again refers to the problem of recognition and who gets legitimacy for their stories and experiences. Placing migrants into different categories is done on many levels, as is made clear throughout this book as well. The indication is that there is not enough attention and legitimacy to go around for all migration experiences, and Cornejo Villavicencio writes about experiencing this as feeling like she was crazy (2021: 61). She then goes on to the list the mental health diagnoses she has, "borderline personality disorder, major depression, anxiety, and OCD" and argues that research shows how the brain functions change due to being separated from parents at an early age (ibid., see Englund 2024 for a more detailed discussion of mental health and illness in the memoir). Again, the author asks some difficult questions in this context, reflecting not only on her own mental struggles but those of others in a similar situation: "Who will we become? Who will take care of us" (ibid.). The questions reveal a lingering sense of fear, lack of security and continuity, as well as a sense of being outside society's safety net.

The question about who will take care of them relates to healthcare and uneven access to it. Cornejo Villavicencio recounts care her parents received at a local community centre (p. 66), and states that she herself has always been lucky enough to get adequate care. She visits a woman who offers a cleanse that will keep immigration agents off her trail, a service to

which Cornejo Villavicencio remains sceptical (2021: 82): "I also believe an immigration cleanse is bullshit because nobody can protect anybody from ICE". The ritual ends with Cornejo Villavicencio being asked how much this protection from ICE means to her, which she interprets as being asked for more money for the cleanse than the nearly 300 dollars she will anyway pay (p. 84). Another harrowing story concerns that of Salome, an Argentinian migrant whose husband died of brain cancer without access to treatment due to being uninsured (p. 85). They, too, tried alternative remedies as modern medicine was not available, and Salome explains that in such a situation, people try anything and are ready to believe in anything, for lack of options (p. 86–87). The examples speak of desperation, though Cornejo Villavicencio's visit to the cleanser was likely done mostly for the purpose of the book.

Problems with access to healthcare are revisited in a chapter entitled "Flint", that deals with the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, and how it affected the undocumented community. Merrit Kennedy (2016) reports for NPR that Flint changed the water supply in 2014, which led to significant reduction in water quality as lead was contaminating the water. Cornejo Villavicencio writes about Theodoro, an undocumented resident of Flint, who found out about the contaminated water through international news and struggled to get water from distribution sites due to not having proper ID (p. 107). A more tragic story concerns Ivy, who was pregnant during the crisis and developed skin rashes but was not properly examined by doctors, and eventually gave birth to a baby girl who did not respond as expected to interaction, again being told by doctors to wait: "The doctors waited four months before determining the baby was blind from the lead poisoning" (p. 113). The accounts retold seem to fall into the category of "slow violence", a concept developed by Rob Nixon (2011: 2):

> By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. […] We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales.

The water crisis in Flint can certainly be seen as a form of slow violence, including slow responses by official and institutions to address the immediate problem, as well as to address health issues that occur over time and

in less direct ways. Much of the human encounters with undocumented people recounted in *The Undocumented Americans* could fall under the category of slow violence, including withholding medical treatment.

The baby is reported as having regained her eyesight but that there is no way of knowing what the consequences of the lead exposure will be (p. 114). Cornejo Villavicencio even goes as far as indicating that the difficulties and dangers are intentional, referring to the "government": "They want us all dead, Latinxs, black people, they want us dead, and sometimes they'll slip something into our bloodstreams to kill us slowly and sometimes they'll shoot and shoot and shoot […]". The violence is thus described as sometimes slow and sometimes more direct and brutal, but primarily as intentional. Cornejo Villavicencio presents herself as a counterforce to the slow violence, stating that she is "not a journalist" due to her engagement with the people she meets and their various problems: "I send water. I fight with immigration lawyers. I raise money. I make arrangements with supernatural spirits to stop deportations" (ibid.). The position of Cornejo Villavicencio is one of journalist, auto/biographer, activist. As with Vargas's account, *The Undocumented Americans*, too, works multiple purposes in a number of directions. The author calls herself "a professional immigrant's daughter" (p. 115) and states that her purpose is to "tell this story", about what she sees as intentional in the way the people of Flint were treated, and that this translates into larger contexts as well: "What I saw in Flint was a microcosm of the way government treats the undocumented everywhere, making the conditions in this country as deadly and toxic and inhumane as possible so that we will self-deport" (ibid.). The book produced by Cornejo Villavicencio becomes a collective document, just as she intended, by a Dreamer but not solely about her own life. Life narratives by so-called Dreamers work to construct a "group identity" through their texts, and they "tell a *collective* story of oppression, disenfranchisement, and nonrecognition" (Caminero-Santangelo 2016: 228; italics in the original). This is the case for Cornejo Villavicencio's book, too, even though she distances herself from her Dreamer status and focuses her work on day labourers.

Nixon (2011: 3) asks in his book how "the long emergencies of slow violence" could be turned into "stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention". Cornejo Villavicencio's memoir/reportage could be seen as one such attempt, to make the stories visible and to bring attention to them. The book also has a personal purpose. In the final chapter, Cornejo Villavicencio (2021: 164) observes that she speaks to "children of immigrants partly to get a blueprint for myself because I'm lost and I'm scared". The situation is outlined as markedly

different in comparison to her brother, who has citizenship due to having been born in New York (p. 162). Both Vargas and Cornejo Villavicencio address the arbitrariness attached to citizenship, bestowed on some and refused for others, and the massive consequences for individuals like themselves. The memoir, through its multiple purposes and registers, offers a glimpse into the lives of undocumented migrants in America, stories of those unseen and unheard, yet also embarks on a very private journey to make sense of life mired in uncertainty.

Conclusion: Dreamers In Between

The Dreamer status is revisited in both memoirs or works of nonfiction examined in this chapter, as the two authors, Vargas and Cornejo Villavicencio, define their status as such, yet remain critical of any special category of migrants, emphasizing the need to go beyond labels of more and of less deserving migrants. This is expressed by Vargas in terms of changing the "master narrative of immigration" (168), and by Cornejo Villavicencio through her efforts to present migrants as the complex, multifaceted people they are, with complex thoughts, desires and dreams, no different from those who have citizenship. Both texts can thus be said to advocate for migrants' rights, in Vargas's book through his outreach work for Define American, and in Cornejo Villavicencio's account through the people she meets and the many ways in which she tries to help them. To deserve or not to deserve citizenship is at the heart of the texts which critiques notions of good and bad immigrants and addresses the question of who gets to be American and on what terms. Cornejo Villavicencio addresses this in the very title of her book, indicating that the people she meets and interviews are undocumented Americans, not just undocumented. Vargas, too, spends large parts of his memoir outlining his efforts to become as American as possible, so as not to be discovered and outed as an undocumented immigrant. Living in the shadows is exemplified in his memoir in terms of his own experiences, lying to get by and fearing arrest. Cornejo Villavicencio, on the other hand, explores the shadows in terms of people she meets who for example struggle to get the healthcare they need.

Vargas, for his part, perhaps unintentionally, seems to emphasize the need for belonging to the nation-state, that it is the prerequisite for any kind of more global belonging. Being undocumented closes all doors at once, except, perhaps, that of the return. It is hinted at, at the very end of

Vargas's memoir, when he calls his mother and tells her of his unrooted existence in the United States with no permanent address. His mother responds that perhaps "it's time to come home" (p. 230). The questions asked by both Vargas and Cornejo Villavicencio; "what would you have done?" (Vargas 2018: 71) and "who will we become?" Villavicencio 2021: 61), speak to this impossible situation, unable to stay and unable to go, and to the lack of response on an official level, other than what Cornejo Villavicencio asserts in terms of an attempt to make people "self-deport" (2021: 115). The questions also work to undermine dominant narratives of migrants and their lives, to highlight the impossible choices people without papers may be left with, and to call for responsibility for the lives of people who have no access to citizenship. Responsibility is placed on American authorities, legislation, and attitudes towards migrants.

Both Vargas's and Cornejo Villavicencio's status, and those of other so-called Dreamers, is perhaps at the core of the most complex issues with migration. What should societies do with people who reside illegally within their borders, but who arrived in ways entirely out of their own control, long before they became adults? Those whose lives are rooted in the new home, and for whom deportation would prove an insurmountable disruption? Both Cornejo Villavicencio and Vargas are deeply critical of the United States where they are both living, even more so in Cornejo Villavicencio's memoir, holding the country accountable for obstacles in terms of receiving citizenship and the discriminatory measures undocumented people face. Yet the problem remains: how should migration be handled and what rules and regulations should there be for those who wish to migrate? The following chapter hopes to if not answer then at least address some of these questions in its examination of two nonfictional books that ponder measures to control, or to stop controlling, migration, particularly relating to certain aspects of it.

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CHAPTER 5

Fortress Europe vs. Open Borders

In a review of *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam* (2018; originally published in 2017) by Douglas Murray, Gervase Vernon (2018: 584) writes that Murray's "argument against easy migration is often conducted against a position almost nobody holds: the idea that there should be no borders". The statement that "almost nobody holds" such a position is at the core of this chapter which examines Murray's book in contrast to and combination with *Against Borders: The Case for Abolition* (2022) by Gracie May Bradley and Luke de Noronha, a text which speaks against the statement by Vernon. The backgrounds of the authors are essential, as this chapter inevitably dives deep into migration politics. Murray presents himself on his webpage as "an author and journalist based in Britain" and has published extensively in *The Spectator* as well as other journals and media outlets (see Murray's webpage). Since the publication of *Strange Death*, Murray has gone on to publish three more books. Vernon characterizes Murray as "neoconservative". The backgrounds of Bradley and de Noronha are arguably different, introducing themselves at the end of *Against Borders*. Bradley is described as a founding member of the campaign Against Borders for Children, as well as having written for numerous media outlets, and de Noronha is an academic at University College London as well as a writer.

The statement by Vernon, that few people support a policy of no borders, is complicated by contemporary research on migration. The book *Open Borders: In Defense of Free Movement* (2018, edited by Reece Jones)

L. Englund, *Storying Contemporary Migration*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-62003-4_5

states in the introduction that people in general "do not question that countries should have the right to decide who can cross borders and enter their territory" (Jones 2018a: 2) and that the starting point today is "that the world is divided into countries, that those countries have the right to institute laws and use resources in their territories, and that those territories are defined by borders" (Jones 2018a: 5). The volume then proceeds to question these assumptions, combining the work of scholars who promote open borders with activists "to put forward a clear, concise, and convincing case for a world without movement restrictions at borders" (ibid.). The book was published before the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw borders close across the world, and also before Russia's war on Ukraine began in February 2022. Borders remain important to unprecedented degrees in our contemporary world, and national sovereignty has gained new meaning despite calls for open borders.

Further research that addresses open or no borders, or heavily criticizes current border policies, has given rise for example to the following statements by migration scholars in the fields of geography, political philosophy, and political and social sciences:

> With the construction of a gated isle of wealth, and with the conscious denial of regular access to citizens from 135 countries, the EU widens the gap globally and regulates mortality of people on a global scale. It produces a segment of the world population willing to risk their lives to get into the EU. (Henk van Houtum 2010: 968)

> However, neither open-borders nor no-border ideas are intended as utopian visions, but rather as critiques of the current condition of borders that differentiate between people based on their citizenship, nationality, ethnicity, or 'race' and that are selectively open only to some people but remain closed to many others. (Harald Bauder 2015: 401)

> In other words, even if there are reasons at the *level of principle* that states' claims to regulate migration outweigh the competing claims of many people to migrate, *practical difficulties* in avoiding dominating migrants in the process of enforcing migration controls make them unjust. The result is that the nature of immigration administration and enforcement commits us to much more open borders *even if there are in principle good normative reasons for allowing states to restrict immigration*. (Alex Sager 2017: 48; italics in the original)

> Economists, however, have long argued that open borders are and always have been an effective solution to enhance economic growth, address global

> inequality, and reduce global poverty. National borders in fact impede economic growth. They trap human capital in locations where people's talents and skills go unused, and they cement inequality in place. (Christine Leuenberger 2018: 180)

> A different trajectory could be envisaged, of course, were European publics and political élites to embrace the benefits of open borders—internally and externally. Many economic analyses point to the strong social and economic benefits of immigration. Most normative arguments establish a clear responsibility to extend solidarity beyond borders—that is, to de-bordering. (Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2021: 464)

The comments seem to indicate that it is not the existence of borders that is the central problem but the way in which they are enforced. This is highlighted in some of the other chapters as well, for example in the previous section on Jose Antonio Vargas's memoir, in which the author asserts that countries do have "a right to define and defend its borders", and that nations also have the right to know their citizens and inhabitants, but that "[m]igration is the most natural thing people do" (2018: 140). The comment reflects what scholars have stated, that nation-states do have a right to control their borders, but no one seems to know exactly how this should be implemented.

In contrast to these calls for open or no borders, there have also been voices that speak in an opposite direction, for example as in the following comments by Yael Tamir, whose book *Why Nationalism?* (2020) discusses the forms of nationalism present today, addressed in the introductory chapter. In an article published during the Covid-19 pandemic, Tamir writes the following: "The virus does not recognise national boundaries, but the struggle against it reflects a distinctly national state of mind. One by one, nation-states closed down, taking measures to protect their citizens, putting their nation first" (2020: 541). Covid was a fact when Bradley and de Noronha published their book in 2022 but had not yet taken place when Murray wrote his. Thus, the situation with regard to borders can be seen as shifting in unexpected ways according to crises and upheavals that may be hard to predict. Despite uncertainty, Tamir, too, offers some hope, calling for a transformation that will emphasize "national solidarity, re-legitimising the welfare state while fostering a desire to forge international cooperation across national borders" (Tamir 2020: 543). With these varied viewpoints in mind, this chapter proceeds to examine the two primary texts in focus from a perspective of Fortress Europe

versus open borders. While parts of this book focus on Anglo-American contexts, this chapter remains more centred on Europe.

The title of this chapter refers to the expression "Fortress Europe", which has gained some attention in previous research. Bastian Sendhardt (2013: 24) outlines that border scholars have come to different conclusions with regard to the European Union and its borders, with one group claiming that the EU makes borders less significant, whereas the other group argues that the EU is working to fortify its external borders, hence the expression Fortress Europe. The migrant crisis of 2015–2016 and the Covid pandemic saw borders close within Europe as well, indicating that Fortress Europe is no longer about protecting external borders of the union but also those within. From a media studies and intercultural communication perspective, Jiska Engelbert, Isabel Awad and Jacco van Sterkenburg (2019: 137) argue that the idea of Fortress Europe balances between openness and freedom of movement on the one hand and managing potential problems arising from this on the other They acknowledge the "tension" between these positions, and state that "political or ideological principles and discursive work" play a significant role for its mediation. Such principles are examined throughout this book and also feature in relation to the works investigated in this chapter.

Migration Statistics

This chapter examines statements made by Murray as well as Bradley and de Noronha with regard to migration statistics and policies, and therefore some data on migration to Europe, and in this case the European Union specifically, is needed before any further analysis. "Statistics on migration to Europe" reports on an official website of the European Union that currently, 5.3% (23.7 million people) are non-EU citizens, and that 8.4% (37.5 million people) were born elsewhere, not in another member state. Reasons for valid residence permits are also given from the end of 2021, stating that family constitutes the main reason for migration, with "other" being the second main reason. Asylum constitutes 9% and work 20%. Non-EU residents are reported as over-represented in for example cleaning services, care, and construction.

Net migration to the EU was almost 1 million in 2020, and statistics from 2021 show that first residence permits were issued to Ukrainians as the largest group, with Morocco, Belarus and India following. Asylum seekers arrived mainly from Asia (29%), Africa (25%), and the Middle

East (25%), with top nationalities being Syrians, Afghans, Iraqi, Pakistani and Turkish. Germany and France were the recipients of a large part of the applications. The asylum system is also outlined, and its effectiveness is addressed, with 774,100 applications pending at the end of May 2022. Irregular border crossings are listed, with Syrians (23.2%) and Afghans (8.4%) constituting the largest groups, followed by Tunisians and Moroccans. There were almost 200,000 documented irregular border crossings in 2021, and almost 154,000 between January and July 2022, with an increase of 85% since 2021 ("Statistics on migration to Europe").

Judy Dempsey (2022) writes for *Carnegie Europe*, a research office that conducts foreign and security policy analysis in Europe, about migration in the EU and particularly concerning its external borders, citing Blanca Garcés-Mascareñas, who argues the following: "Migration could be *the* crisis among all crises facing Europe nowadays for the simple reason that it has become an intractable issue. While the economics of migration asks for millions of new migrant workers every year, the politics of migration demands a closure of borders". The term "economics of migration" is relevant in this context, as statistics cited indicate very clearly that non-EU citizens are over-represented in jobs that would require lower education, so-called blue-collar work, and under-represented in professions that require more skilled labour. A serious question of ethics comes into this, as migration is currently creating a two-layered society in which EU citizens work more skilled jobs whereas migrants do menial work. Promoting this kind of migration seems somewhat problematic. Europe is portrayed as needing to attract more economic migrants who can do tasks European citizens do not want to perform. A significant question concerns the future prospects of migrants brought to Europe to perform unskilled work with modest salaries. Their children will be born as citizens, and it is possible, even likely, that they will want their children to have a better, easier life, and encourage them to pursue higher education. Will more migrants then be brought to Europe in order to continue the cycle of unskilled labour for migrants and skilled labour for those who are born as citizens?

Historically, migrants have been used for unskilled work, to which for example American history testifies. The United States is often seen as a nation built by migrants, and when looking back in time, this rings true to some extent. In the seventeenth century, large numbers of English, Irish and Scottish migrants moved to North America, many of whom were indentured servants (Seeley 2021: 24). A hundred years later or so, the

majority of people arriving were Africans brought as slaves (ibid.). In the English empire in the seventeenth century, migration was used as a means to control the population, and people who were not regarded as useful and desirable were often shipped off to the colonies, for example convicts or political dissidents (Seeley 2021: 28–29). The slave trade brought 1.4 million Africans to North America in less than a hundred years, between the mid-seventeenth century and the mid-eighteenth century (Seeley 2021: 34). Raymond L. Cohn (2009) has examined the antebellum period and states that immigration to the United States from Europe began increasing in the 1820s (17). The arrival of unskilled labourers enabled economic growth due to improved infrastructure, and the US was able to provide jobs to new arrivals (Cohn 2009: 8). Ian Tyrrell (2015: 63–64) argues that despite migration to the United States often being seen in terms of people seeking freedom, "the stimulus to migration everywhere was overwhelmingly economic". To that extent, migration has historically been about finding better opportunities elsewhere, and migrants have often been so-called blue-collar workers.

In more contemporary times, research shows that those with refugee status tend to fair worse in the labour market than migrants with similar characteristics (Fasani et al. 2022: 352; Arendt et al. 2022: 550; Irastorza and Bevelander 2017: 5). However, Arendt, Dustmann and Ku (2022: 553), who conduct their study in a Danish context, observe that part of the reason why refugees may find it difficult to navigate the labour market in the receiving country is the impermanence of their status, as many countries no longer give permanent residence status to refugees. Nahikari Irastorza and Pieter Bevelander (2017: 5) write from a Swedish perspective, acknowledging that Sweden received a large number of migrants in 2015–2016, and has a long history of migration. While the country has generally been more lenient with regard to permanent residency, Irastorza and Bevelander find that asylum seekers struggle more with finding employment in Sweden than in other countries that have a high number of refugees (ibid.). They argue that lack of adequate education is a problem for certain refugee groups in terms of finding employment (Irastorza and Bevelander 2017: 275). There is thus certain conflict between the studies cited, and Bevelander and Irastorza (2020: 23) state that such conflicting results emerge in studies also with regard to whether refugees have different labour market outcomes than other migrants. Research is therefore somewhat inconclusive.

While this chapter deals more explicitly with migration in European and British contexts, a global perspective is central too, as Bradley and de Noronha speak for a global reconfiguration of borders in their book. However, there are also other voices. Jacek Kucharczyk from the Institute of Public Affairs in Warsaw argues that the experience of housing millions of Ukrainians fleeing war "should re-vitalize a pan-European debate about migration and asylum, while the EU institutions and civil society should press the governments to apply the same high standards to other arrivals of people seeking protection, for example by ending the scandalous push-backs on the Polish-Belarusian border" (Dempsey 2022). The comment likely refers to the crisis that erupted on the border between Poland and Belarus in 2021, when people from Iraq and neighbouring countries were offered visas to Belarus from which they were then provided passage to the Polish and Latvian borders (Dempsey 2021). Dempsey (ibid.) writes about the failures of EU to address the problem of migration, drawing on the crisis in 2015 when a large number of people entered Europe through irregular migration routes, and argues that the union was "bitterly divided over giving security and shelter to refugees fleeing the war in Syria". The statement is problematic as not all people entering Europe were Syrians.

Pew Research Center reports that 1.3 million people arrived in Europe in 2015, with Syrians making up 29%. Other large groups arrived from Afghanistan (nearly 200,000) and Iraq (127,000). Further, the report ("Number of Refugees to Europe") states that

> men made up nearly three-fourths (73%) of Europe's asylum seekers in 2015. Refugees from leading origin countries such as Syria (71%), Iraq (75%) and Afghanistan (80%) were also predominately male in 2015. By contrast, asylum seekers from other top origin countries, such as Gambia (97% male), Pakistan (95% male) and Bangladesh (95% male), were almost entirely male.

Of these asylum seekers, the main part were young men aged 18 to 34 ("Number of Refugees to Europe" 2016).

Pierre Viemont, senior fellow at Carnegie Europe, comments on the crisis in 2015 and 2016, arguing that Europe did not just fail in its treatment of the situation: "On the contrary: in the midst of the 2015 crisis, they managed not without pain to restore order on the Balkans route and beef up their civilian force in charge of border controls. Additionally, they reached an agreement with Turkey that still holds today, despite criticisms

from many humanitarian quarters". The current refugee crisis due to the attack on Ukraine also gains some acclaim from Viemont, who states that "Europe has shown a faultless solidarity in hosting more than 5 million Ukrainian refugees" (Dempsey 2022). The generous treatment and welcoming of Ukrainian refugees have also been met with criticism, particularly when compared to the reluctance to accept migrants from the Middle East or Africa. Addie Esposito (2022) explores reasons behind this difference in treatment and puts the blame on islamophobia, racism, othering, as well as the political necessity in Europe to treat Ukrainians well due to a simple dichotomy of right and wrong, one which Esposito argues is not present in the war in Syria to the same degree.

Ukrainians have mainly sought refuge in nearby countries, with Poland having received 1,5 million people and Germany more than a million according to the UNHCR ("Ukraine Refugee Situation" n.d.). Many have also returned or contemplate returning to Ukraine (Odarchenko 2022). The large majority of arrivals have been women and children; 90% according to *UN Women* ("Rapid Gender Analysis of Ukraine" 2022). This is not to underplay any potential racism and preferential treatment (anti-immigrant attitudes and their connection with race in Europe have been studied for example by Ponce 2023), but there may also be other factors to consider. The shock of war in the middle of Europe needs to be taken into account, as many nations seem to have genuinely believed that there would never be any more wars on the continent. A war on one's doorstep is, inevitably, more shocking and threatening than one which is fought thousands of kilometres away. A tornado or flood which strikes one's home village is more devastating than one which happens on another continent. This does not make the suffering in other locations any less acute, but the sad reality is that not all wars and crises are equal, nor will they ever be.

To return to the border crisis between Poland and Belarus in 2021, Dempsey (2021) asks whether it could have been possible to "arrange facilities inside the Polish and Lithuanian borders to document and assess the status of the migrants", in order to diminish the suffering of those on the move. However, she is also understanding toward the policies of the EU countries involved, as providing help and shelter to migrants may have further exacerbated the situation with more and more arriving, continuing the "weaponization of migrants". Such weaponization is an effective measure as EU's difficulty in finding ways to deal with irregular migration is

well known, making it an easy target for anyone wanting to cause disruption and discord. Eventually, Dempsey (2021) makes a comment that seems prophetic in hindsight, considering Russia's attack on Ukraine: "One wonders if Belarus and Russia are itching for what could be a dangerous confrontation with NATO". The EU would thus need to make migration one of its priorities and work to find ways to manage irregular migration. This is not just a question of border security, economy, or cultural unity, but a matter of primary importance if European countries want to make sure that migration cannot be used as a means to coerce and cause internal strife and division.

These problems facing Europe have been extensively addressed in an article for *The Guardian* by Ruben Andersson and David Keen (2023a), in which the authors examine recent migration policies in Europe and their failures, and they also ask "who is benefiting from the wreckage". They claim that "assorted warlords" in Libya have made money from migration deals with Europe, while simultaneously continuing to threaten with new mass arrivals. They also mention deals made with Turkey, citing Kelly M. Greenhill's book *Weapons of Mass Migration: Forced Displacement, Coercion, and Foreign Policy* (2010). The book was written before the migrant crisis in 2015 and current events, yet Greenhill's study carries weight still today. She argues that societies which become targets of what she terms "coercive engineered migration" (2010: 3) will generally become divided over what to do with the arrivals (2010: 4). Further, Greenhill observes that such a method "depends on the existence of domestic discord and political contestation" and that "liberal democracies have indeed been the most popular target" in recent decades (ibid.). Europe's democratic and liberal governments are left without tools to properly address the situation, yet Andersson and Keen are critical of Europe's deals which have given "authoritarian leaders" a powerful mechanism with which to put pressure on the continent.

The article is based on Andersson and Keen's recent book *Wreckonomics: Why It's Time to End the War on Everything* (2023), in which the authors address "wars" that have been waged in recent decades for example on drugs, terror, and migration, and propose ways in which to end such approaches which have often been quite unsuccessful. These ways include making a better "cost-benefit analysis" (2023b: 23), so as to identify why "a given intervention persists despite not meeting its stated goals" (2023b: 234). While it may be impossible to estimate the costs of Europe's

migration policies, an attempt to do so to some degree was made by Wouter van Ballegooji and Cecilia Navarra in 2018, who observe in their report for The European Parliament that the costs of current migration measures and policies amount to 49 billion euros per year (2018: 7). The sum includes calculation of costs relating to "control of irregular migration and cost of human trafficking", as well as tax loss due to a "shadow economy", healthcare costs and costs relating to reception and detention (2018: 8). Estimating costs for a different kind of migration model for Europe could be useful, but it is necessary to remember that any calculations are purely speculative. Eventually, Andersson and Keen suggest that in order to address irregular migration, or "insecure migrations" as they call it, requires rethinking how European labour markets are governed to protect those without citizenship, "improving legal pathways", and improving processes for "responsibility-sharing for refugees" (2023b: 241). They use the word "refugees" while it is likely that they mean asylum seekers. In short, *Wreckonomics*, too, puts responsibility for failed migration practices and human suffering solely on Europe. Europe needs to do better according to the authors, yet they state that "[w]e are not trying to write a set of policy prescriptions here" (2023b: 241). Perhaps this is the core of the issue, that researchers describe problems and what they think is wrong with current policies, yet no one dares to offer a solution. The two books examined in this chapter hope to offer something more than just a disclaimer.

This lengthy introduction to this chapter is necessary for a number of reasons, mainly due to the debate surrounding migration, in which statements made sometimes draw on statistical facts and sometimes not, and more often than not, they are used for a variety of social and political purposes. Mirjana Tomic, project manager at Fjum Forum for journalism and media in Austria pinpoints the problem with migration: "The main issue must be addressed: why is migration a problem? Is it about culture, demography, religion, or language? Is it about economy? Is it about discrimination? Are European societies ready for diversity? Are migrants ready to accept European norms?" (Dempsey 2022). These questions inform this chapter as well, which begins with an analysis of *The Strange Death of Europe* and then proceeds to examine *Against Borders: The Case for Abolition*.

European Values in *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam*

"Europe is committing suicide", asserts Douglas Murray (2018: 1) in the introduction to *The Strange Death of Europe* and attributes this to two factors: migration and subsequent limited integration, as well as losing sight of "its beliefs, traditions and legitimacy" (pp. 2–3). Murray outlines the travels he undertook for the purpose of writing the book, and states that some of the most worthwhile conversations he had were with "Europe's newest arrivals", people who arrived in the south of Europe through various irregular means (pp. 8–9). Such stories will be further analysed in the following chapter which examines stories of those who have arrived in Europe, often as asylum seekers. It is another perspective on irregular migration and one which has dominated headlines throughout Europe for several years. Murray's book, however, begins with the situation in Britain and how migration has changed communities throughout the isles. He outlines legislative changes in the twentieth century that saw borders opened to the world (p. 19).

The Office of National Statistics in Britain reports that in 2011, 7.5 million people in England and Wales were born outside Britain, increasing to 10 million in 2021, which constitute 16.8% of the total population. The most popular countries of birth are India, Poland, Pakistan, and Romania ("International Migration: England and Wales"). The Home Office reports on irregular migration that number of arrivals increased significantly in 2021 and 2022 compared to earlier years, but that this only includes those who were detected by authorities ("Irregular Migration to the UK, Year Ending September 2022"). Of these arrivals between January and September 2022, 87% were male, with more mixed nationalities than in previous years, including Albanians and Afghans. The report also states that the main part of these arrivals claim asylum, with 53% of people arriving "granted refugee status or another type of leave" since 2018 ("Irregular Migration to the UK"). The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford for its part reports that according to census information, "net migration, including British citizens and people moving to or from Scotland and Northern Ireland, averaged 200,000 per year over the decade" ("Net Migration to the UK"). Their analysis is that the estimates made by the Office for National Statistics "were relatively accurate *on average*" (ibid.; italics in the original).

This information is relevant, as Murray (p. 21) argues that there were "massive underestimations of the scale of migration" in the era preceding

the one examined here, relating to the late 1990s and early new millennium, particularly the Labour government under Tony Blair. Will Somerville, Senior Policy Analyst at the Migration Policy Institute, has analysed the Labour government and their relationship to immigration in his book *Immigration Under New Labour* from 2007. In the preface, Demetrios G. Papademetriou (2007: vii) writes that "the Blair government turned Britain into a veritable hotbed of policy innovation, extraordinary activism and a commitment to growth through immigration". Somerville confirms this, writing that Labour "has put migration at the centre of its legislative programme" (2007: 1). Despite this policy, Somerville (2007: 67) also states that politics with regard to asylum seekers has not been more lenient than the previous Conservative government, including the decision by Labour to take away the right to work (ibid.). The information provided by Murray is thus somewhat contestable.

One of Murray's arguments in the chapter on British immigration is that few people in Britain were actually opposed to migration in this era, that polls showed "zero animosity towards immigrants" but that there was concern about the situation (pp. 21–22). Somerville (2007: 134), on the other hand, states that there is, if not animosity, "[p]rejudice against immigrants […] and attitudes have undoubtedly had a bearing on policy". The argument here is that the strict stance on asylum seekers would agree with opinions of average voters, whereas the party's "liberal economic migration policy measures" would not (ibid.). Murray goes on to compare the situation to the rest of Europe, arguing that similar scenarios were playing out in many countries, particularly those that had been colonial powers: "After the process of decolonisation, to varying degrees these former citizens, actually French citizens in the case of Algerians, were felt to be owed something, or at least to be given priority in the guest-workers' schemes" (p. 23). This sense of being owed, according to Murray (ibid.), "suggests that it was inevitable and perhaps even just that in the twentieth century people from these former colonies should return the favour, albeit coming as citizens rather than conquerors".

The topic of colonisation and its connection to contemporary migration emerges in an interview, too, with Murray, conducted by Robert Siegel (2017) for *NPR*. In the interview, Siegel asks the following question:

SIEGEL Do you accept, though, that there's something odd and almost comical about a Brit saying, we never asked for Pakistanis to come to our country en masse when, in fact, no one on the

> Indian subcontinent, to my knowledge, ever asked Britain to come and set up an empire there and decide that it was fit to rule over hundreds of millions of people in that part of the world?

The comment reflects the statement made by Murray that talked about people in former colonies being "owed" something, and Murray's response in the interview is as follows:

> MURRAY It's one interpretation and usage of the word comic. Ironic, perhaps, you'd say. But no, if that is the comparison you'd like to make, then I would throw a question back to you.
> SIEGEL Yeah.
> MURRAY Which is everyone agrees that the colonial era was wrong. I'm not an apologist for empire. But in that case, how long does the reverse colonialism happen for? And if you see it as some kind of blowback for colonialism, then what is the end point of this anti-colonialism?

The indication in Murray's comment is thus that colonialism came and went, that centuries of exploitation and imposing foreign rule eventually ended, yet there is no end in sight to migration from former colonies. This "blowback for colonialism" is actually visible in other material examined for this book. Musa Okwonga (2017: 232) writes in his essay that he grew tired of the "anti-immigrant anger" in British media, and that he, among other black journalists, were called to counter these claims and statements: "I had thought there would by now have been a better public understanding of why so many immigrants seek to come to the United Kingdom. I had thought that there would be a greater level of awareness about the British Empire and its historical role in shaping the world as we see it today" (Okwonga 2017: 233).

Another perspective is offered by Susanne Ramírez de Arellano (2020: 289), who writes about her Puerto Rican background in her essay and argues that part of the debate surrounding the island is whether it is a colony of the United States or not. She also discusses the civil war in El Salvador and American involvement, arguing that "[i]mmigration is retribution; it's payback for the killing fields of Washington" (p. 294). Eventually, she writes that colonialism feels like "forced prostitution; a gulag of the soul" (p. 296). A final example is presented by Sarah Sahim

(2017: 169), who explores the caste system in India and perpetuation of it among migrants in Britain, arguing that "the British are partially responsible for classifying Indians during colonialism" (p. 180). The comments by Okwonga and de Arellano indicate that colonialism is far from over, the end of empire has never fully materialized, and the consequences of decades of colonial rule are very much impacting societies today. Accountability is demanded from former colonial powers with regard to damage done during empire, and the essays cited here connect awkwardly with Murray's statements about the end point of colonialism. The sense of defiance and revenge present in several of the essays in *The Good Immigrant* and *The Good Immigrant USA* speak to more complex and less linear temporal trajectories.

Murray dedicates a chapter to discussing narratives that have been reinforced over the decades to justify high numbers of migration. They include statements that see immigration as "an economic benefit for our countries", that the aging demographic requires immigration, that "immigration makes our societies more cultured and interesting" and eventually that "globalisation makes mass immigration unstoppable" (Murray 2018: 37). Some of these, such as the section on economics, are presented without much factual evidence. Thus, some further investigation is warranted. Murray's comments relate among other things to the welfare state, about the balance between paying taxes and reaping the benefits that welfare states are able to provide (p. 38). Grete Brochmann (2019: 105) reports on the situation in Norway after 2015, when the country received more than 30,000 migrants. Altogether, "almost 850,000 people in Norway had an immigrant background—triple the number in 2000". The change has thus been fast and profoundly transformed society and demographics in Norway, as Brochmann reports. A Commission was given the task to examine the welfare state and the impact of migration, and Brochmann (2019: 107) argues that some of the conclusions provided were for example as follows:

> The Norwegian welfare model is both a resource and a problem when considered in relation to the integration of immigrants and their descendants. The model is vulnerable to the immigration of a high number of adults with low qualifications. At the same time, low economic inequality and solid educational institutions contribute to a high level of mobility among descendants of immigrants. Thus far, Norway has not been sufficiently successful in integrating refugees into the labour market.

The statement thus indicates that the balance between contributing to welfare and benefiting from it is not optimal, and that the narrative about migrants being beneficial for the European labour market is somewhat optimistic, as criticised by Murray too, at least in this particular national context. Further, Brochmann (ibid.) reports that lack of successful immigration of migrants who are from outside Europe may lead to a weakening of "unity and trust and the legitimacy of the social model", due to "increasing economic inequality in conjunction with cultural differences".

Another study from 2021 concerns migration and the welfare state in the Netherlands, Denmark, and Germany (Hedegaard and Bekhuis 2021). The article argues that "a large share of native populations in Europe believe that migrants are a burden on the welfare state; that is, they use welfare services and social benefits substantially more than they contribute to them" (Hedegaard and Bekhuis 2021: 50). They study attitudes towards migrants and find that "migrants from western EU countries were ranked as benefitting the least from the welfare state, closely followed by migrants from rich countries outside Europe, followed at a greater distance by migrants from eastern EU countries and lastly migrants from poor countries outside Europe" (ibid., p. 59). Nora Ratzmann's (2021: 510) study from a German context confirms these notions: "[E]thnicity, defined as the belief in a common origin and shared cultural practices, may significantly shape ideas about national belonging and deservingness to access social benefits and services in Germany". These finding could be connected to the help offered to Ukrainian refugees as well. Are they seen as more deserving due to being culturally closer to receiving nations than migrants from the Middle East?

One more study in the context of the Netherlands by Monique Kremer (2016) studies attitudes among migrants themselves in terms of the welfare state, finding that "the lower-educated labour migrants questioned have little interest in the Dutch welfare state: they just wanted a good employment contract. By contrast, higher-educated Western European immigrants find a generous welfare state very attractive" (p. 397). The findings are noteworthy, contradicting views that migrants with low levels of education would be more interested in welfare benefits. Kremer (2016: 404) observes that "higher-educated Western European labour migrants said that the welfare state increased their quality of life. They preferred to pay higher taxes if it improved quality of life. What they particularly value is the feeling of security that the welfare state gives them". Thus, welfare provide an extra layer of security for people who migrate for economic

reasons. In contrast, for migrants with lower education, "a permanent contract is worth far more than all the social security arrangements put together" (p. 406). A reason for this as presented by Kremer (ibid.) is that such migrants may be "less convinced that the welfare state is also there for them". Thus, attitudes towards the welfare state and potential benefits differ among migrants and these differences are relevant for a discussion of push and pull factors with regard to migration to Europe.

Migrants' attitudes toward the welfare state in Denmark have also been the focus of scholarly research. Karen Nielsen Breidahl, Troels Fage Hedegaard, Kristian Kongshøj and Christian Albrekt Larsen (2021: 157) found in their research that there are "correlations between national identification with the destination country and less willingness to give migrants equal social rights". These correlations have to do with the level of integration into receiving societies, for example indicating that "migrants in mixed couples, typically living together with a native, hold more restrictive attitudes than migrants living alone. These findings indicate the presence of mechanisms of assimilation, which might both be a matter of self-interest and/or identity". The argument is noteworthy, suggesting that migrants who find their place in their new nation and build lives there among those who are originally from that place feel less solidarity with other newcomers. Murray disagrees somewhat in this context, arguing that eventually, it is the migrants themselves who benefit from social security systems in place, from earning money they could not have been earned in their home countries, and for often sending part of it back home (p. 43). The notion of remittances thus comes into the discussion, adding another layer to the complex question of who should benefit from migration.

Murray also comments on the statement that migrants are needed to fill the gaps created throughout Europe due to native-born Europeans not wanting to take on certain tasks. He remains critical of this standpoint, arguing that there is a "racial insinuation that we are above such roles whereas others are eminently suited to them" (p. 50). This is an important comment that must be emphasized, and it highlights the hypocrisy at play when migration is promoted in terms of bringing in people to do menial work. A far more controversial and sensitive topic than labour concerns that of crime, and how it relates to migration to Europe. Murray argues that there was a "taboo" in terms of crime statistics and migration, and that throughout Western Europe, "the period of silence was assisted by the refusal of the authorities to keep or break down any crime statistics based on ethnicity or religion" (p. 56). Murray focuses on sexual crime

and ends the section on a deeply sarcastic note: "[I]f there is a bit more beheading and sexual assault than there used to be in Europe, then at least we also benefit from a much wider range of cuisines" (p. 57). This highly complex topic requires some further investigation.

Göran Adamson (2020) offers a study of crime rates and migration in a Swedish context, and states at the outset that Sweden has "accepted very large immigration, especially from the Middle East and Africa. During the refugee crisis of 2015 only, Sweden received 163,000 migrants" (p. 9). It is thus an interesting context to look at, particularly due to the headlines in recent years about riots and shootings (cf. Kwai and Mahovic 2022; Savage 2022; "Dozens Arrested" 2022; "Sweden Links Riots" 2022). Adamson (2020: 9) reports that more than half of those suspected of a crime in 2017 have migrated to Sweden, and in terms of serious crime such as murder and manslaughter, the number goes up to 73%. Another perspective is offered by Ardavan Khosnood, Henrik Ohlsson, Jan Sundquist and Kristina Sundquist (2021: 124), who state in their research article that sexual crime is on the increase in Sweden. They investigate the role of migrants in these statistics, stating that their findings show that "first- and second-generation immigrants constituted the majority of rape+ offenders" (p. 130). The abbreviation "rape+" here indicates rape, aggravated rape, as well as rape attempts (p. 124).

The study also concludes that more research is needed about the background factors of migrants, as it can "prevent young males from becoming rapists" (p. 130). Adamson (2020: 10) recognises the connection between victims of crime and perpetrators and observes that these often become "clustered both geographically and socially". A study in a Finnish context from 2014 comes to similar conclusions, with Martti Lehti et al. (2014) that the risk related to crime differed between migrants and native inhabitants, and that this could partly be "explained by the high proportion of young men and low-median income level of immigrants". Further, they suggest measures to be implemented in order to rectify the situation: "The findings point towards the importance of social policy measures that promote the employment, education, residential desegregation, and language-skills trainings of immigrants. Furthermore, it might be beneficial if youth policies and youth work provide and promote structured leisure activities among immigrant youths". Thus, statistics offer uncomfortable numbers. However, there are also studies that show the opposite, for example in a German setting which found that crime rates among migrants were

actually higher before the migrant crisis in 2015 (Maghularia and Uebelmesser 2023: 503).

The Strange Death of Europe contains chapters that deal with the lives of those who arrive through irregular means on European shores. Murray dedicates a section to Lampedusa, an Italian island which has become synonymous with asylum seekers crossing the Mediterranean from North Africa. He criticizes operation Mare Nostrum, which, in his words, became a significant pull factor for people wanting to travel to Europe (p. 69). Murray outlines some of the human rights abuses migrants face who rely on the services of smugglers, but also acknowledges the heterogeneity of migrants (pp. 69–70). He recounts meeting people who arrived in Lampedusa in 2015, including a Nigerian man who had lost part of his family during the journey over (p. 71), and also writes about the often quite bleak prospects of those who reach Europe whose futures "can hardly be said to be bright" (p. 73). The book is thus not without empathy toward migrants, which is visible in his report from Kara Tepe on Lesbos, Greece (pp. 86–87) where he talks to migrants who have suffered from torture (p. 90), and about psychological problems among migrants (p. 92). Perhaps this is part of the purpose with Murray's book: to show that the debate about migration need not be polarized (though many would probably argue that Murray's book itself is polarizing), and that the suffering of individual asylum seekers can be acknowledged despite concern about the changing demographics of Europe.

Particularly harsh critique in Murray's book is directed towards former German Chancellor Angela Merkel and her migration policy (se for example p. 79; 94; 123), as well as gaining political support for her multicultural policies (p. 96). As Isabelle Hertner (2021: 461) confirms, Germany took in nearly a million migrants in 2015–2016, with Merkel calling for "more solidarity for refugees and asylum seekers" and allowing people to enter Germany even if they had travelled through other EU countries, going against the Dublin agreement (Hertner 2021: 464). While the crisis of 2015 and 2016 has not faded from memory, more urgent events have occurred that define Merkel's legacy. The Russian war on Ukraine "strips the shine off Angela Merkel's legacy", as expressed in the title of Deborah Cole's (2022) piece for *The Japan Times*. Cole (2022) outlines the waning of support for Merkel since the start of the war, interviewing people who criticize her for making Germany dependent on Russia particularly in terms of liquid natural gas. Kate Connolly (2022) adds that Merkel remains "both defensive and quietly defiant" about her part in German

energy politics and the country's relationship to Russia. The legacy of Merkel has thus lost much of its shine, if not due to her migration policies, then in relation to the war. The finger-pointing exercised by Murray can hopefully open up for critical investigation into the politics of European leaders at pivotal moments in recent history.

Another complex topic in Murray's book relates to that of Islam. Research on Muslim immigrants in Europe offers a variety of perspectives on how the situation should be dealt with, and this chapter looks here at two responses. Hamza Preljević and Mirza Ljubović (2021: 265) emphasize the need for better integration in their article on Muslim migrants in the EU: "To avoid illegality, it is necessary to define a starting point of integration policy, as a necessary step to regularize the status of the migrants, in which the EU member states will accept migrant and refugee communities and their distinct cultures and languages". The comment seems to refer to the opposite of what Murray is advocating, and to represent the exact view he is criticizing, though he also admits that countries in Europe had "failed in turn to assimilate the new arrivals" (p. 114). Failed integration and assimilation emerge in several contexts by researchers as indicated above.

However, Preljević and Ljubović (2021: 270) do not place all responsibility on EU, arguing that "[b]oth the Muslims and the receiving countries bear joint responsibility for the failure of Muslim integration in the EU". Further, this integration should also be two-sided, respecting "the cultural and religious diversity on one side, securing political, social and economic equality on the other side" (ibid.). What exactly this means, however, is left somewhat obscure. A different viewpoint is offered by Bassam Tibi (2010: 126), introduced as a German academic of Syrian origin, having migrated to Europe in 1962. Tibi makes some worthwhile observations in his article, which was written well before the migrant crisis. He addresses the problem of polarized scholarship, part of which he deems "Islamophobic", and part of which he calls "xenophile authors who welcome Islam into Europe unconditionally" (p. 128). He mentions the problem of separate areas in many European cities, where Muslims and non-Muslims live apart, and makes the following noteworthy statement: "Those who affect to deny the challenges not only overlook all of the existing problems by entering a world of wishful thinking, but also unwittingly undermine the possibility of peaceful conflict resolution" (p. 128). This comment is of essence.

Eventually, Tibi (2010: 142) makes a comment that seems to align at least to some degree with Murray's critique: "The question of who is European would relate to an identity based on values, not on ethnicity, not to say on race". This indicates that there is a European identity, that there is something shared among Europeans from different nations, and that it is essentially something that is worthwhile of promoting and preserving. Murray formulates his critique in terms of what he calls a "dominant established narrative of a generation: that anyone in the world can come to Europe and become a European, and in order to become a European you merely need to be a person in Europe" (p. 114). The indication in Tibi's article is that there is indeed something more to being European than to simply being present on the continent. Eventually, he repeats the notion that true integration must happen on both sides, stating that "Muslims living in Europe cannot become Europeans, unless they really want this beyond the limitation of the legal status and passport. The integration aimed at must be based on inclusion on the European side" (2010: 150). Being European is thus attributed to more than legal status and residential status, and both parties need to participate in the process. An earlier study conducted by Ash Amin (2004) explores the idea of Europe and what it may mean in an increasingly diverse reality, and Amin suggests that "empathy/engagement with the stranger" might be a way forward and constitute a new way of being European. Amin's statement bears some resemblance to Kwame Anthony Appiah's perspective on cosmopolitanism as conversations and encounters which do not need to be based on "consensus about anything, especially not values; it's enough that it helps people get used to one another" (Appiah 2006: 85). Amin, too, draws on cosmopolitanism in his article, asking whether Europe could be moving in a direction that is increasingly built on "multiple and mobile identities" (2004: 8).

A more recent work that combines the three, migration to Europe, values, and cosmopolitanism, is the edited volume *Cosmopolitan Norms and European Values: Ethical Perspectives on Europe's Refugee Policy* (2023), in which the editors Marie Göbel and Andreas Niederberger argue that EU's failed migration measures are seen by some as a "failure of the EU to live up to its values" (2023: 3). They observe that in terms of values, two perspectives emerge: one in which the focus is on "a cosmopolitan order" with emphasis on global connections and universal human rights, and the other in terms of separating Europe's values from those of others (ibid.). The question that then arises is whether European values

include "protection, reception and integration of refugees and other migrants", or whether they should be safeguarded from individuals who may not share such values (Göbel and Niederberger 2023: 4). Elżbieta M. Goździak and Izabella Main (2020: 4) also acknowledge this dual meaning of European values, and they eventually assert that the EU will need "some level of solidarity between and among member states" (p. 6) in order to operate efficiently. This is relevant observation, that the EU needs to find some consensus within itself, or at least solidarity, in order to live up to the promise of its values.

The problem with Europe and what it means to Europeans is addressed by Murray, who expresses concern not just over the integration of migrants into Europe, but over Europeans themselves, arguing that many "are unsure whether they want to be Europeans" (p. 225). Much of Murray's criticism against discourses of migration is that there have not been any, according to him, that properly address the situation (p. 245). Murray also somewhat sarcastically criticizes Europeans for their seeming desire to help migrants, a desire which often does not last very long. He calls them the "benevolent Europeans" and argues that they "lost interest in their newest arrivals" (p. 285). The comment indicates that perhaps it is truly Europeans who are lost and not the migrants who arrive there; lost not only in terms of how migration to the scale that has been seen in the past decade should be dealt with but also lost in terms of their own identity. This experience of being lost or adrift can to some extent be detected throughout Western Europe now that war is raging on the continent after decades of relative peace. In a time that requires extraordinary resilience and courage, some nations have been reluctant to help Ukraine to the degree that is needed, to fully commit. Whatever the outcome of the war, history will remember which nations faltered and hesitated when they were most desperately needed. The same can be said about irregular migration to Europe. Nations in southern Europe have to some extent been left alone to deal with the problem. Calls for solidarity in Europe must not only mean solidarity with those who arrive from elsewhere but also with other European nations.

Eventually, Murray offers a few solutions to how Europe could deal with migration, particularly those who arrive as asylum seekers. These solutions include "a policy of keeping migrants in the vicinity of the country from which they are fleeing" (p. 298), "to ensure that asylum claims were processed outside Europe" (pp. 298–299), "to organise the deportation of all those found to have no asylum claim" (p. 299), "a system of

temporary asylum" (p. 300), and last but not least "a more balanced attitude towards our past" (p. 305). Some of these suggestions have already been considered and even put into play since the publication of Murray's book, for example relating to Britain deciding to process asylum seekers in Rwanda, and Denmark giving temporary protection to people seeking asylum. *BBC* reports that the plan would be a "five-year trial", and that asylum seekers could be "granted refugee status in Rwanda" ("What Is the UK's Plan" 2022). The *BBC* article reports that numbers of asylum seekers were the highest in twenty years in 2022, and that the number of arrivals by boat were significantly higher than in recent years (ibid.). Despite the plan to send people arriving illegally to Rwanda, no one had yet been sent at the time of writing the report for *BBC*. In November 2023, The Supreme Court of the UK ruled that Rwanda is not sufficiently safe and that the plan cannot be carried out (Walsh 2024). As for Denmark, "Governance of Migrant Integration in Denmark" states that there was a "Paradigm Shift" in 2019, "moving the focus from integration to return to the countries of origin. The overall goal is now to send refugees back as soon as conditions allow for it".

Peter William Walsh (2024) at the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford ponders whether the proposed system will be successful in deterring people from arriving illegally in Britain. Walsh also remarks that to some extent, the EU already has a similar deal with Turkey that was put in place after the migrant crisis of 2015: "Like the UK's Rwanda policy, the deal aimed to deter people from taking dangerous maritime journeys to seek asylum" (Walsh 2024). These issues must be openly addressed within the EU and Britain, if there is to be a chance at solving problems related to migration. Perhaps that is the essence of what Murray, too, calls for: open acknowledgement of the problems related to migration, of the differing opinions and narratives among European citizens, as well as examination of both past and present in Europe. He ends his book on the note that Europe is a prisoner "of the past and of the present", leading to inability to find paths forward (p. 320).

The Afterword of *Strange Death* returns to terror attacks in Britain and elsewhere in Europe, ending with a comment on the popularity of the book and it becoming a bestseller. Murray asserts that "nobody of any consequence" has tried to counter the facts and statistics presented in the book (p. 335). This chapter did not set out to do that, nor is the author of this book anyone of consequence, but the brief analysis presented here hopes for a more nuanced discussion of some of the statements Murray

makes. On the other hand, the backlash against Murray in reviews such as the ones by Gaby Hinsliff (2017), who calls the book "gentrified xenophobia", or Gervase Vernon (2018: 584), who sees the book as "highly partisan", are also noteworthy. There is a polemic with intent to provoke in Murray's book, but such polemic can also be detected in the backlash against it. How is *The Strange Death of Europe* to be read? As fearmongering and badly disguised xenophobia, or as a voice addressing uncomfortable issues? The same questions can be asked in relation to *Against Borders* to which the chapter turns next.

Futures Worth Living in *Against Borders: The Case for Abolition*

Against Borders opens with an introduction that outlines the purpose of the book and discusses the role of borders separating sovereign states. Gracie Mae Bradley and Luke de Noronha (2022: 2) attribute the hardening of borders to a "recent rise of right-wing governments". They also argue that borders are seen as "natural and permanent", which connects to a "deep historical amnesia about colonialism" and economic inequality (p. 3). The book's argument is that borders "reproduce various forms of inequality, injustice and harm at different scales" (Bradley and de Noronha 2022: 4). This harm and injustice done by borders are manifested in their "depriving people of safer and more direct routes […] but they do not stop them from moving" (ibid.). Migration is thus presented as inevitable by Bradley and de Noronha, and this is a marked difference when compared to Murray's book.

The proposed border abolition is explained in the introduction, and it is outlined as "the freedom to move and to stay" (p. 10). The concept of border abolition, in Bradley and de Noronha's book, "does not mean advocating for free movement in the world as it is currently configured, but rather for transformation of the conditions to which borders are a response" (ibid.). Here, the authors draw on an article by Bridget Anderson, Nandita Sharma, and Cynthia Wright from 2009, which states that the call for no borders questions "nationstates' sovereign right to control people's mobility" and "signals a new sort of liberatory project, one with new ideas of 'society' and one aimed at creating new social actors not identified with nationalist projects (projects that are deeply racialized, gendered, sexualized, and productive of class relations)" (p. 6). The no

border project thus seems to have a larger purpose than simply being about borders, also aiming to reconfigure the nation-state. Anderson, Sharma, and Wright go on to argue that "migrants are not naturally vulnerable; rather *the state* is deeply implicated in constructing vulnerability through immigration controls and practices" (2009: 8; italics in the original). This seems to reinforce the idea presented in the previous section that many of those who oppose borders do not, in fact, oppose the actual borders but the ways in which they are controlled and enforced. Currently, migrants, particularly those travelling without documentation, take great risks traversing seas to reach Europe, paying large amounts of money to smugglers, whereas the comment above indicates that if all movement was free and unrestricted, no vulnerability would occur. Bradley and de Noronha state in the introduction that their book does not "provide a roadmap for how to get to border abolition", as the authors "do not know what the world will look like, and there is no single route to get us there" (p. 10).

The war on Ukraine is a scenario few would have predicted, and the question is what the world would be like with abolished borders in the face of such aggression. *Against Borders* thus seems to speak of border abolition in terms of migration and free movement of people, but does not take into account more sinister forms of border crises, as also represented in the situation in 2021 at the border between Belarus and Poland, or more recently at the Finnish border (Lavikainen 2023). The question then is whether border control against foreign aggression and invasion can exist while border abolition in terms of free movement is implemented. Recent events seem to indicate that the two cannot exist simultaneously, remembering the "weaponization of migrants" addressed by Dempsey (2021).

Bradley and de Noronha also seem to advocate for something more than border abolition in their quest for a just world: "How do we fight to close detention centres and end deportations, stop transnational corporations ruining lives and destroying the planet, while at the same time nurturing spaces of sanctuary and safety in our neighbourhoods?" (2022: 12). There seems to be an anticapitalist agenda in addition to the border abolition purpose (explicitly stated on p. 69). The argument for border abolition that rests on persistent inequality in the world may be behind the statement, and the lingering effects of colonialism as already discussed in relation to Murray's book. However, despite this potential connection, the statement about "transnational corporations ruining lives and destroying the planet" (ibid.) appears to advocate environmental justice and

human rights as opposed to market capitalism. It is a statement to keep in mind when further examining *Against Borders*.

The book begins with an investigation of borders and race, drawing on colonial histories and arguing that the emergence of nation-states has coincided with hard borders, and this history connects with racism as well (Bradley and de Noronha 2022: 24). These notions are by no means new or original but were presented already in a similar form in Teresa Hayter's *Open Borders: The Case Against Immigration Controls* (2004), in which she writes that abolishing border "immigration controls" is the way to make sure that "refugees" receive protection (p. 149). Further, Hayter (2004: 152) argues the following:

> If freedom to migrate meant that movements of people were so large that they led to catastrophic disruption, chaos and decline in living standards in the rich countries, then, however admirable the ideal, it would be understandable that it should be opposed. But the abolition of immigration controls, although it would doubtless lead to some increase in migration, would not have an overwhelming effect on numbers. This is, first, because immigration controls do not work.

The argument thus seems to be that it matters not whether there are immigration controls or not, they will not deter people from migrating. Hayter (2004: 4) explicitly raises the problem of racism in her book, stating that issues relating to immigration essentially have to do with "the racism of Europeans, North Americans and white majorities elsewhere, who more or less explicitly harbour notions of the superiority of the white 'race', whatever that may mean, and the undesirability of destroying the supposed homogeneity of their nation".

Bradley and de Noronha (2022: 29) underline the problem of citizenship in this context, making a point about anti-racism needing to have an anti-border agenda, and observing that "migrant activists" oppose "EU's violent border regime", arguing that these new policies need to be implemented throughout the world and not just in Europe. They assert that "the deeper problem is the territorialisation of land, peoples and cultures, and their transformation into national property" (pp. 30–31). The criticism thus seems directed towards the nation-state. This requires some further investigation. David J. Smith and John Hiden (2012: 1) outline that "unitary centralized states were already taking shape prior to the age of nationalism". Andreas Wimmer (2013: 1) defines the age of nationalism

as having taken place in the past 200 years. Further, Wimmer (2013: 4) connects the nation-state with ethnicity, emphasizing that "political loyalty and shared identity" were the foundations for the nation, leading to a situation where "elites and masses should identify with each other and that rulers and ruled should hail from the same people". A border-free world would therefore eradicate ethnic differences, as well as eradicating the nation-state, making national belonging obsolete.

It is hard to imagine such a world, as it would require equal participation from all current nation-states. It would require a level of trust that hardly seems possible, at least not in current war-torn Europe. Welfare also connects with the nation-state (Sharma 2016: 9), creating lines between those who are made part of it and those on the outside. In terms of migrants, "their identities are seen as marginal and not properly belonging to the nation" (ibid., p. 25). This poses a significant problem that neither Murray nor Bradley and de Noronha seem able to solve. Even if Murray's theses on migration are currently gaining more traction throughout Europe, the fact still remains that Europe has a massive population of people with origins elsewhere. These people have children, who have children in their turn. At what point are they no longer defined as migrants? Similarly, Bradley and de Noronha's call for a border-free world focuses merely on those who have not yet arrived in Europe, hoping to make their journeys safer and smoother.

The comment earlier about the rise of right-wing governments contributing to ever hardening borders (Bradley and de Noronha 2022: 2) connects to these issues, as they indicate that the situation in Europe is currently worse than before, although the nation-state and nationalist project have existed for some time. Mikko Salmela and Christian von Scheve (2017: 569) state that the recent rise of right-wing politics throughout Europe has often been linked to social upheavals such as immigration, but that these phenomena do not provide the sole explanation for a change in politics. Salmela and von Scheve (2017: 586) trace the origins of right-wing parties to the 1980s in Western Europe and connect them to welfare and taxpaying, stating that as early as the 1990s, there were voices arguing for welfare benefits to be reserved for citizens only.

Albana Shehaj, Adrian J. Shin, and Ronald Inglehart (2021: 282) confirm that there has been a tendency to connect support for right-wing politics with immigration but that "empirical support for this link has been inconclusive". They set out to examine "the extent to which immigrant types and the characteristics of migrant-sending countries influence RWP

[right-wing parties] electoral success" (p. 284). The article eventually concludes that immigration remains a central factor to the success of said parties and that further research should look more into "immigrant characteristics […] to understand the conditions under which economic or cultural differences between natives and immigrants increase voter support for RWP parties. Immigrant characteristics do not determine the outcome, but they seem to be part of the story" (Shehaj et al. 2021: 289). Thus, the nation-state and right-wing politics can to some extent be seen to be based, as outlined by several scholars cited here, on similar things: differentiating between groups in society based on cultural and ethnic origins.

Katrine Fangen and Mari Vaage (2018: 461) add that right-wing parties that make it to government are faced with the problem of having to some extent to adapt and transform according to other parties in the coalition if there is to be any chance of co-operation, yet if they make too many concessions, "they risk alienating core voters who are unable to distinguish the anti-system party from the political establishment". Defining right-wing parties as "anti-system" is perhaps somewhat polarising, provoking questions about what the system stands for and who it represents. The comment speaks to the divide between "the system" and those who oppose it, and points to the division between scholars who study party politics in Europe and voters. To that extent, Murray's book could be seen as "anti-system", being that it criticizes recent migration policies. However, some of the measures suggested by Murray are already being considered or even implemented in various European nations. Who is then anti-system if more and more politicians and parties turn toward restricting migration? Perhaps the real problem is that there is no system at the moment. As indicated in this chapter, many European countries are choosing more restrictive policies on migration, yet the actual problem of irregular arrivals in southern Europe has not been addressed and remains an ongoing humanitarian crisis.

The second chapter in *Against Borders* deals with gender and so-called sham marriages. Bradley and de Noronha (2022: 35) ask for "less surveillance, inspection and conditionality surrounding marriages", including giving spouses rights regardless of their marital status. The "sham marriage" has been well-examined in research (cf. Wemyss et al. 2018; de Hart 2017; Hoogenraad 2022). Betty de Hart (2017: 282) asserts that "at the European and national level, the need for controlling fraudulent family relationships has been widely acknowledged". According to

de Hart (ibid.), the problem is not so much whether family relationships should be monitored but more a question of how this should be done in order to be lawful. At the end of the chapter, Bradley and de Noronha (2022: 49) repeat their stance that borders must be made away with, and that "[d]eportation is wrong not simply because it destroys families, but because forcible expulsion itself is fundamentally objectionable. Detention is unjust not simply because survivors of torture are among the detainees, but because incarceration is itself a form of torture". The argument therefore seems to be that expulsion and detention violate human rights and must not be used as methods to control borders. Detention emerges as a central topic in the following chapter.

In a chapter titled "Capitalism", Bradley and de Noronha (2022: 65–66) continue their discussion of these topics and the in their view futile efforts of Europe to halt the flow of migrants to Europe, and the authors state that some of these efforts are mired in the idea that "alleviating poverty will decrease migration". However, they refute the effectiveness of this, making the statement that "people who move are rarely the poorest, and tend to be risk-taking young people moving with the support of their families, or because they feel stuck" (p. 66). As already stated in the section on Murray's book, the large part of arrivals is in fact young men, and it somewhat problematic that Bradley and de Noronha chose not to be open about this fact. The comment about migrants moving because "they feel stuck" does not cite any sources, not do the authors explain in detail what this means. Some insight into the reasons why "people" migrate to Europe is therefore needed.

A study conducted by Ruth León-Pinilla, Ana Soto-Rubio, and Vicente Prado-Gascó (2020) examines the sociodemographic profile of asylum seekers in Spain, providing some insights into who is migrating. They make an important distinction between refugees and asylum seekers, yet state that the two groups are examined together in the study as there are some similarities, for example that both are "forcibly displaced people" (p. 2). According to Murray, not all asylum seekers are forcibly displaced but seeking better futures in Europe, and this is a central question that needs to be addressed. Why do people seek asylum in Europe? Research provides some form of answer to this question. Hannes Weber (2019: 405) states that while the number of new arrivals of Syrians and Iraqis went down in the years after the refugee crisis, the number of Africans actually increased. Weber's study asks whether violent conflicts are the reason for this increase, and they find that "later developments were largely

driven by migratory networks such that migration became a self-reinforcing progress" (p. 420). The comment indicates that more migration causes more migration. Weber (ibid.) finds evidence that "sizeable diasporas from various African countries have formed in many European countries over the past decade in which African immigration had previously been low. Our results suggest that this will probably prompt more migrants to come to Europe in the next years and decades".

Another finding in Weber's study is that "the perceived likelihood of success increased recently. A reason for this might be the intensification of sea-rescue missions in combination with the de facto breakdown of the 'Dublin' regulations". In addition, "many asylum applications are rejected, but formal rejections need not necessarily be followed by forced measures such as deportations" (Weber 2019: 420). However, Weber (ibid.) does admit that it is difficult to obtain accurate data on these issues through quantitative means. Hence the need for more studies that examine personal reasons for migrating, particularly among of asylum seekers. Alexia Tizzano (2022) examines reasons why women do not migrate as much as men, citing statistics from 2015, 2020, and 2021 that show stark contrasts between numbers of male and female asylum seekers (p. 561). Tizzano (2022: 587–594) investigates a few sending nations and potential reasons for why women do not leave, listing gender norms as attached to cultural norms as a significant reason.

Alessandra Conte and Silvia Migali (2019: 395) analyse push and pull factors in their study, observing that

> economic conditions in the country of origin and the presence of migrant communities in the destination country are the most relevant drivers of new asylum applications, even in the presence of high-intensity conflicts. Additionally, when focusing on asylum claims lodged in European countries, we show that past asylum recognition rates positively correlate with new asylum applications.

This confirms Weber's finding about more migration creating more migration. Conte and Migali (2019: 416) explicitly state that "destination country policies, as measured by the recognition rates, are significantly associated with encouraging higher numbers of asylum applications". Thus, while violent conflict is found in the study to play a significant role as a push factor, "individuals tend to escape from unfavorable economic and political conditions, and they are strongly attracted by the presence of

previous migrant communities in the destination country and a common spoken language" (ibid.). Thus, the comment by Bradley and de Noronha about migrants leaving because "they feel stuck" (p. 66) leaves some room for interpretation. A final study cited here conducted by Lenka Janýšková and Jaromír Harmáček (2020) investigates push and pull factors with regard to asylum applications in Denmark 2005–2015. Their findings suggest that violent conflict is a major push factor (p. 62), but also that "people seek asylum in Denmark because their co-nationals already reside there" (ibid.). Thus, the situation for those wishing to significantly reduce the number of asylum seekers and other groups of migrants may provide an impossible task due to the large number of people with migrant backgrounds already living throughout Europe.

Against Borders asks some complicated questions in the chapter titled "Policing", comparing border abolition to prison abolition, arguing that "the cages and walls will rise and fall as one" (p. 84). They also criticize "counter-terrorism policies" (p. 95), and eventually state that "border abolition considers the freedom of those yet to arrive" (p. 101). The project proposed in Bradley and de Noronha's book is thus immense: to completely abolish borders in terms of immigration control, deportation, barriers to citizenship, the capitalist economic system, and to do this not only with people in mind who have migrated and are currently facing restrictive and repressive measures by states that deem them outsiders, but also with regard to those who have yet to arrive. The inevitable question that emerges is what such a world would look like. The authors confessed in the introduction to their book that they do not know what the world will look like in the future and cannot thus give any direct instructions for how border abolition should come about.

Europe, and perhaps the world at large, does not seem prepared for a border-less or border-free world, and the question is if it ever will or should be. Unfortunately, the values embedded in European democratic practices, such as respect for human rights in terms of opposing discrimination in all forms, constitute a soft form of government and institutional practice. Whether such policies form a sustainable and durable way forward remains to be seen. The Russian war of aggression in Ukraine has changed Europe for the foreseeable future, if not forever, and its long-term consequences for various nations are difficult to predict at this point. It is safe to say, however, that the war will likely lead to increased military spending, reinforced border controls, and tense international relations for a long time to come. There are suggestions of a new cold war in the

making, but as of now, the war remains extremely warm, making any future predictions useless and futile.

Bradley and de Noronha end their book with two chapters titled "Interlude" that offer fictional accounts, the first of a dystopic bordered world, and the other of a world without borders. "Interlude: Futures I" provides a story of humans used by multinational companies to cross sea borders illegally (p. 143), a world in which the environment has been destroyed, mentioning "spoiled water" (p. 144), "radiation forecast" and "caustic rain" (p. 146). Bradley and de Noronha use the story to emphasise the dystopian futures awaiting a world such as ours that continues to rely on border control, combining it with corporate greed and environmental destruction. The message about open borders thus goes beyond migration and becomes an ideology promoted in economic, social, and environmental terms. The final chapter, as a counterpoint, offers "an imagined future that is worth living" (pp. 163–164). The fictional stories in the last chapter offer a very different world where the environment is attended to, at least what is left of it, and borders have been erased, even between family members who are based on selection instead of lineage. The stories have a similar ring to them as Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy, which offers a world of environmental devastation, economic exploitation, and genetic experimentation. Bradley and de Noronha (p. 169) emphasize the importance of being explicit about "seemingly immovable and eternal features of our world—like capitalism, prisons, war, the nuclear family and nation-states" which they see as "unjust and unsatisfying".

The list of things to make away with is perhaps what could be called "anti-system", which was discussed in relation to right-wing politics (Fangen and Vaage 2018: 461). The contrast here is essential. If right-wing politics is regarded as anti-system, going against current policies of accepting asylum applications, and wanting to heavily reduce immigration, then Bradley and de Noronha's book can be seen as anti-anti-system. They are opposing the social order currently in place in most nations, the economic system in most parts of the world, as well as the actual nation-states themselves. That seems to be a standpoint that is anti-system to its core. War is definitely "unjust and unsatisfying" to say the very least, but the question remains as to how they can be abolished. At the time of writing, it seems inevitable that nations will continue to look out for their citizens and work hard to protect them and their national sovereignty. Climate change is real, environmental devastation is real, unequal opportunity,

racism, discrimination, and poverty are real. These are all massively urgent issues that need significant efforts from all nations in Europe. Bradley and de Noronha do not offer solutions to these issues, but their book participates in the debate and provides a view of migration and borders that question the economic structures of Europe and beyond.

Conclusion: What Futures for Europe?

Both *The Strange Death of Europe* and *Against Borders* seem to raise more questions than they answer. Murray sets out to criticize current migration policies, or the lack thereof, throughout Europe, while Bradley and de Noronha do the exact same thing yet from an opposite perspective. To that effect, both books speak to the problem of migration and integration which have yet to be solved. One is critical of the way in which the migrant crisis in 2015 was dealt with, leading to increased numbers of foreign-born individuals in Europe, particularly young men. The other is critical of the ways in which attempts to control migration have been made, such as detention centres, deportation, and restrictions to citizenship. The nation-state itself is seen as at the core of these practices that impede people's free movement. Capitalism as the economic system in contemporary Europe is also on the list of things to be made away with. Both texts can thus be seen as anti-system, to the extent that there is an actual system in place that controls migration. Bradley and de Noronha go much farther in their criticism of current Europe, expressing a desire to dismantle national belonging altogether.

Put together, the two books both bring something relevant to a conversation on migration. Murray emphasizes problems that have been silenced to some extent, as for example levels of crime among migrants, as well as the untenable and unsustainable narratives about Europe needing labour migrants to perform menial tasks. Bradley and de Noronha, for their part, focus on the human rights abuses that emerge in relation to detention practices, inviting prison reform as part of their campaign for more humane treatment of people overall. Both books offer important observations about the shortcomings of European migration politics. However, in order for European nations and the EU to make informed decisions about border controls and migration policies, one viewpoint cannot exist without the other. Migration and related phenomena; the welfare state, the labour market, crime, gender equality, sexual freedom, religion, housing, and many more, must be examined together as openly and honestly as possible.

The questions that still remain after having read and discussed both books in focus in this chapter have to do with what kind of a world and what kind of Europe we want to live in in the future. Who can be part of that Europe? Are we excluding people who are already here, who are making full contributions to society and living as well as they can within the sometimes rather small spaces to which they have been relegated and confined? Europe already is multicultural, whatever the term can come to mean, with millions of people living there who have moved from elsewhere. In their wake, other people will want to arrive as well. A central finding in the research examined for this chapter is that several studies seem to agree that migration inspires more migration, that people move to places where people from their countries of origin are already living. Research also suggested that the number of approved asylum applications inspires more applications. These factors were found to be more significant as pull factors than violent conflicts as push factors.

To conclude, the most valuable insights in this chapter were not provided by Murray or Bradley and de Noronha, but by the numerous scholars who have conducted research on a variety of topics relating to migration, such as push and pull factors, crime, and the welfare state. Opinions on migration are abundant, as also shown in the research cited here. A large number of scholars promote no borders or open borders policies. Right-wing politics was also briefly discussed, with some indication that while there is a connection with migration, it is not perhaps as clear cut as sometimes suggested. While this chapter can by no means claim to put all the facts on the table, it has attempted to address some of the narratives surrounding migration, some also mentioned by Murray and Bradley and de Noronha. Only through qualitative and quantitative studies on all the many topics briefly dealt with here that connect with migration, particularly concerning irregular movement, can some form of future for Europe and all its citizens reveal itself. In combination with statistical facts, individual stories of migration must also be heard in order to account for the human dimension.

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CHAPTER 6

Migrant Crisis

Discourses of migration involve views of migrants as deserving, undeserving, a threat to national unity, an enrichment to society, a lesson in empathy and a lesson in naivety. The title of this chapter, "Migrant Crisis", refers not only to the years 2015–2016 when a large number of migrants arrived in Europe, many of whom sought asylum, but also to the notion of migration in crisis, and individual migrants in crisis. Such a crisis, as exemplified in the three texts examined, takes a number of shapes and forms. This chapter on refugee and asylum seeker narratives includes both fiction and nonfiction. At the heart of all stories of migration is the individual, and the personal story is of course what literary fiction builds on. Examining the migrant condition through concepts such as gratitude, empathy, and dignity emerge as central, since they not only highlight the personal experiences of migrants but also place them in a wider societal and political context.

The first section examines the third instalment in the *Refugee Tales* series, *Refugee Tales III* (2019; edited by David Herd and Anna Pincus), which has seen the publication of four volumes to date with stories about the asylum seeker experience, told to for example authors, journalists, and academics. Comma Press, the publisher of the series, outlines that the series "is a campaign to change the law in Britain and introduce a maximum detention of 28 days" and that the campaign "commissions authors to tell the stories of real refugees" ("Refugee Tales" n.d.-a). Literature Cambridge, defining itself as an "independent educational organisation",

L. Englund, *Storying Contemporary Migration*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-62003-4_6

asserts support for *Refugee Tales* on their website, where they state that the initiative enables writers to "collaborate with asylum seekers, refugees and people in indefinite detention", walking "in solidarity with detainees" and creating "a space in which the language of welcome is the prevailing discourse" ("Refugee Tales" n.d.-b). The series is thus explicitly one of advocacy and activism, acting against detention practices in Britain and hoping to change discourses surrounding migrants and migration.

The second section focuses on Dina Nayeri's memoir *The Ungrateful Refugee: What Immigrants Never Tell You* (2020). The memoir tells the story of Nayeri's own life, having left Iran with her mother and siblings as asylum seekers in the 1980s, travelling from Dubai to Italy and then further to the United States. The personal narrative intersects with accounts of other asylum seekers in more recent times, and Nayeri offers criticism of current asylum politics in Europe throughout her book. As in many other texts investigated in this book, the memoir uses the personal narrative to highlight the suffering of people in limbo, living lives as undocumented citizens as in the case of Cornejo Villavicencio's memoir, or unfair migration policies, as for example in Vargas's and Lovato's writing. Ending this book with a personal account of the experience of being an actual asylum seeker and refugee complements previous chapters. Nayeri's memoir also addresses the storytelling in which asylum seekers engage and which determines their fate depending on whether they are believed or not.

The final section is dedicated to a fictional novel, *Exit West* (2017) by Mohsin Hamid, that offers the story of a couple that flees an unnamed country in the Middle East through fantastical means, travelling through doors that function as portals to the West. The novel has received considerable attention by critics and reviewers, with for example Betsy L. Fisher (2019: 1134) arguing that *Exit West* portrays "the failures of modern asylum systems that prioritize border security over human rights". It is a well-known argument by now, repeated many times in this book by a variety of writers and scholars. Ending this book with a discussion of a fictional text that breaches the borders of the possible seems fitting, as the political problems, heated debates, and personal suffering outlined and addressed in this study are considerable, yet lack simple solutions. The novel by Hamid embarks on a path of advocacy that is less direct, leaving the reader with the task of finding a sustainable solution.

Walking for Change: *Refugee Tales III*

The refugee narrative offers insight into a vulnerable and contested, even controversial, position. Here, the mediating effect of the narrative is largely connected with balancing between those in the margins, the undocumented and stateless, and surrounding society including rescue workers, refugee camp directors, border guards and citizens in whatever place the story is located. The stories provided in *Refugee Tales III* also enable a discussion of what Bishupal Limbu (2018) addresses in his article, namely the "deserving" or "undeserving" migrant, a topic which has already been addressed in multiple contexts in this book, for example in relation to the essay collections in Chap. 4, or in the chapter on undocumented migrants. The issue of being deserving or not remains another complex dichotomy which carries significant consequences in terms of general attitudes in society and spilling over into national politics.

The walk mentioned in the introduction, walking in solidarity with asylum seekers and refugees, is not just symbolic but consists of actual physical walking. Sandra Mayer, Sylvia Mieszkowski and Kevin Potter (2023: 5) outline the origins of the *Refugee Tales* project in their introduction to a special issue in the *The European Journal of Life Writing* on stories of refugees and asylum seekers. They explain that the project connects with *Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer's collection of tales from the late fourteenth century, in which pilgrims on their way to Canterbury from London tell stories. Mayer et al. (2023: 7) explain that the act of walking is at the centre of *Refugee Tales* as well, as it "counteracts […] the standstill that defines life in detention". The project therefore revolves around walks in Britain, and the introduction of collaborators who write the stories down, and whose fame helps make them known to a wider audience (ibid., 9).

The "Afterword" of the edition used here, written by David Herd (2019), notes that the walks are meant for sharing stories of people who have experienced detention, with people participating who had such experiences themselves and those that do not (2019: 184). Herd (ibid.) explicitly states that the walks have a political purpose, hoping to incite actual change in detention policies. The concept of slow violence (Nixon 2011) is re-evoked in this context, as Herd (2019: 185) states that it was the focus of a refugee tale in 2016, relating to "a form of violence the hostile environment was constructed to perfect". What the *Refugee Tales* project hopes to achieve is a "politics capable of thinking beyond borders" (ibid.).

The conundrum with borders emerges again in this chapter, with a borderless or -free world as the ultimate aim. Societal narratives of discourses, too, attach themselves to the project as asserted by Judith Kohlenberger (2023: 29), as she argues that there is a "refugee paradox" at play which requires those she terms refugees to be grateful, adaptable, and independent. Kohlenberger (p. 30) observes how Ukrainians were welcomed, claiming that they, too faced expectations about "being helpless and destitute". She speaks of "dominant refugee tales" in relation to dangerous voyages to Europe which are seen as reckless, particularly if children are involved (p. 36). The dominant stories of asylum seekers and refugees become a catch-22, where expectations are impossible to meet and reality in the context of *Refugee Tales* becomes one of abuse (Herd 2023: 198). Herd observes that walking turns into an "act of inquiry" as well as being thoroughly democratic as people participating, those doing the telling and those listening, walk next to one another (ibid.).

Harriet Hulme (2020: 228) makes a noteworthy observation when stating that although the stories published have been told by a migrant to an author or other person of literary authority, "each of the tales has been modified in its conversion from the voice of the original tale teller into the words of the named author. These modifications draw attention to the ethical questions raised by the process of telling someone else's story". The process of telling your own story as it converges with those of others is central to most autobiographical writing, and even more explicitly so in many of the texts examined in this book that tell the stories of others in tandem with the personal narrative. Herd (2019: 192) addresses this issue in the afterword, writing that the act of telling the story to others is "potentially dangerous", due to the ways in which asylum seekers' stories may be used against them, particularly when details change over time (Herd 2019: 191). Therefore, the decision was made to bring in a second party, the people to whom the stories are told. Carolin Gebauer and Roy Sommer (2023: 8) refer to the *Refugee Tales* project as "allied storytelling". The purpose of the project is perhaps the most pronounced of all the texts examined in this study, emerging as a concrete protest against practices and policies, combining storytelling not just with advocacy but with more explicit activism.

Refugee Tales III consists of nineteen stories, some told to famous authors such as Monica Ali, Gillian Slovo and Abdulrazak Gurnah, whereas other stories are conveyed by the refugees themselves. The stories speak of a flawed system, represented as intent on making life as unsustainable as

possible for those seeking asylum. This is repeated throughout the stories in a variety of contexts. A report for the UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency, states that at the end of September 2022, the nationality topping the charts of asylum seekers was Albanian, with Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria coming next. It also argues that "no such thing as a bogus asylum-seeker or an illegal asylum-seeker" exists, since all people have the right to seek asylum, even though they may not be granted refugee status. Further, the report outlines that most asylum seekers are not allowed to work, that they receive an allowance of £40.85 per person per week and indicates that housing is often of poor quality ("Asylum in the UK" n.d.). Eventually the report touches upon the topic of detention, arguing that by the end of September 2022, 2077 people were in immigration detention.

A report by the Migration Observatory ("Immigration Detention in the UK" 2022) lists Iranian, Albanian, Iraqi, and Eritrean nationals as the top four in detention. The time spent in detention is also reported, with the overview stating that "the UK has not legislated a statutory upper time limit on individual periods of immigration detention", one of the main points of contention in the *Refugee Tales* project. In 2021, the large majority of people spent less than 29 days in detention, and 0.4% spent a year or more in detention. The graph provided shows that the length of detention has somewhat decreased in the last few years. Reasons for detention are also addressed:

> There are several categories of people detained under Immigration Act powers. Some individuals fall into more than one category. These categories include: new arrivals awaiting examination by an immigration officer to determine their right to enter the UK; new arrivals who have been refused permission to enter the UK and are awaiting removal; those who have either failed to leave the UK on expiry of their visas (visa overstayers), or who have not complied with the terms of their visas, or have attained their visas by deception; and people in the UK who are awaiting a decision on whether they are to be removed, or who are awaiting their removal, such as refused asylum seekers.
>
> The largest category of immigration detainees comprises people who have sought asylum at some stage during their immigration process, including while in detention. In 2021, detainees who had previously sought asylum accounted for 81% (19,886) of people entering detention.

The report thus forms an important background to the experiences expressed in the stories in *Refugee Tales III*.

A central theme in many of the stories is being caught up in a Kafkaesque situation, in which the demands of the authorities cannot be met. Abdulrazak Gurnah is the collaborator in the story "The Stateless Person", in which the narrator recounts having been in the UK for twelve years without proper documentation, and that they are even unable to obtain status as a stateless person (2019: 6): "If I was stateless, then I would have residence, I could work and contribute to the country, and after a length of time even apply for citizenship. But even that is confused. Although the law required me to apply to be recognised as stateless, the Home Office keep sending me back to the embassy for travel documents so they can deport me". This creates an impossible loop for the narrator, who keeps travelling to the embassy to ask for the right documents which cannot be provided. Fear of detention plays into this, as the narrator "is liable for detention at any time" (ibid.). The narrator reports having obtained a passport and a visa through a person working for a Christian NGO in their home country, the involvement in which forced the narrator to leave in the first place. The person helped them get to Britain but took their passport away upon arrival (Gurnah 2019: 7).

The loop of asylum applications begins at the same time, with the narrator being refused asylum time and time again. Eventually, they apply for work using another person's identity, and are arrested and sent to prison (Gurnah 2019: 8) and then to detention, and then to living in shared accommodation, continuing the loop of appealing negative asylum decisions (Gurnah 2019: 9). The narrator describes the system as "cruel", recounting attempts to remain preoccupied with voluntary work while thinking of their children left behind, now adults (2019: 9–10). Eventually, the narrator asks what they have done "that they are treating me like this", referring to themselves as an "African man" (2019: 11). The situation is thus presented as impossible, with the narrator unable in their own words to return to the country from which they came, and lacking documentation to do so, yet they are not given permission to stay. This presents one of the most central problems with the current asylum system in Europe, which enables such limbo for applicants who cannot return and cannot stay. What the stories of *Refugee Tales III* do is ask for recognition and more importantly for dignity. That is visible in the story retold by Gurnah, where the narrator does not understand why they are treated in the way they are, made to go back and forth between the Home Office and the

embassy in a never-ending loop, at the mercy of migration officials and unable to make any kind of plans for their own life.

Dignity in terms of migration narratives has been studied before (cf. Englund 2020; Gibson 2017). Eleni Coundouriotis (2016: 78) observes the importance of being on the move for refugees, arguing that stories that depict such experiences are "the most dramatic". She connects this movement with dignity, arguing that "the portrayal of the refugees is most dignifying if it shows them in motion" (Coundouriotis 2016: 79). Detention can therefore be seen in direct contrast to this statement and to the need for movement, and it can also be connected to notions of deservingness and empathy. The problem with empathy and dignity arises in the story of M, "The Orphan's Tale" told to David Constantine. M is represented as having a background in Freetown, which likely refers to Sierra Leone, having become orphaned as a child (Constantine 2019: 11). The story emphasizes the need for legitimacy: "Every storyteller wants to be believed" (ibid.). According to the story conveyed, M is not believed: "He was new to the game and they were old hands and to be honest (they said) sick to death of it" (Constantine 2019: 12). It is unclear whether the story here refers to people conducting interviews with asylum seekers, but this seems to be the case.

M's arrival in the UK seems to have taken place while he was still a minor, having been given a place to stay with Mr and Mrs Robinson "who had two small children of their own" (Constantine 2019: 13). M's life in Britain is described as relatively stable, getting an education and hoping to go to university, meeting a woman and moving in with her, and eventually having the chance to apply for a job that was better than his current one at a supermarket. However, upon checking his background, the company discovers he no longer has a right to work due to being an adult (Constantine 2019: 19): "The unravelling has begun. […] Idle cruelty? They halt his progress, re-christen him Illegal, order him to show himself at their counter every Monday morning with a signature record that he has not absconded" (ibid.). The word "cruel" is mentioned again in this story, in the form of a question as in the previous one discussed. It indicates that the asylum process particularly for those stuck in the system is intentionally created to be as dehumanizing as possible. Eventually M is taken into detention, to a cell where he stays with other men in a similar situation, hearing the "the howling of captive fellow human beings who have been told that early next morning they will be on a plane back where they came from, however bad that place and whatever their loves and

friendships, their loyalties, brave beginnings, notable achievements and aspirations here in this worsening land" (Constantine 2019: 23–24). The comment reflects on several of the issues already examined in this book, relating to the deservingness of migrants, their aspirations, as well as seeing the UK as a "worsening land". Responsibility is placed upon the receiving country as in most other stories examined, and it is seen as severely failing those who have arrived upon its shores in search of something better.

Another explicit mention of cruelty takes place in the story called "The Father's Tale", told to Roma Tearne. "Cruelty is the currency he lives by" (Tearne 2019: 46) relates to the protagonist's life as he is shuffled between detention centres, prisons, and various authorities, living a life "in transit" (ibid.). The man's son is born while he is in detention, waiting for his deportation to be put into action at any given moment. The man does not disclose his country of origin but refers to it as a "fragrant land of light and heat and dust" (Tearne 2019: 45), trying to convince authorities that his life is in danger if he returns: "The global connection exists only in name. What happens elsewhere does not matter here. Die if you must, but do not come here with your tales of human abuse" (Tearne 2019: 48). The lines indicate that there is no genuine empathy or understanding for the suffering of those who leave their countries and find themselves in precarious, unsettled situations in their new homes. The man in the story attempts suicide (ibid.) and is eventually taken to the airport for his deportation, pleading to be given more time to file his appeal, which is eventually given right before he is supposed to be put on a plane (p. 50). The man is soon released from detention and given a chance to create a home for himself and his family "in this unforgiving island" after "three months of inefficiency" have passed (Tearne 2019: 51). The cruelty evoked thus lies in the slow system, fast when it wishes to deport someone but slow when someone is given a second chance at a new life, a life that will still require several asylum applications (ibid.).

Britain is referred to as an "unforgiving island" in the story told to Tearne, and as a "worsening land" in the story told to Constantine, painting a picture of the nation as a place of hardship and indifference, as also mentioned in "The Father's Tale". The demand for dignity is connected with being given asylum, being given permanent residence, a life to live and to build. This connects with "The Son's Tale" told to Monica Ali, recounting the story of a man originally from Nigeria who arrived through irregular means in Britain using someone else's passport, "because I

wanted a better life" (Ali 2019: 35). The man reports having made a pretty good life for himself despite his lack of papers, working in security but not being able to control his income which went into the bank account of the person whose passport he travelled with (Ali 2019: 36). Eventually, the precarious situation leads to the narrator getting involved with fraud, buying commodities with fake credit cards. Fast forward, the narrator gets married, has a child, and is then caught making a purchase with one of the fake cards and is put in detention and then serves a prison sentence (Ali 2019: 38). Upon release, the narrator returns home to be a stay-at-home father for his three children but is then given a deportation order (2019: 39). Inevitably, the father ends up in detention after the marriage ends and relationship with the ex-wife sours (2019: 40). The narrator is released from detention thanks to a sympathetic judge, and then works to revoke the deportation order, stating that he understands why many people might think that deportation serves him right: "I came here illegally. I committed crimes. When I came here I was very young and all I could see, when I travelled on that false passport, was a lifeline" (Ali 2019: 42). The narrator expresses that he is not a bad person and that he should be given a second chance.

The abruptness of departure is presented as a contrast to the limbo of the asylum seeker in "The Embroiderer's Tale" told to Patrick Gale. An Iranian man tells of his early life in Iran, meeting a young Armenian woman and becoming involved with her extended family who are Christians. Soon, he finds out at the football field that his mother has called the police on him after finding a bible in his bed (Gale 2019: 75). The narrator is smuggled via Turkey to Italy, where he is given the advice to refuse to give his fingerprints or he will not be able to travel further to Britain. Eventually he relents, having spent time in dirty conditions in detention, gives his fingerprints and is released (Gale 2019: 77). The rest of the story speaks of the kindness of strangers, the Muslim couple who helps the narrator get released from detention and takes him in to live in their home despite him being a Christian, and a man named Timothy at church who offers him accommodation after another short period of detention (Gale 2019: 80–81). Timothy helps him start sewing again and persuades him to get a dog, who helps the narrator with his depression and the traumas of the journey to Britain (Gale 2019: 82). The system he faces in Britain is given less attention than the kindness of strangers, and the reason for his flight also deserves some mention, as his mother was the one who gave him up to authorities. The real tragedy of the Embroiderer's

fate is not ending up in Britain but the travels there as well as the actions of his own family.

The desire for dignity, something which can be deemed as a universal human need, fits in more awkwardly with the story of the Nigerian man than with the story of M. The connection between dignity and human rights has been studied by Sharon Sliwinski, who argues that dignity became a central concept in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, 'positioned like a fraternal twin to inalienable rights' (2016: 173). Simply, the term could be defined as 'inner human value' (Sliwinski 2016: 175) and three strands can be recognized: "dignity as status, dignity as intrinsic value, and dignity as the ability to keep one's composure in the face of suffering". The stories examined here speak mostly of the latter form of dignity mentioned. Not all manage to keep their composure, as for example told in the story "The Applicant's Tale" by F, in which the narrator recounts having been nine and a half years in the system, finally being given the right to work (2019: 145). Despite this positive turn of events, F is forced to move out of their accommodation due to their changed status, and upon being interviewed at a local Job Centre, F is told that they have not been able to show proof of residency for nine and a half years in Britain (2019: 146). F recounts that the situation made them feel as if "I was losing my mind and my self. I just started to shout in the middle of the job centre" (ibid.). The example can certainly be defined as losing one's composure, and dignity in many of the stories examined is tremendous despite the immense pressure the narrators are in.

Wanting a better life for oneself is certainly also a universal human desire, but in the case of migration it becomes inherently complex. Keiko Matsui Gibson (2017: 58) argues the following in connection with dignity: "The sense of human dignity can be recognized in the very act of accepting one's responsibility or fulfilling one's duties in life. In lives that often remain far from fully realized, mere receptivity or acceptance may be compatible with human dignity". A life "far from fully realized" defines most of the stories examined in this book, yet in the case of the Nigerian man the desire for dignity is not just demanded from the outside, from the society in which a person is hoping to live, or from the institutions granting rights to migrants, but emerging internally. Desiring a second chance and acknowledging mistakes made can be seen as an act of dignity.

The lure of an easy life in Europe is present to some degree in "The Volunteer's Tale" told by R, who travels from Sudan to Libya and then on to Italy and Paris, where he sees migrants sleeping "under bridges. I

thought, 'What happened to them? Is it true? Is this really Europe?'" (R 2019: 63). The surprise at how migrants are living is represented here, and R travels on to Britain where his fingerprints are taken and it is discovered he has already been registered in Italy. He is returned there but determined to travel back to Britain as "the only country I could be safe was there" (R 2019: 65). On this second stay in Britain, R is able to get some help with his case, being seen by a doctor who documents the signs of torture on his body (p. 66). R repeats that it was the first time anyone had actually heard him, listened to his story instead of just repeating that he should be sent back to Italy. The story criticizes not just lack of dignity for asylum seekers but the Dublin Regulation, which stipulates that asylum applications will be processed in the country in which the applicant arrived first, and the process cannot be restarted anywhere else. Kimara Davis (2020: 264) confirms that Italy receives a far greater number of asylum applications than most other European countries, and that the Dublin Regulation is under review, with proposal for an updated agreement which has been criticized for not taking asylum seekers' preferences into account (Davis 2020: 276). Preference for certain destination countries has also been researched, with Heaven Crawley and Jessica Hagen-Zanker (2019) studying preferences among migrants who arrived in Europe during the migrant crisis. They found that many Syrians in particular expressed desire to reach Germany due to familial ties (p. 28), and that beliefs about finding work easily in certain destinations were significant (p. 31). While no simple conclusions can be made about destination preferences, the research cited highlights the difficulty in reconciling asylum processes meant for those in need of protection with migrant realities.

This topic is revisited in several other stories as well, for example "The Fisherman's Tale" told to Ian Sansom. The narrator begins their story by stating that they will tell their story but will get nothing in return, as no one really listens or cares. They tell of their arduous journey, likely from the Middle East though the country is not specified, as they mention that their people is similar to Yazidi (Sansom 2019: 106). First, they fled to Syria, then to Turkey, Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary, and eventually ended up in Norway. The narrator states that the "Norwegians did not want us", and the journey continues to Germany and France (Sansom 2019: 107), and then on to Britain hidden in a truck. The story ends on a hopeless note, with the narrator stating that "I realise that life makes no sense, that bad things happen, and that no one listens and no [sic] hears and no one

cares. Now you have my story. And I still have nothing" (Sansom 2019: 108). There are no redemptive features in the story, no possibility for dignity, not even through the act of telling the story. It is a powerful reminder of the fact that initiatives such as *Refugee Tales* may, in the end, have little to no impact on policies and the lives of individuals. Storytelling serves the reader more in this case, more than the narrators themselves. Lucio De Capitani (2023: 236) asserts that the *Refugee Tales* project "provides forms of relief to refugees while also contesting and denouncing the systems that have caused them harm". The fisherman's story as briefly discussed above to some extent contradicts this, and questions whether telling their story actually makes any difference at all. The reception of the project in academic contexts has been overwhelmingly positive, with praise for the collaborative and democratic nature of the forms of storytelling involved. *Refugee Tales* as testimony, "verbal acts in which a person bears witness to harm in a public forum" (Gilmore 2017: 307), invites the secondary witness, the listener and the reader, to engage in struggle against indefinite detention. Yet, the result may be more bleak than anticipated and the value of individual stories may amount to very little in the end.

Cruelty re-emerges in relation to storytelling as the collaborator begins with a note about how they first met the narrator (Wittenberg 2019: 109). Wittenberg asks the narrator why they need him to listen to them, why they cannot just tell the story themselves: "His response is that he needs someone else to hear, a person outside the immediate experience, to acknowledge and record what happened to him and to those whose sufferings he saw and shared" (2019: 110). The act of sharing the story is not just about witnessing but about hearing (ibid.), which implies that the listener, and reader too, has a significant responsibility. Sue Tait (2011: 1223) speaks of this responsibility concerning the reader, asserting that "[t]estimonial literature anticipates that the reader will share responsibility for remembrance and prevention". The story collection thus requires listening from readers and collaborators, but it also demands action. Wittenberg acknowledges this responsibility and the act of bearing witness, stating that he becomes "a partner in testament to the ongoing cruelty and suffering" (2019: 110). This cruelty is outlined by Wittenberg as relating to "the persistent discrediting of the meticulously assembled and carefully corroborated evidence of another person's suffering" (2019: 112). Wittenberg here refers to the asylum process of S, the narrator, and the mistakes made by the Home Office.

The act of listening is a central theme in "The Listener's Tale", told to Gillian Slovo, in which Jane visits people in detention and talks to them as a volunteer. Slovo calls it "her listening life" (2019: 135). Another story, "The Social Worker's Tale" told to Bernardine Evaristo, is about a social worker who helps people with their asylum applications, having once been given asylum themselves (2019: 152). They specialize in helping young asylum seekers, explaining that their work is of central importance as to whether the seeker's application is approved or rejected (Evaristo 2019: 154). The story provided by the social worker concerns a teenaged girl from Eritrea who fled to Libya where she was raped in order to pay for her passage to Europe. The narrator recounts the difficulty in representing a person who is too traumatized to tell their story, "nowhere near recovered" (2019: 156). The trauma itself thus becomes an obstacle to the process, which the narrator thinks could be successful if the girl is able to "tell her story succinctly and fluently" (2019: 156). *Refugee Tales III* enables stories to be told in whatever form necessary, and some of them are more fragmented than others, for example the narrator who ended up in Norway. That is an act of dignity as well, providing space for stories to be told and received in any shape or form.

Indefinite detention as the central theme throughout the stories discussed in this section is recounted in a variety of contexts, yet the degrading and hopeless conditions into which people are forced, often over and over again, are similar, testifying to a system designed to keep people in detention for as long as possible, and withholding help and advice to which they would be entitled. Relatively little is revealed of the backgrounds of the narrators, and it performs as an effective narrative device. The reader is not supposed to be the judge and juror, to be the Home Office clerk who processes asylum applications, making life changing decisions along the way, but to be the listener, receiving the story rather than judging its flaws and merits. The purpose and the role of the reader is similar to the purpose outlined by Cornejo Villavicencio in her memoir, when she states that she wants to bring visibility to those who are normally ignored or made invisible, and to show that undocumented migrants are people just like anyone else. Such aims can be detected in *Refugee Tales* as well, as some asylum seekers recount mistakes made and difficulty in remaining calm and collected throughout the arduous process. Their humanity is placed centre stage, as complex individuals made something

less by the asylum system as represented in some of the stories and in the advocacy efforts by the project.

Any question of being deserving or undeserving is thus removed from the equation, even in the case of the man who committed crimes and spent time in prison in "The Stateless Person". He reports having turned his life around, becoming focused on raising his children and keeping out of trouble. The asylum system in Britain is painted in bleak colours in the stories, but many of them also speak of hope and of the goodness and kindness that some people show the narrators. In many accounts, it is thanks to the perseverance of people who help the narrators that situations turn for the better, if only slightly so. These people are often represented as being outside the official asylum system. An important comment is made by S in "The Erased Person's Tale", who is asked by Wittenberg whether the "the system was cruel, callous, careless or just plain chaotic" to which S responds that the "system is overloaded", but that the people working in "were as varied as anywhere else: some were unfeeling, some couldn't care, some were genuinely kind" (2019: 118). The same can be said for all individuals whose stories are examined in this book: they are just people in general. This still does not answer the question how migration to Europe should be dealt with, particularly in terms of an overloaded asylum system.

Is the overburdening of the system the reason for it becoming "cruel, callous, careless", or are such features entrenched? Agustín José Menéndez (2016) examines the European asylum system past and present, and notes that in post-war Europe, idealism combined with relatively low numbers of asylum seekers (p. 390). Another study confirms that the migrant crisis in 2015–2016 overburdened the system, partly because any burden sharing between countries did not work (Bansak et al. 2017: 1). Seeing dignity in Gibson's terms as responsibility must therefore encompass the system as well and not just individuals, yet it remains unclear whether the system can adapt to high numbers of arrivals. To that extent, projects such as *Refugee Tales* hope to reinstate the intrinsic human value of those seeking asylum. Responsibility is therefore solely placed on Europe, or Britain in this case.

Gratitude Politics: *The Ungrateful Refugee: What Immigrants Never Tell You*

"In a refugee camp, stories are everything", writes Dina Nayeri (2020: 6) in the first chapter of her memoir, *The Ungrateful Refugee: What Immigrants Never Tell Us*, and then continues to state that "[o]ur story was a sacred thread woven into my identity" (p. 7). The topic of stories runs through the memoir, which recounts Nayeri's life from childhood in Iran to adulthood in the United States and Britain, having received refugee status in childhood together with her mother and brother. Although Nayeri's experiences refer to a different era when compared to those seeking asylum today, her memoir recounts experiences of asylum seekers in the present day as well, offering criticism of a system which is built to question their stories: "Every day of her new life, the refugee is asked to differentiate herself from the opportunist, the *economic* migrant" (p. 8). Stories are thus presented as ambiguous and a potential double-edged sword, as inherently important for personal identity to which to anchor oneself, yet also as a device to distinguish between deserving and less deserving migrants, the former being those with refugee status whose suffering has been officially recognized.

Stories and narratives are at the heart of the memoir and this section, which examines Nayeri's memoir from the perspective of how refugees' stories can counter larger narratives about migrants, particularly since Nayeri's writing takes a strong stand against the distinctions made between migrants relocating for various purposes, calling refugee status "a sacred category" (p. 10), and pointing a finger in the direction of the West "as primary beneficiaries of the planet's bounty, who sit behind screens watching suspicious and limp-fisted as strangers suffer" (ibid.). The discussion thus goes somewhat along similar lines as in previous chapters in terms of the responsibility of the West for those who flee their countries. Nayeri touches upon the time that has passed since her own days as a refugee, leaving Iran in 1988 (p. 54), and argues that the discourse surrounding refugees is different today, "hostile, even unhinged" (p. 12). Nayeri states that she wants to understand "the world's reaction to us" (p. 13) and that this endeavour also has a deeply personal nature, desiring to return to the past.

The memoir contains travels to camps for asylum seekers in Europe, speaking to people about their travels and hearing their stories. To that extent, Nayeri's book does much the same as *Refugee Tales*, although in a

more personal setting. Instead of trying to verify the stories heard, Nayeri states that she "saw the truth of these stories in corroborating scars, in distinct lenses on a single event […] in grieving, fearful eyes, in shaking hands, in the anxiety of children and the sorrow of the elderly" (p. 14). The book thus foregrounds the personal story and experience as a truth onto itself, questioning the system that interrogates asylum seekers in ways that entail "a failure of duty" (p. 11). Nayeri places the ball in the reader's court: "It is your choice how to hear their voices. […] Be the asylum officer. Or, if you prefer, read as you would a box of letters from a ruin, dispatches from another time that we dust off and readily believe, because the dead want nothing from us" (p. 15). Again, the reader is asked to participate actively and to be a responsible recipient of the stories told. There is thus a subtle advocacy purpose of the memoir, albeit in less explicit terms than in *Refugee Tales*.

The subtitle of the memoir, *What Immigrants Never Tell You*, brings another important dimension to the storytelling presented and promoted by Nayeri. It indicates that the memoir provides the hidden dimension, the one obscured from view in asylum interviews and other forums for personal life stories. Unlike *Refugee Tales*, which brings stories to light in collaboration with authors and other persons who receive the experience and then tell it forward, Nayeri's memoir attempts to tell the refugee story from within, one refugee relating the stories of other asylum seekers. Temporally, the memoir jumps from childhood to present day, and from autobiographical narrative to stories of others.

Nayeri reveals that she was born in 1979, the same year the revolution in Iran took place, and observes that she grew up in a time of war (p. 21). The uncertain times of her childhood manifest as an "itch in my brain" which makes Nayeri count her pencils, adjust her blanket at night to cover her arms evenly, pick scabs off other people's skin, pull zippers past their end point, and as tic in her neck (ibid.). The obsessive behaviour is addressed several times in the memoir. Nayeri describes the sensation as a "metal bar" in her throat or chest, compelling her for example to count the books in her shelves (p. 23). The anxiety recounted relates not only to war but also to school and the competition to be first in class in a school environment that was "stifling" and "cruel" (p. 22). Despite the strict regime at school, Nayeri describes her parents as supportive and ambitious, recounting the "mantras from my childhood", which include her mother's success in the national entrance exam to university in which had the seventeenth best score: "I came from a test-taking stock" (pp. 24–25).

In addition, Nayeri reveals that her parents had a relatively high social standing in Isfahan with their medical degrees, yet her mother's Christianity was not regarded kindly (p. 26).

The relationship between Nayeri and her mother is a significant thread, and the reasons for their sudden departure from Iran is related to the Christian beliefs of Nayeri's mother. Christianity becomes a way out of a life she did not choose herself as recounted by Nayeri, who states that her mother did not like being a doctor, and that things reached a tipping point when Nayeri's family visited London when she was five, where her grandmother had relocated earlier (p. 29). Nayeri writes that the family "returned altered", as Nayeri's mother became actively involved in "an underground church", enduring harassment and continuous threats. The religious activity of the mother caused friction between the parents, and Nayeri also endured threats and coercion at school (pp. 34–35). Eventually, as the situation escalates, Nayeri's mother starts packing and preparing to escape, and through lucky chance and her father's connections at work as a dentist, they secure passports in the eighth hour, travelling to Dubai on tourist visas but with no intention of returning (p. 54).

The second part of the memoir is called "Camp", and deals with the in-between state of waiting, in which Nayeri and her mother and brother Khosrou live after having left Iran. The flight inspires the family narrative of the "three miracles" that helped them get out of Iran, becoming "our identity, the story of our resettlement and therefore the story of our lives. Long after I shed that narrative, my mother held on; she still defines her life by it" (Nayeri 2020: 75). The miracles relate to the unlikely luck of finding a cargo plane that could take them out of Isfahan, getting a ride to the airport as the car broke down just a few miles before it, and then being able to sneak onto the plane with the help of a security official (pp. 52–53). The family arrives in Dubai not as refugees but tourists, having obtained a sponsored visa with the help of a friend of their father (p. 76). Preparing for a new life in freedom demands sacrifices, and Nayeri's mother makes the children study English and even changes the name of Khosrou to Daniel, "his American counterpart" (2020: 85). The changing of names symbolizes the dual identity attached with leaving a country of origin behind and preparing for life in another, and Dubai is the place in between in which the preparations and waiting takes place. Waiting is a regular feature of much migration writing and can occur in many different contexts, for example "waiting for public services and bureaucratic decisions, and more prolonged and open-ended forms of waiting, for regularisation,

justice and uncertain futures" (Jacobsen and Karlsen 2021: 3). They add that in many receiving societies, "waiting symbolises waste, emptiness and uselessness" (p. 6). In the context of *Refugee Tales*, most of the points above apply, but in Nayeri's narrative, waiting carries a more positive connotation as Dubai is not a place of indefinite detention but merely a place between places, between coming from and going to.

The Nayeris seek asylum at the United Nations, travelling to Abu Dhabi for interviews (2020: 90), and eventually end up overstaying their tourist visas (p. 91). They move in with an Australian missionary couple and the children are enrolled in an English school, in which the other children know that Nayeri is from Iran "because of my broken English" (p. 101). Her separateness from the other children is emphasized, confirming Joseph Taylor's (2020: 249) comment about the refugee continuously being identified by the country of origin: "The refugee has always proved troubling because of her uncanny presence—foreign but assimilated, vulnerable but dangerous, stateless but perpetually identified by the state from which she has come". The comment is relevant for many of the stories examined in this book, but particularly interesting in the context of Nayeri's memoir, as she and her mother and brother actually receive refugee status, eventually. Many of the other narratives explored recount lives of undocumented migrants or those seeking asylum yet being turned away. Nayeri's book speaks directly against such categorisation, and it is a topic she touches upon a few years prior to publishing the memoir, in a piece for *The Guardian*:

> With the rise of nativist sentiment in Europe and America, I've seen a troubling change in the way people make the case for refugees. Even those on the left talk about how immigrants make America great. They point to photographs of happy refugees turned good citizens, listing their contributions, as if that is the price of existing in the same country, on the same earth. Friends often use me as an example. They say in posts or conversations: "Look at Dina. She lived as a refugee and look how much stuff she's done." As if that's proof that letting in refugees has a good, healthy return on investment.
>
> But isn't glorifying the refugees who thrive according to western standards just another way to endorse this same gratitude politics? Isn't it akin to holding up the most acquiescent as examples of what a refugee should be, instead of offering each person the same options that are granted to the native-born

> citizen? Is the life of the happy mediocrity a privilege reserved for those who never stray from home? (Nayeri 2017: n.p.)

The comment relates to several issues that are further unpacked in the memoir, such as the expectations put on those seeking asylum, but also personal and family-related expectations to do well. Gratitude is a part of many stories analysed in this book, also for example in Vargas's encounters with people who felt that he had neglected to follow the right steps in order to gain citizenship, for whatever perceived reasons of vanity or shock value. Clark in *Behold the Dreamers* considers Jende appropriately appreciative of the good fortunes that have come his way, which makes a mockery of the dire situation in which Jende finds himself with regard to his residence status. The many essays discussed in the *The Good Immigrant* and *The Good Immigrant USA* also testify to the "gratitude politics" critiqued by Nayeri.

Nayeri recounts that her mother's Christian activism continued in the United Arab Emirates, causing authorities to intervene due to their overstayed visas. The family is then allowed to fly to Italy, "our next pass-through state, a safe haven as we petitioned other countries" (2020: 104). After a stay at Hotel Barba, a centre for asylum seekers, the Nayeris are given refuge in the United States and travel to Oklahoma (p. 114). A visit many years later in 2011 to Hotel Barba where the family stayed with many others living in the same kind of limbo inspires Nayeri to state that people tend to see "the refugee camp as a purgatory, a liminal space without shape or colour" (pp. 117–118). Nayeri asserts that the time at Barba made her loathe waiting, stating that waiting is "the ultimate indignity" (p. 118). Waiting in multiple shapes and forms features in much of the literature examined in this book, perhaps most acutely and painfully in *Refugee Tales III* and the stories of detention included. An asylum seeker is made to wait, sometimes for years, in various centres, housing arrangements, prisons, official buildings, queues, and in essence also has to wait to restart their own lives. Nayeri writes that her mother resisted this waiting, through various activities and travels in Italy (ibid.). She also observes that this waiting patiently was an expectation among those who had provided the asylum seekers with a safe haven: "Your life is no longer in danger. You could be more patient. You could wait" (ibid.; italics in the original). She here refers to a Romanian couple living at Barba whose love life became the interest of all residents as the woman had an affair with another Romanian man also at Barba (p. 107) and refers to this as the

"primary sin of the Romanians", which was "their ingratitude" and refusal to just sit patiently and wait (p. 118).

Gratitude is significant here as part of the refugee narrative, what is expected of them and the behaviours and attitudes they are supposed to display. In scholarly discourse, gratitude is distinguished from gratefulness, for example by Rusk et al. (2016). They argue that "gratefulness does not concern specific benefactors", whereas "gratitude relates to a much narrower spectrum of events that must involve the perceived agency of someone else" (pp. 2203; 2200). A distinction between the two is provided through the example of "a husband giving his wife a box of chocolates. The wife can appraise both (1) the benefit of her husband showing kindness to her and what his actions might mean for their relationship (producing gratitude) and (2) the benefit of simply getting a box of chocolates (producing gratefulness)". Despite the seemingly simple example, "receiving a gift of chocolates may prompt gratitude regarding the well-intentioned actions of the husband but not gratefulness for the gift itself if the wife does not like chocolate or has decided to go on a diet" (Rusk et al. 2016: 2199–2200). Thus, gratitude involves more complexity and requires what Rusk et al. (p. 2200) term a "benevolent agent". Ross Buck (2004: 100–101) defines gratitude as "involving a constellation of interpersonal/situational contingencies, including the acknowledgment that (a) one has received benefits and (b) one's power is limited (humility)".

In terms of these distinctions, the asylum seeker may thus be expected to show gratitude to the "benevolent agent", in this case, the state or institution providing shelter while the application is processed, and eventually, for the greatest gift of all: status as refugee; an unpayable debt to the country that has taken them in. The mention of humility by Buck is noteworthy in this context and relates to much of what Nayeri criticizes so vocally. Upon arrival in Oklahoma, Nayeri recounts efforts to settle in in American society and school, where her background was not understood, nor her refugee status made to mean much as exemplified in a comment by a teacher who says that Nayeri must be grateful for now being safe in America (2020: 197). The demand for gratitude stretches to Nayeri's mother as well, who becomes acquainted with an Iranian man, against the wishes of their benefactors Jim and Jean with whom the family is staying in Oklahoma. Nayeri's mother explains to them that she respects their opinion but will do as she chooses: "They advised her to be humbler, to show gratitude to her new country instead of isolating herself inside the Iranian community" (2020: 200). The comment quite explicitly

reinforces Buck's statement about gratitude involving the recognition of benefits received and a certain level of humility. Nayeri's mother wanting to make decisions for herself does not express a desired level of gratitude and humility.

The reality of being seen as outsiders in the local community involves a great deal of humiliation, however, as for example at the mother's work where she is blamed for the mistakes of others or told that she is not paying enough attention, or at school where Nayeri is called a "cat-eater, terrorist, sand-nigger, camel-fucker" (2020: 200–201). Nayeri recounts how she thought that adulthood would bring the promise of "meritocracy" she was hoping for (p. 201), while being humiliated in school for sewing coasters in class for money while waiting for her classmates to finish the work she had already done: "'Dina, put your sewing away. In this country, girls have to learn math just like boys. You can do your sewing at home.' I burned at that comment for days, wishing I could articulate all that she had wrong" (2020: 203). Expectations come into play in the teacher's comment, and a prejudice against Nayeri and her background. The refusal to provide refugees such as Nayeri and her mother a sense of individualism, an identity created by themselves and a life lived according to personal wishes and desires, is exemplified in these lines.

In search of the ultimate meritocracy, Nayeri sets her mind on Harvard, taking up Taekwondo in order to stand out from the crowd of other applicants (2020: 287), and receives American citizenship in 1994 at the age of fifteen (p. 288), attending a citizenship ceremony at which "[n]o one felt obliged or humbled, imagining their truer home" (p. 289). The desire of Nayeri to attend Harvard, pushing herself hard at sports and school, is not just about securing a successful future, but about avoiding a similar life as that of her mother: "My great project was about transforming, becoming someone unrelated to Iran, my family, my dramatic circumstances" (p. 293). Nayeri states that her background is significantly different from her mother's, creating a rift between them, and that her critical views of Iran were "part of repaying my debt to the West. Iran was a shameful, confused part of my past, a jumble of contradictions I could solve only by murdering the wild village girl and becoming the best kind of American: elegant and iron-hard, a woman without need" (p. 294). The lines again refer to gratitude, to having to pay a debt to society that took her in. Thus, even the meritocracy in which Nayeri puts her hopes as an adolescent becomes yet another extension of the demand for gratitude, both outside in society and inward, referring to having to pay a debt to the West. The

lines also refer to being a model American, which was addressed in previous chapters on undocumented migration.

The debt stretches to Nayeri's mother as well, with Nayeri stating that she could get her mother what she needed, "if only I could understand Americans enough, be successful enough in their eyes. This country was a meritocracy; it was fair—I would redeem us" (2020: 295). Yet, Nayeri writes that she was "a lesser citizen among Americans who had seen nothing of the world" (p. 294). It is an uphill battle, being "lesser" and fighting to become equal. However, Nayeri also observes that the family did assimilate, becoming American, "mellowed in our Iranian-ness and the end of the Gulf War renewed the feelings of gratitude and American exceptionalism already in the air. We no longer frightened them" (p. 299). Eventually, Princeton accepts Nayeri's application, and she recounts feeling no loss at the thought of not going to Harvard, deciding that "Princeton would be my home. Academia would be my home" if she could not have a home country anymore (ibid.). The memoir thus reveals in intimate detail the divided loyalties toward country of origin and the new home. The narrative of growing up remains focused on the desire to become American, to pay back a debt, to be successful and build a life on merits, whereas the other part of the memoir, told in tandem with the childhood story, complicates the relationship between origins, the past, and the future.

As the personal narrative of becoming an adult in the United States comes to an end, Nayeri gives more space to her work with asylum seekers and the efforts to understand current politics. The story of Darius is recounted at the very beginning of the memoir, stating that he was forced to leave Iran after a girl took an interest in him, and he was unable to get her to leave her alone despite several attempts. After being severely beaten up, he left Iran, entering Turkey by irregular means and eventually arriving in Lesbos after a failed attempt that saw him put in prison for two months in Turkey (2020: 19–20). Nayeri observes that Darius's story is somewhat disorganised, as he is unable to tell it coherently:

> He is rarely believed. 'Economic migrant,' they call him, seeing only his youth and potential. In newspapers and on his iPhone, Europeans are always debating how much refugees will contribute; they claim they *want* the economically beneficial kind, the 'good' immigrants. […] Show any agency or savvy or industry *before* you left your home and you're done. (Nayeri 2020: 19)

Telling an incohesive story is addressed by Francesca Polletta (2023: 111), who argues that "few people tell their own stories coherently. Most of us meander, omit crucial details and fixate on others, privilege what really happened over a coherent narrative line or, alternatively, gloss over what happened in the interest of getting too quickly to the moral of the story". The connection can be made with human memory as well, which is arguably inconsistent by nature.

The difference between Nayeri's own arrival in the United States and that of Darius in Europe is thus marked, as one is welcoming, at least if you live by the rules and assimilate, becoming American and all that it entails, whereas the other is presented as demanding, suspicious and doubting in terms of the asylum seeker's story. Nayeri describes shedding her cultural identity to some extent upon arrival, yet her age may here be of significance. She is considerably younger than some of the people she meets and interviews, being given the chance, and perhaps even expected, to reinvent herself and make her own fortune and future. To that extent, the American dream can be said to be quite alive and well in Nayeri's narrative with regard to her own life, but it is a dream of which she remains critical and from which she distances herself to some extent, despite the Princeton degree.

A second story embedded in the memoir recounts the lives of Kaweh and Kambiz, two young men who left Iran in the early new millennium, arrived in Europe but whose lives became vastly different despite similar beginnings. Kaweh was born in Kurdistan in 1981 (2020: 56), becoming increasingly aware of the political struggle of Kurds, and getting involved in politics himself (p. 60). Kambiz is told to have lived in a province not far from where Kaweh lived, having fewer political ambitions and being more interested in cooking, a profession not supported by his mother (p. 62). Kaweh's activities force him into exile, leaving Iran for Turkey and being granted refugee status by the UNHCR, a status which is not recognised by the Turkish authorities (p. 64). Kaweh travels with a smuggler's boat to Greece, which fills with water, and they are taken back to Turkey. He leaves his valuable letter from the UNHCR with a friend to keep it safe: "He knew that his greatest challenge wasn't the mountain or the sea or corrupt smugglers or hours of tedium and worry. It was the likelihood that the gatekeepers to safety wouldn't believe" (p. 66). The importance of the story is again highlighted by Nayeri, and the indication is overt that it is all about the story for those seeking asylum, that their entire existence

depends on being able to present a story that is believed and deemed accurate.

Kaweh's second attempt takes him to France or Belgium in two separate lorries, and finally in a truck across the canal to England, arriving "on 24 November 2004 with epic dreams. […] How comforting finally to know into what life he had been reborn, to glimpse the version of himself that waited down the road" (pp. 69–70). Meanwhile, Kambiz arrived by lorry in the Netherlands, recounted by Nayeri as having similar ambitions and hopes as Kaweh: "*I'm young. I have talent and a good mind. I will make it here*" (p. 71; italics in the original). The dreams of Kaweh and Kambiz are not much different from Nayeri's own, and the moral of the story is where these dreams eventually take the different individuals. The stories of these people reappear in the memoir when Nayeri recounts her visits to camps for asylum seekers in Europe, and the work she herself has done to help those trying to navigate the system. She writes about becoming acquainted with Paul Hutchings from Refugee Support in 2017, who works to give those seeking asylum more humane conditions and a possibility to preserve their dignity (2020: 121). The notion of gratitude emerges again in Paul's stories of the help provided to asylum seekers, often handed out from trucks to people scrambling to get hold of items.

In addition, the volunteers themselves have expectations: "[E]ven the most good-hearted want to *feel* thanked. They have come for that silent look of admiration that's free to most, but so costly if you're tapped for gratitude by everyone you meet" (p. 122). Gratitude is portrayed as a limited source, being depleted by the high demand placed on those arriving as asylum seekers or refugees in the West. The sincerity of volunteers is also questioned by Nayeri. Gratefulness emerges in a study of narratives created by volunteers working with migrants in Germany, particularly from a perspective of "welcome culture" (Sutter 2019). Sutter (2019: 32) observes "stories about the volunteers' personal experiences with refugees, often highlighting the latter's gratefulness, be it in a written form or a video clip showing volunteers talking about their engagement at the station". This seems to confirm Nayeri's statement about volunteers working with some kind of expectation of gratitude from the asylum seekers. Ethical concerns related to volunteering have been raised by volunteers themselves as well, with Ashely Witcher (2019) addressing some of the issues in her brief paper based on

personal experiences of volunteering. Witcher tells the story of a female volunteer who took a teenager in to live with her as he had nowhere else to go, but soon grew tired of the responsibility and demands from the boy, eventually leaving the Greek island to which she had relocated but not taking the boy with her (2019: 42). The lines echo Murray's critique of Europeans who at first were eager to welcome asylum seekers but soon grew tired of them.

Toward the end of the memoir, Nayeri ponders useful ways to help people seeking asylum, and states that what they need is "friendship, not salvation" (p. 338). She returns to the role of volunteers in camps, and recounts how Paul told her during their travel in Greece that a considerable problem at the camps is romantic relationships between female volunteers and male asylum seekers (p. 337). Nayeri calls the volunteers "idealistic", indicating that the woman may think of herself in terms of being a rescuer, but that the reality of the pressures on those in camps may eventually become too much, after which the relationship comes to an end, with far more dire consequences for the man than the woman (ibid.). Taylor (2020: 249) refers to the refugee as "an uncanny figure subject to both desire and derision", and here the topic of desire emerges most explicitly.

Upon arrival at a camp in Greece, Nayeri questions her wish to return, asking herself "why did I return to this wretched limbo? Why am I not living my life, grateful for every minute I'm allowed to come and go in the free world?" (p. 139). Nayeri answers the question, stating that her reason for travelling to camps is both personal and political, having to do with her own life and particularly that of her daughter, but also with what she terms as "the world is turning its back on refugees, because America is no longer America and Europe is going the same way: these once-Christian nations have abandoned duty in favour of entitlement and tribal instinct" (p. 139). The idea of duty is mentioned in Nayeri's earlier piece for *The Guardian* as well in which she writes the following:

> It is the obligation of every person born in a safer room to open the door when someone in danger knocks. It is your duty to answer us, even if we don't give you sugary success stories. Even if we remain a bunch of ordinary Iranians, sometimes bitter or confused. Even if the country gets overcrowded and you have to give up your luxuries, and we set up ugly little lives around the corner, marring your view. If we need a lot of help and local services, if your taxes rise and your street begins to look and feel strange and

> everything smells like turmeric and tamarind paste, and your favourite shop is replaced by a halal butcher, your schoolyard chatter becoming ching-chongese and phlegmy "kh"s and "gh"s, and even if, after all that, we don't spend the rest of our days in grateful ecstasy, atoning for our need.
>
> Because a person's life is never a bad investment, and so there are no creditors at the door, no debt to repay. Now there's just the rest of life, the stories left to create, all the messy, greedy, ordinary days that are theirs to squander. (Nayeri 2017)

"Duty" implies doing the right thing even when it is unpleasant and uncomfortable, even when it would be tempting to do what is best for oneself. It implies a duty toward mankind, toward those in need of various forms of help. That stretches towards people already in Europe or America, not just those who are hoping to arrive there. What Nayeri asks for is for the burden to be shared, the burden of those forced to leave their homes taking only their stories with them, and for the burden of those storied to be shared, too.

These stories do not only concern stories told to migration officials as part of application processes, but also emerge in other contexts. Nayeri meets people living in the camp she visits in Katsikas, Greece, who tell her of troubles getting medical aid they need, for example glasses for a man with a severe eye condition that would actually require far more expensive treatment: "They are not believed. […] I wonder why they think a person would lie about their keratin. Do they want a needle in their eye for sport?" (p. 143). Nayeri notes that it is not difficult to get people to tell their stories, "most likely as a practice for that day when they will perform it for a jaded and sceptical audience" (pp. 157–158). When wandering in the camp and visiting the store, Nayeri compares the people in the camp with herself, and states that since she is a "white-skinned woman with an American passport and education, I am believed by default" (p. 161). The implication here is that as an Iranian refugee, she may not be believed to the same degree. Having transformed into an American, her status has shifted significantly. One of the families Nayeri meets asks if she can do something for their asylum process, she hears their plea which is repeated by many of the people in the camp (p. 169): "All over the camp, people look at me the same way, like I am a pinprick portal to America" (p. 173). Eventually, one family even asks Nayeri to take one of their children with her to England (p. 180). Connections can be made with Neni, Mbue's

fictional character, who was prepared to give up her son so that he could stay in the United States.

The stories she hears also speak of conflicts between asylum seekers, as well as comments that indicate that not all are seen as equally deserving of asylum (p. 170). The asylum process of Kaweh, however, is told in detail, as he is eventually granted asylum after a lengthy process (p. 215) and able to begin studies at university. The successful story of Kaweh and his ambitions to master English and be as useful to his housemates as possible is contrasted against that of Kambiz, for whom things did not end well. He told his story to Dutch authorities but was not believed yet could not be sent back to Iran as he did not have a passport (p. 219). Despite the situation, Kambiz manages to make a living for himself, doing electrical work (ibid.). The state of limbo is having an effect on him as recounted by Nayeri, who observes that "the future brings anxiety because you don't belong and can't move forward. The past brings depression, because you can't go home, your memories fade and everything you know is gone" (p. 220). The statement connects loosely with what Vargas and Cornejo Villavicencio wrote about undocumented people not being able to travel, and Vargas's memoir in particular speaks of the paradox of being stuck in a place without papers, not allowed to stay but unable to leave. Kambiz is recounted as living in a similar limbo, and the word used by Nayeri, "belong", is significant here. There is thus an implication that national belonging is necessary for the future to be made possible, in order to move forward and become a full member of society. Kambiz complains to his friends about his tuition, saying that he needs to become "a legitimate human" (p. 221).

Even though the asylum process is supposed to be universal, Livia Johannesson (2022: 912) observes that assessing claims for asylum "require interpretations of both international law and domestic legislation and assessments of both past and future events in cultural, political, and social settings, which are distant to the daily lives of decision-makers". It is thus a challenging and demanding task for those conducting it, yet also so for those being interviewed (ibid.). Johannesson's study of Swedish judges assessing asylum claims asserts that "the burden of proof rests with the individual asylum seeker. This generates ambiguity around asylum seekers' status as protection seekers and offers legitimacy to a perception of asylum seekers as individually responsible for persuading states to protect their right to have rights" (Johannesson 2022: 921).

This problem is central in Nayeri's memoir as well, as has already been established in terms of how she frames the memoir, giving readers the possibility to scrutinize the stories told as if they were the ones making asylum decisions.

Another factor that has been found to impact asylum claims is that there are cultural differences as to how autobiographical memory is narrated (Jobson 2009: 457). Kaweh's story touches upon this issue, as his asylum interview goes well and he is granted asylum, yet he regrets afterwards "his arrogant Iranian style: answering a question with another to highlight its absurdity" (Nayeri 2020: 211). For Kambiz, the story ends in much greater tragedy, as he gathers documents to re-open his asylum case but loses them and is left in despair (p. 223). Eventually, he pours fuel on himself and sets himself on fire in Amsterdam, killing himself (p. 225). His family is surprised upon being given his remains which amount to very little, thinking that he had made much more of his life in Europe: "Iranians believe that Europe is all villas and wine. To think that after a decade, a man would own a sack of work clothes, full of dirt, an old phone and some underwear—*that* is the tragedy for them" (p. 227; italics in the original). The comment speaks again of expectations, this time among those at home, believing in the riches and fortunes of Europe, available to all who manage to complete the journey.

The troubles with the asylum story and being believed is addressed multiple times in Nayeri's memoir, also in connection to her own background. She recounts hearing about disbelief from a friend within her community, someone who questions Nayeri's claim to asylum, her mother's involvement in the Christian church, and that their way out of Iran was so unlikely with a visa and a sponsor (p. 232). Nayeri describes hearing this as a "boot to the gut" (ibid.). However, Nayeri also observes that those who have been refugees themselves or sought asylum would not make the best interviewers: "What great temptation to roll up the ladder behind you and move on, to question every story according to the narrowest standards, trying to match its peculiar details to your own" (p. 233). The comment points to conflicted loyalties even among those who have been given asylum, indicating that it is not something they necessarily wish to share with others in similar predicaments. Further, Nayeri (p. 234) also argues that for those who have been given asylum, "there's a sense of entitlement and heroism that follows escape, the desire to keep [their] story pure, to enforce that purity in others". To that extent, even

former refugees themselves become scrutinizers of asylum claims, of people's stories who have similar backgrounds to themselves.

Kaweh becomes an asylum lawyer, and Nayeri arranges to meet him. She writes that he has taken on hundreds of cases and only lost a few of them. According to Kaweh, people lie in their asylum claims for three reasons: "'First, bad advice from friends. Second, success stories taken out of context. Third, experience in other countries, which they assume will apply to the UK'" (p. 236). They perform a mock interview, during which Kaweh asks Nayeri questions and she tries to respond, eventually asking how long the interview goes on for, to which Kaweh answers that it can go on for quite some time and does not end until "they find enough contradictions.' Kaweh doesn't say it, but they're not looking to rescue. They're looking to reject" (p. 237). "Asylum Statistics", a report for the House of Commons Library, reports the following:

> In the year ending 2022, the latest period for which we have estimates, asylum seekers and refugees made up approximately 17% of immigrants to the UK. This includes arrivals under the Ukraine schemes, the Afghan relocation and resettlement schemes, and arrivals in small boats (around 185,000 individuals in total). If including the British National (Overseas) scheme in the category of humanitarian routes, up to 24% of immigration in that year would fall into that category.

Further, they outline that the number of refused applications in the first round "reached its highest point at 88% in 2004. Since then, the refusal rate has been falling overall and was at 23% in the year to September 2022, its lowest point since 1990". Of those who were refused asylum in 2004–2020, around 75% appealed and "almost one third of those appeals were allowed" ("Asylum Statistics" 2022). Statistics does indicate that Nayeri's statement is problematic, claiming that asylum officials are "looking to reject", as the number of refused applications has fallen significantly in the last decades. Statistics show that it is easier now to get asylum than it was twenty years ago, despite the high number of arrivals.

Kaweh's comment about refused asylum claims happening due to three reasons raises the point of cultural difference, which was already briefly addressed in terms of the applicants themselves. Nayeri argues that there are significant cultural differences between those conducting interviews as well: "Americans enjoy drama; they want to be moved. The Dutch want

facts. The English have precedents, stories from each country deemed true that year, that month. The Dutch have something similar. Americans like the possibility of a grand success story, they adore exceptionalism and want to make all greatness American" (p. 242). The statement is difficult to verify and leans to some extent on cultural stereotypes, and Nayeri also acknowledges the storytelling tropes of Iranians, writing that they "like symbols and metaphors" and do not necessarily tell a story in the chronological and orderly fashion expected by interviewers (p. 243). Laura Smith-Khan (2017: 391–392) confirms the cultural problems involved with assessing the credibility of applicants, which "has become key to determining refugee status". Further, Liza Schuster (2020: 1374), who has worked closely with Afghan applicants, emphasizes the lack of expert knowledge about certain countries and areas of those making decisions on asylum applications. Schuster has examined refusal letters, arguing that available reports on Afghanistan were not correctly used, and instead those making decisions "used out of date reports and or cherry picked information to undermine the credibility of the claimant; the credibility of the applicant's account was frequently assessed by judging 'reasonableness' based on speculation, without any consideration of what might constitute reasonable behaviour in Afghanistan" (2020: 1375). Schuster ends her article with a discussion in which she makes the statement that upon having assessed the refusal letters, "it is difficult not to conclude that the driving force in the investigation of an asylum claim is finding grounds to refuse it" (2020: 1383), thus confirming for her part Nayeri's statement.

Cultural differences may therefore have a significant impact on the asylum story, both as it is told and as it is heard, and Smith-Khan (2017: 392) agrees with this: "Coherence and plausibility require that the asylum seeker's narrative coincides with the expectations of the decision maker. Finally, decision makers may draw on demeanour, such as facial expressions and body language, as indicators of truthfulness". Nayeri travels to Amsterdam to meet Parvis Noshirrani who knew Kambiz, and through this meeting, she becomes aware of another man, Ahmed Pouri who helps asylum seekers, not in any official capacity but as "a helper" or "a refugee whisperer" (p. 246): "He has made it his life's work to teach refugees how to be believed by the Dutch, how to tell a convincing story the *Western* way" (italics in the original). In Pouri's own words as cited by Nayeri, "'I tell refuges what to say to IND [the immigration

authority in the Netherlands] and to reporters so they don't work against themselves, so they don't make all refugees look like crazies and liars and manipulators. So that their humanity shows the European way'" (p. 247). The cultural difference is again emphasized, indicating that any such project as a general right to asylum and to refugee status is doomed to fail due to the inevitable human factor involved. Nayeri remains critical throughout the memoir, making an important observation about truth and fiction: "Truth is hard work—it is rigour. You can lie with sloppy facts. And you can tell the truth with well-crafted fiction" (p. 277). The demand for the absolutely verifiable and consistent story goes against autobiographical memory, human memory and how it moulds experiences and events into personal identity. Paul John Eakin (2020: 93–94) asserts that autobiographical memories tend to change a little every time they are recalled, becoming "constructed anew". To make this work in the interview room is an impossible task.

Smith-Khan (2017: 405) notes that in their claims, "applicants need to emphasize particular elements of their identity or experience to align with the legal and bureaucratic understanding of what it means to be a refugee". This connects with Pouri's statement about telling their story the Western way. Pouri further states that the "asylum officer is cynical and overworked. He's not listening for the truth. He's looking for a single lie. Just one" (p. 247). In the afterword to *Refugee Tales III*, Herd (2019: 191) argues that "in so far as the individual does present their story, that story is administratively weaponised against them". This is reinforced by Pouri's words, and by some of the research referenced here. As for the "cynical and overworked" asylum officer, statistics confirms this too, at least in a British context:

> As of June 2022, the total 'work in progress' asylum caseload consisted of 166,100 cases. Of these, 101,400 cases were awaiting an initial decision, 4,900 were awaiting the outcome of an appeal, and approximately 38,900 cases were subject to removal action.
>
> In 2021, there were around 9 asylum applications for every 10,000 people living in the UK. Across the EU27 there were 14 asylum applications for every 10,000 people. The UK was therefore below the average among EU countries for asylum applications per head of population, ranking 16th among EU27 countries plus the UK on this measure. ("Asylum Statistics")

The case load indicates that the number of applications in the process is significant, particularly for those waiting for their first decision.

At the heart of Nayeri's memoir is the story, the story of her own asylum claim, and life as a refugee and what comes after, but also of others who tell their stories and are believed, or not. She states toward the end of her memoir, after a lengthy phone call with Ahmed Pouri, that her family did not have to jump through such hoops: "We were believed, at least by asylum people. Some asylum officer saw us and waved us through" (p. 250). The comment indicates that gates have closed since then or remain only slightly ajar today. Could the difference be in numbers as already briefly addressed in the previous section, as UNHCR reports that there were around 42 million forcibly displaced people in 1991, and 89.3 million in 2021 ("Figures at a Glance" n.d.)? Of those reported, 4.6 million constitute asylum seekers in 2021. The number of refugees has grown by less than ten million since 1991, with 27.1 million in 2021. Is there asylum fatigue? Nayeri's writing reminds readers about the responsibility and duty to take those suffering in, even if it is unpleasant and difficult. What Nayeri eventually asks for is far more simple: an assimilation process that is mutual, that changes not just the person settling in a new place but also that place itself (p. 342). Further, Nayeri states that she believes in "open borders, but Europe is no paradise" (p. 362). With this, she critiques the idea of everyone wanting to come to Europe. And eventually, the notion of gratitude comes into the memoir once more, when Nayeri writes that it is ingrained in every refugee, and that it "is part of a journey toward home, wherever that is" (p. 365).

The asylum seeker's story is at the heart of Nayeri's memoir that balances between the personal and the explicitly political, between the private wish to reconnect with a fragmented past and the need to address asylum seeking and refugee status in a more global sense. The personal story as examined by Nayeri is pulled in multiple directions by officials making decisions about asylum. This has devastating consequences for some of the people she meets or whose stories she hears, particularly in terms of Kambiz setting himself on fire. The desperation is also visible in the family she meets in Greece who asks her to take one of their children with her back to England. Nayeri campaigns for more humane asylum politics, for open borders as she states herself, and for what is at heart of it: the human need for dignity and recognition, the need to be believed.

Part of the indignity imposed on asylum seekers is the sheer length of the process, the endless waiting which Nayeri is critical of. Gratitude plays a significant role here and for the stories both presented and critiqued by Nayeri, and her emphasis remains on the duty and responsibility of wealthier, safer nations.

Moving Together and Apart in *Exit West*

The main focus in this chapter has so far been on real life stories of people who have sought asylum, but this chapter ends with an investigation of a novel that creates a world in which borders take on a new meaning and travel is completely transformed. It is a fitting end to this chapter and this entire study, as the novel provides no answers to any of the complex questions asked. Again, as important as the novel itself is, so is the discourse surrounding it, involving views of scholars and reviewers alike. This final section connects with the first novel analysed in this book, *American Dirt*, bringing the discussion full circle. Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017), at the centre of this section, has received considerable praise, even being shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2017. Hamid, known particularly for his successful earlier novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2011), argues in an interview conducted by Alex Preston (2018) about *Exit West* that novels are more than just observers, "'they also exist. Just as in looking on something we change what is being observed, novels and the arts more generally, in looking at what may come, are also shaping what may come. It isn't an entirely passive position'". The comment indicates that fiction, too, can have an active political purpose, being as much advocacy writing as nonfiction which has been extensively examined in this book. To that extent, seeing the novel as much more than just an onlooker or observer, examining *Exit West* and the scholarly discussion surrounding it, is an important complement to the topics in this book. Preston (2018) states that Hamid's novel "was in part a response to the migrant crisis that was unfolding in various corners of the world as Hamid was writing, but it also predicted with almost uncanny prescience the rise of nativist paranoia and racial intolerance, which have become such features of life in 2018". Preston here refers to the fact that *Exit West* was written just before the election of American president Donald Trump and the Brexit vote in Britain. Shazia Sadaf (2020: 636) argues in the abstract to an article on the novel that it is "set in a post-Brexit-Trump world", which it may be in

hindsight, but it is also potentially problematic to read in too much of more contemporary developments into the novel.

The political dimension of *Exit West* is undisputable, as the novel opens with the following lines: "In a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly at war, a young man met a young woman in a classroom and did not speak to her" (Hamid 2017: 1). Hamid comments on the political nature of writing in an interview:

> I think that people who say that their writing is not political are people who would like to disassociate themselves from the politics implicit in their writing. I am not convinced that it is possible to write in a non-political way. The choice of language, the choice of character, what happens to those characters, how the story develops, all of these things have political components. (Ramzan 2022: 7)

Engaging with the topic of migration so explicitly as *Exit West* does is inevitably a political act. The country in which the main characters live is not mentioned by name, but it is indicated through notions such as "evening prayers" (Hamid 2017: 2) and Nadia, the female protagonist, wearing a long black robe despite not being particularly religious, to keep herself protected (p. 15). Hamid implies in an interview (Brown 2018) that the city in which the protagonists live is based on Lahore but that he chose to leave it unnamed. The young man's name is Saeed, and Sadaf (2020: 644) claims that "[t]he choice of names for the protagonists appears to be deliberate. The name Nadia means 'hope' and a 'caller; announcer'. Saeed means 'fortunate' and 'lucky'. Despite the dystopian setting, these characters symbolize an optimism and a belief in a social Utopia". The comment thus further reinforces the political dimension of the novel, yet it is important to remember the harsh criticism *American Dirt* was faced with, for being written by the wrong author and not having a strong political agenda. The politics of *Exit West* is taken for granted, for example by Lona Moutafidou (2019: 318) who states that "the novel's refugee odyssey does not only deliver a strong political message but, also, and most importantly, records history in fiction". The praise is thus considerable, with scholars seeing *Exit West* as an important novel of this particular time we are living in.

The ominous beginning of the novel continuous in the first chapter, which outlines the backgrounds of Nadia and Saeed. Saeed lives with his parents, whose relationship is described as one of love, living in an

apartment building that "would be squarely in the path of heavy machine-gun and rocket fire as fighters advanced into this part of town", ominously predicting the coming conflict (p. 9). Nadia's relationship with her family is described as far more constrained, as she decides to move out and live on her own after having finished her studies, a decision her parents and sister do not support (p. 18). After having met, Saeed and Nadia decide to go for dinner at a Chinese restaurant whose previous owners lived in the city for several generations but then migrated to Canada (p. 19). Migration is thus a subtle thread of the novel from the start. During the dinner, Saeed and Nadia discuss where they would like to travel, and after the dinner Nadia invites Saeed over to her home to his surprise (p. 22). When driving over to Nadia's apartment on motorcycle and scooter, they pass by refugees who are occupying spaces between roads and pavements (p. 23).

The most central aspect of travel in the novel is a magical element that enables people to teleport through doors. Stories of people travelling in such a way are told in parallel with the main story of Saeed and Nadia, the first being about a man who enters the bedroom of a woman fast asleep somewhere in Australia. The woman is described as "pale-skinned" and the man as having "dark skin and dark, woolly hair" (p. 6), indicating that he is not from a Western country. He enters through the closet, the doorway of which "was dark, darker than the night, a rectangle of complete darkness" (ibid.). The arrival through the doorway is described as involving some effort and struggle, symbolizing the process of birth. Another story concerns a man in an alley in Tokyo, who observes two Filipina girls "standing beside a disused door to the rear of the bar, a door that was always kept locked, but was in this moment somehow open, a portal of complete blackness" (p. 27). A third story takes place when things have started to unravel in Nadia and Saeed's city. A door appears in California, San Diego, on an old man's property that is cordoned off by law enforcement. The man asks an officer "whether it was Mexicans that had been coming through, or was it Muslims" (p. 47) to which the offices responds that he cannot answer. The brief vignette offers a gentle critique of stereotypical views of migrants, of how the "other" is often seen. They also underline divides between the West and other parts of the world, and between those who do not migrate and those who do.

Eventually, mobile phones stop working and the internet connection is turned off in Nadia and Saeed's city, making them and others feel "marooned and alone and much more afraid" (p. 55). Kanak Yadav (2022: 8) observes that the two main characters become situated "in a digitally

connected world foregrounding their similarity with others elsewhere who are part of a parallel experience by virtue of media and technology". Seeing the presence of mobile phones in such a manner highlights the connectedness of internet and the doors that open throughout the world, allowing travel to happen instantaneously and freely. More sinister forces also work in the shadows, with Nadia's family disappearing and her never finding out what became of them (p. 66). Windows, too, become potential dangers as they can break due to shrapnel or being shot through, and both Saeed's family as well as Nadia take measures to cover up the windows and reduce the risk of having them breaking in dangerous ways (pp. 68–69). Thus, with the onslaught of conflict and war, internet is closed down, phones stop working, and windows have to be covered up, making people become more isolated and separate from the outside world, literally in terms of not being able to look out through windows but also in terms of losing the actual connection with the rest of the world, both close by and far away.

The portal doors come into the novel at this point of the story, as there are rumours about doors "that could take you elsewhere, often to places far away, well removed from this death trap of a country" (p. 69). The word "death trap" symbolizes the isolation and separation of becoming closed off from the rest of the world, with the portal doors providing relief and escape. Yadav (2022: 8) argues that the "device of magical 'doors' not only interrogates the world stratified by borders, but it also physically demonstrates that what separates the west from the non-west, or the 'Global South' from the 'Global North', is just a 'door'". The statement indicates that the common world we all inhabit has been arbitrarily divided into two entities, one which is often a place from which people wish to travel and the other the location at which they hope to arrive. The comment implies a no borders policy that emphasizes the shared humanity of all people, despite their places of origin. While this may be the case, political and economic realities are overlooked. Hamid's novel provides more complexity than what is perhaps acknowledged, as not just any doors become magic portals, but some do without any warning. Nadia and Saeed, along with many others, start observing the doors in their homes, but nothing happens to them, which in turn gives the doors "a subtle power to mock, to mock the desires of those who desired to go far away, whispering silently from its door frame that such dreams were the dreams of fools" (p. 70). Doors, which may become portals through which people can travel and escape lives of little promise, also have the power to humiliate and ridicule those looking for a way out, just like embassies granting or

refusing visas or national authorities issuing passports. Even though anyone can pass through a portal door, not any door becomes a portal. Arguably, anyone can travel on a visa, but not just anyone is granted one.

Nadia moves in with Saeed and his father after his mother is killed (p. 73), while the situation around them escalates, leading to the couple trying to find a way out through the doors that have by now been acknowledged globally and "discussed by world leaders as a major global crisis" (p. 83). There is thus again the indication that the doors are not seen in a positive light by everyone, connecting the passage with the story of the old man in San Diego who wondered whether Mexicans or Muslims had come through. The "world leaders" supposedly mean the West, who see the portals as a crisis as anyone can come through. The doors are thus regarded with some apprehension and fear among certain parties, whereas they are seen as providing salvation by others. The first part of the novel does not regard borders as obsolete. The doors also become part of the oppressive regime of the "militants" who have taken over Nadia and Saeed's city, as any use of the doors is prohibited as well as attempts to conceal them (p. 82). Upon receiving a tip, Nadia and Saeed set out to look for one of the doors, and they end up paying an agent who will find one that is not yet under surveillance (p. 85). The story here mimics smugglers taking people across the Mediterranean, as the door has become the gateway to freedom.

Eventually, the agent contacts them, giving them instructions about where to be (pp. 90–91). Saeed's father insists on Nadia and Saeed leaving without him, and he asks Nadia to stay with Saeed until he is in safe place. She acquiesces, after some objections, feeling that the father will not be protected if they leave him alone even if some other relatives come to help him: "[S]he was in a sense killing him, but that is the way of things, for when we migrate, we murder from our lives those we leave behind" (p. 94). Despite the easy travel of the doors, the text makes it clear that the goodbye will be final, that Saeed will never see his father again, as it is for many people seeking asylum or migrating to far corners of the world. The decision to leave is irreversible, causing as big a disruption as any travel in the real world with visa applications or smugglers' boats to Greece or Italy. Hamid comments on the manner of travel in an interview with Jeffrey Brown (2018):

> […] we have become so focused on the story of how somebody crosses the border, how did you cross the Mediterranean in a small boat, or how did you cross the U.S.-Mexico border, crawl underneath the barbed wire?
>
> But once you take away that part of their story, you're left with people who are just like us, actually, that any of us can have this experience. And so hopefully taking away that part of the story doesn't minimize the importance in the real world that that happens, but reminds us that that is not what makes these people who they are.
>
> They are people just like us.

The parameters of travel thus remain to some extent the same, where the agony of goodbyes is depicted in the departure of Nadia and Saeed, and the concern about the doors appearing is shared by "world leaders" and "militants" alike. Hamid's comment that his intention was to remove focus from the mode of transport is a device with which he hopes to emphasize the shared humanity of those who travel with those who live more settled lives. As indicated by Nayeri in a previous chapter, the matter of travel is central to the refugee's story, hence the emphasis on how people arrive in a place may not just be a phenomenon in receiving countries but also a key issue to those on the move. Depicting migrants as just people in general is a central theme in Cornejo Villavicencio's memoir, and it here repeated in a fictional context.

The agent turns out to be reliable and Nadia and Saeed give his father their goodbyes and arrive at the door which they are about to enter (p. 98). The act of walking through the door is physically straining, and Nadia and Saeed eventually find themselves in a public toilet on the other side (p. 99). The place in which they have arrived is Mykonos, Greece, and a refugee camp is located close to the door through which they have just arrived (p. 100). Nadia and Saeed learn from other people in the camp that Mykonos has become a kind of in-between space, as "the doors out, which is to say the doors to richer destinations, were heavily guarded, but the doors in, the doors from poorer places, were mostly left unsecured, perhaps in the hope that people would go back to where they came from—although almost no one ever did" (p. 101). The passage exemplifies the division still present in the world in the novel, where migrants are seen as undesired in wealthier countries. The location on the poor-rich or West-non-West scale in terms of Greece is interesting, as it is a European

country, member of the EU, yet still seen also in Hamid's novel as merely a place one passes through in search of better prospects.

Hamid emphasizes the demystification and de-villainization of migrants in this part of the book, as he writes that people in the camp were "speaking in a cacophony that was the languages of the world" (p. 100), and that "everyone was foreign, and so, in a sense, no one was" (ibid.). Further, Nadia and Saeed learnt that the "island was pretty safe […] except when it was not, which made it like most places" (p. 101). In an interview conducted by Saba Karim Khan (2021: 16), Hamid argues the following: "Everyone else also feels strange and weird and unmoored and to a certain extent a migrant, even if they don't physically change locations. So, in a way I've reframed what my sense of the human is so that I am not a more peculiar human than anyone else". This notion of migration being universally human, even if people stay put in places, introduces a perspective on migration that sees it more as an internal process than an outer one requiring movement from place to place. *Exit West* encompasses both, the physical relocation with fears and anxieties attached to it, and the internal "unmooring". Magdalena Mączyńska (2020: 1091) has made similar observations, stating that the novel works to "demonstrate that belonging is neither inherent nor 'natural'; that environments and species are plastic; that the notion of 'natives' (a word often invoked to describe those who feel threatened by migrants) is unsustainable—not only politically but also biologically". Here, Hamid's novel quite explicitly defends an open border policy, which overrides national belonging. Mączyńska (2020: 1093) confirms this: "*Exit West* urges us to think past national boundaries by normalizing the idea that humans claim belonging through a combination of mobility and habitation".

The travel undertaken impacts Nadia and Saeed in different ways, with Saeed suddenly showing a "bitter" side to him that unsettles Nadia (p. 102), and they climb the top of a nearby hill but arrive there separately, "at different times" (p. 104). After having sought a way out of Mykonos for a while, Nadia befriends a volunteer who helps them find a door that takes them to London (p. 119). They end up squatting in the house in which they arrive through the portal door, and other people soon show up. London is described as full of migrants, occupying empty houses and putting up tents (p. 126). As the situation gets more dire in London, Nadia and Saeed decide to stay for now, with Nadia becoming involved in the committee managing the house, many of whom are Nigerian or from countries bordering Nigeria (p. 144). Here, too, Hamid emphasizes the

common humanity of people and downplays national belonging, as he writes that the group was more diverse than at first expected. Saeed finds a house with people from their country to which he wishes to move, something which Nadia opposes, partly because they would have to sleep apart, since men and women live in separate quarters in the other house, even married couples (p. 149).

The new modes of migration create shifts within nations in *Exit West*, as "fracturing" takes place with regions pulling away, "and it seemed that as everyone was coming together everyone was also moving apart" (p. 155). Meanwhile, the situation in London becomes more tense, with the "migrant ghetto" in which Nadia and Saeed live becoming overrun by law enforcement (pp. 159–160), an operation which eventually does not clear out all migrants. The people wanting them out are referred to as "natives" (p. 161), and Nadia makes an important observation when discussing the situation with Saeed and the animosity towards people like them who have arrived in Britain. Saeed states that their country took in millions too, to which Nadia replies that their country "was poor. We didn't feel we had as much to lose" (p. 162). In this line lies perhaps the greatest wisdom of the entire novel. The issue of having something and sharing it is at the heart of the migration debate, with researchers demanding responsibility from Europe and arguing that countries that have a lot are unwilling to take those in that have less. Previous chapters that discuss the connection between anti-capitalist views and open border agendas are brought into this section as well. Based on scholarship cited in this study, it seems that it is impossible to advocate open borders without advocating a complete dismantling of the current market-driven economic system. Systems that have been built on notions of shared property and communal ownership have historically not fared well, resorting to authoritarian and totalitarian practices. That brings the discussion back, full circle, to the inevitability of borders.

Josephine Carter (2021: 624) makes some important comments in relation to *Exit West* and its views of refugees, identifying two different narratives through which what she terms the "refuge crisis" has been addressed. The first narrative sees women and children as victims "in need of rescue", whereas the second narrative defines people on the move as "migrants who are ungrateful, alien, steal local jobs, threaten the security of the host nation, and are the source of any increases in national crime rates". People living in countries in the West are seen as "exhibiting a

brave generosity" (ibid.). Carter (2021: 624) emphasizes the economic aspect of the crisis: "Moreover, this rescue narrative partakes in misdirection, painting the West in a heroic light, which obscures that the refuge crisis, in part, is the problem of social and global inequalities that have been produced by the neoliberal devotion to unregulated markets and profitdriven objectives". Thus, the economic reality of the world, its disparity and unequally divided wealth, is marked here as central to migration and the subsequent problems arising in various locations.

Further, Carter (2021: 625) argues that "people are more likely to cling to a particular narrative if their own sense of identity is invested and affirmed in its articulation", which is an important statement regarding this entire study. In this context, Nadia and Saeed's conversation goes beyond the two characters, as Saeed reminds her of the many people who have been taken in by their country, whereas other, wealthier places are reluctant to take them in. Nadia's understanding for this reluctance is a nod to the complexity of discourses on migration and the various audiences for which they are produced. Carter (2021: 622) reinforces her critique of market economy by stating that "*Exit West* reveals that when we strip away the fantastical narratives used to vilify the displaced, we discover that framing the protection of private property rights via the discourse of precarity drives the dehumanisation of others". Were there no private property, no dehumanisation would need to take place is perhaps the conclusion that should be drawn from this statement. As already stated, societies which have exercised non-market policies have engaged in massively dehumanising measures.

Eventually, the situation in London de-escalates, and the migrants are allowed to stay, giving Nadia, Saeed, and everyone else living in the house reason to celebrate (pp. 164–165). It feels to them as if "the whole planet was on the move, much of the global south headed to the global north, but also southerners moving to other southern places and northerners moving to other northern places" (p. 167). What is missing in the list is obviously northerners moving to southern locations, and the novel indicates that movement still remains entrenched in a south-north direction. Hamid comments explicitly on the movement of refugees, also taking numbers into account:

> Now our current 21st-century world is made up of nation states, and these nation states say that nobody can cross their borders without permission. And so when somebody is forced to leave their country, their nation state,

> because of some terrible development, we say that these people are refugees and therefore they should have some rights in the nation they go to. My view on the refugee crisis is that I am sceptical of nations' right to control the movement of these people. It is not clear to me that we have the right to tell people that they can't come. So if millions of people now need to flee Afghanistan, let's say, and come to Pakistan for safety, it is not clear to me that Pakistan has the right to say no to these people. What is the basis of that right? Obviously, it would be very difficult for many societies if suddenly everybody moved. It would be enormously destructive to societies. (Ramzan 2022: 5)

The statement goes to some extent against the idealistic notions of several scholars who have engaged with the novel, and it bears remembering that the story is fictional. Hamid still seems to acknowledge what was indicated in previous sections, that numbers or arrivals play a significant role for asylum systems and receiving societies.

Liliana M. Naydan (2019, 438) presents the following interpretation in her article, arguing that the psychological borders between East and West are also being eroded:

> But in Hamid's novel, the West never functions as the promised land that citizens of the East imagine it to be because of the interplay of problems involving technology, violence, and forced migration. In the West, technology and violence sustain a connection to one another and produce an effect of being present without presence that in ways mirrors the one that exists in the East, suggesting that Hamid views the East and the West as similar and not as existing in the sort of binaristic opposition that twenty-first-century mass media aim to propagate and exploit.

The viewpoint seems refreshing, apart from the fact that both main characters lead fairly successful professional lives in their home city until conflict erupts, yet they do not reach the same level of comfort in the places to which they travel through the magical doors. They participate in the occupation of homes in wealthy London suburbs, called a "migrant ghetto" in the novel (Hamid 2017: 159) and end up living on the outskirts of San Fransisco in what Hamid calls a "shanty" (2017: 218). Thus, although Naydan proceeds to present an analysis of the novel that rests less on preconceived notions of East and West, even turning them on their head, relating to poverty and wealth, unrest and peace, the analysis also runs the risk of becoming reductive in its own ways. It bears remembering

that northerners do not move to the south, indicating that the divide between the West and other parts of the world remains intact at least to some degree.

Nadia and Saeed eventually move from London to live in Marin, next to San Francisco, a place "overwhelmingly poor, all the more so in comparison to the sparkling affluence of San Francisco" (p. 192). Again, the novel indicates that economic equality is not achieved, and the newcomers end up living in shacks close to the city. The notion of everyone migrating, whether they stay forever in the same place or not, is revisited at the end of the novel. The story of an elderly, wealthy lady in California is told in terms of her feeling as if she too has migrated due to all the people of various backgrounds gathering in her neighbourhood, and the narrator's voice states the following: "We are all migrants through time" (p. 209). The past cannot be revisited, memories cannot be recreated, and those who live are bound to get older if their lives are not cut short. The novel therefore seems to wish to introduce the idea that everyone is a migrant, either physically or merely in their minds as they live in changing societies and see their own lives and selves change.

The novel ends with Nadia and Saeed separating, with Nadia moving out of their shared home and Saeed eventually entering into another relationship with a woman (p. 218). They keep in touch initially after the breakup, but soon find themselves "less worried that the other would need them to be happy, and eventually a month went by without any contact, and then a year, and finally a lifetime" (p. 222). The passage exemplifies the earlier statement about being migrants through time and it manifests the transience of life, the temporary nature of life itself and of the human connections made. The last chapter of the novel recounts Nadia returning to her city of origin many decades later and meeting up with Saeed. They agree to visit "the deserts of Chile" together (p. 228), after which they go their separate ways, not knowing "if that evening would ever come" (p. 229). The story of Nadia and Saeed thus ends the way it began, with an emphasis on the transience of life and the moving together and apart as an inevitable part of life.

The ending has been discussed in research as well, with Stefano Bellin (2022: 6) arguing that even though the "ending might be read as naïve or as narratives that risk flattening the diverse experiences of migration", the central contribution is "the novel's artistic representation of mass population movements, which is to decolonise our imagination and dismantle the naturality with which we look at states, borders, and national

divisions". The fact that Nadia does return "home" at the end of the novel, and finds Saeed there too, is also significant, indicating that our places of origin, no matter how oppressive or violent, never fully leave us. Yadav (2022: 11) engages with the ending from a different perspective, asserting that "Hamid keeps the ideological underpinnings of the ending ambivalent, since whether the novel is critical of the imaginaries of globalization or optimistic about the future of the globalized world and its cities remains inconclusive". It is perhaps the most fruitful position for an author, to leave the ending open to readers to interpret as they please. Ewa Kowal (2020: 23), for her part, underlines the political nature of the novel in terms of the migrant crisis, stating that "*Exit West* will be read as a nuanced literary response to the migrant crisis, engaged in political activism".

Further, other ideological standpoints are offered for example by Michael Perfect (2019) and Amanda Lagji (2019), who claim that "Hamid's novel proffers that in the world outside the text, movement has become less exceptional, and more the norm" (Lagji 2019, 224), and that the novel imagines "a post-national future" (Perfect 2019, 195). The ending, as stated, does seem to subtly emphasize the importance of origins and national belonging as well, as both Nadia and Saeed return to their city of origin. The indication of the ending is that Saeed has returned permanently, whereas Nadia is merely visiting. In addition, the topic of coming together and moving apart is a central theme of the novel as discussed in this section, and Penny Vlagopoulos (2022: 424) here makes the following comment: "If the whole planet is on the move, our relationship to distant others solidifies, and hospitality is fundamental to how we structure social relations, a notion reinforced as the narrative weaves together disparate lives around the globe". The narrative does weave together lives but it also separates them, as Saeed is separated from his father, and eventually Saeed and Nadia separate too. The novel does not advocate any idea of everyone coming together in peace and harmony, with the world being a better place after the portal doors appear, but mainly that the world is different, and that people are different, as an inevitable process in life.

Eva Rask Knudsen and Ulla Rahbek (2021: 444–445) see the novel as "future-oriented", in terms of its depiction of migrants as "fully human" in order to go beyond "the reductive category of migrant or refugee", making the two protagonists "Everyman or Everywoman to whom one can easily relate as they grapple, each in their own way, with extraordinary circumstances and explore hopeful new communities and new maps of

belonging, or being-with". However, the novel also indicates significant differences between the two main characters, with Nadia being the one getting involved with the housing committee in London and refusing to move to another house with people from their home country, whereas Saeed is keen to stay with people from home. He is also the one who returns first to their country of origin where they eventually meet up after many years apart. Of the two, Nadia is the more adventurous, less attached to home and traditional notions of belonging, making her way in the world with fewer strings attached. Beatriz Pérez Zapata (2021: 765) argues that time as a specific theme of the novel "calls for a rectification of the common misrepresentation of refugees as a dehumanised mass and threat, and that the imagery of destruction and endings of human relationships found throughout the novel calls for a new understanding and a more ethical attitude to the suffering of distant others". This reading does not see the coming together and drifting apart that takes place in the novel as inherent to human nature and to life, but as a device that accentuates the inhumane ways in which migrants are often treated. The ending of the novel, and the entire story, can thus come to serve many political purposes.

Conclusion: Reader as Witness

The three sections in this chapter have examined the status of the asylum seeker or refugee from several different perspectives, starting with the bleak and disillusioned stories of *Refugee Tales III*, moving to Dina Nayeri's memoir of a childhood in Iran, teenage years on the move, and eventually settling in the United States as refugees. The personal becomes political in Nayeri's memoir, and the political becomes personal, first and foremost. The chapter closes with an analysis of *Exit West* and the discourses surrounding it, particularly in scholarly study. Asylum seekers and refugees take on entirely new meanings in the novel. This is perhaps the most important contribution of all three sections, that at the heart of every media report or statistics is a real person with their individual unique story. It may be a cliché, but in terms of people seeking asylum as reported and represented in the texts analysed in this chapter, it bears repeating as many testify to the inhumane conditions under which they are forced to live. Nayeri emphasizes the right of asylum seekers and refugees to be the people they are, to go beyond expectations of gratitude and making sure they are deserving of the help and support they receive. These observations present a dilemma for receiving countries in Europe: how to respect the

dignity and integrity of asylum seekers within a system that struggles to keep up with current numbers.

The cruelty of the contemporary asylum system is a central feature of both *Refugee Tales III* and *The Ungrateful Refugee*. The stories of people stuck in a loop of negative asylum applications and appeals, risking (indefinite) detention at any moment, dominates the former, and Nayeri for her part recounts both accounts of those seeking asylum in Europe as well as those working with asylum seekers. The image of the system they create is one of indifference, disbelief, and delays, becoming the cruelty explicitly addressed by several narrators. As advocacy writing, both texts express a profound political message about a system that fails those it should protect, and the indication is that this is done on purpose to keep people from trying to enter Europe or Britain. Hamid's comment about fictional writing defining the future is here most central, as the two nonfictional texts examined are explicitly advocating for more humane and fair processes, even open borders. The statement that writing shapes our future is at the core. While printed books may have lost some of their appeal and popularity, the personal story never stops being the pillar around which societies and policies are built.

The reader is central to all three texts examined, the person receiving the story in question. *Refugee Tales III* sets out with an explicit agenda, to work against indefinite detention, with collaborators hearing the stories of those who have been in detention. As Wittenberg states in the story that was told to him, witnessing is key. The reader is invited to witness, to listen to the stories told and to truly hear them. Nayeri states at the outset of her memoir that the reader is welcome to occupy any position they like when reading the book, they can decide to be the asylum officer if they wish to. In *Exit West*, the ending of the story about Nadia and Saeed leaves the interpretation to the reader. While the novel has been hailed by researchers for its take on migration and problems with the asylum system, many of them advocating an open border policy in their articles, one which often connects with anti-capitalist critique, it actually provides far more complexity and possibilities for interpretation.

Travel is made easier through the magic portals that open up throughout the world in random places, yet attitudes towards those who travel do not change. The novel does indicate that some change is possible, particularly in terms of its critique of "nativeness", and its philosophical undertones that ruminate on the meaning of time, and how we all

migrate in our lives as we grow up and develop and eventually grow old. Despite the ease of travel, portals remain heavily guarded at first, with riots taking place in London in which migrants have occupied empty houses of the wealthier part of the population. Eventually they are left alone, as the situation cannot be dealt with easily. The novel implies that the presence of so many people from other places, even millions, is tolerated and that this marks a change. This is the utopian dimension of the novel, yet even while Nadia and Saeed ponder that it feels as if the entire world is on the move, it is not explicitly mentioned that people from the north would be moving south. Divides still remain, even in the magic world of Hamid's novel.

Further, the novel begs the question as to what kind of world would emerge if travel was cheap and easy for everyone. Presumably millions and millions of people living in dire conditions in politically unstable or oppressive nations would opt to leave, taking their lives and cultures with them to wherever they would go. Nadia and Saeed make their own way after they have left through the portal door and receive some help in Mykonos from volunteers, but in London they are on their own, and the same seems true for Marin as well. There is no mention of financial aid and allowances for migrants, no state-sponsored policies to help them settle and rebuild their lives. *Exit West* offers a world in which everyone is on their own, perhaps more connected through the doors than before, but also more isolated and left to their own devices. Nayeri states in her piece for *The Guardian* from 2017 that receiving nations will have to accept higher taxes and fewer luxuries, if those arriving need a lot of help to restart their lives. *Exit West* is not a utopia in this regard, the social order it envisions is not one of aid and help but of survival, sometimes through communal efforts and sometimes alone. The world imagined is thus not one entirely without borders but a world without asylum processes. To some extent, this can be read into all three texts examined, that the world envisioned and promoted is not necessarily one void of borders, but without a system that requires people to apply, and apply again, for the chance at a new life. All three texts endeavour to incite political change by foregrounding the individual story. *Refugee Tales III* criticizes the measures implemented as part of the asylum application process in the British system, Nayeri criticizes the disinterest and distrust with which asylum seekers are met as their stories are minutely scrutinized, and *Exit West* envisions a world in which there is no asylum system at all.

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CHAPTER 7

Representation, Aspirations, Advocacy

During the process of writing and revising this book, many new developments have occurred in Europe and the United States with regard to migration. As mentioned in the introduction, former president Donald Trump is campaigning for the November 2024 elections. The European Union reached an agreement on a new Pact on Migration and Asylum in December 2023, which among other things hopes to address "instrumentalization of migrants" ("What is the New Pact" n.d.). 2023 saw 274 000 migrants arrive in Europe through irregular means ("EU migration" n.d.), and in the United States, the Migration Policy Institute reports that 2.5 million migrants were encountered at the border between the US and Mexico in the fiscal year of 2023 (Putzel-Kavanaugh and Soto 2023). It is likely that some of the statistics or scholars cited, or statements made in this book by the author herself, have become outdated by the time the book is published, or that some new geopolitical event has occurred which significantly changes migration patterns and debates. Societal and political discourses and narratives of migration may also change. That is the challenge with a topic as urgent as migration: it is constantly in motion, just like individual migrants themselves who are on the move. Studying stories of migration in published form as has been done here provides some continuity, as they will remain as documents of and testaments to a particular era even if politics and policies shift and transform.

L. Englund, *Storying Contemporary Migration*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-62003-4_7

Representation, aspirations, and advocacy emerge as central themes throughout this book and the material examined, and they are arguably also at the heart of many debates on migration concerning borders, citizenship, the asylum system, and many more contested issues. The balancing between personal and societal stories and narratives of migration is central to much of the primary material analysed throughout this book, and several texts hope to make a difference and to transform how migrants are talked about. The second chapter on representations of migration raises the question of who can write stories of migration, exemplified in the discussion of Jeanine Cummins's novel *American Dirt* which was met with significant backlash upon publication. It was not just the fictional story itself that incited criticism, but the privileged position of the author and alleged bias of the publishing company. Cummins stated, according to the publisher as cited by Myriam Gurba (2019), that she wanted to give voice to migrants whose stories have not been heard, an aim which can be seen as promoting storytelling, particularly of those who remain invisible or at the margins of society. This aim is repeated throughout the material examined, yet Cummins's efforts were seen as insincere and misplaced.

Roberto Lovato's memoir *Unforgetting* is examined as a counter-story to Cummins's novel, not only due to the content and context of the memoir, set largely in El Salvador, but also in terms of Lovato's engagement in #DignidadLiteraria, founded in the wake of Cummins's novel and its initial acclaim. His memoir is based partly on the notion of the "unstoried" (2020: xxiii), of uncovering the stories of people whose personal and collective histories and fates have hitherto been obscured or deliberately silenced. This act of storying the unstoried is part of all texts examined here, even Cummins's novel to some extent. The criticism against Cummins's publisher and the massive visibility produced by celebrity superstars such as Oprah Winfrey is understandable and justified to the extent that it runs the risk of making *American Dirt* a definitive work of migration, an issue raised by Krauze (2020) in his review. Due to the considerable attention and sales of the novel, it is not seen as one book among many, particularly since the "unstorying" continues to this day. Migrants cross borders in various locations and settings without ever being listened to, without having their stories recorded and disseminated.

Storying the unstoried is thus a central part of much of the material, as exemplified in Jose Antonio Vargas's, Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's, and Dina Nayeri's memoirs that all provide space and recognition for people outside their own personal lives and spheres. Lyndsey Stonebridge's words

of warning concerning the efforts of "literary humanitarianism" that hopes to invoke "empathy, and pity for the less fortunate" are relevant, as she argues that such writing may end up similar to sentiments that saw colonialism as beneficial to the people it subjugated (2021: 13). There is thus a very fine line between literary advocacy and literary appropriation, or, worse, literary saviour complex, to introduce such a term. None of the authors can be said to write solely from a perspective of "pity", or other less noble sentiments, but relate their own stories of migration and struggle to those of others, often with insight about the privileges they themselves have managed to obtain.

Being listened to is another prominent aim, to which *Refugee Tales III* also testifies. All the different texts listed do not merely stop at the storying, but demand attention and action from listeners, or readers. To be the witness is the bare minimum, as Jonathan Wittenberg for example observes in relation to the story told to him, becoming "a partner in testament to the ongoing cruelty and suffering" (2019: 110). The reader is enlisted, too, in this task, in accordance with David W. Hill's statement about (2019: 28) the "moral work" of the person who bears witness, which is crucial for "any sort of useful change in the way that we exist in relation to suffering". Nayeri explicitly asks the reader to choose themselves which position they adopt when reading her memoir and the stories of asylum seekers in it: "It is your choice how to hear their voices. […] Be the asylum officer" (Nayeri 2020: 15). The reader is thus asked to witness, to listen, and to judge, if they so choose. Contemporary writing about migration therefore seems to be interactive, inviting readers into the process of advocacy in which they engage.

The moral responsibility of writers writing migration stories and of readers is highlighted throughout. Not just anyone can and should produce such a story, nor can readers just read for pleasure or leisure. This may be at the heart of the problem with *American Dirt*: it is to some extent educational as outlined in Chap. 2, in terms of the somewhat naïve and uninformed main character Lydia who has little to no knowledge of the realities of migrants trying to cross into the United States. However, the novel is not specifically advocating for migrants' rights, nor does it demand as much of the reader as for example Lovato's memoir or *Refugee Tales III*. *Unforgetting* is a challenging read with its extensive information on the history of El Salvador, and the format also requires efforts from the reader as the story jumps between Lovato's travels, his personal life, and the life of his father, one of the many "unstoried" individuals in his book.

It is a memoir that demands engagement from the reader, as do Nayeri's, Vargas's, and Cornejo Villavicencio's memoirs as well. Of the three fictional novels and their characters examined, Lydia is by far the most ignorant and perhaps difficult to relate to, which may explain some of the negative comments about the novel. Neni and Jende as well as Nadia and Saeed, the fictional products of writers with migrant backgrounds, become more complex and well-rounded figures that sometimes make odd choices or do things that are morally questionable. Lydia is less fully developed, representing more the outsider's gaze than the actual migrant or "other". Neni and Jende play on stereotypes to some extent, as an undocumented African couple in New York, but none more so than Clark and Cindy, their wealthy benefactors whose ignorance and overbearing attitudes further emphasize the divide between the characters.

Refugee Tales III for its part centres on indefinite detention and the devastating effects it has on individual lives. To simply read it for pleasure seems impossible, as there is little entertainment value in the stories presented which bear witness to the extensive processes that constitute the asylum system in Britain. Suffering can of course be a form of entertainment, and there is an entire genre of autobiographical writing called the "misery memoir", having emerged in the 1990s when the memoir boom began, and often connected with trauma. The misery memoir generally recounts experiences of "suffering and redemption around ethically simplified conflicts of good versus evil" (Rothe 2011: 87–88). The word "redemption" is here central, and Sue Vice (2014): 11) confirms its relevance, stating that "the narrative trajectory of such works is one of eventual redemption rather than irremediable descent". Arguably, herein lies the leisurely, or even pleasurable, aspect of so-called misery memoirs or misery literature: the reader can rest assured that the life recounted, however tragic and mired in suffering, will eventually be redeemed and the memoir will have a somewhat happy ending where trauma has been overcome and life rebuilt, to the extent that it is possible. In migration stories, such a redemptive feature of the narrative is often missing. Nowhere is this clearer than in *Refugee Tales*.

The redemptive element is missing for example in both Vargas's and Cornejo Villavicencio's memoirs, as their citizenship status remains unclear at the end. Vargas even begins his memoir by stating that he does not know where he will be when the book is published (Vargas 2018: xi), and Strong (2022) confirms at a later date that Vargas is yet to receive legal status. The limbo thus continues for him, and the reader does not know

whether he has eventually managed to legalise his status, or whether he has potentially been deported or taken into custody. The same goes for Cornejo Villavicencio, who revealed her DACA status (2021: 8), yet it does not bring much relief for her in terms of stability and continuity. The stories recounted by people stuck in indefinite detention do not offer redemption either, as exemplified most explicitly in "The Fisherman's Tale", which ends on a note of despair: "Now you have my story. And I still have nothing" (Sansom 2019: 108). Telling the story has not provided a path to redemption, not for the storyteller and not for the reader. The reader, too, is left in limbo together with the Fisherman.

American Dirt is no misery lit story either, yet the novel does provide some redemption and a fairly happy ending. Lydia's travels through Mexico with her son and the girls from Honduras are not just entrenched in survival, but also open her eyes to the realities of migrants. The novel therefore provides the possibility for less informed readers to travel with her, to in turn open their eyes to the realities, albeit heavily fictionalised, of migrants. La Bestia, sexual assault, corrupt police officers, and the kindness of strangers all feature in Cummins's novel. Lydia reaches safety, unlike several of her travel companions walking across the border to Arizona, and is able to restart her life despite being undocumented in the United States. This sets the novel apart from the autobiographical texts examined. The two other novels that featured in this book did not face backlash but have instead been praised. Both *Behold the Dreamers* and *Exit West* have been met with acclaim, perhaps partly because the authors have migrant backgrounds and build their novels on personal experiences, at least to some extent. Imbolo Mbue is of Cameroonian origin and based her novel partly on her own experiences in New York during the recession, and Mohsin Hamid reveals that *Exit West* is set in a country that much resembles Pakistan, his country of origin, although he did not want to make it explicit (Brown 2018). Thus, the two other novels reach a level of authenticity that *American Dirt* cannot. The redemptive features of *American Dirt* therefore become mere fantasy; a story written solely for entertainment and to some extent for education. The migration novel must balance between authenticity, suffering, and redemption, and both Mbue and Hamid manage this far better according to critics.

Exit West does provide a happy ending to some extent, at least according to researchers who see it as advocating a borderless world. The novel is read as a manifestation of such policies, whereas the analysis provided in this study sees it as offering a far more realistic portrayal of

irregular migration in our contemporary world. The difference between the so-called Global North and the Global South is made clear, and the lives of Nadia and Saeed are not unlike those of migrants in the real world. They end up living on the outskirts of San Fransisco, away from the wealth and privilege of the city. In the end, they reconvene in their country of origin, returning to their roots, if ever so briefly. The novel refutes any claims on cosmopolitan world citizenship, even though it could be reality in the novel after the magic portal doors appear. One thing the novel does not address in its vision of a world without asylum seekers is why the doors from poorer countries into the wealthier nations are not guarded. When Nadia and Saeed reach Mykonos, they find out about this arrangement, that the doors from which people like themselves have come are not guarded, "perhaps in the hope that people would go back to where they came from—although almost no one ever did" (Hamid 2017: 101). The arrival of more people is thus not hindered, much like the current system with people crossing the Mediterranean from Turkey or North Africa, hoping to reach the shores of Greece or Italy. The novel reflects contemporary migration issues to a far greater extent than previous scholars have given it credit for. It is not just a utopian story of a world without borders.

Similar realism is present in Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*, in which migration does not provide resolution. Jende's situation is undoubtedly difficult as his asylum claim is rejected, making him dependent on the advice he receives from his lawyer. Neni's ruthlessness when deportation looms closer is not solely a sign of desperation, of being cornered and no longer having a way out. Her determination to stay in New York and find a way to make her dreams come true shows resilience and industriousness, but so does Jende, too, in his resolve to return home to Limbe and rebuild their lives there instead, with a living standard they might never be able to afford in the United States. They are eventually able to do what Kambiz in Nayeri's memoir is not: return home with some form of wealth that enables them to create a comfortable life in their country of origin, despite not having been able to stay in America. Nayeri (2020: 227) recounts that after Kambiz had killed himself, his belongings were handed over to his relatives who were surprised to find out that he had made so little of his many years in Europe, leaving behind mainly some well-worn clothes. The expectation to make money and improve one's life and the lives of those left behind is thus central to several of the texts examined. This expectation clashes with the criticism against countries in the West and their strict

border controls and sometimes inhumane treatment of asylum seekers and other migrants.

The two essay collections examined, *The Good Immigrant* and *The Good Immigrant USA*, also address these expectations in multiple contexts, for example with regard to education as in the case of Dennis-Benn, or proper conduct as in the case of Minhas. The expectations of others and surrounding society to be the good immigrant and to prove one's worth again and again is entrenched in defiance. The typecasting and pigeonholing to which several of the essays testify reveal the negative sides of expectations imposed from the outside, as actors and writers are expected to perform certain roles in their work and writing. The generational and relational ambitions appear as central in the essays, as many give examples of parental disappointment in life choices that do not live up to the expected standard. This comes to include bodily expectations as well as sexual orientation and goes well beyond educational or economic aspirations. Being a model immigrant is addressed in several of the essays, and it is a topic that is revisited in many others of the texts examined as well, particularly in the context of so-called Dreamers.

The demand for gratitude ties in with the discussion of expectations imposed from the outside, and this is part of the defiance of the two essay collections. Nayeri, too, addresses gratitude in her memoir and in the piece that she wrote for *The Guardian*, where she asks the following: "Is the life of the happy mediocrity a privilege reserved for those who never stray from home?" (Nayeri 2017). The comment indicates that for the migrant, only a life of success and righteousness is allowed, and that migrants are held to far higher standards than those who remain in their home countries. The notion of gratitude implies that there is a debt to be repaid to countries to which people have relocated, that a gift has been given and must somehow be compensated. Several of the autobiographical texts examined also speak of benefactors, people who offer help without ulterior motives. Both Vargas and Cornejo Villavicencio recount in their memoirs how they received help from others in order to carry on with their education or to manage their lives as best they could. The examples seem to indicate that the migrant is, inevitably, at the mercy of others, of societies to which they have moved, but also of people around them. An act of kindness and generosity is represented as going a long way.

This relates to some extent to numbers, to numbers of people arriving. The question inevitably arises as to whether there would more goodwill

and interest in helping people resettle if there were fewer numbers of migrants and asylum seekers. Nayeri writes at the end of her memoir that the situation has changed greatly since her family fled Iran: "We were believed, at least by asylum people. Some asylum officer saw us and waved us through" (2020: 250). *Refugee Tales III*, too, touches upon this, in The Erased Person's tale in which the storyteller S states that the "system is overloaded" (Wittenberg 2019: 118). Did the migrant crisis in 2015–2016 bring an end, effectively, to the asylum system as so many people arrived all at once, overwhelming the system and depleting goodwill and generosity that were perhaps not as profound to begin with, in accordance with Murray's statement? Even Hamid admits in an interview that it would be problematic if everyone moved at once: "It would be enormously destructive to societies" (Ramzan 2022: 5). "Everyone" did obviously not move during the two years mentioned, but the numbers were enough to overwhelm national systems of reception, housing, and processing. A counter question would be whether the system could have been made to function better had there been more interest in making it work.

If there would no longer be any borders, there would arguably no longer be any asylum processes either, as people could freely come and go as they please. What would happen to people arriving in Europe? When there are no borders, there is no longer such a thing as citizenship either. What would happen to social benefits, housing assistance, the educational system? Undoubtedly, they would be put under significant pressure in countries that would be likely to absorb the highest numbers of migrants (who would no longer be seen as migrants but just people), locations in which high numbers of people with origins elsewhere already live, such as Germany, Sweden, or France. Would open borders lead to the dismantling of the welfare state? Would Europe, or the EU, become a place of massive income disparity, where some people, in larger numbers than before, live under bridges as reported in R's story in *Refugee Tales III* (R 2019: 63)? Who would these people be? More importantly, what would happen elsewhere, beyond Europe, if there were no borders?

The problem with borders is generally referred to as a Western one. The stories examined here recount realities in which it does not seem possible for most migrants to just apply for a passport and a visa, and they are forced to use more clandestine methods in order to leave. How would open borders work in countries that wish to control the movement of their citizens? Arguably, a policy of open borders would need to be global,

or do researchers and activists intend for it to be implemented in the West only? What about diversity and freedom in sending countries, should they not be defended and developed equally? It is as much a question of resources as of freedom, with many arguing for the West's responsibility to share its wealth. The whole enterprise of open borders is as much anti-capitalist as it is anti-border, perhaps even more so than it truly is about freedom of movement. That complicates the ideological forces at play for example in *Against Borders: The Case For Abolition*. This topic requires further study in order to gain more thorough understanding of what open or closed borders would eventually entail and what this vision would mean without nation-states. An entirely new system would not emerge or exist in a political or economic vacuum. Is it merely an intellectual exercise by scholars, or truly intended as a new world order?

Douglas Murray touches upon some of these issues in his book that asks why Europe sees so little value in its way of life. Murray's book also criticizes Europeans for advocating a policy of accepting everyone who wants to move there. Yet, the "benevolent Europeans who called for this policy to continue lost interest in their newest arrivals" (2018: 285). The criticism indicates that integration failed not just because of high numbers or other factors but also because Europeans were not committed enough to their own project. This is a central contribution of Murray's book, despite the backlash it has faced, and it points a finger towards multicultural policies and diversity programmes as being, to some extent, surface level projects that in reality do not achieve what they set out to do, because of a lack of real commitment. There are of course organisations and individuals who are committed to their work, but the critique could still point towards a solution to Europe's dilemma with migration: if a decision is made to open borders, to promote diversity, there must be full commitment to the project. The same goes for the opposite. If Europe decides to tighten its asylum policies and heavily regulate migration, these decisions, too, need to be strictly adhered to. The difficulty in finding consensus and sustainable policies has led to a situation that serves no one well, and half measures in all directions have exacerbated certain problems, such as boats trying to cross the Mediterranean in precarious and dangerous conditions, southern Europe largely left alone to deal with them, as well as lengthy asylum processes throughout the continent. The weaponization of migrants as acts of hostility against the EU also needs to be addressed as urgently as possible so that it can no longer be used as a means to destabilize nations and to cause discord. Half measures seem to haunt Europe,

also in relation to Russia's war of aggression which very much connects with migration and the futures of Europe.

The suffering of those in detention, with undocumented status, in legal limbo, is indisputable as represented in multiple stories examined in this book. The many personal accounts testify to this, to the degrading and humiliating measures implemented by many nations in order to deter migrants from arriving and from staying. This refers largely to the asylum process, which has already been discussed. Again, Murray's criticism of Europeans losing interest in their own policies is important here. Much of the suffering seems, according to the stories told, to be entrenched in indifference, in indecision. Perhaps that discussion is yet to be had, one would openly acknowledge the shortcomings of the current system and the suffering of individuals. It would also need to take into account the desire of people to improve their lives. Reconciling these issues with the right of nations to know their citizens and the right to choose who resides within their borders is a massive challenge. The question as to whether sending nations have any responsibility for their citizens also needs to be asked.

The findings in the chapters of this book indicate that migration stories are often built around politically motivated statements about migration as outlined. For example, the idea of the grateful refugee, or the expectations imposed from the outside, or the comments with which Vargas was met that indicated that he could have changed his status if he only wanted to, alleging that he chose to remain undocumented for publicity purposes. Cornejo Villavicencio reported from the water crisis in Flint, arguing that migrant's lives are intentionally made harder or destroyed in order to make them "self-deport" (2021: 115). These approaches form a significant backbone to many of the texts that work to refute them. The autobiographical text in the form of a memoir or essay as examined here is essential. Many of the writers take active stances in the face of discrimination and mistreatment, producing their texts with an advocacy purpose. Several of them also take somewhat journalistic approaches, providing lengthy descriptions of colonial history or countries of origins, and how they relate for example to being American. This seems to be *the* form of the migration story, as also demanded by reviewers and scholars who were critical of Cummins's novel.

There is still space and demand for the fictional as well, though not any kind of fiction as already established. Both Mbue and Hamid have produced more successful migration stories if put to the *American Dirt*-test. The authors are from the countries of their protagonists and have experienced migration themselves, and the protagonists of their novels are not

naïve and uninformed, nor are the novels written with educational purposes. The conclusion can thus be made that the contemporary migration story leaves the reader with responsibility to tie up any loose ends, to make the moral judgment themselves. The author presents the facts, or the fiction, and the reader connects the dots. This makes contemporary migration writing interactive, demanding participation from readers and encouraging reading practices that go beyond feelings of empathy or outrage. Refusing to provide redemption puts the reader, too, in a position of in-betweenness and belatedness with no relief and no way out of the limbo, left to their own devices to make sense of what they have just read, mirroring the experiences of so many of the writers and characters whose stories have been examined here.

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https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-62003-4