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Introduction

## **Travelling Narratives and Images in Times of Migration**

**Sigrun Åsebø**

University of Bergen

**Anje Müller Gjesdal**

Østfold University College

**Camilla Skalle,**

University of Bergen

Migrant narratives and aesthetic practices influenced by experiences of exile and migration constitute a growing field in contemporary art and literature. Current trends in migration and globalisation have led to an increase in travelling narratives, images and objects, and the production of aesthetic practices describing and problematising exile and migration, working in and through tradition. Migratory patterns and issues related to the protection of refugees and asylum seekers contribute to the strong societal impact of migrant aesthetics and narratives, but they also serve to explain the need for them as such, and the need to reexamine them. More than ever, we need to understand the experiences of exiles, migrants and refugees. The objective of this special issue is therefore to examine textual, material and visual expressions that represent, discuss and problematise migration.

Recent decades have also seen a scholarly reconsideration of questions related to mobilities and exile (e.g. Agier 2016; Glick Schiller & Salazar 2013; Hannam et al. 2006) due to globalisation and changes in migration patterns. Experiences of exile and migration are also increasingly documented through literary and aesthetic expressions, as

texts, films and visual art projects such as installations and photographs, and the scholarly interest in the output of literary and artistic expressions related to these topics is growing, (e.g. Bal & Hernandez-Navarro 2011; Cherel & Dumont 2016; Schimanski & Wolfe 2017).

While shedding light on contemporary phenomena of exile and migration, travelling narratives and images also invite us to reconsider the way factors such as materiality and gender are accentuated in the crossing of borders. Travelling narratives and images may also represent and destabilise categories such as gender, class, ethnicity, family and sexuality and challenge existing understandings of multilingualism, multilingual literature and aesthetic practices, thus inviting a reexamination of the possible contribution of literary studies, art history and linguistics to their analysis. To this end, the present issue of borderlands proposes an inter-disciplinary investigation of migrant narratives and images, i.e. text and art objects that interrogate, problematise and represent the experience of exile and migration.

### **A travelling stone—and the issues of migratory aesthetics**

In 1999, Norwegian artist Marianne Heske moved a 17 ton olivine stone from Tafjord, a small village in the western part of Norway, to the Island of Lido for the Venice Film Festival, as part of a project called *Stone Story*. The stone was a lovely olivine stone, greyish green in colour and weighing 17 ton. As part of the project, Heske published a small book, documenting the story of travelling stone, from the moment it was chosen for the journey, how it was lifted carefully and placed on a large truck and driven to Italy, including maps showing the destination of the journey. The photographs document the stone in its original space beside the mountains, amongst many other rocks that were remnants of an avalanche long ago. As an art project, the story of this travelling stone has many layers, and Heske herself describes the project in a short poetic text at the beginning of the book:

This is the story about a rolling stone. Awakened by the Artist's magic kiss. 17 ton of Olivine Stone rolling down Europe from the fjord of Tafjord to the island of Lido. Crossing borders without packing, customs or insurance. Now resting on Piazzale del Casino. Playing its speechless role next to the red carpet leading up to Golden Lions Prize. Still a Living Stone. And the Story goes on. (Heske 2010)

Throughout her career, Heske has moved stone, huts, houses and dolls' heads from one place to another, sometimes returning them to their original location, sometimes not. In one of her latest projects, she moved an old dilapidated house typical of poorer Norwegian families' housing in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and left it in front of the parliament in Oslo for months. Tellingly called *House of Commons*, the project underlined class and/as power. Playing on the house as a symbol of the human need for shelter, protection and security, the project was immediately also read as a comment on the migration crisis of 2015. Since the 1970s Heske has worked relentlessly on what

Nicolas Bourriaud has characterised as her 'art of relocation' (Bourriaud 2010), and the *Stone story* is just a small piece in an ongoing artistic engagement where travelling objects and symbols problematise categories such as national identity and cultural belonging. The rock is solid, and its materiality seems to connect it to a fixed site: it originated in Tafjord where there are others rocks exactly like it. Is it (dis)placed and needing to return home? As Doreen Massey underlines in her article 'Landscape as Provocation, Reflections on Moving Mountains', even mountains move, and 'Nature', as any concept we chose to ground ideas of land(scape), place—or ourselves—in, is unstable (Massey 2006). Materiality matters, but matter is never fixed.

The travelling stone is an object and a material remnant of the land and landscape it was sent from, a sign of travel. The olivine stone serves as a metaphor. Understood as such, its structure of meaning can be seen as particularly important. As Néstor Garcia Canclini argues In *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture*, metaphor as the figure of moving meaning, is particularly central to migratory culture, and its usefulness '[...] resides in the concept's own materiality: its refusal to let go of its etymological past where it stood for transport: and its persistent association with uncertainty, mobility, and [...] multitemporality' (Garcia Canclini 2011). Metaphor can be linked to migration through the concepts shared element of the journey. As a travelling object and as a metaphor for travel, the olivine stone connects with this migratory aesthetic, Heske's art deals not merely in the moving of objects but in the relocation of beings (Bourriaud 2010), or perhaps even in how relocation is essential in being.

### **Migration and/as institutional critique**

Apparent in Heske's framing of the *Stone story* is the inherent institutional critique often underlying conceptual art playing with the art object and its site. Any object can become art as long as the artist kisses it, in this case done both literally and metaphorically. The 'art' is not in the object, often it rests in the status of the artist within the boundaries of the art institution. Seen from a perspective interested in exile and migration, this is interesting in itself. Western art institutions tend to favor white western masculinity and its artistic and literary traditions and artists, leaving less room for narratives or aesthetics that do not reference the canon or that do not fall neatly into the frames of a western narrative. Not every artist's 'kiss' carries the same authority, and not all travelling objects are valued equally by the institutions, societies and people that meet them.

Travelling images and narratives may challenge the existing canon and hierarchies of value. As demonstrated by the case of Heske, the female artist challenges the gendered hierarchies of the Western canon, embodied by the 'kiss' of the artist. The stone also challenges the normative hierarchies of centre-periphery, as it is moved from a small rural community in Norway to the glamorous context of the Venice film festival, where it acts as a destabilising element. An actual stone,

placed there for people to interact with by writing on it, sitting on it or in other ways engage with it, can in many ways be understood as a new medium; it is relational in structure rather than representational.

In a contemporary setting, New Media may contribute to new strategies of moving beyond the art institution and also fundamentally changing how we conceptualise migration visually and affectively. Drawing on visual schematas of travel and exile as well as new technologies as means of dissemination and reworking of image and text, new modes of representing migration are developed, as demonstrated by Rachel Williams' text in the present issue. Williams' article focuses on visual culture and discusses how images make us aware of the importance of affect in migratory aesthetics. In *Art and contemporary Irish emigrants: aesthetics and networks of affect in David Monahan's 'Leaving Dublin'*, Williams discusses how contemporary technology and the internet changes the experiences of migration by creating spaces of communication and belonging where people geographically dispersed across the globe can relate. By a close reading of the series of photographs *Leaving Dublin* by David Monahan, the article sheds light on migration from Ireland in the wake of the financial crisis. Ireland has a long history of emigration due to economic challenges, from the potato famine to the bitter aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Irish migratory experiences have been treated in both literature and visual media, but often in a visual language underlining nostalgia and longing connected to the land(scapes) of home. The staged clair obscur portraits in Monahan's photographs speak in the language of postmodern photography, and reference visual narratives and symbols from tradition, but new media and an absence of nostalgia gives a different perspective on Irish migration.

### **The interaction of exile, migration and gender**

Heske's notion of the 'kiss of the artist' that brings the artwork into being so to speak, also makes apparent how gender is accentuated in contexts of relocation and mobility, as this 'kiss' was historically male. Several of the contributions in this special issue examine the problematisation of gender in contexts of relocation, including Andrea Ciribuco's article, *'White queens' and 'Nubian fiends': early Italian American fiction and the problem of colonialism*, and Camilla Skalle's article, *The quest for identity through bodily pain. Female abjection in the literary work of Igiaba Scego*, discussing narratives of migration from and to Italy, respectively. In his study of Emanuel Carnevali's 'Tale One' (1919) and Pietro di Donato's novel *Christ in Concrete* (1939), Andrea Ciribuco examines the role of colonial discourse in Italian American literature in the early half of the 20th Century. He shows the complex transatlantic connections between the Italian emigration to the Americas and the Italian colonialism in Africa, and how colonial discourse is used subversively in the texts in question. Ciribuco discusses the influence of the colonialist discourse related to the Italian colonial wars in East Africa on the literary production of the Italian community in America, and examines the complex links between Italian

colonialism and the emigré communities, and how they affect the representation of class and gender. Through his analysis of texts by two Italian American authors, Ciribuco shows how this migrant literature relocates elements from different cultural spaces in order to represent the exilic experience in literary form.

While Ciribuco examines Italy's historical position as a country of emigration, Camilla Skalle's contribution focuses on recent immigration to Italy, in her study of the work of Igiaba Scego. Scego's writings represent female protagonists who deal with conflictual relationships to identity and cultural belonging, negotiating Italian and exilic identities, and Skalle shows how the representation of struggles with cultural belonging is closely linked to the representation of expressions of bodily pain, such as vomiting or menstruation, in Scego's texts. Thus, she underscores the bodily dimension of the protagonists' suffering as a symptom of their cultural in-betweenness.

### **The materiality of travelling narratives and images**

The stone as a travelling object in Heske's artwork also reminds us of the role played by materiality in migration. People migrating rarely bring large things with them, but the things they bring are dense with meaning. Either they are important to make the journey (life vests, mobile phones), or they are imbued with affect, and act as carriers of memories, as remnants of a life left behind. Susan Ossman's article, *Stitching the cloths of serial migrant life: the quilts of Barbara James*, examines the role of materiality as it deals with how migration can be a complex process of adaptation and creation in the migrating subject. Many migrants move between spaces, relocate several times, and do not fall neatly into our expectations of the migratory subject as an identity negotiating between a home and a host country. How do we approach the serial migrant? As subjects, serial migrants do not share the same experiences, their life stories and identities are networks woven from the threads from the different places and spaces they inhabit, each story is different. The serial migrant as subjectivity moves across and beyond several systems of categorisation over time, changing positions both geographically and socially. The article can be read as a questioning of contemporary theories and ideas of migration as the production of a third space, a space of hybridity in between cultures caused by the arrival in a new country. Ossman approaches the complexity of these questions by way of a close reading of one serial migrant, Barbara James, and her use of quilts as a material, symbolic and also social space where her personal, social and cultural identity is played out. The patterns and fabric of quilts may serve to recall sensations of and from places where the maker once lived: cool tones of turquoise preserve the memory of fog and rain in earlier habitats, the fabrics of clothing of beloved relatives blend in with textiles and experiences from social situations in new places of temporary settlement. The quilts stitch together a home both materially and metaphorically, underlining how migratory subjectivities are forms in relations of affect, materiality and symbolic representation.

The materiality of language should also be emphasised in this respect, as language can also be understood as material—the outside world is ordered in and by language, and becomes comprehensible through linguistic practices. Anje Müller Gjesdal's article, *Travelling toponymy. The contribution of place names to the textual representation of place and memory in Abdellah Taïa's Une Mélancolie Arabe*, examines the contribution of place names of the textualisation of space, understood as a means of rendering spaces of exile more hospitable, and of making home present in exile, as well as a means of inscribing emotions into the cityscape of exile. Drawing on studies in critical place name studies, Gjesdal argues that place names are a key semiotic resource in the representation of space as the site of lived experience, as well as a mnemonic tool for preserving places of home and transition in memory.

### **The critical and utopian potential of travelling narratives and images.**

Returning to Heske's art of relocation, we should emphasise that while the project of relocation allows for a critique of existing canons, hierarchies, and institutions, it also goes beyond the level of merely playing with the institutionalisation of art and the boundaries separating ordinary objects from art, and art spaces from everyday spaces. The travelling stone appears as a metaphor for, or a utopian statement on, borders, politics and capitalism, inviting a reflection on the relationship between art and border-crossing. Indeed, the utopian potential of travelling narratives and images should not be underestimated. Thus, *Stone Story* demonstrates the critical potential of reworking formal and narrative schemata of existing genres in order to create poetic and critical reflections and perspectives on migration and exile.

This is well demonstrated by Inge Lanslot's article '*Il volo. Wim Wenders' short documentary on hybrid space in Calabrian shrinking cities*' which discusses Wim Wender's documentary on immigration to Italy. Lanslots shows how Wenders' documentary 'combines cinematic resources and techniques that belong to the poetic and the reflexive mode of documentary filmmaking', thus contributing to a reflection on documentary filmmaking itself as well as opening up alternative imaginaries and modes of engagement with immigration issues for the audience. Lanslots also demonstrates how the formal features of the genre is utilised and problematised in order to provide for critical reflection and engagement.

### **The challenges of migratory aesthetics**

We have chosen to approach the topic of this special issue through an exploration of Marianne Heske's artwork which problematises issues of national identity, tradition and cultural belonging through a strategy of relocation. In her short text in the booklet for *Stone Story*, Heske underlines how the stone could cross borders without packing, customs or insurance, almost an indirect comment on her own status as a white privileged western woman whose passport can give her access to

almost any country in the world. Travelling to Italy with a Norwegian passport is no problem, the little red book would give you access to most countries in the world. Approaching the Mediterranean from the south, however, is a completely different story. The possibility of crossing the borders without packing, customs or insurance has a different meaning if read as a comment on the precariousness of the refugee or the migrant coming from the south. While acknowledging the fundamental divide that exists in access to safe and free mobility, we argue for the potential of travelling narratives and images in opening up new perspectives, imaginaries and ways of engaging with exile and migration, while keeping in mind the ethical peril of reifying and overly simplifying experiences of these phenomena.

This special issue focuses on travelling images and narratives in times of migration and exile, yet we should take care not to essentialise the images and narratives as such, but also look to their relational character and the possibility of opening up new perspectives and connections. The meaning of the olivine stone in Heske's *Stone Story* does not rest in the art institution. The stone was placed outside the white cube or gallery space. Like most material objects, the stone itself is an open structure. The materiality of the stone, the minimal shape, the hardness and the colour may be important factors, but the aesthetics is not in the form, it is in our relation to it. Do we approach it as a part of 'us' or is it an 'other'? Do we see the stone, or the migrant, as being mis-placed, or do we enter the relation as a space productive of meaning, of affect and new relations? When the stone was taken back to Norway after its stay in Italy, the surface had new inscriptions on it, it was both the same stone and not the same stone. The place of origin or the place of arrival, the 'home' or the 'host' of the stone do not define it: what happens during the journey and how we interact with the stone is as important as the object itself or its origin. The articles collected here share the common goal of problematising travelling narratives, material objects and signs, seemingly in 'the wrong place', (Kwon 2000), which form productive spaces for new meaning to arise.

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