

Book Review of Humpál, Martin and Březinová, Helena (Eds.) 2022. *Migration and Identity in Nordic Literature*. Prague: Karolinum Press, 160 pp



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BOOK REVIEW

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Recognizing the specific relevance of the topic of migration in the current moment, Martin Humpál, Professor of Scandinavian Literature and the Director of the Institute of German Studies, and Helena Březinová, Associate Professor of Scandinavian Studies at Charles University in Prague, as editors of the volume *Migration and Identity in Nordic Literature*, caution against overemphasizing the contemporary nature of the phenomenon. They rather situate their approach in the context that ‘migration has been here since time immemorial’ with ‘varying nature, manifestations and consequences’ (p. 7).

The editors note that migration can be perceived as a continuum with discordant ruptures necessarily demanding new interrogations to reveal historical and sociological insights. Examining the theme of migrations in literature and culture of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries while focusing on Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland, the book addresses the continuing relevance of the concept of identity—individual and national—and further complicates it. The editors’ framings of disturbance, disruption, or hybridity encompass the vast complexity of scenarios presented in the chapters, including the ‘distracting presences’ and absences: they highlight the empty spaces in the functional memory foundational to national identity, as well as explicate the suppression of the heterogeneous past and the ever-elusive nature of personal identity.

Initiated at a workshop at Charles University in 2020, this volume presents 10 distinct chapters by scholars involved in Scandinavian literary studies. The chapters are diverse in their approaches, in the range of literary works considered, and in the analytical apparatus applied. The first of the two parts of the volume signposts the approaches and the overarching concepts and themes represented in the volume. These initial two chapters also take a fresh look at less obvious challenges to the analysis of the interactions between migration and belonging within national lore. Founding myths are not the only element of the ‘national’ identity that gets purged from those social

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entities that are difficult to fit into a projected history. The first chapter by Annika Bøstein Myhr illustrates that 'obligatory forgetting' of the elements that do not support group identity in present-day Europe is a contemporary phenomenon with its own consequences. Ultimately, it leads to a sense of rejection and exclusion from the narratives of belonging. The three distinct samples of literary writing, part-autobiographical, part-fictional, analyzed in the chapter point to the unreliability of national histories and provide common-ground for critiques of national narratives.

In Chapter 2, Satu Gröndahl conducts a conceptual remapping of Swedish (im)migrant literature and scholarly approaches, while fronting the dissonance between the occurrence of migrant and minority writers' literary production as a signal of progressive change and the enduring resistance by the scholarly establishment. The chapter delves into scholarly attempts to systematize and situate (im)migrant literature, while recognizing the complexities and sensitivities of the problem of definition. The Swedish policy reform of the 1970s as a part of the multicultural society project provided a groundbreaking incentive to publishing in minority and migrant community languages. However, according to the author, migrant literatures remained isolated, autonomous, or bound to the country of origin. Essentializing (ethnifying, 'classifying') mechanisms were at work. Gröndahl argues that the presence of (im)migrant literatures in the literary canon is questionable, as migrant authors' inclusion into national literary histories is limited to 'illustrative pages and in fact boxes, not in the main body of the text, and as such, the presentation mirrors a marginalized position in this context' (p. 33). Evidently, a new paradigm is emerging in some of the recent accounts of literary history, moving away from binarism as a principle in determining the 'national.' The second part of the book (Chapters 3–10) introduces aspects of the interrelation between migration, identity, and literature, starting with the notable literary figures and the influence of migration on their literary achievements.

While taking a broad understanding of migrations and the human interactions involved, the volume *Migration and Identity in Nordic Literature* remains attentive to power relations as the element constitutive of the difference between 'North' and 'South.' Othering, the reproduction of orientalist/colonial stereotypes and descriptions of colonial legacies ('European inheritance', p. 86) are also elucidated upon by Jan Dłask, as well as the possibility of the choice of an author to ignore political and socioeconomic realities. With varying points of departure—from literary greats to more recent (im)migrant literature—the volume points to an absence of awareness of the materiality and the context as a privilege that is not an attainable option for all migrants. The translingual and transcultural processes described engage important topics of violence, discrimination, multiple oppressions, and the strategic retreat to bilingualism in order to avoid linguistic alienation and open confrontation with racism (*cabecitas negras* instead of *svartskalle*, as pointed out by Elisabeth Oxfeldt, p. 117). This process of continuing mediation between cultures is summarized as being the 'eternal translation' of oneself, while occupying multiple and unstable ethnocultural identities. Correspondingly, the application of the postcolonial notion of hybrid identity to depict the transcultural space negotiated between the author and the surroundings (*mellanvärld*, p. 107) is identified by Radka Stahr as a useful literary device. Space appears not just as a reflection of identity, but as a co-constitutive of it. As an overarching theme, space acts as a reminder that despite the perceived loosening of ties to place in the era of globalization, migrations for many remain imposed and a source of secondary trauma.

As a setting of social and ethnic segregation and site of intervention by the welfare state, space figures as a determinant of self-identification and a starting point for (im)migrant and so-called 'ghetto literature,' a place-specific configuration of class, gender, and ethnicity that relates to a sense of 'the entanglement that *takes place everywhere*' (Jon Helt Haarder, p. 156). However, this topic could benefit from further exploration of nuanced and positive representations of the role of community to avoid the fixedness of the 'ghetto.'

Additionally, Petra Broomans addresses matters of materiality and space/place behind the experience of migrations with regard to the history of colonization in the European North and the forced relocation of the Sámi people (Chapter 9). Loss of language, culture, and identity is examined as a consequence of the violence of enclosures: closed borders, control of movement, extraction, and environmental destruction of the Indigenous lands. These enclosures introduce the concept of the restrictive state operating at the expense of the homeland and all its cultural, linguistic, and spatial appearances. A multigenerational perspective on loss—loss of ancestral land, loss of culture, language, voice, and bodily integrity—is manifested and recognized through strategies of survival and resistance.

Migration and Identity in Nordic Literature provides a valuable contribution to the notion of national literature and the literary canon as changing concepts, both multifaceted and heterogenous. It illustrates a multiplicity of perspectives on migration and the resulting 'new' and 'alternative' literatures grouped around language, ethnicity, gender, and class. Often intersecting, these are simultaneously pointing to the erasure of the history of migration and exile as constitutive of recognized bodies of 'national' literatures. Even in the cases of Andersen, Ibsen, and Strindberg, the record of the formative power of their transnational experiences remains absent from the official biographies of these renown authors. Voluntary exile worked as a means to self-preservation and emancipation through the absorption of freedoms and life-affirming values, as an educational journey (*udviklingsrejse*). This approach takes the discussion on migrations beyond embeddedness in postcolonial settings. Binarism is avoided, while the volume makes a case toward exposing the entrapment of traditional approaches in the paradigm of literary monolingualism. This volume is opening a space toward literature as a construction between languages and cultures, embracing multilingualism and intermediality. It does not claim to provide definitive answers. It creates multiple new beginnings and opens up to new endings, each calling for further inquiry and reading, in line with some of the works cited and analyzed by the authors of the volume's chapters. Looking into both the past and the present, recognizing the elisions and exclusions of the migratory subject, the volume maintains an open and constructive view. The authors remain observant of an assortment of practices leading toward an inclusive future, while challenging misconceptions of essentialist authenticity and unitary society. These perspectives provide the volume with an underlining of hope: connecting the historical erasures to the present reemergence of the Sámi people, linking the forced migrations of the past to the contemporary experiences of forced displacement.

The appeal of this volume reaches beyond the field of Scandinavian literatures to readers interested in issues such as migrations, identity, nationalism, racism, cosmopolitanism, globalization, cultural hybridity, multiculturalism, and multilingualism. Due to its focus on border thinking and the multiplicity of human experience, it also offers rewarding reading for researchers involved in decolonial cultural initiatives.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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