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**What can literature tell us about migration?**

Dr Amy Burge

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# What can literature tell us about migration?

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the benefits of placing literature more centrally in investigations of migration. It begins with a discussion of categorisation and content of the literature and considers what this literature can tell us about migration, focussing on four key aspects: combating dominant narratives; challenging nationalist ideologies; providing historical perspectives; and therapeutic practice. Finally the paper describes three areas of migration literature that have been less widely theorised, but which are considered of particular interest to social scientists interested in literary approaches.

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**Introduction**

In the preface to their 1995 edited collection *Writing Across Worlds,* Russell King, John Connell and Paul White argue that social-scientific research in migration, while "*rich and diversified in its own way … fails to capture the essence of what it is like to* be *a migrant*".[1] However, literature has not formed a significant part of the study of migration.[2] Indeed, as Woolley notes, it is only recently that the humanities has started to explore themes of migration.[3] Yet, social scientists continue to see literary texts as "*tangential sources*".[4] What are the benefits placing literature more centrally in investigations of migration?

Migration literature addresses some gaps in sociological approaches to migration. Paul White summarises sociological study into migration, noting its focus on the characteristics of migrants, the nature of place, and underlying forces and structures (political, economic, social) of movement.[5] He notes that such studies tend to be statistical and quantitative with less emphasis on individuals.[6] He also notes a lack of work on the role of migration "*within a culture of society*": how society changes based on migration to and from that place.[7] White points to all of these as "*important gaps which can be constructively filled via the use of creative literature.*"[8] Subsequently the field of Migration Studies has ballooned and there are now many ethnographic and anthropological works looking at migrant experienced but there is still much scope for a literary contribution. Literature is all about individual experience and expression.[9] King, Connell and White argue that "*literary accounts focus in a very direct and penetrating way on issues such as place perception, landscape symbolism, senses of displacement and transformation, communities lost and created anew, exploitation, nostalgia, attitudes towards return, family relationships, self-denial and self-discovery, and many more*."[10]

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[1] Russell King, John Connell, and Paul White, 'Preface', in *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration*, ed. by Russell King, John Connell, and Paul White (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. ix–xvi.

[2] Claire Gallien, 'Forcing Displacement: The Postcolonial Interventions of Refugee Literature and Arts', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 54.6 (2018), 735–50 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2018.1551268>; Claire Gallien, '"Refugee Literature": What Postcolonial Theory Has to Say', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 54.6 (2018), 721–26 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2018.1555206>.

[3] Agnes Woolley, *Contemporary Asylum Narratives: Representing Refugees in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 7–10 (for a helpful overview of this work carried out since 2001) <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bham/detail.action?docID=1645510> [accessed 8 January 2020].

[4] Paul White, 'Geography, Literature and Migration', in *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration*, ed. by Russell King, John Connell, and Paul White (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 1–19 (p. 9).

[5] White, p. 10.

[6] White, p. 10.

[7] White, p. 10.

[8] White, p. 10.

[9] King, Connell, and White, p. xiii.

[10] King, Connell, and White, p. x.

In this short paper, I offer an overview of some of the scholarship on literature and migration. Rather than offering a detailed outline of this scholarship, my aim is to signpost to questions and topics of interest for social scientists working in areas of migration and (super)diversity. I being with a discussion of categorisation and content: what *is* migration literature[11] and what are its themes? I then move to consider what this literature can tell us about migration, focusing on four key aspects: combating dominant narratives; challenging nationalist ideologies; providing historical perspectives; and therapeutic practice. Finally, I describe three areas of migration literature that have been less widely theorised, but which I consider of particular interest to social scientists interested in literary approaches.

### Defining migration literature

What to call this group of texts? Anderson writes that "*the growing field of scholarship on literature of migration has been plagued since its beginning with finding an appropriate term for naming this literature*".[12] Scholars have attempted to draw categories or typologies of migrant and refugee fiction, using divergent terms to describe it. Just as public discourse has struggled to categorise "*those on the move*", so too do literary critics vary in their terminology.[13] Woolley, for instance, notes that literary and cultural critics have not always distinguished between asylum seeking, forced migration and other kinds of migration.[14] Discussion of this terminology has incorporated criticism of the ability of different terms to justifiably represent the varieties of literature involved. Connell, King and White identify an 'evolution' in forms of migrant literature:[15]

1. 'pre-literatures' – ethic newsletters or community newspapers; diaries, songs; oral narratives; letters (an attempt to hold on to past identities)

2. Poems, short stories, reportage (usually in native tongue) (forms of therapy)

3. Complex novels, plays, films and poetry (in languages of "dominant metropolitan powers which caused the migration to happen"[16]

4. Final phase is migrant authors/migrants influence "erstwhile 'pure' national (and international) literature".[17]

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[11] I define my use of the term 'migration literature' below.
[12] Katherine Anderson, 'Contemporary Migration Literature in German and English: A Comparative Study by Sandra Vlasta (Review)', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 54.2 (2017), 482–85 (p. 484).
[13] Nando Sigona, 'The Contested Politics of Naming in Europe's "Refugee Crisis"', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41.3 (2018), 456–60 (p. 456) <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2018.1388423>. For a discussion in relation to literature, see Woolley, 10-11.
[14] Woolley, p. 14.
[15] King, Connell, and White, pp. xi-xii.
[16] King, Connell, and White, p. xii.
[17] King, Connell, and White, p. xii.

Stan distinguishes between diaspora, exile, and refugee literature.[18] The term diaspora now encompasses multiple meanings, including immigrant, expatriate, refugee, exile, and ethnic community.[19] As Clifford writes, diaspora is about "*identifications not identities*"; "*diasporic populations do not come from elsewhere in the same way that 'immigrants' do.*"[20] Sellman notes that "*[c]ontemporary Arabic literature of migration in Europe is often labelled and marketed as exile literature (*adab al-manfa*).*"[21] She discusses the distinctions often made by literary theorists between exiles and refugees, arguing that much of this is to do with the privileging of some art over others, in which the exile is associated with intellectual and artistic merit.[22] Gallien argues that

> resorting to the category "refugee" does not necessarily lead to blanket endorsement, but may foster a critical analysis of the way it can be distinguished from other modes of writing about movement (such as travel literature, or migrant, exilic, diasporic writing) and more specifically the *mahjar* (exilic) literary tradition in Arabic. A failure to provide a clear critical distinction between cosmopolitan, exilic, and refugee literatures would amount to dehistoricizing the "figure of the migrant" (Gallien 2017) and decontextualizing writing about movement. For instance, in exilic writing, the focus is placed on existential loss with an emphasis on nostalgic and imaginary return to places of origin (Burt 2010), whereas refugee writing lends itself more readily to extraterritorial readings, as it defines places of departure as much as places of transit and arrival. As such, it is more directly engaged than the literature of exile in subverting national linguistic and literary borders.[23]

Woolley has made a similar argument for the specificity of forced migration and asylum seeking, writing "*asylum seeking – as both legally precarious and persistently indeterminate – is distinct from the traditional narratives of diasporic accommodation that have historically shaped discourses of migration.*"[24]

As a more encompassing term, Declerq proposes "*literature of migration*" (in French).[25] Other proposed terms includes "*intercultural literature*" – "*texts that deal with the relationships between*

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[18] Corina Stan, 'A Life without a Shoreline: Tropes of Refugee Literature in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Go, Went, Gone*', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 54.6 (2018), 795–808 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2018.1551272>.

[19] Khachig Tölölyan, 'The Nation-State and Its Others: In Lieu of a Preface', *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, 1.1 (1991), 3–7 (pp. 4–5) <https://doi.org/10.1353/dsp.1991.0008>; cited in James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 245.

[20] Clifford, pp. 268, 250.

[21] Johanna Sellman, 'A Global Postcolonial: Contemporary Arabic Literature of Migration to Europe', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 54.6 (2018), 751–65 (p. 751) <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2018.1555207>.

[22] Sellman, pp. 758–59.

[23] Gallien, 'Forcing Displacement', p. 740.

[24] Woolley, p. 3.

[25] Elien Declercq, '« Écriture migrante », « littérature (im)migrante », « migration literature » : réflexions sur un concept aux contours imprécis', *Revue de litterature comparee*, n°339.3 (2011), 301–10 (p. 310).

*two or more cultures*"[26] – and migrant poetics.[27] Écriture migrante/ écritures immigrantes[28] has been put forward to indicate *"texts written by people who come from elsewhere"*.[29] However, Declercq argues that this definition ignores oral culture, and the term 'migrant' problematically centres attention on the ethnic origin of the author (Declercq having already outlined that migration literature does not have to be written by an author from a specific ethnic background).[30] Vlasta proposes *'Literatur im Kontext von Migration'* – literature in the context of migration – providing analysis of texts and their content independent of the author's background.[31] Declerq proposes the term 'migration literature' ('literature of migration' in French), that disrupts the false association of the text (which has migration as its theme) and the biography of its author, this breaking the perceived necessary or intrinsic link between text and context.[32] Declercq also argues that such designation breaks the association of migration literature with national literature.[33] Frank furthermore proposes that "*'migration literature' refers to all literary works that are written in an age of migration— or at least to those works that can be said to reflect upon migration*".[34] Declercq, however, takes issue with the inclusion of periodization, asking: is migration not a phenomenon in all time periods?[35]

Many scholars distinguish between "*literature* that emerges from *immigration*" (that deals with the figure of the migrant or the process of immigration) and "*literature* that talks about *immigration*".[36] Duffy suggests a distinction between autobiographical works written by migrants themselves and general fiction by 'professional' writers that reflects migration, directly or indirectly.[37] As Anderson, outlines,

> [r]esearch on literary developments in the context of migration has focused predominantly on autobiographical details, such as the native language and country of origin of authors. This

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[26] Kind, cited in Frank Zipfel, 'Migrant Concepts: Multi-, Inter-, Transkulturalität,Métissage, Créolisation and Hybridity as New Concepts for Literary Criticism', in *Écriture Migrante / Migrant Writing*, ed. by Danielle Dumontet and Frank Zipfel (Hildesheim: GeorgOlms Verlag, 2008), pp. 5-26 (p. 11); cited in Declercq, 308.

[27] Dumontet, p. 92.

[28] Declercq, 309.

[29] Dumontet, p. 88; cited in Declerq, 309, my translation.

[30] Declercq, p. 309.

[31] Sandra Vlasta, *Contemporary Migration Literature in German and English: A Comparative Study* (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2015), pp. 261–62.

[32] Declercq, p. 310, my translation.

[33] Declercq, p. 310.

[34] Søren Frank, *Migration and Literature: Günter Grass, Milan Kundera, Salman Rushdie, and Jan Kjærstad* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 2 <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230615472>.

[35] Declercq, p. 310.

[36] Pierre Halen, 'À Propos Des Modalités d'insertion Des Littératures Dites de l'immigration Ou Migrantes Dans Le Système Littéraire Francophone', in *Écriture Migrante / Migrant Writing*, ed. by Danielle Dumontet and Frank Zipfel (Hildesheim: GeorgOlms Verlag, 2008), pp. 37–48 (p. 37). My translation, my italics.

[37] Patrick Duffy, 'Literary Reflections on Irish Migration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', in *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration*, ed. by Russell King, John Connell, and Paul White (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 20–39.

focus has sparked protest among scholars and authors alike, who feel that the literature produced is valued exclusively by the context that produced it, rather than the intrinsic value of the texts themselves"[38]

Gallien posits that refugee literature includes "*also the publications of former refugees turned residents or nationals, as well as those who have not experienced forced displacement,*"[39] arguing that "*[t]hese tangential approaches are part and parcel of the corpus and provide a broader picture of the "refugee crisis*".[40] White argues for two levels of migration literature: individual authors, and literary responses on a societal scale to the movement of people.[41] Søren Frank also suggests a move away from migrant literature towards migration literature, arguing "*literature of migration is not written by migrants alone*" and that this shift supports "*a move away from authorial biography as the decisive parameter, emphasizing instead intratextual features such as content and form as well as extratextual forces such as social processes*".[42]

Gallien calls this a "*refugee poetics and aesthetics*".[43] Corina Stan makes a case for "*including in the emerging corpus of 'refugee literature' not only accounts inspired by first-hand experiences, but also texts by western writers who see migration as a shared concern.*"[44] Declercq notes that while 'migration literature' is not limited to autobiography, critical work has tended to focus on the 'spatio-temporal' movements of its authors and protagonists.[45] Woolley articulates a difference between texts written by and *about* forced migration and asylum seeking. Texts written about the subject permit an analysis of "*the relationship between self and other invariably raised by the request for hospitality inherent in the asylum claim and the varying ways in which that asylum-seeking other is represented in narrative fiction.*"[46] For Woolley, "*testimony is of a different order of representation, one which has an appeal to truth at its heart.*"[47] Woolley adopts this distinction in order to avoid discussion of authentic and inauthentic, "*which not only recurs incessantly in dominant representations, but is also a constituent part of the asylum determination system.*"[48] King, Connell and White note "*much 'migrant' literature is not, in fact, by migrants, but by writers who are labelled*

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38 Anderson, p. 482.
39 Gallien, 'Forcing Displacement', p. 742.
40 Gallien, 'Forcing Displacement', p. 742.
41 White, pp. 1–2.
42 Søren Frank, 'Globalization, Migration Literature, and the New Europe', *Cosmopolitanism and the Postnational: Literature and the New Europe*, 2015, 107–29 (pp. 2–3) <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004300651_008>.
43 Gallien, '"Refugee Literature"', p. 722.
44 Stan, p. 796.
45 Declercq, p. 302.
46 Woolley, p. 19.
47 Woolley, p. 19.
48 Woolley, p. 19.

*or racialized in some way by the societies in which they live*".[49] They point to more subtle articulations of migrant identity, noting expressions of migration from authors who are not themselves migrants but are descended from immigrants. [50] Declercq, building on King et. al., agrees that 'migrant literature' need not be connected to ethnic identity or an 'authentic' experience of migration – if migrant literature is defined by particular styles, themes, and forms, then non-migrants can also write 'migrant literature' (there is no necessary connection between form and ethnic identity).[51] Viewing migration literature in this way forges connections with diaspora: it is about "*roots* and *routes*".[52]

### Themes in literature on migration

So what can migration literature tell us? What are its dominant themes? Scholarship points to recurrent themes of borders, citizenship, belonging, change (and ambivalence to change), biopolitics, identity, stereotypes, gender, flight, otherness, exile, separation, generational differences, (un)inhabitability, dislocation, bureaucracy, abandonment and return.[53] Sellman and Woolley have suggested that migration literature has shifted its form and content in line with wider societal changes. Woolley has argued that British fiction mirrors shifting attitudes towards hospitality in frequent representation of "*the death, deportation or destitution of the refugee figure*", foregrounding "*this increasingly inhospitable response to those seeking refuge*". [54] Sellman suggests that *"[l]iterary narratives themselves are shifting away from the themes and contexts of colonial and postcolonial Arabic exile literature, and exploring new aesthetics and modes of representing migration in a global context.*"[55] Migration literature engaged with language use can say something about migrants' use of non-native languages and their integration (or lack thereof).[56]

One of the central claims made about migration literature is that it tells stories that are not told elsewhere. Gallien, discussing Abu Bakr Khaal's *African Titanics* (2008), argues that *"[m]ore than reporting on the plight and loss of refugee lives the novel provides testimony that is not heard in mainstream media as well as existential and universal reflections, via the characters' recourse to myths*

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[49] King, Connell, and White, p. xiv.
[50] King, Connell, and White, p. xi.
[51] Declercq, p. 308.
[52] Clifford, p. 251, my emphasis.
[53] Sellman, p. 762; Stan, pp. 797–98; Imogen Tyler and Rosalind Gill, 'Postcolonial Girl', *Interventions*, 15.1 (2013), 78–94 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2013.771008>; White, pp. 3–4, 6, 8, 13, 14; Woolley, p. 12.
[54] Woolley, p. 13.
[55] Sellman, p. 754.
[56] Farid Laroussi, 'Literature in Migration', *The European Legacy*, 7.6 (2002), 709–22 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1084877022000029000>.

*and folk tales*."[57] Sellman notes, for example, "*a kind of 'nightmare realism'*" in representations of border crossings and undocumented migration in the work of Iraqi writer Hassan Blasim.[58] Other have argued for a connection between individual and collective experience in migration literature. Stan argues that tropes associated with "*traumatic recollection*" – "*walls, paper(s), water*" – "*anchor the narrative landscape of the refugee experience, making a powerful case for self-representation as testimony and memorialization*".[59] However, by associating these tropes with a German character, Stan argues that Erpenbeck "*implicitly claims that 'refugee literature' is not simply a record of forced migrations; rather, it dramatizes the ways this predicament is part of a shared world*."[60] Sellman concurs, writing: *"[l]iterature … offers an important space for retelling migration narratives, not necessarily as a testimony to personal experiences, but as an engagement with contemporary predicaments such as the meanings of borders and citizenship and the questions and imaginaries elicited by them.*"[61] Gallien argues that refugee literature "cannot be studied out of its material context, while at the same time … cannot be reduced to it."[62] Woolley argues that analysing representations of forced migration and asylum seeking written not by migrants' themselves can help to explore, "*the representational or artistic standpoint on asylum as an ethical act of recognition, accommodation and solidarity.*"[63] For Woolley, "*texts present new ways of knowing a social situation*" and "*engage[…] in thematic and formal quests to accommodate narratives of forced migration outside the prescriptive spaces of officialdom.*"[64]

### What can literature tell us about migration?

In what follows, I will outline four key ways I think migration literature is useful for the study of migration.

#### *Combating dominant narratives*

Many critics have argued that migration literature directly addresses and critiques dominant (and usually negative) representations of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.[65] Sissy Helff analyses representations of African refugees and asylum seekers in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001),

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[57] Gallien, 'Forcing Displacement', p. 737.
[58] Sellman, p. 752.
[59] Stan, p. 796.
[60] Stan, p. 797.
[61] Sellman, p. 756.
[62] Gallien, 'Forcing Displacement', p. 743.
[63] Woolley, p. 19.
[64] Woolley, p. 25.
[65] See Woolley, p. 23.

arguing that the novel challenges stereotypes of 'African refugees' in Britain and Europe.[66] Nadia Atia similarly claims that the short story 'The Reality and the Record' (2009) "*demands the re-examination of all our narratives, perhaps especially those surrounding the morality of our approach to the ever-growing numbers of displaced persons who find their way to our shores demands*".[67] Oana Sabo argues that Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) "*invites readers to think critically about immigration and global capitalism*".[68]

Woolley considers the ability to act as "*a mode of resistance and resilience*"[69] unique to "*fictional discourses, [that can] ask questions of representation and … consider how representations extend into, and act upon, the public sphere.*"[70] Gallien argues that "*[t]he interventions of artists, writers and activists also expose what is not visible to the eye of mainstream media or what is deliberately kept invisible*".[71] However, there is a potential ambivalence about how migrants see themselves represented in literature; Agnes Woolley writes that "*oscillating between invisibility and overexposure in the public sphere, forced migrants have an ambivalent relationship to the aesthetic forms that seek to represent them*".[72]

### Identity and Nationality

White suggests that "*literature contains some of the most effective explorations of identity issues.*"[73] It can also be indicative of collective/cultural memory or identity – the way a group "*expresses its identity*".[74] The autobiographical nature of much migration literature suggests, further, that "*the act of writing … [can] contribute to the re-definitions of identity*" for these authors.[75] White suggests that migration calls into question aspects of identity, and results in transformation and new influences; individuals may have notice changes to their economic status, religious status, language capacity and, for those who find themselves in a place where they are considered 'other', awareness of their

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[66] Sissy Helff, 'Illegal Diasporas and African Refugees in Abdulrazak Gurnah's By the Sea', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 44.1 (2009), 67–80 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989408101652>.

[67] Nadia Atia, 'The Figure of the Refugee in Hassan Blasim's "The Reality and the Record"', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 54.3 (2019), 319–33 (p. 331) <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989417707802>.

[68] Oana Sabo, 'Disjunctures and Diaspora in Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 47.3 (2012), 375–92 (p. 376) <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989412450697>.

[69] Gallien, '"Refugee Literature"', p. 723.

[70] Woolley, p. 21.

[71] Gallien, '"Refugee Literature"', p. 722.

[72] Woolley, p. 3.

[73] White, p. 2.

[74] Jacqueline Bel, 'Migration, Literature and Cultural Memory.', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 11.1 (2011), 87–97 (p. 92) <https://doi.org/10.3167/jrs.2011.110108>.

[75] White, p. 9.

ethnicity.[76] One way in which scholars have considered this question of identity is in relation to nationality: specifically, the position of migration literature in relation to national literature.

Should migration literature be seen as a contained category separate from national literature? Gallien raises the problematic categorisation of the 'refugee' writer as 'guest' in a host language and culture – what she terms "*the generic anxiety that constitutes refugee literature*" – asking, "*Are refugee writers, for instance, given temporary visibility only when cordoned off in a separate sub-category? Do they comply with certain expectations, or rather highlight their ethical and political limitations and even go beyond them?*"[77] Gallien suggests that the "*the enduring impact of refugee literature and arts*" is precisely its capacity to disrupt existing understandings of national literatures and languages, as well as genre and artistic practice.[78]

Can we see migration literature as *part* of a national literary framework? In an article on *Beur* writers in France in the last quarter of the twentieth century, Farid Laroussi argues that their works "*compose a new literary system*" and "*fashion a new French literary subjectivity*": "Beur *novels do not represent French culture, they* are *French culture*".[79] Laroussi argues that "*French culture is not threatened by plurality but it is enriched by it*".[80] In this sense, literature can create new subjectivities and new identities and, at the same time, offers a context in which to measure the benefits of migration. Declercq similarly connects migrant and refugee literature with 'national literature', noting the difficulties that arise when national identity is so closely associated with literary production.[81] Declercq argues that 'migration literature' *changes* national literary structures, arguing for the emergence of new literary constructions.[82]

Some of these "*exclusionary dynamics in definitions of national literary canons and languages*" are questioned in some examples of refugee writing.[83] Gallien give the example of two *Refugee Tales* collections which integrated migrants' stories with British writers' reading of the frame of Chaucer's text, thus transforming a standard of English Literature. She writes, "*the experience of refugee writing often consists of co-writing and co-translation between 'nationals' and 'migrants', which again complicates monolithic national frames*."[84] Thus, literature and art by migrants is "*helping to rebuild*

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[76] White, pp. 2–3.
[77] Gallien, 'Forcing Displacement', pp. 740, 739.
[78] Gallien, 'Forcing Displacement', p. 745.
[79] Laroussi, pp. 714–15, my emphasis.
[80] Laroussi, p. 717.
[81] Declercq, p. 303.
[82] Declercq, p. 301.
[83] Gallien, 'Forcing Displacement', p. 744.
[84] Gallien, 'Forcing Displacement', p. 744.

*conceptions of nationality*" [85] and "*reinvent[ing] the ways that markers such as Englishness or Britishness are imagined and performed.*" [86] For Gallien, "*there is a long-term impact of refugee literature and arts in that their uprootedness and extraterritoriality interrogate default literary geographies defined along national borders and the default monolingual imaginary of national languages.*"[87] If migration literature is itself questioning or challenging definitions of the 'national', it follows that studies of that literature would benefit from a similar liberation from existing literary geographical categories: in other words, emphasising the global, rather than the national.

### *Historical Perspectives*

Critical work on migration and refugee literature has focused firmly on the twentieth century (the so-called 'Age of Migration') and the twenty-first century, the first two decades of which have been marked by specific movements of people (e.g. the termed 'Migration Crisis' in Europe). Declercq remarks that scholars tend to focus on more recent examples of literature, which obscures historical examples and long-term patterns of migration and its literary representations.[88] Yet "*migration has always played a crucial role in European history and European literature*".[89] A diachronic perspective on migration can be revealing and literary texts can provide such a view; White suggests that the study of literature "*extends the range of understanding of the longer-term impacts of migration and thus our understanding of the forces at work in modern society*".[90]

Older examples of migration literature can be revealing of how historical societies and cultures viewed migration – this is especially important for historical time periods for which we have less first-hand evidence. For instance, a number of Middle English popular texts dating from the Middle Ages are revealing of attitudes towards the migration of individuals (e.g. negative representations of immigrant merchants). The transmission of these texts, many of which circulated in multiple languages, is also an indicator of the nature of migratory flow across cultures. Individual examples of migration literature draw connections between historical moments and the present. For example, Yasemin Mohammad argues that Jamal Mahjoub's novel *Travelling with Djinns* (2003) makes connections between memories of colonialism and the Holocaust to indicate "*that new solidarities can be formed across*

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[85] Anderson, p. 482.
[86] Gallien, 'Forcing Displacement', p. 745.
[87] Gallien, '"Refugee Literature"', p. 722.
[88] Declercq, p. 306.
[89] Søren Frank, p. 121.
[90] White, p. 15.

*lines of ethno-cultural and/or religious division*".[91]

### *Literature and/as Practice*

Finally, a clear connection between sociological and literary work on migration is in the practice of writing and its tangible and imagined connections to individual and communities. White reminds us that migration literature *itself* has an impact[92] – on readers, on authors. Bel notes, *"[l]iterature can … help communities to shape a common heritage by clothing specific events with mnemonic status"*;[93] discussing literature cultural memory, Rigney suggests literature can create "*interest in histories which are not one's own*", thus crediting literature as "*the source of new traditions and the means for broadening the horizons of what one considers one's own heritage*".[94] There is also the question of the role of literature and the arts more broadly in the lives of refugees and migrants; as Marco Martiniello asks, *"[w]hat is the role of arts (music, theatre, literature, etc.) in the solidarity movements in favour of refugees in European cities and beyond?"*.[95] Creative works produced by migrants and refugees are themselves used "*as research tools to engage with displaced communities and restate the public impact of the humanities*".[96] Literature is already an output (albeit a marginal one) of sociological work (research informing fiction); can we imagine making the connection between literature and sociology more central to our research practice? Can literary works inform sociological research?

### **Literary Considerations**

For those seeking to analyse migration literature in terms of what 'truths' it can reveal about the experience of migration, there are some limitations to bear in mind. King, Connell and White points out that "*[m]igrants rarely remember in neat and accurate chronology*"[97] and while statistics may be cold and clear, lived experience, as seen in literature, is less linear.[98] Migration literature "*is individual, subjective, diverse: it reflects but also may exaggerate or even invert the social experience that drives it.*"[99] The influence of publishers and editors is less visible but, nonetheless, significant; the industry

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[91] Yasemin Mohammad, 'Reconfiguring European History and Cultural Memory in Jamal Mahjoub's Travelling with Djinns', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 52.2 (2017), 316–30 (p. 316) <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989415593402>.

[92] White, p. 15.

[93] Bel, p. 99.

[94] Ann Rigney, 'Portable Monuments: Literature, Cultural Memory, and the Case of Jeanie Deans', *Poetics Today*, 25.2 (2004), 361–96 (p. 389) <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-25-2-361>.

[95] Marco Martiniello, 'Introduction to the Special Issue "Arts and Refugees: Multidisciplinary Perspectives"', *Arts*, 2019 <https://www.mdpi.com/journal/arts/special_issues/arts_refugees#info>.

[96] Gallien, 'Forcing Displacement', p. 743.

[97] King, Connell, and White, p. xii.

[98] White, p. 12.

[99] King, Connell, and White, p. xv.

"*imposes its own control over what is published or distributed*"[100] with a potential "*gap*" emerging "*between desires and tropes, between what refugees might want and what they are asked to perform or articulate as asylum seekers.*"[101] There are multiple examples of migrants or refugees encouraged to write by outside organisations or as political activism and, as White points out, there is so much migration literature being published partly because we are in an 'Age of Migration' but also partly because *it sells*.[102]

Yet, this does not mean that migration literature is not useful to social scientists. Just as social constructivism discourages researchers from seeking objective 'truths', so too can migration literature be helpful for thinking beyond the idea of authenticity and 'truth' to consider what can be revealed by the way these texts use literary forms and techniques. Why might a text present its narrative in a non-linear format? How might that shift the emphasis on particular events? Literature is categorisable into a range of specific forms and genres; e.g. novels, plays, poetry, literary fiction, genre fiction, memoir. Literary critics often consider migration literature in relation to these categories, focusing on how forms and genre is used, as well as where it is broken. Anderson, discussing Vlasta's monograph, suggests "*the topic of migration serves as an innovative element that motivates not only language and plot, but also structural elements within the texts*".[103] Formal aspects of literary texts can be affective; Stan argues that a lack of narrative closure challenges readers to "*to dwell in discomfort*".[104] The study of migration literature is as much about its form and production as its content.

### Migration Literature: New Areas

As the scholarship above attests, migration literature is not a new area of study or literary production. Yet, there have been some shifts in literary production that are less well-documented in the scholarship above.

Graphic novels have begun to garner attention beyond specialist publications for their increasing engagement with themes of migration. There are multiple recent examples of graphic novels taking migration as a central theme, for instance *Freedom Hospital: A Syrian Story* (2017) *Illegal* (2018), *The Strange* (2018), and *Alpha: Abidjan to Paris* (2018).[105] Shaun Tan's *The Arrival* (2006), a graphic novel

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100 King, Connell, and White, p. xii.
101 Gallien, 'Forcing Displacement', p. 743.
102 White, pp. 9, 5.
103 Anderson, pp. 484–85.
104 Stan, p. 804.
105 Eoin Colfer, Andrew Donkin, and Giovanni Rigano, *Illegal* (Sourcebooks Jabberwocky, 2018); Jérôme Ruillier, *The Strange*, trans. by Helge Dascher (Drawn and Quarterly, 2018); Hamid Sulaiman, *Freedom Hospital: A Syrian Story* (Northampton, Massachusetts: Olive Branch Press,

containing no narrative or dialogue, has been widely studied as an attempt to present a universal migration story that – through the lack of intelligible language, vague sense of location – places the reader and protagonist in the same position.[106] Many of the recent examples cited above seems to seek to do the same – to present an accessible, universal story – perhaps in order to enhance societal empathy. The frequent depiction of characters as animals in these stories is a sign of this.

A second area which has not yet been studied by literary scholars is the digital. As I outlined above, King, Connell and White sketched "*an 'evolution' in forms of migrant literature*", from fragmented 'pre-literatures' to literary fiction. I would suggest that digital forms – by which I mean YouTube videos, Instagram posts, Tweets, as well as website content – form a next stage in this evolution – perhaps, 'post-literatures' – which echoes, in its fragmentation, the bricolage of 'pre-literatures'. Focusing on these digital literary forms makes visible new lines of influence and dissemination. Take, for example, Nayyirah Waheed: "*perhaps the most famous poet on Instagram*".[107] Waheed is known for her short, minimalist verse, some of which deals with migration directly. For example,

> you broke the ocean in
> half to be here.
> only to meet nothing that wants you.
>
> -    immigrant[108]

And,

> where
> you are.
> is not
> who
> you are.
> -    circumstances[109]

Waheed's poems have reached a wide audience – including celebrities – far and in excess of that usually assumed to read migration literature. The global dissemination that is possible with digital forms introduces new perspectives on national literatures and readerships; their digital creation and

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2017); Bessora and Barroux, *Alpha: Abidjan to Paris*, trans. by Sarah Ardizzone (New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2018).

[106] Giorgio Busi Rizzi, 'Immigrant Song: Nostalgic Tensions in Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*', *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 2020, 1–20 (p. 2) <https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2020.1735464>. See also Rüdiger Singer, 'Cute Monsters and Early Birds: Foreignness in Graphic Novels on Migration by Shaun Tan and Paula Bulling', *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 11.1 (2020), 74–95 <https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2019.1624270>.

[107] Melissa Henderson, 'The Best Poems From Instagram's Favorite Nayyirah Waheed', *JetMag.Com*, 2017 <https://www.jetmag.com/life/best-poems-instagrams-favorite-nayyirah-waheed/> [accessed 19 June 2020].

[108] Nayyirah Waheed, *Salt.* (San Bernardino, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), p. 5.

[109] Waheed, p. 29.

transmission opens up a new category of migration literature which requires new modes of analysis able to articulate an appropriately global perspective. This area has had, thus far, relatively little input from the humanities and which would richly reward investigation.

Finally, I will spend some time outlining the impact of migration on popular and genre texts. Since the mid-2000s, there has been a significant growth in popular and genre fiction texts that discuss migration. My own research has focused on the growing number and diversity of popular and genre texts created by Muslim women, a significant number of which deal with topics of migration, refugees, asylum-seeking, immigration, diaspora, race and gender. Scholarship on migration literature has tended to focus on high-brow, literary fiction – as Baily and Collyer say, distinguishing literature from music, *"literature is produced by a tiny elite minority, and only read by relatively few individuals"*[110] – but this is not always true for popular and genre literature. A closer consideration of popular and genre examples of migration literature may be of interest to social scientists for two reasons. First, popular fiction's association with mass culture and intention to appeal to the widest possible audience makes it is effective at capturing and disseminating mainstream discourse, whether overt or more insidious. As Bernice Murphy articulates in her helpful definition, popular fiction is ephemeral, and reflects contemporary social anxieties and events including, as I outline below, migration.[111] Incorporating popular and genre literature into research alongside interviews is a good way to capture these less visible or easy-to-articulate discourses around migration.

Second, popular fiction scholarship has consistently examined aspects of production, readership, and marketing, all of which have been under-theorised by critics of migration literature, who tend to focus on the texts' content rather than its paratext. This area could be of interest to sociologists similarly concerned with contextual matters. White observes disciplinary differences when it comes to reading a text. He says that social scientists are more concerned with the position and credentials of the author, whereas literary scholars focus on interpretation of the text.[112] This is where genre fiction studies has an advantage over literary fiction, as it has been consistently interested in the means of production and the sociology of literature.[113]  A new approach to studying popular fiction – the genre worlds approach –may be helpful as a way to connect the two ways of reading a text.

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[110] John Baily and Dr Michael Collyer, 'Introduction: Music and Migration', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32.2 (2006), 167–82 (p. 168) <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830500487266>.
[111] Bernice M. Murphy, *Key Concepts in Contemporary Popular Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 8 <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bham/detail.action?docID=5010928> [accessed 23 June 2020].
[112] White, p. 9.
[113] Lisa Fletcher, Beth Driscoll, and Kim Wilkins, 'Genre Worlds and Popular Fiction: The Case of Twenty-First-Century Australian Romance', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 51.4 (2018), 997–1015 <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12706>.

Some popular genre texts deal with migration directly. For example, Ausma Zehanat Khan's detective novel *A Dangerous Crossing* (2018) takes place in and around European refugee camps in Greece and Italy and focuses its story around the experiences of Syrian refugees. With an author's note and recommended reading, Khan's novel is clearly intended to introduce the sizeable genre audience – crime fiction is the most popular fictional genre in many literary markets – to the so-called 'Syrian refugee crisis'. Lengthy descriptions of conflict in Syria are presented through the perspective of key protagonists – usually either Sergeant Rachel Getty, a white Canadian woman, or Inspector Esa Khattak, her Muslim Canadian boss – combining a consideration of public discourse around migration with character development. The reader is thus encouraged to reflect on their own views through identification with the protagonists: the reader learns and develops as the characters do. For example, on a visit to Lesvos, Greece, Rachel describes the work of the "*Hellenic Rescue Team … during the crisis*".[114] A male teenager, Ali, himself a refugee from Syria, overhears, and responds, coldly: "*You call it a crisis?*", to which Khattak explains: "*Where we're from, this is how the conflict has been framed … It's accurate as far as it goes, which is not far enough, I know.*"[115] Ali "*put his long head in his hands, his fingers buried in the curls: 'I find it hard to think of myself as the victim of a crisis. I feel like a person – do you think the war erased that?'*".[116] Later, Ali intervenes in a discussion between Rachel and Esa about the Syrian conflict, stating:

> Am I allowed to speak? I know my country better than you do. Better than Interpol, better than whatever it is you represent, Inspector… You all do it. The UN, the volunteers, the border agents, people on the news. You make choices that affect us, you decides what our lives will be, you decide what we should think about those choices.[117]

Here, the text is modelling a typical response that might be heard in western public discourse and, through the voices of key characters, pointing to the limitations of the rhetoric.

Other texts approach the topic more obliquely, foregrounding genre tropes to explore themes of migration and identity. G. Willow Wilson's *Alif the Unseen* (2012), is a fantasy novel set in a fictional Gulf city. It presents the semi-autobiographical figure of 'the convert' and her struggle to fit in; the convert points out that despite her efforts to fit in – "*dress[ing] respectfully, learn[ing] the language, follow[ing] all the insane rules … even adopt[ing] your religion*"[118], she will "*always be foreign.*"[119] The genre tropes of the fantasy text emphasise these "*anxieties of identity and displacement*"[120]. The convert travels with Alif, the protagonist, and Vikram, a djinn, to the Immovable Alley – a parallel

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[114] Ausma Zehanat Khan, *A Dangerous Crossing* (St. Martin's Press, 2018), p. 155.
[115] Khan, p. 155.
[116] Khan, p. 155.
[117] Khan, pp. 209–10.
[118] G. Willow Wilson, *Alif the Unseen* (London: Corvus, 2012), p. 151.
[119] Wilson, p. 151.
[120] Wilson, p. 153.

world reached via a portal. In fantasy and science fiction, portals are often protected in some way: "*to pass through a portal is likely to pass some kind of test, to gain a new level of understanding of power, to demonstrate oneself as a chosen one, whether through birth or actions or some other merit*".[121] While Alif, who was born in the city, is able to pass through the portal and clearly discern what is on the other side, the convert "*kept swaying back and forth as though falling asleep and catching herself each time she dozed off*."[122] The explanation given is that *"'She's an American' … 'Half in, half out*."[123] The key to this portal, therefore, is related to identity. *Alif the Unseen* uses fantasy tropes to subtly explore questions of borders, identity, and authenticity.

### Conclusion

So, what can literature tell us about migration? For Woolley, migration literature strikes a balance between "*migration as a 'poetics of relocation'*", drawing on Bhabha, "*and the materiality of displacement, statelessness and border crossing.*"[124] In the examples of migration literature she analyses, "*refugees and asylum seekers are not metaphors for rootlessness, but socially situated subjects.*"[125] Equally, while sociological work on migration is often interested in generalizable, literature is more interested in isolating individual voices and experience. Wooley writes "*[t]o represent in this context is also to help shape a more equitable future for those represented.*"[126] "*Is the function of refugee poetics to raise awareness about the conditions of life for those displaced? Can literature prevent future wars from happening?*".[127] Can migration literature change the world? Woolley argues for the potential power of migration literature, noting "*narrative fiction's capacity to enact change for the social subjects*" it describes.[128] Gallien, too, sees "*refugee literature, and art as forms of poetic and political intervention*".[129] Yet, Viet Than Nguyen offers a reminder that literature can only do so much.

Literature changes the world of readers and writers, but literature does not change the world until people get out of their chairs, go out in the world, and do something to transform the conditions of which the literature speaks. … True justice is creating a world of social, economic, cultural, and political opportunities that would allow all these voiceless to tell their stories and be heard, rather than be

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[121] 'Portals', *The Encylopedia of Science Fiction* <http://sf-encyclopedia.uk/fe.php?nm=portals> [accessed 19 June 2020].
[122] Wilson, p. 157.
[123] Wilson, p. 157.
[124] Woolley, p. 4.
[125] Woolley, p. 4.
[126] Woolley, p. 25.
[127] Gallien, '"Refugee Literature"', p. 722.
[128] Woolley, p. 22.
[129] Gallien, '"Refugee Literature"', p. 723.

dependent on a writer or a representative of some kind.[130]

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[130] Viet Thanh Nguyen, 'Introduction', *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*, ed. by Viet Thanh Nguyen, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2018), p. 20; also cited in Stan, pp. 806–7.

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