

Narratives of the New Diasporas: A Theoretical Approach

Abstract

This introduction offers a theoretical and thematic overview of Border Studies and Diaspora Theory to contextualize the way in which contemporary fictions of migration and exile in the 21st century has reinterpreted classic paradigms anew. Literature has played a paramount role in illustrating many of the challenges faced when attempting to narrate the experience of migration. This role is the motivation for this Special Issue as it examines the literary mechanisms employed to engage with current social, economic, and political issues and how discourses on migration and exile contest perspectives on concepts such as ‘mobility’ or ‘space’. Literature on migration, Border Studies and Diaspora Theory have as their point of departure to explore the motivations and/or consequences of human movement, be it within conflict or comfort zones. Thus, after contextualizing key concepts such as ‘the Black Atlantic’, ‘diaspora space’, ‘third scenario’, ‘necropolitics’ or ‘gore capitalism’, this introduction will focus on the different theoretical approaches developed by the authors who have contributed to this Special Issue. These will be presented in order to illustrate the evolution of academic research around Diaspora Studies. The new avenues of research that 21st-century migration has fostered bear witness to the complex and intricate phenomenon that human mobility implies. This introduction includes a detailed description of the contents of this Special Issue to lay the groundwork for the analyses of texts presented later.

KEYWORDS

Migration; border; diaspora; exile; human mobility; transterritorialization; 21st-century literature

As critical approaches to literatures depicting migration and diaspora become more fluid, we are at a turning point where it seems timely to develop new and innovative ways to approach contemporary literatures that depict exile, estrangement, second or third generation belonging, among others. The essays contained in this Special Issue take up the challenge of subverting and reappropriating terminology in order to expand the reach of what is known as diasporic or migratory. In the midst of the greatest migratory wave in Europe in the last eighty years, this Special Issue proves itself not only thought-provoking but also useful to our field. By March 6th 2022, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees indicated that the number of Ukrainians fleeing the war that started on 24 February was over 1.5 million. The numbers seem to be increasing daily. This migration wave is the largest to take place within Europe since the end of the World War II. In between the great display of solidarity from neighboring countries such as Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania, there have been reports of citizens who have been denied entry to some countries based on their race (Bejan & Bogovic, 2022: online). This means that in the middle of one of the greatest humanitarian crises in Europe in the last century, some migrants/refugees matter more than others, and racial profiling keeps being reproduced. There will be time for further analysis on what is taking place in Ukraine, yet we write this article with a heavy heart. At the same time, we realize that research on migration literature is extremely relevant and timely to disseminate.

The current century is one of migrations. Alice Favaro (2020) estimates that there are 258 million migrants worldwide, an eye-opening indication of the seismic impact that diasporic movements have had on our societies. Since the beginning of the 21st century, especially since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, interdisciplinary contributions to Border Studies have increased exponentially from within the academia (Berg & van Houtum, 2004; Brunet-Jailly, 2004; Kolossov, 2005; Nicol & Townsend-Gault, 2005; Ganster & Lorey, 2005; and Newman 2006a and 2006b, to name but some). The renaissance of Border Studies is largely due to the changes

in global border policies that have been implemented over the last decades in different parts of the world. David Newman is one of these scholars who believe in the importance of implementing an interdisciplinary approach to Border Studies to go beyond the idea of physical frontiers since, according to him,

[w]e live in a world of borders which give order to our lives. We discovered that these borders are not confined to the realm of inter-state divisions, nor do they have to be physical and geographical constructions. Many of the borders which order our lives are invisible to the human eye but they nevertheless impact strongly on our daily life practices. They determine the extent to which we are included, or excluded, from membership in groups, they reflect the existence of inter-group and inter-societal difference with the 'us' and the 'here' being located inside the border while the 'other' and the 'there' is everything beyond the border (2006a, p. 172)

Clearly, physical and imaginary borders have strong repercussions over migrant communities and individuals today. The illusion of globalization without borders as a widespread idea that appeared by the end of the 20th century was one mostly centered on free flow of economic assets. As Barbara Korte and Laura Lojo-Rodríguez point out, “even where there are no physical walls, there is often separation in our minds” (2019, p. 3). In a humane sense, this context has given place to an unparalleled hardening of physical borders at an age when capital can move without further ado, but not so people. This is stated by Fabian Georgi, who postulates the term ‘Fortress Capitalism’ to refer to the existing dichotomy between migratory movements and current border policies, and which he defines as “the severely restrictive and violent elements of today’s migration and border regimes as well as a future scenario in which these elements are massively expanded” (2019, p.572). This is not the only term that has appeared in recent years since human mobility is increasingly common due to political instability, climate change, work opportunities, abject poverty, and many other reasons. Apart from the massive migration taking place in the Ukraine at the moment, there are thousands of Hongkongers making their way out of the Chinese Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong. Be it via the British National Overseas scheme, or applying for visas in Canada or Australia mostly, they seem to be leaving to never come back. The economic and social crises in Haiti and Venezuela have also created migration waves into other Latin American countries, being Chile an attractive destination, although facing backlash due to its informality. In addition to this, it is worth remembering the shocking Windrush scandal in the UK, when the Home Office sent citizens, who had lived and worked in the British Isles for more than fifty years, back to Jamaica; or the controversial case of the deportation of underage migrants from the Spanish cities of Ceuta and Melilla, on the north of the African continent, back to Morocco.

Undoubtedly, migration has always been a global phenomenon and can be traced back to the earliest nomadic clans at the dawn of human history. People have emigrated for many centuries and from many countries or settlements. Migration can take different shapes and has varied motivations. It has meant moving from rural to urban areas, from one continent to another and from conflict to comfort zones. Yet, the concern about the last few decades remains at the center of new conceptualizations and approaches to diasporic contexts. These are possibly some of the main reasons why Diaspora Studies have become more and more popular in present-day scholarship. Academic works produced from the most diverse disciplines explore the implications of human movement, transit, transterritorialization and displacement, among other issues. As the backbone of this Special Issue, James Procter’s 2007 definition of ‘diaspora’ as a geographical phenomenon and as a theoretical concept that stands for the physical movement of people from one area to another and for a particular way of understanding world order and cultural representations remains as pertinent as ever. In the last decades, different avenues of research regarding migration and exile have indeed challenged

preconceived notions of place and space, referring to “the doubled relationship or dual loyalty that migrants, exiles, and refugees have to place – their connections to the space they currently occupy and their continuing involvement with ‘back home’” (Lavie & Swedenburgh, 1996, p. 14). Contemporary scholarship has tried to examine the complex and intricate motivations and consequences of human movement across history. Theories around the ‘Black Atlantic’ (Gilroy, 1993), that of ‘diaspora spaces’ (Brah, 1996), or the ‘third scenario’ (Bromley, 2000), among others, fostered by migratory movements, are some of the widely known concepts that have now opened eye-opening approaches to transnationalism, mobility and space. For example, Paul Gilroy’s historical approach to the transatlantic slave trade was paramount to reconsider the so-called Middle Passage, that is, the practice of forcibly transporting Africans to the Caribbean and other locations on the American west coast. An approximate number of 12 million people were subject to this inhuman practice that lasted from the 16th to the 19th century. As a result, African cultures have enriched Western or Eurocentric traditions during centuries as a result of what Gilroy (1993) refers to as the double-consciousness of Africans in the diaspora. Similarly, Avtar Brah’s 1996 concept of ‘diaspora space’ has also been the catalyst for new avenues of research in the last few decades. For Brah, the concept of ‘diaspora space’ not only refers to the conceptual category that migrants inhabit together with the natives of a given host country, but also to the post-colonial sense of place of our times as the result of different imperialist processes. That is, it is a concept that varies from one place to another and from one historical period to the next. Both Gilroy and Brah were fundamental for new postulations such as Roger Bromley’s ‘Third Scenario’ (2000), an expression used to refer to what he conceptualizes as the ‘border metaphors’ implied within migration in order to make reference to the in-between zones in which migrants are located, both political and geographically. For Bromley, each of these narratives are “involved in a process of reclaiming, of travelling back to an endlessly receding origin or identity, a point ultimately of no return, which is seen as diacritical and strategic” (2000, p. 6). This third scenario is, thus, a non-binary space “of reflection and its struggle in the politics of location”, that is, “the inter-cultural site of borderline writings” (6).

Borders, be they physical or imaginary, are in crisis as they keep being reinforced while individuals and entire communities try to cross them daily. Conflict zones such as the Mexican-US border or the Mediterranean Sea illustrate the dangers some are ready to take to reach their sought destination. Other comfort zones such as the European Union or the Commonwealth add different migratory experiences to this complex phenomenon. It is at these physical and imaginary borders that “neo-liberal humanitarian policy ‘rhetoric’ and the violent ‘reality’ of many ‘irregular [and regular] migrants’ embodied experiences of their encounter with attempts to police their mobility” (Vaughan-Williams, 2017, p. 3, emphasis in the original). The idiosyncrasy of migratory and asylum-seeking regulations, together with ex/inclusive political discourses, increase the perceived intricacy of 21st century diasporic movements. Bordering practices have become part of our daily life as they always imply “a certain degree of expulsion from [...] territorial, political, juridical, or economic status” (Nail, 2015, p.2). We have learnt to live with the contradictory images that characterize our geopolitical reality. Achille Mbembe’s notions of ‘necropolitics’ (2019) or Sayak Valencia’s postulations around ‘gore capitalism’ (2010) juxtapose politically correct discourses on border security and migration management. At this respect, while Mbembe relies on Agamben’s idea of the ‘state of exception’ (2005) to define how death operates as a political tool in certain contexts, such as during colonialism or the Third Reich, Valencia focuses on the way in which violence seems to impregnate economic, political, social and symbolic practices. Thus, violence against migrants or migrant communities, according to Mbembe, has been historically legitimized for certain purposes, above all for imperialist and capitalist ones. Life and death, hence, become commodified as a result of the extreme reification of human experience, including human

mobility. In addition to this, gore capitalism, as understood by Valencia, operates in a more visible manner in conflict and/or border zones where brutal violence, be it physical and psychological, is practiced on a daily basis with the consent, or even the support, of official institutions. Let's consider as an illustration of these practices the 'frozen' camps of Central American migrants arriving to the US border or the practice of separating Central American migrant children from their mothers. The aforementioned concepts and research avenues cross-fertilize one another as an illustration of how conflictive human movement can be, especially when approaching such phenomena from a theoretical perspective.

Indeed, literature bears witness to some of these processes while discussing the impact of migration in contemporary societies. This has already been stated by Korte and Lojo-Rodríguez, who consider that "border studies maintains that even the apparently most natural borders [...] are essentially cultural" (2019, p.4). The *Contemporary Fictions of Migration and Exile: Writing Diaspora in the 21st Century* Special Issue will interrogate classic concepts such as 'movement', and 'dislocation' (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1989) and the way in which they can be interpreted today through literature. This interrogation will be done by analyzing a corpus of narratives written in English that fluctuate across different literary traditions, also fostering the mobility of imaginary boundaries around place and space. Among the arts, literature has played a paramount role when illustrating many of the characteristics that shape migratory movements, depending on the destination sought, the circumstances that force them, and the links maintained with the country of origin. This Special Issue, thus, offers an innovative approach to new literary techniques, styles, aesthetics, voices and themes that shed light on the critical issues that contemporary migrations represent for society at the dawn of the 21st century. Nevertheless, some of the 'pull' and 'push' factors pointed out by Gordon K. Lewis back in 1990 still can be identified when approaching migration in this new century. Lewis focuses on analyzing the Caribbean diaspora considering poverty, unemployment and political instability as the main 'push' causes for migration, and the improvement in the means of transport, the wish to have access to a Western education or the fulfilment of a better life as the main 'pull' factors. This distinction is not exclusive of Caribbean migration, as 'push' and 'pull' factors complement each other when approaching other migratory experiences. New avenues of enquiry have fostered ground-breaking research on world literatures that have sparked debates on many issues as the whole world is now "inhabited and constantly reworked by different actors at different times" (Sheringham, 2010, p. 61). Migration and Border Studies have favored the appearance of new terms such as 'global Apartheid' (Golash-Boza, 2015), 'bordered capitalism' (Chang, 2017), 'national chauvinism' (Bieber, 2018) or 'poetics of expulsion' (Miranda-Barreiro, 2022) that are postulated to try to explain the new dynamics of our times. The dichotomy between migratory fluxes and border-control policies also resonates loudly in contemporary literature. Whether forced or voluntary, migration is the focal point of an entire wave of literary output that explores the motivations behind, and the experiences during, this mobilization of individuals and communities across countries or continents.

This Special Issue will ask questions about how intra- and/or trans-national migratory movements inspire contemporary literary production and of the extent to which contemporary migratory fictions challenge outdated paradigms. This is accomplished as literature attempts at mirroring some of the most immediate challenges that contemporary society has to face as migration has turned 'glocal' (Robertson, 2003), making here reference to an economic term that is now applied to literary studies to signify the importance of both 'global' and 'local' conditionings that revolve around society. As Haitian-American award-winning author Edwidge Danticat points out, literature on migration is necessary since "[o]ne of the most distressing aspects of migration, for both adults and children, is how invisible the migrant can become [as] they become slowly erased and their voices become muffled or go unheard" (2019, p. xii). To introduce this Special Issue, we opt for the use of the expression 'contemporary

fictions of migration and exile' to avoid the conceptual controversy around the concepts of 'migration literature', which makes reference to the fictions that revolve around migration be they written by migrant or by non-migrant authors, and that of 'migrant literature', which necessarily has a more personal dimension since it makes reference to the fictions written by migrant authors be they particularly focused on their migratory or not (Hoerder, 1996; Burge, 2020). Literary production around human mobility has now gone beyond restrictive conceptual borders. Migrants, as the main protagonists of these texts, usually hold a contradictory nature within the narration, which is a consequence of the differential experience of globalization, as well as the continuing restrictive measures taken at the level of the nation-state as they have significant implications for forced migration and are examined in varying ways (Woolley, 2014, p. 6). Although Agnes Woolley limits her approach to literature on human mobility to contemporary asylum narratives, most of her theoretical background can be applied to other representational forms of diasporic cultural fictions such as the ones that motivate this Special Issue.

Accordingly, this Special Issue aims at elucidating the mechanisms through which fiction gives voice to contemporary experiences of migration and exile—hand in hand with the horrifying experiences being suffered in the Ukraine, Syria and many other places at the time we write this introduction. The articles that shape this Special Issue examine the literary techniques employed to engage with current social, economic, and political issues. We intend to reflect on how world literatures represent contemporary migratory movements across exclusionary borders, be they physical or metaphorical. Thus, this Special Issue presses the need to revisit the conventional paradigms surrounding Diaspora Studies to engage with and expand upon innovative migratory research. Contemporary fictions of migration and exile have an ambivalent relationship with the stories it represents. Understanding these broadly, border-crossing experiences, legal and illegal migration, asylum-seeking, or even exile might inspire fiction, among other artistic manifestations. The following articles present some outstanding examples of thought-provoking literary criticism that explores migratory literature written in English from key thematic perspectives. Among these, we find diasporic experience(s), borders, internationalization, memorialization, and how space—inclusive of cities—is articulated. Hence, this Special Issue intends to reconsider how paradigms around migration and Diaspora Studies have evolved in recent years, seeking to engage with and expand upon current research avenues in the rich and multifaceted body of literary criticism on migration. More than simply considering migration as a 'hot topic' in literary studies, we seek to incorporate new readings that reveal the tensions between theory and praxis in literary analysis, which will help to pave the way for future studies and to envision a more encompassing and flexible approach to migration in literature, especially narratives.

This Special Issue contains six essays that approach migratory and diasporic literature from different areas of the world. Be it from Turtle Island—current Canada, London, The United States, Asia, Bosnia, and certain unidentified places, these literary texts suggest that these processes can occur anywhere in our planet. Even though the research corpus is varied, all authors share a keen interest in issues of social justice, respect for excluded communities, and have contributed with readings that are both daring and theoretically rich.

In the first article of this collection, Miasol Eguíbar-Holgado delves into novels written by indigenous authors Thomas King, Cherie Dimaline and Waubgeshig Rice. With their characters dwell on a dystopian Turtle Island (Canada), Eguíbar-Holgado's reading is anchored on Neal MacLeod's twofold approaches to indigenous displacement, understood as spatial and ideological diaspora. The texts analyzed posit questions on futures marked by environmental crises and devastation their ultimate outcome. For Eguíbar-Holgado, the literature selected explored challenges old-fashioned and reductionist views on indigenous peoples as being static and futureless. On the contrary, once the apocalypse established in each narrative finishes with

the world as it is known, there is migration. This is a process understood as a diasporic movement enacted by those who are native to Turtle Island, yet strangers in their own colonized lands. From an epistemological standpoint, one of the main contributions of this article is the need to recognize the shift from Western or Eurocentric knowledge to those of indigenous origin which have in the past been neglected or obscured and are now exalted and recognized as necessary for survival within a post-apocalyptic scenario in the novels selected. Eguíbar-Holgado's proposal is bold and timely, as diaspora can be an in-land process as has been endured by the First Nations in the Americas as a whole for centuries.

Silvia Pellicer-Ortín's article is set in Britain but explores issues of metamemory in the works of British-Jewish women authors. This article sheds light on the importance of examining literature by authors that have also struggled to find a space in the representation of memory within the Jewish diaspora. This study is theoretically anchored in Bigit Neumann's postulations around 'fictions of metamemory' and Marianne Hirsch's celebrated concept of 'postmemory'. The corpus selected includes narratives by Lisa Appignanesi, Linda Grant, and Zina Rohan. Jewishness, for Pellicer-Ortín, is marked by identity issues, migration, belonging, and generational bonds. A gendered perspective considering Jewish women's writing is necessary and uncovers an ever-growing corpus of literary works that have not received much attention from critics until recently. This article's contribution to current discussions of Diaspora and Memory studies lies on the fact that Pellicer-Ortín's readings advance the establishment a new research avenue through her proposal that her corpus of novels comprise what she establishes as 'the metamemory novel'. By delving into the intricacies of specific narrative techniques utilized in the novels selected, and how it is women characters that take the role of meta-memorialists, Pellicer-Ortín offers current scholarship a new perspective that can be considered as the theoretical scaffolding of subsequent studies of British Jewish women's writing.

The idea of drawing on collective identity is deepened in the article by Anna Savitskaya who studied Guy Gunaratne's *In Our Mad and Furious City* (2018). This reading relies in two key concepts: first, Vamik Volkan's psychoanalytical approaches to parent-children memory transmission; and second, Marianne Hirsch's conceptualization of epi-memory as one directly linked to the transgenerational transmission of trauma. Via an analysis that focuses on a set of socially excluded characters from the novel, set in contemporary London, Savitskaya explores issues of self and belonging in novel that exposes the city's issues with diversity. The analysis suggests that these conflicts are not only social or economic but of an ethno-cultural nature and they affect migrants and their direct descendants who sometimes become unwelcome 'locals' in the city. In this context, the article delves into the different narrative mechanisms employed in Gunaratne's novel that depict transgenerational conflict within migrant families, but also where trauma seems inherited and augmented in a more contemporary context. Savitskaya's reading emphasises a perennial cultural divide that characterizes the English capital that is not only between white 'local' Londoners and second or third generation migrants. Ultimately, Savitskaya's analysis is focused on how transgenerational transmission of trauma alienates certain characters in Gunaratne's novel.

The following article, by Stefano Bellin, delves into Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) and proposes an ambitious approach to the novel. For Bellin, the novel does not only unfold itself as an example of literature that artfully depicts international migration, but it also calls for readers' participation as in being empathetic and putting themselves in the shoes of those who suffer injustice. His claim is that readers should develop 'disorienting empathy', which follows on Ian William's 'disorientation', and Shameem Black's idea that borders are also symbolic and cultural. Hamid's novel is structured and narrated in such a way that, for Bellin, it encourages it readers to become involved, especially as an exercise that generates awareness for readers who may otherwise not fathom the migratory experience and the challenges of

border-crossing. At the same time, such a reading would also resonate in the lives of those who live in societies that impose borders and hostile migration rules against those they are connecting with through the novel. By fostering solidarity through the act of reading Hamid's text, Bellin's proposal reaches beyond the hermeneutic layer of this act, as white privileged readers could potentially generate a new dialogue, one that looks towards social borders in order to question them. For Bellin, relying on empathy is a very powerful way for people who have not suffered racialized experiences to connect with them and help reshape the world with fairer perspectives.

Also drawing on the existence of many types of borders and the fluid nature of diaspora, Antje M. Rauwerda examines Chang-rae Lee's *My Year Abroad* (2021) as a novel that escapes categorizations due to its incredibly intricate intercultural/transnational connections. For Rauwerda, Lee's text demonstrates that academic terminology is not able to fully define identity, which is full of heterogeneous elements that prevent any form of amalgamated monolithic conceptualization. Lee's satirical tone seems to indicate that the novel is also built with the purpose of denouncing the practice of making taxonomies up when it comes to identity or belonging. Rauwerda follows closely on Steven Vertovec's transnationality and the concept of 'Third Culture Kids' by Pollock, Van Reken and Pollock. The novel's protagonist, a young Asian-American, goes through the experience of spending time in Asia as part of their studies, which, in a way, becomes a process of understanding himself and others, and their place in a world of labels. The main character becomes a catalyst of East/West cultures and divides, and he can accommodate to being 'Asian' while in the US or being 'American' while in Asia—in a gesture reminiscent of Edward Said. From Rauwerda's reading it is possible to understand that The US becomes a cauldron that incorporates elements of many different cultures. This richness is represented by different characters in the text, reinforcing the idea that the US is a country of migrants.

Identity in the US is further explored by Rubén Peinado Abarrio through his study of Aleksandar Hemon's works. Peinado Abarrio's theoretical proposal is kick started by Hemon's self-definition as a diasporic writer; therefore, this article delves into how Hemonian characters are depicted in terms of their displacement. The corpus chosen proves that Hemon's displacement is a constant feature in his literature, and Peinado Abarrio approaches it through Rosi Braidotti's posthuman nomadic subject, and Nicolas Bourriaud's radicant subject. Building on long-gone countries such as Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia, for example, Hemon articulates characters that, for Peinado Abarrio, understand themselves as 'complicated', that is, as being outside national or ethnic labelling. This situation makes Hemonian characters have a flexible citizenship and they merge with the city they inhabit. Here Peinado Abarrio develops an attractive reading as the city itself is a traumatic place. This implies that characters also inherit and bear the 'traumascapes', as theorized by Maria Tumarkin, that haunt different cities, particularly Sarajevo. Hemon expands the experience of the city to the US and Chicago is the place where a recently arrived Bosnian cannot relate to his collective memory, and as a city that may alienate the subject, generating another level of displacement. Despite this, Peinado Abarrio asserts that the urban wandering of the Hemonian character allows the development of a certain type of 'placement' that can be perceived both physically and symbolically in the corpus selected.

It is clear, from all the contributions to this Special Issue, that we are at a moment in which there is a need for new readings and approaches to literature dealing with borders, migration, belonging, displacement, and identity. Despite dealing novels set in different areas of the world, these articles can engage in fruitful dialogue with each other. Be it from a Memory Studies perspective or basing their texts and characters in somewhat similar societies or loci, each article here presents a pathway into new approaches to diasporic and migration literature that, every so often, looks for an update.

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