

Mandy Beck, Claudia Gualtieri, Roberto Pedretti, Cecile Sandten (eds.)

## Narrating Flight and Asylum

Evelyne Keitel, Cecile Sandten (Eds.)

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# **Narrating Flight and Asylum**

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## Introduction: Narrating Flight and Asylum

*Mandy Beck, Claudia Gualtieri, Roberto Pedretti and Cecile Sandten*

Over the past several decades, migration, displacement and asylum-seeking seem to have become constitutive elements of contemporary conjuncture, generating conditions that are often described as "crises" (New Keywords Collective 2015; Boletsi et al. 2021; *Crisis and Critique* 2020). Since the beginning of what has commonly been referred to as the refugee crisis of 2015, there has been discussion within political, media and online social contexts about European nation-states closing their borders to asylum seekers and refugees – a discussion often accompanied by racism, xenophobia and profound fears. To help mitigate the negative effects of these discussions, the essays in this volume, in in-depth analyses of literary and media texts, political and legal contexts, and museum work, focus on the question of how flight and asylum-seeking are narrated, exploring opportunities for political intervention and ethical commitment within a European, and specifically Italian-German, framework. More precisely, the essays collected in this volume originated during the third DAAD conference, held online in November 2020, entitled "Crisis, Risks and New Regionalisms in Europe: Narrating Flight and Asylum," a collaborative conference convened by the Chair of English Literatures at Chemnitz University of Technology and the Chair of Anglophone Cultures and Literatures, Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Theory at the University of Milan.

The aim of the event was to contravene the more recent, rather challenging discourses surrounding flight, asylum-seeking and refugeeism promulgated by the media, politicians and the public within the framework of the refugee crisis. These discourses had begun to gain momentum in the previous decade and have been on the rise again as a result of the Russian war on Ukraine. The conference, as well as the present volume, make a strong plea for including a discussion of Europe within the domains of such disciplines as Cultural, Postcolonial and Literary Studies, on the grounds that Postcolonial and Cultural Studies approaches and methods can be effectively applied to current social, cultural and political problems as well as contemporary crises in Europe. Moreover – at least in Cultural and Postcolonial Studies circles – it is important that a critical reading of Europe's colonial past and neo-imperial and neo-liberal world order be implemented.

The image of the refugee and asylee, who more often than not has been portrayed through a public and popular media discourse of negativity, has become the central focus of the theoretical reflections and political engagement of Critical Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies, as attested to by a number of recent studies and collections (cf. Herd/Pincus 2021; Sandten 2022, 2020a, 2020b). News

reporting on the current refugee situation (e.g. Moria; Lampedusa) revolves around such terms as 'crisis,' 'border,' 'border control' or 'European migration pact.' By focussing on the narrative aspects of refugeeism, flight and asylum-seeking, which the conference, and by extension, the papers collected in this volume set out to do, it is possible to critically address both the experiences and theories advanced by scholars, philosophers and refugees (cf. Herd/Pincus 2016, 2017, 2019, 2021). With this volume, *Narrating Flight and Asylum*, our aim is to focus on the issues of 'making voices heard' and 'making people on the margins seen' in a Europe where it is possible to observe what might be called "a war on immigration" (Bromley 2012: 105). The latter implies that the influx of refugees has made the building of walls and fences necessary so that national borders can be strictly controlled in order to keep out those who do not possess the 'right' citizenship, regardless of whether, as refugees, they would have a right to apply for asylum (cf. also Herd in this volume).

In *The Principle of Hope* (1995; German: *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1938-47), Ernst Bloch addresses the necessity of perceiving art and literature as key media for helping to *imagine* a different world. Bloch also envisions *Heimat*, the homeland, in the sense of an illusion of home. Home, he writes, is something that everyone has but which they have never experienced or known (cf. Bloch 1995: 204). In this context, it is perhaps a utopian view of *Heimat* that determines the true content of a work of art (cf. *ibid.*: 210-11). For Bloch, therefore, *Heimat* seems to always lie beyond borders (cf. *ibid.*: 205). Accordingly, the question of what the world would look like without borders becomes apparent.

Today, there are more than 77 border walls or fences around the world, fences that are specifically designed to keep out refugees (cf. Hjelmgaard 2022). Thus, the question must be asked: What is a border? One of the many answers might be that a border is not an object, but an ideological practice, both the consequence and producer of power relationships (cf. Mezzadra/Neilson 2013).

A border does not restrictively aid in demarcating a nation-state, but in its manifold appearances contributes to building a new concept of citizenship based, on the one hand, on the notion of a strengthened national identity and, on the other, on a political agenda that fully embraces a global neo-liberal market economy. Consequently, it can be argued that national borders are established in order to selectively establish who is allowed in, who may stay, and who must leave, while at the same time once again ruthlessly exploiting former colonial countries suffering from the impact of climate change and a stable future through deregulated capital markets. To aid in thinking beyond borders, in stepping across the line, Salman Rushdie, from a literary perspective, has suggested the following: "Good writing assumes a frontierless nation" (Rushdie 1997: 36). Similarly, Edward Said (cf. 1984) claimed that exile is both in the mind of a writer and in the invigorating effect of the public intellectual's engagement with the regimes of identity control, such as nation, religion, culture and ethnicity. Taking up these ideas with refer-