Beyond Vicarious Storytelling

How Level Telling Fields Help Create a Fair Narrative on Migration

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opportunities

for a fair narrative on migration

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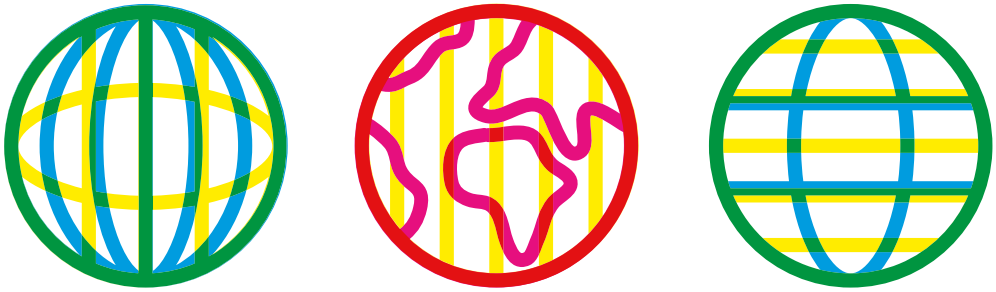

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How Level Telling Fields Help Create a Fair Narrative on Migration

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction 6

2. Migration and Narrative: Emic and Etic Perspectives 8

3. Hybrid Forms: Migrant Testimony and Vicarious Storytelling 10

3.1 Case Stories in Humanitarian Campaigns 10

3.2 Documentary Storytelling: Investigative Journalism 11

3.3 Ambassadorial Storytelling: Humanitarian Narratives in Social Media and Journalism 12

3.4 Allied Storytelling: Collaborative Literary and Artistic Work 13

3.5 Vicarious Storytelling and Social Action 14

4. Toward a Level Telling Field 16

5. Concluding Summary 18

6. Suggestions for Further Research 19

7. References 20

Endnotes 24

Abstract

Life stories play a crucial role in migration discourses: they serve as testimony in journalistic work, form the core of ambassadorial storytelling by NGOs, and inspire collaborative projects initiated by writers seeking to express their solidarity. However, this article argues, drawing on migrants' experiences for such purposes also creates an ethical dilemma: speaking *about* – or even *for* – rather than *with* migrants assigns them a passive role and tends to recycle existing narrative patterns and templates. Starting with a generic distinction between what we call stories of migration (various forms of self-expression granting migrants full authority and control over their narrative) and narratives on migration (external perspectives, e.g. academic, economic, political, and legal approaches, where lived experience doesn't matter), we explore the extensive middle ground of hybrid forms between these two extremes – i.e. different kinds of vicarious storytelling – before discussing their ethical implications. We further show how the idea of the level playing field, a key concept in economics, can be used in transdisciplinary research projects to establish level telling fields, i.e. communicative spaces characterized by a fair dialogue on an equal footing for all participants.

1. Introduction

In public discourses, migrants are often reduced to numbers. Numbers emphasize perceived security threats, helping to portray irregular migration as a challenge to national sovereignty. Numbers also play a key role in European migrant quotas and relocation schemes, defining the 'fair share' member states are expected to contribute to a joint European migration policy. Finally, discussing migration in terms of numbers is a core rhetorical strategy of right-wing nationalism, emphasizing the economic burden on the receiving country. Such reductive representations neither account for lived experience, including suffering, loss, and trauma, nor do they sufficiently acknowledge that basic human rights are at stake when borders are 'protected' by illegal pushbacks or when rescue missions are denied entry to European ports. In addition, they fuel hostility against refugees and migrants, making successful integration, let alone an inclusive welcome culture, difficult if not impossible to achieve.

One way of challenging such stereotypical representations is a humanitarian approach based on narratives and stories. Our argument starts with a generic typology distinguishing three kinds of narrative in discourses on migration (section 2). The first type, stories of migration, present mobility from an inside (emic) perspective, as it includes various forms of self-expression, from conversational storytelling to artistic forms of communicating life stories, through images, audiovisual media, or literary representations (poetry, short stories, memoirs, novels). Ideally, stories of migration grant migrants full authority and control over their narrative. Pragmatically, though, narration is always subject to all sorts of constraints, and this is particularly obvious if fundamental issues like one's status in asylum procedures are at stake. Thus, stories of migration always entail a struggle for narrative agency.

The second type, narratives on migration, approaches migration from an outside (etic) perspective. Examples are legal, political, economic, or other academic and scientific discourses. They adopt a normative stance (law), seek to devise and implement migration policies that are more geared to the electorate than to new arrivals, stress the financial strains of host countries, or evolve scientific methods designed to improve understanding of migration. Such narratives can take the shape of master-narratives (Lyotard 1984 [1979]), mininarrations based on metaphors (Nünning and Sicks 2012), conversational frames (Goffman 1986), or any kind of public discourse.[1] Migration studies is a particularly broad field, ranging from quantitative approaches in economics and the social sciences to literary criticism. What all scientific and scholarly narratives on migration have in common, however, is that, if they present any lived experience of migration at all, they do so primarily from an external perspective.

Stories of migration and narratives on migration form the extreme ends of a scale which accommodates various hybrid forms. Thus, in addition to stories of migration and narratives on migration, a wide variety of narratives uses migrant stories to raise awareness, highlight the humanitarian catastrophe behind technical expressions like "migration flows," and campaign for liberal migration policies. Such hybrid narratives can be differentiated with the help of functional criteria.[2] The functional approach acknowledges that journalists, human rights groups, and NGOs supporting refugees and migrants at various stages of their journey (from transit and immigration to projects geared toward integration and inclusion) employ life stories for different reasons. In order to account for this variety, our working paper introduces a distinction between vicarious storytelling, i.e. the act of speaking on behalf of someone else which is typical of migrant advocacy and humanitarian narratives (see section 3), and empowering storytelling, i.e. initiatives which provide opportunities for migrants to share their stories. Both vicarious and empowering forms of storytelling seek to establish a humanitarian narrative on migration.

The OPPORTUNITIES project argues that in order to achieve this goal NGOs need to move beyond forms of storytelling which rely heavily on empathy. In section four, we propose the notion of the 'level

telling field' which is based on the economic metaphor of the 'level playing field' ensuring fair conditions for competitors in a market. This means in practice that NGOs create opportunities for direct encounters between migrants, citizens, and stakeholders fostering perspective-taking and an ethics of listening. The result is participation grounded in dialogue and meaningful conversation rather than indirect representation through the streamlined mini-stories or quotes which are typical of vicarious storytelling and the framed narratives generated by public debate. In narrative terms, the cross-talk method developed in the OPPORTUNITIES project seeks to strengthen and promote narrative agency in local, national, and transnational contexts: level telling fields call for a new, fairer narrative on migration: one which doesn't merely talk *about* refugees and migrants but speaks *with* them.

2. Migration and Narrative: Emic and Etic Perspectives

Narrative research in the last twenty years has emphasized the epistemological value, psychological use, and social function of storytelling as a means of knowledge production and worldmaking, self-fashioning and identity formation, or communication and community-building.[3] The act of narration, which involves event modeling and event management (Sommer 2023), can be viewed as a performance for the speaker's intended audience. In this sense, storytelling as a process or activity is always embedded in a specific social context that informs the way a story is told. Social contexts also define a story's tellability, i.e. the "quality that makes stories inherently worth telling" (Ryan 2008 [2005], 589).[4] The voluntary decision to tell and share a story is a form of empowerment, turning storytellers into agents with a high degree of authority and control over their narrative.[5] This is particularly important in circumstances such as forced displacement and transit that systematically deprive people – including potential storytellers – of agency. For this reason, narratives are of particular importance in the context of migration.

Stories of migration can take various forms, e.g. informal oral storytelling among friends, family, acquaintances, aid workers, and volunteers, either in face to face communication or by phone; this is the dominant form of storytelling among migrants in transit who rely on this kind of information exchange in order to plan the next steps of their journey, make new contacts, share experiences, and find new motivation to carry on.[6] The harsh conditions in transit usually deny migrants the space, means, and peace of mind needed to produce verbal accounts for broader audiences. It is therefore not surprising that stories of migration tend to be retrospective accounts, memoirs, or novels written after the arrival in a new, safe country.

There are, of course, exceptions like the anthology *My Pen Won't Break But Borders Will: Letters to the World from Moria* (2019-2020) by Parwana Amiri, a teenage refugee from Herat, Afghanistan. Her collection of 14 letters, partly autobiographical, partly fictionalized accounts of life in the infamous refugee camp, was published in 2019 on the Welcome 2 Lesvos blog run by a network of Greek and German activists.[7] The introduction describes Amiri's working conditions: "These letters were written mostly at night by torchlight in the tent that Parwana shared with her eight-person family, in the olive grove. She always waited until everyone was asleep, so that she would have the peace of mind to write in the darkness with her torch." (5) Amiri's project finds agency in a world without hope: "I am a girl in a tent" (25), she notes, in a gesture of defiance and self-empowerment. This is worldmaking put into practice: Amiri's writing begins to transform reality. In 2021, she was invited to participate in a hybrid panel, "School of Resistance," an activist art project produced by Milo Rau for Schauspiel Köln (Cologne City Theater).[8]

While cases like Amiri's real-time stories are rare, retrospective stories of migration occur in different forms and contexts. Jad Turjman's memoir *Wenn der Jasmin auswandert: Die Geschichte meiner Flucht* (2019) is the story of a Syrian refugee who managed to reach Austria, was granted political asylum, and started a promising career as a writer before falling to his death in a tragic mountaineering accident in 2022. *Little Brother: A Refugee's Odyssey* (2019), a collaboration between Ibrahima Balde, a Guinean refugee, and Amets Arzalus Antia, an improvisational poet, is the retelling of Balde's flight across the sea from Guinea to the Basque Country of Spain, where he shared his story with Antia. Blending autobiography and fiction, Dina Nayeri's novel *Refuge* (2017) tells the story of Niloo, an Iranian migrant. Nayeri's book *The Ungrateful Refugee: What Immigrants Never Tell You* (2019) is based on her own experiences and interviews with other migrants. Of course, migration novels are not restricted to

autobiographical or autofictional forms but can make use of the full range of strategies and devices available to writers of fiction. Sefi Atta's novel *The Bad Immigrant* (2021), for instance, uses a male protagonist, admitted through the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program, to represent a Nigerian immigrant's experience of the USA, while Jason Donald's *Dalila* (2017) focuses on a female protagonist from Kenya who, having survived rape in her home country, seeks asylum in Great Britain.

What such stories of migration have in common is that they are emic accounts of what it means to experience displacement, human trafficking, debt bondage, racism, or disillusionment. In contrast, political, legal, scientific or economic narratives on migration approach migration from an etic (i.e. external) perspective.[9] They constitute what Doris Bachmann-Medick and Jens Kugele (2018, 3) – drawing on Erving Goffman's (1986, 21) definition of frames as "schemata of interpretation" – have called "frames" of migration. Such frames, they argue, "constitute methodologically and epistemologically self-reflexive approaches to the complex field of migration" – approaches that are "effective in shaping the field of socio-political experience and behavior that directly impacts the lives of migrants" (3). In other words, narratives on migration engender ideas that not only influence how we think and talk about migration, but also actively shape our understanding of different forms of mobility, as well as informing attitudes toward migrants and refugees (De Coninck et al. 2022).

Abstract narratives can frame the phenomenon of migration in various ways. Nationalist narratives frame migration as a threat to sovereignty, for instance, while economic narratives emphasize the financial burden of accepting large numbers of refugees. Legal narratives highlight the differences between regular and irregular migration, whereas humanitarian narratives insist on a human rights approach to migration. Most policy narratives consider migration as a problem that requires a solution, preferably one that – in the European context – is supported by all EU member states. Most recently, we have witnessed the rise of new narratives which reframe migration as the only sustainable way to respond to the global problem of anthropogenic climate change (Khanna 2021, Vince 2022). These environmentalist narratives, it seems, strive to form a counter-narrative (Lueg and Lundholt 2021) to dominant discourses, inviting us to re-evaluate our notions of migration and mobility.

Narratives on migration differ, however, not only with respect to their thematic focus, but also with respect to the ways in which – as well as the reasons for which – they address the topic of migration in the first place. Accounts like the annual World Migration Report, produced by the United Nation's International Organization for Migration (IMO), for example, primarily fulfill an informative function, as they describe the status quo with the help of numbers and statistics.[10] Such narratives on migration are mainly descriptive, whereas legal narratives on migration qualify as normative, given that they establish rules and regulations which determine, for instance, under what circumstances migrants can be granted asylum in European countries. Political and humanitarian or human-rights based narratives, in contrast, qualify as ideological, albeit for different reasons: while the former are typically informed by election programs and party manifestos, the latter campaign for the rights of migrants by stressing the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in transnational contexts. Closely related to such humanitarian narratives are advocacy-oriented narratives on migration which seek to empower migrants by speaking up for their rights (e.g. when lawyers support migrants in their attempt to seek asylum in a European Union member state).

3. Hybrid Forms: Migrant Testimony and Vicarious Storytelling

However, the distinction between stories of migration and narratives on migration is not always as clear-cut as in these examples. Many hybrid scenarios embed migrant testimonials in narratives supporting humanitarian and journalistic efforts to raise awareness for refugees and migrants – i.e. narratives *on* migration. Vicarious narratives of this kind can pursue various objectives such as documentation, perspective taking, or the evocation of empathy, and can do so with various levels of intensity.[11] Thus most vicarious storytelling will serve a documentary function, informing the audience about specific aspects of the lived experience of mobility. Not all vicarious narratives, however, will also stimulate perspective taking for migrants and refugees,[12] and even fewer will evoke empathy for their experiences of migration or displacement. Nevertheless, most vicarious narratives prompt readers and listeners to try on the perspective of migrants and refugees, enabling them to better understand migrant and refugee experiences. If perspective taking is successful, it can lead to the third objective of vicarious storytelling: the evocation of empathy. Vicarious narratives often resort to what Suzanne Keen (2007) calls "strategic narrative empathy" – that is, they seek to evoke empathy for a specific purpose, raising awareness of the situation of migrants by making their experiences more accessible to others.[13]

But how exactly do vicarious narratives make use of migrant stories? How do they integrate migrant voices in larger narrative contexts to achieve the three main effects outlined above? Vicarious storytelling comes in different forms which are operative in different narrative environments (e.g. humanitarian, journalistic, scientific, or activist discourses). We distinguish four major types of vicarious storytelling in migration discourses: (1) case stories used in humanitarian campaigns, (2) documentary storytelling, (3) ambassadorial storytelling, and (4) allied storytelling. Case stories and documentary narratives merely use migrant testimony, often in anonymized form, to support claims, provide information, and illustrate facts. Ambassadorial narratives go a step further, focusing on specific individuals whose life story is featured through acts of reframing and retelling. Finally, allied narratives are specific cases of collaborative storytelling, usually in the context of literary or artistic projects where allies retell migrant stories.

The remaining part of this section examines each of these typical forms of vicarious storytelling in greater detail by referring to selective examples from NGO campaigns, experts in the field, journalists, and collaborative cultural projects. Our presentation of the individual types of vicarious storytelling focuses first on the framing and purposes of the chosen examples. We then proceed to discuss the ethical and social implications of vicarious narratives by addressing issues and concerns such as categorization and labeling, narrative agency, authority, and ownership, as well as storyteller's positioning vis-à-vis normative discourses. This survey, however, is by no means complete: more forms may be identified in future research. Besides, various combinations of the typical forms distinguished here are possible: for example, the hybrid forms mediating between stories of migration and narratives on migration may themselves be hybrids, integrating various forms of vicarious storytelling. What is more, there are many forms that oscillate between the poles of stories *of* and narratives *on* migration; our typological differentiation seeks to structure the field in a descriptive rather than a normative manner.

3.1 Case Stories in Humanitarian Campaigns

Migrants' stories are routinely employed in humanitarian campaigns by NGOs like Germany's Pro Asyl, whose mission is to offer assistance to individuals, to document human rights violations, and to stand

up for refugee protection.[14] Their recent flyer "Save the forgotten ones!", a plea to rescue former local staff working for the German army in Afghanistan, now threatened by retribution from the Taliban, is an example of the use of migrant stories for advocacy and fundraising purposes.[15] Apart from the fundraising slogan ("Your contribution protects refugees!"), the flyer includes concise information on the flawed rescue mission in 2021, as well as on the current state of affairs in Afghanistan and, among other things, on the German visa processing policy – a reference to promises made by the German government in 2021. The information is backed by case stories, anonymized micro-biographies offering factual information – e.g. professional qualification, role in the German administration, kind of assistance required – relating to individual Afghanis affected by the retreat of the German army. In one case a reference is made to the desperate situation ("Hussein has fled, one of his brothers has been killed. Hussein has remained in hiding ever since, hoping desperately for a way out."), but the omission of further detail shows that an appeal to empathy, unlike in the ambassadorial storytelling discussed below, is not the point of this kind of case story. Nor are these stories designed to give migrants a voice; their purpose is to illustrate and support the political aims of Pro Asyl as an organization whose humanitarian narrative on migration is as simple as it is compelling: the individual matters.

3.2 Documentary Storytelling: Investigative Journalism

Documentary storytelling is the main rhetorical strategy of investigative journalism. A prime example is Daniel Trilling's work on the borders of Europe. Trilling, a British journalist writing for *The Guardian* and the *London Review of Books*, among others, is the author of *Lights in the Distance: Exile and Refuge at the Borders of Europe* (2018). In this book he investigates the strategies and mechanisms behind irregular migration to and within Europe. His main source of information are migrant stories gathered in interviews:

> Clearly, the book relies on individual testimony. I wanted to present that in as open and honest a way as possible, which is why I have narrated our encounters in the first person. I also did it because I want you to see these people as I did, and not to let the harshest experiences overshadow the other aspects of their personalities. […] Some of my interviewees' names have been changed, at their request. (266)

Trilling's work combines the retelling of the stories collected in conversation with background knowledge such as a description of the City of Calais, brief historical surveys to provide context, or information about, or gained from, aid volunteers and social workers, No Borders activists, local authorities, or the police. In contrast to ambassadorial narratives intended to evoke empathy in non-migrant audiences (see section 3.3), Trilling focuses on factual content rather than emotional impact: How do migrants move from A to B, what kinds of support networks can they rely on, how do they manage to overcome various obstacles on the move, and what sources of information are available to them? Trilling's exclusive concentration on story content is partly due to linguistic difficulties, as in the case of Zainab: "My Arabic was limited to a few nouns; her rudimentary English wasn't enough to tell me her story in detail." (39) But although he uses translators to overcome the language barrier, in order "to hear Zainab's story as she wanted to tell it" (39), he retells her story mainly from a third-person perspective, with a few quotations strewn in.

The reason why emotional states, hopes, and aspirations do not play a key role here is programmatic: Trilling's journalistic behind-the-scene approach to the realities of migration focuses less on individuals than on strategies, practices, networks, and relationships of trust between different groups of migrants and stakeholders. The goal of his conversations is neither to highlight the plight of the individual nor to compose fully-fledged biographical accounts of their lives, but to investigate "the effects of Europe's border crisis on the people caught up in it" (xiii). His interlocutors are portrayed as representatives of a group, irregular migrants attempting to cross, or having crossed, the Channel to claim asylum in the UK.

3.3 Ambassadorial Storytelling: Humanitarian Narratives in Social Media and Journalism

While case stories and documentary storytelling mainly use migrant testimony for informative and illustrative purposes, ambassadorial storytelling draws on migrant life stories in order to call for humanitarian, social, or political action. A successful example of this form of vicarious storytelling is a TEDxTalk by Melissa Fleming, former spokesperson of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which centers on the fate of Doaa Al Zamel, a Syrian refugee. Delivered in Thessaloniki, Greece, on May 23, 2015, the TEDxTalk presented Doaa's fate for the first time to a public audience.

Analyzing Fleming's biography of Doaa,[16] Ana Belén Martínez García (2021) shows how, in her written account of Doaa's experiences, Fleming uses narrative strategies that evoke empathy within readers, presenting Doaa as an individual (216), emphasizing her role as an eye witness (214–215), and granting readers an insight into her mind (215). These strategies also structure the TEDxTalk, which places special emphasis on Doaa as an individual, with Fleming showing pictures of her and her fiancé and using terms of endearment ("mum," "dad") when talking about her parents, which creates intimacy between Doaa and the audience. In this way Fleming establishes Doaa's story as a narrative with a high degree of tellability: "Every day, I listen to harrowing stories of people fleeing for their lives across the dangerous borders and unfriendly seas. But there's one story that keeps me awake at night, and it's about Doaa." (00:05–00:22)

The tellability of Doaa's story is further enhanced by her presentation as "an extraordinary survivor." In retelling Doaa's journey from Egypt to Crete, Fleming combines two generic templates: an inverted rags-to-riches plot and the hero protagonist or "victim-turned-survivor" theme (Martínez García 2021: 217). Fleming stresses that Doaa has lost everything in life, explaining why she lets her fiancé Bassam persuade her to leave Egypt and try to escape to Europe despite the fact that she cannot swim and is therefore "terrified of the water" (01:45). The inverted rags-to-riches template enables the audience to understand why the dangerous journey to Europe is Doaa's only chance of a good education and with it a better life. Fleming describes in detail the horrifying scenario when the boat carrying Doaa and Bassam eventually sinks,[17] stressing that, despite these traumatizing events, Doaa still manages to save two children from drowning – a transformation from victim to heroine that makes Doaa's an exceptional fate among other refugee stories.

In addition to using strategies primarily designed to offer the audience access to Doaa's experience, Fleming's talk resorts to "metanarrative digressions" (Martínez García 2021, 215), i.e. rhetorical questions which emphasize the problems that force people like Doaa to leave their home countries ("And let me take a pause in the story right here and ask the question: why do refugees like Doaa take these kinds of risks?" [06:43]). Fleming talks about causes of forced displacement (e.g. the civil war in Syria) and points to the severe problems and disastrous living conditions in refugee camps; while doing this, she shows pictures of destroyed cities as well as camps in the desert. Fleming presents these facts to criticize "the richer world" (08:28), which fails to make sufficient effort to change the situation: "Why, the root question, is so little being done to stop the wars, the persecution and the poverty that is driving so many people to the shores of Europe?" (16:53) At the end of her presentation, she finally encourages her audience to "be inspired by what happened [to Doaa and other refugees] and take a stand for a world in which every life matters" (18:46). Fleming deploys Doaa's story, then, as a means to stress the urgency of her call for humanitarian action. More specifically, her presentation draws on UNHCR's central communication strategies, which she discloses in an interview with Martínez García: "(1) Lead the narrative, (2) Build empathy, (3) Drive action. So it's: inform people, get them to care, and then give them something to do." (Fleming qtd. in Martínez García 2021, 219)

Another instance of vicarious storytelling can be taken to confirm this pattern, even though it is rooted in different media and discourse contexts, pursues a different purpose, and makes use of different narrative and rhetorical strategies. This second example of ambassadorial storytelling is a non-fiction book on forced displacement and migration by Melita H. Šunjić – also a former UNHCR spokeswoman. Published in 2021, *Die von Europa träumen: Wie Flucht und Migration ablaufen* (*Of Those Who Dream*

of Europe: On the Processes of Flight and Migration) presents nine migration stories. Unlike Fleming's account which focuses exclusively on the fate of a single refugee, Šunjić's text foregrounds the diversity of migrants by focusing on nine migrants from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, and Syria, all of whom have left their homes for different reasons such as the flight from war or economic precarity. Šunjić uses a form of vicarious storytelling which employs abstraction and generalization rather than examples. The texts, she explains in the preface, neither refer to individuals nor are they fiction. Rather, they are reconstructions on the basis of interviews with more than 2,000 asylum seekers from East and West Africa, the Near East, and Afghanistan which the author has rearranged in order to ensure the anonymity of the respective interviewees (11–12).

What is the purpose of these stories? On the one hand, Šunjić wants to introduce voices of migrants to the European public debate on migration, which she considers overly Eurocentric (11). On the other hand, she criticizes that public migration discourse has long tended to polarize societies, as it has been directed at creating affect rather than explaining the complex dynamics contributing to the debate (12). Šunjić therefore complements the nine life stories with thematic chapters on key terms such as migrant, refugee, and asylum seeker (Ch. 10), and smuggling and human trafficking (Ch. 12), as well as with a discussion of central topics such as sea rescue (Ch. 13), integration and inclusion (Ch. 14), and European migration policy (Ch. 16). She resorts to ambassadorial storytelling in order to reframe and recontextualize migration discourses in a way that will inform and educate her readers.

3.4 Allied Storytelling: Collaborative Literary and Artistic Work

Vicarious storytelling is also employed in the realm of literature, art, and other cultural productions. Story and essay collections like *The Refugees* (2017) and *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives* (2018), both edited by Viet Thanh Nguyen, compile refugee narratives as retold by established contemporary authors and novelists. Theater productions like *Our Footsteps* (2019), a multilingual collaboration between artists, activists, and refugees in the Netherlands,[18] or the 2016 version of the *London Stories* by the Battersea Arts Centre in London (Gardner 2016), have brought and re-enacted authentic migrant experiences on stage. Since 2021, Little Amal, the giant puppet of a ten-year-old Syrian refugee girl has been visiting and walking through more than ten countries across Europe, where numerous people have joined her in *The Walk*.[19] And the audiovisual installation *Carne y Arena*, created by Alejandro G. Iñárritu, enables audiences to literally experience what it's like to be a refugee by simulating a VR experience in which visitors literally step into the shoes of undocumented Mexican migrants trying to cross the border to the United States.[20]

All these projects seek to make experiences of flight and forced displacement accessible to a wider public. Indeed, authors and artists often lend their voice to migrants and refugees because these groups have little opportunity to participate in public debates on migration and integration. As a result, media representations are often distorted, failing to inform us about the lived experience of migration and displacement. In her review of the third volume of *Refugee Tales*, author Kamila Shamsie points out that "[w]e hear so many of the wrong words about refugees – ugly, limiting, unimaginative words – that it feels like a gift to find here so many of the right words which allow us to better understand the lives around us […]."[21] Shamsie's comment stresses the potential of literature – and art for that matter – to serve as a counterbalance to biased media coverage of migration by introducing to public discourses the perspective of those who are directly affected by movements of migration.[22] A further strength of such collaborative projects is that they stage multiperspectivity in bringing together migrants with different backgrounds and experiences of migration and displacement.

Refugee Tales (2016–2021), edited by David Herd and Anna Pincus, is an excellent example of what can be called "allied storytelling."[23] The four volumes so far published grew out of the project "Refugee Tales: A Walk in Solidarity with Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Detainees," a collaborative protest march of members of charities, activists, refugees, and authors to criticize and challenge the British immigration detention system. The first walk, organized in June 2015 by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare

Group and Kent Refugee Help, took nine days, including several stops during which participants publicly performed two stories or "tales," one being the life story of an asylum seeker or refugee, the other that of a lawyer or interpreter etc. working with those seeking asylum in the UK. Each story was the result of a close collaboration between established writers and the person whose story was presented, and all the narratives were subsequently published in the first volume of *Refugee Tales* (Herd 2016b, 133).

While the walks and events behind *Refugee Tales* are designed to address a local audience in the UK (the initial march, for instance, took place from Dover via Canterbury to Crawley), the literary product of these marches, the four volumes of *Refugee Tales*, addresses a wider readership. The purpose of this collaborative literary project is made explicit in the "Prologue" to the first volume, where Herd (2016a) explains that the book is "a declaration / […] Of solidarity" (v), that the act of walking serves "To make a spectacle of welcome" (vii), and that the stories collected in the volume are intended to create "a whole new language / Of travel and assembly and curiosity / And welcome" (viii). The stories in *Refugee Tales* represent an act of solidarity with migrants and refugees and the attempt to create a new welcome culture. To achieve this aim, they draw on the image of the walk as an active instrument calling for a new migration discourse that acknowledges the voices of those who are usually silenced in the British immigration system (ix): "And every step sets out a demand / And every demand is urgent / And what we call for / Is an end / To this inhuman discourse. (x)[24]

The experience of mobility constitutes a central element not only in *Refugee Tales*, but also in other projects that stand up for the rights of asylum seekers. The project Little Amal, the giant refugee puppet on the move, pursues a similar objective to that of *Refugee Tales*. Amir Nizar Zuabi, Artistic Director of *The Walk*, describes this as follows:

> It is because the attention of the world is elsewhere right now that it is more important than ever to reignite the conversation about the refugee crisis and to change the narrative around it. Yes, refugees need food and blankets, but they also need dignity and a voice. The purpose of The Walk is to highlight the potential of the refugee, not just their dire circumstances. Little Amal is 3.5 metres tall because we want the world to grow big enough to greet her. We want her to inspire us to think big and to act bigger.[25]

The quotation emphasizes several aspects already discussed in previous examples. What distinguishes *The Walk* from these, however, is the endeavor to work toward a shared narrative *of* migration that migrants and members of welcoming societies worldwide can create *together*. In every city, town, or village in which she arrives, Little Amal, who stands for the sum of all refugee children in the world, is received with a special "Event of Welcome" (e.g. a parade through the city center, a musical concert, or a dance performance).[26] Amal then walks across the place, accompanied by her local audience. By inviting spectators to literally share Little Amal's experience of mobility through the physical re-enactment of her journey, the project sets the course for a new collective narrative on migration that appreciates notions of diversity, inclusion, and participation typically excluded from migration discourse.

3.5 Vicarious Storytelling and Social Action

Our discussion of the typical forms of vicarious storytelling has shown that migration narratives can serve not only as framing strategies (as is the case with narratives *on* migration) or means of sense-making, identity formation, and empowerment (stories *of* migration), but also as a form of social action. The "practice-based 'social interactional' approach" to narrative, a framework of narrative analysis for the social sciences introduced by Ana De Fina and Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2008, 2015), allows us to expand our understanding of migration: How can narratives serve as social practices with the potential to bring about societal change – for instance through measures that seek to establish a welcome culture for migrants – and thus lay the foundations for a more diverse and inclusive society? Narratives are shaped by contexts, yet they also "create new contexts by mobilizing and articulating fresh understandings of the world, by altering power relations between peoples, [and] by constituting new

practices" (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2015, 3). Conceptualizing narrative as social action in this way foregrounds the ethical implications of vicarious storytelling, in particular issues of categorization, ownership, and positioning.

Although the act of speaking on behalf of someone, which is at the heart of vicarious storytelling, typically pursues a good cause, it also incurs the risk of categorizing individuals. Life stories of migrants and refugees are highly complex, and their state of migrancy or refugeedom only constitutes one of many dimensions of their identity. Public discourses, however, often give rise to simplified forms of vicarious storytelling such as case stories that reduce the complexity of migrants' life stories to specific labels such as the labor migrant, refugee, or asylum seeker. A similar tendency can be observed in forms of ambassadorial storytelling which produce shorter narrative content: Fleming's TEDxTalk, for instance, deploys specific generic templates to present Doaa as a victim who turns into a heroine. Other forms of vicarious storytelling, in contrast, actively work against such practices of labeling, as is the case in Šunjić's non-fiction book and the *Refugee Tales*, which strive to create multiperspectivity by granting readers insight into a wide spectrum of migrant and refugee experiences.

The issue of ownership involves the questions as to who has the right to tell or retell a story and how the acts of telling and retelling influence the authority of both owners and tellers of stories. According to Amy Shuman (2015, 38), "[much] is at stake in contests and questions about who owns a story and who is entitled to tell it or hear it." This is especially true in the context of migration debates, which are informed by various discourses that uphold uneven power structures diminishing the rights of migrants and refugees: In what context does it seem right for narratives on migration to draw on the life stories of migrants? Who has the right to speak for migrants, to claim their vicarious voice? Under what circumstances does advocacy lead to the empowerment of migrants, and in what situations does it have the opposite effect, increasing their marginalized status within society? When flyers of fund-raising campaigns make use of brief case stories, the answer seems clear: the end justifies the means. In other cases, such ethical questions are difficult to answer because every retelling of migrant stories "complicate[s] (and undermine[s]) the unstated rule that the person who suffered or experienced the event has the right to tell it" (41). As Fleming explains in the "Author's Note" at the end of *A Hope More Powerful than the Sea*, Doaa wanted her story to be heard, but would not have been able to share it with the public herself, for it was too painful (2017, 273–274). She consequently depended on Fleming as a mediator to help her render her experiences tellable and communicate them to a wider public. In cases of collaborative storytelling projects such as the *Refugee Tales* or *The Walk* of Little Amal, however, the question of ownership and narrative authority is transferred to a collective that works together to construct a new narrative which is shared by all participants. As the examples of vicarious storytelling discussed in the previous sections serve to illustrate, each retelling creates new discourse contexts in which ownership and narrative authority "can be refigured, reclaimed, and/or contested" (Shuman 2015, 41).

Migrant advocacy generally pursues a good cause, yet one must bear in mind that all forms of vicarious storytelling carry a degree of responsibility. As Shuman reminds us, the practice of lending a vicarious voice to groups which are underrepresented in public discourse does not automatically increase fairness in discussions of migration or other related issues: "The act of narrating does not necessarily change the conditions of marginalization that underlie access to speaking for oneself or that assign some events to public and others to hidden status. On the contrary, giving voice to the voiceless can just as often reproduce the power relations underlying a group's or speaker's status." (41) In order to avoid such untoward effects, vicarious narratives often resort to strategies of positioning, which clarify their standpoint within the current debate on migration.[27]

4. Toward a Level Telling Field

Advocating the rights of migrants, vicarious narratives are the backbone of humanitarian discourses of migration. Unlike mainstream narratives on migration, which typically frame migration as a crisis or threat, strategic retelling foregrounds the plight of migrants, as well as their political claims and human rights. By feeding back these perspectives into a public debate that might otherwise ignore what happens in real life and in real time, vicarious storytelling challenges Eurocentric discourses on migration which normalize extreme responses (fences, illegal pushbacks, zero solidarity policies). What is more, vicarious narratives can operate against simplifying discourse practices that reduce refugees and migrants to suppliants and petitioners, highlighting the personality and rights of individuals. In this sense, vicarious narratives are instrumental in empowering refugees and migrants.

Despite the best efforts of vicarious storytelling, however, the European border crisis will not be solved by only speaking on behalf of others. The current discursive climate, which is characterized by racist stereotypes, labeling and blaming on the one hand, and mistrust among European partners, lack of solidarity, and nationalist selfishness on the other, reveals a series of systemic problems. These include a lack of a common vision among European member states, a constant shift toward more radical positions, and a laissez-faire attitude with respect to the inhumane treatment of new arrivals in overcrowded and ill-equipped detention camps or illegal pushbacks.

Systemic problems require systemic solutions. One way to work toward a fair narrative *on* migration is to rethink the principles of conversation and to advocate mutual recognition among all parties involved, as well as an ethics of listening to experiment with innovative forms of social action. In programmatic terms: We need to level the playing field, or rather 'telling' field, on migration.[28] In global trade, level playing fields ensure that "all countries and firms compete on an equal footing to offer consumers everywhere the widest possible choice and the best value for money."[29] In analogy to fair trade, level telling fields ensure fair competition between narratives, concepts, and ideas in migration discourses. This involves, first and foremost, a healthier balance between stories *of* migration and narratives *on* migration.

The Level Telling Field (LTF) approach developed by the OPPORTUNITIES project seeks to establish such a new narrative dynamics. Level telling fields, in abstract terms, are playbooks and mechanisms for an open, constructive, and productive debate – the cornerstone of a democratic, pluralist, secular society. They are best viewed as commitments by all participants in a debate to adopt a shared set of premises, to agree on principles and rules, and to define processes and procedures for conducting debates and documenting results. LTF premises include: a) a commitment to a democratic worldview grounded in human rights and a human development paradigm (Nussbaum 2010); b) adhering to commonly accepted standards for evaluating claims, opinions, and arguments; and c) sincerity, i.e. a serious commitment to debate as a democratic means of opinion-building and decision-making. An LTF approach to migration insists that all participants in a debate subscribe to these premises and principles, and defines a set of procedures for ensuring a fair conversation.

An innovative form of transdisciplinary collaboration between researchers and NGOs, the OPPORTUNITIES project not only establishes LTF principles but puts them into practice in order to test the viability of the LTF approach, and to evaluate its effects. Storytelling projects organized by NGOs in Romania, Italy, Austria, Belgium, France, Portugal, Ghana, Senegal, and Mauritania provide the basis for local encounters between migrants, citizens, and stakeholders to engage in practices of mutual storysharing, listening to each other, and allied storytelling. These so-called Cross-Talk events provide a platform for a fair conversation, making use of various forms of life stories, narrative positioning, and perspective taking. The experiences with Cross-Talks and the LTF approach will be shared in the form of a continuously updated manual designed to encourage other human rights groups and NGOs to experiment with similar methods.[30]

The long-term goal of this endeavor is to advocate a new humanitarian narrative on migration, one that moves beyond vicarious storytelling to enable refugees and migrants to speak for themselves, thus protecting narrative ownership, and encouraging European audiences to listen more carefully. The LTF approach offers a new framework for rethinking migration discourses not as a battle of frames, but as a fair dialogue and open-ended conversation on the great challenges of our times. Treating refugees and migrants not as suppliants and petitioners, but as experts with first-hand experience of the many global crises that affect us, directly or indirectly, is an opportunity Europe cannot afford to miss.

5. Concluding Summary

This article approaches the narrative dynamics of migration from a typological perspective in a three-step argument. We first distinguish two major types of narrative representing either an insider's (emic) or an outsider's (etic) view of migration. The former type includes stories of migration told by refugees and migrants themselves, i.e. narratives grounded in lived experience; the latter refers to the economic, political, legal or scientific narratives on migration which dominate both migration policies and the public perception of refugees and migrants.

Proceeding from this distinction, the article in a second step puts emphasis on a hybrid, in-between type of vicarious storytelling on behalf of refugees and migrants. Such humanitarian narratives *on* migration integrate stories *of* migration in order to emphasize authenticity, generate empathy in audiences, or put migrant perspectives on the agenda. We differentiate four subtypes of such vicarious narratives by individuals, organizations, and activist campaigns: (1) case stories, (2) documentary storytelling, (3) ambassadorial storytelling, and (4) allied storytelling.

In a third step we argue that although speaking on behalf of migrants is a legitimate strategy to advance a humanitarian narrative, vicarious storytelling raises ethical questions, as it tends to ascribe refugees and migrants a passive role. This doesn't do justice to the communicative potential of storytelling as a form of empowerment and recognition. We therefore propose a new approach to narrative communication in the public sphere, based on the notions of fair play and level playing fields advocated in sports, both of which are routinely used in economic contexts to ensure fair competition. Level telling fields, we hold, have the power to change the way we talk about migration. The transdisciplinary OPPORTUNITIES project, to which our own project makes a contribution, includes NGOs who will implement LTF principles in Cross-Talk events using a newly developed methodology. Their practical experience will reveal whether the innovative LTF approach is suited to foster a fair narrative on migration.

6. Suggestions for Further Research

Although migration studies is “a broad and diverse research field” (Scholten et al. 2022, 4) with a high degree of interdisciplinarity (De Haas et al. 2020, 44; Scholten et al. 2022, 3), conceptual transfer between economics, sociology, and political science on the one hand, and literary and cultural studies on the other is still in its infancy. The *Introduction to Migration Studies* (2022), edited by Peter Scholten, is a case in point. This comprehensive cross-disciplinary overview of the field is an excellent resource in many ways, yet it fails to include approaches like narrative theory, postcolonial and subaltern studies, critical race theory and diaspora studies, intercultural studies, or gender and queer studies. Challenging existing power structures from various angles, these approaches are indeed vital for a more inclusive migration debate and should therefore be considered an integral part of cross-disciplinary migration research. Recent studies have also highlighted the relevance of the humanities for a “politics of mobility” (Cresswell 2006, 2010) and, more broadly, the field of mobility studies (Aguiar et al. 2018, Merriman and Pearce 2018).

With respect to narrative research, we see an important task in further exploring the forms of vicarious storytelling. The survey in section three is a first attempt at describing the uses, functions, and effects of stories for migrant advocacy in a systematic manner. This preliminary typology could be expanded into a fully-fledged taxonomy which would not only benefit the study of narrative and migration, but could also be of service to the flourishing research on life writing and support recent approaches to human rights narratives and activist storytelling (Martínez García 2020, Hopkinson and Marsh 2020). A theoretical discussion of the narrative dynamics of vicarious storytelling would, moreover, help to develop the analytical paradigm of cross-disciplinary narrative research.

Given that vicarious storytelling is not the only type of hybrid narrative one can distinguish in the ‘stories of/narratives on’ paradigm, further research could also investigate the different ways in which narratives on migration make use of migrant testimony and stories of migration. Since our paper has focused primarily on narratives that serve as migrant advocacy, we have largely ignored how discourses on migration can instrumentalize migrant stories for ill-intentioned purposes. Such hybrid cases would provide a fruitful basis for discussing the discursive power structures which privilege narratives *on* migration over stories *of* migration, thus strengthening social hierarchies between migrants and local citizens. Another important research question concerns the ways and circumstances in which migrants can influence narratives on migration themselves – i.e. without the mediation of vicarious storytellers – for example when engaging in politics or migration research.

Finally, we would like to emphasize that the LTF approach is not limited to migration. It seeks to overcome gridlock scenarios, challenges partisan and tribal politics, and addresses widespread feelings of anger, frustration, and anxiety (Mishra 2017, Shafak 2020) which are indicative of the closing of public space in times of uncertainty. LTF playbooks and mechanisms are a way of examining the shifting boundaries between public and private communication and other consequences of digital technologies, such as the growing pressure on the old functions and business models of legacy media, and the rise of new platforms for curated information. The LTF paradigm may also develop new diagnostic tools for evaluating narrative dynamics in the public sphere (Habermas 1992), and for detecting and countering threats to democratic systems of checks and balances (Ziblatt and Levitsky 2018).

7. References

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Endnotes

[1] For a discussion of the popular uses of the terms *story* and *narrative*, see Mäkelä and Björninen 2023, 21–22.

[2] Of course, migrant testimony can also be distorted or used to discredit humanitarian concerns; such narratives are not, however, the subject of this paper.

[3] See, e.g., Bamberg 2013, Nünning et al. 2010, and Müller-Funk 2008 [2002].

[4] As sociolinguist Neil R. Norrick (2005) has observed, tellability is limited by two boundaries: stories must be sufficiently interesting to find an audience, and they must not touch on issues which are regarded a taboo in a given context.

[5] Agency is a controversial concept whose philosophical implications have been discussed by Hannah Arendt (2008 [1958], 184): Even though human beings may think of themselves as agents, the idea of agency, authority, and control is, in the greater scheme of things, an illusion. In the context of ecocriticism, the idea of human agency has more recently been challenged by the concept of nonhuman agency; for a critical discussion see Caracciolo (2022, 140), who points out that storytelling is a "quintessentially human practice."

[6] See Trilling 2018; his journalistic account of migrant experiences offers numerous examples.

[7] See http://lesvos.w2eu.net/ (accessed August 27, 2022).

[8] See https://www.schauspiel.koeln/en/schedule/a-z/school-of-resistance/ (accessed August 27, 2022).

[9] David Herman (2009) has described the difference between an "etic" and an "emic" perspective in the context of narrative as follows: "[A] question for any account of the basic elements of narrative is whether those elements are in fact oriented to as basic by participants engaged in storytelling practices (= emic), or whether the elements are instead part of a system for analysis imposed on the data from with-out (= etic)." (3)

[10] The World Migration Report has been published since 2000 on a regular basis. All reports can be read and downloaded at: https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/reports (accessed September 9, 2022).

[11] Our understanding of vicarious narrative is inspired by Mari Hatavara and Jarmila Mildorf (2017a, b), who, drawing on Norrick's (2013) understanding of "narratives of vicarious experience," define vicarious storytelling as "the use of stories about the experience of someone other than the narrator" (2017a, 394).

[12] Cognitive approaches to narrative "[distinguish] two ways of adopting other's perspective: the 'imagine-self' perspective and the 'imagine-other' perspective" (Nünning 2014, 182). While the former tends to induce egocentric behavior (237), involving the act of imagining how we would think and feel if we were in the other's place (182), the latter can elicit altruistic and selfless behavior (237), as it entails imagining how another person is thinking and feeling (182). The use of migrant stories in narratives on migration can promote both types of perspective taking, depending on the various purposes of vicarious storytelling.

[13] Keen (2007) distinguishes three types of narrative empathy – bounded, ambassadorial, and broadcast – each of which is directed at a different audience (142). Bounded empathy addresses an in-group; "stemming from experiences of mutuality," it invites the audience "to feeling with familiar others" (142). Ambassadorial empathy includes "chosen others," seeking to "[cultivate] their empathy for the in-group, often to a specific end" (142). Broadcast empathy encourages everyone "to feel with members of a group," as it stresses "common vulnerabilities and hopes" (142).

[14] See https://www.proasyl.de/en/ (accessed August 27, 2022).

[15] See https://www.proasyl.de/wp-content/uploads/Posterfl_web_Afgh.pdf (accessed August 27, 2022).

[16] After her TEDx talk turned out a huge success, Fleming approached a literary agent, asking whether Doaa's story could be turned into a book (Fleming 2017, 272). Two years later, in 2017, Fleming published Doaa's biography *A Hope More Powerful than the Sea*.

[17] More specifically, sentences like "Doaa was holding on to the side of the boat as it sank, and watched in horror as a small child was cut to pieces by the propeller" (04:54); "Doaa and Bassam watched as men in the distance took their life vests off and sank into the water" (06:00); or "he released himself into the water and Doaa watched as the love of her life drowned before her eyes" (09:16) are aimed at prompting readers to vividly picture the scene and to do so with empathy.

[18] See https://ourfootsteps.nl/ (accessed August 27, 2022).

[19] The initiative's website can be followed at: https://www.walkwithamal.org/ (accessed August 27, 2022).

[20] For further information on Iñárritu's art installation, see https://phi.ca/en/carne-y-arena/ (accessed August 27, 2022).

[21] See https://www.refugeetales.org/books (accessed August 27, 2022).

[22] In fact, recent studies have started to highlight the value not only of literature, but also of theatre, film, and other visual arts to fight common stereotypes prevailing in media representations of migrants and refugees (see, e.g., the contributions in Bayrakdar and Burgoyne 2022, González Ortega and Martínez García 2022, and Meerzon et al. 2020).

[23] The term *allied storytelling* is inspired by the concept of "white allies" in the context of critical race theory (see Muwanga forthcoming).

[24] That the "Prologue" is written in verse is no coincidence, but a tribute to the medieval poet Geoffrey Chaucer, whose *Canterbury Tales* are the literary template on which the "tales" in the volumes are modeled. The intertextual reference ought to be taken not only as a literary artifice, but also as an indication that migration and mobility are far from being new. On the contrary, they go back to the Middle Ages and even earlier.

[25] See https://www.walkwithamal.org/ (accessed August 27, 2022).

[26] See https://www.walkwithamal.org/about-us/little-amal/ (accessed August 27, 2022).

[27] For a detailed survey of the history of positioning theory and a discussion of its relevance for narrative research, see Deppermann 2015. Inspired by social psychology, positioning approaches in narrative analysis investigate the nexus between processes of identity formation and narrative in various contexts (Bamberg 1997, 2004); recent work by Samuli Björninen, Mari Hatavara, and Maria Mäkelä (2020) discusses narrative positioning in political storytelling, including possible "dangers of narrative" (Mäkelä et al. 2021) as well as harmful effects of storytelling (see also Meretoja 2017, 2018; Nünning and Nünning 2017; Presser 2018; and Meretoja and Davis 2018). These approaches prove particularly beneficial when it comes to analyzing how storytellers position themselves vis-à-vis value-oriented and normative discourses as they engage in practices of vicarious storytelling.

[28] The metaphor of the level telling field is inspired by the sports metaphor of the level playing field, which refers to "a state or condition of parity or impartiality; a situation offering equality of opportunity or in which fairness to all parties is observed." This definition is from the Oxford English Dictionary; on the economic implications of level playing fields, see the working paper by Mahmood Messkoub (forthcoming).

[29] See https://www.oecd.org/trade/topics/levelling-the-playing-field/ (accessed August 27, 2022).

[30] For more information, see https://www.opportunitiesproject.eu/resources/manual (accessed August 27, 2022).

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