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Representations of War, Migration, and Refugeehood

Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Edited by
Daniel H. Rellstab and Christiane Schlote

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Christiane Schlote**

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Representations of War, Migration, and Refugeehood

War, migration, and refugeehood are inextricably linked, and the complex nature of all three phenomena offers profound opportunities for representation and misrepresentation. This volume brings together international contributors and practitioners from a wide range of fields, practices, and backgrounds to explore and problematize textual and visual inscriptions of war and migration in the arts, in the media, and in academic, public, and political discourses.

The essays in this collection address the academic and political interest in representations of the migrant and the refugee, and examine the constructed nature of categories and concepts such as "war," "refuge(e)," "victim," "border," "home," "non-place," and "dis/location." The contributing authors engage with some of the most pressing questions surrounding war, migration, and refugeehood as well as with the ways in which war and its multifarious effects and repercussions in society are being framed, propagated, glorified, or contested.

This volume initiates an interdisciplinary debate that reevaluates the relationship among war, migration, and refugeehood and their representations.

Daniel H. Rellstab teaches linguistics, intercultural communication, and semiotics at the University of Vaasa, Finland. He authored a study on Charles S. Peirce and wrote on language and identity in multilingual contexts. Recently, he coedited *Dialog und (Inter-)Kulturalität. Theorien, Konzepte, empirische Befunde* (with Simon Meier and Gesine L. Schiewer, 2014).

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Introduction

*Daniel H. Rellstab
and Christiane Schlote*

At the threshold of the twenty-first century, Eric Hobsbawm (2002) called the twentieth century “the most murderous century of which we have record.” Two industrialized world wars, exacerbated by innovations in transportation, communication, and weaponry, numerous wars fueled by the Cold War and violent conflicts induced by colonization and decolonization, all resulted in millions of deaths. Yet the expectations Hobsbawm (2002) voiced for the twenty-first century shortly after 9/11 were equally devastating: “armed violence, creating disproportionate suffering and loss, will remain omnipresent and endemic . . . in a large part of the world” and the “prospect of a century of peace is remote.” The map of the Conflict Barometer of the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research confirms Hobsbawm’s predictions. The map shows that violent conflicts are prevalent in many parts of the world and only the US, Canada, Western Europe, and Australia are represented as blank spots (Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research 2013, 12). These blank spots are particularly telling. As Jacques Derrida (2005, 155) pointed out in his analysis of the post-Cold War world, globalization, or *mondialization*, is “more inequalitarian and violent than ever” and is much “less global or worldwide as it seems.” It “concentrates into a small part of the human world so many natural resources, capitalist riches, technoscientific and even teletechnological powers” and only reserves military security for this small part. The blank spots are also deceptive, as the regions represented are also entangled in violent conflicts. The US, for example, remains engaged in its “war on terror” (Fischer 2014, 1; see also Rogers 2013). In 2013, the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations “administered fifteen peacekeeping missions and one special political mission in Afghanistan.” With almost 17,000 civilian and almost 100,000 uniformed personnel, they try to bring about reconciliation in conflicts across all five world regions (Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research 2013, 23). But, at most, their success only ever seems to be temporary.

Repercussions of violent conflicts have been equally far-reaching, especially in regard to forced migration and increasing numbers of refugees. For 2012, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR)

reported more than 35 million people of concern, including refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons. Most of these people live in South-west Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa, and many people are internally displaced with those countries bearing the largest burden of migration which are already affected by violence (UNHCR 2014). Although Western Europe, not least due to its geographical location close to the Middle East and the Maghreb, is also affected by the challenges of migration, it routinely reacts by passing more rigid immigration laws and practices against unauthorized immigration (di Giorgi 2010; Grewcock 2014; Lesinska 2014). The same applies to Australia's immigration policy. Here, according to the UNHCR (2014, 3), the public debate about asylum seekers arriving by boat has "the potential further to erode support for the institutions of asylum and the 1951 Refugee Convention"—an erosion that has already begun a long time ago. Likewise, the US, despite its motto *E pluribus unum* and its reputation as an "immigrant nation," has increasingly clamped down on undocumented migrants, especially since 9/11 (Douglas and Sáenz 2013).

Daily reports of ongoing wars, armed conflicts, natural disasters, and refugees and internally displaced persons crises from Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, and the Philippines to Somalia, Sudan, and Syria have accompanied the production of this volume. The Sicilian island of Lampedusa, in particular, as a tourist destination and as a traumatic site "that has witnessed the unsolicited arrival hundreds of dead bodies of asylum seekers and refugees who . . . have unceremoniously washed up on its shore," has become exemplary of an "epoch of simultaneity," which allows for the juxtaposition of "two absolutely dichotomous figures—the wealthy tourist from the Global North and the utterly disenfranchised refugee from the Global South—within the same geographical space" (Pugliese 2010, 105). This simultaneity also applies to representations and visualizations of war, migration, and refugeehood, which have been "almost as old as warfare itself: from ancient cave paintings" (Roger 2013, 17) to the television age. Yet the history of representations of war can also be read as a history of the growing awareness that war cannot be represented. Analyzing potential "crises of representation" in literary and media representations of war, Elaine Scarry has claimed that "thinking of modern wars in terms of . . . numbers is a desperate and futile gesture because their status as dead or injured bodies is conceptually irrecoverable or unimaginable in their materiality. They therefore resist meaningful figuration and representation" (quoted in Norris 2000, 3). In a similar vein, Margot Norris (2000, 5) has argued that even "in sincere and compassionate poetic and narrative strategies for representing mass killing, we find that omissions, repressions, disavowals, and displacements may inadvertently produce verbal or discursive violence to suffering populations."

Although these ethical concerns dominate today's discourses, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, relatively consistent rules dictated how to perceive war and how to represent war in narratives and images. However,

the aesthetics of battlefields, which became ever more complex, and weaponry which killed from and in a distance, made it impossible for the observer to grasp and report the “truth,” and the history of the classical observer came to an end (Köppen 2005). Since then there has been an increasing understanding that war eludes perception or, as Charles Baudelaire (1868, 298, emphasis in original) succinctly put it, “une bataille *vraie* n’est pas un tableau.”¹ The fundamental insight in the incapability of the observer to oversee complex battlefields and the dawning realization that the horrors of war called for specific means of representation led, for example, Baudelaire to appreciate Constantin Guys’s sketches of war (Köppen 2005, 143). These did not aim at objectivity, but exhibited an individual’s gaze at battlefields and their terrors. As Baudelaire declares, “No journal . . . no written record, no book could express so well this great epic of the Crimean War, in all its distressing detail and sinister breadth”² (1972, 410).

In World War I, an immense mediatization of the senses, brought about by the new technologies applied, took place. The experience of an industrialized war seemed to parallel avant-garde experiments and their destruction of syntactic coherence and central perspectives (Köppen 2005, 226–52). Yet the war experience also led to the insight that the “novel horrors” of war could not be depicted using a “traditional lexicon” (Black 2013, 1). As Arthur Schnitzler (1977, 220, translation by the authors) observed, “The lexicon of war is written by diplomats, the military and the rulers. It ought to be corrected by those returning from war, the widows, the orphans, the medical doctors and the poets.”³ At the same time, the warring parties discovered the power of moving images and commissioned it to raise the morale on the front lines and at home—in Germany, in Great Britain and in the United States (DeBauche 1997; Eberwein 2009, 18). Although early films could not reproduce “the roar of war” (Winter 2011, 102), they were powerful in that their images carried “a kind of authenticity, a surface realism,” and it was often the silence which provided the “visceral punch”: “One man is ‘hit’ and slides down the trench. Entirely silent, without any musical accompaniment, the scene had a staggering effect on the audience, many of whom had relatives serving in the war at that very moment. Women fainted; others cried out and had to be escorted from the cinema” (Winter 2011, 104). However, war movies and other representations of war were also seen as presenting a distorted view of war (DeBauche 1997), and the new medium lost its “innocence” very early on. The ambiguous power of representations of war became even more evident in World War II, a war of unprecedented cruelty, which was also fought using mass media and propagandistic strategies of representation on all fronts (Chadwick 2011; Köppen 2005, 315; Szasz 2009). Theodor Adorno decried the “total obliteration of the war by information, propaganda, commentaries . . . the mish-mash of enlightened manipulation of public opinion and oblivious activity” (2005, 55) and, in view of the Holocaust, made the famous comment that to “write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (1983, 34). According to Adorno

(2005, 54), World War II has transformed life into “a timeless succession of shocks, interspaced with empty, paralysed intervals.” Thus, representations of war and its repercussions are no longer possible. Nonetheless, after World War II, representations of war have increased a thousand-fold. Nowadays, literary, visual, and artistic images of war are “constantly generated in ever more explicit forms,” and they have become “essential to the economics of leisure and pleasure” (Gilsenan 2002, 101). Stories of wars are told on big and smaller screens (Conolly-Smith 2013; Winter 2011)—not only in the Western Hemisphere but throughout the world (Chapman 2008; Marples 2012; Wilson 2013). Representations of war pervade popular culture, such as video games (Schulzke 2013), (war) museums, theaters, and public spaces, where monuments and memorials remind us of the fallen and the deceased, of victory and defeat, and are used to construct and represent national identities (Gilsenan 2002, 100; Wodak and de Cilia 2007).

Representations of war also include representations of its most visible repercussions, such as refugees and migrants. Migration and refugee discourses play a vital role in the public sphere and are a regular part of daily news coverage (Khosravinik 2009; Montali et al. 2013; Van Dijk 2012). In the humanities, there has also been an increasing interest in the figure of the refugee and the asylum seeker and their representations (see, e.g., Bayraktar 2012; Berger and Komori 2010; Carey-Thomas 2012; Donn 2013; Farrier 2013; Gavarini 2011; Woolley 2014). As Liisa Malkki (1995, 497) has shown, there “is no ‘proto-refugee’ of which the modern refugee is a direct descendant,” and the refugee “as a specific social category and legal problem of global dimensions” has only emerged during World War II, largely due to the establishment of refugee camps and administrative procedures as key elements of standardized means of power. In this context, it is important to note that conventional notions of the refugee as dehistoricized (Malkki 1996) can be perpetuated and intensified exactly in and through those moments when they are being represented. In his study of selected refugee narratives in Norway, Stephen Dobson (2004, 23–24) has defined “refugeeness” as a process in which “refugees in exile are the source of hybrid exile cultures, founded existentially, through ontologically valued choices, which give rise to different ways of Being” and emphasized that, as importantly, this “entails changing conceptions of self” and “boundary experiences.” Escape, exile, and migration belong to some of humankind’s oldest experiences and are, as scholars have argued, “the ‘normal’ state of affairs” in the field of Migration Studies. An awareness of the historical dimension of refugeeness can thus help to reconceptualize “images of displacement as an anomaly in the life of an otherwise . . . stable . . . society” (Essed, Frerks, and Schrijvers 2004, 3).

Just as these concepts are context-specific and as “the memories of the two World Wars can be perceived as fundamental crossroads revealing contested traces of the same event” (Lamberti 2009, 4), in the Saidian sense, representations of war, migration, and refugeehood are also always

misrepresentations, because they are “embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer” (Said 1979, 272). On one hand, we have, as Jacques Derrida (2006, xviii) pointed out, a responsibility to the victims, “the ghosts” of war, the victims of “political or other kinds of violence” in that “to give or return a voice” may at least keep the possibility of justice open (2006, 211). On the other hand, this responsibility is situated within the larger framework of well-known critical and ethical debates concerning the “rhetoric of violence” (De Lauretis 1987, 32) and “the violence of representation” (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 1989, 9). “What scope is there, then, for writers and artists to assert a positive role,” when violence and terror can already be found in the very “acts of creating and imagining?” (Berendse and Williams, 2002, 15–16). In this context, Michael Gilson (2002, 102) speaks of a “pornography or voyeurism of violence” and, in a similar vein, the editors of *Violence in American Drama: Essays on Its Staging, Meanings and Effects* ask, “Is violence itself despicable only or is its representation even more despicable? What is more callous, a violent act or the often-desperate need some people have to represent it, record it, or perhaps the voracious need of others to consume it?” (Muñoz, Romero, and Muñoz Martínez 2011, 6).

In contrast to previous studies, and in the true sense of the verb *confer* (from Latin *conferre*, “to bring together, compare, debate”), this volume brings together international contributors and practitioners from a wide range of fields, practices, and backgrounds to explore and problematize literary and visual representations of war, migration, and its actors in the arts, in the media, and in academic, public, and political discourses. Contributions from the fields of the arts (applied theater, drama, film, photography), linguistics, literature, and media and postcolonial studies engage with some of the most pressing questions surrounding war, migration, and refugeehood and the various ways in which war and its multifarious effects and repercussions are framed, propagated, sold, glorified, and contested. This interdisciplinary approach is based on the belief that, what Norris (2000, xv) has called the incommensurability of “warfare and innovative art,” requires an approach that enables a discovery of cross-connections among different disciplines. Despite the fact that a concept like interdisciplinarity seems “to defy definition,” Julie Thompson Klein (1990, 11) has identified the following objectives as in need of interdisciplinary work, including “to answer complex questions,” “to address broad issues,” “to explore disciplinary and professional relations,” and “to solve problems that are beyond the scope of any one discipline.” Corinna Delkeskamp (quoted in Klein 1990, 41) has defined the concept as pertaining to the following arguments: a “common interest in an object of study, social concerns . . . and an ethical concern for the contrast between ideal and actual academic humanism in university structures.” Importantly, there is “no single pattern of disciplinary interactions” apart from “a common pattern of justification—that of ‘necessity’ or ‘complexity’” (Klein 1990, 44). The interdisciplinary pattern employed in