

Anja Tröger. Affective Spaces: Migration in Scandinavian and German Transnational Narratives

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Anja Tröger. *Affective Spaces: Migration in Scandinavian and German Transnational Narratives*. Cambridge: Legenda, 2021. 181 pages. ISBN: 978-1-83954-013-4

As repeated waves of migration have washed over the countries of northern Europe for roughly the past six decades, politicians and the media have paid considerable attention to economic impacts, political ideologies, and policy discussions, but relatively little to the experiences of the migrants themselves. Instead, literary texts have risen to the challenge of exploring some of the ways migration, with its various attendant challenges and opportunities, plays out for individuals, families, and ethnic groups. Yet while each of the Nordic societies and their European neighbors has grappled with immigration and integration issues in nationally specific ways, important commonalities across borders connect and define migrants' experiences. Comparative scholarship on literary depictions of migration is unfortunately rare, but Anja Tröger's debut book, *Affective Spaces: Migration in Scandinavian and German Transnational Narratives* (2021), makes an insightful contribution to this emerging discursive field. Tröger accomplishes the impressive feat of discussing twelve literary treatments of the topic, published between 2011 and 2017, from four national traditions—Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Germany—in fewer than two hundred pages. In order to manage this, Tröger maintains a tight focus on the affective experiences and relationships of the fictional characters in the texts, which also enables her to contrast the effects of specific national policies and attitudes towards migrants in these neighboring northern European countries quite vividly.

Many of the twelve texts Tröger discusses—three each in German, Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish, respectively—were written by emerging authors with migrant backgrounds and depict migrants from foreign countries, while a few by established Nordic writers flip the lens around to focus on Scandinavians' reactions to foreigners at home and abroad. In each novel, the reader is invited to step into someone else's shoes, to identify with the abstract Other who is either a victim or agent of marginalization and discrimination. Each grouping of texts addresses a different aspect of the migratory experience, from initial displacement through the second, postmigrant generation. The author's goal with this approach is, she notes, to "gain deeper insights into 'the big picture'" of migration in Nordic and German societies (165) and to critique those societies' failures with regard to individual and structural racism, thereby calling the widely lauded notions of Scandinavian exceptionalism and happiness into question. Tröger opens the conversation with a discussion of Jonas Hassen Khemiri's well-known exchange with Swedish Justice Minister Beatrice Ask in

2013, in which he offers to trade skins and experiences with her in order to give her insight into the “policies and practices of exclusion, processes of othering, and the disparate distribution of precarity in the context of migration” (2). In the remainder of the introduction, Tröger sets up her conceptual paradigms of transnational flows, liminal zones, and affective responsibility.

Throughout the book, which is based on her PhD thesis at the University of Edinburgh, Tröger uses affect theory as her primary tool for unpacking fictional descriptions of migrants’ experiences and drawing conclusions about the consequences of those experiences for individuals and societies. In contextualizing her choice of theoretical lens, Tröger explains that affect informs the experience of integration into a social group or national community, endorsing Sara Ahmed’s assertion that “‘how we feel about others is what aligns us with a collective,’ or, equally alienates us from this very collective” (165). Aside from a few places where “affect” and “effect” appear to be interchanged, Tröger’s theoretical framework is clear, effectively articulated, and consistently applied.

Each text grouping explores a different aspect of affect by placing texts from different countries about similar stages of migration in dialogue with each other. In chapter 1, Tröger contrasts Akos Doma’s German-language text *Der Weg der Wünsche* [The Way of the Wishes] (2016) with Johannes Anyuru’s Swedish-language text *En storm kom från paradiset* (2012) [*A Storm Blew in From Paradise*, 2019], examining the political problems and personal motivations of the refugees and the violence they experience while in transit. In chapter 2, Tröger uses Alen Mešković’s Danish-language text *En mandstelt* [A Tent for One] (2016) and Abbas Khider’s German-language text *Ohrfeige* (2016) [*A Slap in the Face*, 2019] to illuminate border crossings and the quest for asylum within a context of national and transnational power relations. Chapter 3 shifts perspective to look, in Vigdis Hjorth’s Norwegian novel *Snakk til meg* [Talk to Me] (2011) and Kirsten Thorup’s Danish novel *Tilfældets gud* (2011) [*The God of Chance*, 2014], at Scandinavian characters interacting with and fetishizing individuals they encounter abroad and whom they perceive as Other. Similarly, in chapter 4, Tröger’s focus is on Scandinavian characters—in Aasne Linnestå’s Norwegian novel *Opphold* [Residence] (2014), Negar Naseh’s Swedish novel *De fördrivna* [The Displaced] (2016), and Lone Aburas’ Danish novel *Politisk roman* [Political Novel] (2013)—who must grapple with their affective responsibility toward migrants in their own neighborhoods. In the final chapter, Tröger examines Zeshan Shakar’s Norwegian-language text *Tante Ulrikkes vei* [Our Street] (2017), Senthuran Varatharajah’s German-language text *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen* [Before the Increase of the Signs] (2016), and Pooneh Rohi’s Swedish-language text *Araben* [The Arab] (2014) in order to both describe the postmigrant characters’ relationships to the societies in which they live and trace their affective engagement with those societies and their inherited cultures.

On the whole, Tröger does an outstanding job outlining the contours of the migratory experience for the displaced characters in these texts and probing the

affective practices that serve to demarcate otherness and vulnerability, most notably the sense of liminality that pervades the migratory journeys depicted in the texts. While the author's analysis of these textual representations of migration and (attempted) integration is skillful and compelling, however, it would have been helpful if she had also considered possible tensions and discrepancies between these fictional depictions of migration and integration and the actual conditions and policies in the Nordic countries and Germany. Such a grounding of the narratives would have done much to provide context for the affective experiences depicted in the texts and open the door for real-life discussions about pluralization and marginalization in northern European societies and cultures. Still, the inescapable similarities between the refugee camps, deportation processes, and rhetorical othering depicted in the texts and reported on in Nordic and German media underscore the validity of Tröger's arguments about unequal power structures, precarity, and moral obligations.

By revealing how these texts expose the limitations and blind spots of the much-vaunted happiness of the Nordic countries, Tröger demonstrates how the texts aim to increase their readers' affective engagement and sense of responsibility for the migrants they encounter. The texts give voice to marginalized characters, "give them a literary platform, and ... refute the notion that they are rendered invisible and inaudible" (169), undermining stereotypes and preconceptions by enabling the reader to identify with migrant and postmigrant characters of many different stripes. Moreover, Tröger argues that the texts she discusses can also "be viewed as supporting a transnational incentive by visualizing the undiminished ascendancy of borders...and embodied boundaries" (168). She concludes by citing Zygmunt Bauman's admonition that "conversation will remain the royal road to agreement and so to peaceful and mutually beneficial, cooperative, and solidary coexistence" (171). Amidst the divisive fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing global migration crisis, Tröger's book offers a helpful, concrete path to addressing egregious harms perpetrated, consciously and unconsciously, against some of the most vulnerable members of the human community.

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