

Imagined Migrations, Transmitted Knowledges

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Abstract:

Configurations of Migration, edited by Jennifer Leetsch, Frederike Middelhoff, and Miriam Wallraven, links media representations of migration with knowledge about migration. In the form of a selection of articles, interviews, short stories, and personal essays collected from an online conference in 2021, the book presents a wide range of perspectives on migration. It enriches the field of migration studies by giving voice to a diverse range of writers, scholars, and artists from around the world.

Imaginierte Migrationen, übertragenes Wissen

German Abstract:

Configurations of Migration, herausgegeben von Jennifer Leetsch, Frederike Middelhoff und Miriam Wallraven, verknüpft mediale Darstellungen von Migration mit Wissen über Migration. In Form einer Auswahl von Artikeln, Interviews, Kurzgeschichten und persönlichen Essays, die auf einer Online-Konferenz im Jahr 2021 zusammen getragen wurden, präsentiert das Buch ein breites Spektrum an Perspektiven auf Migration. Es bereichert das Feld der Migrationsstudien, indem es eine Vielzahl von Schriftsteller_innen, Wissenschaftler_innen und Künstler_innen aus aller Welt zu Wort kommen lässt.

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Migration studies have taken on a new importance in light of the many rhetoric about migrants in the world. *Configurations of Migration* aims to reconcile the abstract and theoretical academic work on migration with real-life migration knowledges. As stated in the introduction of the book, Leetsch et al. understand migration knowledges “not only as knowledge about migration [...] but also as knowledges produced by migrants themselves in an actor centred ‘history-from-below’ approach” (p. 6). The book is divided into three sections: *Visualizing Migration*, *Writing Migration*, and *Performing Migration*. Each section contains several articles tackling a form of media dealing with migration. The book’s definition of migration covers a broad range of topics and time periods: from German political refugees in France in the 18th and 19th centuries, to migration waves during the Yugoslav wars in the 20th century, to Syrian refugees in Turkey today.

In the introduction, the book sets out to link migration imaginaries and medial representation with migration knowledge. These migration imaginaries are constituted through different forms of cultural expression, such as literary text, visual art, theatre and film, etc. (p. 3–4). Through defining migration knowledges and migration imaginaries, the book aims to offer new perspectives on migration and render them more intelligible. The result is a mixed success. The book, which is a selection of articles, interviews, short stories, and personal essays collected from an online conference in 2021, is successful in giving voice to migrants and showing the influence of cultural productions on migration knowledge. However, it fails to cohesively link all the different chapters together, due to the different topics and formats included in the book. In the first section, “*Visualizing Migration*,” the focus is on representing the migrant. This section explores the work of Charles Landvreugd and Mieke Bal through interviews with them, as well as the perception, representation, and impact of images of migrants. What this section

achieves is questioning how the representation and positioning of migrants in film, performance, and images contributes to their perception by the audience and the wider world. It discusses how framing the migrant is important for transmitting the knowledge about their circumstances and how that framing must contend with stereotyping and pre-existing power relations while simultaneously employing empathy and understanding towards the migrant.

The third section, “Performing Migration,” supplements the work of the first section by expanding on medial representation of migration and the knowledge presented through them. This is particularly highlighted in chapters 13 and 14, “Performing Migration” by Burcu Dogramaci and “Walking the Land” by Jennifer Leetsch respectively. The two articles inform the reader of the history of migrant workers in Germany and the connection of Black migrants in the UK to the land. The chapters discuss two different forms of media: *Inventur-Metzstrasse 11* (1975), a video piece by Zelimir Zilnik and *Black Men Walking* (2018), a play written by Andy Brooks and directed by Dawn Walton. Investigating how the history of two often unseen groups of migrants has contributed to the world around them is a valuable contribution to migration studies, moving away from the abstract perception of migrants to the reality and humanity within the land they are part of.

However, the book’s second section, “Writing Migration,” strays away from the theme of migration knowledge and imaginaries in that it broadens the scope of the concept. Frederike Middelhoff’s “The Most Outcast *Réfugié!*”, Kai Wiegandt’s “Western Migrants in Hong Kong,” and Katrin Dennerlein’s “Knowledges and Morals: Narrating Consequences of Colonial Migration in Uwe Timm’s *Morenga* (1978)” offer alternative perceptions of migration. Middelhoff’s chapter discusses French refugees to Germany in the 18th century, while Dennerlein’s and Wiegandt’s chapters present migration from the point of view of colonizing persons. In contrast to the rest of the chapters, Dennerlein’s and Wiegandt’s articles do not discuss the disadvantaged position of the migrant, especially as the main characters of the novels analysed are not victims of forced migration. The two chapters are not informative of migration as much as informing of the perception of migration from the point of view of a privileged character; the knowledge transferred through these novels is not concerned with the migrant, but with the colonial anxiety and perception of the colonies, which contradicts the attempts at giving voice to migrants themselves.

The contributions to the book offer diverse, engaging, and informative perspectives on migration despite their broad and differing subject matters. The book's inclusion of short stories, personal essays, and interviews alongside academic articles adds to the diversity of migration knowledges. Yet that also contributes to the lack of a cohesive structure that makes it difficult to link the chapters together, even as they are connected through the concept of migration. This is owed to the fact that the book broadens the concept of migration, through perspectives, geographies, and time periods. This is not helped by the different writing styles and languages included in the chapters, a predictable outcome considering the various contributors to the book. Nonetheless, the book remains a valuable source for multiple topics in migration studies, and succeeds in including voices and views, academic and otherwise, that transcend "Western comfort zones" (p. 221), delivering on its promise of linking migration imaginaries with knowledges of migration.