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Reimagining Centrality in Cătălin Dorian Florescu's Short Stories

Abstract: Cătălin Dorian Florescu's main tropes had been traditionally confined to the stylistic regime of the novel until 2017, when he opted for a short stories format in his volume *Der Nabel der Welt*. My paper will investigate the themes and dynamics of Florescu's dialect of displacement, cultural transfer and the search for a homeland in this collection of short stories, while also paying close attention to the framework of diasporic identity as it was projected in his earlier works. Drawing on contemporary theories concerning displacement and diasporas, my contribution seeks to explore the specific manner in which these issues calibrate Florescu's original perspective of what it means to have a coherent individual identity against the fragile background of a European one.

Keywords: Displacement; Migration; Postmigration; Homeland; Postcommunism.

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A Writer of the "In-Between"

Cătălin Dorian Florescu's only volume of collected short stories, *In the Navel of the World* (2019) is a compact version of his main themes, developed throughout his oeuvre: identity and its fractures, homecoming and alienation, the search for personal truth, migration to the West, separation from the homeland and, ultimately, clashes of apparently irreconcilable world-views. Like many of his previous books, this one is rooted in personal experience – Florescu left communist Romania with his family in the 1980s, as they emigrated to Switzerland, where he would later become an acclaimed writer. Included among the writers of "the Eastern turn" of German-language literature, Cătălin Dorian Florescu is also a writer ceaselessly seeking the essential meaning of notions such as belonging, home, migration and cultural transfer. He is, in fact, part of a larger phenomenon, one that involves a new wave of writers coming from the former communist bloc, who made a lasting impression on the contemporary imagination of German-language prose¹. Along with other important names, such as Saša Stanišić, Katja Petrowskaja, Ilija Trojanow, Florescu helped shed new light on post-communist

Eastern Europe in the context of the new challenges the European space had to face since the turn of the new century. German and literary studies scholars such as Brigid Haines wrote of an “Eastern turn”² of German-language literature, signaling the growing influence these authors have on the contemporary canon.

However, as Valentina Glajar notes, writers from Eastern Europe writing in German have not been the subject of critical attention in earlier decades³. I shall explore Cătălin Dorian Florescu's short stories from his only volume of the genre, *In the Navel of the World*, focusing on his strategies to reveal the complex realities that shape the ethics and aesthetics of the newly established contacts between spaces and communities that share common grounds but diverge in economic dynamics, mentalities and social opportunities. Florescu contributed to a certain refinement of the concept of a “turn”, be it Eastern European, or, from a vaster perspective, simply post-communist.

When she discussed the emergence of a Turkish dimension in German literature, Leslie Andelson noted that we could also sense certain characteristics of the historical period in which these changes occur, that is the 1990s: “the epoch is characterized by categorical disorientation and historic re-orientation”⁴. During that decade, Germany was transitioning from a state of division to one of unification, the effects of globalization became visible and Turkish migration began to articulate a space and dialect of its own in German-language literature. The Turkish turn that Andelson dissects in her 2005 analysis is relevant in this exploration of Florescu's fiction because it is the conceptual environment in which radically

different traditions, ethnicities and cultures connect (European/non-European, Christian/Muslim). Migrants from Communist countries are European, but they bear the mark of a radical difference to Western Europeanness that makes them foreign, outsiders. Florescu does not fixate upon the typologies that suit his autobiographical experience, but includes a wide array of characters that challenge the fluid archetype of the migrant. In his short stories, the diversity of characters adds depth to the generic framework in which the narratives develop – from migrants in search of a home, fleeing war or trying to build a future further from violence or immediate threat to young people trying to escape a hopelessly poor and uncertain homeland, Florescu's protagonists are, first and foremost, bearers of the distinctive stigma of alienation. The navel of the world, the volume's classical reference and central allegory is, quite literally, everywhere but home. Elusive and dangerously appealing, this geographical aleph redefines centrality in relation to escaping or fleeing an oppressive context. In a comprehensive Foreword opening his volume, Florescu revealed that the short stories had been written over a period of sixteen years, spanning an important part of his career. The subtext of this detail implies that the writing of these stories coincides with the creative process underlying his better-known novels, from *A Time of Wonders* (2002) to *Jacob Decides to Love* (2011) or *The Man Who Brings Happiness* (2018). The short genre is conducive to the accurate display of the many plots and characters this thematic nexus involves – Florescu's protagonists diverge in many aspects, but are united in their experience of migration, displacement and an often desperate search for a new home.

In a clear departure from his rather strict gallery of Eastern European protagonists, Florescu suggests that Europe has recently become the destination chosen by migrants from the Middle East or Asia, too. This opens new avenues of interpretation, as the dynamic element of this new wave of migration implies a different kind of triggering conflict. However, this doesn't alter the fundamental dimension of the phenomenon, one that involves, as Katarzyna Jerzak argues, "a doubled perception of reality"⁵. In this sense, the displaced, or, to use Jerzak's term, the exile, is split between home and the new country in a manner that is determined by an entire world that they carry along with them on their journey. "Unaccommodated and dissatisfied"⁶, those seeking a better life in Western Europe cannot escape their fundamental condition – they must see their new life through the lens of their memory and their past, unable to carve their future outside the mental framework of their former lives. The writer highlights this point by referring to an emblematic image of what migration means in the essential terms of his book: one of his most expressive characters is the protagonist of *Russian Roulette*, a short story focusing on the inner turmoil of a young man who cannot find his place, whose entire existence is determined by a permanent need to explore new paths and opportunities. Despite his drive to break away from his former life, he is, in Florescu's term, stranded, as if the victim of a shipwreck. He is one of the many travelers reaching the European shores of the Mediterranean, and, in a certain sense, his arrival is not a triumph. The nine stories explore, in painful detail, the depth of this metaphor: being stranded

on the promising shores of Europe signals a double failure – to stay at home or to overcome the challenges of an arrival to a foreign shore. As Roxana Rogobete noted⁷, migration could bear a double meaning – a search for prosperity and for a new Heimat. It is an experience that implies a dialogue, a connection between identity and otherness that is inherent to the search for a new, improved life. The journey implied by migration is not defined by the sole purpose of reshaping one's sense of home, but also by the significant encounters along the way and the endless mirroring into the essential substance of alterity.

Seeking Refuge and a New Homeland: Florescu's Nine Stories

One of the elements that certify Florescu's ability to recalibrate autobiography and his own experience as a migrant from Eastern Europe to the West is the recurrent presence of childhood and adolescence. In the first story, *In the Navel of the World*, he recounts his experience of fleeing communist Romania with his family, and arriving in Switzerland, a land of great promise and prosperity they feel deeply alienated from. The father takes the role of the displaced immigrant, remembering the complex journey of the family and the paradoxical meaning of their departure. The son, Florescu's fictional alter-ego, comments, upon seeing his father insist on preserving pre-emigration habits, such as listening to Radio Free Europe: "...there was no reason to be nostalgic, because nostalgia simply wasn't part of the plan. Nostalgia is the price that only gets added once you are stuck. In Switzerland, for example"⁸. The family, however, was not stuck in Switzerland, but in a

chronotope that suspended time and space and allowed them to return to significant moments that had shaped their personal memory of the past. Their need to preserve rituals (such as listening to Radio Free Europe) and to revisit the moment they fled Romania for the West – that fateful August morning in 1982, when they left their apartment, established a symbolic landmark they would permanently return to. Fleeing communist Romania was the ultimate collective fantasy for Easter-Europeans behind the Iron Curtain, and Florescu reaffirmed its biographical centrality on numerous occasions: “I can no longer remember if I regretted our departure or if I wished for it. If I was afraid. If I chose myself. It was a sequence of events, nothing more, and in this instance, memory fails. Maybe it was even a little bit exciting. Me, a little fellow traveler”⁹. The now-adult narrator implicitly refers to his childhood perspective from *A Time of Wonders*, where the same event is narrated from an infantile point of view. The presence of the father strengthens the suggestion that events bear different meanings at different ages and that memory is shaped by the impact these moments have on individual consciousness. The experience of fleeing a communist country with closed borders, controlled by a repressive totalitarian regime proved cardinal and transformative for the protagonist's father. The story revolves around the notion of internalizing the immigrant experience, as both characters, father and son, reveal their feelings toward their new homeland with a mixture of irony, nostalgia and regret – the past reveals itself as the inexorable matrix of their present life, the determining cause of the insurmountable abyss separating their former lives and those left behind.

“‘The navel of the world, boy,’ Father says, ‘the navel of the world. We got lucky’”¹⁰. Despite this apparently perfect match between the immigrants and their new home, the fine suture lines of the symbolic transplant are still visible. They speak the language, despite some minor remnants of their foreignness – “the rolling Rs”¹¹. Yet “the problem is you don't want to stand out yourself. Standing out, not belonging. A permanent stay in a foreign zone. Illegality in perpetuity. For eighteen years already”¹². Some asperities are permanent, despite their constant efforts to minimize their effect, reminding of Said's observations concerning the “unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place”¹³. Language, in this sense, remains cardinal not only in revealing their origins but in articulating a sentimental dimension rooted in the belief in a necessary simultaneity between language and feeling. “You say “I love you” and feel nothing. You say “I hate you” and feel nothing. You only feel something once you translate it inside. Into the language of your childhood. Into the language in which Father cursed and the first girl desired me. If you still feel nothing, even then, you're lost”¹⁴.

One of Florescu's recurring themes, explored at large in a separate short story, *I Must Germany*, is the symbolic locus of the border, delimiting worlds and separating historical itineraries. He reflects on the perilous adventure of crossing the border during communism, as many died trying to flee the country, shot on the border by armed guards. “This particular sensitivity to borders”¹⁵ becomes, in this narrative based on oppositions, an ontological issue. Florescu also creates an arch over time – the same border that separated worlds before

the fall of communism does the same three decades later. The former political migrants from Eastern Europe are replaced by others, from Asia and war-torn countries, seeking refuge from violent, life-threatening conflicts. The ongoing process of receiving immigrants is disguised by Florescu into a historical flow that signals the fact that the role and significance of borders are ever shifting, changing their meaning in different historical contexts.

I Must Germany focuses on the monotonous, predictable life of a young police officer working at the border guard. Once the boundary of the Iron Curtain, the Romanian border is now the gate to the European Union and its promise of peace and prosperity. Although firmly advised by his family to emigrate to the West, officer Șerban seems less enthusiastic. His mother has already left for Austria, where she works as a caretaker for elders, but he appears too patriotic and attached to the ideals of his noble mission: "We are protecting a truly special border, not just a random one, but the external border of the EU. Not all colleagues have this opportunity. [...] We are the last barrier that holds the flood"¹⁶. Badea, his overzealous work colleague who turned in his own fugitive brother to the Communist authorities when he tried to flee the country, is more likely to cultivate such arduous patriotism, when, as Șerban admits "in fact, Badea and I are just sitting in the car for a long time, hidden in a small forest, and we keep staring"¹⁷. The story proposes a complex narrative that is both static and elaborately dramatic, as it revolves around the metaphor attached to the concept of border, also implying a limit, a boundary and a crossing point that neither protagonist dares to overcome. The

semantics of entering and exiting Romania are also challenged, proposing a critical perspective on the historical dimension of the no man's land between countries and political regions. Both officers have been "gatekeepers" to a world of promise and hope, yet both failed in fulfilling their role. Șerban's lack of will could be read as an ironic response to the demise of the mirage of the border in communism – leaving the country for a better life in the West has proved its limits and drawbacks. Moreover, his lack of enthusiasm suggests that younger generations have become disillusioned with the dream of emigration, given the essential identity fracture such a decision entails.

Șerban finds himself in the unexpected position to be faced with a Syrian refugee fleeing his country for Germany. He has lost his family in a shipwreck as they all tried to reach Europe by boat. Slow-paced and atmospheric, the short story reaches unexpected levels of dramatic tension. The Syrian man must reach Germany at any cost: to save his life, to honor a promise made to his family, to find a peaceful environment in which he could survive. De-centered, Florescu's protagonist mirrors the generic state his characters find themselves in. Their strive for certainty and stability, doubled by a sense of belonging and purpose highlight just the immediate terms of their crisis. Whether they experience migration directly or they search for a new country and home, those who undergo this process are witnesses to one of today's defining challenges – that of uprootedness, displacement and shifting identities. The cardinal metaphor of the "navel of the world" signals the split meaning of a lost home and the desire to find a

space bearing the imagined, pre-conceived qualities of a center. Florescu challenges the spatial hierarchies implied by the former historical order imposed by the East/West divide in the era of the Iron Curtain by signaling an obvious shift: once again, migration changed its scope and meaning. If apparently it is still driven by the desire for a better, more secure life, recent migrations reshaped the topography that ultimately welcomed them. Europe has changed into a social and geographical structure in which centers and peripheries are interconnected, constantly aiming for a fundamentally democratic political environment and, with a few exceptions, comparable living standards. If, as John Neubauer argued, "each East-Central European communist regime forced its own pattern of exile and emigration"¹⁸, on the surface, migrants coming to Europe from other continents appear as a homogenous entity. It is not a coincidence that Florescu presents them as a large, amorphous group emerging from the ships stranded in Silt – they exist solely as a group, a collective noun effacing individual identity.

Europe as the Promised Land

Read today, one might find it surprising yet timely that Florescu articulates a critique that asks difficult questions about Europeaness and foreignness, trying to discern between the many layers involved by the puzzling equation of identity. These questions might open new avenues of reading and interpretation, if we were to consider Florescu's short stories a type of literature that explores postmigration. As it was explained by Moritz Schramm, "the term postmigration does not refer to an

end of migration, but rather to the general impact that earlier and ongoing migration movements have had on society, and on culture and the arts in particular"¹⁹.

"The postmigrant condition", much like "the Eastern turn", are notions that define particular aspects of the phenomenon that shaped mentalities and the collective imagination of recent decades. This concept was first used in 2004 by theater director Shermin Langhoff. Together with his collaborators, Kira Kosnick, Martina Priessner and Tunçay Kulao lu, they discussed it in two distinct circumstances – first, during a film festival, in 2004, then two years later, at an interdisciplinary film and theater festival – 'Beyond Belonging' at the Hebbel am Ufer theatre in Berlin. In a consistent theoretical approach to this acutely contemporary issue, Anne Ring Petersen, Moritz Schramm and Frauke Wiegand note that it was conceived as "a discursive tool to voice a cultural critique and political protest against the exclusion of migrants and their descendants from contemporary art and culture in Germany"²⁰. The notion of "migrantization", central to the postmigrant condition, operates a significant transfer: it turns the migrant into the target of hostility, suspicion and prejudice. The art forms that embraced this phenomenon, especially theater, elicited a positive response from the public, signaling the ongoing interest in these issues animating today's social and political spectrum.

Issues such as otherness and alienation, the fear and rejection of migrants, perceived as a threat to the collective ideal of peacefulness and prosperity are central to many of Florescu's fictions, but they become prevalent in *Shipwreck* and *The Old Woman's Eyes*. The arrival of migrants on

the shores of Sylt, an exclusive, luxurious resort in Northern Germany, is constructed like a mythological scene describing the descent of aliens from other worlds. Florescu's irony is subtle yet penetrating, oscillating between humorous accents and a transparent critique of Western Europe's stance toward migration. The "invasion", as it is perceived by the privileged guests of the utopic island, was preceded by a supernatural, mystical moment, traditionally announcing divine acts or phenomena impacting an entire civilization – the church icons started weeping, warning of a biblical descent. The narrative capitalizes on this mystical dimension, while a subversive, secondary narrative voice exposes the limits of empathy and hospitality Western Europe has long cultivated at grassroot. The implicit Christian dimension, founded on a moral ideology of compassion, is undermined by a rejection of otherness, rooted in an overtly manifested isolationist individualism. Dialogues such as this are revelatory – Hauke, the messenger of the Sylt guests sent to inspect the shoreline and the menacing ships approach, reports:

– Wherever the money is, there's also the devil. Where there's no money, well, he's still there, but twice as much, he murmured, as if to himself. Then he spoke louder: There aren't hundreds of them. People sighed in relief. There's thousands. I went from ship to ship and counted around two thousand people. And these were just the Hörnum ships.

– Ok, but who are they? someone else shouted.

– Refugees. Refugees arriving by sea, as they are called. Somali, Ethiopians,

Tunisians, the whole of Africa is here. I've never heard of the countries these people are coming from.²¹

Florescu alludes to a reverted form of colonialism, reminiscent of the conquest of the Americas at the end of the fifteenth century: "...there, in the open sea, was an entire fleet with all ships aligned like pearls in a string, probably reaching Westerland and further. The ships were one near another, with the long part facing the shore"²². The sheer amazement at the "invasion" turns the scene into an almost magical-realist moment:

People reached out their arms to the sea, and all were calling out the same thing. Men with large stomachs and women with wrinkled, dried out faces, dog owners, couples in love, loners, fishermen, artists, entrepreneurs, waiters and chambermaids, naked and clothed people of course, dentists, lawyers and an entire group of children from the homes near Hörnum. They were all shouting: "What is this?"²³

The initial allusions to conflict and violence gradually softens into a tonality of failure and regret – the encounter is not a clash of civilizations, but a missed opportunity to welcome those affected by poverty, war and genocide. Rich Europeans on vacation and migrants in rags, hungry and rejected by all, these are the notions that paint one of Europe's many contemporary faces. Florescu's critique echoes a dramatic meaning of reversed colonialism – migration invites to a revision of the concept of Europeaness, of the core values at the foundation of the European Union and

the late echoes of colonial conquest and domination. The alleged destruction of the Sansibar restaurant illustrates the power of prejudice and the accurate reflection of Europe's limited understanding of otherness. Two Silt guests debate who is to be blamed for the incident, whether it was the hungry mob of migrants or restaurant guests panicking at the shock of the arrival of migrants. In a visible subtext, Europeans are driven to destroy their emblematic establishments of wellbeing in order to symbolically defend them from migrants. The bleak atmosphere and the heavy conceptual baggage of this story earns it a double metaphoric connection to the notion of centrality – not only does it rely on the thematic arch of seeking a home, a new center (or “navel”, as it were) of the world, but it also reflects, in a condensed form, many of the volume's evident allegories, becoming a center that other stories gravitate around.

Alienation, radical change, the loneliness and dramatic inner shifts migration implies are some of the notions explored in *Wedding Night*, a short story focusing on a particular type of migration – matrimonial “tourism”, a well-established practice that gives bachelors from Western Europe the opportunity to travel to Eastern countries to meet potential future spouses. A Swiss man named Urs and a Romanian young woman from Drobeta Turnu-Severin, a rather small, underdeveloped city by the Danube, meet and agree to enter a process of courtship that might ultimately lead to marriage. Nora has doubts, though. Urs is neither rich nor attractive, and a life in a foreign country with a man she didn't love was less than appealing. Her prospects at home were even less promising, and the family counted on her marriage to elevate

their living standards. The frugal Urs, whose name they used to mock (it means “bear” in Romanian) gave them small gifts and bought them a new TV set. Florescu's implicit critique of the East/West divide involves the way in which wealth and prosperity are quantified. Economic inequality and the inevitable living standard gap between Romania and Switzerland become a source of irony – Urs makes videos of his rather modest apartment and its furnishings, trying to impress Nora and her family. He boasted about the new symbolic geography of social success, mentioning Zurich's shopping boulevard, Bahnhofstraße, but mistaking Nora's name for Rita's, another woman he had been courting:

Unfortunately you can't see Bahnhofstraße. It is one of the most expensive commercial streets in Europe, all those who have plenty to spend come here. But there is some left for mere mortals. And it is not a little. Rita and I will go shopping there. Not Rita, Nora and I, I mean. The first thing I'm going to show her is Bahnhofstraße. She will be amazed. Everyone does this when they have someone visiting from abroad, they show them Bahnhofstraße.²⁴

Switzerland is the promised land, and Urs' gifts are proof of Nora's elevated living standard if she agreed to marry him. They (who) actively encourage her to overcome her fears and hesitations and accept his marriage proposal, yet as the departure day approaches, the more alienated and lonely she feels. An overpowering crisis looms large, and she doubts her ability to leave her country and family behind for an

uncertain future with a foreigner whom she feels disconnected from.

The Night's Last Client is set in Romania (although the name of the country is only suggested), narrating moments from the difficult, marginal life of street children, most of them exploited by local criminal mob that abuse them by forcing them to beg and steal. This is a separate country, one that "for many, (it) doesn't exist"²⁵, a hopeless territory that is both real and imagined. The last stories dwell on a particular type of the miraculous, of the uncanny reunion of characters and circumstances that framework the multiple meanings of deterritorialization and the search for a coherent, consolidated relation to a space that offers the certainties of a homeland and a sense of belonging shaped by a symbolic center. *The Smell of the World* recounts the (?) of two strangers who visit The Church of the Holy Blood in Bruges. It is, fundamentally, the story of Ursula, a woman who fled the Bosnian war and arrived in Belgium hidden among corpses. Her character could be read as a potential allegory of literature's power of discourse – as a result of the trauma inflicted by war, she cut the ties with the outer world by refusing to speak; however, she started to read voraciously. The obvious opposition between assimilating language and producing it should, almost imperatively, be read as the writer's commentary on the transformative power of literature, especially the literature that places defining contemporary issues such as migration and the search for a home into a universal context. Their shared experience of witnessing the presentation of the Holy Blood could also be read as a symbolic moment, since the notion of pilgrimage, one of Western

Europe's most frequent forms of exile, is rather visibly connected to the specters of exile, in their inexhaustible diversity. The church, Christian faith, the Blood of the Savior are, in their basic sense, a perpetual and infallible navel of the world.

The last prose, *September 11*, is a polyphonic account of the ways in which history is written in a minor key before it claims its universal meaning. Around the fateful day of 9/11, when terrorism massively impacted the course of global history, two people from different backgrounds intersect and share their stories. Max Birner is a hypochondriac unable to adjust to the demands of a normal life, as his body had become a source of grave anxiety. He checks his body on a daily basis, and this pathological encounter with his own body inevitably ends in a kind of panic attack that renders him motionless, transfixed and paralyzed with fear. Estranged from his closest family (and, in conjunction with his severe hypochondria, from his own identity, body, and social presence), Max could not tolerate any disturbances coming from other apartments, especially from the one below. He repetitively stamped the floor with his foot in order to signal his discomfort to his neighbor, Rosalie, a Brazilian immigrant who divorced her Swiss benefactor, the man she had married in order to emigrate to Switzerland. Her life spiraled into precarity and marginality, as she started to familiarize with prostitution rings and a peripheric level of urban life. Upon reading a letter from her brother, imprisoned in Brazil, she finds his remark "there [in Switzerland] it is heaven, here, it is hell"²⁶ unsettling, yet significant. Migrants are often caught between extreme notions and opposite frameworks of experience, and finding

a place of their own to alleviate their traumatic histories becomes their greatest existential challenge. "Nothing else happened on 9/11", the narrator announces, capturing the tension between small, private, marginal worlds and the global stage.

Conclusion

Florescu's *In The Navel of the World* complements his vaster narratives by exploring some of his predilect allegories and central themes. His recurring preoccupation with the meaning and structure of the inner world of migrants could be read as a form of exploring his own memory of migration and search for a new center, be it symbolic or tangible, geographic. Thus, the articulation of fictional characters that undergo the profound process of adjusting to new lives in different cultures and political circumstances is, in many ways, an exercise in writing and re-writing autobiographical accounts of the writer's own experience as a migrant. Florescu also challenges the historical meaning of migration by reuniting, in the imaginary space of his writing, Easterners fleeing communism from countries fallen prey to savage dictatorships and contemporary migrants

fleeing war, conflict, poverty and famine in Asia and Africa. There are obvious lines of separation between European migrants coming from former communist countries to Western Europe, seeking to escape economic or political difficulties and refugees fleeing to survive. Historically, they belong to different periods, epochs and even centuries. If the last decades of communism and the immediately following post-communist period outlined the era of economic and political migration, the second decade of the twenty-first century was a time in which wars, famine and constant danger were the driving factors of migration. Asylum seekers, refugees, migrants stranded on Mediterranean shores without documents or personal belongings have become the symbolic image of a collective identity in crisis. If communist/post-communist migrants had at least an imagined community of spirit with Europe and cultivated a certain degree of entitlement to become part of its significantly higher living standard and democratic politics, non-Europeans were faced with different prospects. Indeed, as Nelson Gonzales Ortega noted, Europe was "the land that no one promised them"²⁷. Florescu seeks to capture these tension lines in his short prose.

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27. Nelson González Ortega, Ana Belén Martínez García, "Theorizing Textual, Visual and Performative Approaches to Recent Migration to Europe" in Nelson González Ortega, Ana Belén Martínez García (eds.), *Representing 21st-century Migration in Europe. Performing Borders, Identities and Texts*, New York, Berghahn, 2022, p. 4.