Book review of Bönisch-Brednich, Brigitte, Christou, Anastasia, Meyer, Silke, Karner, Marie, and Escher, Anton Jakob (eds.) 2024. *Migrant Narratives: Storytelling as Agency, Belonging and Community*. London: Routledge, 226 pp.

NJMR NORDIC JOURNAL OF MIGRATION RESEARCH

BOOK REVIEW

HUP HELSINKI UNIVERSITY PRESS

BOJANA BABIĆ

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

What happens when a group of dedicated and passionate scholars comes together to explore their shared interests and concerns about migrant narratives, drawing on field notes, interviews, transcriptions, reflections and theoretical uncertainties? Can they facilitate meaningful conversations between diverse narratives, such as those of refugees, migrant children, expatriates, émigrés, guest workers, migrant women and business people, in various socio-economic and political contexts, including Bosnia, Spain, Germany, the UK, Turkey, Syria and India? Can they engage in scholarly conversation that is not only between different life stories but also between different academic disciplines, such as anthropology, cultural and literary studies, history and geography? Can they pave the way for new approaches to knowledge production in the field of narratives? If so, how?

The edited volume *Migrant Narratives: Storytelling as Agency, Belonging and Community*, published by Routledge in 2024, proves beyond doubt that all this is possible. Adopting not only the perspective of 'migrants as storytellers' but also of 'scholars as storytellers', this book offers more than just another volume on migrant narratives. It explores migrant narratives as a scholarly project, building on the notion of narrative turn as a progression of cultural and ontological processes (Bachmann-Medick 2016; Goldstein 2015; Holbraad, Pedersen & de Castro 2014). It takes the importance of reflection on the politics of storytelling (Jackson 2002) further through the lenses of Kreiswirth (1994), who argues that stories should be used not only to shine a light on the experiences of migrants, but also on *how* we define, talk and organise knowledge.

In line with this, Bönisch-Brednich's introductory chapter (Chapter 1) outlines how the book evolved into a collective storytelling project. It all began with a workshop on migrants' narratives and then grew into a series of workshops providing a platform for intellectual exchange among the contributors to this volume. During these workshops, contributors practised deep listening and reflection on the materials they presented. This unique interdisciplinary collective practice effectively transformed the workshops themselves into a form of fieldwork.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Bojana Babić
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany
bojana.babich@gmail.com

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Babić B. Book review of Bönisch-Brednich, Brigitte, Christou, Anastasia, Meyer, Silke, Karner, Marie, and Escher, Anton Jakob (eds.) 2024. *Migrant Narratives: Storytelling as Agency, Belonging and Community*. London: Routledge, 226 pp. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research* 2027; 17(2): 2, 1–4. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.1312

Moreover, this specific method of collective practice revealed the themes that connect the content of these migrant narratives. Agency, belonging and community not only emerged as the main topics of the narratives themselves, but also structure the book in its storytelling form. The book became framed through the following sections: 'Scripted Narratives – Continuities and Ruptures', 'Agency – Resourceful Victimhood', 'Silence and Voids in Gendered Narratives – What Can and Cannot Be Told' and 'Collective Narratives – Stories as a Way of Doing Community'.

The approach taken to structure the book was not without its risks. Rather than being considered separately, the three themes of agency, belonging and community are explored together in each article. Every narrative, especially a migrant narrative, is deeply rooted in the intersection of these three themes and requires their common presence. Moreover, the book lacks a common theoretical foundation. Each chapter is discussed from the perspective of different disciplines and theories, which threatens to undermine the message of the book: that of the power of a collective scholarly storytelling project.

Yet the contributors to this volume have demonstrated the power of collective practice by providing creative solutions to these obstacles. During the workshops, they identified a consistent structure for each chapter that would enable collective storytelling. Each chapter begins with a migrant story, giving migrants the opportunity to share their experiences as storytellers. The narrative then moves on to the researcher's methodological reflections on the story, including its social and historical context, as well as other relevant information, such as details of the research project in which the story was collected. Finally, each chapter concludes with an analysis given by the author of the chapter.

For instance, the contribution written by philologist Ulla Ratheiser (Chapter 7) starts with an extract from an interview with a renowned British comedian of Pakistani origin when she was a guest on a popular TV show. During the show the comedian discusses how she used comedy to explore her family and the Muslim community tradition in the UK, which ultimately shaped her identity. Ratheiser argues that identities are constituted within representation, revealing not only who one is, but also who one can become, even when using an instrument such as comedy. Another example is the contribution by an American studies professor Mita Banerjee in Chapter 12. In it, two young Syrians who post YouTube videos on the Syrian and Arabic cultural encounter with German bureaucratic system recognise their own struggles but also their agency. As the author of the chapter reflects, exposure to a broad audience transforms xenophobia into conversation and, hopefully, leads to integration. No less impressive is the opening of Chapter 10 – written by historian Angela McCarthy – about the letters sent home from Ceylon by a young Scottish business migrant in the 1850s. These letters unveil how important it is to bring the extracts of narratives into broader temporal and contextual frameworks. As such the emotions of one person flowing through these letters can be contextualised in the broader picture and serve even as historical evidence. Lastly, I would like to highlight the contribution by the geographer Arie Johanna Karner that engages with an almost mysterious connection between the small village in Lebanon and the famous boat Titanic (Chapter 11). This connection shapes not only the history of the village, but also its present through various social media.

Hence, this dedication to collective storytelling is what makes the book so exceptional. What's more, it restates the book's value as a joint scholarly project, giving readers a chance to explore singular migrant stories and their emplacement in interdisciplinary

scholarly discussions. This allows for a space where different academic discussions and real-life experiences can coexist and interact, embodying what Arendt (1958) termed the 'paradox of human plurality'.

This is particularly important nowadays. The present era is marked by numerous crises, profound societal polarisation and academic struggles to navigate them. The emerging inequalities, asymmetries, injustices and power relations among the various actors involved in these situations are difficult to confront at an individual level (Callon & Law 2005). As this book demonstrates, fruitful conversation can be one productive way to bring together people of different life experiences, socio-economic backgrounds, political perspectives and theories. It can be achieved through deep and consistent listening, not only to interlocutors, but also to different disciplines and theories, making it a part of fieldwork practice.

As such, this book is both timeless and timely. While taking readers on a unique storytelling journey, it demonstrates again and again how unpredictable collective actions can lead to unique collective experiences and even produce collective agency. As Callon and Law (2005) have argued, agency is the capacity to act and to give meaning to action. It cannot be contained in one or many people, and in their affects, nor can it be located in institutions, norms, values and discursive or symbolic systems. Action, including its reflexive dimension that produces meaning, takes place in hybrid collectives that include people as well as material and technical devices, texts, narratives and much more (Callon & Law 2005).

It is there that new perspectives emerge about how we can use narratives and storytelling to generate knowledge. This unique collective scholarly storytelling volume is a prime example of this and is definitely worth reading and thinking with.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Bojana Babić
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany

REFERENCES

Arendt, H. 1958. *The human condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bachmann-Medick, D. 2016. *Cultural turns: New orientations in the study of culture*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110402988.

Callon, M. and Law, J. 2005. 'On qualculation, agency, and otherness', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 23(5), pp. 717–733. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1068/d343t.

Goldstein, D. 2015. 'Vernacular turner: Narrative, local knowledge, and the changed context of folklore', *Journal of American Folklore*, 128(508), pp. 125–145. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerfolk.128.508.0125.

Holbraad, M., Pedersen, M.A. and de Castro, E.V. 2014. *The Politics of Ontology: Anthropological Position*. Available at: https://www.culanth.org/fieldsights/the-politics-of-ontology-anthropological-positions (Accessed: 15 June 2026).

Jackson, M. 2002. *The politics of storytelling: Violence, transgression and intersubjectivity*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press.

Kreiswirth, M. 1994. 'Tell me a story: The narratives turn in the human science', in **M. Kreiswirth and T. Carmichael (eds).** *Constructivist criticism: The human science in the age of theory*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 61–87.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Babić B. Book review of Bönisch-Brednich, Brigitte, Christou, Anastasia, Meyer, Silke, Karner, Marie, and Escher, Anton Jakob (eds.) 2024. *Migrant Narratives: Storytelling as Agency, Belonging and Community*. London: Routledge, 226 pp. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*. 2027; 17(2): 2, 1–4. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.1312

Submitted: 15 June 2026
Accepted: 15 September 2026
Published: 28 October 2026

COPYRIGHT:
© 2027 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons NonCommercial-NoDerivatives Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0), which permits unrestricted distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited, the material is not used for commercial purposes and is not altered in any way. See https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/.

Nordic Journal of Migration Research is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press.

HUP HELSINKI UNIVERSITY PRESS a NMR NORDIC MIGRATION RESEARCH