

Article

Refugees' Arriving through the Lens of Fiction: Unveiling the Ambivalences of Hegemonic Expectations

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Abstract: In this article, we use fiction as a lens to study processes of refugees' arriving in Austria. For that purpose, we draw on findings from our transdisciplinary and participatory project "The Art of Arriving—Reframing 'Refugee Integration'" in which we have created a real-world laboratory and examined if and how the meaning-making processes involved in creating and interpreting art can foster reframing "refugee integration" concepts and provide alternative views on the arrival of refugees beyond an assimilationist lens. By inviting and accompanying artists from different cultural realms (literature, music, and photography) and with different refugee experiences during the process of jointly creating an artwork as well as by getting access to the recipients' interpretations of these artworks, we gained insights into the various ways that artistic practices unveil and contest common hegemonic expectations that shape the processes of refugees' (and other migrants') arriving. Our analysis of the short story "Außen vor" ("Being [left] out") written by Hamed Abboud, Anna Baar, and Mascha Dabić—of its creation and reception process—contributes to the ongoing debates on how refugees' artistic practices can serve as means of cultural and social transformation.

Keywords: refugee; migration; arts; fiction; arriving



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1. Introduction

The role of arts has become a main topic of multidisciplinary research within the subfield of arts and migration. One of the recently debated issues has evolved around the question of how and under which circumstances arts—and especially migrants' artistic practices—have the potential to challenge hegemonic, taken-for-granted assumptions and contribute to "reframing" the dominant narratives of and widespread perspectives on migration and refugeehood in particular. Migrants' artistic practices are considered to contest stereotypes and reduce prejudices (DiMaggio and Fernández-Kelly 2010; Totah and Khoury 2018), establish a "post-racial consciousness" (Martiniello 2018), provide opportunities for political agency and empowerment (Bhimji 2016; Damery and Mescoli 2019; Martiniello and Lafleur 2008), and contribute to the imagination of a post-migrant society (Petersen and Schramm 2017) where the idea of super-diversity (Vertovec 2019) and multiple belonging has replaced essentialist conceptions of cultural difference.

Our paper contributes to this strand of research by drawing on findings from the project "The Art of Arriving—Reframing 'Refugee Integration'". We launched this project in 2019 as a reaction to political and media discourses that dominated the discussion on the arrival of refugees from the Middle East in Austria. Between 2014 and 2016, 160,000 asylum seekers arrived in Austria, most of whom were from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq (BMI—Österreichisches Bundesministerium für Inneres 2020). Discursively constructed as a "refugee crisis" in politics and media (Krzyżanowski et al. 2018), the primary focus was on questions surrounding how to "integrate" these refugees, emphasising "cultural differences" as a critical obstacle to success.

With an explicitly transdisciplinary, participatory, and multi-method research design, we aimed to focus on how artistic practices can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of refugee integration (Mijić and Parzer 2022). By creating a real-world laboratory, we examined if and how the meaning-making processes involved in creating and interpreting art can foster the reframing of “refugee integration” concepts and provide alternative views on it beyond an assimilationist lens. We worked together with nine artists (musicians, writers, and photographers) who were asked to translate their experiences and perceptions of “arriving” into aesthetic expressions. The created artworks formed the basis for subsequent group discussions with diverse groups of artwork recipients. By accompanying the artists during the joint process of creating an artwork as well as by getting access to their recipients’ interpretations of these artworks, we were able to gain insights into the various ways that artistic practices contribute to unveiling and contesting common, taken-for-granted assumptions and expectations that shape the process of refugees’ arriving.

This article focuses on the project’s team of writers and the fictional short story they created. Considerable existing research examines the role of fiction in the process of (forced) migration as well as on the inclusive/exclusionist potential of (nationally organised) literary fields (Sievers 2008, 2016; Sievers and Vlasta 2018; Berkers 2009; Berkers et al. 2014).

However, little is known about how fiction can be used as a lens to study issues of arriving. Mijić/Frühwirth (Frühwirth and Mijić 2018a, 2018b) and Wiebke Sievers (2019, 2021) offer interesting insights into how a piece of fiction represents aspects of (forced) migration. In comparing the results of the analysis of narrative interviews with former refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina and the analysis of the novels of three authors with relations to the former Yugoslavia, Frühwirth and Mijić work out, inter alia, that assimilation, overcompensation, numbness, or resignation can be reconstructed from both the novels and the interviews. Here and there, however, resistant moments also become apparent. Through the deliberate creation of friction, individuals positioned in the in-between are striving to take back control over their own identities (Frühwirth and Mijić 2018a). Wiebke Sievers (2019) focuses on the questions how issues of war, flight, and political developments in Europe have been reflected aesthetically in fiction in the context of the migration movement of 2015. Using the example of Yahya Hassan’s poetry, Sievers (2021) examines how artistic and cultural practices might contribute to change towards more equal societies by providing perspectives for transforming narratives in discourses of migration.

Additionally, referring to several accounts from arts-based research allows us to learn how narrative writing can be integrated into social scientific research. As Patricia Leavy points out, the use of narratives in social research can be located on a science–art continuum: “Some approaches to narrative inquiry are closer to traditional qualitative research practice [. . .] whereas others are further along the artistic side and draw significantly on literary traditions” (Leavy 2020). Following her overview of different approaches, our procedure exists somewhere between narrative autoethnography and fiction-based research. Fiction (e.g., as part of an autoethnography) has several advantages:

Through fiction we are able to express ourselves freely, reveal the inner lives of characters, and create believable worlds for others to enter. Fiction as a research practice is well suited for portraying the complexity of lived experience because it allows for details, nuance, specificity, contexts, and texture; cultivating empathy and self-reflection through relatable characters; and disrupting dominant ideologies or stereotypes by showing and not telling (which can be used to build critical consciousness and raise awareness). (Leavy 2020)

Our research is, however, not limited to the artistic work itself—in our case, a short story—but also includes the process of creating the artwork as well as its interpretation by a potential audience. Our approach of bringing together different perspectives (from artists, sociologists, and recipients) enables us to provide a broad, multifaceted picture of

“refugees’ arrival”—a concept we have adopted from Ludger Pries (2016). To this end, our article answers the following two questions:

1. How are the various facets of refugees’ arrival presented, performed, and negotiated (a) in the process of creating the artwork, (b) in the artwork itself, and (c) in the process of interpreting the artwork?
2. How do fiction and the analysis of its creation and reception process serve as a means to reveal and contest hegemonic expectations refugees are confronted with?

The article is structured as follows: First, we will outline Pries’ concept of arrival and discuss the benefits of analysing the process of “refugee integration” beyond the assimilationist lens. Second, we will describe our methodological framework and how we have applied the process of data collection and analysis in the transdisciplinary setting of a “real-world laboratory”. Third, we provide a comprehensive analysis of (a) the artists’ writing process, (b) the short story itself, and (c) the reception process before, fourth, we discuss our main findings with regard to the question of how arts (and particularly fiction) offer a lens to study processes of refugees’ arriving and to unveil the ambivalences of hegemonic expectations in the context of forced migration in Austria. By hegemonic expectations, we are referring to the dominant societal attitudes that shape the discourse surrounding refugees in the arrival society. These expectations might refer to how arrivals would have to behave in the process of their arrival but also to questions of belonging and legal and political aspects of social participation. They have a powerful influence on how refugees are categorised and evaluated and play a crucial role in shaping the prevailing (hegemonic) narratives about them.

2. Refugees’ Arriving beyond the Assimilationist Lens

The arrival of refugees in Europe has always been accompanied by medial and political discourses of “integration,” which usually focus on the need for newcomers to assimilate into the majority society. Until the 1980s, migration research was also dominated by assimilation theories (for an overview, see Parzer 2023) and notions of a process in which “migrant groups” more or less progressively assimilate into a supposedly homogenous “majority society” remain common, even if some of these accounts see assimilation as an analytical tool rather than a normative claim (Berry 1997; Esser 2001). Our work aims to avoid terms such as “assimilation” and “acculturation,” which we believe are of limited analytical value. This is especially true in “postmigrant societies” (Foroutan 2019), where super-diversity (Vertovec 2019) and new majority–minority relations (Crul 2016; Jiménez 2017) have become defining characteristics of many cities in the Global North. More recent approaches focus on issues of social participation and cultural membership. For instance, Marco Martiniello (2006) introduces the term “fair participation” and argues that immigrants can be considered as integrated into a host society as soon as they have similar opportunities for participation as non-immigrant citizens (Martiniello 2006, p. 9). In a similar vein, Ludger Pries considers integration to be a mutual process of understanding and participation in all of the social activities and areas deemed important.

Against the backdrop of refugee migration from the crisis- and war-torn regions of Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq that took place between 2012 and 2016, Pries developed the concept of “arriving”. He refers to the definition in the Duden dictionary, where “arrive” (ankommen) has the following meanings: “to reach a place, to come to a place; [. . .] to find appeal, resonance; [. . .] to affect someone [in a certain way], to touch them; to be important [to someone], to be of significance” (Duden quoted in Pries 2016, p. 131; translation by A.M. and M.P.). For Pries, this definition of arrival is characterised by the fact that it is not something passive but an interaction between those arriving and the place where they arrive. From this perspective, Pries positions himself against assimilation theory concepts and understands “arriving” as an open-ended (and often years- and decades-long) process of being taken in.

For refugees, arriving means in the first place to be—at least provisionally—in a safe haven and to have, at least temporarily, found accommodation. Arrival is always linked to satisfaction, a certain easing of tension, being included and being accepted. Arrival is a part of socialization, of social integration and of system integration [. . .]; it is always an open process. (Pries 2018, pp. 150–51)

We use the term “arriving” as a kind of theoretical and practical working term that provides an open space for all project participants (sociologists, artists, and recipients) and also enables and evokes several different associations and meanings of arrival in the context of refugeehood.

3. Research Design

The overarching research design is inspired by “real-world laboratories,” which have been developed and successfully applied in the context of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research that focuses on the production of knowledge for social innovation and societal change (Singer-Brodowski et al. 2017; Wanner et al. 2018). Methodologically, real-world laboratories are located between the poles of classical scientific experiments and creativity-driven “lab projects”. Their objective is to solve societal problems in a real-world context by “combining the value of concrete action paired with scientific rigour and persuasiveness” (Wanner et al. 2018, p. 95). We consider this approach to be particularly valuable for gaining insights into refugees’ arriving. By implementing an artificial space where sociologists, artists, and recipients work together, we aim to create and translate different but complementary forms of knowledge in the context of refugee migration/refugeehood.

In the first step, we invited artists with and without refugee experiences to translate their experiences of and knowledge about arriving into aesthetic expressions.¹ There were no further specifications regarding genre, content, or form; the only requirement was to jointly create an artwork within a four-month period of time. Additionally, we asked to accompany the artists as participant observers during the process of creating the artwork and to record it. By exploring the respective artistic fields, three teams were recruited, each consisting of one artist who experienced recent flight from Syria between 2010 and 2020; one artist whose refugee experience lies in the more distant past—more precisely, who fled from the former Yugoslavia between 1990 and 2000; and one artist without any refugee experience. Regarding different fields of cultural production, our focus was on music, literature, and photography. These are omnipresent in contemporary refugees’ cultural production and are characterised by the creation of replicable artworks, that is, pieces of art that can be reproduced in multiple copies, which allows participating scientists and artists to use the artworks during the whole research project and beyond. For the creation of the artworks, the artists received a fee.

In the next step, we used these artworks as a stimulus for group discussions, with the aim of revealing how the artworks are perceived and interpreted by potential audiences (including those who rarely come into contact with these aesthetic forms of expressions in daily life).² The main criterion for the group composition was whether or not the participants themselves had refugee experiences, that is, we had discussions in which only people with refugee experience participated and discussions that were composed exclusively of participants without refugee experience. Additionally, to this most crucial differentiation, we also accounted for gender, age, and social class. We approached the participants by a combination of snowball and purposive sampling.

Our extensive corpus of data consists of (a) audio recording transcripts from the creation process, (b) the artworks created by the artists, and (c) the audio recording transcripts from group discussions with recipients. Data analysis was conducted by adopting and adapting the documentary method, as formulated by Ralf Bohnsack (Bohnsack et al. 2010; Reischl and Plotz 2020), who developed this method of data interpretation in the 1990s according to Karl Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge, Harold Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology, and Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of habitus. The documentary method’s main assumption is that our shared experiences (grounded in similarities due to social position, gender,

generation, or migration/refugee experience) shape our “collective orientations”. These orientations take the form of implicit and tacit knowledge that guide practical action. Hence, reconstructing this implicit knowledge (which is also called “conjunctive knowledge”) is the documentary method’s primary goal.

Regarding the practical procedure of data interpretation, [Bohnsack \(2010\)](#) suggests distinguishing between two levels of analysis. The “formulating interpretation” is used to summarise what is being said and is therefore limited to the manifest level of subjective meaning. It is only the preparatory step for the “reflecting interpretation”, which lies at the heart of data interpretation and with it of our analysis. The reflecting interpretation provides access to the conjunctive tacit and implicit knowledge by reconstructing the “documentary meaning” of human objectifications. It focuses on what is also called “latent meaning structures” by moving beyond the actors’ subjective meaning (and intentions) and emphasising how an action is being done ([Bohnsack 2010](#), p. 103): it is not so important to grasp “what’s going on,” but rather how practice is produced ([Reischl and Plotz 2020](#), p. 49).³

4. Analysis

Our case demonstrates the project’s tripartite research that comprises (1) the material we have conducted during the process of writing the short story, (2) the analysis of the short story itself, as well as (3) the first results from the group discussions where recipients interpreted the short story.

The literature team consisted of the writers Hamed Abboud, Anna Baar, and Mascha Dabić. Hamed Abboud was born in Syria. After the initially peaceful uprising against the regime in his home country was suppressed by military force, he fled to Egypt at the end of 2012. Via Dubai and Turkey, he came to Austria in 2014 where he now lives and writes in Vienna. In his composition *In meinem Bart versteckte Geschichten* ([Abboud 2020](#)), he portrays what it means to have to search for a place in a foreign society but simultaneously points out “that the search itself, despite all the hardships, can be more enriching than having an unquestioned home”. Anna Baar was born in Zagreb to an Austrian father and a Dalmatian mother. She grew up in Vienna and Klagenfurt in Austria, and on the Croatian island of Brač. She lives and works in both Vienna and Klagenfurt. In 2022, she was awarded the Grand Austrian State Prize. Her latest book, *Divân mit Schonbezug* ([Baar 2022](#)), contains a collection of stories about “growing up between cultures, about home and longing.” Mascha Dabić was born in Sarajevo and has lived in Austria since. She has translated numerous novels and other writings from the Balkan region into German, and her doctoral dissertation in translation studies deals with the topic of “interpreting in psychotherapy”. She also wrote a novel on this subject, which was published in 2017 under the title *Reibungsverluste* ([Dabić 2017](#)).

The literature team first met at a kick-off workshop in September 2021. A total of five meetings took place that each lasted several hours. Besides the kick-off workshop, two of meetings were held in-person, and two were held remotely due to an Austrian COVID-19 lockdown. At the kick-off workshop, the writers decided on an initial approach to the writing process. They agreed for one to take initiative and begin to write a text, to which the other two writers would respond in turn. To facilitate their work, they set up a Google Docs document, which allowed the sociological research team to trace the process.

The result was an 8300-word, German-language short story called “Außen vor” (“Being [left] out”); it was written between September 2021 and February 2022 and takes place in and in front of a restaurant in an unspecified Austrian town. The main characters include a man whose name is considered irrelevant. His flight/forced migration, in which nobody ever seemed to be interested, ends—at least for the time being—in the kitchen of the mentioned restaurant. Here, he mainly tries to arrive by not standing out; he is guided and taken care of by the cook, who determines the kitchen’s unspoken rules merely by his position. One day, the fragile balance, which the man tries to primarily maintain by revealing as little of himself as possible, is disturbed by a guest he encounters in the restaurant and—later that evening—in front of it. A woman, who does not reveal her real name

until the end of the story but uses the pseudonym “Jane,” not only ignores his (imposed) need for invisibility and blocks the way back to his place of arrival, but also reacts to his rejection by attacking him for his behaviour. As he eludes her—first mentally by letting his thoughts wander to bygone times, then physically by crossing the threshold of the restaurant—Manfred, the first named protagonist, enters the stage. His mere appearance provokes mean thoughts in “Jane”, which, on their way out, are, however, filtered by her “socially instilled sense of guilt” and ultimately end in polite chit-chat. Other protagonists are Sven, Jane’s roommate, and Manfred’s boss, Faruk. Manfred, who has moved from the province of Lower Austria to the unspecified city, and Faruk, who arrived in the country as a refugee many years ago, are both social workers who counsel refugees. Through flashbacks, the reader learns that this activity had a strong influence on both men’s lives. As for Sven, we only know that he is not vaccinated against COVID-19 and therefore not allowed to enter the restaurant by law—in contrast to Jane, Manfred, and Faruk who are held back from entering the building (from arriving) by other forces. At one point, the main characters all meet in front of the restaurant. While unloading the vegetable truck together with the cook, the man whose name is irrelevant recognises Faruk as a social worker by whom he felt abandoned. Exploding out of invisibility, he confronts Faruk with what he defines as betrayal and during this confrontation Faruk suffers a fatal accident: he slips on icy ground.

Embedded in the central storyline are numerous flashbacks and memories of the protagonists, within which various facets of arriving are also negotiated. A closer look shows that these facets are all characterised by one essential commonality: arriving is described as a process of getting closer (to other people, to places, to projects), in which, however, the difference between inside and outside—between the self and its environment—becomes particularly apparent. Our tripartite analysis suggests that there are different strategies for dealing with this gap. However, arriving seems to always be accompanied by processes of smoothing and processes of hiding that are (or have to be) carried out by the people involved in the process. Efforts are made to smooth one’s own appearance, actions, and language to make the individual’s perceptible surface as even as possible, since (only) plain surfaces protect from friction; only flawlessness safely shelters from criticism.

4.1. *The Writing Process*

The material collected during the writing process shows that the artists saw themselves confronted with an extraordinary situation: for one thing, since we wanted them to work together as a team on a topic; second, because they were observed during their work; third, since they were not writing for their “usual audience,” but rather for people sociologically interested in their work. Drawing on Ervin Goffman’s metaphor of the theatre ([Goffman 1959](#)), we can argue that the situation blurs the differentiation between back stage and front stage, and the audience is more diverse and less predictable than usual.

The data analysis showed that the artists had different ideas about how to deal with these challenges. In the early stages, there was a clear contradiction between (1) the need to set and follow definitive rules during the process (to specify who is going to cover what and in which order) and (2) the desire to proceed in a rather improvisational and experimental way without any self-imposed rules. Improvisation prevents predicting how the individual characters will develop or how the story will evolve.

Most remarkably, one of the writers considered the question of how to avoid the trap of “kitsch” (such as, for instance, a love story) as the most crucial challenge of improvisation. The term “kitsch” is usually used to describe actions or things that are intended to evoke positive emotions in a very striking way. It is defined as being in poor taste, leaving no room for interpretation and clearly defining what one has to feel. This author’s position may result from her anticipation of kitsch being regarded as inferior in the art field and potentially also in the science field. However, it can also be assumed that this author does not consider a love story to be an adequate format for dealing with the topic of arriving. Here, the question arises: how may arriving be represented? Kitsch—or more generally,

an overly specific (re)presentation—obviously represents a negative horizon (at least for one of the writers). However, it remains unclear if this author thinks it must be avoided in order to do justice to the theme of arrival or in order to satisfy certain artistic demands (or both).

The writers ultimately agreed upon an approach between regulation and improvisation by deciding that the story would gradually be composed of individual parts, each of which would be the responsibility of the individual authors and would be connected to each other by hinges. In this context, a team member (unintentionally) created the word “*unterschneiden*”—a combination of distinguish (*unterscheiden*): we want our stories to be distinguishable—and overlap (*überschneiden*): we want the stories to overlap. This neologism can be seen as the motto for the cooperation. Essentially, the writers adhered to this approach and alternately continued to write their story by referring to aspects introduced by their colleagues or discussed at their meetings. Eventually, however, the authors’ individual approaches became less significant, and the story took on a momentum of its own.

Besides clarifying the writing approach, an essential part of the author discussions concerned how arriving should be negotiated in their joint work. Based on the group composition—three authors with three differently composed experiences of arrival—the writer asking for clarification and regulation assumed that at least three different experiences of arriving should be represented in their work: the experiences of those who arrived as refugees some time ago, the experiences of those who arrived as refugees only recently, and the perspectives of those who have not been confronted with any refugee experience at all. However, this clear-cut categorisation, which was presumably the result of a relatively pronounced need for unambiguity, was not accepted by the team. By referring to the character she has already introduced (“Jane”) as well as to her own biography, the team member who also favoured the more improvisational approach argued that such unambiguity does not usually stand up to a somewhat closer look. Behind the facade, there are often quite unexpected origins and (hi)stories that remain undiscovered or are even deliberately concealed in order not to be perceived as different. In their conversation about categorisations and their own experiences, it then became clear that, ultimately, none of them could be considered an ideal-typical representative of one of the three categories. This is because each story of arrival carries so much that is individual and, at the same time, so many aspects that can be applied to all people, regardless of the background against which their arrival takes place. The neologism “*unterschneiden*”—this combination of distinguish (*unterscheiden*) and overlap (*überschneiden*)—also effectively sums up the simultaneity of the distinctiveness and the overlap regarding the experiences of arriving.

Here, one interpretation already emerges, which will become more pronounced as our analysis continues: since the process of arriving must take place under the given social conditions, it always seems to be accompanied by some kind of disguise. Arriving in a new social context often only seems possible under the condition of concealment, which is the only way to ensure being well received by others (in German “*ankommen*” means both arriving at a place and also being well received by others).

4.2. Analysis of the Short Story

The authors’ approach (of alternately writing the story and using hinges to connect the individual parts) is clearly reflected in the short story’s formal structure. A series of easily distinguishable sequences follow each other and ultimately form the whole of the story. The short story introduces several characters, many of whom somehow remain intangible. They lack weight and seem to be in a kind of suspended state, as if their main challenge is gaining a foothold or taking roots. Giving the reader brief insights into the thoughts of the protagonists reveals a tension between this realm of thought (the inside) and what is conveyed in the protagonists’ encounters (the outside). Overall, the story reveals a pronounced inside–outside tension, while the boundary between the inside

and the outside—which threatens to become porous in every interaction—is sought to be maintained through smoothing.

This can be exemplified by three key scenes of the story. While the first is situated in the kitchen, the second reveals itself first in the restaurant and then outside it, where the rest of the story also unfolds.

1. The man whose name is irrelevant tries to remain invisible; silently and with his head bowed, he follows the work processes without attracting attention in any way. However, this plan is disrupted by a mishap. He cuts his hand and thus also seems to break the central barrier between his inside and outside. Falling into panic, forgetting his intention of restraint and silence, a cry of “Notfall” (emergency) slips out. The cook comes running and what the man whose name is irrelevant has always been most afraid of happens: he is laughed at and realises that he has used the language he has so carefully tried to avoid (“if you don’t speak, you can’t make mistakes”) incorrectly. That is, by breaking the skin, he not only physically breaks the barrier between the inside and the outside, but the cut actually causes him to briefly fall out of his role. Later, he realises that “Unfall” (accident) would have been the right word, not “Notfall” (emergency). This scene impressively shows that the power of language lies in mastering these subtle differences. Under the condition of uncertainty, speaking, and thus also acting, becomes a permanent risk, a “Tretminenfeld” (minefield)—as described in the story—and people are constantly preoccupied with the question of how to behave at every moment to avoid causing any kind of irritation and to ensure that they will be well received by others. Likewise, “every new situation you get into brings a new risk,” such as the moment the character steps out of the kitchen.
2. The man whose name is irrelevant leaves the familiar environment and sees himself suddenly confronted with a person—she calls herself Jane—who wants to know more about him than he is willing to reveal. Usually, he evades such situations by using rehearsed, memorised phrases or proverbs to bypass the minefield of language and of interaction in general:

“Such phrases [. . .] as many other quick formulations, saved him many times and provided a smooth, sleek way out of conversations with pushy people who thought they would know the truth and knew him better than he knows himself.” (Translation by A.M. and M.P.)

However, Jane demands more than that; she asks for more than she herself was ever willing to show. Provoked by his rejection, she finally starts to confess that she, too, has another language, another origin—but a language not spoken and an origin never discussed. Both have been polished away, like her real name. Her (hi)story is usually smoothed and seemingly unfitting facets of herself typically remain hidden. However, this smoothing and hiding that support Jane’s efforts to be accepted quite obviously also cause suffering, since they ultimately prevent her from arriving at herself. In the search for causes of her behaviour, she finds herself in the tension between the feeling that all of this is her own fault, her own volition, and the feeling that she simply had no other choice under the given circumstances; she moves between a neoliberal logic of self-responsibility and a complete rejection of it. However, the story ultimately suggests that both paths are easy to follow; the real difficulty is recognising and acknowledging that the true challenge is taking responsibility in a society where we do not have everything under our control—where our existence and actions are significantly determined by prevailing cultural repertoires and structures of society. Only under this condition can we contribute to the change of structures and perspectives by which we feel constrained.

3. To understand what happens at the end of the story, we have to take a look at a central facet of arriving through how it was experienced by the man whose name is irrelevant:

“[H]e met many dedicated people who had helped him and many others, and who later hurt him and many others. Between these two states, there was a long road, paved with different events that consisted of good intentions. A woman appeared in his memory, [. . .] she was always ready to offer help and accompany people not from this country [. . .] an exciting intercultural party here, a successful integration initiative there, and constant job placements and networking, which was actually very necessary and enriching.

What happened one day, however, [. . .] undid everything that had been done and accomplished so far, because when the highly committed woman led a project in which the participants were not quite so skilled and motivated, another side of the woman revealed itself, as failure was unacceptable to her [...], as if she was trying to preserve a principle, or a high ideal, which existed in her head and was firmly anchored there. With subtle hints, she proposed to improve the results of the project, and he, with his irrelevant name, was next to her, seeing these radical good intentions that were actually dishonest. ‘For what?’ he asked himself, ‘to create a fake image? [. . .]’

In front of her friends, the woman said [...] ‘my refugees that I take care of are all equally good and have adapted very finely,’ as if she wanted to distance herself from those who were not taken care of by her and are therefore not good. That small and pompous word ‘my’ bothered him. He heard it all the time in this country, and since he arrived, he tried not to belong to anyone. ‘How difficult is it supposed to be to become your own self?’ he asked himself, thinking that it always had to do with fear, and the woman committed what she committed so that the lurking people, waiting for a mistake or failure, would never have reason to criticise her.

In the same conversation, he listened to her bragging about success, but there was no success, only failed attempts by the participants, only overwhelmed people who have to adapt, change a thousand times every day, and think about how to satisfy their highly dedicated helpers and supervisors.” (Translation by A.M. and M.P.)

In addition to all the other challenges of arrival, those who arrive must express their gratitude and humility every day anew, while also watching the helpers try to cover up their failures, weaknesses, and moral profits at all costs. He did not want to be one of this woman’s refugees and fled to another city where he encountered Faruk and his organisation. When he met Faruk again, at the very end of the story, he fell off the grid. Again, he broke his silence but still could not find his own voice. Enraged, he yelled at Faruk. In this situation, everyone dropped their covers, their veils: the man whose name is irrelevant dropped the cover of everlasting gratitude and invisibility; Faruk dropped the veil of the do-gooder. His final words were not full of regret, as Jane—who was the only one who also understood the language in which he utters his final curse—led Sven and Manfred to believe. While they were lifting these veils, they were doing so without being able to show a “truer” version of their selves. Rather, they were only displaying another facet, a facet that owes much to the fact that they were required to cover up for so long. Only Jane finally reveals something: her true name.

4.3. Reception

The following section mainly refers to the findings from the analysis of the first group discussion, which was conducted with two participants and which used the short story as an impulse to reflect on the meaning of arrival.⁴ The recipients’ composition made this group discussion especially interesting: although both participants did not have a refugee experience, one of them experienced migration. In fact, it was difficult to identify

a conjunctive space of experience in the course of this discussion (which is the actual goal of the documentary method). Rather, they worked out very different approaches to the text and the issue of arriving. With regard to the discourse organisation, it was particularly interesting that Discussant B (a man without refugee experience) started with his interpretation of the text without any problems. His interpretations were met with agreement by Discussant A (a woman with migration experience). After some time, Discussant A also spoke up by pointing out that she may not have been well-enough prepared, which was followed up with the question of whether it was intended that they just talk like that. She tried to clarify what exactly was expected of them, since meeting expectations seemed to be of paramount importance to her, as the further course of the discussion quite visibly revealed. At this point, we could clearly identify a structural analogy to the creation process itself (especially for the writer with a refugee background) that provoked the need to precisely clarify the expectations or thoroughly discuss how the group should proceed in order to satisfy these expectations.

While Discussant B's comments at the beginning and throughout the course of the discussion were characterised by an unemotional and distanced analysis of the text (he was constantly referring to specific passages), it became promptly clear that the group discussion and examination of the text was emotionally challenging for Discussant A. Thus, the discussion was interrupted after Discussant A's first statement, where she admitted that she prefers to remain silent out of fear of saying something wrong and that she did not feel good in this situation but rather very nervous and exposed. After a short pause, however, she agreed to continue.

Still, the two participants largely stuck to this division of roles. Discussant B's accounts remained quite distanced, while Discussant A's remarks were emotionally profound. Both identified the text as very rich in the sense that it addressed many important topics that could be associated with arriving, but the participants also agreed that the text had many blanks. While Discussant B sought to fill these blanks quite matter-of-factly with a textual interpretation, Discussant A closed the gaps—those parts that lacked emotional depths, as she put it—with personal experience. This seemed to enable her to look at certain topics in a far more differentiated way than is usually even the case in the sociological discussion of these topics. For example, she explained that German was the language where she could be herself for the first time. In her society and language of origin, she had to hide facets of herself (particularly the fact of being gay). By contrast, German is the language in which she found her freedom, in which she feels strong, and in which she was able to become the person she is today. Here, Discussant A turned the aspect of the widespread and dominant expectation to integrate on its head and spoke of a right to integrate:

“[W]e should also somehow have the right to move, also sometimes to say: Okay, I choose now to be a different person and maybe leave something behind and say okay, this part of life and this part of language belong to me now. I have the impression that German, for example, also belongs to me. It's also my language and (.) not just a foreign language but it's also (.) something I can make my own that's very important to me.”

Here, the agency of the people arriving is brought into focus along with the aspect of self-responsibility within the framework of the given social structures.

However, this very agency is usually denied to people who are arriving, even by those who try to help them. Discussant A brought up the behaviour of the social workers described in the short story, as if a dam had just been broken by their depiction. She condemned the infantilisation of people, especially by those who feel they belong to a left-wing liberal milieu. Here, one gets the strong impression that this fear of not living up to expectations, which was evident with Discussant A especially at the very beginning of the discussion, stems precisely from the fact that there is a massive tension between the inside—one's own perspective—and the outside: what one is willing to show or what the others are willing to take in. Likewise, engaging with the story, and perhaps especially with

all the different aspects that it presents and all its inherent gaps and voids, were useful in breaking through this tension and finding one's own voice again in a self-chosen language.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Our analysis of the different sets of data within the tripartite research process shows that arriving can be viewed from multiple perspectives. Clearly, the most obvious kind of arriving is the process of physically entering a new geographical, national, and social space after fleeing one's home country (like the man whose name is irrelevant), after being raised in a family with migration experience (Jane), after moving from the countryside to the city (Manfred), after climbing the social ladder (Faruk), or after starting a project together (the literature team). While these understandings of arriving are centred around the idea that arriving takes place after leaving somewhere/something and/or moving somewhere and/or joining someone, the story (and the process of production and reception) illustrates another meaning of the term "arriving"/"ankommen": "ankommen" also means finding resonance and recognition, while "gut ankommen" means "to be well received". "Gut ankommen" in the sense of being well received can be accomplished through demonstrating something that is highly valued and appreciated in the social group or society where someone arrives; however, in most cases, "to be well received" is accomplished by not failing and not disappointing one's expectations—by not standing out.

Putting the two main meanings of "arriving" together—to get to a place and to be well received—reveals one of the central structural communalities of different kinds of arriving: the process of arriving always seems to be accompanied by the perception of being confronted with very pronounced expectations, which, however, often remain very vague with regard to how they can be met and when they are actually achieved. At this point, at least three questions arise: (1) Where do these expectations come from? (2) How do those who are arriving deal with these expectations? (3) What do we learn about arriving if we examine the inherent logic of these expectations?

While we follow the principal sociological insight that expectations only become relevant through an actor's embeddedness in one or more social networks ([Granovetter 1985](#); [Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993](#)), we would like to carve out their cultural dimension by drawing on the idea of "cultural repertoires," which was first mentioned by Ann Swidler (1986) in her ground-breaking article "Culture in action". "Cultural repertoires" have become one of the key concepts in cultural sociology of social inequality ([Lamont 1992](#); [Lamont et al. 2015](#)) and focus on the notion that actors draw on culturally available "ways of understanding the world" (or, in Goffmans' terms, "interpretive frames") in order to create action. We argue that expectations are grounded in the cultural repertoires that have been developed and spread in a certain society (or a part of it) over time and which individuals and social groups draw on to organise their actions. For our analysis, three aspects are particularly relevant. First, when actors draw on cultural repertoires, they are doing this without being fully aware of it. Rather, cultural repertoires work as an implicit and tacit knowledge that is highly internalised and as such is considered taken-for-granted. Second, newcomers—and people who are arriving—are not usually familiar with most of the cultural repertoires circulating in the place of arrival. Because they form rather implicit knowledge, cultural repertoires can hardly be made explicit and communicated. This ambivalence between effectiveness and latency results in a specific tension between strong expectations on the one hand and missing guidance with regard to how to fulfil them on the other. Third, cultural repertoires are embedded in power relations, as they both reflect as well as reproduce (and legitimise) the social and symbolic order of a given society, "the established" being those who are dominant and also who have the power to decide upon which behaviour in a certain interaction is right or wrong. This is why we propose carving out the hegemonic dimension of cultural repertoires: they are not only dominant and the most powerful but also serve to control others—newcomers in particular—and shape processes of arriving. As a result, one is always acting on uncertain grounds in the process of arriving. For instance, every social interaction, every use of the new language,

carries a risk of revealing oneself as not belonging, whereby the boundaries of belonging are also not clearly and unambiguously defined.

The more uncertain the ground, the stronger the desire for clear rules that can be followed or at least with which you can cope. This aspect becomes clearly evident through contextualising the analysis of the creation process and the group discussions. In both contexts, the analysis reveals a certain tension between the need to clarify the rules or a need for concreteness (expressed by those with refugee or migration experience) and a more improvisational approach that leaves more room for a certain vagueness (expressed by those without refugee experience or those whose refugee experience is further in the past). This leads to the assumption that, in particular, people who more recently arrived in a society or a group wish for something tangible to hold on to, or to act against in case of unfair treatment. If the prevailing expectations and rules are not tangible or comprehensible in the process of arriving, precisely because one does not have the access the necessary cultural repertoires, one is also deprived of one's own agency. This means that explicit rules do not only have a restrictive function but can also be liberating.

One strategy for dealing with this lack of knowledge regarding one's own adequate behaviour in certain situations of interaction is to make oneself invisible, to remain silent, and to hide one's own perspectives and impulses to act. As our analysis reveals, people arriving hold on to any clues that they get in their attempt not to stand out in a negative way. Sometimes this is achieved through proverbs that one has memorised to escape potentially exposing situations; sometimes it is over-achievement by means of which one tries to correspond. Some people even consider it necessary to conceal their real name to avoid the risk, despite perfect assimilation, of being perceived as other and excluded.

At this point, some of the benefits of using such a fiction-based approach to study facets of arriving become apparent: fiction—probably better than other realms of art—enables characters to provide their inner thoughts by using techniques of inner monologue or a narrator who has access to the minds of the characters. This is also mentioned by Leavy, who argues that “[...] fiction offers us unique access into interiority by representing interior dialogue (what a character is thinking)” (Leavy 2020, p. 60). We add that it is the specific tension between the characters' described behaviour (“outside”) and how their thoughts are presented (“inside”/“interior”) that makes this sort of data so valuable for the (sociological) analysis of arriving. It enables the ambivalences that arise from being confronted with rather vague expectations in the process of arriving to be shown. Compared to traditional techniques such as the narrative interview, fiction promotes stronger references to experiences beyond one's own biography. As we have seen in the literature team, the writers drew on a broad range of their own and other people's different experiences of arriving, bringing together various different perspectives as well as strategies that are somehow concentrated and/or condensed into a few characters and chains of actions. These evoke similarities to Max Weber's fundamental idea of creating ideal types: pointed descriptions of phenomena or types of actions. Based on their own and others' experiences and various (unsystematic but extensive) observations, writers create characters and situations that highlight the “typical” (including fuzziness and blind spots as in every sociological typology). However, this is not only beneficial for analysing social processes but, as Leavy points out, also creates empathy in the readers:

Storytelling and writing are fundamental parts of human life and our study of it. [...] Stories that we hear or read can also make a deep and lasting impression. Stories have the potential to make us feel connected; open our eyes to new perspectives; stimulate the development of empathy, self-awareness or social reflection [...]. Stories enable us to imagine what is and what might be. (Leavy 2020, p. 43)

Another way that fiction contributes to empathy is that it is intentionally incomplete; it leaves “space for the readers' interpretations and imagination. In other words, there are interpretive gaps in fiction [...] Readers fill in these gaps, and in doing so they may

actively develop empathetic connections to the characters (and the kinds of people they represent)” (Leavy 2020, p. 60).

Our tripartite research design helped make especially clear that the process of arrival is characterised by how those who are arriving are confronted with the difficulty of having to meet expectations, yet without being given any guidance on how to meet these expectations and when they are actually met. On the contrary, these expectations can be assumed to also potentially change depending on the need and the prevailing social climate, e.g., the attitudes towards refugees and migrants in a society or a certain social context. By focusing on the logics of knowledge production in science and the artistic field and by shedding light on the challenges of mutual translation between sociology and the arts, the potential as well as the limitations of this transdisciplinary approach become apparent. Fiction and the analysis of its creation and reception process serve as a means to unveil and contest those hegemonic expectations, which refugees (and other migrants) are exposed to during their process of arriving. The benefits of fiction lie in its ability to outline the authors’ personal experience as well as the experiences of others in a condensed and sharpened way. This makes it possible to express the ambivalences of the usually very subtle and vague expectations, as well as the feelings and emotions, which accompany this process. However, we only know a little about the impact of art (and fiction in particular) on broader processes of cultural and social change. Even if a piece of art challenges common knowledge and taken-for-granted assumptions, this does not mean that it automatically has the transformative power to change refugees’ trajectories. The impact might be rather limited and subtle, and it also depends on who and how many are reading, watching, or listening. The task of science, however, is to contribute to analysing the manifold perspectives that artistic practices, their production as well as their reception offer to better understand—and probably contribute to reframe discourses on—refugees’ arriving.

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Notes

- ¹ The artists were selected on the basis of extensive research into the current artistic landscape, particularly focusing on musicians, photographers, and writers who are known to have had refugee experiences themselves. The artists without refugee experience were selected based on the focus areas of their artistic work. To ensure the most dynamic collaboration possible, we carefully curated teams that brought together diverse artistic perspectives.
- ² This part of the project is still ongoing at the time of writing this paper. As we successfully applied for additional funding by the FWF to support Ukrainian scientists, we have extended this part of the research by including group discussions with recently fled refugees from Ukraine in Austria.
- ³ For an extensive description and discussion of the project’s methodological background as well as its ethical considerations, see Mijić and Parzer (2022).
- ⁴ This group discussion was conducted by students of the course “Reconstructive Social Research” at the Department of Sociology, University of Vienna during the summer term 2022.

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