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Children's and Young Adult Literature as a Space for Reflection on Migration: An Introduction to Thematic and Narrative Perspectives

The lines on the cover of this special issue of *Filoteknos* take on dynamic forms – they twist, intersect, dissolve, and reconnect. Their movement is not linear but rather circular, fragmented, and interwoven. This visual design serves as a metaphor for the migration narratives that emerge from the contributions gathered in this volume. It highlights the multilayered aspects of children's and young adult literature, as well as the many different representations and interpretations of migration herein.

Just as the cover is inspired by the diversity and complexity of migration narratives, the conception and development of this special issue trace back to the international conference held in March 2024 at the University of Wrocław, Poland. This conference focused on migration, identities, and growing up in transnational spaces and was part of the binational German-Polish, interdisciplinary sociological and literary studies project DoDzi¹ – Growing Up in Transnational Families: Children's Perspectives on 'Good Childhood' – which examines childhood and transnational family arrangements. From a sociological perspective, the project focused on how children interpret and evaluate

¹ The acronym is derived from the Polish title “Dorastanie w rodzinach transnarodowych. ‘Dobre dzieciństwo’ z perspektywy dzieci” (DFG: 465048370; NCN: 2020/39/G/HS6/01633). Alexandra König leads the German side of the project and Dorota Michułka the Polish side. More information about the project can be found at “<http://www.uni-due.de/biwi/koenig/dodzi/>”.

transnational arrangements and what normative patterns of a “good childhood” (Bühler-Niederberger, 2024) are embedded within them (see König, Schwittek, Jendrzey, 2024). Additionally, the study examined how transnational families are reflected and represented in children’s and young adult literature (Jendrzey, 2025; for a literary perspective see Zajac, 2023). The literary studies perspective focused on the interaction between the book and the reader. The analysis explored how children engage with the narratives presented in children’s literature to gain insights into their perspectives on transnational families and childhood: how they position themselves in relation to fictional characters in children’s and young adult literature, identify with or sympathize with them, and how they interpret the depicted family structures in light of their own experiences (Michułka, 2024a; Michułka, Zajac, 2024).

A central aspect that connects both perspectives within the DoDzi project is the understanding and analytical potential of children’s and young adult literature. From both a sociological and a literary studies perspective, it is regarded as a social document closely intertwined with the societal contexts of its time (Dörner, Vogt, 2013). As Grzegorz Leszczyński (2006: 11) emphasizes, it is always embedded in contemporary events and historical experiences, making it not only a literary genre but also a witness to social processes – one that can (re)construct and deconstruct them. In this sense, children’s and young adult literature provides a productive avenue for understanding social dynamics, historical developments, and cultural transformations, as well as the specific interpretative patterns of social phenomena embedded within them. Literary narratives play a central role in this context, as they provide a fundamental framework for making sense of lived reality. They are regarded as a “primary means of organizing experience and a tool for constructing models of reality” (Ryan, 2005: 345). Furthermore, narratives illustrate processes of development and individual transformation within a “past-present-future” schema (Ricoeur, 1988).

The potential of engaging with children’s and young adult literature and the narratives within and around it was explored on multiple levels within the DoDzi project. On the one hand, children’s and young adult literature was analyzed at the textual, reception, and production levels (Vogt, 2014). On the other hand, it was also employed as a tool to create an age-appropriate stimulus for empirical research (see Schwittek, Jendrzey, forthcoming). This methodological approach highlights the dual function of children’s literature: both as an analytical object for reflecting on social processes and as a practical instrument for capturing children’s perspectives on migration and transnational lifeworlds. In order to examine this latter aspect in greater depth, we conducted an interview with Alexandra König, the lead of the German Part of the DoDzi project, which is included in this issue of *Filoteknos*. In the interview, she reflects on the role of children’s literature in her research, its integration into the project, and its methodological application for studying (transnational)

childhood experiences. As the project's findings illustrate, these experiences and interpretations are highly diverse (König et al. 2024). And not least, challenging in regard to traditional understandings of migration.

The findings of the DoDzi project highlight that, from children's perspectives, migration extends far beyond the physical relocation from one place to another. Children frame, interpret, and negotiate migration within transnational contexts in diverse ways, taking into account the perspectives of both migrating and non-migrating actors while emphasizing relational dimensions. They speak about migrations rather than migration, recognizing its various types, contexts, trajectories, and the motives that shape them. This becomes apparent both in children's own accounts (König et al. 2024) as well as in their reception of migration-related literature (Michulka, 2024b). Migration is not perceived as a one-dimensional transition but rather as a dynamic process of reorientation, adaptation, and strategic negotiation within individual and interfamily contexts. While migration can open up new resources and opportunities, it is also often accompanied by loss, uncertainty, and emotional challenges. In short, children incorporate broader interpretations and contexts that transcend traditional understandings of migration, particularly those shaped by methodological nationalism.

In this context, Nina Glick Schiller (1995) and her colleagues already in the 1990s called for a new perspective on migration – one that challenges conventional concepts and makes the complexity of migration processes more visible. They introduced the transnational perspective, which, in contrast to methodological nationalism, allows migration to be understood not as a one-dimensional and irreversible process but as a form of dynamic mobility in multiple directions, encompassing both physical and social dimensions, such as cross-border relationships. Therefore, migration is no longer interpreted as a linear, territorially bound process. Instead, this approach emphasizes the circularity, temporality, and multidimensionality of migration movements (Faist, Fauser, Reisenauer, 2014; Pries, 2010: 15f.). This “transnational turn” and its call for more complex perspectives on migration (Glick Schiller et al. 1995; Pries, Seeliger, 2012) is also reflected in recent approaches of literary studies to analyze children's and young adult literature (McAdam, Arizpe, Abou Ghaida, 2024; Świetlicki, 2023; Arizpe, 2021). As the contributions in this special issue illustrate, literary representations of migration capture its complexity and contribute to questioning and renegotiating traditional notions of migration.

With this volume, we bring together international and interdisciplinary analyses of children's and young adult literature that examine narratives about and related to migration. By exploring how migration is represented in children's literature, this volume expands knowledge of these representations and deepens our understanding of migration itself, while also demonstrating how children's literature reflects broader social contexts. Thus, the focus is not

only on analyzing migration and its representation but also on highlighting the potential of children's and young adult literature as an analytical object in its own right. As Susanne Gaschke (1995: 1) aptly states and inspires us: "Children's literature is a complex cultural phenomenon that appears simple to many. One of the greatest deficits in academic engagement with children's books lies in underestimating this complexity, in the refusal to acknowledge its multilayered nature and to consider it methodologically." This issue of *Filoteknos* reflects the complexity of children's literature and the broader socio-cultural discourse on the subject of the new fluid migratory identity, the poetics of migration, new narrative strategies in migration literature for young people, and the subject of the changing family model. In transnational conditions, the literary image of the family in a situation of migratory separation, in fact, takes the shape of a new community that is liminal² "beyond borders," moves away from the nuclear model of family towards a group of close people – such as grandparents and relatives – while acquiring new cultural meanings, values, and social senses. Contemporary literature for children and adolescents addressing the changing approach to the child and childhood as a socio-cultural construct reflects these transformations.³ The cultural differences inherent in the daily life of the country of settlement will also become a challenge for the migrant family of migration-themed books at the level of the setting and plot.⁴

A review of the contributions revealed a highly heterogeneous approach to migration narratives. Not least because all contributions understand migration not merely as physical movement from one place to another, but also incorporate various migration narratives and contexts, which we aim to highlight in the special issue. To structure the diverse perspectives on migration,

² More about liminality in children's literature see issue 13 of *Filoteknos* edited by Sylwia Kamińska-Maciąg and Mateusz Świetlicki in collaboration with Alicja Wang.

³ Notably, this is a relatively new issue in the Polish socio-cultural space, which has so far mainly been the focus of sociologists (Slany, Ślusarczyk, Pustułka, 2017; Walczak, 2016; Urbańska, 2009). In the field of Polish literary studies, migration and transnational childhoods have yet to receive a complete monographic study, although several articles have already addressed such issues (Rembowska-Płuciennik, 2024; Gromadzka, 2022; Wójcik-Dudek, 2019).

⁴ Such books show important moments in the life of the protagonist: the difficult decision to leave of the parents (or one of the parents), the departure of the child protagonist abroad with their family, the moment of arrival in the new country, the search for work by the parents, various situations of confrontation with the new reality, the new country of settlement and attempts to assimilate into the local environment, language barrier and difficulties in communication, peer rivalry, the attempt to confront one's own culture with a foreign culture and determine one's own attitude to the new culture, the attempt to understand it, establish a dialogue, exchange views, then tame the place, adapt to the new conditions, but also make friends (see Rembowska-Płuciennik, 2024; Świetlicki, 2023).

we have organized the contributions into four thematic groups: Staying, Leaving, Returning, and (In)Visibility. However, this categorization should not be understood as the only possible or definitive classification. Many texts address multiple aspects simultaneously. We particularly aim to highlight these overlapping narratives, as they demonstrate that migration in children's and young adult literature is not depicted in a one-dimensional or single-perspective manner. This becomes evident not only in the thematic engagements of the authors with the subject but also in the theoretical approaches of their analyses. Thus, the chosen structure is not intended as a rigid classification but rather as a structural framework that brings central themes and patterns into focus without constraining the complexity of individual contributions. It provides a way to grasp the dynamics of migration narratives and illustrates how different perspectives and storytelling approaches intersect and complement one another.

STAYING – REPRESENTATIONS OF NON-MOBILE ACTORS OF MIGRATION

This grouping encompasses not only the physical dimension of staying but also the perspectives of non-mobile actors, as well as a metaphorical understanding of migration. The first thematic section is introduced by Anna Pigoń, who examines migration as both a narrative and structural element in historical and contemporary Polish girls' novels. In her analysis, migration is understood primarily in a metaphorical sense – as an expression of inner development and social transformation. It functions as a key motif of change, symbolizing the protagonists' transition into adulthood. The remaining two articles in this grouping focus on Stayer children, that is, children of migrants who do not migrate themselves. This underscores the fact that literary narratives of migration do not solely adopt the perspective of those who physically move but also reflect the experiences of those who stay behind (Faist et al. 2012: 22ff.). In this context, Dorota Żygadło-Czopnik examines the phenomenon of transnational families as a consequence of parental labor migration. Her contribution analyzes how parental absence is represented in literature and how the lived realities of children who stay behind are portrayed. Here, migration is understood as a field of tension between distance and proximity, loss and continuity. Similarly, Justyna Szumańska and Justyna Zajac examine the representations of non-mobile children, linking them to the literary depictions of refugee (mobile) children. The connection between these two migration experiences underscores that migration is not an isolated event but rather a universal human phenomenon. In literature, migration emerges as a narrative construct that encompasses experiences of boundaries, loss, and uncertainty, but also of hope and adaptation.

LEAVING – EXPLORING CHILDREN’S AND ADOLESCENTS’ MOBILITIES

The second thematic group – Leaving – comprises four articles that focus on the departure from a familiar place, whether due to war or racial oppression, displacement, or environmental changes. This group is opened by the article by Ewa Klęczaj-Siara, which explores the movement of African Americans in the early twentieth century from the rural South to the industrial cities of the North in the United States. Analyzing picturebooks about African American artists, the author explores the representation of this (domestic) migration and the experience of navigating new social spaces. Here, migration is not depicted as a linear movement from one place to another but rather as a creative and multifaceted process of spatial appropriation, in which identity and community are continuously renegotiated and reshaped. The following two articles examine forced migration in the context of the war in Ukraine, analyzing Ukrainian children’s and picturebooks published after 2014. Svetlana Efimova explores how these works employ therapeutic writing strategies to help children process the traumatic experiences of war and displacement, thereby establishing a “resilience narrative.” Here, migration is understood not only as an individual experience but also as a collective one. This collective dimension of migration – as part of a national narrative rather than solely an individual experience – is also central to Daria Semenova’s contribution. She analyzes the representation of internally displaced children, demonstrating that migration extends far beyond the physical act of relocation. Rather, it is a dynamic process that reshapes identities, social relationships, and the very concept of home. The final contribution in this group, by Larissa Carolin Jagdschian, examines the depiction of displacement as a consequence of climate disasters. The author illustrates that climate migration is not only portrayed as a direct result of climate change but also as a narrative of societal failure. Here, migration is not presented as an individual fate but rather as a global, systemic issue deeply embedded in political, social, and ecological structures.

RETURNING – MIGRATION AS A RECIPROCAL AND TEMPORAL PROCESS

The penultimate group of articles focuses on the literary negotiations and representations of return migration, with an emphasis on the reciprocal and temporal character of mobilities, which can include both geographical (movement) and/or imagined (return) mobilities. In this context María Alcantud-Díaz analyzes the depiction of return migration in picturebooks, aiming to identify the narratives conveyed within them as well as their societal implications. Here, migration is understood as a multifaceted process that encompasses social,

emotional, and economic reorientation. The analysis particularly emphasizes that migration is not a linear movement but rather a cyclical and dynamic phenomenon that presents both challenges and opportunities for individuals and societies. The complex interconnections of migration are also explored in the contribution by Deepali Agarwal. Through an analytical lens, the author reviews the book – *A Home for the Hargila* – which explores themes of migration, climate change, and the disappearance and return of the Hargila storks in Assam, India. The review demonstrates that migration is not considered in isolation but rather embedded within an ecological and social context. The narrative connects the migration of birds to human migration and its social consequences for marginalized communities, highlighting the intricate interrelation between climate change, social inequality, and displacement. Here, migration is not depicted as an isolated phenomenon but as a process of leaving and returning, deeply embedded in a broader network of systemic interconnections.

(IN)VISIBILITY – MARGINALIZATION OF MIGRATION NARRATIVES AND ITS DIVERSITY

The following contributions illustrate how historical developments, publishing decisions, and sociopolitical narratives shape the literary representation of migration. Jana Mikota analyzes the historical evolution of migration depictions in German-language children's and young adult literature from 1945 to the present. Her study demonstrates how thematic focuses and narrative strategies vary across different social and political contexts. Migration is understood as a part of broader societal negotiation processes, which are reflected in children's and young adult literature. The literary negotiation of migration is also examined by Katarzyna Jendrzey, who draws on interviews with Polish publishers of children's and young adult books. Her study highlights a narrative of invisibility and deliberate avoidance, which manifests in publishing decisions and contributes to the limited visibility of migration in Polish children's and young adult literature. At the same time, she reveals that migration is perceived from a publishing perspective as both a socially marginal topic and a politically and socially charged issue. A similar pattern of marginalization is also evident in Russian children's literature, as Ekaterina Shatalova demonstrates in her article. She analyzes how migrants and refugees are depicted in contemporary Russian children's literature and demonstrates that migration is often portrayed primarily as a problem or challenge for the majority society. From her perspective, migration emerges as an underrepresented and stereotyped topic in Russian children's literature, frequently narrated from an outsider's point of view.

The contributions presented in the four groupings focus on analyses of children's and young adult literature, particularly at the textual and production levels. Thematically linked to the volume, but not involving literary analysis, is the

guest contribution by Krystyna Slany and Justyna Struzik, which is also included in this issue. Through interviews and focus groups, the study examines the agency and identity formation of migrant children in Polish schools. Here, migration is not understood as a simple transition from one culture to another but as a dynamic process of negotiating identity, belonging, and social relationships.

Beyond the contributions and groupings, this issue of *Filoteknos* includes the previously mentioned interview with Alexandra König, a sociologist specializing in childhood and family research. As a co-responsible contributor to the Dodzi project, she shares her insights and perspectives on this project as well as on the subsequent project, TraNa.

Traditionally, this issue also features the VARIA and review sections. The VARIA section includes an article by Karolina Szymborska, in which the author examines how various concepts of childhood in philosophical and literary discourses are linked to understandings of time and temporality. She presents different temporal archetypes of the child, navigating between the philosophy of finitude and the philosophy of beginnings.

The review section includes a contribution by Dorota Michułka, reviewing the book *Technopaideia. Zaawansowane technologie w edukacji humanistycznej*, edited by Sebastian Borowicz and Joanna Hobot-Marcinek.

For the final words of this introduction, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the authors for their valuable contributions to this issue of *Filoteknos*, as well as to the reviewers for their dedicated feedback and constructive comments, which have greatly enriched this publication.

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