

Migration Novel as a Conversional Genre

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In a world fraught with mobility and displacement, fictional narratives of migration play a major role in raising awareness and sympathy. The task of (re-)defining this genre, which is alternatively called diasporic, immigrant, or migrant literature, among other identifiers (Kosmalska 2022), requires a model that would be able to encompass a range of novels that often recount a quest in search of a better life. Defining the borders of migration novel, which here broadly refers to any novel that features migrant characters, offers the added benefit of transcending established categorisations and making room for more helpful categories.

In this project, we examine whether the migration novel fits the category of what Andrew Piper (2015) has termed a “conversional novel.” Based on St. Augustine’s *Confessions* and by analysing the changes in linguistic patterns in the course of a novel, Piper’s proposed model seeks to determine if somewhere throughout a novel a “conversion” takes place: “a structure in which narration is marked by a strong sense of before and after, by a singular sense of temporal difference” (2015: 64). Employing methods of computational reading would allow us to highlight “a family of resemblances between novels that we had not noticed before, one that depends on larger-scale linguistic shifts that are not accounted for by our critical methods of reading” (2015: 66). We argue that the conversion in a migration novel could take place at any moment in the process of migration, thus resulting in a significant shift at the level of language usage and semantics.

In order to define a new genre or delimit the boundaries of an older one, a large corpus of novels should be analysed. Previous attempts at theorising migration literature as a genre have focused on general thematic trends in writings featuring migrants (Pourjafari and Vahidpour 2014; Burge 2020; Kosmalska 2022) and, in most cases, rely on a few case studies to develop their definition (Frank 2008; Vlasta 2016). For the purpose of this study, we focus on a body of migrant narratives consisting of 150 contemporary anglophone novels, extracted from the *Penguin Book of Migration Literature* (2019), which share the plot of characters migrating from one country to another. In the first place, the corpus is explored through distant reading, which enables us to detect patterns that are difficult, if not impossible, to find through close reading. However, relying solely on distant reading would have the disadvantage of detecting “false conversions.” Therefore, in this case, the ideal methodology is a mixed methodology to avoid what Piper has elsewhere identified as “the problem of generalization” (2020) in many digital humanities projects.

We use a vector space model and TF-IDF to perform inter- and intra-chapter comparisons in each novel, which shows us the semantic similarities and variances in each chapter and different parts of the novel. This would ultimately allow us to identify a potential conversional moment in a novel. In the next step, the novels that represent the most discrepancies between their two halves (i.e. before and after “conversion”) are selected for close reading to see if the discrepancy indeed stems from a conversional moment, or rather it is rooted elsewhere. Based on the patterns detected in these selected novels, the model is refined, and the process of distant reading is repeated to “reduce the so-called scale of conjecture” (Piper 2015: 75). This eventually leads us to a narrower, more concrete definition for a conversional migration novel.

One of the advantages of this model is that it lets us define and redefine our model in each step, thus resulting in a step-by-step process towards defining the genre of the migration novel. The primary result of this study is discovering a moment of conversion in many of these novels, where the before and after languages of the narrative are remarkably different. The other, more important result is identifying sub-genres of migration novel, such as the traumatic migration novel, which are more helpful than existing, general categories such as migrant/immigrant/refugee novels or other similar terms. In many cases, resemblances could be found in places hard to imagine through close reading but revealed through language processing. Our model lets us detect common threads in novels not previously associated together and define sub-genres for an omnipresent type of narrative in contemporary literature.

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