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Challenging Nordic Exceptionalism: Norway in Literature by and about Irregular Migrants

Annika Bøstein Myhr

Abstract, According to social scientists, the Nordic countries have claimed to have a unique humanitarian and peace-loving relationship to the colonized or poor parts of the world, and, according to criminologists, the Nordic countries have exceptionally humane punitive systems. This article asks whether the native Norwegian author Simon Stranger's fictional account of the life of an irregular migrant in Norway may contribute something to the problematisation of the image of Norway as representative of a so-called Nordic Exceptionalism that two autobiographical accounts written by the irregular migrant Maria Amelie do not – or cannot – do, and vice versa.

KEYWORDS, Nordic Exceptionalism, Norway, irregular migration, autobiography, novel, Trandum National Police Immigration Detention Centre

By comparing a work of fiction about irregular migration written by a Norwegian citizen to two autobiographical works written by an author with personal experience of living in Norway as an irregular migrant, I have two aims. First, I wish to assess whether the genres, and the literary and rhetorical devices through which the authors express themselves, can be said to reveal their stance on Norway as representative (or not) of a Nordic Exceptionalism, as defined by social scientists on the one hand,¹ and criminologists on the other.² Second, I seek to determine whether the authors' stances reflect differences in their backgrounds (including their different juridical statuses). The novel I will analyse is Simon Stranger's *De som ikke finnes* ['Those who don't exist'] (2014),³ which is the final volume in a trilogy for young readers, and tells the story of the Ghanese boy Samuel who comes to Norway, hoping to get help from the teenage-girl Emilie, whom he met three years earlier when he came to the Canaries as a boat

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migrant, as described in the trilogy's first book, *Barsakh*.⁴ The autobiographies I will analyse are those of the Russian-born author Maria Amelie, whose birth name is Madina Salamova (in Russian) or Madine Salamty (in Ossetian).

Amelie was 17 years old when she arrived in Norway in October 2002, together with her parents. Prior to publishing the book *Ulovlig norsk* ['Illegally Norwegian'] and applying for asylum independently of her parents in 2010,⁵ she lived in Norway for a total of eight years, first as a child of asylum seekers, and then, when her parents' asylum application was rejected, as an irregular migrant. *Illegally Norwegian* describes these eight years of Amelie's life, with some flashbacks to the family's past in Russia and the Caucasus. Amelie's next book *Takk* ['Thank you'], from 2014, tells the story of her expulsion from Norway, and voices her gratitude to the several thousands of people who supported her case in 2010–2011.⁶

In my analysis, I will focus mainly on Stranger's *Those who don't exist* and Amelie's *Thank you*, but also include supporting references to the two initial books in Stranger's youth trilogy, as well as to Amelie's *Illegally Norwegian*. I will also support the analysis of Amelie's and Stranger's works with contextual information about Norway's history of migration, after having presented a more detailed discussion of the meanings lent to the term Nordic Exceptionalism by social scientists and criminologists.

NORDIC EXCEPTIONALISM

The idea of Nordic Exceptionalism originated in the Cold War era, when, as Christopher Browning puts it, "a 'Nordic brand' was advanced which was essentially built around the idea that the Nordic countries, in terms of foreign policy, international morality and social justice, both at home and abroad, were 'better' than the rest."⁷ Browning explains how three elements came to serve as the pillars of this 'Nordic brand'. First, the brand rested on the following claim:

[T]he Nordic countries were exceptional in regard to the Cold War reading of international politics. Instead of the inevitable conflict between states, the Nordics presented themselves as having successfully overcome the security dilemma between themselves to establish a region of peace and prosperity."⁸

According to Browning, the idea of the Nordic countries serving as models for "how to settle conflicts and build a peaceful security community" originated in the pan-Scandinavianist movement of the nineteenth century, and "was further enhanced in the early–mid-twentieth century through the creation of various so-called Nordic societies and later the Nordic Council."⁹ During the Cold War, the

“peace-loving and rational’ Nordics,” in Browning’s words, “differentiated themselves from the rest of ‘warlike’ or ‘conflict-prone’ Europe” by becoming “active norm entrepreneurs.”¹⁰

If the “Nordic peace industry” was one element of the Nordic Exceptionalism brand during the Cold War, the second element can be termed “internationalist solidarity” (with countries in the Third World), while the third element was the idea of an egalitarian social democracy that could function as a “Third Way between US capitalist neoliberalism and Soviet-style state socialism.”¹¹ In a post-Cold War context the need for a Third Way was no longer there.¹² Furthermore, the role of the Nordic countries as international peace-makers and bridge-builders was challenged by Denmark’s and Norway’s participation in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹³ In addition, Nordic political unity has been undermined, as some countries have joined the EU while others have not.¹⁴

Nevertheless, even if two out of three elements of the Nordic Exceptionalism have been weakened, Norway and its Nordic neighbours *have* continued to seek to play a role in overcoming the global North–South divide, and to be “‘exceptional’ in their solidarity with the world’s poor.”¹⁵ That such solidarity has been and continues to be especially important in Sweden was evident during the migrant crisis of 2015, when the country received more than 160,000 asylum seekers, more per capita than any other country in Europe.¹⁶ Norway may have continued to present itself as a “humanitarian great power” well into the 2000s,¹⁷ but it received only around 31,000¹⁸ asylum seekers in 2015, and attempted to close its Storskog border crossing with Russia in order to stop asylum seekers from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan entering through ‘Europe’s back door’. Norway even tried to return the 5,500 asylum seekers who crossed the border at Storskog to Russia, which was described as “a safe third country for most third country nationals.”¹⁹ As with Amelie’s case in 2011, the Storskog asylum seekers in 2015 exposed to the public that even if Norway’s humanitarian aid contributions are generous, practising humanitarian ideals at home is an altogether different matter.

Cases involving migrants like Amelie have also come to challenge the image of the Nordic countries as being characterised by what John Pratt in 2008 coined penal *Scandinavian Exceptionalism* – later recoined as penal Nordic Exceptionalism.²⁰ Penal Nordic Exceptionalism builds on the values of “humaneness and social solidarity”²¹ which underlie the general exceptionalism that social scientists have described. The term penal Nordic Exceptionalism is indicative of the Nordic countries’ supposed “low rates of imprisonment and humane prison conditions.”²² Given that the values of Nordic Exceptionalism as described by social scientists are waning, it may not be surprising that penal Nordic Exceptionalism has also become the subject of critical scholarly scrutiny. As sociologist Vanessa Barker argues:

Nordic penal regimes are Janus-faced: one side relatively mild and benign; the other intrusive, disciplining and oppressive. This paradox has not been fully grasped or explained by the Nordic Exceptionalism thesis which overstates the degree to which Nordic penal order is based on humaneness and social solidarity, an antidote to mass incarceration.²³

Barker goes on to explain how the “lack of individual rights and an ethno-cultural conception of citizenship make certain categories of people such as criminal offenders, criminal aliens, drug offenders and perceived ‘others’, particularly foreign nationals, vulnerable to deprivation and exclusion.”²⁴ These findings are similar to those of Norwegian criminologists,²⁵ who have also explored the dynamics of the case of Amelie, who was perceived to be culturally Norwegian, but was expelled from Norway due to her lack of juridical rights as an irregular migrant.²⁶ As I see it, the two outlined discourses on Nordic Exceptionalism are interrelated, and I will look for Amelie’s and Stranger’s stance on both. In my opinion, Amelie and Stranger do not have to have been aware of the academic descriptions of these discourses in order to have expressed opinions about them that may be identified through the analysis of their works.

CHOICE OF TEXTS

As I have argued elsewhere, it is important to read autobiographical texts by irregular migrants in Europe, so as to learn more about the lives of a substantial number of people who live here, but, as the title of Stranger’s novel puts it, officially “don’t exist.”²⁷ In 2014, the year when Amelie’s *Thank you* and Stranger’s *Those who don’t exist* were published, it was estimated that nearly 15,000 immigrants who had been told to leave Norway were continuing to stay in the country.²⁸ Many of these people had come to Norway as asylum seekers, that is “someone who says he or she is a refugee, but whose claim has not yet been definitively evaluated.”²⁹ Many of them had also been denied refugee status because the Norwegian state did not regard them as “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.”³⁰

Both quantitative and qualitative studies have been conducted in the attempt to find out what happens with rejected asylum seekers and others who continue to live in Norway as so-called *irregular migrants*³¹ – that is as persons “who, owing to irregular entry, breach of a condition of entry or the expiry of their legal basis for entering and residing, [lack] legal status in a transit or host country.”³² Irregular migrants are an extremely diverse group of people, and qualitative

research obviously has its shortcomings, since findings based on one or a few persons' stories are not representative of the group as a whole. (Also, such representativity would be impossible to test.) Quantitative research is challenged by the fact that irregular immigrants are living in hiding.

People mostly learn about irregular migration from the popular media. It is, however, a weakness of the media that they mediate *second-hand interpretations* of irregular migrants' stories, which means that the agendas of journalists or newsrooms frame the migrants' stories.³³ Research shows that in the mass media irregular migrants are typically presented as a group, rather than as individuals, and as either victims or villains³⁴ – or, in a few cases, as heroes.³⁵ Media coverage of migration may be motivated by viewer or sales numbers, ideological considerations and populist trends, and migrants' stories are often mediated negatively, rather than compassionately.³⁶ Given the weaknesses inherent in presentations of irregular migrants in statistics, research and mass media, the question remains: what do we know, or rather, what *can* we know, about irregular migrants? Also: what does it tell us about the West, a part of the world that holds freedom of speech as its most esteemed value, that thousands of people are living here, without the possibility to tell, first-hand, what it is like to live on the margins of society?

It would seem that some of the few first-hand sources that may provide insights into the world of irregular migrants are autobiographical accounts, like Amelie's. These are, however, extremely rare to come by, given that irregular migrants risk a lot by revealing their status and identity, and because many irregular migrants are not fluent in their host country's language and may not have the necessary education to be able to express themselves in writing. Even if autobiographical accounts cannot tell us the objective *truth* about the lives of singular irregular migrants, such works may open up for a more nuanced understanding of their destinies, and of the effects on individuals of the structural forces that frame their lives. Such literature, one could assume, may also instigate in the reader a more compassionate stance towards irregular migrants as individuals than that which media's stereotyping or "faceless" coverage of their stories allows for.³⁷

A combination of factors has created a demand for authors of fiction to include stories of irregular migrants in their works: the increasing number of irregular migrants in Europe; the media's skewed coverage; and the almost total absence of autobiographical accounts of their lives. Reading works of fiction may seem less useful than reading irregular migrants' autobiographical accounts if we want to know what their lives are *really* like. However, we should not forget that fiction can depict irregular migrants as *whole* human beings, as individuals we can identify with, to a greater extent than statistics, research and media coverage can. In addition, while an irregular migrant's autobiography may

attempt to win the sympathy of the reader in order for its author to obtain legal status in a given country, fiction written by an author holding valid citizenship can be more uncompromisingly critical of both the irregular migrant, and the citizens, policies and practices of the receiving country.

AMELIE'S STORY IN THE CONTEXT OF NORWEGIAN MIGRATION HISTORY

Until the 1970s, Norwegian history was characterised by emigration rather than immigration.³⁸ Since the 1975 labour immigration halt, refugee and family migration have continued to contribute to the country's net migration, so that in January 2015 immigrants accounted for 13 per cent of the population – and 23 per cent of the capital Oslo's 648,000 inhabitants.³⁹ In 2001, Norway became a part of the “borderless” EU/Schengen area – even though the country is not a full member of the European Union (EU), only of the European Economic Area (EEA). As in many other European countries, immigration is at the top of the Norwegian political agenda,⁴⁰ and in the years leading up to 2014, foreigners, asylum seekers and third-country nationals increasingly became objects of control and administration for the Norwegian government.⁴¹ We have to understand Stranger's and Amelie's books against this historical backdrop.

Amelie's autobiographical accounts of her life as an irregular migrant from Russia in *Illegally Norwegian* and her expulsion from Norway in *Thank you* are unique, and thus very interesting documents in a European context. They are not only two extremely rare first-hand accounts of the life of an irregular migrant: Amelie's story, as she described it in *Illegally Norwegian* and the newspaper article “Ikke et menneske” [‘Not a human being’],⁴² actually resulted in the introduction of a new law in Norway, the so-called *Lex Amelie*, which allows rejected asylum seekers to return to Norway as labour immigrants if they have a required specialist education and a job offer.⁴³ This law would seem to confirm the existence of a humanitarian and penal Nordic Exceptionalism; however, a brief glance at *Illegally Norwegian* and the book's reception reveals a more complex picture.

Unlike the Storskog asylum seekers, Amelie had the benefit of being able to write a book in Norwegian. In *Illegally Norwegian*, Amelie demonstrated, as criminologist Thomas Ugelvik has shown,⁴⁴ that she was culturally Norwegian, and accepted as Norwegian by Norwegians, even if the *state* did not recognize her Norwegianness juridically. Coincidentally, because of the clumsiness of the police, Amelie's juxtaposition of the *good* Norwegian people with the *inhuman* Norwegian state was put into play in a crucial way. 2011 was “Nansen year,” in which Norway celebrated the 150th anniversary of the birth of polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen. Nansen was appointed High Commissioner for Refugees by the League of Nations in 1921 and, in 1922, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his

work on behalf of the displaced victims of World War I. His so-called Nansen passports saved around 450,000 people who had been made stateless by Lenin in 1921 and, as the principal of the Nansen Academy put it, Nansen “was the first person in the world to realise that refugees, too, have a right to an identity.”⁴⁵ On 12 January, Amelie had just given a speech about conditions for “illegal immigrants” in Norway when five policemen – some say eight – arrested her outside the Nansen Academy in Lillehammer.⁴⁶

As the high-profile social anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen put it, there was “a heavy symbolism in the fact that it was exactly there that she [Amelie] was arrested.”⁴⁷ Nansen had made a “significant humanitarian contribution” in the Caucasus, the very area from which Amelie’s family had fled, and in Eriksen’s words, Nansen’s humanitarian contribution “was based on the same fundamental human compassion that Maria had experienced so often with ordinary Norwegians, and so seldom from the Norwegian state.” Eriksen predicted that “[t]he apprehending of Maria Amelie in front of the Nansen Academy will enter history books as a symbol of a country that has lost touch with its own basic values.”⁴⁸ Amelie’s book and her arrest, which was filmed by her friends and broadcast widely across Norwegian national media,⁴⁹ persuaded many people in Norway to take Amelie’s side *against* the state, and *for* humanitarian values. Thus, one might say that Amelie’s *Illegally Norwegian* and the events in the aftermath of the publication of the book showed that while the Norwegian state is *not* characterised by a particular humanitarian relation to people from less fortunate parts of the world, the people *are*.

However, as I have discussed elsewhere,⁵⁰ critics soon argued that the popular support of Amelie was based on both cultural and biological racism: Amelie was not really from a less fortunate part of the world, but had grown up in a very wealthy family; she was obviously very resourceful, since she had obtained a higher education in Norway while living there illegally; and people would not have marched in the streets to prevent Amelie from being expelled from Norway had she not been white and spoken Norwegian fluently. In short, the Amelie case exposed that *neither* the state *nor* the people of Norway are representative of a particular Nordic Exceptionalism as defined by social scientists. The idea of Norway as representative of a particular penal Nordic Exceptionalism was also challenged in both *Illegally Norwegian* and *Thank you*, as I will explain.

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE MEASURES OF COERCION

An official report from July 2014 stated that people without known identities and rejected asylum seekers who do not leave the country represent a *security problem*.⁵¹ For the purpose of detecting and excluding illegitimate migrants as efficiently as possible, the Norwegian state already before 2014 employed what

sociologists Marko Valenta and Kristin Thorshaug call *active* and *passive measures of coercion*.⁵² The logic of *passive exclusion* includes measures “which contribute to lowering the standard of living for migrants, making them want to return to their country of origin voluntarily.”⁵³ Amelie’s *Illegally Norwegian* may be read as a description of the effect that these measures can have on an individual. For instance, the book describes how Amelie could not hold a taxable job, have a bank card, obtain insurance, travel abroad, seek medical aid if she got ill, etc. The “goodness” (148) of the Norwegian people is in this book in fact presented specifically through individuals’ *resistance to* or *disregard of* Norwegian law – since this gave Amelie the chance to complete upper secondary school, obtain a university degree without identity documents, find illicit work, etc.

In *Thank you*, Amelie distinguishes between, on the one hand, people who “lever etter prinsippet om at nestekjaerlighet skal utgjøre norsk realpolitikk” (110) [‘live by the principle that Norwegian realpolitik shall be compassionate’] and, on the other, the state and people she meets who defend non-compassionate behaviour by more or less apologetically arguing that they “bare gjør jobben sin” (13, 16, 21, 40, 54, 71, 88, 110, 114) [‘are merely doing their job’]. Many of the individuals Amelie points to as non-compassionate are representatives of institutions such as the police and the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), which enforce the Norwegian state’s *active measures of coercion*. Active measures of exclusion also include “reception centres that are supposed to be ‘simple and austere’ – unlike prisons which emulate life on the other side of the fence,” and the prison-like Aliens Holding Centre at Trandum, located close to Oslo’s biggest airport, Gardermoen.⁵⁴

Most Norwegians knew little or nothing about Trandum and the Norwegian state’s treatment of rejected asylum seekers before Amelie’s arrest in January 2011, and Amelie’s explicit goal with her second book, *Thank you*, is to “fortelle om hvordan det er å vaere her på innsiden av det stedet der ingen journalister eller vanlige mennesker får tilgang” (66) [‘tell what it’s like to be here, inside the place which no journalists or regular people can get access to’]. Amelie describes Trandum as a prison-like place (45, 60, 65, 113), surrounded by high fences, with small cells, many locked doors and troubled people, one of whom tells her: “Jeg tror ikke det er noen som blir løslatt fra Trandum” (32) [‘I don’t think anyone is ever released from Trandum’]. In Stranger’s novel, Samuel befriends another irregular migrant, who describes Trandum in very similar terms – which suggests that life on the streets is preferable to Trandum, since to end up in Trandum means that you have lost all hope of a future in Norway:

Trandum [...] er en leir for utviste asylsøkere. Den ligger like ved flyplassen. Det er til Trandum politiet sender de som skal ut igjen. [...] Det er som et fengsel, med vakter, låste celler og piggrådgerder. De siste årene har alt i livet mitt handlet om



Figure 1. Fence around Trandum Immigration Detention Centre. Photography: National Police Immigration Service.⁵⁵

ikke å bli sendt dit. Havner man der, er det ingen annen vei ut enn hjem.⁵⁶

[Trandum [...] is a camp for expelled asylum seekers. It's located close to the airport. The police send those who are to leave the country to Trandum. [...] It's like a prison, with guards, locked cells and barbed wire fences. For the last few years everything in my life has been focused on not being sent there. If you wind up there, the only way out is home.]

Photos from Trandum available on-line and an episode of the tv-series “Helene sjekker inn” [‘Helene checks in’] confirm these impressions (Figures 1–3).⁵⁷

TRANDUM AND NORDIC EXCEPTIONALISM

In 2013, criminologists Thomas and Synnøve Ugelvik described Norway's only closed immigration detention centre, Trandum, as “a part of a wider Norwegian (and thus also European) immigration control regime.”⁵⁸ They found that compared to Norwegian prisons, the Nordic Exceptionalism argued by Pratt in 2008,



Figure 2. Corridor at Trandum. Photography: Espen Rasmussen / VG /.



Figure 3. Single room at Trandum. Photography: National Police Immigration Service.

“seems to be less apparent in the country’s immigration detention system.”⁵⁹ As the Ugelviks put it, whereas “prison is understood as an integral part of the Norwegian welfare state, on the same level as schools, hospitals and other institutions, the detention centre is not.”⁶⁰ While the main goal of Norwegian *prisons* is rehabilitation and reintegration into society, Trandum is merely a transit stop for people the country does not want, because they have the wrong kind of background.

Norwegian immigration policy only aims to include a selected few migrants: skilled labour immigrants, largely from EU countries; and asylum seekers who can prove that their lives are in danger in their home countries and thus be deemed refugees, and their families. As criminologist Katja Franko Aas says, in the reception of asylum-seekers in Norway, the state:

is attempting to clarify individuals’ identity, not necessarily in order to know “who” they are, but in order to find out which

country he or she is a citizen of and which category of states the person can be placed in. This practice has, paradoxically, meant that citizenship has become increasingly important in a global world. In spite of the development of new forms of cosmopolitan and European belonging, ethnic diversity and talk of floating identities, it is, for this reason, so important, indeed essential, to the Norwegian state, to establish the identity of those who arrive as guests, as job-seekers or as people in need of protection.⁶¹

Structural global inequality is the very foundation of the system that causes people to be incarcerated at Trandum. For this reason, the detention centre may be seen to represent a major challenge to the idea of the Nordic countries as ‘good global citizens’; peace-loving, humanitarian and resourceful societies that unlike, for instance, the old colonial powers, are somewhat exempted from any guilt for structural global inequality.⁶² In its treatment of rejected asylum seekers and other irregular migrants, one might argue that the Norwegian state is proving itself as guilty as the countries that once actively colonised those parts of the world from which the irregular migrants often come. In this context, Trandum, as it figures in Amelie’s *Thank you*, can be seen as a symbol of how the Norwegian state perpetuates global inequality and does *not* represent the social scientists’ Nordic Exceptionalism.

In *Thank you*, Trandum is also presented as a challenge to the idea that Norwegian penal policy is an aspect of a Nordic Exceptionalism. Amelie addresses the trauma and humiliation of having to go through full body searches, including sitting naked over a mirror every time she enters the centre after having been to court or just speaking to her lawyer (Figure 4). Through the voice of her lawyer, she makes her reader aware that this routine is, in fact, stricter than in Norwegian prisons: “Men i vanlige fengsler skal ikke fanger bli gjennomført etter et advokatbesøk” (68) [‘But in ordinary jails, prisoners are not supposed to be [body] searched after seeing their lawyer’]. Interestingly, however, even though Amelie speaks of Trandum as “helvete på jord” (100) [‘hell on earth’], and her experience there as very traumatic (100–101), her trauma is not rendered structurally in *Thank you*; instead the book is narrated in a *chronological* and *coherent* manner – as was *Irregular Norwegian*.⁶³

LITERARY DEVICES AND QUESTIONS OF RELIABILITY AND TRUTHFULNESS

In *Thank you*, Amelie on the one hand articulates her gratitude to the many people who supported her after her arrest in 2011, and on the other depicts the difficulties that the Norwegian state put her through by sending her to Trandum.

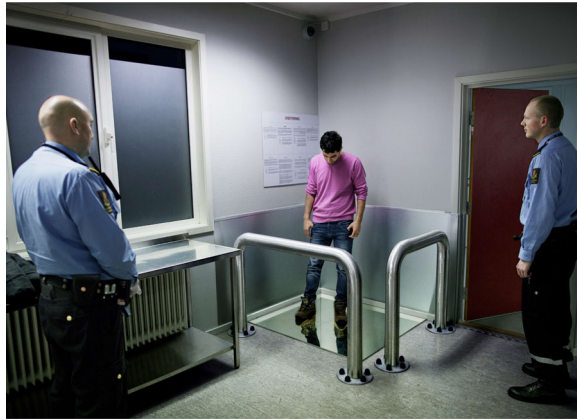


Figure 4. Mirror check at Trandum Immigration Detention Centre. Photography: Espen Rasmussen / VG / NTB.

She explicitly questions the criminalisation of vulnerable asylum seekers (114), and asks:

Hvorfor er det ikke obligatorisk å vurdere den psykiske tilstanden til asylsøkere i tillegg til den fysiske? Mange ankommer Norge med store psykiske traumer. Og hva med de psykiske traumene folk får *etter* å ha søkt asyl i Norge? (112)

[Why is it not obligatory to evaluate the mental condition of asylum seekers, in addition to the physical one? Many people arrive in Norway with severe psychological traumas. And what about the psychological traumas that people get *from* applying for asylum in Norway?]

In *Thank you*, Amelie describes several traumatic memories: of her arrest (9–18); of the full body search she was put through in Trandum (21, 68, 78); of being addressed by her birth name of Madina Salamova at Trandum and in court (20, 37, 94); of being reduced to “Maria Amelie-saken” [‘the Maria Amelie case’] (47), and treated as a representative of all irregular migrants in Norway by the press (28–31); of being put in a padded cell in the courthouse (34); and of hearing the stories of others living at Trandum (43–46, 57–61, 69–72). She describes how while at Trandum she contemplates self-mutilation or suicide as a solution to her troubles (63–66). She is released from Trandum to live with her boyfriend under police surveillance until deportation (73–80). She reads articles speculating about her parents’ story (81–82), is deported, and lives in Russia from January 2011 (86–93). As soon as she gets a Russian passport in March the same year she moves to Krakow, in Poland, through the International Cities of Refuge Network

(ICORN) (97). In April she returns to Norway, where she meets her parents, who have suffered severe health problems while Amelie has been away (97–99).

Events are told in the order in which they take place; this is somewhat disconcerting because according to trauma theory, asylum seekers and irregular migrants have problems relating their stories in a coherent and chronological narrative. As Anne Whitehead puts it, traumatic events have, on the one hand, a “haunting or possessive influence,” and on the other are in fact “resistant to narrative structures and linear temporalities.”⁶⁴ If this is the case, it seems pertinent to ask whether the chronological and coherent narration in *Thank you* could be understood as a response to yet another *passive measure of coercion* that faces asylum seekers and irregular migrants – the demand to describe traumatic experiences in an artificially coherent manner. Research on asylum interviews from Belgium has shown that the creation of coherent narrative structures and linear temporalities, to use Whitehead’s phrasing, are demanded if individuals want to obtain asylum.⁶⁵ There is no reason to believe that Norway is much different in this regard.

As we have seen, the main target of Amelie’s criticism in *Thank you* is the Norwegian state and its representatives: the police, politicians, and the guards in Trandum, as well as the immigration authorities. However, the chronology and coherence of both of Amelie’s books could also prompt us to examine conventions inherent in the autobiography and asylum interview genres. Coherence and consistency are considered criteria for truthfulness and trustworthiness in courts⁶⁶ and, to a large extent, are also implied criteria in the autobiography genre. In an examination of the narrative demands placed on asylum seekers to the US, historian and literary scholar Madeline Holland describes how literary norms may impact asylum seekers’ cases:

Western literary standards shape our understanding of what a ‘true story’ should sound like; this conflation of *literary* story-telling and *truthful* story-telling in the context of asylum proceedings can result in the failure to recognize ‘true’ stories told by asylum seekers.⁶⁷

A credible asylum story, Holland explains, making reference to Professor Stacy Caplow, an expert in asylum law, should be detailed, plausible and consistent.⁶⁸ Rendering trauma through an incoherent narrative in the autobiography *Illegally Norwegian* might have damaged the consistency and plausibility of Amelie’s story. This, in turn, could have worked to estrange her supporters, and made it less likely for her to obtain legal rights to stay in the country.

Bearing in mind Whitehead’s description of traumatic events as “resistant to narrative structures and linear temporalities,”⁶⁹ it would seem that in order to

be believed, asylum seekers and irregular migrants have to be *untruthful*, in the sense that they have to structure the *unstructurable* according to demands for coherence and consistency.⁷⁰ Since a chronologically structured narrative often has fewer textual gaps;⁷¹ it not only seems more consistent, but may also more efficiently eschew the risk of readers misinterpreting the story by filling in gaps in ways that accord with their own standard cultural narratives. Doron Menashe and Mutal E. Shamash have dubbed such misinterpretations as the Narrative Fallacy, and explain how this often works against marginalised groups:

[T]he apparently innocent role that narrative plays in resolution of questions of fact actually serves to disguise a powerful force for the preservation of the social status quo, which inevitably works against marginalized groups whose access to the prevailing social narratives is limited.”⁷²

If autobiographical accounts written by irregular migrants, like those of Amelie, have to be coherent and consistent in order to seem *reliable*,⁷³ it seems pertinent to ask whether *fictional* renderings of irregular migrants’ lives would lose or gain credibility from structural complexity and non-chronological rendering of events.

GENRES AND THE QUESTION OF REPRESENTATIVENESS AND RESPONSIBILITY

Simon Stranger’s *Those who don’t exist* is an example of a novel that tells the fictional story of an irregular migrant in a formally *non-coherent* manner. The novel has 31 chapters, spread over five sections. The perspectives of Emilie from Norway and Samuel from Ghana are described in separate chapters, and Samuel’s past is presented to us as involuntary flashbacks. The fact that the chapters describing the present time do so from Emilie’s point of view emphasises Samuel’s lack of voice and agency as an irregular migrant in Norway. While the reader is informed about Samuel’s arduous story by the book’s heterodiegetic narrator, Emilie is initially kept in the dark. The use of shifting focalisation and dialogue thus *formally* presents how Samuel’s story is muted.

Dorrit Cohn points to heterodiegetic narration and freedom of focalisation as one of three distinctive “signposts of fictionality,”⁷⁴ or features of fiction that cannot be found in historical narrative or non-fiction.⁷⁵ Amelie avoids using devices such as shifting focalisers and heterodiegetic narration, and this may reflect the fact that the truthfulness of the books as autobiographies largely depends on her, the book’s narrator, not pretending to have access to other people’s minds. Additionally, Amelie needs to emphasise that she *does not know* her parents’ version of what has happened in the past – since if she is oblivious, she cannot carry any responsibility for their actions.⁷⁶

The involuntary memories that haunt Samuel and make him absent-minded in the present, are in some cases set off by the introduction of objects which carry no particular meaning to Emilie, but that to Samuel are metonymical references to traumatic events. For instance, Chapter 6 ends with Emilie offering Samuel chocolate, as a reaction to his fiddling with a chocolate roll on her kitchen table. In response, Samuel “snur seg og ser på henne, men det er noe fjernt i øynene hans. Som om han har forlatt kroppen sin og reist av gårde, til et sted langt, langt borte” (31) [‘turns around and looks at her, but there is something distant in his eyes. As if he has left his body and gone off, to a place far, far away’]. Chapter 7 then describes how Samuel was raped by the owner of a cocoa plantation, where he had started to work after he returned home from his first encounter with Europe in the trilogy’s first book, *Barsakh*.⁷⁷

By pointing metonymically to Samuel’s past, the chocolate on Emilie’s table becomes a symbol of the distance between the protected lives of people like Emilie, and the humiliations and violence that people of Samuel’s background have to endure. In this sense, Stranger’s novel illustrates that while fictional accounts present detailed information about *individuals’* lives (even details they seek to suppress to themselves, and would very likely be reluctant to talk about in both everyday conversations and interviews with researchers or representatives of the state), they also lend to the story of the individual a symbolic value that makes it *representative* of something that is bigger than the individual. Through the story of Samuel and Emilie, Stranger metonymically tells the story of the *First* and *Third World*, and of Norway’s culpability for the West’s perpetual exploitation of developing countries.⁷⁸

In *Thank you*, Amelie refuses to represent anyone but herself: she stresses that her story is “unik” (66) [‘unique’], and that she is “sikker på at jeg ikke kunne representere andre enn meg selv” (29) [‘certain that I cannot represent anyone but myself’]. She cannot accept that irregular immigrants in Norway be treated as *one* group, and even if she understands that it may be practical for journalists to contact her, or for politicians to refer to her case instead of relating to a very complex set of cases (29), the feeling of being treated as a spokesperson for irregular immigrants is agonising: “Jeg ser nå at underveis, mens saken pågikk, ble jeg tillagt mer og mer ansvar for alle papirløse” (110) [‘I now see that while my case was ongoing, I was ascribed more and more responsibility for all undocumented migrants’], Amelie explains, and it is not at all hard to understand that this must have been a heavy burden.

In comparison, it seems a *privilege* for the Norwegian citizen Stranger to be able to take the ethically correct stance in raising the question of Norwegian guilt for global inequality in a work of fiction. Stranger risks nothing juridically, and is free to use other literary devices than Amelie. Hence, it seems fair to say that the different juridical statuses and life trajectories of the two authors

influence what responsibilities they choose to assume, and through which genres. For Stranger to write credibly from the irregular migrant's point of view, he cannot write a work of non-fiction, whereas Amelie's credibility to a large extent hinges on her *not* using certain devices characteristic of fiction, as for instance incoherence in form or unreliable narration.

LITERARY FORM AND THE POSITION OF THE IMPLIED READER

As mentioned above, Samuel's story breaks up the events in the novel's present time, and this structural feature reflects his confused and traumatised state of mind. Like other works of so-called "trauma fiction," Stranger's novel represents a "paradox or contradiction."⁷⁹ For as Whitehead asks: "If trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation, how then can it be narrativised in fiction?"⁸⁰ The paradoxical existence of *trauma fiction*, Whitehead explains, is made possible by the ability of fictional *form to represent* the distortion of time and the confusion of space that trauma inflicts on individuals. Still, it should be noted that the chapters describing Samuel's past not only work to explain the power that his memories of traumatic events have over him. Another, and not less important, effect of these chapters, is their presentation of events in Samuel's life that explain very concretely to the reader why Emilie has good reason to be afraid of him.

The fact that Emilie is not informed of these reasons easily kindles the kind of prejudice in the reader that is so often triggered by media coverage of irregular migration. Instead of trying to avoid setting the stage for the Narrative Fallacy to occur in the reader, Stranger in his novel plays on, and thereby exposes, the tendency of Norwegians to imagine the irregular immigrant as unreliable, dangerous and desperate – just like Samuel. Stranger's way of simultaneously presenting Samuel's story (to the reader) and hiding it (from Emilie), on the one hand plays on fears we may have that what we do not know may be even *worse* than what we imagine. On the other hand, it emphasises that it is Samuel, not Emilie, who is truly struggling, and that his struggles are a product of the current world order.

"History has forced the status of outlaws upon us," Hannah Arendt said in 1943 about the many stateless Jewish migrants at the time.⁸¹ This is equally true of undocumented migrants like Samuel today. As Giorgio Agamben puts it (in a text where the word refugee is used to signify "a person without a country"), it is paradoxical that "precisely the figure that should have incarnated the rights of man *par excellence*, the refugee, constitutes instead the radical crisis of this concept."⁸² In the words of Agamben:

In the nation-state system, the so-called sacred and inalienable rights of man prove to be completely unprotected at the very

moment it is no longer possible to characterize them as rights of the citizens of a state. This is implicit, if one thinks about it, in the ambiguity of the very title of the Declaration of 1789, *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* [...].⁸³

In the words of professor of law Costas Douzinas, as a result of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “a new type of ‘man’, the national citizen, came into existence and became the beneficiary of rights.”⁸⁴ Reading Stranger’s novel, one cannot help but ask whether Samuel would not have had a much better life had he been a Norwegian citizen, like Emilie. Here, it is, however, worth mentioning that Emilie was suffering from anorexia when Samuel first met her in the trilogy’s first volume, *Barsakh*,⁸⁵ and that she now seems to be healthy again. By comparison to Samuel’s problems, Emilie’s anorexia may come across as a symptom of a self-absorbed culture of abundance that Samuel in *Barsakh*, three years prior to the events in *Those who don’t exist*, could not *choose* to belong to, no matter how hard he tried – instead he was interned in a refugee camp and returned to Ghana.⁸⁶ Still, Emilie’s anorexia tells us holding citizenship in a wealthy, Western state is no guarantee against suffering.

In *Those who don’t exist*, Stranger plays actively on references to insights about Emilie and Samuel from the first two volumes of his trilogy. In doing so, he effectively constructs two different implied reader groups: those who can fill in textual gaps with information from the previous books; and those who cannot. In several ways, both readers’ sympathies are steered towards Samuel, but we also get access to Emilie’s perspective. When the two youngsters meet again in Norway, Emilie is afraid of Samuel because she sees that he has suffered and is desperate in a way that he was not when they met in Spain. He is dirty, has both fresh and old wounds, seems desperate enough to steal things from her house, and is generally intimidating. The novel also explains that Emilie’s reluctance to help Samuel is partly caused by her fear that the police could add such an act to the crime she had committed in *Verdensredderne* (2012) [‘The saviours of the world’]: Emilie had participated in the torching of H&M’s main warehouse, as a protest against the unfair, inhuman and environmentally damaging methods of the clothing industry.⁸⁷

“*Herregud, jeg vil ikke i fengsel!*” (11) [‘*Oh my God, I don’t want to go to jail!*’], is one of Emilie’s first thoughts after seeing Samuel outside her window in *Those who don’t exist*. Emilie’s thoughts in this situation open up a textual gap that cannot, however, be filled through knowledge of Emilie’s criminal record from *The saviours of the world* alone. The reader also has to know something about Norwegian immigration law. Clause 108, paragraph three, letter a, of the Norwegian Immigration Act of 2008 describes the grounds for Emilie’s fear: “A

fine or imprisonment for a term not exceeding three years shall be imposed on anyone who: (a) wilfully helps a foreign national to stay illegally in the realm [...].”⁸⁸ Through the character Emilie, and the description of her development through the trilogy as a whole, *Stranger* shows how even the most idealistic individual’s will to help outsiders and ambitions to change an unjust global system is held in check by strong structural forces, defined by Norwegian and international law.⁸⁹

Samuel eventually tells Emilie that he will be put in jail if he is sent back to his homeland Ghana, because he and another boy had killed the owner of the cacao plantation where he had worked. The reader is not told exactly how much of his past he discloses to Emilie, but the chapters describing his flashbacks to the reader reveal that he has participated in the killing of a man, who had raped and physically abused young boys (including Samuel), and that he fled Africa in a container on a cargo ship and worked as a prostitute in Amsterdam, where he also got hooked on heavy drugs. The flashbacks that we as readers get access to let us understand that *despair* drove Samuel to make bad choices. The book thus frames Samuel as both *victim* and *villain*, but in doing so plays on the prejudices and fears of both the *implied readers* and Emilie in a way that Amelie never does in her books.

Amelie instead presents the reader as her kind-hearted supporter: “Det er slik det er å være et medmenneske. Og det har du vært for meg./Takk” (120) [‘This is how it is to be a fellow human. And that is what you have been to me./ Thank you’]. Amelie does not risk alienating her readers, whose egos are instead flattered by the suggestion that supporting her makes them ethically superior, and representative of Nordic Exceptionalism – in spite of Norway’s complicity in global injustice, and in spite of the fear and prejudices that may have corrupted many others in Norway – particularly representatives of the state. Where Samuel is intimidating, Amelie is grateful.

PREJUDICE AND ETHICS

Samuel’s appearance and previous actions indicate to Emilie and the reader that if she does not give him money, or something that he can sell for money, his dire life situation may force him to harm Emilie. Since she refuses to give Samuel money or valuables, it is a relief that he leaves without hurting her. Then again, it is not surprising that Samuel has taken the opportunity to empty Emilie’s mother’s jewellery box before leaving. In response to this, and because of Emilie’s fear of having to go to jail, Emilie and her boyfriend Antonio go looking for Samuel, and spot him by a jewellery store in Oslo. When Antonio informs the store owner of Samuel’s name and country of origin, and the owner in turn informs the police, Emilie and Antonio have an argument:

– Har du glemt hvor du kommer fra, Antonio? sier hun. Stemmen hennes er skarp. Anklagende. – Har du glemt at foreldrene dine også flyktet en gang, for å få et bedre liv?

– Neida ... svarer Antonio og ser usikkert på henne.

– Synes du det er rettferdig å slenge igjen døren nå, bare fordi du og jeg lever her og har det bra? (123–24)

[Have you forgotten where you come from, Antonio? she says. Her voice is sharp. Accusatory. – Have you forgotten that your parents once fled too, in order to get a better life?

– No ... answers Antonio, glancing insecurely at her.

– Do you think it's fair to slam the door shut now, just because you and I are living here and doing fine?]

Pathos-filled passages like this one call for the readers to see themselves and the world in a larger perspective, and to consider whether or not it is acceptable for us to trust our prejudices as a guideline for our actions, and to be complacent with the state of affairs.

The novel's middle chapter, "Intermesso" (55–60), also raises ethical questions, through its description of a hidden connection between Emilie and Samuel. Here, we are told that Samuel's forefather, whose name is, symbolically, never mentioned, once rescued Emilie's forefather, Kristian Odense, when his ship sank off the west coast of Africa. Had Samuel's forefather not rescued Odense, there would be:

Ingen barnebarn, eller oldebarn, eller tippoldebarn, som skal våkne opp av at noen banker på vinduet, et sted utenfor Oslo, og som skal se ut og få øye på ansiktet til en gutt med mørk hud der på den andre siden av glasset. (59)

[No grandchildren, no great-grandchildren, no great-great-grandchildren that would wake up from someone knocking at the window, somewhere on the outskirts of Oslo, and who would look out and see the face of a dark-skinned boy, there on the other side of the glass.]

Stranger informs the reader that Odense, upon his return to Denmark, which Norway was at that time united with, "vil begynne i et firma som driver med videresalg av varer fra Det fjerne østen. Bomullsduker. Porselen. Krydder" (60) [will start working for a firm that trades in goods from The Far East. Cotton tablecloths. Porcelain. Spices]. The company's success enables Odense to leave his descendants a small fortune. Stranger's aim with the "Intermesso" is

obviously to awaken in the reader an awareness that Norwegians, even without knowing it, may have a family history of colonial exploitation: indeed, they may owe their lives and financial security to individuals who have not been able to secure their descendants' future, and whose stories we will never read about in history books or autobiographies. The rhetorical aim of the "Intermesso" is clearly to raise the ethical question of how people who have coincidentally been born into wealth and security in the West can defend not sharing that wealth and security with others, who have, equally coincidentally, been less fortunate with their birthplace.

Had Amelie chosen this more confrontational line of argument in her books, she would have risked alienating her readers. Stranger obviously feels more free to confront the readers with their negative prejudices against the 'other'. Employing prejudices in fiction does not mean that one agrees with them, and the ethical values of the *implied author* of *Those who don't exist* are clearly both noble and humanitarian. Furthermore, the ethos of the *historical author* Stranger only grows from the fact that he, a native Norwegian, takes it upon himself to conduct what must be read as *self-criticism* on behalf of all Norwegians. As the novel's historical author, Stranger comes across as holding the values of Amelie's *implied reader*, and as a spokesperson for the future development of Nordic Exceptionalism. This image is cemented by the two other books in the trilogy, and by Stranger's subsequent publication of the international success *Leksikon om lys og mørke* (2018) ['Lexicon of light and darkness']⁹⁰ – a reality-based novel about the family past of his Jewish wife, and the history of the house in which she grew up, which during World War II was the headquarters of the notorious Nazi double agent Henry Oliver Rinnan.

By constructing moral authority for himself as an author, Stranger may prove the kind of authenticity to the reader that James Dawes points to as crucial for novelists and others (journalists, humanitarian and human rights workers, field-workers, etc.) who wish to give voice to other people's suffering.⁹¹ Establishing such moral authority and authenticity is crucial for an author like Stranger, who, in comparison to Amelie and others who are telling their *own* stories, may be accused of inauthenticity. In Stranger's defence, it *is*, according to postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak, possible to communicate something valuable and valid about the life of the 'other': "The position that only the subaltern can know the subaltern, only women can know women and so on, cannot be held as a theoretical presupposition [...], for it predicates the possibility of knowledge on identity," Spivak argues.⁹² Dawes in his turn reminds us that "giving voice can also be a matter of *taking* voice," since "in giving voice to suffering we can sometimes moderate it, even aestheticize it," and thereby do injustice to victims of atrocities.⁹³ The fact that Samuel commits suicide after having been arrested and sent to Trandum is a part of the plot that could be said to justify Stranger's

writing a novel about Samuel – Stranger gives voice to Samuel’s story, since Samuel himself does not survive to tell it.

OUTSIDER AND INSIDER POSITIONS

One might say that Stranger is attempting to awaken a self-critical stance in the Norwegian reader, and can afford to do so, because he is a Norwegian citizen. In the case of Amelie, it is perhaps important for her that Norwegians who read her books get the impression that she sees them as they ideally *want to be seen* – as representatives of a Nordic Exceptionalism. When she wrote *Illegally Norwegian*, Amelie had everything to lose, but by the time she wrote *Thank you*, she was already living in Norway legally, and did not strictly *have to* present Norwegians as good people – although the lawfulness of her stay in Norway still depended on her holding a job within her field of expertise. The gratitude that Amelie feels for being allowed the chance to live in Norway would, similarly, not *have to* keep her from taking a critical stance towards Norwegians.

The fact that Stranger allows himself to take such a critical stance, while Amelie does not, indicates that while both authors in their books dispute the notions of a Nordic Exceptionalism, as described by both criminologists and social scientists, and question their validity in Norway today, they do so from different *positions*. Amelie takes the position of the outsider who wants to be an insider, and Stranger positions himself as the insider who, for ethical reasons, wishes to take the outsider’s stance. These different positions are reflected in the different genres of their books, and in the different formal devices that these genres open up for.

As I see it, it is highly unlikely that Amelie would have been able to change her irregular migrant status had she written *Illegally Norwegian* as a book of *fiction*; the focus would then not have been on *her* as a real individual living in Norway, needing to legalise her stay. One may, however, ask oneself if, although her books are autobiographical, she *could* have employed formal devices that might have represented the distortion of time and space that the traumas of her journey had involved. I think that on one level, Amelie’s coherent way of structuring her story should be read as a rhetorical device, inviting the compassion, acceptance, and inclusion that Norwegian passive and active measures of coercion work against. If she had complicated her story by presenting it in an incoherent form, the reader might be left with the impression that her story has gaps that are not filled out. An incoherent structure could give the reader the impression that Amelie’s story is not transparent, and that Amelie as a person is not honest or trustworthy. Such an effect is something that Amelie would have wanted to avoid. This is the effect that Stranger achieves in his depiction of

Samuel, precisely through the use of the incoherent and non-chronological structuring of his story – and by shifting between Samuel and Emilie as focalisers.

FREE CHOICE?

Samuel's untrustworthiness may indeed come across to the reader as the main explanation (and excuse) for Emilie's failure to live up to her humanitarian ideals, when the 'other' literally comes knocking at her door. Through his portrayal of Emilie, Stranger metonymically contrasts Nordic citizens' self-proclaimed and internationally recognised self-image as "the good agents' in international relations"⁹⁴ with the reality that Norwegians are inhospitable when immigrants stand on their doorsteps. Thus, he suggests that Norway and Norwegians may be good humanitarians when the 'other' lives far away, but are inhibited by both international and national law when it comes to questions of human rights and the treatment of irregular immigrants in their own country.

The fact that Stranger lets Samuel send Emilie a letter from Trandum in which he attempts to free her from the guilt of being white and born in the West (175) can be said to weaken the book's critical potential; however, this also has to be understood as a sign that the book is written for young Norwegian readers, who may be struggling with what Elizabeth Oxfeldt has pointed to as a particular Scandinavian feeling of guilt for being born in a privileged part of the world.⁹⁵ While Amelie in *Thank you* emphasises that it is up to each and every individual to *choose* to live up to what can be labelled as the ideal of Nordic Exceptionalism, Stranger's description of Emilie explains to young Norwegian readers why making such a choice may not be so easy in practice. In this sense, the novel does not merely attempt to speak on behalf of the marginalised 'other', but also aims at creating understanding for the moral demands facing young members of the majority population in Norway.

"Å ikke ta et valg, er også et valg" (110) ['Not to make a choice is also a choice'], Amelie argues, and firmly assigns to others some of the responsibility that she has felt because the media have made her into a representative of all irregular migrants:

Jeg innser nå at det ikke er bare mitt ansvar, men at ansvaret også ligger hos politiet som deporterer, hos saksbehandlere, hos de som jobber på asylmottak, hos de som utformer politikken. Alle har et ansvar for å behandle papirløse mennesker i landet vårt med respekt. (110).

[I now realise that it is not only my responsibility, but that the responsibility also rests with the police, who deport people, with case officers, with people who work in reception centres, with

people who shape politics. Everyone has a responsibility to treat undocumented migrants in our country with respect.]

Amelie, in *Thank you*, tells the improbable story of a person who was at Trandum and returned to Norwegian society – and who can publish a book in which she refers to Norway as “landet vårt” (110) [‘our country’] – thus demonstrating her high degree of integration. The fact that Samuel, in Stranger’s novel, dies in Trandum invites us to read his story metonymically, as the story of *all* the irregular migrants who lose their lives trying to reach Europe and a better life, and whose autobiographies we will never read. The question is to what degree the choices each and everyone of us make decide the destinies of people like Samuel.

THE POTENTIALITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF AMELIE’S AND STRANGER’S BOOKS

Both Stranger’s depiction of Emilie and the genre and content of Amelie’s book, *Thank you*, suggest the vision of Norway as a peace-loving, resourceful society, somewhat exempt from guilt for structural global inequality, is an *ideal* for many Norwegians. The massive and active support for Amelie in 2011 may be interpreted as a sign of a will to defend and demonstrate identification with this ideal. Stranger’s novels signal that such an ideal is also alive and healthy in Norwegian works of fiction. Yet, both Stranger’s and Amelie’s works indicate that to the extent that Norway’s national identity is based on the ideal of a Nordic Exceptionalism as defined by social scientists and criminologists, this self-image is in need of revision.

The limitations of the law that was introduced to enable Amelie to return are evidence that in Norway, Nordic Exceptionalism does not apply to everybody. In the decade that has passed since the law was introduced, only a dozen individuals have been able to re-enter Norway on the basis of it. Thus, it might be argued that the solution that the Norwegian state introduced in the Amelie-case cannot be said to exempt Norway from guilt for historical structural global inequality; instead, it works to uphold that guilt. The depictions of Trandum detention centre in Amelie’s *Thank you* and Stranger’s *Those who don’t exist* also severely challenge the notion of Nordic Exceptionalism, in both the humanitarian and punitive senses of the term: the camp represents a global discrimination which is rooted in the past and perpetuated in the present – in Norway, and by the Norwegian state and its representatives. Samuel’s death at Trandum highlights how many irregular migrants’ stories can only be told by bystanders, and through fiction.

It is noteworthy that the criticism Amelie and Stranger voice both reflects and is limited by their personal backgrounds and juridical status. From his assumed outsider position, the insider Stranger can voice national self-criticism in a manner and in a genre that Amelie, from her assumed insider position,

cannot allow herself. Amelie, in her turn, could not have achieved a change in Norwegian law, or thanked those whose support contributed to this new law, through works of fiction. Conversely, it is hard to see how Stranger's novels could have resulted in a new law being passed – but his trilogy is certainly aimed at changing readers' mentality and raising awareness of the role Norwegians play and have played in maintaining global inequality.

The authors' positions and choices of genre and literary devices clearly reflect not only their juridical statuses and life trajectories, but also their *aims* with their books. Paradoxically, in spite of their using different genres and literary devices, it does appear that the two authors do share a common goal – namely to reveal that a Nordic Exceptionalism is *not* to be found in the Norwegian immigration system, which both passively and actively excludes immigrants with the wrong kinds of backgrounds. To conclude, it seems fair to say that Stranger's fictional account about the life of an irregular migrant to Norway does contribute something to the problematisation of the image of Norway as representative of so-called Nordic Exceptionalism that autobiographical accounts written by the irregular immigrant Amelie do not – or *cannot* – do, and *vice versa*. Precisely for this reason, we need both kinds of literature.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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2. John Pratt, "Scandinavian Exceptionalism in an Era of Penal Excess: Part I: The Nature and Roots of Scandinavian Exceptionalism," *The British Journal of Criminology* 48, no. 2 (2008a): 119–137; and "Scandinavian Exceptionalism in an Era of Penal Excess: Part II: Does Scandinavian Exceptionalism Have a Future?" *The British Journal of Criminology*, 48, no. 3 (2008b): 275–292. The terms 'Scandinavian' and 'Nordic' are used interchangeably in international

research, even though only people from Denmark, Norway and Sweden would refer to themselves as Scandinavian, whereas people from these three countries and Iceland and Finland would agree that they are Nordic. I will be using the term 'Nordic Exceptionalism' here, since this is the term that seems to be most widely used in criminology, social sciences and literary studies – and even if Pratt wrote about "Scandinavian exceptionalism" in his two articles from 2008, he did in fact include data from Finland, and has put a draft version of an article entitled "The Nordic Exceptionalism Thesis Revisited" on ResearchGate: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346309408_The_Nordic_Exceptionalism_Thesis_Revisited#fullTextFileContent. See also Vanessa Barker. "Nordic Exceptionalism Revisited: Explaining the Paradox of a Janus-Faced Penal Regime," *Theoretical Criminology*, 17, no. 5 (2013), originally published online 20 December 2012):

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3. Simon Stranger, *De som ikke finnes* ['Those who don't exist'] (Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2014). None of the books I am analysing here are available in English translations, but I will for the sake of fluency refer to the books' titles in my English translations. I will provide my own English translations in brackets after quotes from the Norwegian books, and give page references from the Norwegian books in parenthesis, without the name of the author or year of publication.
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 6. Maria Amelie, *Takk* ['Thank you'] (Oslo: Pax, 2014).
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 19. *Ibid.*, 415; see also NOAS (Norwegian Organisation for Asylum Seekers), "Norway's Asylum Freeze: A report on Norway's response to increased asylum arrivals at the Storskog border crossing with Russia in 2015 and subsequent legal developments," <https://www.noas.no/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Storskog-rapport-februar-2019.pdf>.
 20. See note 2 about the terms *Scandinavian* and *Nordic Exceptionalism* as used by Pratt and others.
 21. Barker, 2013, 5.
 22. Pratt, 2008a, 119.
 23. Barker, 2013, 5.
 24. *Ibid.*, 5.
 25. Nicolay B. Johansen, Thomas Ugelvik, and Katja Franko Aas, *Krimigrasjon? Den nye kontrollen av de fremmede* ['Crimmigration? New controls on aliens'] (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2013); Synnøve Ugelvik, and Thomas Ugelvik, "Immigration Control in Ultima Thule: Detention and Exclusion, Norwegian Style," *European Journal of Criminology* 10, no. 6 (2013): 709-724.
 26. Thomas Ugelvik, "Hvem er Maria Amelie? Fortellinger om ulovlighet" ['Who is Maria Amelie? Narratives on illegality'], *Krimigrasjon? Den nye kontrollen av de fremmede* ['Crimmigration? New controls on aliens'], eds. Nicolay B. Johansen, Thomas Ugelvik, and Katja

- Franko Aas (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2013), 65–85.
27. Myhr, 2015b.
 28. Thelocal.no, “Norway Home to 15,000 Illegal Immigrants.” *The Local*, 03 September 2014, <http://www.thelocal.no/20140903/illegal-immigrants-in-norway-nears-15000>. In 2014, a total of 547,335 persons were “illegally present in the EU,” see: Epthinktank.eu, “Irregular Immigration in The EU: Facts and Figures,” *European Parliamentary Research Service Blog*, ed. Member’s Research Service, 27 April 2015, <http://epthinktank.eu/2015/04/27/irregular-immigration-in-the-eu-facts-and-figures/>. I have chosen numbers from 2014, since the two books on which I am mainly focusing here were published in that year.
 29. UNHCR, Asylum-Seekers (2020), <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c137.html>.
 30. UNHCR, Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 & 1967), <http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.html>.
 31. Jan-Paul Brekke, and Susanne Søholt, *I velferdsstatens grenseland. En evaluering av ordningen med bortfall av botilbud i mottak for personer med endelig avslag på asylsøknaden* [‘In the border zone of the welfare state: An evaluation of the arrangement of the loss of reception centre accommodation for persons whose asylum applications are finally rejected’] (Oslo: Institute for Social Research, 2005); Ann-Sylvi Hansen. “Et liv i skyggen. Papirløse migranternes livssituasjon i det norske samfunn” [‘A life in the shadows’] (Master thesis. Vestfold and Buskerud University College, 2015). https://openarchive.usn.no/usn-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/285535/Hansen_Aud-Sylvi_2015_Masteroppgave_teksten.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y; Katrine Løland, “‘Me and you are living in different worlds, but we are in the same country...’ (Dawit). Om irregulære migranternes hverdagsliv” [‘The every day life of irregular migrants’] (Master thesis. University of Bergen, 2013). <http://dspace.uib.no/bitstream/handle/1956/7039/109360364.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>; Solveig Holmedal Ottesen, *Papirløse migranter: En undersøkelse av situasjonen for mennesker uten lovlig opphold i Norge, og humanitære tiltak for denne gruppen i andre europeiske land* [‘Undocumented migrants: An investigation into the situation of persons without legal rights for residence in Norway, and humanitarian measures for this group of people in other European countries’], (Oslo: Kirkens bymisjon, 2017), <https://kirkensbymisjon.no/content/uploads/2017/09/Pairløse-migranter-rapport.pdf>; Andrea Louise Rutledal, “Den skjulte hverdagen: En studie av hvordan papirløse migranter beskriver og forstår sitt hverdagsliv i det norske samfunn” [‘The hidden every day life: A study of how irregular migrants describe and understand every day life in Norwegian society’] (Master thesis. University College of Oslo and Akershus, 2012). <https://oda.hioa.no/nb/den-skjulte-hverdagen-en-studie-av-hvordan-papirløse-migranter-beskriver-og-forstar-sitt-hverdagsliv-i-det-norske-samfunn>; Cecilie Øien, and Silje Sønsterudbråten, *No Way in, no Way Out? A Study of Living Conditions of Irregular Migrants in Norway*, (Oslo: Fafo, 2011).
 32. EU, “Irregular Migrant” (2020), https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/european_migration_network/glossary_search/irregular-migrant_en.
 33. Even the morally ‘correct’ human rights campaigns may be criticised for their commodification of suffering persons’ narratives. See: Kay Schaffer, and Sidonie Smith, “Venues of Storytelling: The Circulation of Testimony in Human Rights Campaigns,” *Life Writing*, 1, no. 2 (2004): 3–26.
 34. Heaven Crawley, Simon McMahon, and Katharine Jones, *Victims & Villains: Migrant Voices in the British Media*, (Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, 2016), https://pure.coventry.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/8263076/Victims_and_Villains_Digital.pdf.
 35. Aleksandar Mitić, “The Strategic Framing of the 2015 Migrant Crisis in Serbia”. *Migrants, Refugees, and the Media. The New Reality of Open Societies*, ed. Sai Felicia Kristhna-Hensel, (London: Routledge, 2018).
 36. Aslaug Veum, “‘Rom-tiggerne. De utskjelte’. Ein multimodal analyse av korleis tilreisande rom blir framstilt i norske aviser” [‘Roma-beggars. The Reviled.’ A multimodal analysis of how visiting Roma people are presented in Norwegian Newspapers’]. *Folk uten land. Å gi stemme og status til urfolk og nasjonale minoriteter* [‘People without a country. Giving voice and status to indigenous peoples and national minorities’], eds. Norunn Askeland and Bente Aamotsbakken, (Portal Akademisk Forlag, 2017), 225–245.

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39. SSB, "Immigrants and Norwegian-born to Immigrant Parents, 1 January 2015," SSB (2015), <http://www.ssb.no/en/befolkning/statistikker/innvbef/aar/2015-03-04>. I have chosen numbers from January 2015 here, since these are representative of the situation in Norway at the time of the publication of *Thank you*, and *Those who don't exist* in 2014.
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41. Katja Franko Aas, "Analysing a World in Motion: Global Flows Meet 'Criminology of the Other,'" *Theoretical Criminology* 11, no. 2 (2007a): 283-303; Katja Franko Aas, *Globalization & Crime* (London: Sage, 2007b); cf. Leanne Weber, and Benjamin Bowling, "Valiant Beggars and Global Vagabonds: Select, Eject, Immobilize," *Theoretical Criminology* 12, no. 3 (2008): 355-375.
42. Amelie 2010; "Ikke et menneske" ['Not a human being'], *Aftenposten*, 04 January 2011,
43. Ministry of Justice and the Police. *Oppheving av reiseforbod for faglaerde i somme tilfelle* ['Revocation of travel ban for skilled workers in some cases'], 31 March 2011, <http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dokumentarkiv/stoltenberg-ii/jd/Nyheter-og-pressemeldinger/pressemeldinger/2011/oppheving-av-innreiseforbud-for-faglarte.html?id=637601>; Ministry of Justice and the Police. *Instruks om tolkinga av utlendingslova § 71 andre ledd tredje punktum - oppheving av innreiseforbod for faglaerde i visse tilfelle* ['Instructions on the interpretation of the Immigration Act § 71, second paragraph, third sentence - lifting of the entry ban for skilled workers in certain cases'], 01 April 2011, <http://www.regjeringen.no/nn/dep/jd/dok/rundskriv/2011/gi-022011-instruks-om-tolkinga-av-utlend.html?id=637611>.
44. Ugelvik, 2013.
45. Aanensen, Kristian & Amund Aune Nilsen, 2911, "Det første som skjer i Nansenåret" ['The first thing that happens in Nansen Year'], NRK, January 13, 2011, <https://www.nrk.no/norge/-det-forste-som-skjer-i-nansenaret-1.7461165>.
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47. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, "Maria Amelie og arven etter Nansen" ['Maria Amelie and the legacy of Nansen'], *Dagsavisen*. 14 January 2011, http://www.dagsavisen.no/nyemeninger/alle_meninger/cat1003/subcat1017/thread119099/.
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49. NRK, "Maria Amelie pågrepet" ['Maria Amelie apprehended'], NRK, 2011, <https://www.nrk.no/video/26872>.
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57. NRK, "Helene sjekker inn: Politiets utlendingsinternat på Trandum" ['Helene checks in: Trandum National Police Immigration Detention Centre'] (2017), <https://tv.nrk.no/serie/helene-sjekker-inn/2017/MDHP12700217>.
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60. Ugelvik, and Ugelvik, 2013, 721.
61. Katja Franko Aas, "Epilog: medlemskap på prøve" ['Epilogue: Membership on trial'], *Krimmigrasjon? Den nye kontrollen av de fremmede* ['Crimmigration? New controls on aliens'], eds. Nicolay B. Johansen, Thomas Ugelvik, and Katja Franko Aas (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2013), 241-250, p. 245.

62. Browning, 2007; DeLong, 2009, 368-369; Keskinen et al., 2009, see also Kristín Loftsdóttir, and Lars Jensen, "Introduction: Nordic Exceptionalism and the 'Others,'" eds. Kristín Loftsdóttir, and Lars Jensen, *Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic Region: Exceptionalism, Migrant Others and National Identities* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 1-12.
63. See also Myhr in press, 2022.
64. Whitehead, Anne, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 5.
65. Marco Jacquemet, 2005, "The Registration Interview. Restricting Refugees' Narrative Performances," *Dislocations/Relocations. Narratives of Displacement*, eds. Mike Baynam, and Anna de Fina (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing), 194-216. Factors that may influence the asylum interview and the narrative in the report that comes out of an asylum interview are for instance: the asylum seeker's (lack of) education and (failing) understanding of the asylum interview genre, as well as fears that the translator may relate their stories to other people from their home country. Immigration officers' interviewing skills, understanding of the report genre, and (lack of) knowledge of the situation in the sending country are also crucial (see eg. Jacquemet 2005; Bjørghild Kjelsvik, "'I Have no Family': Identity, Participation Roles and Interpreting in Interviews of Asylum Seekers," *Tidsskrift for samfunnsforskning* [Journal of Social Research] 56, no. 1 (2015): 58-86.; Frode Helmich Pedersen, "Avhøret i et fortelleteoretisk lys" ['Interrogation in the light of narratology'], *Etterforskning under lupen* ['Investigation under the magnifying glass'], eds. Egil Hove Olsvik, and Patrick Risan (Oslo: Politihøgskolen), 100-126, <https://phs.brage.unit.no/phs-xmlui/handle/11250/2634563>.)
66. Pedersen, Frode Helmich, 2016, "Fortellinger og plausibilitet. En kritisk analyse av Eivind Kolflaath's bevisteori" ['Stories and plausibility: A critical analysis of Eivind Kolflaath's theory of proof']. *Tidsskrift for Rettsvitenskap* [Journal of Jurisprudence] 129, no. 1 (2016): 43-73. <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1504-3096-2016-01-02>, 62-65. See also: Pedersen 2019, 21-22.
67. Madeline Holland, "Stories for Asylum: Narrative and Credibility in the United States' Political Asylum Application," *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 34, no. 2 (2018): 85-93, p. 86.
68. Holland, 2018, 87-89; Stacy Caplow, "Putting the 'I' in Wr*t*ng: Drafting an A/Effective Personal Statement to Tell a Winning Refugee Story," *Journal of the Legal Writing Institute*, 14 (2008): 249
69. Whitehead 2004, 5.
70. See also Holland, 2018, 86; and Caplow, 2008, 6.
71. Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," *New Literary History*, 3.2, On Interpretation: I (1972), 279-299, p. 282.
72. Doron Menashe, and Mutal E. Shamash, "The Narrative Fallacy," *International Commentary on Evidence*, 33, no. 1 (2005): 1-45, p. 15. "The Narrative Fallacy is an erroneous heuristic, through which fact finders attempt to use commonplace narratives in order to make sense of insufficient information, but mistakenly choose the wrong narrative (i.e., a story that does not in fact reflect reality) and so end up distorting the information they do have access to, and misunderstanding it."
73. It could be argued that in *Illegally Norwegian*, Amelie, who had lived in Norway for eight years, used her knowledge of Norwegian cultural schemes in order to present herself as culturally Norwegian. This serves as a reminder of that it is possible to exploit the Narrative Fallacy to one's benefit. See Myhr in press, 2022.
74. Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999).
75. Secondly, fiction allows for unreliable narration, or a disjunction between the norms of the author and those of the narrator, and thirdly, in fiction, we have two levels of analysis (story and discourse), while understanding historical records additionally requires an understanding of the relationship between story and reference to historical events. In police investigations and the treatment of asylum seeker cases, as well as in the reception of autobiographical books like Amelie's, the discovery of a mismatch between narrative and reality may have serious consequences. For instance, the connection between narrative and extra-literary reality similarly makes it more juridically perilous to point critically to named individuals in a book of non-fiction like Amelie's than in fiction. (Yet, in Scandinavia, the naming of real people in fiction has, since Karl Ove Knausgaard's *Min kamp* (2009-2011) ['My struggle'], increasingly

- become a trend, and an ethical and juridical challenge. It should also be mentioned that borders between genres are permeable and historically changing, so that non-fiction prose today may in fact use shifting focalisation, allow for unreliable narration, and refer to unreliable facts about the extra-literary world. See Annika B. Myhr, Sandra Theting Aarstrand, Maria Drangeid, Camilla Einerkjaer, Karl G. Johansson, Sunniva G. Knapstad, Kristin Lorentsen, Karen Musaeus, Camilla H. Schäffer, Ane N. Thorsen, and Johan Tønnesson. "Minne, glemsel og identitet: Bergsveinn Birgisson's *Den svarte vikingen* som identitetsskapende narrativ" ['Memory, oblivion, and identity: Bergsveinn Birgisson's *The Black Viking* as an identity-constitutive narrative']. *Edda* 4 (2015): 312-325.
76. Amelie, 2010, 7; Rem, 2014, 82, 102.
77. Stranger, 2009.
78. By the West I here mean Europe and USA, and by the East I mean colonised countries in Asia, Africa and South America.
79. Whitehead, 2004, 3.
80. *Ibid.*, 3.
81. Hannah Arendt, "We Refugees." *The Jewish Writings*, eds. Jerome Kohn, and Ron H Feldman (New York: Schocken Books, 2007 [1943]), 264-274, p. 274.
82. Giorgio Agamben, "We Refugees," *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures*, 49, no. 2 (1995), 114-119, p. 116.
83. *Ibid.*, 116.
84. Costas Douzinas, "The Paradoxes of Human Rights," *Constellations*, 20, no. 1 (2013): 51-67, p. 55.
85. Stranger, 2009.
86. Anorexia nervosa is often "considered a Western culture-bound syndrome" – see C.G. Banks, "'Culture' in Culture-Bound Syndromes: The Case of Anorexia Nervosa." *Social Science and Medicine*. 34, no. 8 (1992): 867-884. As Western cultural ideals have spread across the world, anorexia has become more prevalent in non-Western countries – see eg. Kathleen M. Pike and Patricia E. Dunne, "The Rise of Eating Disorders in Asia: A Review." *Journal of Eating Disorders* 3, no. 1 (2015): 33. Ideals of slimness and fat-phobia nevertheless have as their basis a culture of abundance that people like Samuel are desperate to get access to, and that those, like Emilie, who belong in it, may suffer from. Emilie's anorexia, in the context of Stranger's novels, thus comes across as a critical comment on the absurd effects of global inequality.
87. Stranger, *Verdensredderne* ['The saviours of the world'] (Oslo: Cappelen Damm, 2012).
88. Ministry of Justice and Public Security. *Act of 15 May 2008 On the Entry of Foreign Nationals into the Kingdom of Norway and Their Stay in the Realm (Immigration Act)*, 15 May 2008, <http://www.regjeringen.no/en/doc/laws/acts/immigration-act.html?id=585772>.
89. See Agamben, 1995, 116, and Douzinas, 2013, 55, as mentioned earlier.
90. Simon Stranger, *Leksikon om lys og mørke* ['Lexicon of light and darkness'] (Oslo: Aschehoug, 2018), published in English as: Stranger, *Keep Saying Their Names* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020).
91. James Dawes, *That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocity* (Cambridge, Mass., London, Engl.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1, 4, 8.
92. Gayatri C. Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, (New York & London: Routledge, 1988), 253-254.
93. Dawes, 2007, 8.
94. Diana Mulinari, Suvi Keskinen, Sari Irni, and Salla Tuori, "Introduction: Postcolonialism and the Nordic Models of Welfare and Gender," *Complying with Colonialism: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Nordic Region*, eds. Suvi Keskinen, Sari Irni, Diana Mulinari, and Salla Tuori (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009): 8.
95. See project web page: Scandinavian Narratives of Guilt and Privilege in an Age of Globalization (Scanguilt), 2014-2019, <https://www.hf.uio.no/english/research/theme/scandinavian-narratives-of-guilt-and-privilege/>. In one of the project's collective volumes, Ellen Rees writes about Amelie "passing" as Norwegian through her expression of a feeling of guilt for being privileged. Ellen Rees, "Den norske skyldfølelsen i Maria Amelies *Ulovlig norsk* og *Takk*" ['The Norwegian feeling of guilt in Maria Amelie's *Illegally Norwegian* and *Thank you*'], *Skandinaviske fortellinger om skyld og privilegier i en globaliseringstid* ['Scandinavian narratives on guilt and privilege in an age of globalisation'] (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2016), 188-205.

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