



CHAPTER 4

When Author Meets Audience: The Potentiality of Literature to Re-narrate Selves, Belonging, and National Community

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INTRODUCTION

Zeshan Shakar is a young political scientist and bureaucrat who turned celebrated author overnight. His first novel, *Aunt Ulrikke's Road*, written in 2017, sold almost 100,000 copies in a year, a high number for a country of five million, and won the prestigious Tarjei Vesaas award.

“I didn’t know this about Norway” is a frequent comment from readers. Others, who are well aware of the grim realities depicted in the novel, appreciate its acknowledgment of this version of the post-9/11 years, the

This chapter is a spin-off from my postdoctoral fellowship within the Archives, Libraries and Museums, digitalization, and the Public Sphere (ALMPUB) program, financed by the Norwegian Research Council. Oslo Metropolitan University provided funding for the editing and the Open Access publication.

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C. Fagerlid, M. A. Tisdell (eds.), *A Literary Anthropology of Migration
and Belonging*, Palgrave Studies in Literary Anthropology,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-34796-3_4

disadvantaged satellite towns and the experiences of Norwegian-born and bred young men with Muslim backgrounds—an acknowledgment crafted in a trustworthy texture and recognizable period style of clothing and hip-hop. As an advisor to the Vice Mayor for Education in Oslo, Shakar has close knowledge of living conditions in the Grorud Valley agglomeration and the relationship between socioeconomic background and life chances. “The novel is a literary version of the numerous reports I have read,” he says.¹ His construction of the novel as self-reporting from two adolescents to a fictive research project preserves a link to social research. *Aunt Ulrikke’s Road* acts as a kind of “public ethnography” with a double validation (Fassin 2013a, b). For one part of the population, it brings to light previously unknown realities. For the other part, who knows this reality all too well but is rarely heard, it validates their experiences. For all readers, the novel fills in a fuller picture of the present. It can thus transform “the way the world is represented and experienced” (Fassin 2013b, p. 628).

As report turned *novel* the “ethnographic” thick description (Geertz 1973) in *Aunt Ulrikke’s Road* also realizes a performative potential connected to literature. Acclaimed and appreciated, the book is an example of the “more compelling, more accurate, and more profound accounts of the social worlds they explore” than works of many scholars (Fassin 2014, p. 52, see also Introduction to this volume). I argue in this chapter that Shakar’s account of the Grorud Valley, in Oslo, Norway, has the capacity to transform Norwegian society in certain respects. The novel re-narrates selves and belonging—and consequently also the national community—through recounting, from an insider’s perspective, experiences rarely inscribed into a common reality.

Like his two protagonists Mohammed (Mo) and Jamal, Shakar grew up in the high-rises on Aunt Ulrikke’s Road in the satellite town of Stovner, Oslo, around the year 2000. All three share Muslim backgrounds and a modest home environment, with a single parent (or both) on minimal welfare benefits. Moreover, Jamal’s mother is struggling with disabling depression. At the age of 35, Shakar says that he experiences no contradiction between being a Norwegian and part of a minority.² In his youth, however, he saw himself as “a foreigner,” as did all minority people he grew up with, regardless of religion.³ Zeshan explains in several feature

¹ Østlie (2018); see also Guttormsen (2018) and Hestman (2018).

² Lundgaard and Stenersen (2018).

³ Lundgaard and Stenersen (2018).

articles how he, like Mo and Jamal, had been angry in his youth⁴: angry about incidents of everyday racism, angry about the treatment of Muslims in Europe and the world, and angry about not finding acknowledgment of his and his friends' experiences and worldviews in the media or mainstream society.

Anger is an important ingredient in *Aunt Ulrikke's Road*. The first entry in the diary-formatted novel is July 22, 2001. All Norwegian readers know that on this date, ten years later, a far-right extremist and white supremacist will kill 77 people in the government quarters and at the Utøya youth summer camp. The first entry date functions in a similar way to the opening of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, "The explosion will not happen today" (1967 [1952]). But we know that it will happen.

This chapter is based on a close reading of the novel, feature interviews and reviews in Norway's largest newspapers and on blogs. It also draws on participant observation, notetaking and recording, at five Meet the Author events at four public libraries,⁵ carried out during a year-long fieldwork at libraries in Oslo.⁶ After presenting the library events and the central problem of representation, I proceed to the first analytical part where I show how the othering gaze (Fanon 1952) shatters self and belonging, whereas the protagonists piece together the fragments through "hybridizing" (Bakhtin 1981) and "minoritizing" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 2004) language and (hi)story.⁷ In the second part, I argue that *Aunt Ulrikke's Road* takes steps in recreating the national imagined community (Anderson 1983) by expanding and combining core genres of the Norwegian literary canon.

Meet the Author Events at Libraries and the Paradox of Representation

All reviewers agree that *Aunt Ulrikke's Road* is a great novel. They disagree, however, on whether it is a novel about "others"—in relation to a ghetto-like suburb, class, *utenforskap* ("outsideness"), or minorities, immigrants, or integration—or about "us," about Norway and Norwegianness.

⁴Hestman (2018), Lundgaard and Stenersen (2018).

⁵Library employee Helene Voldner convened three of the events, and Sigrun Aas interviewed him at Stovner, while the last discussion, with Lerstang, was not convened.

⁶In addition, I have had numerous smaller and larger conversations about the novel as it has been widely read and discussed.

⁷The Norwegian words for "story" and "history" are the same: *historie*.

From all perspectives, however, the novel appears as explicitly political, and as we shall see, in line with the characteristics of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "minor literature" (1986, 2004).

Oslo is a socioeconomically and ethnically divided city, in the novel as in reality. Although the libraries were situated in demographically different parts and are widely used by ethnic minorities, the audience members who intentionally attended the events—the ones involved in "deep play" (Geertz 1973)—seemed similar in all neighborhoods. As usual at such events at libraries, the audience was predominantly middle-aged and female, with around 10% males and even less non-whites. The more shallowly involved in the fringes of the discussion, were far more diverse, and became increasingly attentive as Shakar's fame grew. At his local library in Stovner, the interest in Shakar and his book reached far beyond the usual literary public. Hence, the events bear witness to a gendered, white and likely middle-class literary audience at libraries, but also that this homogeneity can change.

Libraries have presented Zeshan Shakar and his novel from varied viewpoints. The three first meetings I attended in winter and spring 2018 took the most predictable approaches. One theme was "coming of age, identity, integration, radicalization and extremism,"⁸ where Shakar met the author Demian Vitanza. Vitanza's most recent book is an award-winning docufiction about a Norwegian foreign fighter in Syria (2017).⁹ A Grorud Valley library staged Shakar, a 35-year-old debutant, with the 30 years older and renowned Jan Kjørstad, under the headline "Composite." The authors' commonalities consisted, partly, of having grown up in and written about the Grorud Valley and, more explicitly, of recently having published novels about the aftermath of terrorist attacks.

At Stovner Library, the meeting naturally focused on the important role the neighborhood plays in Shakar's novel. The audience's questions also reflected this local interest. All four interventions in the Questions & Answers were slightly critical, centering around the accuracy and truthfulness of the representation, and in one case, the possible consequences of inventing a local "honor killing" for the sake of the plot. Both the convener of the event and the author reminded the audience that "it is a novel." Shakar returned to the latter question on several occasions afterwards. It appears also as backdrop to his lecture at the prize ceremony for the Vesaas award (Shakar 2018).

⁸ All translations from Meet the Author events and the novel are mine.

⁹ The discussion touched upon the fact that Jamal is not "radicalized." Instead, the local mosque proposes to fund his education, which does not occur due to a specific event blown out of proportions in the media. Shakar is clearly toying with preconceived ideas of the majority.

The title of the award lecture, “The ambassador’s problem” describes the paradox of representation: First, there is a feeling of pride of having written a book about the place and people he grew up with,

[...] about us, by us. A history which hopefully provides a larger and more nuanced picture than the stories often told about Stovner by people from outside. I was proud of representing Stovner when meeting readers and journalists. [...] More and more frequently I notice that I don’t want to represent anymore. I feel imprisoned by it [...]. For every photo I pose in front of a high-rise, every comment I give to a question about integration or youth crime, I contribute to slightly shrinking Stovner. (Shakar 2018)

As if to epitomize the extent of the problem, a newspaper ironically reported that two people had asked questions after the lecture, both said they “liked his book, but wondered: Do they really speak like that at Stovner?”¹⁰ This paradox of representation recalls what Deleuze and Guattari (1986 [1975]) have termed the revolutionary conditions for “minor literature.” Minor literature is not a particular kind of literature but written from the margins of an established literature. It is “that which a minority constructs within a major language” (p. 16), whether that “minority” be women, workers, immigrants and their descendants, or other subordinate groups.¹¹ One of the characteristics of minor literature is “the collective value” everything within it takes on (p. 17). As Shakar (2018) writes, one becomes “an oracle,” with the empowering prerogative as well as reductive obligation to speak on behalf of a whole local community. The two further characteristics of minor literature are “the deterritorialization of language” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, p. 18) and “the political immediacy” vibrating within every individual concern and intrigue (p. 17). All three “revolutionary enunciations” (p. 17) are present in Shakar’s novel.

At the two last Meet the Author events that I attended, 12 and 18 months after the publication of Shakar’s book, the libraries appeared to have taken into account the problem of representation. Stovner Library featured three authors well-known for their detailed description of local neighborhoods under the headline “Oslo-Love.” Tove Nilsen has written about growing up in a recently built satellite town in the 1960s (1983),

¹⁰ Henanger (2018).

¹¹ Indeed, this kind of writing should be “the problem for all of us: how to tear a minor literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path?” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, p. 19).

while Lars Saabye Christensen is a hugely successful author who has published numerous novels from the western, *petit bourgeois* area of Oslo in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., 1984). Lastly, in February 2019, Shakar conversed with the author Amalie Kasin Lerstang about “young people, suburb, labor and memory.” Lerstang has recently published a collection of poems about deindustrialization in a small industry town (2018). The discussion showed many similarities between the two vulnerable communities, as well as the challenges of representing them in literature.

The varied emphases at libraries and in book reviews clearly attest to the complexity and multiplicity of Shakar’s writing. *Aunt Ulrikke’s Road* recreates, to use the words of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), the *heteroglossia* of social languages—in a linguistic, sociopolitical, and cultural sense—of contemporary Oslo, Norway, Europe. This heteroglot “work space of the novel [...] can become an active force in shaping cultural history” (Holquist 1990, p. 72), a point I will return to when discussing Shakar’s genre-blending.

“THEY ARE MAYBE THE MOST DEFINED HUMAN BEINGS
IN NORWAY, BUT DEFINED BY PEOPLE FROM THE OUTSIDE”:
RE-NARRATING SELVES AND BELONGING

The Theme: Three Levels of Utenforskap (Outsideness)

The author and many reviewers agree that the main theme of *Aunt Ulrikke’s Road* is *utenforskap*, “outsideness.”¹² The term appeared in sociopolitical debate in the traditionally social-democratic Norway in the early 2000s with the increasing economic inequality and social insecurity connected to the implementation of neoliberal policies. Usage of the term has risen sharply over the last five years along with the reality it connotes.¹³ *Utenforskap* can be explained as the intersectionality, or overlapping, of economic, sociopolitical, and cultural marginalization and stigmatization. The limitations and stigmas of *utenforskap* featured in *Aunt Ulrikke’s*

¹²I suggest the correct translation of *utenforskap* is “the state of being outside,” rather than—as it is sometimes translated—the state of being an outsider. The term *utenforskap* is not connected to any identity, only to a *lack* of something that exists on the inside.

¹³The term *utenforskap* shows a steady increase in Norwegian newspapers with under 20 references a year from 1993 to 2002 and an explosion the last 3–4 years, with more than 2000 in 2018.

Road interweave three layers: poverty; ill-reputed neighborhoods; and lower-class and/or immigrant, particularly Muslim, backgrounds, considered in terms of a lack of *savoir-faire* (limiting individuals from within), and classism and racism (limiting individuals from outside).

Shakar gives the layers of *utenforskap* two voices: Jamal is particularly marginalized through poverty. Mo, who starts university at the other side of town, feels the stigmatization of the Grorud Valley and Muslims, intermingled with class. The protagonists also represent two strategies for coping with “outsideness,” though neither seem successful. Many book reviews mention the theme of *utenforskap*, but not all grasp the complexity, or intersectionality, of Shakar’s argument.

The Mission Statement: About Us, by Us

A man in his 30s, of Pakistani origin, with a neutral, accent-free Oslo dialect, stands up at the end of the Meet the Author event at a Grorud Valley Library: “When I started reading, I thought, ‘Oh, no, not another book in Kebab Norwegian!’” “Kebab Norwegian” is a term used by the media and non-speakers, like this person, for a socio-dialect¹⁴ (or *patois*, see Deleuze and Guattari 2004, p. 8; Hebdige 1987, p. 158) spoken by many youths in the eastern, multiethnic parts of Oslo.¹⁵ The library audience laughs convivially at this point. The man, whom I later learnt is the teacher, author and blogger Assad Nasir, continues:

¹⁴ “Multiethnolect,” as this “socio-dialect” is sometimes termed, seems misplaced as it does not belong to particular ethnic groups but is spoken by particular members of a whole generation. Rather, it seems to be the product of a new generation of children of immigrants and natives, produced through peer-learning (see Wulff 1988). Maria Navarro Skaranger (2015) was the first to make literary use of this dialect in her novel *Alle utlendinger bar lukka gardiner*, “All foreigners have closed curtains,” from another Grorud Valley satellite town. In Skaranger’s acclaimed novel, the language is not made into a relativizing, deterritorializing force in the same way as in Shakar’s book. The most deterritorializing language in a Scandinavian novel seems to be in Swedish author Jonas Hassán Khemiri’s (2003) outstanding debut *One Eye Red*.

¹⁵ In general, dialects are valued in Norway, with, for example, high exposure and valorization on national broadcasting. There is however a more or less implicit hierarchy between periphery and center in addition to a widespread stigmatization of certain dialects, including the derogatively named “Kebab Norwegian” (a hierarchy discussed by Shakar and Vitanza at the event, as the latter comes from the county with the lowest-valued dialect, Østfold). By contrast, many class-conscious milieus with strong literary traditions value the traditional Oslo East working-class socio-dialect.

But further into the book I began to *recognize myself*, particularly in the Mohammed character. The more I read, the more I experienced that the book was about *me*. I recognized very many of Mohammed's traits, how he thought and how he behaved. It was almost like reading a book about myself. I have *never* experienced that with a Norwegian novel before. Thank you!

The comment is met with laughter and strong applause. Shakar has written the man's experiences into Norwegian literary discourse and mainstream society (see Fassin 2013a, b). Assad Nasir follows with a question, not much debated in Norwegian media, on whether it was a conscious choice *not* to mention the country of origin of the protagonists' parents. Shakar answers "yes," and I will return to the explanation of why later. He thanks Nasir and replies:

To the extent this book has a mission statement it was perhaps exactly that: To describe, literarily, an everyday life that has not been much described.

Shakar expanded on "the mission statement" of the novel in a conversation with the author Vitanza at an event at another library some months later. Vitanza pointed out, in relation to his own docufiction *This Life or the Next* (2018), that the stories of the Islamist foreign fighters are rarely told from an insider's perspective, only through the argumentation of the prosecutor. Shakar ponders:

It's funny that you say "prosecutor." For the Grorud Valley and minority groups, the "state attorney" is the external gaze, which has always been on the Grorud Valley: the media, politicians, a jumble of "prosecutors." To the extent that I had an activist approach to the book, it was because I was, and am, [preoccupied] that people from Stovner, the Grorud Valley, with minority backgrounds are allowed to tell their own (hi)story, in their own terms. Not only to be the ones to be told stories *about*. They are maybe the most defined human beings in Norway [...] but defined by people from the outside.

In order to present the (hi)stories of "the people from Stovner, the Grorud Valley, with minority background, on their own terms," Shakar has constructed the novel as self-narratives from two seemingly opposite adolescent boys. Mohammed writes carefully composed emails, and Jamal speaks carefree into a dictaphone, a literary trick that the critics and Vesaas Prize committee celebrated in unison.

*The Hybridization of Social Languages,
and What Is a Minor Literature?*

The alternation between Mo's and Jamal's distinctly different languages assembles the novel as an explicit "heteroglot conglomerate" (Holquist 1990, p. 167). It is a *novelistic hybrid*, in Bakhtin's sense (1981), where the author's voice mixes with not only one but two distinct voices. The result is an acute awareness of heterogeneity. The readers immediately understand, if they do not know already, that Muslim youth with the same address and same year of birth can be utterly different. The two distinct Norwegian sociolects are marked by several axes of difference: geography, class, age or generation, status, and power. Mo's elegant language, and large but standard vocabulary, are sharply contrasted with Jamal's faulty grammar, syntactical inversion, consistently wrong prepositions, and limited vocabulary, peppered with recent slang of foreign origin. Jamal's undeniably incorrect Norwegian indicates both his *utenforskap* and an equally undeniable double-edged compensatory strategy (see Willis 1977). Mo's sophisticated language, on the other hand, carries the promise of a class journey. But, perhaps surprisingly, eloquence can only take you so far when your luggage is heavy with *utenforskap*.

Jamal's language also illustrates the *organic hybridization* that leads to changes in languages (Bakhtin 1981). Newly imported words and inventive idioms deterritorialize the Norwegian language, like a "minor language" within a major one (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 2004). For instance, Jamal introduces himself as "Liksom, vi alle er svartinger på en hvit land, skjønner du?" (untranslatable, but approximately: "Kinda', all we are darkies on an white country, see?") The pejorative term and the faulty prepositions create a critical and piercing visual image of present-day realities. Norway is in many respects still a white country where dark Norwegians are discriminated against; they are not completely *in* the country, but somehow superimposed "on" it. Jamal's deterritorializing, organic hybridization of Norwegian thus expands the reader's understanding and perception of reality.

Jamal is a very funny guy, unintentionally and intentionally, in contrast to the uptight Mo. The linguistic creativity with which Jamal manages his meager resources is also part of the reason why many readers have an affection for him.¹⁶ His creative and witty language indicates that he uses the language tactically (de Certeau 1984), like an art of

¹⁶Discussions on book blogs show that many appreciate the audiobook particularly because of the freshness of Jamal's voice and language, read by Tohid Akhtar.

resistance (Scott 1990). At the very end of the novel, when planning his first trip outside Oslo (and second outside Stovner), Jamal plans to practice standard, so-called potato (i.e. native) Norwegian (Shakar 2017, p. 427). That remark makes the reader realize the extent to which Jamal's language is a conscious choice, not simply the destiny of a school dropout of foreign origin.¹⁷

By contrast, Mohammed¹⁸ *assimilates* through language. If he writes slang, it is only to criticize it and keep the “Stovner language” at arm's length (much like Fanon 1952 describes among middleclass Martinicans). However, Mo's elegant, standard Norwegian, does not help him. As soon as he turns up with his “Muslim” appearance and lack of middle-class *savoir-faire*, he too feels that he loses out.¹⁹ Jamal, however, understands from the beginning that being Norwegian is not only a question of mastering the language: “Kinda’, all we are darkies on an white country, see?”

The novel's seemingly pessimistic ending, in which Mohammed ditches his final bachelor exams, secludes himself in his childhood room, and smokes a joint or more with Jamal under a hilarious symbol of failed urban renovation, seems to suggest that discrimination and prejudices lead Mo back to the start. More optimistically, as a sign of strength rather than resignation, the return or homecoming suggests that Mo realizes that he must not renounce where he comes from.

¹⁷This remark is reminiscent of, though far from as dislocating as, the point when one understands that the language of the protagonist in Jonas Hassen Khemiri's *One Eye Red* (2003) is a *political* construct to resist “Swedification,” not unintentionally rendered “satellite-town Swedish.” The political message of Shakar in this instance seems, however, to be a different one when read in connection with Jamal's previous point where he reminds the researcher (to whom his and Mo's self-narrations are directed) of anonymizing him. For all we know, “Jamal” might be one of those who defy the bleak statistics of socioeconomic heritage, like his hugely successful creator, Shakar and his twin brother, who is lawyer at the Royal Palace (see Hestman 2018).

¹⁸Shakar's choice of names was probably not a coincidence. When Mohammed became the most common name for baby boys in Oslo, there was an outcry on discussion forums and social media about what the leader of the right-wing coalition government party calls the “sneak-Islamization” (*snikislamifisering*) of Norway. The term was first used in 2009 and is still common parlance after the 2011 terror attack, which was founded on “counter-jihadist” and Eurabia conspiracy theories. It is therefore no coincidence that Mohammed is the “assimilated” one. Mohammed himself is, unsurprisingly, unhappy with the traditional Muslim name (Shakar 2017, pp. 7–8).

¹⁹As double job applications with fake Curriculum Vitae reveal, persons with “foreign sounding” names are 25% less likely to be invited for an interview. The percentage is even higher if you are male (Midtbøen and Rogstad 2012).

Shakar differs from both his two protagonists regarding language. He emphasizes, (perhaps increasingly as many seem to believe that he *is* Mo) that he is neither character but shares traits with both.²⁰ When Shakar reads Jamal's passages publicly, he does not change intonation. The well-educated bureaucrat and celebrated author speaks Jamal's syntactical errors and slang as his own language, blurring the distance between the two. In public speech, Shakar effortlessly shares Jamal's idioms when it suits the context. However, unlike Jamal who seems territorialized at Stovner, Shakar deterritorializes and minoritizes Norwegian as a "major language" far into literary circles and mainstream media.

Existentially Changing Events

Mohammed is a reflexive, thoughtful person. His carefully constructed narrative starts by juxtaposing his perception of Stover before and after a key event of existential consequences.

But really, I used to like Stovner. I liked to be a child here. [...] The tower-blocks were dwellings. The tagging at the metro station were drawings. The welfare beneficiaries, neighbors. All the brown children, friends. The white children, too. [...] At school, the children of the rainbow were supposed to live together. There were culture days with food from all corners of the world. We visited mosques, churches and temples. We played football in the plain (*sletta*), all together, and when we were finished, we drank the best water in the world from the taps at the club house and ate raspberries on the steep slope (*skrent*). (Shakar 2017, pp. 9–10)

Mo ruminates over happy childhood memories from before the unraveling of the discourse of multiculturalism and the right-wing turn. Playing football is one of the most universal of carefree childhood activities.²¹ However, the references to "the plain" and "raspberries on the steep slope" situate—"territorialize," as García-González writes in her chapter in this volume—his childhood in the particular landscape of hilly, peri-urban Norway. Like much of the vegetation on the steep slopes, raspberries spread through rootstalks, or rhizomes.

²⁰ Hestman (2018), Lundgaard and Stenersen (2018), Skotheim (2017), Østlie (2018).

²¹ The contrast between the naturalness of children playing football and the political assumptions—and lack of empirical underpinning—in the discourse of "integration" is also a common trope in "second generation" cultural expressions. See Abdel Haq's poem "Between the walls" for a French example (2007; Fagerlid 2012, pp. 25–26).

On the way to the lavatory in second grade, Mo stumbles upon a life-changing experience that becomes a key moment in his self-perception. The scene vividly describes for the reader the deeply perturbing psychological consequences when an outside, generalizing, negative gaze has the power to challenge and replace a person's worldview and self-perception.

I stopped right around the corner from the voices. I heard them clearly. Two older teachers. What they spoke so angrily about was us.

The many foreigners at the school. Weak pupils. Parents who didn't understand anything. The neighborhood that was a slum. They feared going to the metro when the sun was down and the gangs were out. They couldn't wait to retire and get away.

I think. Much of it went above my head. But there were things that were impossible to misunderstand. That was the extent to which they disliked us, and how angry we made them. (Shakar 2017, p. 11)

The event literally unsettles his body. With an upset stomach, Mo runs all the way home—the familiar, childhood landscape passes in a flash. It also becomes something shameful that he hides from everyone, “as if I had been the witness to a crime which would disappear if I only kept quiet” (Shakar 2017, p. 11).

I kept quiet and found out that Stovner was actually quite small, and Aunt Ulrikke's Road was even smaller. I found out that at Stovner, people lived in houses on one side and in tower-blocks at the other, and that the two kinds often did not resemble each other, and that actually, it was like that in Oslo as well, and in the world. I found out that the [two] teachers were not the only ones. They talked about us in the news and wrote about us in the newspapers. [...]. I remember when they started to say “integrate.” (Shakar 2017, p. 12)

What I had grown up with, changed into something strange, grownup and ugly, there was nothing I could do. [...]. I thought [about it], until I got angry, worried and weary. Everything mixed together into a displeasure sitting in the stomach and sometimes moved up, sometimes down. I struggled with nausea and a loose stomach. (Shakar 2017, p. 13)

The existential othering that changed Mohammed's perception of self and local community, and of the world in general, has a considerable literary predecessor in Frantz Fanon (1952). “‘Dirty nigger!’ or simply ‘Look!

A Negro!” (1967, p. 89) is the dramatic start of the chapter “The Lived Experience of the Black Man” (1967 [1952]). By this “simple” remark the explosion announced at the beginning of *Black Skin, White Masks* finally takes place. The man becomes pinned to his skin as black. The power/knowledge (Foucault 1976) of inferiority becomes internalized (Hall 1990, p. 226), or better “epidermalized” (Fanon 1967, p. 11). Fanon’s postcolonial classic exposes the psychological effects of domination, including colonialization, in a way similar to the *Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir five years prior (1947).

Locked into this suffocating reification [...]. [T]he Other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and attitude, the same way you fix a preparation with a dye. I lose my temper, demand an explanation [...] Nothing doing. I exploded. Here are the fragments put together by another me. (Fanon 1967, p. 82)

Like Fanon, Mo’s existential experiences become an event that changes him. Mo’s earlier perceptions of self, friends, and neighborhood shatter. He too must find a way to put together the fragments. These experiences become events or “generic moments,” which carry with them, although undoubtedly destructive, “an opening to new potentialities in the formation of social realities” (Kapferer 2010, p. 1). *Black Skin, White Masks* is an example of how “new theoretical directions” can be “founded in existential [experience and] practice” (Kapferer 2010, p. 17). Fanon’s classic is a fragmentary personal psychoanalysis and auto-theory in the mixed form of poem and essay. *Aunt Ulrikke’s Road* is a coherent fictional narrative, which formulates an analysis based on the experiences of events.²² Both make use of the reflexivity produced by the temporal distance in the “now of the writing and the then of the narrated past” (Gullestad 1996, p. 5).²³

Narratives are an important means to piece together the fragments coherently into a new self. In *Aunt Ulrikke’s Road* the micro-descriptions of unacknowledged versions of reality are an important ingredient in this narrative reconstruction of a new “me.”

²²Not surprisingly, judging from the experiential force of the description, Mo’s experience is based on a similar event in the author’s life (Ellefsen 2017; Grindem 2017; Lundgaard and Stenersen 2018).

²³Most chapters in this anthology expose this temporal reflexivity of narratives.

*Acknowledgment of Alternative Experiences
and Worldviews: September 11, 2001*

The clash between majority and minority experiences of reality after the September 11 attacks in New York City is another key event in the novel. Mo and Jamal have almost opposite reactions but neither conforms to the mainstream interpretation as Shakar depicts them.²⁴ Mo, who wants to escape everything about his background, is distraught about President Bush's speech "about the struggle between good and evil facing us[.] A fundamental, long-lasting and monumental struggle. I can't take it," as Mo writes (Shakar 2017, p. 64). His sole concern is the effect this dichotomous division of the world will have on his own situation. The Manichean language leaves no space in between, which is catastrophic for a brown person with a Muslim name and background who has put his faith in perfect assimilation. Already after the 1991 Gulf War—but probably even before—European Muslims have felt excluded by the rhetoric of "are you with us or against us" (see Fagerlid 2001).

As the novel's readers know, 9/11 is just the beginning. During the five-year period covered in the novel, from 2001 to 2006, there will be the global Mohammad cartoons controversy, riots in French *banlieues*, and an "honor killing" (moved from real-life Sweden to Stovner, for the sake of the literary plot). Mo watches with abjection how tabloid talk shows and comments sections in newspapers ignite and polarize.

Jamal, on the other hand, does not fear the Manicheanism. He embraces it. This is probably the most radical move of the novel in mainstream society. It not only represents an unheard or morally despicable voice, it describes and explains it. Shakar, in the discussion with Vitanza²⁵:

[Jamal] experiences that he has been in a situation for a very long time. He feels that he has lost a lot. To be a Muslim immigrant in the Grorud Valley, you've lost, all the way. And now, when someone finally does something. The joy isn't necessarily connected to the terror, that someone dies, he doesn't think that far. [...] I'm not saying that it is a morally correct position, or a just worldview, and defend it. Just that there is an absurd logic in

²⁴ It should be noted that people from all kinds of backgrounds, not only Muslims, reacted to the rhetoric and course of events after 9/11. A "Not in our name" movement spread from the US to many countries, including Norway, in the wake of the invasion of Afghanistan and the imminence of an invasion of Iraq. These boundary-blurring circumstances do not get a mention in the novel.

²⁵ See also Hestman (2018).

being a little bit happy about September 11, anyway. That's what I'm trying to convey. [... Jamal] is concerned about the US and all they've done, and he feels that the Norwegian public doesn't acknowledge his worldview at all. They don't acknowledge things he's concerned about and things he sees as important. People need recognition for what they perceive as significant, and when they don't get that, there is a discrepancy. As in the classroom, where Jamal sees that the teacher doesn't care about what he cares about.

The following event occurs early in the book when Jamal is still at school. In class, on September 12, Jamal encounters a completely different perception of the Twin Towers attack than in the fervent discussions among his friends. The teacher asks the pupils to stand and commemorate the innocent victims with three minutes of silence. Jamal becomes upset as he notices that the teacher is about to cry and a classmate bursts out in tears.

They cry for them, but not for others and that makes me think even more like them and me, we're not the same. You see? 'Cause then, they'd cried a bit for others too. But now we stand, not one, but three fuckin' minutes for the innocent in the US? Seriously, some innocent guys died there, but like, innocent guys die more at those darkie countries 'cause of the US, right? So how them at the US completely innocent then? Aren't we more innocent than them? (Shakar 2017, pp. 66–67)

Unlike Mohammed who implodes the othering experience into his digestive system, Jamal, like Fanon, gives the rising heartbeat and shivering an outlet and explodes. He shouts at the teacher and class that “darkies” are treated differently, and that not to acknowledge that is the real lack of respect in this situation. Then he quits school for good.²⁶

It is worth noting that Jamal's explosion takes place in a Norwegian classroom, and that it is in national media Mo seeks acknowledgment but finds the opposite. Their sense of *utenforskap* is, in the case of 9/11, a result of local and geopolitical marginalization, not “cultural difference” or a “lack of integration” as some commentators seem to claim.²⁷

²⁶ Jamal finds a job after a while as a car washer in the informal economy. At first, he is happy about having some money, which has always been scarce in his family. The reader understands how exploitative the job is and how low his wages are. Jamal does not realize this, but, expectedly, he notices how his body starts to ache from the hard and repetitive work. Jamal exemplifies here the bleak *utenforskap* of socioeconomic marginalization.

²⁷ My argument concerning “cultural difference” is in line with literary scholar Iversen's critique of reviewers who “celebrated the book as a description of something foreign”

THE GREAT IMMIGRANT NOVEL, OR RATHER HOMESTEAD
PROSE FROM THE SATELLITE TOWN? THE RECREATION
OF A NATIONAL COMMUNITY

The Anger of the Second Generation

Jamal and Mo express the experiences and anger of a new generation born and bred in Norway but denied full acknowledgment as such. Shakar is not alone in arguing that the term “second generation,” so closely connected to “immigrant,” is misleading. Many do not know their parents’ countries of origin.²⁸

At the same time, this generation has certain experiences and challenges in common. One important characteristic is the sense of entitlement that comes with their place of birth, and the anger when this birthright is infringed. Shakar, at Stovner library:

The “second generation” is much angrier than the “first generation.” They have grown up here and expect to have the same things that the others who’ve grown up here have. And when they don’t get that, they become angry and discouraged. I draw a parallel to [riots in] Stockholm and Paris. The second generation [...] feel they don’t get what they are entitled to (*krav på*), which they can see that all others have got.

Shakar presents here a sound, non-essentializing, strategic working definition of a “second generation.” What issues are at the core of this generation’s expectations and anger? So far, we have seen how Mo and Jamal have experienced a denial of self-definition, belonging, and worldviews. *Aunt Ulrikke’s Road* channels their anger into coherent narratives, but is the novel also redressing it? At the level of the boys’ narrative lives, the answer is no. In this second part of the chapter, I turn attention to the numerous efforts to define and label the novel. I argue that the complexity

(2018). Concerning the “lack of integration,” several of the commentators jump from socio-economic lines of argument about poverty to punchlines concerning “integration,” which in public debate does not connote socioeconomic inclusion, but so-called foreign cultural (*fremmedkulturelle*) immigrants. Askelund (2017). See also e.g., Ramnefjell (2018) and Stølan (2017).

²⁸ If the children of immigrants have been “back home” or *lâ bas*, they often feel like and are treated as visitors (see Fagerlid [2001] for a description of this experience among both “first-” and “second-generation” British Sylhetis).

of Shakar's storytelling opens up a new space in the national literary canon as it enlarges and combines the established categories of *Bildungsroman*, "class journey," and "homestead prose."

The Great Immigrant Novel?

"The reviewers compete in *not* calling it an immigrant novel," is Shakar's first remark at the meeting with Jan Kjørstad where the library convener had started by asking about "the longing for the great immigrant novel" in the Norwegian literary public.²⁹ Shakar continues:

These guys are born in Norway, so the term fails completely. It might sound like I'm splitting hairs, but when are we going to call a story like this a Norwegian (hi)story, as part of Norway? [...]. When are we going to call Jamal and Mohammed Norwegian?

At the library event, Kjørstad follows Shakar's reply with a passionate and insightful defense of *Aunt Ulrikke's Road* as, finally, the great Norwegian immigrant novel of transformative potential:

I've been in the game for forty years and have followed the yearning for the immigrant novel. In Sweden and Denmark, they got it earlier. I'd say that this novel has much of what one has been hoping and waiting for. I mean the *expansion of reality*. An expansion of the *Norwegian reality*. "Immigrant novel" is the wrong term if you scrutinize it closely, but this is a third culture. People with their parents' culture and with the culture of the country where they grow up. And then they make a third culture, which is something completely *new*. And it is incredibly interesting.

This "new culture," particularly regarding music and style, has been observed in postcolonial immigrant nations like England since Iain Chambers' and Dick Hebdige's contributions to *Resistance through*

²⁹It should be noted that *Aunt Ulrikke's Road* is not the first Norwegian novel that describes the experiences of the "second generation." It seems, however, generally agreed that Shakar's prizewinning novel has a higher literary complexity and quality than the predecessors, followed by Skaranger (2015). The first novel written by an immigrant to Norway was published in 1986 by 16-year-old Khalid Hussain. The youth novel *Pakkis* ("Paki") became an instant and long-lasting success and describes "Pakistani" children in Norway as "neither here nor there" (see Osborne 2016, p. 3). It is, therefore, quite different from the homegrown, "third cultural" or new kind of writing of Shakar, Skaranger, and the aforementioned Swedish author Khemiri (e.g., 2003).

Rituals in 1975. In the 1980s, numerous analyses within cultural studies showed the remaking of Britishness through cultural expressions. According to Dick Hebdige:

There is an army of in-betweens and neither-nors out there who feel they belong to no given community. They realise that any community they might belong to in the future will have to be *made by them* or it won't get made at all. In some parts of Britain, West Indian patois has become *the* public language of inner-city youth, irrespective of their racial origin. (Hebdige 1987, p. 158)

Helena Wulff's (1988) ethnography of teenage girls in South London describes empirically this new generation of blacks *and* whites who together create new cultural currents through peer-learning and interaction in microcultures. This new or "third" cultural production has reached literary Norway with full force with Shakar's fine novel, Kjarstad argues.

*The Second Generation and Postindustrial
Western European Decay, Norway-Style*

In the first email to the fictional research project, Mohammed presents himself through a territorialized, but generic story of Western European satellite towns and inner cities. All the conventional features are present: a "second generation" not knowing their parents' country of origin; the male hoodies in front of high-rises; the female hijabs with trolleys; the contrast between villas and tower blocks; "white flight" and white working-class elders with unhealthy lifestyles; the (relative) overcrowding and dilapidation; the "noise of children and smell of food"³⁰; and finally the presence and menace of the far right (Shakar 2017, p. 8).

Novels of Transformation and Norway as Diaspora Space?

Aunt Ulrikke's Road conforms to what literary scholar Mark Stein (2004) terms "novels of transformation." Stein argues many Black and Asian British novels are "novels of transformation" in a double or even triple sense. First, they describe individual processes of change inherent in the

³⁰ "Le bruit et l'odeur," as the then mayor of Paris, later president of France, Jacques Chirac said in a speech in 1991, later preserved in a song by the "second generation" band *Zebda* (Cherfi 1995).

Bildungsroman. In addition, they have a particular performative function: the narratives construct conceivable new subject positions for protagonists and, consequently, also for readers (2004, pp. xvi–xvii). Simultaneously, the literature redefines Britain and Britishness little by little (2004, pp. 36–54). The writers “diversify” or cosmopolitize “the country from within,” as Helena Wulff (2018a, b, c) describes the Swedish authors Jonas Hassen Khemiri and Pooneh Rohi. Society essentially becomes a “diaspora space” where “the diasporian is as much a native as the native now becomes a diasporian” (Brah 1996, p. 238).

The earliest British novels of transformation appeared well before 9/11. Despite persistent racism and discrimination, the novels depict change for the better and convey optimism. However, Shakar’s novel is sad and pessimistic.³¹ Both boys seemingly stagnate or even regress. Norway, like much of Western Europe, is experiencing increasing Islamophobia, economic inequality, and a political far-right turn. Yet the bleak storylines of the fictional characters Mohammed and Jamal do not mean that the real-life country is not diversified from within (see Wulff 2018a, b, c). To the contrary, the man in the library audience who found “himself” in a Norwegian novel for the first time is certainly not alone. The novel has taught many others about current living conditions in Norway, of which they had little or no awareness (see Fassin 2013a, b).

Heimstaddiktning and the National Community

Although, in the library discussion with Kjørstad, Shakar accepted the term “second generation” novel, it is certainly not his preferred label. He explained that through the writing process the story appeared more and more situated in the particular place of Stovner, to the extent that the final version was named after the road where he and the protagonists grew up. Accordingly, the publisher’s webpage describes it as “homestead literature from the satellite town.”³²

³¹ *Ours are the Streets*, by Sunjeev Sahota (2011), is an example of a British post-9/11 novel sharing *Aunt Ulrikke’s Road’s* disheartened outlook. The streets have not yet become theirs “as much as anyone’s” (p. 70), as the humble and hard-working first-generation dad hoped.

³² <https://www.gyldendal.no/Forfattere/Shakar-Zeshan> (accessed June 19, 2019). In a newspaper article, the journalist Meyer (2018) explicitly links “represent your hood” in hip-hop to homestead prose, with the conclusion that *Aunt Ulrikke’s Road* brings the genre of homestead writing back into literature.

“Homestead prose”—*heimstaddiktning*—is a prominent Norwegian literary label with multiple meanings. At the simplest level, homestead prose is “a literary mapping” of the new nation (Andersen 2001, p. 284), with roots in nineteenth-century Norwegian nation-building. In a realist manner, the literature paints local traditions and mores steeped, territorialized, in a particular scenery and local landscape. The mountainous geography with small, isolated farms is an important trope in the Norwegian imagined community (Anderson 1983), captured in the well-known Norwegian song text (and long-running television series) “where no one believes that anyone can live” (*der ingen skulle tru at nokon kunne bu*). Shakar’s *Stovner*, including its complicated dialect, fits well with this trope of a “place where no one believes that anyone can live.”

Originally, homestead prose was inspired by the nineteenth-century nationalist, German genre *Heimatkunst*, which developed in response to the nostalgia of urban migrants in the wake of rapid urbanization, industrialization, and modernization (Andersen 2001, p. 283). In Norway, homestead prose led to neorealism and portrayals of working and living conditions, not only for fishermen and farmers but increasingly also for early industrial workers. Two important authors connected to this tradition are of particular interest in understanding Shakar’s entry into the Norwegian literary canon: Johan Falkberget and Oskar Braathen.

Nobel Prize nominee Falkberget, himself a miner from the age of seven, wrote numerous novels about the social and cultural conditions of the copper mining municipality at Røros (Andersen 2001, p. 354). Falkberget’s depiction of the highly international character of the mining community in inland Norway has made Norwegian literary scholar, Per Thomas Andersen question or even reject him as a homestead author. As mentioned above, homestead writing historically arose from the nostalgia brought about by industrialization and urbanization. Like Falkberget, Shakar, however, acknowledges and makes visible the ever-present global connections within every local community. Thus he, like his predecessor, participates in removing the genre’s nationalist lens.

The urban writer Braathen is another important precursor to Shakar’s political homestead writing. In numerous neorealist novels and plays, Braathen depicts the living conditions of male and female industrial workers along Aker River in Oslo in the early twentieth century. While Braathen portrays the advent of the Norwegian working class, a century later Shakar is part of an international wave of authors portraying living conditions in a postindustrial era. As homestead literature, *Aunt Ulrikke’s Road* writes

Stovner and other disadvantaged suburbs *and* the topic *utenforskap*—whether in general or as the particular plight of a “second generation”—into the heart of the Norwegian literary canon.

Coming of Age in a Small City in a Big World

But *Aunt Ulrikke's Road* is far more than homestead prose. It also conforms to the *Bildungsroman* form in which growing up involves the acquisition of new knowledge and understanding. *Bildung* as social mobility is a cherished plot in social-democratic Scandinavia. Mohammed sets out literally on a class journey—by bus and through the socioeconomically and ethnically divided Norwegian capital—to a university education across town. Here, he also meets his middle-class girlfriend who lives with her parents in a neighborhood along the bus route.

The novel's political context—deindustrialization, rising inequalities, polarization, loss of faith in multiculturalist rhetoric, and the anger of “the second generation”—is European, but the geography is specifically central Scandinavian. The socio-literary universe too is seemingly as taken out of a Norwegian folktale. The folkloric national epic hero is the poor but cunning *Askeladden*, “Lad of Ashes,” who “marries the princess and inherits half of the kingdom.” His “class-journey” reflects the national ethos of equality (see Lidén et al. 2001). For a long time, Mohammed conforms well to the image of the Lad of Ashes, as a scholarship winner for his academic achievements and with a middleclass princess in a house with garden. Then, unlike any fairytale, the class journey of Mo grinds to a halt toward the end of the novel.³³

Coming-of-age novel (*oppvekstroman*) and class journey are the labels Zeshan Shakar most frequently uses,³⁴ in addition to “Oslo-history year 2000.” He frequently cites that his greatest source of inspiration is the monumental literary success of Lars Saabye Christensen's *Beatles* from 1984.³⁵ Christensen's novel centers around the coming of age of four boys from *petit bourgeois* Oslo West during the turbulent late 1960s and early 1970s. In *Beatles*, the political and sociocultural global upheavals of the era play an important role in local lives, as the geopolitical situation of the 2000s does in

³³From an epic perspective, Jamal is a more resilient hero who never resigns in spite of a never-ending stream of calamities.

³⁴Skotheim (2017), Skrede (2017)

³⁵Brun (2017), Lundgaard and Stenersen (2018), Magerøy (2018), Meyer (2018), Skrede (2017)

Shakar's novel. Both novels embody their *zeitgeist*. In *Beatles*, the characters' loss of innocence as they grow up parallels the loss of innocence of the wider world as the news from Vietnam spreads and "monopoly capital" replaces their fathers' small enterprises. Similarly, the optimistic "colorful community" of Mo's childhood years crumbled with the Twin Towers and the increased political polarization mediated through tabloid talk shows. The principal character in *Beatles* grows up into disillusionment and a harsher, more complicated world. Mo loses his naïve faith in education, assimilation, and life outside Stovner. In the same period in real-life Oslo, the future child mass-murderer Anders Behring Breivik started his political trajectory in the youth organization of the right-wing government-party-to-be.³⁶

CONCLUSION

As an award-winning and celebrated homestead narrative and *Bildungsroman* depicting *utenforskap* and class journey, *Aunt Ulrikke's Road* inscribes the Grorud Valley and the experiences of a new, multiethnic generation into the heart of the Norwegian literary canon. How? By giving voice to "the most defined human beings in Norway but defined from the outside." *Aunt Ulrikke's Road* expands our perception of Norwegian reality, as a "great immigrant novel" as Jan Kjørstad pointed out—or as any good, complex novel in Bakhtin's sense. The author, Zeshan Shakar, is living proof of the organic hybridization, the expansion of reality taking place, that no Utøya massacre and inflammatory comments sections can reverse.

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³⁶ Johnsrud et al. (2011).

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