# **1. Introduction**

In contemporary societies, explicitly racist practices are rendered increasingly difficult to pin down amid the circulation of antiracist discourses of acceptance, difference, and diversity. This is to the extent that overtly racist practices have become widely stigmatised, if not denied altogether, in the public sphere (Bennett, 2018b: 26). Despite this, racism in Western countries remains dominant and systemic across all levels of society (van Dijk, 2021: 76), with it possible that progressive organisations, legislation, movements, and NGOs are neither racist nor antiracist (van Dijk, 2021: 77). Within this context, the simultaneous doing and denying of racism has resulted in more covert and subtle racist practices (Levchak, 2018: 47), that is *liquid* forms of racism that are ambiguous and harder to pin down (Weaver, 2011).

This study examines how refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants, and migrants (henceforth *migrants[[1]](#footnote-1)*) are (re)presented across thirty-two curated stories disseminated on the websites of UK-based charity organisations. These stories were all published during, or in the aftermath of, the EU referendum (henceforth Brexit) amid the resurgence of pro-nationalist, anti-immigration discourses that continue to underline wider political debates concerning migration. We aim to show that *liquid* racism emerges through the narrative positioning of migrants in relation to wider discourses of integration, specifically the construction of identities of fulfilment that comprise gratefulness and resilience. We argue that curated stories (Fernandes 2017; see also Section 5) intended to generate support for, and raise public awareness of, migrants and their (often traumatic) experiences co-opt contradictory images of migrants who emerge as agentive and grateful despite hardship, and who contribute and eventually integrate. This sustains wider conceptions of migration as a primarily transactional, neo-assimilatory process (Bennett, 2018b), particularly amid the prevalence of neoliberal forms of governance that underpin contemporary migration policies. These policies foreground autonomy, personal responsibility and “introduce social relations formed by the economic market [to] valorise people in terms of their flexibility and adaptability” (Jaskulowski and Pawlak, 2022: 2059). We conclude that social actors, in this case philanthropic organisations, with explicitly antiracist aims simultaneously reaffirm the institutionally supported, systemic, racist practices that they intend to reverse.

In the sections that follow, we first situate the circulation of discourses of integration within the broader socio-historical context(s) of the UK and Europe. We then review our primary analytical frameworks, including *narrative* *positioning* (see Bamberg, 1997; 2012) and *critical* *discourse* *analysis* (see Fairclough, 1995) to explore how migrant identities are constructed throughout our dataset, before going on to present our data. Our analysis focuses on two curated stories representing migrant protagonists as successful story participants, first in terms of their ability to endure hardship and, second, in relation to their efforts to contribute to UK society.

# **2. Neo-assimilation and the nation: migration in the UK context**

Migration currently continues to be a highly politicized and salient issue across Europe (see Wodak and Boukala, 2015; Bennett, 2018a, 2018b), with migrant flows primarily directed towards economically developed countries (Bennett, 2018b: 54). For a long time, perceptions of EU migration relegated migrants to a strictly economic role in society (Martiniello, 2006: 83) – in other words, to do no more than work and contribute, to stay but never settle. In the present day, however, EU political and media debates increasingly address the permanent integration of migrants within their host country, their public and political representation(s), and their (political) mobilisation. This has particularly been the case following the resurgence of right-wing nationalist ideologies in Europe that increasingly legitimate democratic decision-making along populist lines. These ideologies also emphasise polarising notions of the nation and its people to problematise immigration as a process of social, cultural, and political integration (Bennett, 2018b: 1). Because racism is both a social and historical concept that manifests through its relation to (ethno-) national histories (Bennett, 2018b: 25), current European migration debates are therefore (re)contextualizations of discourses in circulation for the last century, including colonial distinctions of the civilised and the uncivilised and the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ (Horner and Weber, 2011: 142; Bennett, 2018b).

As such, European migration policies and debates are largely informed by discourses of integration, with integration broadly defined here as the incorporation of migrants and/or those categorised as ‘foreigners’ (Horner and Weber, 2014: 140) within their host societies. Integration thus underlines any policy that manages how migrants are to become part of the host society (Bennett, 2018b: 46). Within the UK context, integration is often discursively constructed as a two-way process that involves the *mutual* accommodation and establishing of social connection between refugees andother members of their host communit(ies) (Ager and Strang, 2008: 177). This paradigm superseded multiculturalism at the turn of the 20th century, amid increasingly negative conservative responses towards community heterogeneity and diversity (Kostakopoulou, 2010: 936). As a result, renewed focus has since been placed on nationalist and disciplinary approaches to policy that favour discourse(s) of national values and social cohesion to consolidate monocultural nation states (ibid). However, integration comprises symbolic practices that, above all, “accentuate the nationality of citizenship” (Kostakopoulou, 2003: 100), and so migrants must become ‘like’ other citizens in their host community, if not “better citizens than most of the settled population” (Bennett, 2018b: 50), as well as “make an effort to integrate […], speak the national language, and be familiar with the history, values and ways of life of the host society” (Kostakopoulou, 2010: 937) if they are to be accepted. Integration is therefore primarily the responsibility of migrants themselves who must try to become more like the dominant in-group (Bennett, 2018b: 51). This resonates with the assimilatory nature of integration as it entails not just a geographical but also an identarian relocation whereby migrants constitute an ‘other’ that must integrate within the nation state (Horner and Weber, 2011: 140).

In the UK, the discursive representation of immigration and integration as political issues has also encouraged racist discrimination against ethno-racial communities understood as ‘not belonging’ (Valluvan and Kalra, 2019: 2394). This is despite of the fact that the UK is considered a leader in the development of antiracist legislation in comparison to other EU states (Fella and Bozzini, 2013: 53), with its model of multiculturalism having (positively) impacted the lives of minority groups since the 1980s (Lotem, 2021: 260). However, Britain’s colonial past continues to have enduring relevance in terms of how ethnic minorities are managed and perceived (Fella and Bozzini, 2013: 54), although antiracist movements no longer prioritise contesting racism and its ongoing salience to the British context through the lens of its colonial history (Lotem, 2021: 261). Migration is thus framed as a risk to national security in the public sphere as pro-nationalist discourses centring in-group identity, security, and sovereignty resurged during and after Brexit. The result has been the hierarchisation of migrants to the extent that some are represented as more desirable than others (Bennett, 2018b: 70), with migrants discursively constructed as an ‘outgroup’ that is external to, and substantiates, the ‘ingroup’ – that is, the nation and (claims to) Britishness.

Discourses of migration in the UK context have also been shaped by the transformation of (everyday) bordering processes. Specifically, everyday bordering has in the past decade become an increasingly central part of British life, with ordinary citizens assuming the roles of “border-guards and/or suspected illegitimate border crossers” (Yuval-Davis *et al*, 2018: 229). This practice naturalises the racialised boundaries between those ‘who belong’ and those ‘who do not’ and contributes to the foregrounding of a dominant bordering discourse that goes hand-in-hand with the discourse of the UK “as a desired space for immigration” (ibid: 239). In light of this, we continue to witness racial ordering and the reproduction of colonial practices in UK contemporary (im)migration discourses (El-Enany, 2020: 18).

Nonetheless, philanthropic organisations, including non-governmental and/or charity organisations, are well-established in the UK to support and assist migrants (Nawyn, 2011: 684). We understand charities as non-profit organisations that primarily rely upon public donations. These organisations, however, are only distinct from policy, support, and wider institutions in principle, with the functioning of the public sphere ultimately predicated upon private actors (i.e., individuals, groups) communicating with public actors (i.e., the state) (Bennett, 2018b: 6). Here, we understand institutions as,

“… the set of ideas or expectations about how to accomplish the various goals of society, such as the socializing of a society’s young, meeting the economic needs of a society’s citizens, and protecting members of society from outside threat” (Trepagnier, 2010: 64)

We thus follow Trepagnier (2010) by problematising individual philanthropic actors as equally imbricated in the institution of systemic racist discourse(s). These discourses are given rise to as part of a process of *structuration* (see Giddens, 1984; Trepagnier, 2010) where social structure(s) and individual agency are mutually dependent. While an explicitly antiracist actor – in this case, philanthropic charity organisations – may not intend to perpetuate racist discourses, then, the action they undertake is ultimately predicated upon their knowledge of the institutional norms and expectations within which the action occurs (Trepagnier, 2010: 71-72). The involvement of philanthropic actors in migration governance is therefore far from straightforward, with their compliance rather a process of creating and navigating conditions through which the tensions and incoherence of illiberal migration practices can be justified and controlled (Schweitzer et al., 2022: 6; see also Pallister-Wilkins, 2020: 1004). Philanthropic organisations and other actors in positions of governmental/non-governmental authority may thus reproduce institutional norms and expectations despite desiring to do ‘the right thing’ (Lester and Dussart, 2014: 24), with their actiongoing largely unexamined (Trepagnier, 2010: 72). We must therefore understand institutions as people-run and people-led for the agency of those in positions of power to be questioned (Bennett, 2018: 29).

Within the UK context, previous CDA research examining how migrants are represented in the British media (e.g., KhosraviNik *et al.*,2012; Ozdora-Aksak *et al.,* 2021; O’Regan and Riordan, 2018; Baker *et al*., 2008) supports widespread understandings of integration as an asymmetrical process, with migrants often positioned as the ‘problem to be solved’ and as the ‘foreign threat’ to British sovereignty. Indeed, these broadly negative characterizations of migrants resurged amid the Brexit referendum and are concomitant with pro-nationalist, populist rhetoric recontextualising racist discursive tropes surrounding burden, threat, and abuse that have existed for decades (Bennett, 2018a: 157). In addition, societal shifts towards neoliberal ideologies place renewed emphasis on the successful production of “responsible and governable but alienated neoliberal subjects” (Kipnis, 2007: 385). As such, neoliberal discourse practices introduce social hierarchies that valorise those migrants who are “mobile, adaptable, rational, [and] hard-working” (Jaskulowski and Pawlak, 2022: 2059) and who legitimise their right to settle in terms of market and economic value (ibid). We will therefore argue that the narrative positioning of migrants in our data as successful story protagonists and as *desirable* citizens who are *deserving* of support substantiate the express goal of philanthropic organisations to provide them with social assistance and aid. While these organisations must navigate institutions, political debates, and a wider discursive context that all “construct refugees as both victims who [are] dependent upon state assistance *and* as foreigners, therefore potential national security threats” (Nawyn, 2011: 680, our emphasis), these organizations do so by mobilising value judgements about migrants that positively frame only those who successfully contribute. As such, what determines their right to welfare assistance and support is the extent to which they sustain the migration as transactional discourse.

# **3. Anti, liquid, and internalized racism(s)**

Racism is a complex system of economic, social, cultural, and/or political dominance that is enacted along economic, social, political, and cultural axes (van Dijk, 1991: 224). This dominance has most prominently culminated in European ideology of racial superiority, where (often negatively valued) moral and/or sociocultural characteristics are ascribed to non-European/non-white peoples on the basis of bodily appearance, particularly skin colour (van Dijk, 1991: 225). Historically, such categorisations have been mobilised to rationalise the oppression and exploitation of said peoples as part of the European imperialist project (ibid), with ‘race’ of ongoing importance to the organisation of modern nation states and societies (Lentin, 2004: 37). As such, it is important to understand racism as embedded in the histories of European states and as the reproduction of systemic racial logics (Lentin, 2016: 26; see also Lentin, 2004: 1), rather than as confined to specific behaviours, beliefs, and actions alone. Racism is therefore encountered both as a “cumulative and structural effect of less violent forms of everyday racism… in politics, on the job, in school, in academic research, in government agencies, in the media” (van Dijk, 1993: 5), among others, as well as preformulated by elite groups, institutions, and their discourses (van Dijk, 1993: 2).

At a global level, there is growing resistance towards racist behaviours, social practices, and ideologies. Indeed, antiracism has become a global macromovement to resist ethnic domination (van Dijk, 2021: 2) and antiracist discourse is increasingly operationalized to more positively position the dominated over the dominant (van Dijk 2021: 4). Antiracism is thus an area of social participation now engaged with by millions of individuals that comprises various pathways, including everyday antiracism (i.e., opposing racial inequality as part of everyday popular culture), radical antiracism (i.e., challenging socio-economic power structures that privilege and reproduce racism), among others (see Bonnett, 2000: 88), with most forms of affirmative antiracist action seeking to challenge racism within, rather than as constituted by, the socio-economic status quo (Bonnett, 2000: 118). Although antiracist praxis and the celebration of diversity and difference have become more widespread, antiracist practice remains nondominant on social media, in politics and mainstream media, among others, with little influence on populations that benefit from racial inequalities (van Dijk, 2021: 2-3).

Despite this, racist practices are now widely stigmatised to the extent that they are rendered increasingly difficult to identify (Bennett, 2018b: 33; Weaver, 2011: 252). For example, while racism is often ascribed to particular political positions and ideologies (such as the far-right), institutions and eras, this ultimately serves to compartmentalise and consign racist practices to the past, rather than to the present, and to specific groups and ideologies, rather than the everyday practices of the general public. This outlawing of explicitly racist practices has given rise to more subtle forms of racism (Levchak, 2018: 48), resulting in the circulation of more ‘passable’ racist positionings, images, and attitudes. This encourages a more motile and liquid form of racism that discursively emerges through a layering of (potentially contradictory) meanings (Weaver, 2011: 253), subverting racist intentionality in such a way as to disguise it altogether (Lentin, 2016: 35; see also Weaver, 2011: 253).

In addition to disguising potentially racist intent, subverting systemically racist discourses also renders them more easily introjected by oppressed groups, to the extent that by “looking to the larger society to construct a sense of self, [the] target group find[s] negative images that serve to colonize and recolonize them” (Speight, 2007: 130; see also Lipsky, 1987). By operating at both interpersonal and institutional levels, overt and covert forms of racism and their effects may therefore become *internalized*, such that “institutionalization and the normalization of oppression in daily life [results in] the internalization of the dominant group’s values, norms, and ideas” (Speight, 2007: 130). Racial inequality therefore has the potential to shape how minority group members perceive themselves and each other, to the extent that mainstream racist values can be (often unconsciously) reproduced to justify their own oppression (Pyke and Dang, 2003: 151). Because migrants are not only forced to live within the constraints of wider racial hierarchies, but also lack the power to challenge these structures (Bennett, 2018b: 30), internalized racism is thus an adaptive reaction to racist forces (see Lipsky, 1987) with the potential to reproduce racist dynamics among minority group members.

# **4. Narrative positioning and the construction of identit(ies)**

We conceptualise identit(ies) as (re)shaped, (re)constituted, and given meaning by narratives[[2]](#footnote-2) through which we organise ourselves, our experiences, and our lives (Bruner, 1991: 4). Narratives are thus sense-making systems of self and representations of speakers’ subjectivities (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008: 378), with ident(ies) both shaped by, and shaping, wider social and discursive practices (De Fina, 2003: 18). We explore the construction of migrant identit(ies) in terms of *narrative positioning* (see Bamberg, 1997; 2012). By applying three levels of narrative positioning we explore how, through locating oneself and others, narrators organize their stories to construct a sense of self (Bamberg, 1997). Level 1 positioning refers to the story world and the ways characters are represented within it in response to the question ‘*How are characters positioned to one another in relation to the reported events?*’ (Bamberg, 1997: 337). Level 2 positioning is situated within the storytelling context and focuses on the relationship between a narrator and their audience, responding to the question ‘*How does the narrator position themselves to the audience?*’ (ibid). Finally, level 3 involves reconciling narrative choices (levels 1 and 2) with the master narratives, discourses, and wider sociocultural context in order to construct a sense of self - in other words, to answer the broader question ‘*Who am I?*’ (ibid).

Identities, however, are not merely representations of speech activities – they are consistently (re)constructed, (re)negotiated, and (re)cast across time and space (Bamberg, 2012: 7). To investigate how migrant identities are constructed, we also follow Bamberg by exploring narrators’ positioning across all levels in terms of three dilemmas impacting the identity formation process. The first dilemma indicates that subjects situate their sense of self on a *diachronic* continuum of *change*, whereby self is shaped according to particular formative and/or transformative events that take place over time. In a similar vein, the second dilemma posits that along this continuum, subjects position themselves in terms of *sameness* to, as opposed to *difference* from, others. Therefore, subjects align with, or distance themselves from, particular groups and social categories to establish a sense of self. Finally, the third dilemma posits that identity formation, as an *agentive* process. Agency is bi-directional, that is subjects can both construct and be constructed by the way the world is. Agency may therefore be constituted by the self (a *self-to-world direction of fit*) in instances where a subject has high agency and presents themselves as powerful and self-determined. On the other hand, subjects with low agency who are rather constituted by the world (a *world-to-self direction of fit*) may rather be represented as less powerful, less influential, and/or as victimised.

In tandem, our dataset predominately comprises curated stories (Fernandes, 2017; see also Section 5) that recount the often traumatic and emotionally distressing experiences of relocation and seeking asylum in the UK. Within this context, narrators and co-narrators (i.e., the institutional voices behind the stories) often mobilise *affect* as a resource to position themselves in relation to their intended audience. As such, narratives are to be understood as embodied practices that must be interpreted within the context of tellers’ and audiences’ lived experiences (Giaxoglou and Georgakopoulou, 2021: 248). We focus on narrators’ *affective positioning* (Giaxoglou, 2021), constituted by the use and effects of linguistic and/or discourse cues to express emotions in relation to story events and characters (level 1), audiences (level 2), and the self (level 3). To explore how narrators mobilise language to (re)project and (re)negotiate affective positions and identities, we concentrate on specific positioning *cues* (see Wortham, 2000; Giaxoglou, 2021: 60) which include (i) attributing *quoted speech or thought* to story protagonists (see also Lampropoulou, 2013); (ii) *evaluative indexicals* which presuppose characters’ affective and social positions; and (iii) shifts between generic *you* to *I* that strengthen the shared perceptions of the story’s main point.

# **5. Our data: curated stories**

Our dataset comprises thirty-two curated stories posted on the websites of UK-based charity organisations between 23rd June 2016 and 20th July 2021, spanning the period following the British European Union membership referendum, the announcement of the New Plan for Immigration in May 2021, as well as the passing of the Nationality and Borders Bill in July 2021. This was to facilitate the collection of data immediately following the referendum itself, as well as during the period of related unrest characterising the years that followed.

Curated stories were sourced from 9-UK based charity organization websites which provide support and advocacy services to migrants, including those registered as national (i.e., government-affiliated) and independent (i.e., non-government affiliated) charities. The stories collected specifically include those published as ‘blog posts’ with the aim to provide personalised accounts from refugees who have benefited from the support of the charity. We use the term *curated stories* here to refer to an emergent culture of storytelling whereby (curated) narratives are presented with predetermined storylines that are mobilised as tools of philanthropy, statecraft, and advocacy (Fernandes, 2017: 2; see also Giaxoglou and Spilioti, submitted). Their apparent authenticity renders them more legitimate, accessible, and successful, with their ability to (re)present story participants as relatable often strategically mobilized in the service of philanthropic organisations (Fernandes, 2017: 3). To this end, they are not traditional naturally occurring narratives but scripted, non-spontaneous narrative texts whereby the migrant appears as the initial teller and main protagonist, with their representative charity organization(s) as potential co-tellers. Due to the predetermined storylines that characterise curated stories, the story characters are *pre-positioned* (Giaxoglou and Georgakopoulou, 2021) as deserving of social aid and assistance. We thus understand these stories as *representations* of migrant positionings that serve the local goals of the charity organisation in relation to the wider discourses of migration circulated within the UK’s broader socio-ideological context.

# **6. Analysis: identities of *fulfilment***

We now turn to two representative curated stories of our dataset to illustrate how identities of *fulfilment* are constructed (see also Lampropoulou and Johnson, submitted), via the positioning of their protagonists as agentive, resilient and grateful story participants.

## **6.1 Positive adjustment, resilience and independence**

The following story, titled “Fathy” (see Refugee Action, 2017) and dated October 5th, 2017, recounts the journey and experiences of Fathy, a young refugee woman from Burundi, over a one-year period since arrival in the UK. The story is published as a blog post by the charity organisation with the intent to provide further insight into the lives of refugees and the support that the charity provides for them.

(1)

Fathy’s journey as a refugee began when she was sixteen years old, after fleeing her home-country of Burundi with her mother and siblings. During their six years in Kenya, their mother passed away, leaving Fathy responsible for her brothers and sister.

“I had taken on all the responsibility to be a parent and a sister to them, to make all the decisions,” said Fathy. “That is when my life changed.”

Becoming the sole carer for her siblings, she was determined to provide them with the best possible future.

She was relieved when she found out that they would be settling in the UK. “I was happy to be moving away from hardship. I always dreamt of the UK… it’s a free country.”

Even with her natural positive outlook, she was under no illusion about the challenges that lay ahead. She knew she had to work hard to make a good life for herself and siblings. “When I got to the UK, I found that you have to work hard to get what you want. Nothing is easy,” said the twenty-four-year-old. “It was awkward at first, but I told my siblings that this is where our new life will be and we have to do well.”

She realised early on that learning English would be vital to building a successful and independent life for herself in her new home.

“You can’t do anything if you don’t speak English,” said Fathy. “It is an English-speaking country. If you do well in English, you will do whatever you want after that.”

[One omitted paragraph describing Fathy’s English skills upon arrival to the UK] It took her four months to access formal English language lessons and she says that progress she has made over the year has been remarkable.

“Sometimes I record myself so I can listen back to what I sound like. The difference between now and when I first got here is big,” said Fathy. “My vocabulary is getting better but I still have to improve a lot.”

[One omitted paragraph describing Fathy’s volunteer work and how it has benefited her] “I work with women who are struggling to learn the language, but I say to them that they have to learn English so they can at least do their shopping,” said Fathy. “Some women are so eager to learn and they try hard to speak English. I feel good about doing something to help them.”

[Story goes on to further describe how learning English has benefited Fathy and her everyday life] “I feel that I have grown up a lot this year,” she said. “I have learnt to do everything on my own and I tell other women that they should not rely on others and they should learn English so they can be independent too.”

The level of the story world (level 1) positions Fathy, via the provision of orientation (Labov, 1972), as fleeing her home country Burundi and relocating in Kenya, before becoming responsible for her siblings, despite her young age. What follows is an instance of direct speech representation “I had taken…changed” that dramatizes Fathy’s sense of responsibility for her siblings and is framed as a turning point in her life: from an ordinary child she resumes parental responsibility for her siblings due to their mother passing away. This sense of responsibility is associated with agency in that she is positioned as the decision maker regarding her siblings’ future. What follows is another instance of direct speech representation “I was happy… country” that dramatically? associates her past with hardship and the future with freedom, as it comes directly from the protagonist’s perspective. In fact, the direct speech instance is introduced, in a mediated way, with indirect thought “she was relieved…UK” framing her relocation to the UK as a positive outcome. This marks a milestone in Fathy’s life at the level of the story world that immediately juxtaposes the negative past with the prosperous future and her home country with the UK which is, in turn, framed as an idealised “heartland” (Taggart 2004:274).

What follows is extensive provision of background information in third person narration that mitigates the prosperity associated with her future in the UK by underscoring the challenges involved with her relocation. This is marked by the contrastive adverbial “even with” that juxtaposes Fathy’s previous characterisation as hopeful and positive with the potential challenges of the future. Specifically, ‘challenges’ take the form of ‘hard work’ and Fathy is, nevertheless, positioned as responsible and agentive via indirect reports of her thoughts “she was under no illusion” as well as knowledgeable “she knew she had to”. Hard work, in turn, is presented as a duty via deontic modality “had to work hard”. This is illuminated via another instance of direct speech representation “when I got…want” where Fathy dramatizes the difficulties involved in settling. Additionally, through direct representation of her emotions “it was awkward at first” the required hard work is evaluated as unexpected. Yet, Fathy is positioned as determined and decisive and, again, agentive in relation to her siblings “but…well”. The story unfolds by focusing on learning English as the pillar of hard work and by positioning Fathy as proactive “she realised early”, committed “you can’t do anything...”, and resilient, overall, in her progressive learning of English. Finally, Fathy’s learning progress is presented as rewarding in her (direct speech) representation of volunteering for other women “Some women…help them.” The last instance of direct speech representation “I feel…too” constitutes the coda that summarises the conclusive point of the story – specifically, associating learning English with success and independence. Overall, at level 1 we observe Fathy transforming via positive adjustments from vulnerable and an object of hardship to mature, independent, free, agentive and successful. These positive adjustments are associated with hard work which is positively framed as progress. The path to this journey for independence and success is learning the English language.

At level 2, that is the narrator’s positioning in relation to the audience, the story follows a pattern in that first, factual information is offered via third person narration such as “UK requires hard work” and “English is vital to building a successful life”. Immediately after the introduction of each piece of information, direct speech representation follows where the protagonist herself reiterates and further argues for this. The vividness and dramatization involved in offering first hand words, experiences, thoughts and emotions contributes not only to the newsworthiness and tellability of the story, but also to effective argumentation (Georgakopoulou, 1997; Lampropoulou; 2013). This is because the narrator does not only tell but rather shows the audience, using direct speech, the point of the story.

Shifts between third- and first-person perspectives are also materialised, apart from traditional narration, via free indirect thought in instances like “she knew she had to work hard” and “she realised early”; indirect thought, unlike its speech counterpart, has the effect of “making the reader feel close to the character’s thinking process” (Semino and Short, 2004: 15). As such, the audience is already communicated Fathy’s thoughts before they are introduced to Fathy’s words, shifting perspectives between the narrator’s and the protagonist’s voices. It is this part of the story where the narrator’s voice coincides with the voice of a mediator, namely the charity. This pattern is representative of the curated aspect of the story. But, we argue, even when the charity speaks, this is used to do justice to Fathy’s point of view (through indirect thought and direct speech representation) rather than to appear as omniscient narrator. On first read, then, Fathy is positioned as agentive and in control of her narrated experience. However, these shifts from third to first person perspective and from indirect thought to direct speech, at level 2, also serve to mobilise affect and appeal to the audience by highlighting the representativeness of Fathy’s experience. As such, they position Fathy as an independent and inspirational migrant who operationalises her personal experience to unite others facing similar difficulties, as in instances where Fathy explicitly addresses other refugee women “I say to them…do their shopping” and “I tell other…independent too”. Fathy is therefore affectively positioned vis-à-vis her audience, namely other refugee women, and motivates them to be moved by her story and follow her paradigm.

Overall, we observe that, at level 3, an inspirational migrant identity is constructed to foreground a migrant who is hopeful and perseveres despite hardship and adversity, and who comes across as successful and empowered following adjustment acts. Fathy’s story suggests that adaptation problems and other difficulties are accompanied by hard work, such as learning the English language. Hard work, in turn, is represented as positive adjustment in Fathy’s life, enabling her to transform from vulnerable to agentive, independent and successful. The framing of positive adjustment acts and the foregrounding of agency and independence are key contributors to the construction of identities of *fulfilment*, with Fathy appearing rewarded and fulfilled following hard work. We argue that this identity construction reproduces a migration as transaction discourse that aligns with neoliberal master narratives of hard working, independent and resilient migrants, with Fathy’s wider positioning challenging dominant discourses of ungrateful migrants who primarily take or receive. It is the construction of fulfilment identities that emerge from commitment to hard work and resilience (in Fathy’s case) that serve to positively frame migrants who take control of their own lives despite hardship rather than relying on the state for their settlement. These identities of fulfilment serve to reinforce a dominant migration as transaction discourse.

## **6.2 Positive adjustment, gratitude and a duty to contribute**

The second extract is an abridged version of a narrative interview, namely not a traditional autobiographical narrative but the presentation of the protagonist’s experiences in response to interview prompts. Interviews are valuable for exploring how narrators negotiate a sense of self, as they “make relevant the analysis of explicit, argumentative modes[…] and their negotiation with an interviewer who […] is not a member of the group” (De Fina, 2003: 26). This narrative interview is titled “Abdullah’s story” (Refugee Council, 2020), dated 13th June 2020 and recounts the experiences of Abdullah since resettlement in the UK, and particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview is posted as a ‘case study’ under the ‘news’ section of the charity website that aims to share what Abdullah had been doing during the pandemic.

(2)

How did you feel when you were told you would be resettled in the UK?

When I heard that we would come to the UK at first it was the feeling that you’re having to leave your parents, your family, your brothers, your friends and your place. But on the other hand, there is security for your kids, for yourself, the education and healthcare. And to know that where you’re going is a peaceful country. A safe country.

I don’t know what to say about my feelings, but it was really difficult at the beginning. After a little while, the people and the general atmosphere and the type of nature with the river is very similar to where I come from. The people were kind, similar to the people from where I come from. They were nice and welcoming, which helped. […]

We heard that you’ve been helping the community at the moment [during Covid-19], what have you been doing?

I have been contacting families, whether they are Syrian or British people. I have a good relationship with my neighbours. I have been getting some shopping for both Syrian and British. I go to the supermarket and collect medication for some people who need it […].

Why did you want to help during Covid-19?

Firstly, this pandemic, it’s a thing that the whole world is fighting and at least I could do some little things to help. Secondly, I have been living here 3.5 years and I’ve never felt like I’m a stranger here, so this is a little bit paying back to the community and to the British people.

There have been a lot of situations and things that have happened that have made me love people and Britain more. I can’t count them, there have been a lot.

What feedback have you received from the people you’re helping?

With social distancing, I can’t really stop and talk. I have to be quick and just leave things. I can interpret people’s expressions though to see that they’re happy. Some people were saying thank you and they can’t thank me enough. It’s my duty to do this though, I keep saying to people that they don’t have to thank me, it’s a little bit to just pay back to the community.

[One omitted question and response relating to Abdullah’s employment in the UK]

How have things changed in the years that you’ve been here?

Things have changed since, we know our area and the areas around us. Our English has improved and we can ask people things if we don’t know. We can communicate. It’s easy. At first it was a foreign country, a new place to us. Luckily now things are a lot better and we can ask or enquire if we’re not sure about things.

[…]

What are your hopes for the future?

I want my kids to be educated and get to the targets that they’re wanting.

And for me, to continue living in peace in this country and to manage to get a little business started – self-employment to support me and my family. At the moment we have our temporary residents visa but hopefully in the future if we get citizenship it will open more doors for us. Citizenship will give us more freedom and more opportunities.

[Words of thanks omitted]

The opening of the interview invites the protagonist to talk about his feelings in relation to his relocation to the UK. In his answer, at the level of the story world (level 1) he navigates his emotions to position himself as emotionally vulnerable in the past “it was really difficult at the beginning” and more stable at present “after a little while…helped”. It is the kindness of the local people and the similarity of the nature to his place of origin that is presented as having triggered this change. In tandem, Abdullah offers a polarised representation of his home country with the UK, creating a divide between security and peace vs. insecurity and war. Through this contrastive representation, the UK is, again, associated with increased opportunities and stability (healthcare and education), and thus presented as an idealised heartland. Throughout the narrative interview, shifts from low to high agency gradually position Abdullah as more agentive, independent and confident compared to passivated and isolated in the past where the UK was presented as “a foreign country” and “a new place to us”, with two factors seeming to have contributed to this. First, Abdullah focuses on the sense of belonging to the local community “I have a good relationship with my neighbours” and “I never felt like a stranger here” positioning himself as socially integrated in terms of his contact and interaction with the local population (see also Bennett, 2018b: 46). He then goes on to positively frame this integration “have made me love people and Britain more”. As such, Abdullah fulfils the criterion of having established social connections with localmembers of his host communit(ies) (Ager and Strang, 2008: 177). Second, learning English is once again reconciled with “improvement”. Communicating via English is presented as having contributed to Abdullah’s integration as he is positioned as managing his own life and his every day needs thanks to his use of language, in contrast with the past where not speaking English rendered the UK “a foreign country”. So, at level 1, we observe positive adjustment and improvement from past to present leading to desirable attributes, including integration, confidence and independence via learning English. There are also future plans that will further contribute to successful integration, namely starting up a business and getting citizenship. These are presented as wishful plans at the end of the story that will lead to full integration and a potentially happy ending.

At level 2, the protagonist seems to be interacting with the audience via consistent shifts from generic ‘I’ to ‘you’, shifting from personal experience accounts “when I heard that we would come to the UK” to shared perceptions and arguments “there is security for your kids … where you’re going is a peaceful country”. This shift here consolidates the framing of the UK as an idealised heartland, as generic ‘you’ serves to present it as a shared perception (Myers and Lampropoulou, 2012). Abdullah is therefore affectively positioned in relation to his audience. With references to shared perceptions aided by instances of generic ‘you’ the audience is invited to onboard Abdullah’s rough journey from insecurity to safety and, eventually, integration.

We will now focus on another aspect of the protagonist’s identity construction - that of gratefulness and gratitude, which we argue is also aided by his (affective) positioning at level 2. The story concentrates on the present where Abdullah shares his experiences of helping the community during the pandemic, affectively evaluating it as a duty to the British peoplewho, as mentioned earlier, have been helpful and welcoming. Shifts from personal feeling and experience “I’ve never felt like I’m stranger here” to generic statements “this is a little bit paying back to the community” are consistent. In this case, Abdullah moves from disclosure of feelings in an autobiographical mode and personal self-reference to framing this duty as a general statement that functions as a shared understanding via a copulative clause “this is a little”. Later, when mentioning that he is thanked for his contribution, he again emphasises a sense of obligation “it’s my duty” via first person pronoun which is then reiterated with a generic habitual statement “it’s a little bit to just pay back to the community”. ‘It’ in this case and ‘this’ earlier, via anaphora, refer to the help he provides in return for the help he has received. Additionally, this generic statement appears at the end of the answer as a conclusive point, a coda that summarises the gist of main argument. However, this sense of obligation is also hedged via a minimiser “a little bit” (Mauranen, 2004) and “just” acknowledging the low impact of the contribution and affectively positioning the narrator as modest. These function as strategic hedges (Mauranen, 2004: 175) that are used to mitigate any perceived boasting on the part of the protagonist. We argue these shifts from personal to generic statements and from personal pronouns to generic ‘you’ positively frame the contribution to the British people, underscoring its transactional aspect as a shared perception. In this way, Abdullah’s narrated experience is used emblematically to appeal to a wider audience who are projected as sharing these perceptions.

Overall, then, at level 3 we observe an agentive migrant who, via positive adjustments, has taken control of his life, speaks and communicates in English, is integrated and is, additionally, able to help others. This contribution is framed as an obligation in return for the help and welcome he has received from the locals. Abdullah’s fulfilment identity construction comprises gratefulness and a duty to (moderately) contribute. This gratitude aligns with wider master narratives of migrants who not only need to contribute but also make more effort than the local population to successfully integrate (see Bennett, 2018b). In Abdullah’s case, this greater effort is strengthened by the fact that he is positioned as not wanting to take credit for it. To this end, this fulfilment *with* gratefulness identity reproduces a dominant migration as transaction discourse.

# **7. Discussion and final remarks**

Our study of narrative positioning within the online curated stories of UK-based charities has pointed to the construction of identities of *fulfilment,* comprising resilience and gratefulness, through which migrants, as successful story participants, are positively represented. This is primarily in terms of their high agency and positive adjustment to and integration within British society over time. Specifically, this involves linguistic and cultural integration, economic and voluntary contribution, and personal and educational development within their host communit(ies). We focused on two curated stories where independence and resilience in the first case and gratitude and a duty to contribute in the second case are framed as highly valued positionings following positive adjustment. However, we have problematised the construction of identities of *fulfilment* on several levels. First, they are successful as they adhere to, above all, the functional benefits that are attributed to immigration as its most positive aspect (Bennett, 2018b: 175), with this a recontextualization of wider, well-established discourses of integration legitimated for decades by government policy and the media (Bennett, 2018b: 109). An inability to contribute is thus not just a sign of self-deficiency, but also framed as in conflict with British social and cultural norms. Secondly, migration is also represented as not just an economic, but also a linguistic and cultural transaction that expects migrants to adopt the language, values, and history of the host society as a mandatory rule to live by (Kostakopoulou, 2010: 937). Therefore, failing to become ‘like’ other British citizens entails failing to integrate, rendering unsuccessful migrants as ‘others’ to the nation state. Integration is therefore reinforced as, primarily, a process of neo-assimilation. Finally, by attributing agency to migrants (i.e., by centring their transformation from a state of low to high agency), the curated stories examined here recast expectations of integration as primarily the responsibility of migrants themselves, rather than the state. Identities of *fulfilment* are thus only successful to the extent that they adhere to integration as a unidirectional process, rather than one of mutual accommodation. The neoliberal paradigm of integration, then, posits that migrants have no one but themselves to blame should they ‘fail’ to engage with it as an economic, linguistic, and cultural transaction.

We have therefore demonstrated that philanthropic organisations, despite their explicitly antiracist aims and intention to give voice to migrants, can paradoxically silence them by covertly engaging in institutionally supported racism. This applied to both the national and independent charities comprising our dataset as they seemed to follow similar patterns in their narrative positioning of migrants, leading to the reproduction of the same dominant discourses. While charity organisations undoubtedly align with humanitarian ethos and seek to provide support and assistance to migrants (Nawyn, 2011: 684), it is also true, however, that they must “find solutions within the socio-economic status quo [and] the overall framework of democratic, advanced capitalism” (Bonnett, 2000: 118). Charities are also non-for-profit organizations that not only rely on public donations and support to provide aid, but also enact humanitarian assistance for, and at the will of, the state (Hyndman, 2000; Nyers, 2006). This is within a context where denouncing racism as “a disruptive force rooted in the everyday practices of institutional life and the so-called ‘majority’” (Maeso, 2015: 64) is perceived to be a revolutionary activity. Within this context, we argue that these stories sustain racist hegemony by co-opting value judgments long disseminated by government policy and media. These align with the neoliberal, neo-assimilatory dimension of wider discourses of integration as well as the racialised boundaries created by the transformation of bordering processes in the British context. They thus adhere to, and therefore sustain, understandings of racism as a situation that ‘affects’ ethnic minorities (Maeso, 2015: 66), rather than the reproduction of what is a historic, widely institutionalised system of dominance.

We conclude that challenging racist hegemony will require further dismantling both explicitly racist and antiracist outlets that can, and do, (re)produce racist practices and hierarchies. Given that they constitute the first and, in many cases, primary interaction that migrants have with British life and society (Nawyn, 2011: 681), greater self-awareness on the part of philanthropic organisations, among other antiracist social actors, will be required to effectively address the pervasiveness of racism across institutions and societies (Weaver, 2011: 252). Despite the constraints and ambivalences of the charity sector, this will involve a reframing of their communicative strategies for and about migration and a reconsideration of the stories that are used to reflect and shape migrant experiences. We therefore believe that by scrutinising the largely unexamined actions of social actors who, in principle, aim to do the ‘right thing’, we contribute to the field of research that aims to more effectively challenge the doing-and-denying of racism within narrative representations of migration. We hope to have demonstrated the need to keep open channels for critical dialogue in order to unearth the embeddedness of antiracism in racism.

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1. We adopt the term *migrant* here as an umbrella term to refer to mobile populations who leave their country of origin with the intention to settle in a host country. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We follow Giaxoglou and Georgakopoulou (2021) by using the term *narrative* to refer to theoretical frameworks and related concepts. We use the terms *storytelling* and *stories* to refer to analysis and analytical tools. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)