Preface

This is a book about the intricate ways in which belonging and narrative condition each other, and about the ways in which their relation can elucidate our understanding of narrative art and of the art of the novel in particular. Belonging as I conceive it is not an anthropological given; it is continuously produced in and through narrative. I like to think of it as basic constituent of human being—the yearning for a place in the world without which both place and world would crumble. Moreover, I think that much of narrative's sweeping allure (it can be found in any culture) stems from its capacities to emplot and emplace our lives. The traction that narrative has gained in recent theories of identity is a powerful testimony to the fertile relation between belonging and narrative that is the concern of this book. And while life-stories are becoming more and more novelesque in our thoroughly mobilized, digitalized, and crisis-ridden age a popular fantasy of the self as a writer (enhanced by new possibilities of self-publishing) is that of the novelist.

We tell and we listen to stories because we yearn to belong, and ever since its modern inception the novel has become a viable testing ground in this matter. With its endlessly malleable form, its preferred tropes of quest and trial, and its oddly detached characters in search for meaning and mooring, the novel is a perfect candidate for such exploitation. If and how we belong—by way of leaving home, building new homes, dwelling in multiple homes (some of which might be imaginary), or dismissing the idea of home all together—depends largely on narrative. This book argues that the novel, with its generic affinities to troubled states of belonging, has incessantly shaped both the yearning for a place in the world and the narrative vectors and affective currencies in which such a place can be forged. The final stretch of writing this book in the winter of 2015/16 coincided with the daily realities and reports of staggering numbers of refugees leaving their homes in search for a more salient future—mobilized by war, social injustice, and electronic media. Today's world is a world in which rumors, news, stories, and images circulate in the blink of an eye to even the remotest corner of the globe, with vast impact on our sense of the near and the far, the neighbor and the foreigner. The geopolitical consequences of the recent upheavals are still unforeseeable, but from redrawing maps to charting itineraries and (de)regulating borders, and from restructuring places and communities to mending broken biographies narrative will

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play a crucial role in the outcome. For better or for worse, the world we will inhabit in the future depends on the stories that we tell ourselves today.

Among scholars of literature and culture, however, narrative has yet to recover from the bad reputation that it gained in the wake of poststructuralism. As a "structure of desire, a structure that at once invents and distances its objects and thereby inscribes again and again the space between signifier and signified" (Stewart ix) narrative is thought to be generative of symbolic order, and symbolic order is viewed as the executive branch of ideology. No doubt, narrative and ideology are natural allies (not least because all ideology asserts narrative form). But narrative is also a practical component of dwelling in the world. We use it to connect sense impressions and memories; to orient ourselves in the world and familiarize us with places and people; to draw boundaries between inside and outside, public and private; to build institutions and regulate our attachments. Both socio- and psychogenesis relies on it. From an anthropological perspective narrative has been aptly described as "one of the large categories or systems of understanding that we use in our negotiation of reality, specifically [...] with the problem of temporality; [wo]man's time-boundedness, and [her] consciousness of existence within the limits of mortality" (Brooks xi). This is a useful starting point to think about the fertile relation between belonging and narrative for sure. But is narrative not just as invested in our existence in space? Our relation to space may be more tangible than our relation to time, more pragmatic and this-worldly than our quarrels with mortality and the existential unknowability of our own death, but it is just as crucial to our sense of belonging, and certainly no less reliant on narrative.

My interest in narrative as a practical component of dwelling in the world thrives on my wish to complicate, and perhaps even move beyond representational assumptions about narrative that dominate our understanding of what narrative is and does to this day. I have learned much from structuralism and narratology, especially from their shared tendency to view literature as an integral and quantifiable part of human signifying practice, and I owe a considerable debt to Peter Brooks's psychoanalytic approach to narrative as a system of understanding that progressively unfolds over time, driven by the dynamics of memory and desire in its creation of meaning and form. But I disagree with a bedrock assumptions of these theories; namely, that narrative is superimposed retrospectively on an experience (or an entire existence) that is on some deeper level unmediated, and as such part of the non-narrative flux of the real. Based on my understanding of media as something that we both use and are—yes, our bodies are media, and they are places, too—I believe that no matter how deeply we delve into the fabric of our being, our experiences are never unmediated. Against the rigid oppositions between subject and object, or life and narrative that such (often tacit) implications about raw experience and secondary mediation bring to bear on our understanding of narrative, this study assumes that being in the world always entails being engaged with the world; that narrative is a basic mode and mediator of this engagement;

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and that living and telling our lives are continuous and interdependent because of our deep-seated need to belong.

In short, this book is invested in moving beyond narrative as a mode of representation to learn more about narrative use. Its job is to put forth an understanding of narrative as an endlessly useful resource of orientation and emplacement that both feeds and is fuelled by narrative art. Like any work of theoretical ambition (and, as it happens, like any novel), this book searches and squabbles rather than posits and proves. My endeavors to chart a narrative theory based on the human need to belong have led me to traditions as divergent as philosophical anthropology, human geography and social psychology. Some of these traditions are explicitly engaged in ongoing efforts to rethink the relation of life and narrative. Others offer insight into the inherently progressive constitution of space and place, "the unutterable mobility and contingency of space-time" (Massey, *Space, Place* 5) that, in turn, prompts questions about narrative's stakes in both propelling and coping with these dynamics. But what does all of this have to do with art? And what is the role that literature plays in these narrative operations? Taking my cue from social psychology, I argue that the stories we live by draw from those artistic (and often fictional) narratives that we consume when we read novels and comics, watch movies and television, play computer games, etc. The widely shared hunger for narrative artifacts at work in this pattern made me wonder why our life stories gravitate so notably toward them. And when thinking about the matter in the light of this study it occurred to me that one thing that makes these artifacts so immensely attractive for someone who yearns to belong is an amplified sense of *narrative agency*. I use the term to describe the capacity to make choices about the telling of one's story and impose them on, relate with, and ultimately be in the world. A main claim that I unfold in this book is that the novel exploits this kind of agency (which happens to be just as endlessly malleable as its searching form) to the end of suturing troubled life-worlds. In fact, since its modern inception the novel has been so conducive to dealing with troubled states of belonging that it became the main provider of the narrative frames and formulas that modern individuals need to dwell in the world.

But this book does not attempt to cover all the varieties or even the basic types of narrative forms and agencies that have gained shape in and through the art of the novel. Instead of writing a survey of this development, I chose four iconic American sites—the frontier, the region, the ghetto, the homeland—to explore how four paradigmatic American novels give voice and form to concerns with belonging particular to these sites. Of course, there are other sites, novels, and concerns with belonging than those dealt with here, and as any student of narrative knows, a different selection and combination would have amounted to a different story. The story that I tell through my examples takes us to a series of conflicted sites of U.S. cultural history that are prone to bring out both the salience and significance of having a place in a changing world, and the proactive role that

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narrative assumes in the making und unmaking of this place. The letter, the sketch, the found object, and the brain-as-storytelling-machine are the main protagonists in this story, and their adventures revolve around mending and suturing troubled life-worlds. Charles Brockden Brown's frontier gothic *Edgar Huntly, or, Memoirs of a Sleepwalker* (1799) exploits its narrator's compulsive habits of letter-writing and sleepwalking to stage a narrative act of *re*covering a haunted ground previously traversed with no proper sense while *un*covering a state of impossible belonging. Sarah Orne Jewett's regionalist masterpiece *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) endorses the "minor" art of the sketch in an exercise of familiarization and attachment that destabilizes both the medium of the book and the genre of the novel at a time when defamiliarization and detachment become the hallmarks of narrative art. Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934), written with the ambition that ethnic literature should absorb the experimental impulse of modernism, mediates the experience of immigration through a fearful Jewish boy with a rare gift of gathering objects, people, and stories to dwell in them. And Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker* (2006) depicts the Midwestern homeland as a product of two interactive eco-systems: the life-sustaining environment and the nonstop narrating human brain, one geological, the other neurological, one endangered by global capitalism and post-9/11 trauma, the other threatened by a brain disease that spreads through colliding storylines.

At the end of my story I hope to have made tangible how the human need to belong operates as a driving force of literary production, and vice versa; and how the American novel, because it comes from a place where belonging is even less of a given then in other parts of the modern world, makes for a particularly rich field of study in this regard. Hence, much will be said in this book about what narrative brings to the human need to belong, and how narrative art and the art of the novel are involved with this need. But even if my story persuades its readers that narrative is a practical component of dwelling in the world—can one actually be at home in it? My answer to this question is simple: To the tenuous degree that one can be at home at all, it is in and through narrative. There is no other way.

Writing this book in a language that is not my mother tongue has taught me a lot about not belonging, or not quite belonging—about the comfort that is lacking when being unable to tap into the secret wisdom of one's own language where thoughts turn in circles or come to a halt. Writing this book as a member of an academic institution made me aware of that institution as a place of support and care.

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