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Questioning Representation: Testimonials, Witness Accounts and Literary Migrant Narratives

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Abstract

*This article rethinks contemporary approaches to asylum by examining literary accounts of human displacement to problematise representations and authenticity. A believable testimonial of asylum seekers' experience is key in the asylum application process and the pursuit of such truth by Europe's border forces usually entails a celebration of authenticity. Yet, the emphasis on migrant testimonials as the definitive source in understanding the migration 'crisis' is deeply problematic. This essay argues that literary representations of displacement are equally valuable in helping us understand contemporary migration. This paper engages with the poetry of two exiled poets, Warsan Shire and Yousif Qasmiyeh, to illustrate the importance of literary accounts of migration, and to demonstrate that the intimate and traumatic stories of the borderline condition should be shared on migrants' own terms, not by the demands of the European border forces. By drawing on John Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and its representation of the current approach to human displacement, this paper also explores the role of fiction to 'narrativize' the nuances of migratory experiences.*

Keywords: Migrant testimonials; Asylum seekers; Political refugees; Authenticity (Philosophy) in literature; Social acceptance.

Introduction

The process of asylum demands that displaced people produce evidence demonstrating the legitimacy of their experiences and their eligibility and entitlement to international protection. Not only does this mean that asylum seekers are often interrogated to convey their traumatic stories, but also that such a celebration of authenticity creates a problematic and unhelpful notion regarding the refugee 'crisis'. Refugee status is not granted to asylum seekers by virtue of their being what Jacques Derrida terms an 'absolute, unknowable other'.¹ Instead, refugees are only welcomed by border forces once they have produced a convincing testimony of their experiences of fleeing in search of protection. Such testimonials demonstrate a term that Derrida defines in conversation with Anne Dufourmantelle in *Of*

¹ Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle tr. Rachel Bowlby, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to respond* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

Hospitality (2000).² Derrida discusses how 'Fortress Europe' welcomes migrants only once the host/guest dynamic is established; this is what he calls 'conditional hospitality'. The person may be welcomed into Europe but only once he or she has adhered to certain conditions. Mariangela Palladino and Agnes Woolley explain such conditional hospitality as a set of 'laws that surround the concept of hospitality such that any home—or nation—may remain sovereign'.³ Derrida's notion of 'unconditional hospitality' is more generous:

Shouldn't we also submit to sort of holding back of the temptation to ask the other who he is, what her name is, where he comes from, etc? Shouldn't we abstain from asking another these questions, which herald so many required conditions, and thus limits, to a hospitality thereby constrained and thereby confined into a law and a duty?⁴

Derrida's rhetorical questions suggest that narrativization of migrant experiences should not be demanded in order to grant hospitality, protection or refuge. As Woolley points out, those affected by displacement should not be 'condemned only to answer for their experiences as refugees'.⁵

The reliance on migrant testimonials arguably places a duty on refugees themselves to provide the tools to understand migration today. The writing of Warsan Shire and Yousif Qasmiyeh—both poets in exile who sought international protection—contribute to that understanding in literary form, based on their own experiences. Furthermore, fictionalised migrant narratives can be equally valuable and powerful for our understanding of human displacement. Aminatta Forna reminds us that 'fiction uses metaphor to see the truth',⁶ and that representing the refugee 'crisis' through fiction can enable and influence our understanding of displacement. Migration is a global human phenomenon which cannot and should not be expected to be explained and resolved by refugees alone. This paper addresses John Coetzee's novel *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) as an example of a fictional narrative that provides a valuable response to human displacement as the work consistently interrogates current practices to deal with the migrant 'crisis'.

This paper tackles three fundamental issues which typify the securitarian nature of Europe's bordering practices and asylum processes. The first section of the essay addresses the undermining and problematic nature of border force interrogations which are depicted in the poem 'Conversations About Home (At the Deportation Centre)' (2011) by Shire, a British-Somali poet. Secondly, through a reading of Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), this study examines the novel's representation of migration as a shared humanitarian 'crisis' and its emphasis on the shortcomings of institutions and civic society to assume responsibility. The last section moves onto an analysis of Qasmiyeh's poem 'The Camp is Time' (2017) to illustrate the crucial need for refugee voices to illuminate the debates on migration and portray the complexities of life in exile. The series of questions in Qasmiyeh's poem demonstrate that the search for an absolute testimonial account is a deeply problematic approach to asylum. While refugees should not be forced to answer for their displacement,

² Derrida and Dufourmantelle.

³ Mariangela Palladino and Agnes Woolley, "Migration, Humanitarianism, and the Politics of Salvation," *Literary Interpretation Theory Journal LIT* issue 29, no. 2 (April 2018), 139. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10436928.2018.1463591>.

⁴ Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, 135.

⁵ Agnes Woolley, *Contemporary Asylum Narratives: Representing Refugees in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Springer, 2014), 19.

⁶ Aminatta Forna, "Nadine Gordimer helped me see how fiction writing can illuminate reality," *The Guardian*, 20 August 2013. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/20/aminatta-forna-witness-inward-testimony-gordimer>.

Qasmiyeh's work here shows that poetry can offer complex and nuanced portrayals of the current 'crisis.'

The problematic nature of border force interrogations

Gayatri Spivak adopted the term 'native informant'⁷ from ethnography⁸ to refer to, as Ola Abdalkafor puts it: 'the Other when s/he is viewed and tackled as a source of information [...] and renders her/him as a passive object of knowledge'⁹. It was originally 'used to describe indigenous people who provide information about non-western societies to western ethnographers,'¹⁰ and is rethought by Spivak in the context of postcolonial literature. Sukalpa Bhattacharjee reflects on Spivak's notion of the 'native informant' as a figure who 'remain[s] simultaneously inside and outside of the dominant discourse [...] [t]hey are identifiable yet without a "voice"'.¹¹ Woolley argues that subjecting refugees' narratives to scrutiny risks compelling forced migrants to act as Spivakian 'native informants'.¹² In this light, it is crucial not to deny the significance of narratives written by refugees and asylum seekers themselves in representing asylum. Shire talks about exile and displacement in her poem, 'Conversations About Home (At the Deportation Centre)' and addresses the ongoing failures of the asylum process in its quest for refugee testimonials. Shire begins with a terse opening: 'Well, I think home spat me out'.¹³ This line reads as a response to a question, as if the speaker is being interrogated about his or her story. The poem continues to play with the idea of interrogation:

God, do you know how difficult it is, to talk about the day your own city dragged you by the hair, past the old prison, past the school gates, past the burning torsos erected on poles like flags?¹⁴

Seemingly questioned by border forces or by an authority, the speaker herself—drawing attention to the impossibility to really respond—poses a question in return. Here we are reminded of the challenges brought about by the mere act of recollecting one's own experience of exile. The speaker demonstrates that the process of asylum, as Woolley also notes, 're-inscribe[s] the original trauma that precipitated the asylum seeker's flight'.¹⁵ In this sense, the current approach to displacement is extremely problematic as the asylum seeker's request for sanctuary is only granted in exchange for traumatic accounts. This fits Derrida's notion of 'conditional hospitality'. Shire describes the experience of being 'spat out,' to convey how violently she was discarded from her own country before seeking asylum elsewhere. The image of spitting and ejection is here inscribed in the context of having to relay (and in a sense relive) one's story in order to prove and corroborate an asylum claim.

While testimonials from asylum seekers can demonstrate their right to international protection, they cannot justify the border authorities' right to demand the migrant's traumatic

⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1999), ix.

⁸ Spivak, 6.

⁹ Ola Abdalkafor, *Gayatri Spivak: Deconstruction and the Ethics of Postcolonial Literary Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2005), 12.

¹⁰ Abdalkafor, 9.

¹¹ Subrata Bhattacharjee, "Review: Towards a Theory of Native Informant", *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no.14/15 (2001), 1194-1198. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4410482>.

¹² Agnes Woolley, *Contemporary Asylum Narratives: Representing Refugees in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Springer, 2014), 19.

¹³ Warsan Shire, "Conversations About Home (at the Deportation Centre)" in *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (London: Mouthmark, 2011), 24.

¹⁴ Shire, 24.

¹⁵ Woolley, *Contemporary Asylum Narratives*, 19.

experiences. Shire's poem draws upon this issue as she distinguishes between being forced to tell one's migrant story, and wanting to tell one's story on one's own terms. Although the poem's title 'Conversations About Home' suggests that the speaker is conversing with the border authorities, Shire makes it clear that the conversation is imagined; she states 'They ask me *how did you get here?*'¹⁶ as if she is reflecting on real conversations that she has had in the deportation centre. In doing so, Shire demonstrates that while she is unable to speak to the border forces as she does in the poem, poetry offers a space for this much needed discussion to happen. According to Woolley, the need or desire to express oneself as one sees fit is lacking in Derrida's discussion of the politics of hospitality, for she speaks of the potential of 'the asylum seeker's own desire to convey his or her story, and the need for conditions that enable this act of communication.'¹⁷

It is important to note that when the opportunity arises for the border force authorities to hear stories of exile on the refugees' or asylum seekers' own terms, the authorities are not always willing to take this into account. Yet, when granting asylum, a migrant's word alone is often not enough to prove entitlement to international protection. Agnes Woolley addresses this condition of asylum in her chapter 'Documenting the Body' as she writes that:

[I]n the absence of verifiable documentation in claims for asylum, the wounded or physically scarred body of the asylum seeker is often substituted for accurate textual documentation about the claimant's experiences.¹⁸

Shire's poem illustrates that while the migrant's body provides a narrative of traumatic experiences, it only serves as a valid form of documentation when the authorities are willing to interpret and evaluate it. In her poem, she denounces the fact that visible signs of trauma are not taken at face value as she asks: 'They ask me *how did you get here?* Can't you see it on my body?'¹⁹ Here, the migrant's body is greeted with suspicion by border control. The fact that she is asked '*how did you get here?*' reveals the coldly investigative nature of those interviews. Shire's use of the broad but vague 'it' in her defiant question: 'Can't you see *it* on my body?'²⁰ pinpoints the challenges that asylum seekers face when asked to prove their right to sanctuary. 'It' demonstrates that the body carries signs, traces and legacies of the trauma of displacement, which are difficult to precisely locate and pin down. While the authorities force migrants to put their refugee condition into words, what is considered viable proof is solely dictated by the bureaucratic machinery of the asylum system. In this sense, Shire's question illustrates an apparent disjuncture between the migrant's and the border force's notions of displacement. If the speaker's body does not fulfil the criteria for refugee status, the authorities may reject her narrative; immigration officials have the right and authority to determine what signifies human displacement more than the displaced people themselves.

This reductive approach to migration is addressed by Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman in their chapter on 'The Psychotraumatology of Exile' as they translate a report which asks:

Why are these men and women, who have already been through unspeakable ordeals, chasing after a piece of paper drawn up by someone who is a stranger to their past life, a retrospective witness who saw nothing of what they lived through, someone who, while

¹⁶ Shire, "Conversations About Home (at the Deportation Centre)", 25.

¹⁷ Woolley, *Contemporary Asylum Narratives*, 60.

¹⁸ Woolley, 134-5.

¹⁹ Shire, "Conversations About Home (at the Deportation Centre)", 25.

²⁰ Emphasis is my own.

ready to listen and possessing established medical skills, cannot by definition know better than the applicant him/herself what happened, and how it came about?²¹

Although the process of asylum claims to distinguish displacement, the condition cannot be truly understood to be classified into particular standardised guidelines when the authorities are not willing to listen to what it actually means to its victims. Shire's poem illustrates that while refugees are forced into the role of the 'native informant', ironically, the border authorities give no opportunity for displaced people to actually recount the real and human implications of the refugee 'crisis.' The poem demonstrates the cognitive dissonance between the asylum process and what asylum actually means. Although by definition, asylum seekers have left their country and are 'unable to go back because [they] fear persecution,'²² Shire describes the asylum application process by '[t]he lines, the forms, the people at the desks, the calling cards, the immigration officer'²³ as though the fear of persecution is not enough for the border forces to acknowledge a person's plea for asylum. When reflecting on the structure of this process, Shire brings us back to the realities of experiences in exile as she states, 'all of this is better than the scent of a woman completely on fire'.²⁴ The contrast between the experience of trauma—powerfully conveyed by Shire's sensorial reference to violence on a woman's body—and the task of filling in a form demonstrates that an adequate response to the migrant 'crisis' cannot be found through the current approach of interrogating displaced people.

A shared humanitarian 'crisis'

Shire's poetry stems from her own experiences, yet fictional narrativisations of the refugee 'crisis' are also valuable in understanding migration. While it is true that first-hand narratives of migration offer an insight into the realities of forced displacement, Aminatta Forna reminds us that it is unhelpful to solely celebrate witness accounts.²⁵ Migrant narratives produced by non-refugee writers, such as Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* provide us with an insight into the downfalls of the current asylum process. Coetzee's novel depicts a story of two migrants—a little boy, David and a man, Simón—who meet on the boat as they flee their homeland. While David is not Simón's son, he assumes responsibility for him and attempts to find his lost mother during the journey. Once settled in the 'host' country, David understands and responds to the local school's curriculum in a way that is unacceptable to educational establishments; he cannot 'sound the letters of the alphabet',²⁶ he reads books from the illustrations rather than the words. The young boy's teacher claims that David 'fails to adjust to the realities of the classroom'²⁷ and because of that, the teaching staff wonder if he has a 'deficit'.²⁸ Here, the school turns David into a problem as it fails to see, understand and valorise the world through David's eyes. In this scene, Coetzee's novel disrupts the current approach to migration as it provides a metaphor for failures to understand the migration 'crisis' through the eyes of migrants.

²¹ Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman tr. Rachel Gomme, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 242.

²² Government Digital Service. "Claim asylum in the UK". <https://www.gov.uk/claim-asylum>. Accessed 14 January 2019.

²³ Shire, "Conversations About Home", 26.

²⁴ Shire, 26.

²⁵ (Forna 2013)

²⁶ J. M. Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* (London: Vintage, 2013), 242.

²⁷ Coetzee, 203.

²⁸ Coetzee, 242.

When reading ‘*An Illustrated Children’s Don Quixote*’ Simón reads to David that: Don Quixote and his friend Sancho [...] had not ridden far when they beheld, standing by the roadside, a towering giant with no fewer than four huge fists, which he waved menacingly at the travellers. [...] Sancho gave his friend a puzzled look. *I see no giant*, he said. *All I see is a windmill with four sails spinning in the wind.*²⁹

The *Don Quixote* inter-text functions as reminder to emphasise that there are multiple perspectives of a single scene and of reality itself, that there are multiple narratives and multiple readers. While Simón declares that the real image is that of a windmill, David insists that he sees a giant; Simón states that there is a dominant perception of things which is often dictated by the gaze:

Don Quixote [...] presents the world to us through two pairs of eyes, Don Quixote’s eyes and Sancho’s eyes. To Don Quixote, it is a giant he is fighting. To Sandro, it is a windmill. Most of us—not you, perhaps [...] will agree with Sancho that it is a windmill. That includes the artist who drew a picture of a windmill. But it also includes the man who wrote the book.³⁰

Simón explains here the differences in how people can interpret an image—as well as reality. While there is no ultimately ‘reliable’ or authentic account of the world, David explains that there is a dominant narrative in *An Illustrated Children’s Don Quixote* as most people agree with Sancho’s perspective. David on the other hand provides a counter-narrative as he insists—like Don Quixote—that the object in the story is ‘not a windmill [but a] giant!’³¹ The novel here effectively challenges the limits of representations but also calls interpretation into question as a boundless exercise. The same can be said regarding witness accounts of any scene as there is no authentic account of reality and any representation arguably entails a misrepresentation.

The asylum process falls short of what it aims to achieve not only because it forces migrants to tell their story, but because the process demands that their story must be legible within the dominant discourse of the Eurocentric epistemological framework. Coetzee’s novel offers a solution to this problematic approach as Simón states that:

Instead, let us (Simón, Inés, and the teacher—señor Leon) make effort to see the world through his eyes, without imposing on him our way of seeing the world. David wants to know who he really is, but when he asks he receives evasive answers like ‘What do you mean by real?’ [...] Can you blame him if he feels frustrated and rebellious, and then retreats into a private world where he is free to make up his own answers?³²

It is this ‘effort’ which is not being made to understand and support displaced people.

Coetzee’s novel demonstrates that the asylum process produces a paradox for asylum seekers as they are ‘both defined by their history and at the same time must give it up completely if they are to be accepted as co-citizens.’³³ The characters’ ‘self-identified kinships’³⁴ illustrate this paradox. When trying to help David find his mother, Simón is questioned on David’s past and his connection to him before migrating, to which he responds:

²⁹ Coetzee, 181.

³⁰ Coetzee, 182-3.

³¹ Coetzee, 182.

³² Coetzee, 247.

³³ Palladino and Woolley, “Migration, Humanitarianism, and the Politics of Salvation,” 141.

³⁴ Palladino and Woolley, 141.

He is neither my grandson nor my son. He and I are not kin. We were brought together by accident on the boat when he lost some documents he was carrying. But why would that matter? We arrive here, all of us, you, me, your sister, the boy, washed clean of the past.³⁵

In this, Coetzee highlights the fact that the refugee is often unable to freely move forward with his or her life after asylum. The constant demand for documentation and for believable stories of loss and trauma rekindle the pain and suffering experienced during the migration process. While David's documentation includes information regarding his biological mother, his emotional bonds are not determined by the documents he loses as he establishes a familial bond with Inés. The disjuncture between David's documentation and his agency demonstrates that authenticity is not the only way to approach migration as the demand for proof often forces migrants to adhere to the conditions of their past.

The borderline condition

The experience of displacement is further explored by exile poet Yousif M. Qasmiyeh, whose work lyricises what André Green refers to as 'the borderline condition.'³⁶ In his psychoanalytic work *On Private Madness* (1986) Green examines the term 'borderline' in the context of psychiatry. When trying to conceptualise the borderline condition, he questions:

Who or what is borderline? The important thing about such a question is the distinction between to *have* something borderline and to *be* borderline. I can *be* a citizen or *heimatlos* [homeless], but to be borderline—that is difficult for me to conceive [...] To be a borderline implies that a border protects one's self from crossing over or from being crossed over, from being invaded, and thus becoming a moving border (not having, but being such a border). This in turn implies a loss of distinction between space and time.³⁷

As examined by Stonebridge, the condition speaks of being a refugee or asylum seeker and the refusal to conform to the narrative of those who patrol the border, as she observes that: 'Like a person attempting to demonstrate the condition of statelessness to immigration control, Green insists that what does not appear visible matters, is significant, conditional even, for a certain way of existing.'³⁸ Qasmiyeh's poem 'The Camp is Time' (2017) illustrates the borderline phenomenon rather than resolving it, as he depicts the life of a person living in border territories, in a refugee camp. Stonebridge describes Qasmiyeh as '[a] Palestinian born in Beddawi refugee camp in Lebanon.'³⁹ According to Stonebridge, Qasmiyeh's poetry challenges us

to imagine what United Nations High Commission for Refugees representative, Carol Batchelor, has eloquently described as 'a negative': 'Proving statelessness is like establishing a negative. The individual must demonstrate something that is "not" there [...]'⁴⁰

Qasmiyeh's poem illustrates the 'borderline condition' as the speaker 'refuses' to make sense of his refugee experience. Rather, he asks a series of questions: 'Who writes the camp and what is it that ought to be written in a time where the plurality of lives has traversed the place

³⁵ Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 95.

³⁶ André Green, *On Private Madness* (1986) cited in Lyndsey Stonebridge, "Statelessness and the poetry of the borderline", *Textual Practice* 29 no. 7 (2015): 1333.

³⁷ André Green, *On Private Madness* (London: Karnac Classics, 1986), 62-3.

³⁸ Stonebridge, "Statelessness [...]", 1335.

³⁹ Stonebridge, 1333.

⁴⁰ Stonebridge, 1333.

itself to become its own time?’⁴¹. Here, the speaker rejects responsibility for his displaced condition and refuses to answer for his experiences by phrasing his thoughts as questions rather than answers—echoing Shire’s lyrical form and narrative strategies as analysed above.

Qasmiyeh’s series of questions leads us to wonder how people living in the borderline conditions of the refugee camp can possibly make sense of their experiences, for the space is beyond their understanding of life outside its boundaries. Qasmiyeh illustrates the camp’s complete disconnection from the outside world and the stateless condition of its inhabitants with the powerful image of a camp that ‘becomes its own time.’⁴² In this sense, the speaker describes a camp space that is not regulated by time as we know it. Instead, the camp’s growing populations, ageing people and infant births, have forced time to be measured only by history, presence and the future presence of the camp’s inhabitants. Qasmiyeh further elaborates on this spatio-temporal reflection as follows:

The camp is a time more than it is a place. Upon and above its curves, time remembers its lapses to the extent that it is its time—the one whose time is one =—that preys on a body that is yet to be born.⁴³

The camp that ‘preys on a body yet to be born’ effectively conveys the idea that the camp depends on its people to have some notion of time passing. ‘In the camp, time is hung like threads of dried okra,’⁴⁴ time is no longer cyclical but hangs without any continuity.

Qasmiyeh’s poem challenges the shortcomings of the current approach to dealing with refugee populations by demonstrating its failure to understand the borderline condition, and in particular the diffracted sense of time in a refugee camp. In this sense, the desire of authorities to interrogate migrants for their experiences of loss are extremely problematic and unhelpful. The borderline condition should more fruitfully be understood as the ‘absence’ of sovereignty.

Conclusion

To conclude, while the current processes of granting asylum ostensibly have the intention of gaining authentic accounts of migrant experiences, they fail to respect, understand and support the lives of displaced people. Therefore, literary representations of experiences of displacement are crucial to our understanding of the so called ‘refugee crisis.’ Shire and Qasmiyeh illuminate, respectively, the problems of speaking about trauma and the very particular (and nonlinear) experience of living in a refugee camp. While Shire’s poem emphasises that the asylum process does not allow migrants to speak on their own terms, Qasmiyeh’s ‘The Camp is Time’ reveals that refugees should not be forced to make sense of their experiences in exile when they do choose to talk about it. Coetzee’s novel *The Childhood of Jesus* brings light to the fact that migrants, like David, often relay their experiences in a multitude of ways. There are different ways of telling and reading stories and the novel encourages us to abandon the current linear approach to asylum narratives, and its attendant celebration of authentic accounts. It demonstrates that rather than forcing migrants to adapt their stories to the demands of the immigration bureaucratic apparatus, the authorities have a responsibility to re-orient their own approach in order to respond to and understand displacement. Collectively, the poems and the novel discussed here tell us that an emphasis on clearcut narratives within the asylum process creates a false illusion that the so-

⁴¹ Yousif M. Qasmiyeh, “The Camp is Time”, *Refugee Hosts* (online, last updated 2017): I.

<https://refugeehosts.org/2017/01/15/the-camp-is-time/>

⁴² Qasmiyeh, II.

⁴³ Qasmiyeh, II.

⁴⁴ Qasmiyeh, XVI.

called refugee ‘crisis’ is a straightforward issue. Human displacement and its political, cultural and emotional implications are in fact extremely complex; migration cannot be understood if the current approaches to asylum continue to uphold linearity and authenticity as guiding principles to translate the refugee’s experience.

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