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Refugee Tales V: Migrants' Fragmented (Auto)Biographies and Wasted Lives in the Contemporary British Expulsive Environment

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Abstract This paper aims to shed light on fragmented migration narratives as portrayed in *Refugee Tales V* (2024) which mainly focuses on the United Kingdom's migratory policies. Besides depriving migrants, refugees and asylum seekers of their civil and human rights, these policies engender wasted lives for certain categories of human beings who are not allowed to stay in the United Kingdom. Ten years after the first walk of solidarity, the ethics of care, consideration and attention that start with the act of listening to stories of people who experience the reality of the British border institutions' immigration detention are still relevant.

Keywords Refugee Tales V. Act of listening. Host-hospitality-hostility. Awaiting. Wasted lives.

Summary 1 Introduction: The Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group and the *Refugee Tales* Project. – 2 Migrants' Fragmented (Auto)biographies. – 3 The Expulsive Environment and Wasted Lives. – 4 Conclusion.

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1 Introduction: The Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group and the *Refugee Tales* Project

This paper investigates migration narratives produced within British immigration detention centres. The intent at the core of these forms of narration, which started about a decade ago, is to give voice to human beings who are unjustly marginalised and confined. Besides being *personae non gratae*, their presence is perceived as a threat mainly to the current economic balance in the United Kingdom. In this paper, the analysis is limited to two (auto)biographies, which best represent both unwelcome, marginalised human beings and the current political and economic British context. Before discussing the two real-life stories, some background on the activist and political nature of the *Refugee Tales* project[1] is required.

The Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group (GDWG) is an organization that made itself known chiefly in online spaces and whose well-designed website gathers practical and legal information for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, updated news, links to social media such as Facebook and X, along with other helpful contact channels. The GDWG was established in 1995

> in response to the UK Immigration Services as they began to detain people at a small holding centre near Gatwick Airport.[2]

Thanks to their online presence**,** this non-profit organisation unapologetically announced its humanitarian and activist agency, and over the years, the GDWG has managed to reach migrants, refugees and asylum seekers with the main purpose of supporting them, especially during their time facing detention.

Seventeen years after GDWG began offering compassionate, unceasing support, their activities became particularly relevant when on May 25, 2012, during an interview with the *Daily Telegraph*, Theresa May pronounced the phrase "hostile environment" (Kirkup, Winnett 2012), asserting the government's intent to create in Britain unwelcoming and dissuasive conditions for illegal immigrants. In 2014, in response to this new phase of British anti-migration policies, David Herd – poet, professor of modern literature, activist – and Anna Pincus – director of Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group – launched a wider campaign in defence of migrants' rights which is

> an outreach project of Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group inspired by the experiences of men held in immigration detention at Gatwick

1 https://www.refugeetales.org/.

2 Source available at https://www.gdwg.org.uk/.

> and the work of the group in 20 years of visiting.[3]

Herd and Pincus expanded the GDWG's social and political commitment to support people affected by immigration detention by initiating another humanitarian activism project named *Refugee Tales*, which draws on Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-88) for inspiration.

Since 2015, "walks of solidarity", as defined by Herd (2016, 133), take place every summer. The walks, bringing together British citizens, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, consist of hiking through the English countryside and sharing stories. The latter triggers two fundamental aspects of what might seem just a mere moment of trekking and talking in the English countryside: a) the aspect of visibility as emphasised by Lidia De Michelis (2019); b) the aspect of care, as emphasised by Lucio De Capitani (2023). While drawing parallels with Chaucer's English canonical literary work, De Michelis simultaneously acknowledges the project's qualities of

> Summon[ing] and combin[ing] the world-making power of storytelling and the extraordinary bonding potential of walking in solidarity to reconfigure the English polity as a welcoming space of listening and 'appearance'. (2019, 27)

In conjunction with being visible is the act of care. As Lucio De Capitani emphasises, this annual event, besides raising awareness of immigration detention, confers a further meaning to the project which

> walks the line (pun intended) between the political and the therapeutic: it provides forms of relief to refugees while also contesting and denouncing the systems that have caused them harm. (2023, 236)

In this sense, the ethics of care, consideration and attention that start with the act of listening to stories of people who experience the reality of the British border institutions' immigration detention are still important, especially from a therapeutic/psychological perspective. During the sharing of stories, the listener recognises and welcomes the teller as a human being, as if they are active and peer members of the same society. Even though temporarily, the teller is recounting and spending time in a productive way, which contrasts with the wasted time spent in that limbo known as the

3 Source available at `https://www.gdwg.org.uk/who-we-are`.

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detention centre that only exacerbates their feelings of alienation, bewilderment and helplessness.

The act of storytelling is then turned into a collection of tales published by Comma Press, a not-for-profit, Manchester based publisher and development agency. Herd and Pincus have so far edited five volumes titled *Refugee Tales* (2016; 2017; 2019; 2021; 2024).

In 2018, the *Refugee Tales* project extended its original engagement and launched a campaign to call for an end to the practice of indefinite detention of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in the United Kingdom. The aim of the project can be easily perceived in the following quote taken from Herd's essay "Calling for an End to Indefinite Detention: The Spatial Politics of Refugee Tales":

> Refugee Tales is a civil society project that calls attention to the fact that the UK is the only country in Europe that detains people indefinitely under immigration rules, and which in so doing calls for that policy to end. The way the project makes its call is by sharing the stories of people who have experienced detention, and the way it shares those stories is in the context of a public walk. (2019, 15)

Walking outdoors freely and telling stories along the way are, for the organisers of the event, two complementary pursuits that underpin this project which combines a humanitarian and radical, oppositional politics. In a podcast for *The Guardian* Ali Smith – patron of the *Refugee Tales* – discusses the issue of migration in the United Kingdom and emphasises the importance of stories because

> humans' ears are open, and they are, and because we can't resist and we won't resist because we are human and human story... at last that's what story does, that's why we always tell stories, stories are welcoming in and walking alongside. (2016, 00:00'47''-00:00'57")

In support of her statement, Smith quotes John Berger, who at a public event at the British Library some time earlier expressed his point of view on the current, great movement of people across the world, focussing on the significant role played by the storyteller:

> I'm thinking about the storyteller and the storyteller's responsibility is hospitality, you invite someone into a story, you must look after the person who is listening to you, and you must also ensure the person's ears are open because of the hospitality, hospitality goes two ways. (2016, 00:03'05"-00:03'22")

Berger's thoughts on hospitality materialise in the storytelling that occurs during the walk in the English countryside organised by the *Refugee Tales* project. The improvised storyteller who walks freely on English land and across (in this case local) boundaries, verbalises thoughts, feelings and reminiscences of their past and present life at their own pace. In this manner, the teller of the story invites the audience to enter their own private sphere and reality. On this occasion, the "two ways" hospitality argued by Berger manifests itself. Through this process, what Herd defines also as "an exchange of information" (2016, 133), but also a trust-based relationship, emerges between the teller and the listener, in addition to making the teller feel included and recognised as a human being, even if only temporarily.

In 2020, despite the COVID-19 restrictions, the organisers and volunteers did not desist and "like all other large-scale public events, Refugee Tales 2020 [was] re-thought" (Herd 2021, 146). New media and digital technologies did allow the walk to take place:

> instead of gathering in one location and collectively following a shared route, people walked where they could, drawn together across a three-day weekend by a series of online events: talks calling for A Future Without Detention. (Herd 2021, 146)

Whilst those were all anxious times lived in isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the annual walk of solidarity moved online on the YouTube channel where the *Refugee Tales* community virtually gathered to "call for a future without immigration detention", and following Herd's suggestion, participants sent photographs of bridges intended as symbols of crossing boundaries and borders along with making connections:

> If there is one good consequence of lockdown Refugee Tales, it is that this year at least, anybody can join in. […] this year people are joining from across the world, joining in solidarity in the call for a future without immigration detention. In order that we can make that shared call vivid, please let us know via our website, where you are and where you are walking. And please, when you see one, take and send us a photo of a bridge. We are making bridges this year, and we are crossing borders. (Herd 2020, 00:05'58"-00:06'49")

At the end of the online event, as "the project plotted [walkers'] location on an online map" (Herd 2021, 146), the annual walk was done "in over twenty countries worldwide" (146). Further evidence of this crossing of physical boundaries and borders is given by the fourth volume, which is a collection of international tales gathered

during the border-blind COVID-19 pandemic. In the "Afterword" to the fourth volume of tales, Herd places emphasis on:

> the act of sharing stories [that] cannot stop. And nor can the walking because, as the project walks, so in walking, it looks to reclaim the ground. The ground is solidarity to which the sharing of stories is crucial. The walk continues. Detention must end. (Herd 2021, 152)

Despite the GDWG and *Refugee Tales* project's increased engagement and multiple forms of activism, the United Kingdom remains the only country in Europe that detains people indefinitely under immigration rules. Herd indefatigably persists in talking about the asylum process as a process that "symbolically dehumanises asylum seekers by restricting their ability to narrate their story on, and in, their own terms" (Hulme 2018, 141). Although Harriet Hulme reads the *Refugee Tales* project's attempt as an act of "mimicking the structure of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*", it may be read instead as a "means of a 'rewriting' of canonical stories" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, [1989] 2002, 96). The published volumes contain a "Prologue", and differently from Chaucer's prologue which "describes the physical and mental attributes of his tale-tellers, Refugee Tales turns the focus onto us, its readers, with a powerful poetic call for us to develop an ethical and hospitable response to the refugee crisis" (Hulme 2018, 141). Borrowing the Australian scholars' reflections on postcolonial literature, the narrations collected in the published volumes represent an act of replacing the language. Relying on this textual strategy, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers develop into authors who unconsciously respond to the literary canon of the inhospitable host country.

As a matter of fact, the *Refugee Tales* project has managed to direct the audience's attention to the matter of migration along with the atrocious detention system. Over the years, thanks to its digital visibility, the project has raised awareness about the British immigration detention system, reached an international audience and given rise to similar activist movements worldwide.

Thirty years after its foundation, GDWG continues to advocate for civil and human rights for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers who arrive at the UK borders seeking a dignified life which consists of working and being active, contributing members of British society. Similarly, eleven years after its appearance on the Internet, the *Refugee Tales* project continues to advocate for the end of indefinite detention.

2 Migrants' Fragmented (Auto)biographies

In this unceasing process of supporting detainees and calling for an end to the practice of indefinite detention of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in the United Kingdom, both the GDWG and the *Refugee Tales* project have evolved, especially in terms of taking action and achieving widespread availability and dissemination, and the five volumes published so far testify to this political and humanitarian commitment.

The five volumes are characterised by an identical structure that partially emulates Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*: each volume contains a general "Prologue" that functions as a preface to every single edition; the titles of the stories shared during the walks provide a distinctive description of the protagonist; the "Afterword", which is one feature of the *Refugee Tales* that is not found in Chaucer's tales, provides updated information about current British and European social-political contexts and how they affect the mass-movements of people across the world; a recapitulation of the real-life experiences collected in each volume and the list of "Contributors" who generously participated in the processes of listening and writing.

The published tales may be defined as fragmented (auto)biographies. They include personal details and circumstantial accounts of events which are ultimately the fundamental constituents of the nonfiction literary genre of both biographies and autobiographies. What distinguishes the method of presenting these biographies is the co-production between the subject of the tale and an established writer, and this is clearly perceived in the subheading that reads "as told to". In this context, as Herd points out, a pure collaboration made of "a proper telling, a proper listening and a crafting of the tale as a consequence of that" (2016, 00:06'59") occurs. As these are biographies of human beings who fled their country of origin, and more importantly, may be vulnerable to the (British) authorities' retaliation, the storyteller's identity remains anonymous as do anyone and/or anything else that could lead to the subject's identification. Then, it is important to underline the fact that the transcribed real-life experiences are a far cry from transcribed real-life experiences, but are, instead, heavily mediated literary retellings. The stories collected and published so far have gone through a gradual process of change. As if to bear witness to the changes both the project and the annual walks of solidarity have gone through over the years, some individuals who have experienced detention and eventually have been granted permission to remain tell their stories as first-person testimonies. This change in authorship appears in the printed version with the subheading "as told by". *Refugee Tales III* marks the emergence of these first-person narratives. Nonetheless, anonymity is still crucial to the extent that in the third volume, for instance, six

out of nineteen tales are introduced with the subheading "as told by" followed by the teller-and-writer's initials only. In the following editions, even though the number of first-person testimonies has not increased (five out of fourteen in *Refugee Tales IV* and three out of sixteen in *Refugee Tales V*), the teller-and-writer identify themselves by their full names.

Furthermore, the five volumes are characterised by specific keywords that distinguish each edition and, once again, these bear witness to developments in these political, humanitarian forms of activism working to reverse excessively harsh measures implemented by the British government to deter immigration. In *Refugee Tales V*, the tellers' fractured realities, the sense of uncertainty, of feeling alien and abandoned are prominent in the descriptive frames of mind that characterise the sixteen human beings trapped in a limbo while waiting for an arbitrary decision made by immigration officials.

Britain indefinitely detains in custody human beings who are subject to immigration control, essentially turning them into untried/unconvicted prisoners. As GDWG and the patrons of *Refugee Tales* continue to emphasise, this is an administrative process without judicial oversight under immigration rules. Thus, migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are considered and treated as felons, which places these individuals under immense levels of stress and seriously affects their mental health. The United Kingdom is one of the largest users of detention in Europe. People are held in detention centres known as "Immigration Removal Centres" (IRCs), Short-Term Holding Facilities (STHFs) and prisons, and the latter distinctly alludes to a criminal procedure. According to Home Office policy, detention must be used sparingly and for the shortest possible period. The reality, however, is that many thousands are held each year, and some for very lengthy periods. Being held in prison-like conditions without a time limit causes anxiety and distress especially in this context where most of the detainees already have traumatic backgrounds, and the psychological impact of being held is absolutely damaging. The number of Detention Immigration Removal Centres in the United Kingdom has increased over the years. They are scattered across the country, and the majority are run by private security companies and by the Prison Service. People in detention cannot leave and have very limited freedom of movement within the centres, and to make things more troubling, security levels are similar to those of prisons.[4]

Characteristics of British Immigration Detention may be found, for instance, in "'The Friend's Tale' as told by Ridy Wasolua", where the etymologies of host, hospitality and hostile versus stranger and estranged are at the core. His existence in the so-called 'civilised

4 Source available at `https://www.aviddetention.org.uk/`.

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and advanced' Western societies is marked by detention centres, deferrals and relocating from one detention centre to another. As the editors inform readers in their "About the Contributors" section, Wasolua "was detained in Colnbrook, Harmondsworth and for several years in Brook House" (Herd, Pincus 2024, 166). His tale is divided into fragments, arguably, so as to mirror his fragmented state of mind. Wasolua introduces himself by describing his first encounter with the host-and-hostile country:

> The transition from the ship to the imposing building was a journey into the unknown. As we were led, one by one, with our handcuffs still binding us, a sense of unease settled in the pit of my stomach. (2024, 74)

Plausibly, this reminiscence evokes for attentive readers the time of the slave trade and hints at a parallel between uprooted Africans' arrival in the New World conquered by European countries and current migrants, refugee and asylum seekers' arrival in Western societies; they will realise that the two patterns are similar.

Later in his recounting, Wasolua provides the audience with a window onto another morally reprehensible reality when he describes in detail the first detention centre in which he was held:

> The interior was a labyrinth of halls and rooms, each one cloaked in shadow and uncertainty. […] as we were seated, one by one, a procession of procedures began – a series of measures aimed at extracting our identities and histories. Fingers pressed onto sensors, images captured, swabs taken […] Metal doors, locks, and the stark reality of confinement painted a contrast to the vision of safety we had held. (74-5)

His confinement is characterised by isolation, the absence of visitors and "the silence of explanations" (76). Furthermore, the lack of solicitors who speak his language makes him feel estranged, out of countenance and suspended "between the past and the present" (76). After a series of interviews, he manages to convince the immigration official that his "actions were driven by the instinct for survival rather than any malicious intent" (77) and "the reality of [his] newfound freedom" leads readers to another fragment characterised, this time, by the disappointing awareness of having been manipulated and exploited by a stranger who allegedly happened to share his origin. Being free but alone in a foreign country with no means of support, Wasolua follows a stranger as a "leap of faith […] a shred of hope" (78) that emanate from eventually speaking and communicating in the same language. However, later on, Wasolua finds himself trapped in yet another nightmarish reality, and the stranger's betrayal erodes

his sense of self, "leaving an indelible mark on [his] psyche" (81). Another fragment in his recounting is a long description of the time spent, once again, in detention:

> the transition marked another step into the abyss, a continuation of the tumultuous journey that had marked my life. […] The detention centre, with its barred windows and confined spaces, mirrored the entrapment of my spirit. […] this was a place of limbo. (82)

Despite being surrounded by walls he defines as "both physical and metaphorical" (83)**,** a sort of fellowship develops among detainees through "shared glances, unspoken understanding – that bridge[s] the gaps of language and origin" (83). However, these brief moments of solidarity do not compensate for his by now rooted sense of alienation, of "not belonging, of not being deemed worthy" caused by "the relentless series of trials [he] had endured" (83). Being continuously questioned exhausts his body and mind. He feels emotionally weak and helpless not only in front of his interviewers but also physically to the point of experiencing a sort of splitting: "it was as if I were a spectator to my own suffering" (84). The last fragment shared with his readers is about his release. From his arrival to his being granted leave to remain, the "pursuit of a better life" (88) has functioned as a beacon of hope and a source of strength. During the time spent in detention, Wasolua was not only afraid of having his claim rejected, but also anxious about how he would be able to survive in a new country if he were to be granted refugee status:

> How could I reintegrate into society without resources, without a support network, without even the assurance of a roof over my head? (87)

However, such barriers can gradually crumble thanks to humanitarian organisations such as the GDWG and the *Refugee Tales* project. As a form of recognition, but, above all, solidarity with human beings forced to leave their country of origin for different reasons, Wasolua "has worked with Refugee Tales since it began" (Herd, Pincus, 166). He is an artist and filmmaker based in London, but, most importantly, he is a long-term participant in GDWG activism. For ethical, compassionate reasons he continues to stand by the principles of a humanitarian asylum policy along with taking sides with the fellow-human beings who suffer the reality of the British border institutions' immigration detention. Through his artwork he aims at giving a different opinion on migrants, refugees and asylum seekers:

> Refugees are hard-working people that just want to settle down and get on with their lives, but there's barriers that need to be

> crossed. We're going to keep working, breaking these barriers, and keep doing more videos to try to make a change.[5]

However, the release of individuals from immigration detention centres is not synonymous with integration and full recognition of civil and human rights. Issues of racism aside, as Herd proposes for consideration in his "Afterword" in volume V:

> the person seeking asylum in the UK continues to be prohibited from working. That prohibition is itself environmental in that it denies any kind of productive relation to lived space, where such a prohibition can continue for years, not uncommonly over a decade. (150)

This banning gives rise to forms of undeclared work and consequent exploitation of the labour force. According to British rules, while seeking asylum, the individual receives "a statutory payment" of approximately five pounds a day on which an individual is asked to survive "for months and years" (151). Furthermore, contradictions in the British laws turn the hostile environment into an extractive environment. If human beings seeking asylum cannot work in the United Kingdom, they can work in British detention centres "for the deeply abusive payment of £1/hour" (150). As mentioned earlier in this paper, immigration detention centres are run by private companies and among them there is Clearsprings, which houses human beings seeking asylum and whose CEO, "Graham King, [in 2024] entered the UK rich list" (151). Unquestionably, this is a legal form of exploitation and simultaneously a modern form of slavery. The only difference between the time of the slave trade and the contemporary refugee mass-movements lies in the supposedly 'voluntary' aspect of their uprootedness.

3 The Expulsive Environment and Wasted Lives

As discussed by Toni Morrison in *The Origin of Others*, over the centuries, the Western world has exercised forms of political and economic control of large parts of the world, and it still has a hold on the black community worldwide. Since the end of the nineteenth century and more significantly since the 1980s, notwithstanding changes in Western political conditions, forms of control and pressure have not disappeared, and the African-American novelist detects them in the ongoing form of control known and understood

5 Source available at `https://www.gdwg.org.uk/voices-from-detention`.

as globalisation (2017, 96). Furthermore, according to Morrison's reflections on history, the current mass-movement of human beings who cross borders in search for better life conditions, along with those journeys made by migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, represent one of the consequences of Western, political and economic control. Human beings who flee their countries of origin for Western societies, besides asking for shelter, aspire to live in safety and dignity and to have a fresh start in life. Their being unwelcome and marginalised perpetuates unjust societies based on exploitation that benefits Western societies and their economic and political prestige (2017, 95).

Marginalisation keeps migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in a limbo that fosters forms of undeclared and underpaid work. These irregular labour arrangements make them vulnerable while their hardship remains, at the same time, invisible and mostly ignored by a public primed to fear newcomers through a steady stream of stories depicting hordes of migrant criminals and welfare abusers overrunning Western borders. The GDWG and the *Refugee Tales* project's political and social engagement, as well as their firm intent to broaden the general audience's awareness of matters and concerns that are under-reported in the mainstream narration of current migrations, represent a form of opposition to increasingly populist and right-wing contemporary concerns regarding mass migrations from non-Western to Western countries.

On these grounds, the genuine collaboration between migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and the founding members and authors behind the *Refugee Tales* project is decisive to enable the alternative storytellers to, at least, compete with and circumvent the narrative of present-day migrations depicted by the mainstream media. This is easily perceived, for instance, in "'The Thirteen Year Tale' as told to Hannah Lowe". As inferred by the title, Oliver – the storyteller – had to endure thirteen years of waiting for political asylum:

> Your
> thirteenth
> year
> in Britain,
> you gain
> asylum.
> Detained,
> you find
> at last
> a good solicitor,
> who helps you
> walks you
> through
> the door (39)

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It may be argued that Lowe's poetic literary style suits Oliver's fragmented narrative, and her lines made of a single word or very short sentence fragments, as in the above extract, reflect the teller's disconnected reality.

This tale too is subdivided into fragments, and, in this context, the numbered sections represent the different steps in Oliver's journeys, namely both the journey undertaken from his "country – nameless for safety –" (32) and the journeys within the British borders due to his having been "*dispersed*" (33; emphasis in the original) and relocated from one detention centre to another. The first section functions as an introduction both to the tale and the writing style adopted by the writer-listener. This tale, in fact, is written in the literary form of a poem:

> I look so small beside you, and you a giant –
> having told me over lunch a story
> so large and full of sorrow, misdeed and drama.
> I wonder how to write what you have spoken?
> A tale in which, at best, you are the broken
> hero, and this country, where we live, an ogre – (31)

The inhospitable and brutish United Kingdom, compared to the mythical figure of a monstrous creature who in legends and fairy tales eats humans, seems to represent the hostile, expulsive environment described by Herd in his "Afterword". Oliver, the heroic figure, is confronted by the cruelty of the British border immigration detention, and the decade-long struggle to arrive at a final decision appears designed to wear down the hero's resolve.

During one of his numerous moments of bewilderment he quotes some lines from Warsan Shire's poem "Home" (2011): "Now, *home is the mouth of a shark*" (32; emphasis in the original) along with "*you only leave home when home won't let you stay*" (36; emphasis in the original). He left his wife and daughters behind, he hid himself "in the boot | of someone's car" (32), he crossed borders under "a stranger's name" (32), he went through "more interviews, more questions" (33) which eventually denied and rejected his first asylum application. The following years spent waiting for another decision to be made are characterised by the awareness of depending on arbitrary rules at the core of a "*points-based system*" that, from the claimants' perspective, involve an endless cycle of "*dispersal, port of entry, leave to remain, | PTSD*. You're back where you began" (34; emphasis in the original).

His next applications for political asylum are delayed and denied, "they give you weeks to leave. | You stay and claim the sofa. All day long" (34). Like Wasolua, Oliver too is in a limbo, his life suspended and lived in "the fear | of detention, deportation, counting pennies | for bread" (35). Oliver's description of his wasted life epitomises

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Marc Auge's concept of non-places and, secondly, Giorgio Agamben's concept of "the state of exception" (2003, 23). Oliver's reclaiming of a sofa may be compared, borrowing Auge's words, to "the planet [where] refugees are parked" ([1992] 1997, 34) while waiting to be accepted and included in Western societies; whereas the British environment of immigration detention along with the societal environment that confines human beings like Oliver to its margins may be compared to the state of exception which is

> neither external nor internal to the juridical order, and the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other. (Agamben 2003, 23)

The arbitrariness of "a zone of indifference" (23) due to the British legal vacuum in immigration laws brings about a societal context where individual liberties, civil and human rights are denied to the so-called 'illegal' immigrants. This makes them vulnerable and disposable to the sovereign power of neoliberal and global markets' logics. Or, as Herd sustains in his "Afterword" in volume V:

> The UK government has addressed the shameful reality of what Giorgio Agamben called the state of exception by making the exceptional state of detention the political norm. […] Detention is being defined by being extended. […] detention is being further hard-wired into the political process. (156)

This vicious circle only engenders and fortifies unjust and unfair Western societies and continues to reproduce patterns of exploitation and dehumanisation. It is as though colonialism has never ceased to exist, with the only difference being that in the 21st twenty-first century, forms of slavery, labour force exploitations and marginalisations are not perpetuated in the overseas dominions, but in the mother country.

In his "Afterword" in volume V, Herd proposes for consideration the shift "*From the Hostile Environment to the Expulsive Environment*" (2024, 149; emphasis in the original). Except for the virtual walk of 2020, as mentioned above, the walks of solidarity have been occurring yearly in southern England "where the organisation is based" (2024, 149). In contrast to the act of walking and sharing real-life experiences, which, much like the landscape where the walks take place, has remained unchanged since *Refugee Tales* was inaugurated, Herd does not fail to point out the ways in which the British political environment has changed for the worse. As the co-organiser of the project puts forth, "the hostile environment […] picture[s] a territory that is generally unwelcoming" (2024, 150),

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but in addition to being just unreceptive towards human beings who fled their country of origin, it has expanded and turned into a breeding ground for illegal forms of exploitation. As mentioned earlier, private companies such as Clearsprings foster the production of human waste. Twenty years after its first theorisation, this concept may also be applied to a certain degree to the reality of the British immigration detention system.

Developed by Zygmunt Bauman in *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (2004), this concept concerns how liquid modernity and globalisation, which prioritise flexibility, speed and consumption, marginalise those who are unable to adapt and conform to these constantly changing conditions by rendering them superfluous/redundant to the system's needs while also treating them as disposable or marginal. Bauman emphasises that the term 'wasted life' encompasses not only poverty or exclusion, but also the loss of meaning and personal value (2004, 5-6).

Within the context of the British immigration detention system, the so-called 'superfluous' population of outcasts is represented by migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, who find themselves trapped in a limbo wasting their time and life while waiting for an arbitrary decision to be made. In his work, Bauman provides a profound understanding of what it means to be an outcast or human waste, and his reasoning is still, sadly, pertinent today. In the wake of the 2020 global pandemic and the simultaneous migrant crisis, the lines have been clearly drawn between the essential and the non-essential; the citizen and the asylum seeker.

Furthermore, relying on the Polish-British sociologist's postulation, the spread of imperialist globalisation has created a lawless "frontier-land", in which global solutions are to be found for local problems of overpopulation; and local solutions for the global problem of the large, displaced population of asylum seekers (Bauman 2004, 72).

In truth, Bauman's concept of wasted is one of the recurrent adjectives detectable in the real-life experiences collected in volume V and easily defined as a key word for the stories. Tellers, directly or indirectly via their contributors, phrase their feelings by employing this polysemic adjective. In so doing, language does externalise their actual distinguishing features. They are confined in detention centres in prison-like conditions, they are banned from having a decent life, they are deprived of civil and human rights. Eventually, this confinement results in a wasteful squandering of human capital as, reprising Wasoula's statement, "refugees are hard-working people".[6]

6 Source available at https://www.gdwg.org.uk/voices-from-detention.

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4 Conclusion

What started as a hostile environment later developed into an expulsive environment which exacerbates and entrenches growing inequalities and problems of housing and food insecurity as well as the erasure of civil and human rights for large segments of the population. In this at first hostile and then expulsive environment, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers' lives are marked by precariousness, uncertainty, and enduring feelings of estrangement and not belonging. The active listening to their stories, which are based on real-life experiences, promotes trust, understanding, and empathy and, at times, inspires and motivates both the storyteller and their audience. Listening is an act of care. It requires active engagement but also requires a fierce passivity especially if the act of listening is approached through a phenomenological lens. In this sense the listener turns into a deliberate host who welcomes without preconceptions both stories and their protagonists. Arguably, the ability to receive is easier with strangers, and absorbing the Other comprises the work of navigating and shifting from stranger to friend. While it may be difficult in practice, during the democratic act of listening, the transmission and the reception must work in reciprocity and on a mutual level, this act dispenses with any form of hierarchy.

In a 2016 article for *The New Yorker*, musicologist Kerry O'Brien affirms that composer Pauline Oliveros dedicated her life to the art of listening as a form of activism. Indeed, Oliveros described the act of listening as a necessary pause before considerate and solicitous actions:

> Listening is directing attention to what is heard, gathering meaning, interpreting and deciding on action.[7]

Oliveros' assertion vividly resonates in the *Refugee Tales* project and its annual walks of solidarity. In 2024, the annual walk of solidarity celebrated its tenth anniversary and:

> to mark this moment the project will stage The Refugee Tales Festival of Walk – still calling for a future without detention, still calling, as an urgent first step, for an end to indefinite detention.[8]

If, on the one hand, last year's walk of solidarity was elevated to the artistic form of festival, which is a further sign of the evolution and

7 Source available at `https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/listening-as-activism-the-sonic-meditations-of-pauline-oliveros`.

8 Source available at `https://www.refugeetales.org/walk-2024`.

development of this social, political and humanitarian project, on the other hand, it is deplorable that the call for the end of indefinite detention still needs to be demanded loud and clear.

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