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The *Refugee Tales* Project as Transmedia Activism and the Poetics of Listening
Towards Decolonial Citizenship

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Abstract The *Refugee Tales* project aims to raise awareness about the experiences of asylum seekers in Britain. It pivots around a walk through the British countryside, which becomes the occasion to share tales about immigration detention, subsequently published in a series of anthologies. In this essay, I frame *Refugee Tales* as a series of activist citizen media practices, engaging in prefigurative politics by providing refugees with a chance to perform a critical form of citizenship. Finally, I discuss how the tales themselves juxtapose forms of sympathetic and hostile listening.

Keywords Refugee Tales. Hostile environment. Activism. Citizen media. Decolonial citizenship.

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1 Introduction

1.1 British Migration Politics and the Hostile Environment

Over the last two decades Europe has been facing, as regards migration flows, what Agustín and Jørgensen call, in opposition to the idea of a refugee/migration crisis, a "crisis of solidarity" (2019, 12). This crisis can only be understood in the context of neoliberal globalization, characterised by the "selective promotion of human mobility as an instrument to reduce salaries and rights, as well as disciplining of ethnic minorities" (Della Porta 2018, 8). Within the logic of neoliberal development, irregular migrants provide an essential flux of cheap labour, which is to be actively included into European economies by means of its criminalization (Mezzadra 2004). This dovetails with the politics of securitarian nationalism, which, by rendering migrants 'illegal', liable to expulsion and invisible in public spaces, conveniently turn them into a workforce that "[does] in fact move around, but largely stripped of rights" (Felli 2021, 137-8). Within this context of criminalization, exploitation and surveillance, each European country presents aspirant migrants and asylum seekers[1] with unique challenges.

A case in point are Britain's migration policies since the late 1990s. During the rule of New Labour, the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act and the 2002 Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act established arbitrary detention as the norm for asylum seekers, whose rights and means of support were also curtailed, while refugees were mostly painted as welfare parasites (Woolley 2014, 4-5; Gallien 2018, 739). A prominent example of this attitude was Tony Blair's 2005 speech on immigration and asylum, which, while sprinkled with multiculturalist rhetoric, nevertheless argued that stricter asylum laws were needed to "root out abuse of the asylum system" (2005). Blair's speech relied on a widespread dichotomy between deserving/useful/legal migrants and "genuine refugees" on the one hand, and "failed asylum applicants and illegal immigrants" on the other, hiding the fact that migrants are put in one category or the other mostly depending on whether they happen to have the economic, social, cultural, or hu-

1 This essay focuses on asylum seekers, in line with the *Refugee Tales* project. The legal condition of asylum seekers is, technically, distinct from that of other categories of migrants. In many ways, however, it is dangerous to naturalize the distinction between refugees and migrants who leave their country for reasons other than avoiding war, violence, conflict, or persecution – the reasons that the 1951 Refugee Convention recognizes as valid for applying for asylum (`https://www.unhcr.org/what-is-a-refugee.html`). That division can be unfair and discriminatory when it is used to dismiss the right to move of people that have no chance to migrate through legal channels and whose motivations (such as the desire for a better life) may be just as cogent and legitimate as those of people fleeing from persecution and violence.

man[2] capital to navigate the legal framework. Most importantly, this dichotomy is alive and well in the more recent plan of creating "a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants", as Theresa May famously put in 2012 (quoted in Hill 2017). May's hostile environment became a reality with the 2016 Immigration Act, which made 'illegal working' a crime, implemented provisions aimed at disrupting the daily activity of illegal immigrants, and empowered immigration officers (Fudge 2018, 558).[3] The hostile environment was reinforced, in the following years, through further exclusionary and punitive immigration legislation.[4]

One of the pillars of the British hostile environment is indefinite immigration detention. Immigration detention is an administrative procedure that involves keeping in custody those who are subject to immigration control, while they wait for permission to enter the country or wait to be deported; however, Britain is the only country in Europe in which immigration detention is indefinite, meaning that there is no limit to how long an individual can be detained (cf. AV-ID Detention 2020). Indefinite detention – a practice "arbitrary from beginning to end" (Muir 2017) – makes the British immigration system a particularly perverse one for asylum seekers: already vulnerable individuals – whose existence depends on repeatedly producing detailed and 'believable' narratives of their often traumatic experiences, which are then routinely scrutinized and systematically disbelieved by immigration officers – are completely put at the mercy of the state, which effectively suspends their rights, reserving the prerogative to detain them *indefinitely* in what are, for all intents and purposes, prisons, and to transfer, release and re-imprison them at whim. This system creates enormous psychological damage for those who have to endure it, which is a deliberate and integral part of the hostile environment.

1.2 Introducing *Refugee Tales*

It is in this context that *Refugee Tales* was conceived. An activist project started in 2014 by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group, *Refugee Tales* aims to raise awareness about the experiences of asylum

2 For a discussion on how neoliberal citizenship can also include/exclude migrants depending on a person's *human* capital, see Mavelli 2018.

3 The hostile environment, moreover, was implemented within the context of Brexit, which mobilized racist images of the 'refugee crisis' to strengthen the claim to leave the EU (Mayblin 2017, 17), hence in a context of heightened xenophobia.

4 Highlights include the recent, unashamedly classist point-based immigration system, and the recently approved Nationality and Borders Bill, aiming at heavily penalizing people arriving to the UK through 'irregular' means such as boats.

seekers in Britain, particularly those who have been through the immigration detention system. The project initially focused on the abolition of indefinite detention but has gradually evolved into a call to stop immigration detention altogether. Inspired by Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and originally subtitled "A Walk in Solidarity with Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Detainees", *Refugee Tales* pivots around a yearly walk through the British countryside, which becomes the occasion to share tales about migration and detention. The tales, for the most part written by established authors in collaboration with the refugees that are the protagonists of the stories, are publicly read at the stopping points of the walk during evening performances. Subsequently, they are published in a series of anthologies. To stress their shared authorship, the tales are presented as "told to" a writer.[5]

The four anthologies (published in 2016, 2017, 2019 and 2021) are arguably the most visible product of the *Refugee Tales* project. Including, at this point, almost sixty different tales, these anthologies register, through a variety of perspectives, the harsh and systematically cruel reality of immigration detention in the UK, while making the case that "no one flees voluntarily or without good reason, and that flight most often entails not only the loss of one's family or family members, friends, one's home, job and security, but also of one's material possessions or important personal documents" (Sandten 2020, 124). In this essay I am interested in discussing the poetics of some of these tales, but I believe that the broader context of the *Refugees Tales* project must first be taken into consideration. I follow Claire Gaillen's suggestion that "refugee literature cannot be studied out of its material context, while at the same time stressing the fact that it cannot be reduced to it" (2018, 734). In the case of *Refugees Tales*, this means not only to understand refugee narratives as both political *and* poetic interventions, but also to observe how the poetics of the tales is constructed in tandem with the wider set of transmedia activist practices that constitute the backbone of the *Refugee Tales* project.

Therefore, the rest of the essay is divided in two parts. In the next one I frame *Refugee Tales* as a series of activist citizen media practices, undertaken by a network that the project itself helps to construct. I discuss how the project, within this process of community creation, engages in a form of prefigurative politics by providing refugees with a chance to perform a critical form of citizenship which I define as decolonial.[6] In the final part of the essay, I stress how the tales com-

5 Starting from *Refugee Tales III* (2019) some of the tales have been authored by the refugees themselves (and are presented as "told by" their authors).

6 As specified in section 2.4, this use of 'decolonial' refers to Ramón Grosfoguel's attempt to combine world-system theory and decolonial thinking (2010).

plement the various practices carried out within the project by contrasting, on the one hand, the act of listening to other people's stories as an exercise in empathy, trust, and political solidarity, and, on the other hand, the unsympathetic, inquisitorial listening required of immigration officers to bring about the hostile environment. I discuss this final point – which encapsulates the politics and the poetics of the project as a whole – by commenting on a few short stories from the *Refugee Tales* anthologies, focusing on "The Soldier's Tale as told to Neel Mukherjee".

2 *Refugee Tales* as Citizen Media Practices

2.1 Defining Citizen Media (Practices)

Refugee Tales lends itself to an interdisciplinary analysis, which must take into consideration how the project is also a form of refugee activism developed through different media and practices. In this sense framing the project in terms of citizen media, and specifically in terms of citizen media *practices*, may be a useful move. The former concept is defined as follows by Baker and Blaagaard:

> The concept of citizen media encompasses the physical artefacts, digital content, practices, performative interventions and discursive formations of affective sociality produced by unaffiliated citizens as they act in public space(s) to effect aesthetic or socio-political change or express personal desires and aspirations, without the involvement of a third party or benefactor. It also comprises the sets of values and agendas that influence and drive the practices and discourses through which individuals and collectivities position themselves within and in relation to society and participate in the creation of diverse publics. (2016, 16)

In other words, citizen media, in this conception, indicates what unaffiliated citizen do and produce through a variety of media – including their bodies – to enact change, express themselves and, in doing so, perform their citizenship. This definition, according to which citizen media encompasses more than simple media content (and its circulation), resonates with Hilde C. Stephansen's proposal to shift the focus to the set of practices that are constructed and performed *around* citizen media.

This shift gives prominence to what people think, say, and do in relation to citizen media; to what practices people engage with that are oriented towards citizen media; and, lastly, to how these practices can structure *other* practices by reconfiguring spaces and publics (2016, 29). In particular, a practice framework highlights how

citizen media and the practices that grow around/because of them are instrumental in creating new (counter)publics,[7] rather than simply how media *content* circulates through already established ones. Stephansen, as Baker and Blaagaard, also relies on the idea that citizen media empower those who perform/create them and allow them to enact their citizenship (see Rodríguez 2011); and that citizenship itself is not to be understood exclusively in legalistic terms – as status, as membership to a state – but can be *constructed* through acts of citizenship (Isin 2008).[8]

My proposal is to see *Refugee Tales* precisely as a cohesive set of citizen media practices through which the refugees' citizenship is performed against a regime that denies them all that citizenship entails – rights, communal participation, (legal) belonging, a public voice. The advantage of reading this project through these lenses is to connect what the project does (refugee activism/advocacy through a variety of media and practices, as well as creating new communities, networks, and publics) with what the project produces (performances, short stories, media content), highlighting how the project embraces both textual/literary, digital, and performative forms of activism.

2.2 Walking as Political/Therapeutic Performance

As mentioned, the core of the *Refugee Tales* project is a yearly walk through the English countryside, with stops along the way in which the tales are read. So far, there have been six major walks: in 2015, from Dover to Crawley via Canterbury; in 2016, from Canterbury to Westminster via Dartford; in 2017, from Runnymede to Westminster; in 2018 from St. Albans to Westminster via the East End of London; in 2019 from Brighton to Hastings, and in 2022, from Merstham to Winchester. In 2020 and 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the walk *en masse* did not take place, although small-scale walks and online events were nevertheless organized.[9] David Herd, one of the two co-editors of the anthologies, described the original 2015 walk

7 Nancy Fraser's definition of counterpublics, which Stephansen borrows, is: "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (1990, 67).

8 Engin Isin defines "acts of citizenship as those acts that transform forms (orientations, strategies, technologies) and modes (citizens, strangers, outsiders, aliens) of being political by bringing into being new actors as activist citizens (claimants of rights and responsibilities) through creating new sites and scales of struggle" (2008, 39).

9 In 2020 the main walk was replaced by a three-days weekend of online events that connected those who walked, from wherever they could (see RT 4, 146). The location of the individual walks was then plotted on an online map (available on `https://www.refugeetales.org/`). The same formula was repeated in 2021.

as "a spectacle of welcome" in which "people who are hidden by and from the culture, rendered invisible by the procedures of the state, were here taking and asserting their places in the landscape" (RT 1, 134). The location of this first "spectacle of welcome" was significant: the passing through of Kent, Surrey and Sussex was a "crossing of a deeply national space by people whom the nation has organised itself in order precisely that they be kept from view" (RT 1, 138). As Helen Barr comments, walking, for *Refugee Tales*, functions as a counter-narrative that displaces traditional geography by "contest[ing] those fictional pathways that keep us in our place" and allows to "tell different stories from those that our maps foreclose" (2019, 82). Of course, "different stories", within the project, are also *literally* told when the various tales, later published in the anthologies, are read out during the evening performances.

Besides intervening performatively on a politically charged geography, the walks function as therapeutic tool for participating refugees. On the one hand, "walking with *Refugee Tales* helps former detainees to feel more at home with the new-to-them landscapes and people" (Meerzon 2020, 261). For instance, Herd points out that the first walk managed to get former detainees "more at ease", specifically granting them a form of relief deriving "from the fact of being out and about, a way of being in space that for some hadn't been available in several years" (RT 1, 139). One of the interviewees in a video commemorating a smaller-scale walk in 2021 – a former detainee who had trouble sleeping after his experience of detention – mentions that, while taking part to the walk, he felt tired but slept "very well" (Lawrenson, Hooper 2021, 03′09″-03′39″), testifying to the therapeutic aspect of the experience. Another interviewee comments on the communal nature of the walks, calling them "a very, very shared experience", which forges bonds among the participants by having them collectively live through various hardships – bad weather, difficult stretches, tiredness – but also through the convivial act of eating together (Lawrenson, Hooper 2021, 03′44″-04′06″).

2.3 Sharing Stories, Doing Collective Research

The *Refugee Tales* walks are also spaces characterized by various forms of listening, talking and storytelling – from the informal conversations throughout the walks to the reading of the tales during the evening performances. This plays a crucial role in configuring the walks as political spaces of liberation that act against the hostile environment, mobilizing, in Emma Cox's words, "perambulatory companionship and encounter" (2020, 488). On the one hand, the walks signify the possibility to talk freely and be listened to, which asylum seekers, and specifically detainees, do not normally have. One

of the interviewees of the previously mentioned video stresses the need, for refugees, to have "some people to hear you, to listen to you, to give you time" – he adds that since he keeps "many things inside", he needs "someone to listen to me, to give them [to], to share" (Lawrenson, Hooper 2021, 05′30″-05′56″). On the other hand, the walks, as events in which the tales are publicly read, are also moments in which refugees' voices are listened to in a more structured way.

All the ways in which the tales are disseminated, through the various channels and platforms that the project employs,[10] aim at raising awareness of immigration detention. But this dissemination has also an immediate benefit for the mental health of the refugees, derived from the knowledge that their stories are being circulated, even if the tales have been, for the most part, technically told by someone else. Herd comments that many people "said […] that it was a relief that the tale [that is, *their* tale] was being told, though […] they could not, in the immediacy of the moment, be the person who told it. More subtly, what people said was that they were relieved that the account was being passed on" (RT 1, 142). The project, in this sense, 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. In this sense the project rejects the idea of 'apolitical' humanitarian help (see Bhimji 2020, 12), explicitly engaging with the colonial and neoliberal structures of immigration detention while also envisioning ways to provide relief to refugees in distress. Within the project, these two sides are fully intertwined.

While the very sharing of the tales advances a theoretical reflection of what immigration detention in the UK is, more recently the project has developed yet another mode to investigate and grasp the mechanisms of immigration detention, in the form of a Walking Inquiry. The inquiry was conceived to integrate and expand the conversation developed by the public inquiry into mistreatment at Brook House Immigration Removal Centre – whose limited scope might convey the idea that the abuses produced within immigration detention are not systemic. The Walking Inquiry, animated by the methodological principle that "its shape and direction should be determined by people with lived experience of detention" (RT 4, 143), employed a series of events – walks, when possible, as well as online gather-

10 The series of videos produced within the *28 Tales for 28 Days* initiative is also worth mentioning. *28 Tales for 28 Days* (`https://www.28for28.org/`) is a series of recorded readings, published between September and October 2018, in which various actors and writers (including some of those involved in the *Refugee Tales* anthologies) read out some of the short stories written within the project.

ings – to single out several questions[11] that, from January to June 2021, were then discussed online. Conversation was further spurred by short video entries and films by people with lived experience of detention and by people with relevant expertise. The results of the inquiry were published in 2022.[12]

2.4 Connecting Activists, Performing Citizenship

All the activities described above – the walks, including smaller monthly gatherings organized between the main events; the public reading of the tales, the publishing of the anthologies, as well as the circulation of the stories on digital platforms; and the collaborative research project of the Walking Inquiry, including its videos – ultimately result into a cohesive collection of citizen media practices that aims to promote discussion on immigration detention and enact political change, but also, most crucially, to *connect* people that are invested in this political struggle. These practices have gradually built what Herd defines a "walking community" (RT 4, 139): a network of interconnected people that walks, talks, discusses and learns together; and that includes, most importantly, people who have lived experience of immigration detention. More broadly, the various citizen media practices connected to the project create and cultivate various interwoven publics and activist communities. These encompass the participants to the walks and to the Walking Inquiry; the (co-)creators of the tales; individuals or small groups that engage in *Refugee-Tales*-inspired walks across the world or join *Refugee Tales* online events; the readership of the anthologies; and a wider network of activists engaged in social justice for refugees that the project connects and supports, also through social media, including, for instance, a Parliamentary Advocacy group led by people with detention experience that *Refugee Tales* hosts.[13]

Moreover, what these citizen media practices have in common is to give prominence to the experience of asylum seekers and former detainees and provide them with a space – as well as a community/public – to share their stories; to empower them, as it were, to tell their stories. In doing so, the project directly counteracts the prac-

11 The questions discussed by the Walking Inquiry were: "What is it like to be detained? How are people detained? What are the long-term impacts of detention? Why are people who have experienced detention not heard? How does detention damage society? What is our response?" (https://www.refugeetales.org/walking-inquiry-read-more)

12 For more information about the workings of the Walking Inquiry, see https://www.refugeetales.org/walking-inquiry; also RT 4, 142-6.

13 RT 4, 142; see also https://www.refugeetales.org/about.

tices of the British immigration system, which isolates and damages asylum seekers. Framing the struggle against immigration detention in terms of antagonistic forms of storytelling is particularly appropriate, since refugees, within the asylum system, are forced to repeatedly narrate their stories, but in a way that neither is healing nor can operate political change, but so that the 'authenticity' of their tales can be tested (from a position of systematic disbelief) and their access to asylum policed – a form of 'storytelling' akin to torture, which disempowers the storyteller. *Refugee Tales*, on the other hand, aims at connecting asylum seekers with sympathetic listeners; it allows them to talk and be listened to in multiple forms, on their own terms (which should include the right *not* to share, as stressed in the conclusion); and it allows them to enter a space of political participation where they can enact a critical notion of citizenship. The latter idea resonates with Isin and Nielsen's idea that acts of citizenship "create a sense of the possible and of a citizenship that is 'yet to come'" (2008, 4). The citizen media practices of the *Refugee Tales* project, in other words, provide refugees the chance to perform such acts of citizenship and, in doing so, to test possibilities for alternatives to the received conception of citizenship as legalistic membership to the state.

As Huysmans and Guillaume point out, "while citizenship has been an instrument of crafting a people of equals, in which rights are universal and not a privilege, historically it has also been a vehicle for working differentiations within this universal people" (2014, 24). Opposing this exclusionary form of citizenship by sharing their tales, and hence claiming political agency out of a position of imposed powerlessness, refugees may perform a different form of citizenship compared to the one they are excluded from. The roots of the immigration system and the form of citizenship it upholds is colonial, capitalist and neoliberal – it is structured around race and the uneven world-system of modern capitalism; and it aims at limiting legal movement by facilitating the criminalization (and thus enabling the exploitation) of migrants. I would therefore argue that the acts of citizenship that *Refugee Tales* promotes can also be understood as prefigurative politics aimed at shaping a form of decolonial citizenship. Such citizenship is decolonial because it based on demolishing, rather than upholding, the "several entangled global hierarchies" (Grosfoguel 2010, 70) that constitute the modern/colonial/capitalist world-system and whose logic informs the immigration (detention) system. From this perspective, *Refugee Tales* fits the definition of citizen media (practices) presented at the beginning of this section: within this project, various unaffiliated citizens – including, crucially, asylum seekers – engage in a variety of practices and forms of content production that are aimed at enacting social change through a variety of media, which in this case means changing the public meaning of citizenship and asylum. They do so by – and while – creating new communities and publics.

3 The Poetics of Listening in the *Refugee Tales* Anthologies

3.1 Two Forms of Listening

Among the various citizen media (practices) of *Refugee Tales*, the importance of the tales written within the project is self-explanatory – the tales are what the project mainly employs to convey information on the predicaments of refugees and are what the project coalesces around. However, what specific function do the tales as texts with their own poetics have within the project? I would argue that one way in which the tales, as texts, can be seen as an organic development of the project is by being narrative resources through which the political meaning of (not) listening to a person's story, and the capacity of stories to create community and enact change, can be properly elaborated, understood, and envisioned. Many of the tales juxtapose two different forms of listening: a sympathetic listening that is based on accepting someone else's story, and, in doing so, creates bonds and enables political possibilities; and an inquisitorial listening that is aimed at scrutinizing, disassembling, and disempowering the other's story. In doing so, the tales register – and convey in a dramatic form – the core of the political struggle that the project engages with in a variety of other media, performances, and practices.

The clash between sympathetic and hostile listening is spelt out, for instance, in "The Erased Person's Tale as told to Jonathan Wittenberg". The tale begins with a conversation between the author and S, the refugee whose story is being told. The conversation, is about the significance of asking someone *else* to tell your story:

> So, I ask him, why does he want me, or anyone else, to tell his story? Wouldn't it be more powerful coming directly from him? His response is that he needs someone else to hear, a person outside the immediate experience, to acknowledge and record what happened to him and to those whose suffering he saw and shared. He wants me to be his witness, not because his narrative requires verification, but because of the fact of hearing itself: because it signifies that in a world that so often seeks to deny and disbelieve such accounts, his story has been absorbed by a listening heart. (RT 3, 110)

The relationship between writer-witness and refugee-storyteller is then summarized in explicitly political terms: "S needs me, us, to be allies" (RT 3, 110). A "listening heart", in other words, is one that can engender activist-oriented community, in stark contrast with the silencing experience of immigration detention that S endured: "You've no voice when you are inside there" (RT 3, 109).

The contrast between the two forms of listening is often dramatized by the juxtaposition of an asylum interview and a moment of empowering storytelling. For instance, in "The Arriver's Tale as told to Abdulrazak Gurnah", the protagonist, while waiting for his interview, passes the time by sharing stories with his fellow detainees, "[telling] each other stories of our escape from danger and death" (RT 1, 38). This brief passage entails a strong sense of comradeship, which however is destroyed as soon as the protagonist is called in for his interview:

> I was interviewed for three hours by three different people. All of them were calm and persistent, but I could tell from the way they asked me questions that there was something behind it. They did not believe me and as the hours passed I began to think what I had not thought possible over the three months I had been waiting. They did not want me here. They did not like me. The result of the interview was that I was refused permission to stay. (RT 1, 38)

The interview shatters the spirit of the protagonist, who feels "as if I was something broken and discarded, thrown away with other broken things" (RT 1, 38). Similarly, "The Orphan's Tale as told to David Constantine" begins with the equally mortifying interview of the Liberian asylum seeker M:

> M wants to be believed, to persuade, to get them feel the living truth of it and be moved to pity. At first he thought the plain facts would do the trick, but when he paused in relating them he looked into faces which were dubious. […]The harder M strove to be persuasive, the worse he became at it. […] He slipped from trying to remember and answer in good conscience to trying to guess what they wanted him to say. Pretty soon he was all at sea and in a sudden rage he said things that would be taken down – almost sorrowfully, as it seemed – and used in evidence against him. (RT 3, 11-12)

In the passage the interview reveal itself as a trap: refugees are expected to tell the truth; but, the "plain facts" often will not do, forcing the refugees to rely on lies or on a narration that tries to appease the expectations of the officers, but that can easily backfire and be used to demolish their claims. The story ends tragically with M about to be deported, defeated by a system intended to isolate him and break him down: "sever the connections, tear the web, a human quite alone is an easy thing to manage" (RT 3, 22), he comments poignantly. But the tale also offers an example of a form of listening, which *creates* community. When M meets Céline, a woman he will eventually fall in love with, the two listen each other's story:

> She told him her story and he, hesitantly, told her his. He spoke almost in a whisper, she had to lean close, her child was at the kitchen table, drawing, and seemed absorbed. When he halted, shrugged, and said that was enough for now, they looked at one another with different eyes. Anyway, you're safe here, she said. (RT 3, 15)

The safety Céline talks about refers not only to the fact that M managed to flee from the circumstances that have led him to seek asylum, but also the fact that she offers him the chance – the time, the place, the patience, the "listening heart" – to tell his story in the way he feels comfortable with.

3.2 "The Soldier's Tale as Told by Neel Mukherjee"

Among the stories published in the anthologies, "The Soldier's Tale as told by Neel Mukherjee" deserves particular attention, because it tackles the contrast between these two forms of listening through a unique focalization. The titular soldier is Salim, an Eritrean refugee, forcibly conscripted into the army when he was about eighteen and forced to fight in various wars for six years. He subsequently manages to escape, spending several years in Sudan, where he marries and has a son, only to eventually try to reach Europe. After being sold into slavery and escaping, he arrives to Italy, where he is granted temporary leave to stay but is entirely destitute. Trying to run away from his miserable life, he finally reaches Britain, where the authorities, however, decide to deport him back to Italy. The reader's last image of Salim is of him "still suspended in this purgatory, waiting and hoping and dreading" (RT 2, 90). While recounting the events of Salim's journey is arguably the main political aim of the tale, the narrative device that makes the story particularly compelling is the fact that the narrator is Salim's caseworker, who is reading and processing his asylum application.

Within the caseworker's narrative the opposing forms of listening that I have sketched so far meet and clash. On the one hand, the caseworker acknowledges the suffering contained within asylum applications, from which the caseworker is haunted: "I read pages and pages of these every day. Sometimes just a bare mention of an atrocity, without any details, is the most troubling, leaving me to imagine the lacunae and, then, I do not know which is worse – the imagination succeeding or failing" (RT 2, 85). But the caseworker also specifies that they *have* to read them because they are "a cog in the wheel of the giant machine" of the immigration system. Their institutional role necessarily leads them to keep their sympathy in check: "you learn very quickly that you have to turn down most of them", and to

do so you have to "insulate yourself in the face of such evidence" (RT 2, 86). But how do you reject an asylum seeker? The caseworker-narrator offers a demonstration by pointing out the inconsistencies and gaps in Salim's application. For instance, they note that "the account of [Salim's] time in Sudan is perfunctory, and skates so quickly over such important turning points that my suspicion, honed by years of Home Office training, cannot help but be aroused" (RT 2, 87). These are the things, the caseworker says, that "we've been trained to winkle out of applications and use to demolish the arguments for refugee status" (RT 1, 87). "Winkling out" accurately conveys the image of an interrogator *torturing* a subject to extract a confession.

And yet, after proving their credentials as a dutiful Home Office functionary, the caseworker admits that "something in Salim's application gets through. Sometimes, even for the hardest of apparatchiks, a detail catches hold" (RT 2, 87). The caseworker admits that, despite its imperfect presentation, the text nevertheless manages to impact them. They eventually reveal the moment in which their armour of indifference is destroyed – when they read a specific line from Salim's application: "'I cannot see the difference between Eritrea and Europe – I'm not free in any of those places.' And this pierces through my hard shell" (RT 2, 90). Once the "shell" is pierced – arguably by Salim's shattering of the myth of free and civilized Europe –, the caseworker is assailed once again by the "lacunae" (RT 2, 90) – the voids in the asylum seeker' tale that the caseworker would like to fill in. Not to invalidate the tale, this time, but to understand the actual plight of the people whose stories the process of asylum application inevitably obfuscates: "Once the questions press, the formal application is nothing; the story that is alive, the person that is alive in the story, lies in the answers to the hundreds of questions I want to ask at every turn" (RT 2, 90). But such understanding is not possible: within the space of the immigration detention system, in which the caseworker is embedded, their sympathy has no way to manifest itself in a gesture of solidarity. On the contrary: the caseworker is fully complicit in Salim's deportation."The Soldier's Tale", therfore, details the predicament of individuals reduced to a cog within a system whose injustice they can recognize but cannot – or do not bring themselves to – fight. In registering such impotent, ambivalent desire for solidarity, however, the tale makes the case for imagining and creating communities in which solidarity can engender practices of political change: physical, digital, and imaginary spaces where systems of oppression *can* be fought back, also, crucially, by those they affect the most – the whole point, I would argue, of *Refugee Tales*.

4 Conclusion: Two Caveats

In this essay I discussed how the *Refugee Tales* project, since its inception, has aimed to create activist, solidarity networks through various citizen media practices, especially through moments of storytelling in which refugees are active voices; and how it has empowered refugees to participate in spaces where they could imagine different, radical forms of citizenship. *In lieu* of a conclusion, I would like to propose two correctives to some possible implications of the reflections proposed thus far.

Firstly, I have argued that *Refugee Tales* creates spaces for imagining decolonial citizenship through citizen media practices. I do not consider, however, participation to citizen media practices by refugees or refugee activists as *inherently* decolonial, but only if these practices and forms of participation *consistently* go against the interconnected hierarchies of race, class, gender and mobility, aiming towards a total liberation from these hierarchies. This means that the unaffiliated citizens that join these practices should aim for an ever-expanding struggle that gradually connects with all the categories of oppressed people within the modern/colonial world-system, and not just specific groups of oppressed people. An example that is very relevant for *Refugee Tales* concerns the slippery distinction between refugees and other migrants. While it might be tactical to focus on the fight for a fairer asylum system, in the long run a truly decolonial citizenship should be conceived with the granting of universal mobility and asylum rights in mind, aiming at a broader form of mobility justice (see Sheller 2018) instead of simply settling for a more inclusive or lenient asylum system. I believe the project *has* placed itself within this decolonial framework, but this achievement should be defended and maintained through constant theoretical reflection and engagement, and is not guaranteed by the mere fact of platforming refugees.

Secondly, because asylum and mobility should be conceived as universal rights and not as a privilege, the importance of speaking and listening that I have stressed within this essay should always coexist with a right to opacity, as Édouard Glissant puts it (1997, 194). While it is crucial to enable refugees and migrants to tell their own stories, especially as active co-participants to a political project, the role of refugees should never be reduced to that of witnesses whose value depend on their ability to tell their story, even if the telling is meant to be aligned with the liberation of refugees; and no activist should ever feel *entitled* to listen to the story of a refugee because they have contributed to create conditions in which the sharing of that story could be more humane or conjoined with more politically progressive objectives. Universal right to asylum and mobility ultimately means, in this sense, liberation from the burden of testimony as necessary prelude of recognition.

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