Introduction: Life Writing through Refugee Tales

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Abstract

This cluster took off from an interdisciplinary and international workshop hosted at the University of Vienna in May 2022. Some of the original contributors turned their presentations into articles for this cluster; other articles were recruited later on. The original idea for both the workshop and cluster was inspired by the UK's *Refugee Tales* project, founded and organized by David Herd and Anna Pincus. Some of the articles collected here discuss the life writing aspect of this project from different angles and positions: Patience Agbabi as contributing author to the first *Refugee Tales* volume, Sandra Mayer as a scholar of literary celebrity, and Sylvia Mieszkowski as cultural analyst. Other articles take a look at other projects in which displaced persons work on life narratives alongside citizens of the host countries: Jessica Gustafsson writes about the Swedish *Flyktpodden* podcast and Helga Ramsey-Kurz about the Austrian ARENA initiative. Two articles provide the collection with an opening frame, as they focus on the paradoxes that are perpetually produced by immigration law and the cultural conceptions of 'the refugee' in the European context (Judith Kohlenberger) and in Austria, specifically for minors (Ayşe Dursun and Birgit Sauer). An Afterword by one of the founders and organizers of *Refugee Tales* (David Herd) closes the cluster, offering an assessment of the project's role in the context of the UK's political situation in the summer of 2023, just after both Houses of Parliament passed the Illegal Migration Bill, which the UN has publicly denounced as contrary to international law.

Keywords: (auto-)biographical narrative, life writing, displaced persons, refugees

Zusammenfassung

Diese Sonderausgabe nahm ihren Anfang in einem interdisziplinären und internationalen Workshop, der im Mai 2022 an der Universität Wien stattfand. Einige der in diesem Kontext gehaltenen Vorträge bildeten die Basis für Beiträge zu diesem Sonderheft. Andere Beiträge wurden nach dem Workshop akquiriert. Die Inspiration, zu diesem Thema zu arbeiten, verdanken wir dem *Refugee Tales*-Projekt aus dem Vereinigten Königreich, das von David Herd und Anna Pincus gegründet wurde und weiter organisiert wird. Einige der hier versammelten Beiträge diskutieren den *life writing*-Aspekt dieses Projekts aus unterschiedlichen fachlichen Perspektiven: Patience Agbabi als Autorin, die einen Text zum ersten *Refugee Tales*-Band beigetragen hat; Sandra Mayer als Forscherin zum Phänomen *celebrity* im Literaturbetrieb; Sylvia Mieszkowski aus kulturanalytischer Sicht. Weitere Beiträge widmen sich anderen Projekten, in denen Flüchtlinge gemeinsam mit Bürger*innen ihres Gastlandes an auto-biographischen Texten arbeiten: Jessica Gustafsson schreibt über den schwedischen Podcast *Flyktpodden* und Helga Ramsey-Kurz über das von Innsbruck aus initiierte ARENA-Projekt. Zwei Aufsätze, die sich beide mit den Paradoxien der Flüchtlingspolitik beschäftigen, eröffnen den Rahmen dieser Sonderausgabe. Der erste beleuchtet Paradoxien, die im Kontext europäischer Einwanderungsgesetze und hartnäckiger kultureller Stereotype über ‚den Flüchtling' unweigerlich und fortlaufend produziert werden (Judith Kohlenberger); der zweite analysiert die Erfahrungen minderjähriger Geflohener in Österreich aus der Sicht der Politikwissenschaft (Ayşe Dursun und Birgit Sauer). Das Nachwort zu unserer Sondernummer wurde von einem der Gründer und Organisatoren des *Refugee Tales*-Projekts, David Herd, verfasst. Es umreißt die Rolle dieses Projekts im Kontext der politischen Lage im Vereinigten Königreich im Sommer 2023, kurz nachdem beide Kammern des britischen Parlaments das Gesetz zur Illegalen Einwanderung (Illegal Migration Bill) verabschiedet haben, das von der UN als mit internationalem Recht unvereinbar deklariert wurde.

Schlüsselwörter: (Auto-)biographisches Erzählen, life writing, Vertriebene, Flüchtlinge

In March 2023, public debates around the UK government's asylum policy reached fever pitch when British football legend and popular BBC *Match of the Day* presenter Gary Lineker was temporarily suspended from the programme. Lineker had taken to Twitter to criticize Conservative Home Secretary Suella Braverman's announcement of the government's proposed Illegal Migration Bill, which – when it becomes law – will severely clamp down on those entering the country illegally.[1] Individuals without access to safe and legal routes of escape, and hence often forced to make their perilous journeys across the channel by boat or in the back of – or, for that matter, under – a lorry, will be removed to a 'safe third country like Rwanda' and permanently denied the right to claim asylum in the UK.[2] In direct response to Braverman's emphatic 'Enough is enough. We must stop the boats',[3] Lineker tweeted: 'Good heavens, this is beyond awful'.[4] The tweet immediately triggered a heated discussion on the platform, which became more antagonistic when Lineker defended his position by posting a further tweet in which he controversially compared the rhetoric employed by Braverman to National-Socialist propaganda: 'There is no huge influx. We take far fewer refugees than other major European countries. This is just an immeasurably cruel policy directed at the most vulnerable people in language that is not dissimilar to that used by Germany in the 30s […]'.[5] Not surprisingly, Lineker's comments were severely condemned by the government and Tory MPs, urging the BBC to take action against its employee's alleged breach of the organization's social media guidelines.

The BBC's subsequent suspension of Lineker led to an enormous public outcry and expressions of solidarity by his *Match of the Day* co-hosts and other high-profile BBC presenters, which effectively amounted to a strike action.[6] Barely three days later, the BBC was forced to make a U-turn in the face of the overwhelming public support for Lineker, who was quietly reinstated as the show's host. While the BBC agreed to an independent review of its social media and impartiality policy, Lineker made it clear that not only did he consider his statements justified and 'factually accurate' but that he fully intended to continue using his social media channels to speak out on issues of migration and asylum.[7] He did so immediately after the BBC lifted its suspension, thanking his supporters, but also adding: 'however difficult the last few days have been, it simply doesn't compare to having to flee your home from prosecution or war to seek refuge in a land far away. It's heartwarming to have seen the empathy towards their plight from so many of you.'[8] In the end, the BBC's controversial decision massively backfired when, in a bizarre and not unironic turn of events, BBC chair Richard Sharp became embroiled in his own impartiality scandal and had to step down from his position at the end of April 2023. Sharp gave in to mounting public pressure for his failure to disclose his role in helping to secure a personal loan in 2021

to then Prime Minister Boris Johnson[9] – a clear conflict of interest that smacks of a systematic Tory takeover of the country's cultural institutions and their inevitable susceptibility to government influence.

In July 2023, after a lengthy ping-pong negotiation over amendments, the Illegal Migration Bill was passed by both Houses of Parliament and, as we finalize this introduction, awaits being signed into law by King Charles III. Yet, the Lineker case exemplifies the rising levels of hostility and antagonism that characterize the current public debate around asylum policy in the UK. It also bears testimony to a widespread feeling of resistance to the government's plans. Specifically, it demonstrates the powerful impact of well-known public figures who make use of their popularity, visibility, and access to broad and diverse publics, not only to voice government-critical opinions but also to mobilize public support that can translate into activist pressure. This capacity to focus and channel public attention is undoubtedly part of the rationale behind campaign videos such as 'Refugees Not Criminals'. Commissioned by the Refugee Council, this video boasts an impressive cast of global celebrities including Emma Thompson, Meryl Streep, Sylvester Stallone, and Benjamin Zephaniah. Activating the potent affective relationship between celebrities and their audiences, the video has the protagonists directly addressing the viewers, who are placed 'in the position of a refugee – a mother, a grandmother, or a child – who has been forced from their home because of war devastating their country'.[10] Widely spread on Twitter via the hashtags #NotACriminal and #TogetherWithRefugees, the video was designed as a response to Braverman's announcement and is meant to make UK citizens aware of, and rouse them to take action against, a deeply inhuman policy and practice.

We submitted the original proposal for this cluster in 2021, the year of the 70th anniversary of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a UN-ratified document that defines the legal status of refugees and outlines nation states' responsibilities towards them. This was six years after the so-called 'refugee crisis', which saw rights guaranteed by the Convention eroded, undermined, talked away by populist discourse, and only a few days after the launch of volume IV in the *Refugee Tales* book series, which has been attracting international attention.

According to the *World Migration Report 2022*, published in December 2021 by the Director General at the 112th session by the Council of the UN-related International Organisation for Migration (IOM), roughly one in thirty people worldwide was an international migrant in 2020.[11] The exact number – lower than originally expected, due to travel restrictions in the wake of Covid-19 – is 281 million, in other words, 3.6 percent of the world's total population. Then, in March 2022, the Russian Federation

invaded Ukraine, forcing another 8 million people into exile.[12] This spectrum of migrants is extremely broad and includes well-paid cosmopolitans, at one end, as well as the forcefully displaced and dispossessed, at the other.

In our cluster, we focus on refugees who had to flee persecution in their home countries, seek safety elsewhere, and are trying to build a new life and re-attain their status as subjects, partly through narrating their life stories and experiences. Specifically, it dedicates itself to exploring tales told about and by people who have been seeking asylum in Europe. As a publication, it grew out of an international, interdisciplinary workshop titled *Refugee Tales*, which was co-hosted by Sandra Mayer, Sylvia Mieszkowski, and Ricarda Nater-Mewes at the University of Vienna in May 2022 as part of the Long Night of Research.[13] While Mayer specializes in celebrity studies and shares a research focus on life writing with Mieszkowski, Nater-Mewes and Mieszkowski are interested, respectively, in stress and its cultural representations. Kevin Potter, replacing Nater-Mewes for the editorial project, brings his expertise in migrant literature to the table. Based on the workshop, our cluster explores the paradoxes that are produced around refugees (see the contributions by Judith Kohlenberger and Ayşe Dursun / Birgit Sauer). It also analyzes two attempts at providing visibility or giving voice to those often made invisible or rendered mute by media reports on migration: *Flyktpodden*,[14] a Swedish podcast that focuses on connections between forced migration and the exchange of experiences (see the contribution by Jessica Gustafsson), and reports that are part of ARENA (the Archive of REfugee NArratives),[15] which brings students and refugees in Austria together in a dialogue that results in life writing (see the contribution by Helga Ramsey-Kurz). Meanwhile, the title of our cluster – *Refugee Tales* – pays homage to the eponymous activist project based in the UK (see the contributions by Patience Agbabi, Sandra Mayer, Sylvia Mieszkowski, and the Afterword by David Herd), which first prompted us to organize a workshop around it.

Founded in 2014 by Anna Pincus, the current Director of the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group, and David Herd, Professor of Poetry at the University of Kent at Canterbury, *Refugee Tales* is an activist project of collective protest. The UK is the only country in Europe whose immigration laws allow indefinite immigration detention, and *Refugee Tales* calls for an end to this practice in breach of all definitions of human rights. The project, which attracted considerable celebrity support over the past few years,[16] has three main strands – visits, walks, and tales – that interconnect: some visits turn into collaborations with authors and thus to published tales (as was the case with Patience Agbabi's 'The Refugee's Tale', the writing process of which she discusses in her contribution to this cluster); some tales are read during lunch-breaks and at the

end of each walking day; some walks are joined by some of the writers and other volunteer visitors. As a whole, *Refugee Tales* not only aims to provide immediate help to the currently detained, but also works towards replacing current immigration law that allows for indefinite immigration detention in the UK with one that enshrines a temporally limited form of detention. Beyond the mere change in legislation, the *Refugee Tales* project also tries to help (re-)grow a culture of welcome that has been thoroughly lost.

Visits

There are two Immigration Removal Centres near Gatwick Airport – Tinsley House and Brook House – both of which are visited by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group and both of which hold persons who have been detained for many different reasons. As an independent report, commissioned by the private security firm which operates both facilities, details, '[d]etainees fall into one of three categories: foreign national offenders who have served a prison sentence in the UK and are awaiting deportation (known as TSFNOs); those detained while their asylum application is considered; and others who are thought to have entered or stayed in the UK illegally (sometimes referred to as overstayers).'[17] As confirmed by Anna Pincus, the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group visits any person in detention 'who self-refers to the charity' and does 'not exclude anyone or prioritize anyone according to the reason why they are detained'.[18] Organized by the GDWG, volunteer visitors join people who are being detained at an Immigration Removal Centre for a few hours to give them the opportunity to have a conversation free of aggression, administrative burden or immediate consequence for their asylum application. As footage recorded undercover by Callum Tulley, a custody officer employed by G4S,[19] for the BBC documentary programme *Panorama*[20] shows, these detention facilities subject detained persons, who have never been accused (let alone convicted) of any crime, not only to a prison routine but sometimes also to verbal abuse and physical mistreatment.[21]

Immigration Detention Centres (IDCs) and Immigrant Removal Centres (IRCs) are our time's manifestations of the concentration camp, as Giorgio Agamben already pointed out in the 1990s, theorizing them as sites of 'inclusive exclusion',[22] as '*the space that opens up when the state of exception starts to become the rule*' (emphasis in the original).[23] They are the most sinister of 'non-places', in the sense of Marc Augé,[24] and characterized, as Stephanie Malia Hom maintains, by the '*via negativa* lived by the people within them'.[25] The general idea behind the *Refugee Tales* visits is to break the IDC's routine of soul-destroying tedium, and to counter the noise and violence

(sometimes actively) produced by the guards, the rules, and some of the centres' architectural features, to maximize detained persons' discomfort. Visitors, who come prepared to listen and to share stories, try to provide a calm space in which conversation can restore for the detained person some of the humanity which is being destroyed by disciplinary surroundings explicitly designed to turn people into objects.

Walks

Both the *Refugee Tales* project's organized walks and the texts published as 'tales' draw on Geoffrey Chaucer's medieval literary collection of narratively framed life stories, in which different characters – amongst them the Miller, the Knight, and the Wife of Bath – tell to their fellow pilgrims on the road to Canterbury Cathedral. This allusion also gestures to the highly pertinent interconnection between mobility (specifically unaided by technology, i.e. walking), history, and the social (and thus also political) visibility of human community and discursive exchange. In particular, we will recall that in the fourteenth century, when Chaucer was writing, the pilgrimage served two important literary functions. On the one hand, it was well-understood to offer a means of travel available to people of all classes and social positions: gaining permission from church officials, pilgrims could undertake a journey that would allow them to seek penance or enlightenment, or offer a way for them to perform a ritual that was supposed to help along their salvation. On the other hand, a pilgrimage offers something important for a narrative structure, as it spatializes the passage through life itself. To give one example: the Knight in 'The Wife of Bath's Tale' has to learn 'What thing it is that women most desiren';[26] and as a result of his having undertaken an arduous pilgrimage (in his case, as a form of penance), he in turn achieves insights into and enlightenment about women's 'sovereynetee',[27] much as one (hopefully) should in one's passage into adulthood. As such, a story of movement and the checkpoints along one's travel stand in for moments in one's personal development, paralleling struggles and encounters that shape our selves and subjectivities.

Significantly, in the case of *Refugee Tales*, there is an added function. Considering detained persons are stuck within an enforced limbo – a moment of suspending their passage from one place to the next, but also in temporarily freezing them in an indefinite present – walking counteracts, on spatial terms, the stand-still that defines life in detention. Walking and mobility offer potentials for collaboration, togetherness, and solidarity, much like one's myriad encounters in life can offer edifying possibilities. Similar to the way that the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* are brought together in the least likely manner, so, too, do detained persons experience connection

within a regime that otherwise enforces stress,[28] isolation, and disillusionment. Here, again, walking is *itself* a regime of life writing, enunciating life as such across an extensive, spatial assemblage.

Since 2015, *Refugee Tales* has been organizing annual walks of a few days each, some of which begin or end at locations that are connected to the history of legislation or the history of immigration in England.[29] In 2015, the walk began in Dover, the UK port town located at the narrowest point of the English Channel, and therefore a preferred point of crossing from/to continental Europe. Dover was chosen as the walk's starting point, though, because, at the time, it was the site of an Immigration Removal Centre that was erected – possibly with symbolism in mind or else producing terrible irony by this choice of location – at the site of a nineteenth-century fortress, built to guard against Napoleonic invasion, on the White Cliffs.[30] In the first year, the walkers' path took them to Crawley, a small town in Sussex. It is an area, populated since the Stone Age, that now lies at the edge of Gatwick Airport and is thus the site of Brook House, another IRC made infamous by *Panorama*.

The walk of 2016 was immediately preceded by a large-scale forum, held at the University of Kent, on 'Being Detained Indefinitely: A Day of Thought, Performance and Action'. It opened with an address by Pious, a man with personal experience of detention, who is still involved with the *Refugee Tales* project and, more recently, spoke to Parliament on this matter (see David Herd's Afterword to this cluster). In the walk's second year, participants started in Canterbury (one of the UK's most famous pilgrimage destinations) and finished in Westminster, thus approaching the seat of Parliament from the south-east. Westminster also served as the end point of the walks in 2017 and 2018, being approached from the west, when the walk started in Runnymede (where the Magna Carta was signed in the early thirteenth century), and from the north, when walkers set out from St. Albans in Hertfortshire (where the first draft of the Magna Carta was written), respectively. In 2019, the walk was based on the plan of tracing the border, in this case the south coast of England, eastwards. It began in Brighton (a settlement that goes back to neolithic times, but has been hosting several Tory Party conventions in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries) and ended in Hastings (site of the battle which brought England under Norman legislation in 1066). Due to Covid-19, there was no collective walking in the summers of 2020 and 2021, but a host of walks in small pods 'all over' in 2020, and within Canterbury in 2021, still happened. A year later, when the pandemic that had put detainees (just as convicted prisoners) in disproportionate danger began to subside and vaccination rates once more allowed social mingling, the walk took off from Merstham, located on the North Downs Way, and, on a National Trail across the south

of England, led to Winchester (one of the earliest administrative centres at the largest town of Roman Britain and King Alfred of Wessex's residence). In the summer of 2023, the route took walkers from the Three Bridges (a neighbourhood of Crawley that became well-connected through the railway that links Brighton and London and is near Tinsley House, the other of Gatwick's two IRCs) to Worthing on the south coast of West Sussex, which is surrounded by the iconic chalk cliffs of the South Downs. Walking together in solidarity, detainees, organizers, volunteers, and other supporters constitute a form of *communitas*, embodying a seemingly near-extinct culture of welcome, by making themselves visible in public space and claiming the ancient 'right of way', a right to mobility and thus a form of freedom that detention painfully takes away. As David Herd explains in his Afterword to our cluster, a hearing was granted by the UK Parliament,[31] so the *Refugee Tales* project could present the findings of its own Walking Inquiry into Immigration Detention. Results are pending.

Tales

Although a case could be made that the *Refugee Tales* project's two so-called 'walk films'[32] constitute a form of audio-visual life writing, it is predominantly the third strand of the project – the collection of tales – that overlaps most obviously with our interest in the genre. To date, Comma Press has published four volumes of *Refugee Tales*, which came out in 2016, 2017, 2019, and 2021. Between them, they contain 58 texts, written by (more or less) famous Anglophone authors, based on conversations these writers had with detainees, who related their life stories.[33] The collaborative origin of most[34] of these pieces – predominantly narrative texts, but also a few poems – is made explicit by the subtitle 'as told to', which follows the standardized title of Chaucerian pattern ('The Migrant's Tale', 'The Interpreter's Tale', 'The Barrister's Tale', 'The Embroiderer's Tale', 'The Activist's Tale' etc.) and precedes the respective author's name. Among these professional writers are prize winners as well as authors of bestselling fictional texts, such as Abdulrazak Gurnah, Ali Smith, David Constantine, Kamila Shamsie, Bernardine Evaristo, and Patience Agbabi. By producing written tales out of what their interlocutors related orally, these literary professionals aim to give form to the life stories and provide the detainees with a voice. Both of these actions are meant to contribute to restoring the sense of subjectivity permanently under attack in a system designed to dehumanize. At the same time, by bringing a certain degree of fame to the table, the writers – through their generally recognizable names – help attract readers and thus widen public awareness for the problem of indefinite detention.

Ambivalent in_visibilizations

Quite a few of the contributions to this cluster are interested in exploring what effects the possible invisibilization of refugees can have. For instance, many consider the effects on public opinion or political discourse; or what hypervisibilization of particular types of refugees by the mainstream media can lead to, as far as a host country's population's perception of refugees in general is concerned. Others explore what effects – for instance on policy makers, but also on artists and the public – can be produced through activist projects that might or might not harness star-power for its cause, thereby providing visibility where there was none before. What interests us, specifically, in this cluster, is that testing and negotiating forms and degrees of visibility and invisibility often produces ambivalences. To notice, describe, and explore these, we find, is important, even if some of the paradoxes that are produced by these ambivalences cannot be resolved. What we mean by 'ambivalences', in this context, is that not all forms of visibility are only good or only bad; and that not all types of invisibility are inherently, exclusively harmful or purely protective. As a result, different permutations of positively and negatively connoted forms of in_visibilty need to be acknowledged and their (potential) consequences taken into account.

The simplest way of explaining that not all forms of invisibility are necessarily of disadvantage, is to point out that invisibility might confer a much-needed form of protection. As an example of this, the first two volumes of *Refugee Tales* grant complete anonymity to the tellers of the life stories, who are thus allowed to disappear behind the names of the professional authors who have agreed to write down their tales. While this successfully protects the tellers of their life stories from possible retaliatory or vindictive action by the authorities, whose coarse, sometimes negligent, and sometimes cruel behaviour the collected tales help to reveal, it also renders the tellers invisible as political subjects, which is an example of invisibilization operating in a far less positive way. As a consequence, from volume III onwards, *Refugee Tales* also contains tales that were not written down by famous authors but by the persons who actually lived the particular life that is narrated. As tellers of life stories become their own authors, they gain visibility: now, the line below the respective tale's title represents this person by a single capital letter, and the otherwise typical ascription 'as told to', plus author name, changes. As a case in point, in *Refugee Tales III*, 'The Orphan's Tale as told to David Constantine' is followed by 'The Foster Child's Tale as told by A'. The single letter A or, in some cases, double letters still maintain/s

protective anonymity, since it is not clear whether it/they form/s part of the teller's middle or family name at all, or whether they are initials. Yet, the *place* of the teller of the tale is marked and their voice replaces any mediating writer's voice. Between them, volumes III and IV of *Refugee Tales* contain eight such tales that, no doubt, empower the tellers to become narrators/authors of their own lives' stories. But it is hard to deny that without the established framework provided by the previous two volumes, most particularly by the glamorous names of well-known, popular, prize-winning, sometimes outright famous authors, the reading public's attention might not have been attracted sufficiently to a volume that also contains a tale by 'R' or 'N' or 'JB'.

An even more negative form of invisibilization is that created by the fact that bail hearings, in the UK, are not conducted as a 'court of records'.[35] This dynamic results in the fact that in the legal process – at the end of which a judge decides whether bail from detention is granted to a person or not – the detained person's life story does not play any part. At the same time, visibilization, too, can have drawbacks or even pose a real threat, as exposure of identity or even only exposure of status (for instance by denunciation) might well result in deportation. Ultimately, however, *Refugee Tales* as a whole is driven by the belief that a carefully controlled, selective, and respectful form of visibilization is needed to bring it to a broader public's attention that indefinite detention exists, what the process looks like, what it can do and does to people, and what the consequences of these actions can be.

Theories of detention and carceral logic

This cluster remains in dialogue with the ongoing theoretical work on forced migration, bordering, detention, and (im)mobility; and readers should remain attentive towards the extent to which *Refugee Tales* and life writing enhance the scholarly work in this field. With respect to detention, one must also consider the forces of 'refugee warehousing'.[36] Such a concept dramatizes the dehumanization and instrumentalization of refugees in detention, describing 'the multiyear impact of such restricted mobility, enforced idleness, and dependency in camps or other segregated settlements'.[37] Activists have used this term to strategic effect; being warehoused, after all, has a connotation of existing in a state of depleting value and surplus inventory. To use such a term to describe humans in makeshift prison settings is, then, a powerful way to comment on our ongoing negligence and indifference towards detained persons.

In the past ten years we have witnessed a growth of scholarship around bordering, with researchers re-examining the material consequences of boundaries, states, sovereignty, identity, and movement.[38] These studies examine how new and sophisticated border regimes – including efforts to construct new walls, externalize borders, and employ new surveillance technologies – have intensified detention systems in ways that are increasingly not only more complex and widespread, but also more profitable. After all, the need to discipline, manage, define, and settle immigrants reinforces a carceral logic[39] in response to the presumed criminality that comes with crossing (abstract and real) borders.[40] Against this regime, though, life writing creates possibilities of seeing and recognizing the complexity of refugee identity beyond the ways state organs try to reify them within definable boundaries (such as those needed to receive asylum and visas). Finally, the paradigm that has grown to recognize the ubiquity of movement – the so-called New Mobilities Paradigm – has offered a tremendous amount of work relating to the paradoxes of detention within this otherwise mobile regime.[41] In their own ways, scholars within this discourse have helped us see that detention plays its own role in creating tensions and contradictions within regimes of mobility. As the next section, and the articles within this cluster, will show, the theoretical field with respect to forced displacement and detention is rich and multi-faceted, and offers more avenues for dialogue within life writing, migration, detention, and mobility.

Contributions

In the articles that follow, we have called upon the scholarly engagements, ambiguities, tensions, and conflicts that arise within refugee life stories and *Refugee Tales*. These are stories that include different forms of media, the constellation of legal problems and discourses to which refugees and displaced persons are subjected, and the wider world of storytelling and life writing that shapes refugee representation. To begin, Judith Kohlenberger intervenes into the scholarly debate around migration and the 'refugee question', drawing our attention to a pattern rightfully described as the 'refugee paradox'. Kohlenberger convincingly argues that, in a system governed by the cultural assumptions of, and biases toward, refugees and asylum-seekers, the subjects who have to navigate this system have to embody paradoxical relationships not only to their host country, but also to their own experience as refugees. On the one hand, Kohlenberger argues, one is expected to be noticeably vulnerable and conform to an idea of a 'deserving' person in need; on the other, one also has to comply with an expectation of self-reliance. Such traits come into conflict when asylum-seekers rely

upon the approval of immigration officials who might, unreasonably, expect a stoic, striving, economically-affluent person who also illustrates the pitiable circumstances from which they departed. These expectations that confront refugees are well-documented, not just in what they outwardly convey, but also, as Ayşe Dursun and Birgit Sauer show us, in their affective and differing interests. Dursun and Sauer call upon a series of qualitative interviews that illuminate the range of paradoxical interests and affects, and culminate in the lived experience of unaccompanied minors who are seeking asylum. The narrations these minors offer dispel any notion that their interests automatically align or identify them with the broader system. Instead, they make the ways in which they construct affectivity on their own terms more legible. Continuing on from this line of thinking – one that recognizes the systematic forces that reinforce affectivity and intensity – Sylvia Mieszkowski draws on the theory tradition of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, to take a broader look at UK immigration policy, indefinite detention, and the *Refugee Tales* project as different apparatuses that either contribute to, or attempt to alleviate, stress. Mieszkowski suggests that stress is not merely a grudgingly accepted by-product of the UK immigration complex, but that producing it may, in fact, be the point of a system replete with solvable paradoxes and contradictions. She argues that since the UK immigration complex is an apparatus with many nodes, deliberately constructed to reinforce and produce stress, the *Refugee Tales* project has built a counter-apparatus that attaches itself to these nodes, with a triple goal: to make visible that stress is used as a tool against refugees and asylum-seekers; to agitate against the conditions that produce this stress; and, ultimately, to abolish indefinite detention.

In Jessica Gustafsson's piece that follows, the *Flyktpodden* media project and podcast series offer an inspiring source of refugee life writing and storytelling. The project facilitates dialogues between refugees and asylum-seekers who arrive not only from different contexts, but from different generations, fostering a rich understanding of the various patterns that govern the history of displacement and diaspora. Gustafsson's article furthermore offers a lesson in the ethics of listening and hearing, ensuring that stories have the impact they are meant to have, and that the proper attention is given to those who tell them. Such a structure also circumvents the limited and narrow assumptions about migration that have plagued news media all over the world. Overcoming simplistic narratives that culminate around refugee life writing also means overcoming the dominant model of 'activist' and 'intellectual', leading to Sandra Mayer's contribution to this cluster. Mayer helps illuminate the collaborative, dialogic, and inclusive nature of the *Refugee Tales* project, and how it decentres and destabilizes the image of the celebrity activist, particularly the appeals to

marketability and authority that come with such an image. What takes centre stage, Mayer argues, is the collective storytelling itself, allowing the collaboration to activate struggle rather than conforming to the ideology of individualism – an ideology that, while marketable, obscures the actual conditions of collaborative activism. Taking a further step into the domain of collaborative storytelling and life writing, Helga Ramsey-Kurz shares another collaborative storytelling project called the Archive of Refugee Narratives (ARENA), an initiative developed at the University of Innsbruck, Austria, and that has since expanded to the Universities of Bochum and Liège. This undertaking helps to show, on the one hand, the kinds of stories refugees are compelled to divulge to immigration officials while suggesting, on the other, that there are preconceived, discursive, and cultural assumptions about what counts as a legitimate refugee story. Much like the *Flyktpodden* project that Gustafsson writes about or the qualitative interviews that Dursun and Sauer conduct, ARENA, too, offers a corrective to otherwise one-dimensional discourses and assumptions about the lives that refugees live. The collaboration process involved in making these stories available remains at the forefront of these efforts.

We are honoured to be able to include, as the concluding article of our cluster, a contribution by the award-winning poet Patience Agbabi, who offers her first-hand account of the very method behind, and the genealogy of, her long poem, 'The Refugee's Tale', which was published in the first volume of *Refugee Tales*. Developing a rich, metatextual analysis alongside her own writing process, Agbabi tells us what kind of troubling and often difficult questions needed to be asked and answered to construct this intricate work. Being offered insight by a *Refugee Tales* author also helps illuminate the level of ingenuity and talent that lies behind such a collaborative project, which reminds us that life writing always requires a degree of creativity, but that writers have to contend with many of the same paradoxes and ethical conflicts towards which many of our contributors gesture. Ultimately, the articles we have grouped together for this special issue share an important value: that stories offer possibilities that are unavailable within the hostile immigration environment and the limbo of indefinite detention. We are also honoured to have been provided with an Afterword by David Herd, one of the co-founders of the *Refugee Tales* project. In it, he offers the unifying theme that no project of this scale is ever done alone, and presents an inspiring look at how the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group and *Refugee Tales* have always been attached to, and geared toward, public advocacy. Herd's final words make sure we do not lose sight of what is at stake, both for asylum-seekers and detainees, and for citizens of the UK. Indefinite detention must be brought to an end, and storytelling, walking, speaking, listening, and writing all function as pieces within

this wider project, while animating each other and producing possibilities to which each of us aspire: more just circumstances for refugees and detainees.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

[1] For details see David Herd's Afterword to this cluster. Cf. also: Anonymous, 'Illegal Migration Bill completes passage through Parliament', *UK Parliament: House of Lords*, 18 July 2023, https://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2023/may-2023/lords-scrutinises-illegal-migration-bill/, date accessed: 1 August 2023.

[2] Cf. UK Home Office, 'Policy Paper: Illegal Migration Bill: Overarching Factsheet', *gov.uk*, 28 April 2023, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/illegal-migration-bill-factsheets/illegal-migration-bill-overarching-factsheet, date accessed: 8 May 2023.

[3] On 4 January 2023, in his first speech of the year, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak made five pledges on behalf of the government he heads. The last of these reads: 'We will pass new laws to stop small boats, making sure that if you come to this country illegally, you are detained and swiftly removed.' Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street and The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, 'Prime Minister Outlines His Five Key Priorities for 2023', *gov.uk*, 5 January 2023, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-outlines-his-five-key-priorities-for-2023, date accessed: 1 August 2023. Braverman tweeted about this on @ukhomeoffice, *Twitter*, 7 March 2023, 9:32 AM, https://twitter.com/ukhomeoffice/status/1633022905628884992, date accessed: 8 May 2023.

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[6] Cf. for instance, Waterson, Jim, 'Match of the Day to Air Without Presenter or Pundits after Gary Lineker's Suspension', *The Guardian*, 10 March 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/football/2023/mar/10/gary-lineker-step-back-match-of-the-day-bbc, date accessed: 2 May 2023.

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[9] Cf. for instance, Waterson, Jim, 'Richard Sharp Resigns as BBC Chair after Failing to Declare Link to Boris Johnson Loan', *The Guardian*, 28 April 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/media/2023/apr/28/richard-sharp-resigns-as-bbc-chair-after-months-of-mounting-pressure, date accessed: 10 May 2023.

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[11] International Organization for Migration, 'World Migration Report 2022', *IOM Publications Platform*, https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2022, date accessed: 7 March 2023.

[12] The Center for Strategic and International Studies quotes 7,536,433 Ukrainian refugees for 30 September 2022; Yayboke, Erol, Anastasia Strouboulis and Abigail Edwards, 'Update on Forced Displacement around Ukraine', *CSIS*, 3 October 2022, https://www.csis.org/analysis/update-forced-displacement-around-ukraine, date accessed: 13 July 2023. The UNHCR puts the number at 8,075,440 as of 15 February 2023; UNHCR, 'Ukraine Refugee Situation', *Operations Data Portal*, https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine, date accessed: 13 July 2023.

[13] A brief report of the workshop is available; Potter, Kevin, 'Refugee Tales: Lange Nacht der Forschung', *University of Vienna*, 30 May 2022, https://anglistik.univie.ac.at/news-events/einzelnachrichten-ansicht-events/news/refugee-tales-lange-nacht-der-forschung/?tx_news_pi1%5Bcontroller%5D=News&tx_news_pi1%5Baction%5D=detail&cHash=8f9e02d5453eb3d52953e2cbcebfd664, date accessed: 13 July 2023.

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[15] Anonymous, 'ARENA: Archive of Refugee Encounter Narratives', *University of Innsbruck*, https://www.uibk.ac.at/anglistik/arena/, date accessed: 13 July 2023.

[16] This 'star-power' – brought mainly by writers and actors – is best demonstrated by one video shot in support of limiting detention to 28 days: Anonymous, '28 for 28', *Refugee Tales*, https://www.refugeetales.org/28-for-28, date accessed: 13 July 2023.

[17] Lampard, Kate, and Ed Marsden, *Independent investigation into concerns about Brook House immigration removal centre. A report for the divisional chief executive of G4S Care and Justice and the main board of G4S plc*, November 2018, https://s3-eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/brookhouse-prod-storage-15trcu6wv3q1/uploads/2022/03/CJS005923_001-241-244-Independent-investigation-by-Kate-Lampard-and-Ed-Marsden---01-NOV-2018.pdf, date accessed: 1 August 2023.

[18] Email Anna Pincus to Sylvia Mieszkowski, 27 April 2023.

[19] G4S is a multinational security firm. The name of the undercover cameraman was published by the BBC. Anonymous, 'Detainees "Mocked and Abused" at Immigration Centre', *BBC*, 1 September 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-41121692, date accessed: 13 July 2023.

[20] The *Panorama* episode titled 'Undercover: Britain's Immigration Secrets' was broadcast on 4 September 2017 and is publicly accessible: BBC, 'Undercover: Britain's Immigration Secrets', episode of *Panorama*, 2017, *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_fp0QLDKgME, date accessed: 15 June 2023.

[21] While the Lampard/Marsden report (commissioned by G4S) confirmed verbal abuse, its authors were unable to corroborate physical abuse of detainees by guards. Having said that, several staff had been fired by G4S before the review of the facility took place.

[22] Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* [1995], trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998, 8.

[23] Agamben, Giorgio, 'What is a Camp?' [1994], in: *Means without End: Notes on Politics* [1996], trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, 37–45, 38, 9.

[24] Augé, Marc, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*, London: Verso, 2009.

[25] Hom, Stephanie Malia, *Empire's Mobius Strip: Historical Echoes in Italy's Crisis of Migration and Detention*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2019, 65.

[26] Chaucer, Geoffrey, 'The Wife of Bath's Tale and Prologue', in: Stephen Greenblatt (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Major Authors*, 10th edition, volume 1, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, [-1400]2018, 237–266, line 905.

[27] Idem, line 1038.

[28] See the contribution by Sylvia Mieszkowski in this cluster.

29 The walks' routes are prepared and practiced by a group of *Refugee Tales* volunteers, led by Christina Fitzsimons. Warm thanks to David Herd, who provided this and many other details in this subsection.

30 This particular IRC has been shut down since. For a report on it and its specific location, cf. Herd, David, 'The View from Dover', *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, 3 March 2015, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/view-dover, date accessed: 22 February 2023.

31 Anonymous, 'A Walking Inquiry into Immigration Detention', *Refugee Tales*, https://www.refugeetales.org/walking-inquiry, date accessed: 13 July 2023.

32 One of these, by Tony Green of ITV News Meridian, was broadcast in July 2022. The other, by Edward Lawrenson and Sam Hooper, is available on the *Refugee Tales* website: https://www.refugeetales.org/walk-films.

33 Anonymous, 'Books', *Refugee Tales*, https://www.refugeetales.org/books, date accessed: 13 July 2023.

34 All of the pieces in volumes I and II of *Refugee Tales* are a product of collaboration. Some of the texts collected in the later volumes – six in *Refugee Tales III* and two in *Refugee Tales IV* – were published under the anonymizing initials of the persons whose life the tales relate.

35 Herd, David, 'Afterword', in: Herd, David, and Anna Pincus (eds.), *Refugee Tales III*, London, Comma Press, 2019, 191.

36 Smith, Merrill, 'Warehousing Refugees: A Denial of Rights, a Waste of Humanity', in: *World Refugee Survey*, Washington: US Committee for Refugees, 2004, 38–56; Ehrkamp, Patricia, 'Geographies of Migration I: Refugees', in: *Progress in Human Geography* 41:6 (2016) 813–822; Sassen, Saskia, *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: Harvard UP, 2014; Fekete, Liz, 'The Deportation Machine: Europe, Asylum and Human Rights', in: *Race & Class* 47:1 (2005) 64–78; Vianelli, Lorenzo, 'Warehousing Asylum Seekers: The Logistification of Reception', in: *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 40:1 (2022) 41–59.

37 Sassen, 2014, 56.

38 Mezzadra, Sandro, and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor*, Durham: Duke UP, 2013; Brown, Wendy, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, New York: Zone Books, 2010; Nail, Thomas, *Theory of the Border*, Oxford & New York: Oxford UP, 2015; Sager, Alex, *Against Borders: Why the World Needs Free Movement of People,* London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020; Jones, Reece (ed.), *Open Borders: In Defense of Free Movement*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019.

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