



## In\_Visibilizing Stress: *Refugee Tales* as a Counter-Apparatus

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### Abstract

This article claims that the UK immigration complex is best understood as an apparatus (in the sense of Foucault and Agamben) that uses stress as a tool. It further argues that the *Refugee Tales* project acts as a counter-apparatus, and that the project's life writing branch makes visible the many roles which stress plays in the context of immigration legislation. Stress researchers in the humanities maintain that poverty is one of the greatest stressors (Baker), that cutting people off from their material and mental resources is the most effective way to produce stress (Hobfoll), and that disturbing established rhythms of stress and relaxation can lead to 'zombification' (Korovkin/Stephenson). Selected pieces of life writing by women and men in the four volumes of *Refugee Tales* published to date, shed light on how stress manifests for people caught up in the immigration apparatus. They do so by demonstrating how narrative can i) be a source of stress, ii) trigger stress originally caused by something else, iii) represent stress, iv) perform, v) communicate, but also vi) alleviate it. By visibilizing what the immigration apparatus keeps from view, the analysed pieces of life writing contribute to *Refugee Tales'* overall goal of putting an end to indefinite detention in the UK.

*Keywords:* Refugee Tales project, in\_visibilisation of stress, apparatus, life writing

### Zusammenfassung

Das Immigrations-System Großbritanniens ist, so die These dieses Beitrags, als Dispositiv (im Sinne Foucaults und Agambens) zu beschreiben, das Stress gezielt, aber

verdeckt, als Werkzeug zum Einsatz bringt. Das *Refugee Tales*-Projekt hingegen lese ich als dessen Gegen-Dispositiv, das versucht, der Unsichtbarmachung jener Rollen, die Stress im Immigrations-System spielen kann, entgegenzuwirken. Stressforscher\*innen in den Geisteswissenschaften haben Beweise dafür vorgelegt, dass Armut der größte Stressfaktor ist (Baker), dass der effektivste Weg, Menschen unter Stress zu setzen, darin besteht, sie von ihren Ressourcen abzuschneiden (Hobfoll), und dass die Unterbrechung etablierter Rhythmen von Belastung und Entspannung zur sogenannten ‚zombification‘ (Korovkin/Stephenson) führen kann. Einige der auto/biographischen Texte von Frauen und Männern in den bisher vorliegenden vier Bänden *Refugee Tales* werfen Schlaglichter darauf, wie Stress vom Immigrations-Dispositiv genutzt wird. Die Texte erreichen dies, indem sie Narrative mobilisieren, die aufzeigen, wie i) erzwungene Narration die Quelle von Stress sein kann, aber auch wie Erzählungen ii) Stress wiederaufrufen, der eigentlich einer anderen Quelle entspringt, iii) Stress repräsentieren, iv) ihn performieren, v) kommunizieren, aber auch vi) mildern können. Indem die auto/biographischen Erzählungen sichtbar machen was das Immigrations-Dispositiv im Verborgenen zu halten sucht, tragen sie zum Erreichen des Ziels bei, das sich das *Refugee Tales*-Projekt gesteckt hat: die Abschaffung der unbefristeten Festsetzung herbeizuführen.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Refugee Tales-Projekt, Un\_Sichtbarmachung von Stress, Dispositiv, biographisches Schreiben

## Introduction

Indefinite detention, as currently practised in the UK, thrives on making things invisible. The activist project *Refugee Tales* has been fighting to put an end to this since 2014; its participants and organizers make female and male detainees' stories known to the public, pressuring legislators to change the law that allows this exception to *habeas corpus* to persist. Invisibilization is crucial for the practice of indefinite detention and operates on many levels. Detention centres, for one, tend to be located at the periphery of society, such as the two Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs) at Gatwick Airport. Some are 'hidden in plain sight' at the outskirts of big cities, much in the way that Stephanie Malia Hom describes the Centro d'Identificazione e Espulsione (Centre of Identification and Expulsion; CIE) at Ponte Galeria at the edge of Rome.<sup>1</sup> Others are situated at the edge of the country, such as the former IRC in 'The Citadel' on Dover's Western Heights.<sup>2</sup> Mostly, what happens inside these centres remains hidden from the

public's view, unless undercover reporting – as was the case with *Panorama* in 2017<sup>3</sup> – provides a glimpse. Case workers often change during the course of asylum application processes, as these can take many months or even years. Information is not infrequently lost, potentially helpful corroborations are not seldomly disappeared, and – in a climate of suspicion – the gaps of knowledge that this mishandling creates work against the applicants. Moreover, bail hearings in the UK are not conducted at a 'court of record'.<sup>4</sup> As a result, detainees' life stories are completely invisibilized, and can play no part in the judge's decision to grant bail or not. Unless a project like *Refugee Tales* devotes energy to bringing it before the public gaze, another aspect remains hidden from view: the suffering detainees undergo, much of which results from systematically-produced stress and (often gendered) violence inflicted on people who are (in one way or another) caught up in the immigration apparatus.

To begin with, I will contextualize indefinite detention as the logical consequence of the then UK Home Secretary Theresa May's explicit policy goal of producing 'a really hostile environment'.<sup>5</sup> Next, I will argue that the life writing branch of *Refugee Tales* shines a light on the techniques that create this hostility. My core claim will be that the UK immigration complex operates by systematically creating stress – first and foremost for displaced persons of all genders, asylum seekers, and detainees, but also for other people involved in some capacity (such as case workers or lawyers) – in a way that dehumanizes everybody caught up in the process. I also argue that the legislation, organization, and administration of immigration in the UK needs to be understood as a network of relations, the purpose of which is not to process applications for asylum or legal immigration, but rather to generate stress. To support this claim, I will explain what an 'apparatus' is, in the sense that Michel Foucault, who coined the term in the late 1970s, and Giorgio Agamben, who expanded on it in the late 1990s, use the word. Next, I will expound why it is useful to think of *Refugee Tales* as a counter-apparatus. After that, I will analyse selected passages from women's and men's life stories collected in the four *Refugee Tales* volumes against the backdrop of stress research. Specifically, I will be referring to Stevan Hobfoll's 'conservation of resources theory', Michael Korovkin and Peter Stephenson's idea of 'zombification', and Dana Becker's description of 'stressism' and what it disguises. The goal is to use these concepts productively, so they can enable a better understanding of the life writing texts assembled by *Refugee Tales*. Moreover, this engagement with theory should demonstrate that the techniques employed within the 'really hostile environment', and what this environment does to people exposed to it, match the chief stressors mentioned above and their most likely effects. I hope to demonstrate that producing, administrating, and instrumentalizing stress lies at the heart of the UK

immigration apparatus, and that making this visible in order to put pressure on policy-makers by activating the electorate is *Refugee Tales'* weapon of choice as a counter-apparatus. Specifically, I propose that narrative, in the selected pieces from the project's volumes,<sup>6</sup> fulfils six functions in relation to stress: causing, triggering, representing, performing, communicating, and alleviating it. *Refugee Tales*, ultimately, uses these functions of narrative to work towards removing the greatest source of stress: indefinite detention.

### **The 'really hostile environment' as product of an apparatus**

Six years before the *Windrush* scandal<sup>7</sup> broke in 2018 and four years before her 'citizens of nowhere' speech,<sup>8</sup> at the Tory party conference 2016 in Birmingham, Theresa May, at the time Home Secretary, talked to *The Telegraph*. In this interview, and presumably expecting a positive reaction from the majority of the UK's electorate, she unequivocally stated one of her party's policy goals: 'The aim is to create here in Britain a really hostile environment for illegal immigration.'<sup>9</sup> May took office as PM in July 2016. Two months before that, almost to the day, the Immigration Bill received Royal Assent and entered into force as *The Immigration Act 2016*. Ever since, the ways in which this piece of legislation has been actively producing the 'really hostile environment' that May had promised are numerous.

Under this *Immigration Act*, it is illegal for a person who has applied for asylum to work; it is also illegal to open a bank account before 'leave to remain' has been granted (a status that can take years to achieve). The only legal means of payment available to non-detained asylum seekers is the Azure Card,<sup>10</sup> which is only accepted at designated shops and does not cover public transport, although asylum seekers are obliged to report regularly (often weekly) to assigned institutions to keep their application process pending and avoid detention. Sometimes the reporting location is the local police station, but it can be a facility many miles from their accommodation. Thus, Tory policy-makers have succeeded in creating the 'really hostile environment' for which they had been pushing for over a decade: by denying access to a social structure. This social structure includes a strong network, potential meaning-making opportunities, access to further one's qualifications, institutions to enable social integration, systems that enable them to acquire and safekeep funds, and mobility.

May's 'really hostile environment', however, also manifests administratively. Even under the best of circumstances, red tape can produce paradoxical<sup>11</sup> situations in which it is impossible to fulfil conflicting instructions. As a snippet of 'The Appellant's Tale' demonstrates, the familiar frustration with red tape takes on an existentially

threatening dimension inside the immigration complex. In only a few lines, the carefully ungendered speaker communicates their conviction that malicious intentions lie at the bottom of a process in which – for the appellant – everything depends on getting something right that, as it turns out, *cannot be done correctly*:

Make no mistake, you tell me: these movements are deliberate. [...] Everything is deliberate. ‘You know what they did?’ [...] they faxed you forms to apply for leave to remain that you must complete because they give you a deadline. Except the forms they send are the kind of forms you can only use if you are applying from abroad. Everything. Deliberate.<sup>12</sup>

The second-person narration used throughout ‘The Appellant’s Tale’ has the effect of shrinking the distance between reader and protagonist, thereby activating the reader’s own experience with red tape (albeit presumably in less risky circumstances) and the potential for them to identify with the protagonist. At the same time, the second-person pronoun keeps visible the distance between protagonist and narrator to whom the story is being told. This distance, too, is of significance. The rhetorical device draws attention to the tale’s collaborative origin, rather than making the teller of the tale (whose life is being narrated) disappear behind its narrator/author. In a system whose decisions over people’s lives render them invisible (again),<sup>13</sup> this is a deeply political narrative decision. The ‘you’ in the rhetorical question cited above, however, is a different ‘you’ than the one in the rest of the quoted passage: it is not the narrator who uses it, but the protagonist/teller of the life story, addressing the narrator/author of the tale. In effect, it furnishes the protagonist with some narrative authority over the story-in-the-tale, and makes it clear that the narrator relates a story he has heard from the person inhabiting this life. In other words, while the ‘you’ inside the rhetorical question emphasizes the life that is being lived and told, the ‘you’ in the rest of the tale puts stress on the listening to, and the process of writing down, that life story.

The interpretation put forward so emphatically by the protagonist of ‘The Appellant’s Tale’ – ‘Everything. Deliberate.’ – ascribes intentionality, yet, while reading the life writing collected in *Refugee Tales*, it becomes clear that there is no proper doer behind the deed. Instead, the administrative dead-end manifesting in the ‘wrong form’-story is the result of an impersonal system that has withdrawn all support. As Franz Kafka, Robert Musil, Kazuo Ishiguro, and – more recently and directly connected to (post-)Brexit Britain – Ali Smith have taught us,<sup>14</sup> entropy is the inevitable result. This occurs if no one is held accountable for manoeuvring people, who require help, through the labyrinthine administration of a state apparatus. ‘The

Appellant's Tale' – *ex negativo* – points to what would be required to create a welcoming, or even merely a non-hostile, environment<sup>15</sup> and describes how what could and, ideally, should be an ordered process declines into chaos, the brunt of which is felt most keenly by the already vulnerable.

From a less systemic and more individual perspective, what is expressed in the above-quoted passage from 'The Appellant's Tale' is the infliction of stress by paradox. Stress is the inevitable outcome when there is no obvious way to act correctly or – even worse – obviously no correct way to do so while action is *required* under pressurized situations. It is impossible, of course, to prove that any specific person *intentionally* sabotaged this appellant's application. Yet, this relatively simple and non-controversial step in the immigration process certainly seems geared towards provoking either a wrongly filled-in application or resignation on part of the appellant. The result is either no application at all or a missed deadline, both of which puts an appellant in the wrong and constitutes grounds for having the application rejected, and the appellant possibly forcefully removed or indefinitely detained, for which the blame – adding insult to injury – is put on the appellant.

When there is no doer behind a deed, the cause for a given effect must be sought in a structure, matrix, (social) system or ideology. Four decades before the UK Parliament passed *The Immigration Act 2016*, Michel Foucault, in an interview later included in Giorgio Agamben's pamphlet 'What Is An Apparatus?', shared a definition that helps to understand the UK immigration complex better:

What I'm trying to single out with this term is [...] a thoroughly heterogeneous set consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions [...]. The apparatus itself is the network that can be established between these elements.<sup>16</sup>

If the elements belonging to a 'heterogeneous set' go unrecognized, then it is also easy to deny that they are connected in a net-like structure. Yet, I propose that the UK immigration complex should be seen as an apparatus exactly in this sense. The *Immigration Act* mentioned above is just as much part of this UK immigration apparatus as the 'wrong form' (and, of course, the 'right' form that never materializes in 'The Appellant's Tale'). Detention centres are the most infamous nodes of this network; but they are not the only ones, as police stations and courthouses also feature. Inside detention centres, various architectural forms operate that contribute to the 'heterogeneous set', such as the typical series of locked security doors, the

prison-like lay-out; the fences topped with barbed wire, and the 'fixed chairs' (that are bolted to the floor) in the visitors' room – chairs that are, moreover, colour-coded: red for detainees, green for visitors.<sup>17</sup> Some of the UK immigration apparatus's regulatory decisions include forbidding visitor and detainee from touching, which includes handshakes or fist-bumps. They also decree that writing materials cannot be checked by a guard, and then passed from visitor to detainee, but must be moved – with a delay, of course – through an (unnecessarily or, depending on the perspective, *necessarily* complicated) alternative system.

'The Visitor's Tale', which has a male protagonist, mentions most of the features Foucault lists, stressing these arrangements' effect in the least hostile of the detention centre's spaces:

Arriving at the room set for visits, what strikes me is that this is a sort of no-man's land, a place where the detainee can come through and mix with visitors on neutral ground. [...] But it's not neutral ground, of course. It's detention centre ground. This is one of those arrangements – civilised in themselves – like non-bullying policies in institutions which are designed to deter, if not actually to bully – arrangements which help an essentially inhumane set-up to seem caring and respectable.<sup>18</sup>

What is described here is not only how a set-up's inhumanity is rendered invisible through its (alleged) neutrality; it also shows how the 'wolf' – that is, the 'really hostile environment' – manages to hide in the 'sheep's clothing' of (alleged) care and respectability. In 'The Dancer's Tale', which also tells the life of a male protagonist, the narrator actually uses the term 'apparatus',<sup>19</sup> and in two other pieces of *Refugee Tales* life writing the protagonists themselves come very close. In 'The Activist's Tale', Solomon – one of the few protagonists who can be named because he has won the case against his unlawful detention – is reported to have described, while addressing the House of Commons, 'the mental torture of being made to wait, of becoming an object in a bureaucratic machine designed for the convenience of the Home Office'.<sup>20</sup> In describing his experience of awaiting (and fighting) deportation for nine years, the male protagonist of 'The Stateless Person's Tale' uses the image of a cruel machine to describe the assemblage of human and non-human elements – such as the police, the court, the Home Office, and a set of practices such as the careless clearing out of an arrested person's personal property (including identity papers and certificates) – against which he tries to prevail: 'Perhaps they did not think I was trying hard enough, or perhaps there is no thinking behind it, just a machine which is programmed to be

cruel.’<sup>21</sup> The exact phrasing of this last part of the sentence is revealing. Despite the almost hopefully-voiced ‘[p]erhaps [...] there is no thinking behind it’, the term ‘programmed’ suggests that there *is* thinking (and even skilled action) at work. Once again, it is hard not to connect these dots and link them to the intent that May so blithely revealed in her interview with *The Telegraph*.

The last point in Foucault’s definition on which I will comment connects to the ‘scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions’ as some of an apparatus’s constitutive elements. It is my contention that *Refugee Tales* tries to match the complexity of the UK immigration apparatus, to be able to act as an effective counterweight. Parts of its network are: its three branches (visits, walks, tales), the events it organizes, and the people (of celebrity status<sup>22</sup> or not) it mobilizes to prevent the ‘really hostile environment’ from getting away with ‘weaponising the process of the narration such that the language itself is hostile’.<sup>23</sup> By doing all of this, the *Refugee Tales* project turns itself into a counter-apparatus. One of the most important Foucaultian insights into how all-pervading, discursive power operates is that it cannot help but bring forth resistance against itself as part of its own productiveness.<sup>24</sup> *Refugee Tales* – as an activist endeavour that rests on ‘moral and philanthropic propositions’, from which it also gains its drive – is a manifestation of resistance brought forth by what it fights, and my article – albeit not ‘scientific’ in the sense the ‘natural sciences’ reserve for themselves – aims to be a scholarly ‘statement’ that adds its analysis of stress-related practices to the counter-apparatus. Precisely because the project and its analysis are forms of resistance, however, they are – according to Foucault – also necessarily *part of* the UK immigration apparatus. There might very well be those who find this hard to stomach. For instance, some *Refugee Tales* activists might be moved to reject this Foucaultian reading because they would like to see their resistance as the absolute ‘other’ of that against that which they fight, and might not want to think of themselves as integral elements of that to which they resist. Yet, from a Foucaultian perspective, this is how an apparatus, as an assemblage pervaded by, and producing power works. Accordingly, the bad news is that there is no position outside of, or ‘other to’, power, so that resistance, by definition a by-product of power, *must* be produced by power itself. The good news is that that which resists by making itself a part of what it resists, stands a chance of dismantling the whole thing. It is thus my claim that *Refugee Tales* mirrors the structure of the immigration apparatus’s network of heterogeneous elements – in the project’s walks, visits, and tales, the scholarly papers, the propaganda, the speeches addressed to Parliament, the activation of celebrities etc. – and thereby turns itself into the immigration complex’s counter-apparatus. As such, it can never be free or independent of what it resists; it



can never be its 'other', but has to remain a part of what it fights, until the apparatus is dismantled and the counter-apparatus can disintegrate along with it.

When Giorgio Agamben builds on Foucault's concept of the apparatus, he highlights that it also contains 'a set of strategies of the relations of forces supporting, and supported by, certain types of knowledge.'<sup>25</sup> As the life writing of *Refugee Tales* makes clear, practices that enact these 'types of knowledge' include information-gathering through detainee-interviews or through the many forms that need filling in during the asylum application process. But they also include the regularly-demanded signatures of applicants who have been 'released into the community', required to trace their whereabouts. Other types of knowledge entail practices of deleting information that could either confirm statements or refute other sources, or diffuse suspicions harboured against asylum applicants. This happens through neglect or wilful destruction of information, for instance, with tax records, as the *Windrush* scandal brought to our attention.<sup>26</sup> Asylum-seekers and detainees often perceive these 'relations of forces' (as Agamben characterizes them) as anonymous or actively anonymized (for instance by frequently changing caseworkers or by mysteriously vanishing files<sup>27</sup>). Consequently, these 'forces' are not easily tied to identifiable persons who make transparent decisions, and take actions for which they can be held accountable.

In reaction to such strategies of administrative obfuscation and anonymization, some pieces collected in *Refugee Tales* resort to tropes. In 'The Orphan's Tale', which tells the story of the male protagonist M, the narrator uses a metaphor:

a clean white hand approaches and between thumb and finger takes hold of the end of a thread and delicately pulls. The unravelling has begun. Some pathogen has been insinuated into the web of his life. It eats the little love-knots and the subtle connections. It is a sovereign undoer of living intricacies.<sup>28</sup>

The *pars pro toto* of the 'clean white hand' is racialized but also points to the sterility of the process, perhaps even to a lab environment, where a human experiment might be conducted. Driven by the curiosity to know how the 'unravelling of living intricacies', the subtle destruction of 'undoing' takes its course. At the same time, 'pathogen' implies contagion or poisoning, while the passive voice of 'has been insinuated' shields any potential human doer behind the deeds of 'slow violence'.<sup>29</sup> 'The Father's Tale' offers its conclusion that:

The ‘hostile environment’ promised by the British government has been created precisely with this end in mind. Designed by humans to break the human spirit. These days the rich and powerful bottle inhumanity and sell it to the displaced.<sup>30</sup>

The specific ‘bottle’ into which this ‘inhumanity’ is poured and by which it is delivered to ‘the displaced’, I claim, is stress.

### Stress research in the humanities

For the psychologist Stevan Hobfoll, who developed his conservation of resources theory in the 1990s, stress is a process that ‘emerges from context’,<sup>31</sup> no matter whether it is located ‘in the mind’, or ‘in the environment’, or conceived of as ‘psychodynamic’ or even ‘endemic to life’.<sup>32</sup> As he reminds his readers, Bruno Bettelheim and Victor Frankl – back in the 1960s and based on their experience of Nazi concentration camps – had depicted ‘the confrontation with stress as a search for meaning amid the challenge of meaninglessness’.<sup>33</sup> Hobfoll redirects this discussion by claiming that ‘resources, not cognitions, [were] the *primum mobile* on which stress is hinged’.<sup>34</sup> Trying to get away from a ‘mentalistic, individualistic, and internal’<sup>35</sup> understanding of stress, he offers a definition that bases stress in biology but – pointing to some common ground between cognitive and environmentalist theories<sup>36</sup> – takes cultural experiences and social relations into account.<sup>37</sup> Stress, for Hobfoll, results from a lack of resources, which may ‘include objects, conditions, personal characteristics, and energies that are either themselves valued for survival, directly or indirectly, or that serve as a means of achieving these resources.’<sup>38</sup> Consequently, stress can arise from ‘a threat to resources’ or from ‘an actual loss of resources’ or ‘when individuals do not receive reasonable gain [...] following resource investment [...]’.<sup>39</sup> Although Hobfoll, in contrast with Frankl and Bettelheim, does not base his theory on the experience of *homines sacri*,<sup>40</sup> his conservation of resources theory is a good fit for describing what happens to detainees and applicants for asylum.

Displaced persons are often radically cut off from their resources: unable to access assets back home or faced with the fact that contacting family, if technologically possible, might put loved ones in danger; in the case of a precipitous flight, they may have had to leave documents behind, such as proof of identity, degrees, certificates or evidence of political affiliation. The journey from the country of origin often reduces resources further, and the less legal the trip, the more staggering the cost. Those who have to circumvent authorized pathways may lack food or water, encounter danger from rapists or muggers, and risk drowning in the Mediterranean, suffocating in a

lorry or dying of exposure stowed away in a boat. Once displaced persons arrive in a country where they can seek asylum, language barriers, ignorance of the legal framework, lack of access to the internet and funds, but also the absence of friends or persons of trust block further resources, often to the point of destitution. Detention centres are violent places full of desperate people, in which practices like keeping the lights on around the clock, unhygienic conditions, and a noisy environment destroy resources like physical comfort or sleep. For Hobfoll, there are two ways of coping with stress: one problem-focussed, which consists of planning and seeking support; and one emotion-focussed, which may be rooted in accepting that which lies beyond one's power, and engaging in positive re-interpretation of fundamentally negative outcomes, thereby sustaining motivation. The immigration apparatus, of which 'the really hostile environment' is an effect, frustrates both strategies, while projects such as *Refugee Tales* aim to restore access to them.

Some researchers in the humanities come at stress from a different angle, focussing on its effect. In *Zombie Factory: Culture, Stress & Sudden Death*, the anthropologists Michael Korovkin and Peter Stephenson argue that the 'stress cycle',<sup>41</sup> an internalized pattern of pressure and relaxation, can change living organisms into automata, effectively emptying them out: '[V]ulnerable individuals are found in every type of society; and the stressors they are exposed to can – either by coincidence, or by design, or even both – form a pressure-pattern which is capable of transforming them into zombie-like creatures'.<sup>42</sup> This zombification, I argue, is exactly the effect that the UK immigration apparatus produces.

Several of the pieces in *Refugee Tales* describe patterns of stress (during detention) and relaxation (during the phases when asylum applicants are temporarily released into the community). They also describe unexpected interruptions of the 'relief' or 'relaxation' phase and testify that these are typically accompanied by great noise. The protagonist of 'The Appellant's Tale' is an adult man: 'You used to wake up at 6 am, panicking and sweating because they came for you three times. Banging on the door.'<sup>43</sup> In 'The Dependant's Tale', the protagonist is a student who used to go in and out of detention with her family several times when she was a child. Her story comes in parts that are the narrated 8-years-old-self's experience, the narrating self's description of her condition in past tense, and the narrating self's current state in present tense:

The nightmare always starts in the same way: a big man standing at the foot of my bed, shouting at me. 'Get up! Hurry hurry hurry! Pack up your stuff! We've come to take you away.' I call out to my parents, but the man just shouts again. Sometimes it's a nightmare, and sometimes it's for real. [...]

I had the nightmare early every night. My brother started wetting his bed. [...]

From time to time I still wake up in the middle of the night, shaking with fear when I hear a loud banging or shouting.<sup>44</sup>

In this example, stress-inducing random noise, coupled with a threat of violence that operates at the intersection of age and gender, produces trauma. Korovkin and Stephenson argue that, beyond traumatization, and further down the path of zombification, the excoriation of personality starts. In 'The Support Worker's Tale,' the young male protagonist (who inadvertently links the ideas put forward by Hobfoll and Korovkin/Stephenson) puts it like this:

So when we talk about destitute asylum seekers, what does that really mean? Well, the obvious to start with – money, food, shelter. But it goes beyond material deprivation, down to the destitution of the whole self. It means being in but not of the world. Like a shade from the world below [...].<sup>45</sup>

The male protagonist of 'The Arriver's Tale' takes up this topos of 'the world below' as the dwelling place to which those deprived of resources – including the all-important resource of the self – are confined:

I was released in 2011 only to return to the limbo I was in before. I am not allowed to work. I have now been here for eight years. I have no choice but to live where I am told to live and wait for the next hearing to allow my application to be considered. Do you know what limbo means? It means the edge of hell.<sup>46</sup>

The 'edge of hell' is a powerful metaphor to describe May's 'really hostile environment'. It clarifies that this is not only the physical space to which the deprived dwellers of detention centres are confined; but, perhaps more importantly, it is the mental space into which they are pushed. In achieving zombification, the immigration apparatus comes into its own as a machine for de-subjectification, as described by Agamben,<sup>47</sup> and, as such, becomes readable, with reference to Hannah Arendt,<sup>48</sup> as a warning sign that the state which sustains and uses it, might be about to lose its footing in democracy.

For psychologist and social worker Dana Becker, stress is a protean concept, since it may characterize a situation or an event, but may also describe a

psychological/physiological state or an emotion.<sup>49</sup> In *One Nation Under Stress*, she focuses on the ideological baggage that stress has acquired over the past few decades. Some of her findings seem transferrable; not only from the US to the UK, but also from the white, relatively privileged middle-class, on which she focusses, to those deprived of all resources. It is the 'chameleon-like nature of the stress concept' which 'makes it possible to obscure or conceal social problems by individualizing them in ways that most disadvantage those who have the least to gain from the status quo – among them, women and the poor.'<sup>50</sup> In her book, she demonstrates how stress is often presented as a container concept of 'liberal individualism', which we are called upon to target with what Foucault terms 'technologies of the self.'<sup>51</sup> Such an understanding of stress, Becker emphasizes, hides the fact that poverty is the biggest stressor of all. 'Stressism', a term she coined to capture the problem, thus 'fosters the illusion that, in the push towards improved adjustment, human vulnerability must be battled one person at a time.'<sup>52</sup> If stress is understood like this, as Mark Fisher does, when he describes 'the privatisation of stress',<sup>53</sup> it undermines the notion of accountability and responsibility that lie beyond the reach of the stressed individuals themselves. An alternative understanding, Becker suggests, is available that allows us to think of stress as a vulnerability 'linked to social forces' and therefore in need to be addressed or 'solved primarily through social and political means'.<sup>54</sup> As a project, *Refugee Tales* aims to build up enough social and political pressure to solve the problems indefinite detention creates, and aims to do so by its abolition. The most important technique of its life writing branch, I contend, is to create pressure by successfully narrativizing stress.

### Stress in *Refugee Tales*

In the following, I will introduce six functions that narrative can assume in relation to stress, using life writing collected in the four volumes of *Refugee Tales* as my material. The goal is to demonstrate that narrative can be a source of stress, can trigger stress first caused by something else, can represent, perform, communicate stress, but also alleviate it. When narrative is weaponized<sup>55</sup> by the immigration apparatus, the duty to narrate – again and again, in an interrogation-context saturated with suspicion, where the listener's goal is to trick the narrator into contradicting themselves, so that the contradiction can be used to destroy their case – can itself become a source of stress. Several tales portray this first function of narration in relation with stress, for instance, when pointing out that interviews conducted with asylum seekers can run to six hours.<sup>56</sup> But there are also narrations that produce stress in the reader, quite possibly with a view to motivating them to join the project's effort. There are single

sentences, such as in the final phrase of ‘The Orphan’s Tale’ that ends with a deixis to the UK as ‘[...] this worsening land’,<sup>57</sup> which send a shiver down the spine of more than one Brexit-observer.

During the lengthy asylum interviews, interviewees’ stories may also contain elements that recall encounters with government thugs back home, war lords or torturers, and thus trigger stress by revisiting these memories. But even the most benevolent statements of support<sup>58</sup> or even conversations with visitors can fulfil this second function, the triggering of older stress, since inviting refugees or asylum-seekers to repeat their life story might use the same questions asked by officials inside the immigration apparatus:

I am about to pose another question when I realise I am repeating the act of interrogation. I have a vision of you going through the asylum procedures, the endless questioning, the appeals and interrogations. You must experience these repetitions as traumatic times, this time enacted by a bureaucracy that is meant to be benign. Yet all its apparatus calls up terror.<sup>59</sup>

The third function narration takes on in *Refugee Tales* is that of representing stress. The first tale of the first volume, ‘The Migrant’s Tale’, offers the best example of this, as the narrator describes the male protagonist:

He holds his upper arms and rocks back and forth. Slow and steady, waves in the bay. I’ve seen this same movement, this same posture, in other times and other cultures. When the big emotional plates deep below the skin start hitting each other, this wave of pain appears on the surface.<sup>60</sup>

Other tales follow a strategy in which the stories do not try to represent stress through description or metaphor (‘big emotional plates’ and ‘wave of pain’ suggesting tectonic motion and resulting tsunamis) but instead carry out narrative’s fourth function: performing stress. ‘The Chaplain’s Tale’ contains an example of this, in which the attempt to capture the ungendered (perhaps even un-gendered) protagonist’s stream-of-consciousness in the third-person all but deletes the narrator’s voice:

[...] and then they all they they [sic!] deep guttural pain and deep guttural pain and a pause and deep guttural pain and head bowed and a pause and inaudible words and yes drums and shibboleths and shibboleths and drums and shibboleths and shibboleths and drums shibboleths drums in comprehensible yes and the they

found him in the hinterland searching for some half meanings in the confusion and disorder of his broken words and sounds and yes [...].<sup>61</sup>

Caught in its repetitive loops, this performance of stress points to a mind that has given up on making itself understood to an interlocutor. Yet, there are also tales in which narrative's fifth function, to communicate stress, is paramount and often tied to narrators who address readers. 'The Support Worker's Tale' provides an example:

[...] you won't even be able to cross the threshold of the unimaginable, let alone begin to get anywhere near what actually happens. Which body parts to bend and buckle and twist, which to tear, rip, slash, gouge, which to burn, with fire or acid... [...] I read pages and pages of these every day. [...] I *have* to read them, because I am a cog in the wheel of the giant machine that determines whether these torn, branded, gassed, fleeing people can make a new life for themselves in a country where they are safe from harm. [...] But you learn very quickly that you have to turn down most of them. What you also learn is that gradually the human mind begins to insulate itself in the face of such evidence – or narrative if you will – to the point that you start to protect yourself from what you read. You have to.<sup>62</sup>

Warning the reader that the narrative is not going to be able to fulfil its function of communicating the stress the torture victims feel, the narrator combines this disclaimer here with the thought that this failure can serve a protective function for the support worker. 'The Barrister's Tale' communicates the female narrator's stress explicitly:

I don't feel heroic or admirable. I feel stressed. If I allow myself to get too emotionally involved in each case, I won't be able to do my job, I'll be no good to any of my clients. I manage by not taking it all on.<sup>63</sup>

According to 'The Erased Person's Tale', which tells the life of a male protagonist, detainees get used to the fact that the immigration apparatus has a 'way of disappearing' people, takes their 'voice', or ensures that overworked lawyers or case workers 'won't have time to listen' or 'lack the will to hear', as files 'go missing'.<sup>64</sup> From this practice stems one of the core ideas of the *Refugee Tales* project's life writing branch. Giving detainees the opportunity to tell their stories and inviting visitors to listen to them aims to alleviate the detainees' stress – the sixth function of narrative –

by the very act of narration in the context of welcoming collaboration. 'The Erased Person's Tale' explains this best:

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 which so often seeks to deny and disbelieve such accounts, his story has been absorbed by a listening heart.<sup>65</sup>

All six functions of narrative discussed so far feed into contributing to the *Refugee Tales* project's overall aim, namely to remove indefinite detention as the greatest cause of stress by putting pressure on the UK government to abolish it and, ultimately, to dismantle the entire zombifying apparatus which UK governments have been assembling for over more than a decade.

## Conclusion

One cannot dismantle an apparatus by attacking only one of its elements. In order to take it down, a network of equal complexity is necessary, capable of tackling each of the apparatus's elements of the 'heterogeneous set [...] of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures'.<sup>66</sup> As a project, *Refugee Tales* matches the targeted UK immigration system's complexity and, as its counter-apparatus, it cannot be completely separate from the set of relations against which it operates. According to Foucault's description of the productive side of power, it has to overlap with, and partake of, what it seeks to dismantle. Borrowing from contemporary stress research, I read the UK immigration complex as an apparatus assembled to produce stress, to which refugees, asylum seekers, and detainees are vulnerable exactly in the sense described by Hobfoll's conservation of resources theory, by Korovkin and Stephenson's hypothesis of 'zombification', and Becker's description of the blind spot of stressism. As the UK immigration complex's counter-apparatus, *Refugee Tales'* life writing branch makes visible how narrative can not only be a source of stress, trigger stress, but also represent, perform, communicate, and alleviate it, all of which works towards mobilizing narration to fight for the



removal of indefinite detention as the worst cause of stress in the arsenal of the UK's immigration apparatus.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hom, Stephanie Malia, *Empire's Mobius Strip: Historical Echoes in Italy's Crisis of Migration and Detention*, Ithaca & London: Cornell UP, 2019, 63.

<sup>2</sup> Herd, David, 'The View from Dover', *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, 3 March 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/view.dover/>, date accessed: 4 July 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the introduction to this special issue and its Afterword by David Herd.

<sup>4</sup> Herd, David, 'Afterword', *Refugee Tales III*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2019, 183–194, 191.

<sup>5</sup> Kirkup, James, and Robert Winnett, 'Theresa May interview: "We're going to give illegal migrants a really hostile reception"', *The Telegraph*, 25 May 2012, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/theresa-may-interview-going-give-illegal-migrants-really-hostile/>, date accessed: 4 July 2023.

<sup>6</sup> The project's walks (cf. introduction this issue) also produce visibility and diffuse stress, albeit by embodiment and communal movement through public space. The walks deserve being discussed separately and lie beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>7</sup> In 2018 it was reported across the press' political spectrum that Prime Minister Cameron's administration had denied rights to some of its non-white citizens, many of whom had emigrated upon the UK government's official invitation from the Caribbean, onboard the *Empire Windrush*, in the 1950s.

In some cases, citizens were illegally detained, threatened with deportation, or actually deported. Cf. Anonymous, 'Anger as "Windrush generation" face deportation threat', *BBC*, 11 April 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-43726976>, date accessed: 28 February 2023; Gentleman, Amelia, 'Windrush U turn is welcome, but May's policy was just cruel', *The Guardian*, 16 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/apr/16/windrush-u-turn-welcome-but-theresa-may-policy-cruel>, date accessed: 24 February 2023; Newton Dunn, Tom, 'OH, RUDDY HELL! Amber Rudd resigns as Home Secretary and takes "full responsibility" for misleading MPs after Windrush scandal', *The Sun*, 29 April 2018, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/6172116/home-secretary-amber-rudd-resigns-after-windrush-scandal/>, date accessed: 24 February 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Anonymous, 'Full Text: Theresa May's Conference Speech', *The Spectator*, 5 October 2016, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/full-text-theresa-may-s-conference-speech/>, date accessed: 22 February 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Kirkup/Winnett, 'Theresa May interview', see endnote 5.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Slovo, Gillian, 'The Listener's Tale', *Refugee Tales III*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2019, 131–136, 134, and Anonymous, 'Guidance Azure card: conditions of use and list of stores that accept it', *UK Government*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/stores-that-accept-azure-cards-for-asylum-section-4-support>, last updated: 24 February 2015, date accessed: 12 April 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the articles by Kohlenberger and Dursun/Sauer in this special issue.

<sup>12</sup> Herd, 'The Appellant's Tale', *Refugee Tales I*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2016, 69–84, 79.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Bidisha, 'The Outsider's Tale', *Refugee Tales IV*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2021, 23–27: 'Even my home country wasn't home. In the place I grew up, I was invisible, as I am now.' Wittenberg, 'The Erased Person's Tale', *Refugee Tales III*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2019, 109–119, 110: 'As I listen and record, I become a companion in defiance against the silence in which vicious regimes try to bury the knowledge of the crimes they have committed against the dead and disavow the living trauma of those who manage to survive them.'

<sup>14</sup> Kafka, Franz, *The Trial* (1925); Musil, Robert, *The Man without Qualities* (1930–1943); Ishiguro, Kazuo, *The Unconsoled* (1995); and Smith, Ali, *Autumn* (2016, see specifically the passport application scene at the post office). A tribute to the first of these writers – 'Kafka not Chaucer' – forms part of Herd, 'The Appellant's Tale', 80.

<sup>15</sup> Making the right form available; helping appellants to fill it in correctly or at least checking whether they have done so, and, if not, correcting their mistakes; ushering the filled-in form through the process; making sure it reaches the right addressee; seeing to it that this addressee engages with the form in a timely fashion; taking care that the decision makes it back to the appellant, also within an acceptable time period; perhaps even explaining the reasons behind the decision taken or giving advice about future steps.

<sup>16</sup> Foucault qtd. in Agamben, Giorgio, 'What Is An Apparatus?' in: *What Is An Apparatus and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009, 1–24, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Moore, Hubert, 'The Visitor's Tale', *Refugee Tales I*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2016, 41–47, 43.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> Appignanesi, 'Lisa, The Dancer's Tale', *Refugee Tales III*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2019, 85–97, 90.

<sup>20</sup> Nayeri, Dina, 'The Activist's Tale', *Refugee Tales IV*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2021, 55–64, 63.

<sup>21</sup> Gurnah, Abdulrazak, 'The Stateless Person's Tale', *Refugee Tales III*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2019, 5–10, 9.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. the contribution by Sandra Mayer in this issue.

<sup>23</sup> Herd, 2019, 191.

<sup>24</sup> One of the earliest expressions of this idea can be found in *The History of Sexuality Vol I*: 'Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.' Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Random House, 1978, 95. Two useful attempts to trace this idea across Foucault's work are by Bălan, Sergiu, 'M. Foucault's View on Power Relations', in: *Cogito -*

*Multidisciplinary* 2:2 (2010) 55–61, and Davidson, Arnold I., 'In praise of counter-conduct', in: *History of the Human Sciences* 24:4 (2011) 25–41, 27–28.

<sup>25</sup> Agamben, Giorgio, 'What Is An Apparatus?' in: *What Is An Apparatus and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009, 1–24, 2.

<sup>26</sup> 'The Appellant's Tale', too, is a story about information almost destroyed but miraculously rescued by an inefficient garbage disposal. Herd, 'The Appellant's Tale', 76 and 82.

<sup>27</sup> 'But there are other ways of disappearing: [...] You don't go missing, your files do.' Wittenberg, Jonathan, 'The Erased Person's Tale', 119.

<sup>28</sup> Constantine, David, 'The Orphan's Tale', *Refugee Tales III*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2019, 11–24, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Nixon, Rob, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: Harvard UP, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Tearne, Roma, 'The Father's Tale', *Refugee Tales III*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2019, 43–51, 46–47.

<sup>31</sup> Hobfoll, Stevan E., *Stress, Culture, and Community: The Psychology and Philosophy of Stress*, New York & London: Plenum Press, 1998, ix.

<sup>32</sup> *Idem*, all 4.

<sup>33</sup> *Idem*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> *Idem*, 21.

<sup>35</sup> *Idem*, 25.

<sup>36</sup> *Idem*, 35.

<sup>37</sup> Thanks to Kevin Potter for pointing out that this thesis is also supported by the work of neurobiologist Robert M. Sapolsky, who published his results in *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* (1994).

<sup>38</sup> *Idem*, 45.

<sup>39</sup> *Idem*, 45–6.

<sup>40</sup> In his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), Giorgio Agamben takes a concept from Ancient Roman law, the eponymous *homo sacer* – a figuration of what Agamben calls 'bare life' because the law of the land does not apply to them – and updates it for the context of the late twentieth century. Agamben makes the case that, in contemporary society, detainees in a refugee camp come closest to embodying the *homines sacri* of old, by being included in the law only by virtue of exclusion from it.

<sup>41</sup> Korovkin, Michael and Peter Stephenson, *Zombie Factory: Culture, Stress and Sudden Death*, Truro: Libri Publishing 2010, 46.

<sup>42</sup> *Idem*, 120.

<sup>43</sup> Herd, 2016, 84.

<sup>44</sup> Lewycka, Marina, 'The Dependant's Tale', *Refugee Tales I*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2016, 85–91, 85, 89, 91.

<sup>45</sup> Cohen, Josh, 'The Support Worker's Tale', *Refugee Tales II*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2017, 73–83, 74.

<sup>46</sup> Gurnah, Abdulrazak, 'The Arriver's Tale', *Refugee Tales I*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2016, 35–39, 39.

<sup>47</sup> 'What defines the apparatuses [...] in the current phase of capitalism is that they do no longer act as much through the production of a subject, as through the processes of what can be called desubjectification.' Agamben, 2009, 20.

<sup>48</sup> 'Thus the 'national state', having lost its very foundations, leads the life of a walking corpse, whose spurious existence is artificially prolonged by repeated injections of imperialist expansion.' Arendt, Hannah, 'The seeds of a fascist international (1945)', in: *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, New York: Schocken Books, 1994, 143.

<sup>49</sup> Becker, Dana, *One Nation Under Stress: The Trouble With Stress as an Idea*, Oxford & New York: Oxford UP, 2013, 2.

<sup>50</sup> *Idem*, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Foucault, Michel, 'Technologies of the Self', in: Martin, Luther H., Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (eds.), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, London: Tavistock Publications, 1988, 16–49, 17.

<sup>52</sup> Becker, 2013, 184.

<sup>53</sup> Fisher, Mark, 'The privatisation of stress', in: *Soundings* 48 (2011): 123–133, 124.

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<sup>54</sup> Becker, 2013, 18.

<sup>55</sup> Herd, 2019, 191.

<sup>56</sup> Smith, Simon, 'The Chef's Tale', *Refugee Tales IV*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2021, 93–102, 97.

<sup>57</sup> Constantine, 2019, 24.

<sup>58</sup> 'The Teacher's Tale' contains such an example: 'We are working on the language in a doctor's report that will support your fresh claim to asylum. [...] But her report makes you tearful – not because the words are hostile and intimidating but because they are on your side and trigger something you don't want to remember. You have no problem with the word torture. It's the other words I have to explain: flashback; deterioration of mental health; isolation; anxiety; post-traumatic stress disorder.' Parsons, Emma, 'The Teacher's Tale', *Refugee Tales III*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2019, 137–143, 143.

<sup>59</sup> Appignanesi, 2019, 90.

<sup>60</sup> Todorovic, Dragan, 'The Migrant's Tale', *Refugee Tales I*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2016, 1–12, 4.

<sup>61</sup> Zand, Michael, 'The Chaplain's Tale', *Refugee Tales I*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2016, 13–16, 14–15.

<sup>62</sup> Cohen, 2017, 85–86.

<sup>63</sup> Holmes, Rachel, 'The Barrister's Tale', *Refugee Tales II*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2017, 53–61, 59.

<sup>64</sup> All Wittenberg, 2019, 119.

<sup>65</sup> *Idem*, 111.

<sup>66</sup> Foucault qtd. in Agamben, 2009, 2.