



Decentring the Author: *Refugee Tales* and Collaborative Life Narrative as Activism

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Abstract

This article focuses on collaborative life-storytelling as a tool of socio-political literary activism in the context of the *Refugee Tales* project. It argues that *Refugee Tales* is unique: on the one hand, it capitalizes on the cultural authority and ‘attention capital’ (Van Krieken) of well-known writers who offer a scathing critique of the UK asylum system; on the other hand, the project deconstructs this authority through collaboratively-authored life narrative, polyphony, and diversity. Adding value as a marketable name, public face, and articulate voice, the celebrity author nevertheless experiences a decentring, as the focus shifts towards more dialectic and inclusive negotiations of authorship. In this process, the myth of the white, male author genius is dismantled and replaced by an emphasis on the collaborative and the collective. What takes centre stage instead is the powerful process of storytelling as an act of remembrance, recording, and bearing witness, emerging as a collective endeavour through exchange, repetition, and circulation within the public sphere. This storytelling project thus has the potential to disrupt, and ultimately change, dominant discourses around migration, displacement, and asylum. Furthermore, *Refugee Tales* problematizes the ideology of individualism that underlies the cult of the genius author, autobiographical narrative, and celebrity construction.

Keywords: *Refugee Tales*, collaborative storytelling, authorship, celebrity activism

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag wird der Stellenwert kollektiven Erzählens als aktivistisches Instrument im Rahmen des *Refugee Tales*-Projekts untersucht. Es wird die Hypothese aufgestellt, dass obgleich sich das Projekt die kulturelle Autorität und das ‚Aufmerksamkeitskapital‘ (Van Krieken) von prominenten Schriftsteller*innen zunutze macht, um Kritik am britischen Asylsystem zu üben, der Mythos des schöpferischen Genies und der moralischen Instanz letztendlich dekonstruiert wird, indem der Schwerpunkt bewusst auf kollektives auto/biographisches Erzählen gelegt wird. Während die Anliegen des Projekts vom Bekanntheitsgrad und der öffentlichen Sichtbarkeit der beteiligten Autor*innen durchaus profitieren, wird hier ein neues Konzept von Autorschaft ausverhandelt, das auf den Prinzipien von Inklusivität, Diversität und Vielstimmigkeit beruht und bewusst von traditionellen Autor*innen-Rollenbildern abweicht. Gleichzeitig rückt der Prozess des gemeinschaftlichen Erzählens, Erinnerns und Dokumentierens in den Mittelpunkt, wobei das etablierte Verständnis von kultureller Autorität, künstlerischer Kreativität, auto/biographischem Erzählen und literarischem Ruhm hinterfragt und zum Teil revidiert wird. Als kollektives Erzählprojekt hat *Refugee Tales* das Potential, den vorherrschenden Diskurs zu Migration, Flucht und Asylpolitik aufzubrechen und zu verändern. Darüber hinaus problematisiert es die Ideologie des Individualismus, die dem Kult um das literarische Genie, der Autobiographik und *celebrity* als kulturellem Phänomen zugrunde liegt.

Schlüsselwörter: *Refugee Tales*, kollektives Erzählen, Aktivismus, *celebrity*

Introduction: Authors as activists, or the politics of literary celebrity

Bernardine Evaristo's memoir *Manifesto* (2021), programmatically sub-titled *On Never Giving Up*, is not only an inspirational account of becoming. While it charts Evaristo's story of making her mark on the literary mainstream as a writer, teacher, and academic, *Manifesto* also launches a powerful plea for the artist to harness her public profile for the greater collective good: 'Personal success is most meaningful when used to uplift communities otherwise left behind. We are all interconnected & must look after each other'.¹ A long-standing campaigner for diversifying the British publishing industry and increasing the visibility of Black and Asian writers,² Evaristo is also the first Black woman to have won the Booker Prize for her novel *Girl, Woman, Other* in 2019. Following her joint win alongside Margaret Atwood for *The Testaments*, she has

repeatedly emphasized the award's game-changing impact: 'winning the Booker Prize has increased my cultural capital so that when I have things to say, my audience is much more substantial'.³ Often pushing sales figures to astronomic heights and enabling access to wider, transnational audiences through a diverse array of media channels, celebrity is embraced by Evaristo as a positive force of change that amplifies voices and may transform the 'rebel without' into the 'negotiator within'.⁴ This convertibility of 'celebrity capital' into other forms of influence – economic, social, cultural, and/or political⁵ – appears to dictate her responsibility to use her public profile for political activism.

Given Bernardine Evaristo's substantial record of activist engagement, her active support of *Refugee Tales* does not come as a surprise.⁶ By using collaborative and multimedial life-storytelling as a tool of socio-political intervention, the project benefits from the public visibility and name recognition of such literary heavyweights as Ali Smith, Monica Ali, Jackie Kay, Patience Agbabi, and 2021 literature Nobel laureate Abdulrazak Gurnah. They all help retell the stories of migrant experience for a broader public with the aim of ending indefinite detention in the UK. In this process, their 'celebrity capital' and international stature are powerfully paired with the cultural authority of the writer, which is closely tied to the deeply entrenched cultural topos of the artist as a clear-eyed visionary who appeals to the moral conscience of their readership. These qualities are bound to generate attention among mainstream audiences with limited, or no, points of contact with the realities of refugees' lives. They might be removed, therefore, from refugees' stories of flight, trauma, displacement, and detention. At the same time, while adding value as a marketable name, public face, and articulate voice in the service of a worthy cause, the respective celebrity author becomes decentred due to the intrinsically collaborative nature of *Refugee Tales*. It is, after all, a project that undermines, and eventually collapses, the boundaries between author, narrator, character, and subject.

Taking as a starting point the ways in which writerly authority can be harnessed for the purposes of political activism, this article explores *Refugee Tales'* potential to disrupt not only dominant discourses around immigration and displacement, but also around authorship, celebrity, and autobiographical narrative. A collective endeavour that relies on the public acts of remembrance, recording, and bearing witness, this storytelling project problematizes ideologies of individualism and exceptionalism that underlie the cult of the (white, male) author genius. *Refugee Tales* thus signals a move towards more inclusive and collaboratively-shaped forms of authority and legitimation. By the same token, this project draws attention to the dialectic negotiations and tensions at the heart of cultural constructions and practices like

celebrity. While celebrity as such may be centred on the idea of an outstanding and uniquely gifted individual, it more precisely emerges from a complex interplay of industries, media, institutions, and audiences – all of which implicate forces of power and hierarchy. The same could be said for modes and formats of autobiographical narration, as they often serve as the prime sites and vehicles for staging the self; situated at the intersections of public and private, they famously raise expectations of truthfulness, authenticity, and authority. *Refugee Tales* draws our attention to the inherently polyphonic nature of life-storytelling as a process that shifts and evolves, and that gains its potency as an instrument of socio-political activism from the acts of sharing, repeating, and retelling among, and between, individuals (well-known and obscure) and communities.

Authorship, authority, and (celebrity) activism

In her review of recent refugee literature, including autobiographical accounts of, and journalistic investigations into, refugee experience, government detention policies, and human trafficking, Charlotte McDonald-Gibson critically addresses the journalistic retellings of other people's stories and their alleged power to 'give a voice to the voiceless'.⁷ Confronting the media's complicity in raising the temperature of public discourse around migration and who deserves our compassion, she points towards commodified empathy and its questionable ramifications. As armed conflicts all over the world rage with unabating force and drive millions of people from their homes to escape death, destruction, and deprivation, a concomitant 'battle for our compassion'⁸ is being fought, as McDonald-Gibson puts it somewhat provocatively. This battle follows hard on the heels of debates around why a particular type of refugee – usually white, Christian, assimilated – is likely to elicit more empathy than those fleeing their home countries in Africa or in the Middle East. In turn, this raises pertinent questions about the media portrayal of 'people in crisis' and the ways in which they are being cast in roles that correspond to our expectations.⁹

The so-called 'battle for compassion'¹⁰ is anchored within a wider battle for attention in a media-saturated world suffering from data and information overload. In a society that is increasingly 'organized around the distribution of visibility, attention, and recognition', the ownership and control of what the sociologist Robert Van Krieken calls 'attention capital' is crucial for enlisting near-global public support and solidarity.¹¹ Van Krieken's work on celebrity as integral to the social fabric is based on Austrian philosopher, economist, and architect Georg Franck's theory of the 'economy of attention'.¹² This theory identifies attention as a scarce and much sought-

after resource that is often considered more valuable than material income. The reason attention is so enticing is that, as Franck puts it, ‘the attention of others is the most irresistible of drugs’.¹³ Answering a fundamental human need to see ourselves validated by, and reflected in, another human being’s consciousness, attention (re)affirms our subjectivity and allows us to develop empathy and connections.¹⁴ Similar to money, attention functions as a currency measurable in quantifiable statistics (such as sales and circulation figures, views, hits or followers). These metrics become part of, and ultimately increase, the attention capital.

For both Franck and Van Krieken, attention is the main currency of celebrity: ‘Celebrity is about being highly visible to a broader public and possessing the capacity to attract relatively large amounts of attention, which can in turn be transformed into other kinds of “capital” – esteem, status, wealth, influence, perhaps even power’.¹⁵ It comes as no surprise, then, that celebrities from all fields, but especially from the entertainment industries, have become serious players in the field of global humanitarianism and activist engagement – being as they are the prime owners of convertible attention capital. Again, like money, attention is self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating; as a result, the causes promoted by an attention-rich individual will garner more public/media attention than others. Far from being ‘powerless elites’, as Francesco Alberoni stipulated in the 1960s,¹⁶ highly visible public figures who command and direct our attention wield power to shape our perceptions and views of the world (at least potentially and not without pitfalls), for ‘(n)othing exerts greater power over us than that which forces us to take attentive note.’¹⁷ If we subscribe to Van Krieken’s understanding of celebrities as the ‘elite of media society’,¹⁸ we must acknowledge the media’s key role in manufacturing attention capital. This corresponds to Olivier Driessens’ idea of celebrity itself as a type of capital, which he defines as ‘recognizability, or as accumulated media visibility that results from recurrent media representations’,¹⁹ holding benefits (such as recognition and influence) and risks (scandal and surveillance, for instance) in fairly equal measure. Celebrity capital’s potential to transgress different areas of cultural production and be converted into political influence, agency, and discursive power fundamentally underlies celebrity activism.

In practice, these conversion processes, symptomatic of what could well be described as the current age of ‘celanthropy’ and the ‘celebvocate’,²⁰ are not as smooth and straightforward as they often appear to be. For all their kudos as media-savvy foci of collective identification who trigger feelings of compassion and solidarity through an affective bond with their audiences, celebrity activists have often been criticized as phoney do-gooders whose humanitarian commitment is merely a thinly-veiled ploy

to promote their own celebrity brand.²¹ Moreover, they have been accused of reinscribing stereotypes and ‘reproduc[ing] [...] hierarchies and inequalities’ in North/South power relations.²² Some scholars have attributed this pattern to celebrity activists’ status as ‘oligarchs in the attention economy’ whose commercially driven interventions often usurp ‘the power of voice’.²³ Whatever their motives, celebrity interventions in times of crisis risk triggering a backlash that focuses on their alleged superficiality and elitism. Thus, for instance, the range of responses to the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 revealed a gulf between ‘the celebrities making a difference’ and ‘the celebrities making us cringe’, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*.²⁴ Similarly, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, the ill-judged social media campaigns and demonstrations of solidarity by performing artists and entertainment celebrities led to charges of self-serving elitism and critiques of celebrity culture itself.²⁵

While celebrities from the entertainment industries and sports regularly encounter ridicule and criticism as a reaction to their do-gooding exploits, the authority and legitimacy of eminent writers as shining examples and guiding moral compasses is generally more readily accepted.²⁶ Whether it is the British playwright David Hare, who lashes out against the UK government and its response to the Covid crisis,²⁷ or the Booker-Prize-winning Indian author-activist Arundhati Roy, who keeps fiercely denouncing the government of Hindu nationalist Indian prime minister Narendra Modi²⁸ – they all productively mobilize their cultural capital as truth-telling artist-propagandists. Crucially, this idea of the writer as a publicly visible, acute critic of the *zeitgeist* is both made use of, and shaped, by the PEN international writers’ organization. A key player in the global advocacy of free speech, human rights, and cultural diversity, PEN takes advantage of the intellectual and reputational capital as well as the media visibility of its most prominent members.²⁹ What this suggests is that literary celebrity embodies a ‘distinct brand of fame’ that springs from the intersections of art, entertainment, politics, and commerce; one that, paradoxically, passes as a kind of anti-celebrity, ‘unsullied by the manipulations of commercial or popular culture’, as literary scholar Wenche Ommundsen puts it.³⁰ To contend seriously that literary celebrity hovers somewhere above the baser realities of the marketplace is, at best, naïve; yet, this perception stems from, and continues to feed, a long-lived cultural myth in which the author figures as a prophetic authority through their combined, multiple identities of writer, teacher, social critic, and political activist.

At this point, it seems worth taking a closer look at literary celebrity and the ways in which it connects with the concept of field migration. Liza Tsaliki, Christos Frangonikolopoulos, and Asteris Huliaras have put forward the argument that ‘the

development of celebrity activism may be the latest manifestation of the revised relationship between fame and achievement, whereby celebrities need to perform achievements (through activism and charity) in order to retain fame'.³¹ While this may be true for certain types of media-generated, often short-lived, hypervisibility, it does not apply to literary celebrity. Largely irrespective of the genre in which writers operate, their celebrity is still firmly rooted in a (somewhat obscure) idea of talent and merit. In fact, the activist engagement of celebrity authors (as well as its public perception) is closely linked to the status they occupy in the cultural imagination, triggering specific audience expectations that can ease the authors' forays into political activism. According to Nahuel Ribke, who has studied such celebrity field migrations, public figures come with a whole set of meanings anchored in, and constructed through, their original or primary field(s) of action. These meanings, Ribke argues, are 'hierarchically structured according to the prestige of the genres with which they are associated within the fields of cultural production and consumption.'³² What this 'genre approach' to celebrity politics and activism highlights, then, is that the success of such undertakings depends on *who* performs them. In the case of celebrated writers, the privileged position they occupy within these hierarchies of cultural values and meanings vitally affects their ability to convert their celebrity capital into political influence.

This privileged position, which translates into writers' authority to make much-noted interventions through, and outside, the literary medium, derives from a cultural repertoire of what Jérôme Meizoz calls 'postures' that allows them to claim allegiance to specific models of authorship.³³ Co-constructed by authors, audiences, and various other industry stakeholders (including publishers, agents, critics, and prize juries), one of the most prevalent and culturally enduring of these authorial postures is that of the prophetic sage and truth-teller. Informed by a Romantic conception of strong authorship, it casts the author in the role of the inspired creator-genius and enlightened *poeta vates* whose work and public persona ultimately serve political agendas. In this context, Percy Bysshe Shelley's much-quoted dictum that 'poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World' has cast a long shadow.³⁴ It has indeed 'offered to later writers an enduringly capacious model for engagement with politics',³⁵ enabling them to draw on liberally, and evoke, the image of the Shelleyan poet-legislator as rebellious truth-teller in the construction and performance of their authorial personae.³⁶ As Gisèle Sapiro has shown in her work on the relationship between politics and authorship in the French literary field, the figure of the writer-as-prophet historically became gradually more prominent over the course of the nineteenth century. '[A]t a time when writers were losing control of their spheres of

influence to new professional experts and the values of scientific accuracy and technical competence', their social function and cultural authority had to be redefined and came to rest on the defence of universal values, such as justice, equality, and freedom of expression, through the act of 'political prophesying'.³⁷ When comparing the social position and responsibility of writers to that of prophets, Sapiro draws on Max Weber's theory of charismatic power. Contrary to the priest, the prophet does not derive their power from an institution but their exceptional personal gifts and charismatic appeal:

He [sic!] acts because of a personal calling and does not earn a living through his prophecies, which are offered freely. This selfless, disinterested nature of the calling can definitely be observed in modern writers who personally commit themselves to a universal cause. With the transfer of the sacred function from religion to the new philosophical humanistic faith, the writer appears as a lay patron saint, be it one who acts on the basis of his own subjective responsibility and not in the name of any church or institution.³⁸

The tropes of exceptionalism, commitment, and vocation thus can often be found as staples in the performances of the writerly self, especially outside the literary medium; they form a central component of the 'autobiomyths'³⁹ that build and sustain an authorial persona as it navigates the treacherous territory between art, politics, commerce, and celebrity culture. It is easy to see how such (self-)mythologizing acts of persona construction serve to solidify discourses of elitism that surround the cult of the genius author; and, at the same time, how they aid the purposes of organizations, movements, and projects in their efforts to publicize, advance, and legitimize their causes. As I will show in the following, the celebrity activism of *Refugee Tales* is unique in that it capitalizes on the image of the writer as crusader-prophet who is in a position to offer a scathing critique of the UK asylum system and its deep-rooted inhumanity. At the same time, *Refugee Tales* deconstructs this image through the project's focus on collaboratively-authored life narrative, diversity, and polyphony.

Refugee Tales: Decentring the author, recentring (the) story(telling)?

One of the many definitions capturing the fluid nature of celebrity identifies it as a state, condition, or set of practices that equals 'impact on public consciousness'.⁴⁰ As a project protesting and counteracting the UK asylum system's dehumanizing practices and indefinite detention, *Refugee Tales* crucially relies on its ability to influence public

opinion and, by extension, politicians and policy-makers.⁴¹ It seeks to achieve such 'impact' via multiple, transmedial strands of activist intervention.⁴² These include organized walks, bringing together asylum seekers, former detainees, volunteers, writers, politicians, and ordinary members of the public. Together, they traverse the countryside, as public space, in solidarity and share tales of migrant experience, with the aim of creating a 'new geography'⁴³ of welcome and hospitality within a familiar and symbolically charged landscape. The four volumes of *Refugee Tales*, published by Comma Press, construct another pillar of the project's activism. Each volume contains migrant (life) narratives being told to, and rendered by, well-known writers such as Philippe Sands, Kamila Shamsie, Patience Agbabi, Bernardine Evaristo, and Abdulrazak Gurnah, who, together with Ali Smith, is one of the patrons of *Refugee Tales*. In addition, high-profile media campaigns such as *28 Tales for 28 Days* take the project to new audiences via alternative media channels and formats.

As a walking, listening, and storytelling project that seeks to obtain social change through maximum 'impact on public consciousness', *Refugee Tales* has skilfully availed itself of celebrity support and endorsement. On a pragmatic level, it makes perfect sense for the project to involve figures of public interest and authority, used to making their voices heard, in the processes of communicating the experience of those whose voices are usually suppressed. On a higher plane, the project also makes use of celebrity's affective capacity to provide reference points of identification and orientation. *Refugee Tales'* 2018 spin-off venture *28 Tales for 28 Days*, a crowdfunding campaign pushing for the introduction of a twenty-eight-day time limit on immigration detention, mobilized the full force of celebrity attention capital.⁴⁴ Twenty-eight tales were read, filmed, and subsequently made available online. They were presented by the authors who co-created them (e.g. Gurnah, Shamsie, Agbabi, Evaristo, Neel Mukherjee) alongside a group of high-profile British and Irish TV and screen actors (such as Jeremy Irons, Maxine Peake, Christopher Eccleston, Andrew French, Sinéad Cusack, and Zoë Wanamaker) in an attempt to reach wider, diverse audiences through the potent alliance of celebrity appeal and digital medium.

If you consider theories of celebrity that stress the exceptionalism and qualities of a uniquely gifted individual, as suggested, for instance, by Joseph Roach's notion of 'it',⁴⁵ then it is easy to see why such forms of celebrity advocacy can be a double-edged sword. Celebrity endorsement generates visibility and publicity, and thus ultimately creates a market, for the accounts of migrants' and asylum-seekers' experiences. However, it often risks deflecting attention from the cause at hand and legitimizes audiences' voyeuristic craving for 'poverty porn' that is based on, and fed by, an intrinsically imbalanced power dynamic. One might even share the misgivings voiced

by Chris Rojek, who alleges that it merely offers a ‘placebo for Western consumers’⁴⁶ that helps them assuage guilt, luring them into a deceptive sense of empowerment to rectify the ills of the world. The discursive power ascribed to celebrity implies, somewhat problematically, that some voices are indeed louder and treated as more significant than others. This is a conundrum to which there is no ready-made solution, and ultimately projects like *Refugee Tales* are faced with the task of weighing up the benefits of celebrity involvement against its obvious risks and pitfalls. Trying to counter, or at least mitigate, potential charges of elitism, exclusivity, and a post-imperial Western saviour approach, *Refugee Tales* places a strong focus on plurality, participation, and polyphony. It is ‘the work of many hands and many voices’ – a powerful message augmented by the carefully curated iconography of the project’s filmed mission statement, jointly delivered by the contributors (better and lesser known) to *28 Tales for 28 Days*.⁴⁷ In addition to its emphasis on collective commitment, solidarity, and collaborative action, the video is designed to emphasize the project’s diversity and inclusiveness. This characteristic is reflected in the multi-ethnic backgrounds of the participants, some of whose biographies reveal direct experience of exile and displacement, as well as their diversity in terms of age group, gender, class, and sexuality.

Among the major criticisms put forward against celebrity activism are, as mentioned above, the ‘usurping of the power of voice’ and its failure to involve those whose plight is being flagged.⁴⁸ While fully exploiting the benefits of celebrity advocacy, the activism of *Refugee Tales* is careful to avoid these trappings. Instead, the project embraces a model of collaborative storytelling and shared authorship that results in a chorus of voices, and, ultimately, a multi-layered conglomerate of perspectives and viewpoints.⁴⁹ The life narratives collected in the four volumes of *Refugee Tales* (2016, 2017, 2019, 2021), the profits of which go to the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group and the Kent Refugee Help, emerge from an intricate process of telling, listening, sharing, and creative *re-telling* that unfolds between a (former) detainee and an established writer. This process usually starts with an invitation by *Refugee Tales* founders and co-ordinators David Herd and Anna Pincus and is followed by an in-person meeting, often at the detention centre, and in the company of a translator and a volunteer. In light of the complex ethical issues at stake in the uneven distribution of agential power between those who tell their stories of detention and asylum and those who get to embellish artistically and present them to the public, it is imperative to ‘establish a relationship of trust’.⁵⁰ The importance of forging such a bond is powerfully demonstrated in Patience Agbabi’s account of producing ‘The Refugee’s Tale’ in her contribution to this cluster. Ideally, such a relationship forms the basis of

any form of collaborative authorship, as it ‘involves a particular kind of commitment [...], a mutual responsiveness to one another’ and ‘allows for a give and take and a mutual interdependency’.⁵¹ This type of relationship is a *necessity*, however, in a project that inevitably deals with the weighty concerns of voice, ownership, and appropriation.

Refugee Tales’ project of collective storytelling through a chorus of voices, in which the established (or, even, celebrity) writer is one, is supported and amplified by the choice of publisher for its four volumes. Founded in 2007, Comma Press is a Manchester-based, not-for-profit publisher specializing in short fiction and ‘interdisciplinary commissions’ as polyphonous forms of artistic expression.⁵² It pursues a commissioning policy which sets out to radically challenge the parameters of publishing and to reconceptualize the idea of authorship as acts of resistance, making it a particularly fitting project partner for *Refugee Tales*. Not only does Comma Press focus on publishing short-story collections that bring together different authors under the umbrella of a specific theme, but it takes the collaborative principle one step further by commissioning short fiction based on transdisciplinary dialogue. The anthology series *Protest: Stories of Resistance* (launched in 2017) and *Resist: Stories of Uprising* (launched in 2019), for instance, both edited by Comma Press founder and CEO Ra Page, form part of Comma’s ‘History-into-Fiction’ strand, which pairs writers of historical fiction with historians and sociologists as specialist consultants.⁵³ Page reports that, when asked to participate in such collaborative set-ups, writers often express their reluctance, which is partly due to the dictates of a literary marketplace geared towards promoting the (single) author as a brand.⁵⁴ More problematically, however, this position appears to feed on what Page calls the ‘literary garret myth’,⁵⁵ which styles the writer as solitary genius and otherworldly being set apart from the rest of society by their special skills and talents. Paradoxically, Page argues, this quixotic remoteness makes the writer appear particularly suited to make lofty pronouncements on any number of subjects:

Only the self-mythologized ‘writer in a garret’ could seriously consider themselves an expert on everything. But you would be surprised how many of these there are. Indeed, such is their isolation that, when they do finally come out of their garrets, blinking in the light of instant popularity, they are often very susceptible to believing their own hype. A confidence that assumes that other areas of expertise automatically come with, or are implied by, their literary skills emerges, to the point that it is difficult to stop the public’s and media’s love of a good book from erecting a cult of personality around the author.⁵⁶

As Page observes, ‘when the author is not just placed on a pedestal, but *enabled* in their refusal of all other counsel by the literary garret myth, they can no longer be regarded as a progressive force, let alone a radical or revolutionary one’.⁵⁷ Closely related to the writer-as-prophet topos, the ‘garret myth’ and its attendant cult of the author thus risk hampering the writer’s authority as a vanguard of social change.

Collaborative storytelling, as it is practised by *Refugee Tales* – combining multiple, unfamiliar perspectives, a respectful exchange of experience and expertise, and venturing out of one’s comfort zone – is one way of challenging, or even dismantling, this myth. While the *Refugee Tales* anthologies are marketed on the back of their most famous writer contributors and their substantial attention capital (as indicated by book covers, blurbs, and other promotion material), shared ownership of the stories is flagged by the designation ‘as told to’. In *Refugee Tales* volumes III and IV, by contrast, the paratextual label ‘as told by’ sets apart first-hand narratives of (former) detainees and volunteers, which are published partly under capital letter initials. Essential to protecting the identities of individuals in extremely vulnerable positions, the anonymity of the tales’ (original) tellers and (co-)creators raises some thorny questions in connection with the ethics of storytelling. Indeed, narratives are ‘culturally mediated practices of (re)interpreting experience’ that can be ‘oppressive, empowering, or both’.⁵⁸ It seems legitimate to ask, for instance, whether the act of amplifying the voices of those whose voices are routinely unheard and systematically suppressed might not ultimately amount to a re-silencing that undermines the sense of selfhood so crucial to displaced, marginalized, and dehumanized individuals.⁵⁹ Conversely, unmediated narrative agency, when exercised by those who have experienced profound trauma, could re-traumatize them, thereby attesting to the powerful, and therefore double-edged, impact of ‘narrative (self-)interpretations [...] constituting us as subjects capable of action’.⁶⁰ Ultimately, these tensions cannot be entirely resolved; but they can, have to be, and are being addressed in an ongoing process of carefully assessing the gains and potential drawbacks of the kind of celebrity-powered, collective storytelling activism pursued by *Refugee Tales*.

One could argue that collaborative narration will always involve a certain amount of unequally distributed power and agency that can never be fully levelled out, try as one might. Yet, its implications are profound, on the one hand, as a form of activism carried out on behalf of, and including, those whose voices are (re)introduced and amplified in the public sphere, and, on the other hand, as a practice that challenges fossilized conceptions of authorship, enabling new types of author figures to emerge. To be sure, today’s literary industry and market create an ideal environment for the

celebrity author to remain alive and kicking; but as the focus shifts towards more dialectic negotiations of authorship, through such projects as *Refugee Tales*, the cultural myth of the author as solitary – mostly white, and often male – genius falls apart. Most, if not all, of the established writers who participate in *Refugee Tales* subscribe to a model of ‘engaged authorship’,⁶¹ performed via their literary texts as well as extra-literary interventions, and guided by a strong socio-political consciousness as well as, in some cases (e.g. Monica Ali, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Bernardine Evaristo), their own or their families’ experience of migration.

As refugees’ and asylum-seekers’ stories are ‘told to’ the authors who commit them to written form, often through the mediating agency of a translator, the distinctions between author, implied author, narrator, character, and subject collapse, just as the author takes on multiple roles of artist, recorder, chronicler, and social commentator. While the author is in many ways decentred, what gets *recentred* is the process of storytelling as an act of remembrance, recording, testimony, and, most crucially, recognition. Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith have observed these effects of storytelling in their landmark study of life narrative and human rights activism: ‘As people meet together and tell stories, or read stories across cultures, they begin to voice, recognize, and bear witness to a diversity of values, experiences, and ways of imagining a just social world and of responding to injustice, inequality, and human suffering’.⁶² What matters most in this context is that storytelling becomes visible as a collective endeavour through exchange, repetition, and circulation in the public sphere via multiple media channels. Only if ‘individual stories accumulate, the collective story gains cultural salience and resonance’;⁶³ only then can storytelling fulfil its potential to disrupt, and ultimately change, dominant discourses around migration, asylum, and detention.

Conclusion: Celebrity as a collaborative construction

As a whole, the activism of collaborative storytelling, as it is practised in the context of *Refugee Tales*, complicates the ideology of individualism underlying not only the cult of the author, but also the idea of writerly authority, and the truth claim of autobiographical narrative. Intrinsicly bound up with notions of achievement, excellence, and public recognition, celebrity is considered to play a central role in the ‘social production of individuality’ in a modern, impersonal society governed by uniformity and standardization.⁶⁴ This may well be the case, but *Refugee Tales*’ involvement of the celebrity author as a voice *among* rather than a ‘voice *above* others’ (my italics, SM)⁶⁵ reminds us that celebrity is a collaborative construction that involves

networks of industries, institutions, and media, and whose cultural and social meanings are negotiated and co-produced by diverse publics. If the celebrity (author) can be credited with any kind of impact to effect social change, then it is also worth keeping in mind that '[t]he celebrity's power is derived from the collective configuration of its meaning' and its embodiment of 'subject positions that audiences can adopt or adapt in their formation of social identities', including socio-political agendas and an awareness of socio-political concerns.⁶⁶

Refugee Tales powerfully demonstrates that agency – authorial, narrative, celebrity-powered – is always embedded in, and in dialogue with, its structural frameworks and the communities within which it operates. The form of collaborative activism employed by the project is not without its flaws, inconsistencies, and pitfalls, as it seeks to manoeuvre a difficult terrain between art and action, political lobbying, and the marketplace. At the same time, it points towards possibilities how hierarchies can be broken up, and how public perceptions and cultural discourses can be altered, or at least diversified – not only with regard to migration, flight, displacement, and asylum, but also in view of authorship, cultural authority, and celebrity, as politics and poetics overlap in the universal act of storytelling. Celebrity authors ultimately come and go; but the stories remain.

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Notes

¹ Evaristo, Bernardine, *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 2021, 189.

² Evaristo is curator of the 'Black Britain: Writing Back' series for Penguin UK and sponsors a postgraduate scholarship for Black and Asian writers at Brunel University, where she teaches creative writing. See Pilgrim, Tim, 'Bernardine Evaristo Backs New Scholarship for Black and Asian Writers', *Brunel University London*, 27 May 2021, <https://www.brunel.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/articles/Bernardine-Evaristo-backs-new-scholarship-for-Black-and-Asian-writers>, date accessed: 20 December 2022.

³ Evaristo, 2021, *Manifesto*, 176. Cf. also 'Bernardine Evaristo with Nicola Sturgeon: The Triumph of *Girl, Woman, Other*', *The Edinburgh International Book Festival on YouTube*, 22 August 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3C4EHdt7Rc>, date accessed: 20 December 2022.

⁴ Evaristo, 2021, *Manifesto*, 183.

⁵ Cf. Driessens, Olivier, 'Celebrity Capital: Redefining Celebrity Using Field Theory', in: *Theory and Society* 42:5 (2013) 543–560.

⁶ Evaristo's rendering of 'The Social Worker's Tale', which is included in *Refugee Tales: Volume III* (Manchester: Comma Press, 2019), can be accessed through *Refugee Tales'* spin-off *28 Tales for 28 Days* media campaign website: <https://www.28for28.org/videos/the-social-workers-tale>, date accessed: 9 January 2023.

⁷ McDonald-Gibson, Charlotte, 'Stories of You and Me: Things Lost and Gained in the Telling of Refugees' Tales', *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 April 2022, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/refugees-immigration-stories-literature-book-review-charlotte-mcdonald-gibson/>, date accessed: 6 March 2023. Cf. Jessica Gustafsson's contribution in this cluster for a discussion of 'voice' and 'listening' as theoretical concepts.

⁸ McDonald-Gibson, 2022.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ In this context, see, for instance, the work by Lilie Chouliaraki: *Spectatorship of Suffering*, London: Sage, 2006; *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism*, Cambridge: Polity, 2012.

¹¹ Van Krieken, Robert, *Celebrity Society*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge, 2018, eBook, chapter 1.

¹² Cf. Franck, Georg, *Ökonomie der Aufmerksamkeit: Ein Entwurf*, Munich: Carl Hanser, 1998.

¹³ Franck, Georg, 'The Economy of Attention', in: *Journal of Sociology* 55:1 (2019) 8–19, 8.

¹⁴ Cf. Franck, Georg, *Vanity Fairs: Another View of the Economy of Attention*, Cham: Springer, 2020, 1.

¹⁵ Van Krieken, 2018, eBook, chapter 1.

¹⁶ Cf. Alberoni, Francesco, 'The Powerless "Elite": Theory and Sociological Research on the Phenomenon of the Stars', in: Denis McQuail (ed.), *Sociology of Mass Communications*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, 75–98; (first English translation of the Italian original).

¹⁷ Franck, 2019, 16.

¹⁸ Van Krieken, 2018, eBook, chapter 1.

¹⁹ Driessens, 2013, 552.

²⁰ For an in-depth discussion of these terms, cf. Rojek, Chris, 'Celanthropy, Music Therapy and "Big-Citizen" Samaritans', in: *Celebrity Studies* 4:2 (2013) 129–143; and Tsaliki, Liza, "'Tweeting the Good Causes": Social Networking and Celebrity Activism', in: Marshall, P. David and Sean Redmond (eds.), *A Companion to Celebrity*, Oxford: John Wiley, 2016, 235–257.

²¹ Cf. for instance, Lisa Ann Richey and Stefano Ponte's discussion of 'compassionate consumption' – as represented by the humanitarian campaigns of Bono and Bob Geldof – in their book *Brand Aid: Shopping Well to Save the World*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

²² Richey, Lisa Ann, and Dan Brockington, 'Celebrity Humanitarianism: Using Tropes of Engagement to Understand North/South Relations', in: *Perspectives on Politics* 18:1 (2020) 43–59, 44.

²³ Idem, 53.

²⁴ Mitchell, Thomas, 'How Celebrities and Film Studios Are Responding to the Ukraine Invasion', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 March 2022, <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/movies/how-celebrities-and-film-studios-are-responding-to-the-ukraine-invasion-20220302-p5a0wz.html>, date accessed: 10 March 2023.

²⁵ Cf. for instance, Hess, Amanda, 'Celebrity Culture Is Burning', *The New York Times*, 30 March 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/30/arts/virus-celebrities.html>; Mahdawi, Arwa, 'The Coronavirus Crisis Has Exposed the Ugly Truth About Celebrity Culture and Capitalism', *The Guardian*, 31 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/31/the-coronavirus-crisis-has-exposed-the-ugly-truth-about-celebrity-culture-and-capitalism>, date accessed: 10 March 2023.

²⁶ It would be a topic for another article to explore the reasons for this apparent credulity.

²⁷ In April 2020, on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, Hare vigorously spoke out against the UK government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, whose effects were aggravated by years of Conservative austerity politics. Hare has since made his frustration the subject of a stage monologue, *Beat the Devil*, premiered in August 2020 at the Bridge Theatre in London, and a satirical poem, 'Agony Uncle', directly targeted at the then British prime minister Boris Johnson. Cf. Brown, Mark, 'David Hare

Pens Furious Poem About Boris Johnson's Handling of Pandemic', *The Guardian*, 19 April 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/apr/19/david-hare-pens-furious-poem-about-boris-johnsons-handling-of-pandemic>, date accessed: 10 March 2023.

²⁸ Cf. for instance, Roy's opinion piece 'Modi's Model is at Last Revealed for What It Is: Violent Hindu Nationalism Underwritten by Big Business', *The Guardian*, 18 February 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/feb/18/narendra-modi-hindu-nationalism-india-gautam-adani>, date accessed: 11 March 2023.

²⁹ For a discussion on literary celebrity and the work of PEN, see McDonald, Peter D. et al, 'Clearing a Space for Multiple, Marginal Voices: The Writers' Activism of PEN', in: Mayer, Sandra and Ruth Scobie (eds.), *Authorship, Activism and Celebrity: Art and Action in Global Literature*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, 31–44.

³⁰ Ommundsen, Wenche, 'From the Altar to the Market-Place and Back Again: Understanding Literary Celebrity', in: Redmond, Sean and Su Holmes (eds.), *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, Los Angeles: Sage, 2007, 244–255, 245.

³¹ Tsaliki, Liza, Christos Frangonikolopoulos, and Asteris Huliaras, 'Introduction', in: Tsaliki, Liza, Christos Frangonikolopoulos, and Asteris Huliaras (eds.), *Transnational Celebrity Activism in Global Politics: Changing the World?*, Bristol: Intellect Books, 2011, 7–24, 10.

³² Ribke, Nahuel, *A Genre Approach to Celebrity Politics: Global Patterns of Passage from Media to Politics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015, 172.

³³ See Meizoz, Jérôme, *Postures littéraires. Mises en scène modernes de l'auteur*, Geneva: Slatkine Érudition, 2007.

³⁴ Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 'A Defence of Poetry', in: Leader, Zachary and Michael O'Neill (eds.), *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003, 674–701, 701.

³⁵ Mayer, Sandra, and Ruth Scobie, 'Introduction: The Idea of the Author', in: Mayer, Sandra and Ruth Scobie (eds.), *Authorship, Activism and Celebrity: Art and Action in Global Literature*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, 1–16, 5.

³⁶ Among them, notably, is Salman Rushdie, who, in line with his iconic – and now, sadly, firmly consolidated – status as a 'martyr' of free speech, has persistently evoked this figure as someone whose faith in 'literary art as the proper counterweight to power' is unshakable. Cf. Rushdie, Salman, 'The Pen and the Sword: The International PEN Congress of 1986', in: Salman Rushdie, *Languages of Truth: Essays 2003–2020*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2021, 220–224, 223.

³⁷ Sapiro, Gisèle, 'Forms of Politicization in the French Literary Field', in: *Theory and Society* 32:5/6 (2003) 633–652, 640.

³⁸ Sapiro, Gisèle, 'Authorship and Responsibility: The Case of Émile Zola's Commitment in the Dreyfus Affair', in: Dorleijn, Gillis J., Ralf Grüttemeier, and Liesbeth Korthals Altes (eds.), *Authorship Revisited: Conceptions of Authorship Around 1900 and 2000*, Leuven: Peeters, 2010, 1–10, 4.

³⁹ I develop this concept in analogy to Michael Benton's 'biomythography', which acknowledges the processes of myth-making and the multiple subjective truths that underlie the (re)presentation of lives through different media and genres. Cf. Benton, Michael, *Literary Biography: An Introduction*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 47–66.

⁴⁰ Rojek, Chris, *Celebrity*, London: Reaktion Books, 2001, 10.

⁴¹ See the introduction and David Herd's Afterword to this cluster for more detailed explanations of these policy-changing efforts.

⁴² For an overview of the history, inspiration, main objectives, and activities of *Refugee Tales*, see the introduction to this cluster by Sandra Mayer, Sylvia Mieszkowski, and Kevin Potter.

⁴³ Cf. Barr, Helen, 'Stories of the New Geography: The Refugee Tales', in: *Journal of Medieval Worlds* 1:1 (2019) 79–106.

⁴⁴ Anonymous, *28 Tales for 28 Days*, <https://www.28for28.org/>, date accessed: 28 March 2023.

⁴⁵ Cf. Roach, Joseph, *It*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007.

⁴⁶ Rojek, 2013, 141.

⁴⁷ Anonymous, 'Many Voices', *28 Tales for 28 Days*, <https://www.28for28.org/voices>; Anonymous, '28 Tales for 28 Days - *Refugee Tales* Statement', *28 Tales for 28 Days*, <https://www.28for28.org/28-tales-for-28-days>, date accessed: 28 March 2023.

⁴⁸ Richey and Brockington, 2020, 53. Cf. also Tsaliki, Frangonikolopoulos, Huliaras, 2011, 305.

⁴⁹ In this context, see Sylvia Mieszkowski's contribution to this cluster, in which she offers a close reading of the collaborative, polyvocal nature of the tales and makes a case for looking upon the *Refugee Tales* project as a 'counter-apparatus'.

⁵⁰ Sandten, Cecile, 'Refugee Tales: Asylum Stories and Walks as New Forms of Literary and Political Intervention', in: *Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies* 31:3 (2020) 121–136, 125.

⁵¹ Bacharach, Sondra, 'Collaboration: Rethinking Origins and Ownership', in: Boes, Tobias, Rebecca Braun, and Emily Spears (eds.), *World Authorship*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2020, 61–72, 68.

⁵² Cf. Anonymous, 'About', *Comma Press*, <https://commapress.co.uk/about>, date accessed: 30 March 2023.

⁵³ Cf. for instance, Anonymous, 'Protest: Stories of Resistance', *Comma Press*, <https://commapress.co.uk/books/protest-hardback>, date accessed: 30 March 2023; Anonymous, 'Resist: Stories of Uprising', *Comma Press*, <https://commapress.co.uk/books/resist-hardback>, date accessed: 30 March 2023.

⁵⁴ Page, Ra, 'Commissions: The Politics of Origin and Market', in: Boes, Tobias, Rebecca Braun, and Emily Spears (eds.), *World Authorship*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2020, 74–86, 77.

⁵⁵ *Idem*, 82.

⁵⁶ *Idem*, 81–82.

⁵⁷ *Idem*, 82.

⁵⁸ Meretoja, Hanna, *The Ethics of Storytelling: Narrative Hermeneutics, History, and the Possible*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018, 2.

⁵⁹ On the complex questions of voice raised by the *Refugee Tales* project, see Patience Agbabi's contribution to this cluster.

⁶⁰ Meretoja, 2018, 12.

⁶¹ Cf. Schofield, Benedict, 'Engagement: Authoring European Futures', in: Boes, Tobias, Rebecca Braun, and Emily Spears (eds.), *World Authorship*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2020, 133–147.

⁶² Schaffer, Kay, and Sidonie Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 1.

⁶³ *Idem*, 3.

⁶⁴ Van Krieken, 2018, eBook, chapter 1.

⁶⁵ Marshall, P. David, *Celebrity and Power: Fame and Contemporary Culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, x.

⁶⁶ *Idem*, 57–58.