



The Refugee's Tale: The Story of the Story

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Abstract

This essay explores the collaborative process of creating the poem 'The Refugee's Tale', which was initially read at a live event and subsequently published in the first *Refugee Tales* anthology (Comma Press, 2016). It presents the metatextual process of interviewing the refugee to obtain their story, 'The Refugee's Tale' itself,¹ and the multifaceted aspects of the creative composition of the long poem. It examines a variety of literary and ethical challenges from the perspective of a participating writer: the imperative to do justice to the politics of the *Refugee Tales* movement as a whole and the individual tale in particular whilst concurrently attending to the aesthetics in creating a literary work; the intersections and differences between creating life writing and fiction; the decision to utilize the mnemonic properties of a particular European poetic form, the heroic crown, to tell the tale of a North African woman; the avoidance of pornography of pain; and, fundamentally, questions of voice – generating it, giving it, lending it, and silencing it. The author concludes that the merits of this collaborative process, the pairing of refugees with literary writers to craft and recite their life story, is the most effective way to capture the public imagination and enable those silenced voices to be heard.

Keywords: *Refugee Tales*, collaboration, fiction, poetry

Introduction

Creative collaborations are often contingent on synchronicity, the participants sharing an idea or goal yet coming from different perspectives. This was the case with *Refugee Tales*. I was asked to participate in this project in 2014 by Anna Pincus and, again in early 2015, by David Herd. They noted that in 2014 I had launched *Telling Tales*, a twenty-first-century, multicultural retelling of all of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.² Whilst touring *Telling Tales*, there was abundant audience engagement but the most incisive question I was asked by an academic at the University of Oxford was this: ‘Chaucer aimed to critique medieval society; did you set out to challenge contemporary Britain?’

I had not. In previous poetry collections I had been overtly political, addressing racism, feminism, sexuality, class struggle. But in creating *Telling Tales* the politics were covert not overt. Maybe I had missed an opportunity to change Britain if not the world. *Refugee Tales* would be the perfect opportunity to use *The Canterbury Tales* to critique a dual social ill: the vilification of asylum seekers, and their indefinite length of detention. It was going to enable me to combine authorship and activism. I had previously defined myself as a poetical activist, a poet giving voice to the voiceless, a phrase I now wish to alter, as I am not the one who is ‘giving’; they are. And they are not voiceless; they have a voice that is currently not being heard. I was, rather, creating a voice of the unvoiced.

Many of my published poems are monologues written in registers not commonly heard in poetry but this was different; this was the story of someone’s actual life. They had given their permission; they, who had been denied a public voice, were *giving me their voice* to create a work of art. This was urgent, meaningful; life and death! It was an honour to be asked, a serious responsibility and new creative territory. I said ‘Yes!’

Telling Tales begins with an epigraph, the oft-quoted lines from ‘The General Prologue’ to *The Canterbury Tales*, which resonated strongly at the beginning of this new project:

[...] Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.³

This translates into contemporary English as: ‘Whoever tells a tale as someone else has told it must, if [they have, PA] undertaken to do so, repeat every word as near as [...] [they, PA] can, however rudely and broadly [they speak, PA], or else [they, PA] must be telling the tale untruthfully, inventing things or finding new words’.⁴

The key challenge of contributing to the *Refugee Tales* was to honour the words of the original speaker and yet, simultaneously, edit, alter, shape them. A near impossible task... Therefore, this essay will outline the collaborative process of creating ‘The Refugee’s Tale’: from the external events leading up to composition, then include the text as originally published in *Refugee Tales* (2016), to the nitty-gritty of the writing process. I will discuss some of the intersections and differences between creating life writing and fiction and the nuances of voice in such a collaboration.

‘As told to’

When did ‘The Refugee’s Tale’ begin as a collaboration? From the moment Anna Pincus contacted me in 2014, months prior to the UK’s ‘refugee crisis’ media frenzy,⁵ I was briefed about the behind-the-scenes work the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group was conducting. Having agreed to participate in the project, I was informed by Anna that she had paired me up with an interviewee, Farida: I would be writing ‘The Refugee’s Tale’. In all my writing life, I had never been given a title preceding a creative piece, so already this felt like a new collaborative process.

When I arrived at the GDWG Office in Croydon in February 2015, it was no ordinary arts-driven meeting; this was an induction to the wider context of refugees’ experience. Anna Pincus had arranged a visit to the Brook House Immigration Removal Centre close to Gatwick Airport so that I would witness what it was like to be detained there. In short, it was like a prison. We had to deposit our belongings in lockers, enter security, and were treated with some suspicion although Anna visited the centre on a weekly basis. We met and spoke to a male detainee she visited regularly. There was no privacy. The room contained several tables and chairs for detainees and their visitors. It was a sobering but necessary introduction to the work of GDWG and the conditions detainees must endure. Though of course, the psychological impact of indefinite detention is worse than a prison sentence, where there is at least an exit date.

Back in the neutral tones of the office, Anna introduced me to Farida and her friend Julia, a lawyer. At the time I believed the lawyer was present to prevent me asking anything too intrusive, which added to my anxious state of mind. I subsequently learnt that Julia was simply present in the capacity of a friend, to support Farida. I

expected Farida to be quiet, traumatized, head bowed like that of the man we had just met in the detention centre. But she was an extrovert. Confident, articulate, attractive, and extremely open. It was only as the interview progressed that I realized she was also traumatized. She passionately wanted her story to be told. Despite her confidence, the emotional impact of what had happened, and the fact that she was well known in her country of origin and certain revelations might put her and her family in further jeopardy, prevented her from telling it herself.

Anna pointed out to us the box of tissues on the table, a human touch, and I was struck by the importance of meeting there, in the GDWG office, a safe and significant space. This interview was a development on the brilliant humanitarian work the group has been conducting for decades. This would be the first interview of the *Refugee Tales* project. As a poet, I have often thrived on residencies where working *in situ* added depth to the writing: Flamin’ 8, a tattoo and piercing parlour in North London; the Historic Dockyard at Chatham, Kent; and Harewood House, a stately home outside Leeds, Northeast England. There was an intensity in this room, too, before the recording even began.

Of course, I had not been specifically told to write a *poem*. I could write in any form I wished. And yet I had been recruited as the poet who had just created a poetic reworking of *The Canterbury Tales*, a book in deep conversation with Chaucer’s prosody. And Farida enthusiastically informed me that she loved poetry. Poetry, especially formal poetry, would surely be the best vehicle to harness the difficult emotions the tale would evoke. Thus, before we pressed the recording buttons – we made two recordings, one on my tablet and one on their tape for backup – my poetic antennae were sensitized.

Technology increased self-consciousness. Our first interactions after pressing the record button were much more inhibited than the previous twenty minutes. But we soon were able to ignore the machines, and the importance of the task, both on a human and a professional level, took precedence. The interview lasted an hour and a half. Farida told her story well. Her voice was strong, clear, and often animated. She broke down several times and the tissues were gratefully received, but she obviously felt supported enough to reach the end of her story in one sitting.

I occasionally asked questions for clarification, and when I listened back, I sounded even more nervous than I felt at the time, speaking too quickly, sounding younger than my years, struggling to find the right words, out of my depth, terrified I would say the wrong thing, traumatize Farida further and have to bear the wrath of the lawyer. I was also incredibly moved by the story and wanted to keep my interventions to the minimum.

First-, second- or third-person narrative? The strength of the interview held sway. ‘The Refugee’s Tale’ would be told first-person in Farida’s voice; it was my job to shape the narrative into art. The wording used in the anthology for all the tales is the title of the tale followed by the words ‘as told to’ and then the name of the writer to accentuate the collaborative process.

At this point, I will reproduce the tale⁶ with the short introduction I use for readings, followed by an analysis of some of the literary challenges I encountered as a writer and poet. My poem is set in Sudan. The voice is that of a middle-aged woman born in Sudan, of Egyptian heritage. Farida is not her real name, and I also changed her job and number of her children to protect her identity. But the fundamental trajectory of the story is true. I refer to the Copts, short for the historical Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt, a Christian denomination mainly in the area of modern Egypt but also in Sudan and Libya. The Nuba are the indigenous peoples of the Nuba Mountains in Southern Sudan.

The Refugee’s Tale

1.

Maybe the real story begins here
in this office, before you press record
and we look in the mirror of each other’s eyes, we’re
first time meeting; maybe you say the word
‘Refugee’ in your head when you call me Farida,
Refugee, what is that burn mark on your hand?
You already have a story of the torture
I suffered in my war-torn homeland.

But these marks are from cooking bread for my family,
this is the first time I’m cooking in my life!
I never even made a cup of tea
back home. I make a very good falafel,
you must try. Are you recording? Food of the homestead:
Christians, Muslims, we bake the same flatbread.

2.

Christians and Muslims break the same bread
before the change: though my parents are Egyptian,
I am born in Sudan, Sudan is in my blood.
Though I am always a Christian
even for ten years I loved Muslims
more than Christians, my Muslim neighbours
care for my parents when we jetset to Paris or Rome –
I loved Muslims as I love the Nuba;

love my country, we Copts, always first class,
we had good English, all of us working in the banks.
Cleaner to driver, everyone is close
to Farida, no door that is not wide open, thanks
to God, since I leave university mid-year,
and that day, I start my career.

3.

The day I started my banking career,
my parents complained but they couldn’t control me.
Back then was good atmosphere,
I am making good money,
my husband is running his business in patents,
we build a large family house, we have six children,
and some flats in Egypt for the pensions of our parents.
Always we are donating to the poor of our brethren.

Then government changes, doors begin to close.
At work, what took two hours now takes two weeks
and Christians are flocking overnight to the US.
Then, the rumour of a banking leak...
Watching the planes flying over my head
I refused to leave my country, my homestead.

4.

I refused. I love my country, my homestead,
my mother, my father, my husband’s father and mother,
the motherland; I would rather be buried dead
than leave, I was the last one to leave: my brother-
in-law, he’s unwell, he needed support to heal
his divided mind, we nurture him like a plant
and polish each leaf, each flower to help seal
him together – like the two faiths that can’t

be divided by politicians completely corrupted,
splitting the country like an open wound: they insert
a lie and there’s Christians abducted.

I refused to cover my hair but my heart
was divided by language, river, boundary, country,
the day I retreated my status to refugee.

5.

Why should I be treated as stranger, as refugee
in the country I was born, barricaded in

my bank, while demonstrators outside shout blasphemy,
hundreds, thousands fed with propaganda poison?
We’re told remain calm, stay here, you have food
but my phone buzzed like a dying insect –
my husband, my children, my parents pleading with God.
I remembered the side door, the back exit

where the generator hummed in the dark
and I find myself descending the iron stairs,
the noise of the crowd out front like a bull shark
and somehow my legs find the car, my hands on the gears
and my friend is closing the door imagining the crowbar
fists of the crowd pounding on my car.

6.

The fist-headed crowd are pounding on my car.
My car is not moving. Each fist has a face
that looks like my own. How can we be at war
when the Nile flows through our twin faiths?
If my car is my coffin,
their fists are the clods of earth, the rich yellow soil
of my country. I start the engine,
praying, Dear God, let it...let it not stall...

But my car is the black and the steel
of a bullet-proof jacket, today it will save
my life, with my hands on the steering wheel
and my life in the hand of God, it begins to move
and the waving fists part like the Red Sea.
I still think it’s miracle I find myself free.

7.

It’s miracle I’m still having job but my mind is not free:
each day government is ringing for bank information
that I am not having. They don’t believe me.
More doors are closed in my face with no explanation.
Maybe somewhere there’s a typed memo,

on a blank piece of paper someone has printed my name,
someone is watching my house, how, I don’t know,
anger is a gloved hand and a flickering flame.

That night, the family is sleeping on the second floor
except my oldest son and daughter coming back
from Coptic club: they open the side-door
and all they are smelling is smoke... Someone broke
into our life, their hand through our window bars
that night, to smother the moon and stars.

8.

The night smoke choked the moon and the stars
I tried to call the fire... I tried to call them
hundreds of times. If it wasn’t for our neighbours
hearing us shouting...my neighbours came
and there was water...I shouted like crazy,
Please, please help us at this address,
and nobody came. Like they arranged it, maybe,
the fire brigade not to come, and we all perish.

My husband insisted to break the room and go inside
and the flames...I was so worried about him...
but my neighbours... all my family survived.
We prayed there together, Christian and Muslim,
in the heat of the fire, we knelt on the earth, and wept.
I thought I forget but their love I’ll never forget.

9.

I thought I forget in this life but I never forget
the three hours it took for the fire engine to arrive
felt like three days. There is no regret,
we were lucky to be alive.
But how can you sleep, then, knowing the country you love
wants you to die, how can you close your eyes shut
when they’ve been pitted like an olive?
I’m praying to God every night but

then after that, they started with my husband.
He was away with his business abroad,
they arrested him at Customs
coming back to our country, his papers ignored.
He sense something bad would... had a premonition...
the day they imprison my husband, he had not eaten.

10.

They put my husband in prison, he is not eating
the right foods, they knew he was diabetic
but they’re starving him of insulin,
wouldn’t let me give his medicine, I was frantic.
I didn’t know where he was based,
didn’t know what they can do to him to get me
and finally I decided there was no way... I could not...resist.
That’s when I decided to leave my beloved country.

They said, you should be grateful we left you in peace,
this is a Muslim country but we let you pray
in your churches. Cooperate for your husband’s release.
I know nothing of that bank information to this day.
Always I am wearing my cross and refused to sweat
in the heavy black and steel of my bulletproof jacket.

11.

The heavy black and steel of a bulletproof jacket
is the depression I wear on the worse days
when freedom here weighs heavier than the death threat
back home and my family fall on their knees.
But back home I refused, why should Farida wear widow’s
black when there is still hope for my husband
to bend the bars on his prison windows.
Always, there’s light on the horizon.

I knew a Muslim high official, a friend
of my husband, Farida, trust me, I have a plan.
So I’m buying us tickets to London, even then

thinking we can come back when things cool down.
The day of his release, I’m barely breathing;
meeting him at the airport, the sky is bleeding.

12.

When I met him at the airport...he was bleeding...
his chest was full of blood...and he had
ulcerative colitis, he is needing
urgent medical...very sick...he bled
onto the flight...and is sleeping very peaceful
and the whole of my family is here and safe.
As soon as we land we take him to hospital
and...they save his life.

An international visa is an open door
but the next day we go to Croydon to claim asylum
and though the lady is very kind it pains me more
than everything to cut myself from my home,
my country, with each section of my claim.
My story...depressed photo in a frame.

13.

The story depends where you put the frame:
with my oldest son, my oldest daughter
each in a separate room, but exactly the same
questions, each the author
of a story they will match to see if the grief
fits together the jigsaw of what it is
to love your country and be forced to leave
your whole life behind in broken images.

For me it was lucky, maybe God knows how much I suffered;
maybe it was easy to check my job, my contacts;
maybe the fictions in the newspapers
were detained by the facts.

Now I’m underclass, my head covered with shame.
How am I begging when I can’t remember my name?

14.

How can I begin to remember my name
when I can't leave the house...when the ache of leaving
my mother...she died... the blame
is too much...my whole body drowned with grieving
in this room, with the ribbed roof, where I sit with my sins
heavy as Jonah...this silent attic
where memories play back like the cries of muezzins
mixed with the cries from the priests when she first fell sick?

But good people come, who open me to feel
again for others; and as I translate the words
of a refugee life to a form, I begin to heal.
Their voice is my own voice striking a chord.
May our truth conquer fear:
maybe the real story begins here.

15.

Maybe the real story begins here:
when Christians and Muslims broke the same flatbread;
the day I started my banking career
and refused to leave my country, my homestead;
maybe the day I retreated my status to refugee;
or the fist-headed crowd pounding on my car
and the miracle when I find myself free;
the night the smoke choked the moon and stars.

I thought I forget but some things you never forget:
the day they imprison my husband, he is not eating;
the heavy black and steel of my bulletproof jacket
when I met him at the airport, broken, bleeding.
The story ends where you put the frame:
but however it begins, remember my name.

‘Maybe the fictions of the newspapers / were detained by the facts’

I called this essay ‘The Story of the Story’. I use the word ‘story’ deliberately because ‘Farida’ used that word in the interview to describe the real-life events that led to her leaving Sudan and starting a new life in Britain. Yet, even then, I knew the word ‘story’ was loaded, complex, multifaceted.

In *Story Genius*, a self-help novel-writing manual, the author, Lisa Cron, challenges the primary meaning of the word ‘story’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*: “‘An account of imaginary or real people and events told for entertainment’”.⁷ The *OED*’s primary definition of ‘story’ privileges ‘entertainment’, which implies a superficiality, frivolity, escapism. Cron is not against entertainment but knows the primary impulse of story is more profound. She states: ‘We don’t turn to stories to escape reality. We turn to stories to navigate reality’.⁸ How would I render Farida’s life’s story into a work of art? Would I be recreating fact, and at what point might it become fiction? What are the intersections and differences between life writing and fiction, or, in this case, narrative poetry?

A few days after the interview I listened to the recording. I only listened back twice: once to hear the interview all the way through, and the second time, stopping the recording to write down exact key phrases. All the phrases that reverberated in my mind became the repeated lines of the poem. I was already able to recall large chunks of the interview.

Listening back was a totally different experience from the live interview. Firstly, it was the second time I was hearing the story, so I knew the trajectory of events and was more prepared emotionally for the difficult moments. But the more profound difference was sensory: Farida’s voice, the timbre of it, the emotion of it, the accent, the diction, the idiom, the pauses, the variations in volume – all these things were magnified. Gone was the neutral office space with its thoughtfully positioned box of tissues, Farida’s physicality, Anna and Julia in their supportive roles and my mistaken anxiety about the latter’s legal background, the knowledge that a few hundred metres away stood the grim detention centre we had just visited and in the opposite direction, the roar of planes landing and taking off from Gatwick airport, possibly transporting asylum seekers out of the country. There was simply Farida vocalizing her story, and that intimacy had a profound effect on me.

From the outset, I felt strangely confident that I could write a poem in Farida’s voice because she had given me so much of herself and her life history, and even after the recording was switched off, I could hear her voice quite clearly. I have a long-term interest in the use of the vernacular in poetry which I had demonstrated in my recent

Chaucer retelling, so I felt able to do justice to Farida’s turn of phrase on the page and in subsequent live readings of the poem. I also made the decision to use the key phrases as repeated lines in a heroic crown, a poetic form I will discuss later in this essay. But then I encountered an unexpected obstacle in my creative process: the imperative to change the names and other details in the poem to protect my subject’s identity felt wrong.

I had agreed to this project because I wanted to tell the whole truth, with accuracy, and yet I had been given instructions to ‘feyne thyng’, make things up, like Chaucer, to ‘finde wordes newe’. But wasn’t that what writers did all the time? This was not an official asylum seeker hearing where real names and facts must be adhered to. There were, in fact, legal reasons why I must exercise my writerly imagination and make things up. Of course, I would explain why I had done so in any introduction to the tale. But how much should I change? I had to change the name but I checked early on whether I also had to change the country. That would have been more difficult due to the specific political tensions there. Luckily, I was informed it was permissible to set the poem in Sudan so I did not have the additional challenge of mapping the story elsewhere.

As my interviewee was originally from Egypt, I did some online research on Egyptian names and ‘Farida’ struck a chord. I sat with the name for a few days until it felt like word made flesh. I knew nothing about Sudan or the Christian Coptic Church and how it operated in a predominantly Muslim country; so, I also read about the culture, the landscape, the peoples, the politics. I wanted it to feel real in my mind as if I had travelled there personally so that I could confidently write about it first-person and read it aloud with conviction.

For me, and, as I have subsequently learnt, for many of the *Refugee Tales* writers, collaboration meant using the person’s actual words, which was tantamount to an act of empathy. And then, with each live reading, reading the words *aloud*, you are embodying them. You are re-enacting the emotion of the interview room. Each time you read, you are collaborating. The first time I read ‘The Refugee’s Tale’ live, Farida stood at the back of the room in case she needed to vacate it quickly, due to the trauma of hearing her story out loud in public. However, she managed to stay for the duration of the reading. Afterwards, she embraced me with the words, ‘It is me!’ I knew then that I had done my job as a writer. It was a big relief.

I also embraced my own agnostic theism that had engaged with Christianity and the voice of my late Christian mother to tap into the voice of faith that would permeate the poem. And I felt some African solidarity too. But from the outset I wanted this collaboration not to be 50:50. Farida’s words and idiom must predominate and I

would fill in the gaps as seamlessly as I could, elaborating on detail, adding simile and metaphor (‘we nurture him like a plant’, ‘the waving fists part like the Red Sea’, ‘my story...depressed photo in a frame’), echoes or emphases to render the poem three-dimensional for the listener.

At first, I agonized about rendering the poem too poetic, but I’m a poet known for telling it as it is, not for flowery language, so I eventually gained confidence to put some of my writerly self into the tale: my reverence for the vernacular, my facility with form. *Refugee Tales* had not set out to publish transcripts of the interviews; they specifically wanted collaborations with writers. *I must work as a writer* became my mantra.

In stanza one, Farida’s phrase ‘I make a very good falafel / you must try’ enabled me to make the leap to another type of food that might serve as a strong emotional image: ‘Christians, Muslims, we bake the same flatbread’. Farida did not mention flatbread in her original story and yet flatbread must have featured behind the scenes. Farida’s story was complex: some Muslims persecuted her; some saved her life. This was a strong narrative thread. But the burn mark on the hand, the making of the falafel were not made up, and served as a brilliant way of showing how Farida’s life had changed, from being at the top of society in Sudan to the bottom of society as a refugee in Britain. Furthermore, it served to challenge my preconceived notion that refugees were from the underclass in their country of origin. I have since had the pleasure to sample Farida’s falafel on more than one occasion, in her home and on the annual *Refugee Tales* walks.

I stated previously that I kept my interview questions to the minimum. Occasionally, I could not resist rendering Farida’s voice more overtly political, for example, in stanza 13. I had questioned her about the Home Office interview and inserted the phrase ‘The story depends where you put the frame’ to make a wider point about her story, and the story of the story. I wanted to emphasize the crux of the matter in the metaphor ‘the jigsaw of what it is / to love your country and be forced to leave / your whole life behind in broken images.’ I wanted to see how Farida reacted to the negative stories in the national press about asylum seekers being benefit scroungers, which prompted her reply: ‘How am I begging when I can’t remember my name?’ But I ventriloquized her idiom in the statement ‘maybe the fictions in the newspapers / were detained by the facts.’ She did not say this; I said it. My authorial voice slipped in, disguised as hers. At that stage, the story is nearing its close: I am deliberately pulling out from close-up to wide-angle focus, so it felt befitting to make a critical observation.

‘I translate the words / of a refugee life to a form’

My macro-objective was to shape the voice of Farida’s story, so that it flowed like speech as much as possible, yet was condensed by the framework of a fixed form to render it more memorable and even aesthetically pleasing for the listener. This was not entertainment; I wanted the audience to empathize, and form enables words to mean more. Technically, I work best as a writer when I have a strong framework, and I wanted to do this tale justice by giving it a structure that embodied it most closely.

The collaborative poem, ‘The Refugee’s Tale’, is a corona; a sonnet form where the last line of one stanza becomes the first line of the next. But I chose a very specific subtype: the heroic crown, the sonnet *redoublé*, a fifteenth-century Italian form. Fourteen stanzas come full circle followed by a final fifteenth stanza that incorporates the first lines of the preceding fourteen. This structure has been used in recent times by the poet George Szirtes, himself a child refugee from Hungary in 1956, who insists the form originated in Hungary. I had previously been in email conversation with him, and he gave me some tips including the essential one: begin with the final fifteenth stanza. In his biographical poem, ‘Portrait of My Father in an English Landscape’ (1998), the poet subverts the repeated lines so that they echo but are not identical to the preceding one.⁹ This produces a sense of translation, revision, call and response, a subtle shift in perspective that renders the repetition more multi-layered and complex. I decided this would work well for my collaboration.

Why choose this early Renaissance European structure when the speaker is a twenty-first-century middle-aged, North African woman? Replaying Farida’s recording, I was struck by speech patterns, key phrases repeated for emphasis. This highlighted the cyclical nature of experience, how she had lent me her voice to enable me to be reproducing her voice; and she herself was empowering the voice of others through voluntary work, helping refugees fill in benefit forms. Official forms are often intrusive, demanding multiple facts about a person’s life that often don’t fit within its parameters: in contrast, poetic forms, ostensibly restrictive, can liberate the writer to convey the full range of human experience. To contain emotion, give aesthetic pleasure from a very painful occurrence, and stay in the mind of the reader, her story needed a fixed form. And the heroic crown is a form that comes full circle and goes beyond, like her experience.

The rhymes flowed easily. I have worked in rhyme my entire poetic career. I had written coronas before but this was my debut for the heroic crown. Writing the last stanza first was a godsend because the whole structure fell into place. I already had versions of the first and last lines of the preceding stanzas. I already had the interview.

I knew the trajectory of the story. I felt confident with the voice. I wrote the first draft quickly, with Farida’s voice echoing in my head. At that stage, I didn’t grapple with ethical issues around voice as I had confidence in the *Refugee Tales* set-up, the respectful way in which they had approached their participants, the politics underlying the entire project. However, having written the piece, I shall now discuss several of the complex issues that must be addressed when taking on someone else’s voice: generating it, giving it, lending it, silencing it.

‘Their voice is my own voice striking a chord’

Before I began writing ‘The Refugee’s Tale’, several questions presented themselves.

- Do you have everybody’s permission?

Yes, I did. The *Refugee Tales* set-up was watertight.

- Is it ok to take on the voice of someone less privileged than yourself? What is the power dynamic?

I had initially assumed Farida would be less privileged than myself. However, in her native country she had been at the top of society and yet, in Britain, unable to work due to her refugee status, she had been demoted to the underclass. The power dynamic was complex. She had shared her story and given me permission to rewrite it, yet I did not have the imaginative freedoms I was accustomed to; in my mind it would always be her story.

- How much do you adhere to their words and how much do you change to create a work of art?

I adhered to the interview as much as I could and retained Farida’s voice but changed details to protect her and her family; added simile and metaphor to make the story more three-dimensional and shaped the narrative into a heroic crown to make it more memorable.

- Which parts of their story do you keep and which do you cut?

In the actual interview, Farida told me two stories; her own, then that of a young woman who was a friend of the family. I only used Farida’s story. You streamline to focus, give the story more gravitas.

- How do you avoid what critics call ‘the pornography of pain’?

In 2017 I read from *Telling Tales* and ‘The Refugee’s Tale’ at a conference at the University of Bonn in Germany, entitled ‘Representing Poverty and Precarity in a Post-Colonial World’. At breakfast, an academic asked that exact question: How does a writer avoid misappropriating difficult subject matter for their own artistic ends? How much might their aim for social change end up sensationalizing poverty? What was my core inspiration for writing ‘The Refugee’s Tale’?

Taken unawares at breakfast, I answered ‘love’, meaning if your intentions are good, then you have the ‘moral high ground’, but she said that was far too abstract for an academic. Here is an extract from the email I sent her after I had returned to the UK, expanding on our in-person conversation about the *Refugee Tales* project:

The poems and stories were each written after face-to-face interviews with the refugees, asylum seekers, detainees, and those who support them. The participants were chosen because they were already part of a support network in the UK. Many of us have become friends during the collaboration. I’d never worked in this way before. Previously, all my poems were based on research and imagination.

I’ve been thinking about our short discussion on the ethics of representation. I used the word ‘love’ but I think ‘caritas’ would be a more accurate word. It encompasses empathy. If a writer has empathy, the work is coming from a good place. Poverty or precarity becomes not merely a ‘subject’ to write about, or worse exploit. *The work is infused with a challenge to change society for the better* [my italics, PA]. The writer’s original intentions can still be misinterpreted but that will always happen.

No subject should be taboo for a writer. Yet a writer in this public eye has to take responsibility for their publications. And a writer with empathy is able to walk in the shoes¹⁰ of those less privileged than themselves with integrity. Many such writers also work to enable the less privileged to develop their own voice to a high standard so they can share their experiences first-hand, if they desire it.¹¹

That has happened with the *Refugee Tales* project; through the ongoing support network, some have been able to tell their own tales and read them in public first-hand. The academic to whom I had sent this email responded that ‘caritas’ was also too abstract. She said that artists usually aim for things like ‘beauty’ and ‘truth’ (as if these were not abstract). Interestingly, when I created my poem, I wanted the public to hear the truth through a medium that was aesthetically pleasing, as an antidote to the media frenzy against asylum seekers and economic migrants. I wanted to create a poem of formal beauty that resonated with a personal and political truth of lived

experience. Ironically, in writing ‘The Refugee’s Tale’, I *was* doing what this academic felt most artists do all the time but from a different, specific perspective.

It was good to be challenged about my motivations for participating in the *Refugee Tales* project. But five years later, I wish I had said this:

Society does not want to hear depressing stories. It is easier to demonize people who are suffering than to try to alleviate that suffering. If those stories are not told, voices will be silenced and worse still, other people will tell their stories and recast them as the villains. There are many ways to tell stories and the literary and visual arts reach large audiences, open up discussions that might make the world a better place. We have to ultimately ask ourselves, who most benefits from the stories being told?

I would then have quoted David Herd in the ‘Afterword’ to *Refugee Tales*, in which he shares, then analyses, the feedback he received from the people whose tales were being told:

[T]hey were relieved the account was being passed on [...]. What perhaps it means is that a story that belongs to one person now belongs, also, to other people; that other people acknowledge the experience that constitutes the story, but also that in making that acknowledgement they register responsibility. These are tales [...] that call for and generate a collective; tales that need to be told and re-told so that the situation they emerge from might be collectively addressed.¹²

Herd accentuates the impact of the collaboration, how the passing of a story from one person to another, followed by repeated readings of it, might eventually effect change in broader society. In the initial interview, Farida acknowledged relief in sharing her story with me, knowing that I would write it and publicly share it. Her story had become our story.

‘Whoso shal telle a tale’

Let me return to Chaucer, to the idea of lending voice, giving voice, and mixing voice. Farida had lent me her voice; how would I handle that responsibility in a world where stories of asylum seekers’ lives had been effectively silenced from the national discourse?

I was reminded of the early days of rewriting *The Canterbury Tales* for the twenty-first century. Having boldly claimed in an Arts Council funding application that I was the only living poet who could do justice to the range of registers in *The Canterbury Tales*, I developed writer’s block. I was paralyzed by Chaucer’s reputation as The Grandfather of English Literature. Luckily, a fellow poet, Jane Draycott, translator of the medieval dream poem, *Pearl*, gave me some invaluable advice. She said when you’re taking on an old masterpiece, you have to decide where you position yourself in relation to it: are you walking behind it, following in its footsteps? Are you walking alongside it, maybe holding hands with it? Are you marching ahead of it? Or are you *inside* it? In other words: are you playing safe, keeping faithful to the original text; slightly going off at a tangent but still close; forging new ground with echoes of the original; or trying to capture the timeless quintessence of the text?

In ‘The Refugee’s Tale’, I was not rewriting a work of fiction. This was real life; a true story. And if I chose first-person delivery, I must be bold and take some risks. I must get inside it, get to the essence of it. And I must *reherce as ny as evere I kan / Everich a word, if it be in my charge*.

My imperative was to honour Farida’s idiom, her diction, her syntax, her exclamations! To emphasize her pauses when overcome by excessively painful memories. It was to enable the reader or the listener to imagine they themselves were in that GDWG office; ‘we’re first time meeting’ rather than ‘we’re meeting for the first time’. ‘Always we are donating to the poor of our brethren’ rather than ‘we are always...’. ‘I tried to call the fire...’ rather than ‘I tried to call the fire brigade.’ It had to be her.

When I inserted the similes, metaphors, interjections that were not in the interview, they had to be in Farida’s voice, to flow seamlessly as if she herself had said them. In that way, it changed my practice as a writer. I had written a couple of poems from interviews before but it had never been politically imperative to represent that voice with such accuracy. David Herd defines this in his ‘Afterword’: ‘[...] to tell another person’s tale one has to listen at length and very closely; at such length, in fact, that the experience being relayed grafts onto and alters the listener’s language’.¹³ This act of collaboration required intense concentration and a sensitivity to Farida’s unique patterns of speech. It was a challenge in technical craft as well as *caritas*.

Conclusion: ‘Remember my name’

‘The Refugee’s Tale’ and most of the other tales in the series began with an interview. They are written to be read aloud so that the voiceless are heard. They are written first and foremost for *listeners*. ‘The Refugee’s Tale’ uses a form with sonic echoes both in the rhymes and the longer, near-repeated lines that culminate in a final stanza that revoices, retells itself to the very last line.

There is the ultimate paradox that I finish with the phrase that is mine, not Farida’s: ‘remember my name’. Through hearing my introduction, the live audience knows that Farida is not her real name; from reading David Herd’s ‘Afterword’ to the *Refugee Tales* anthology, the reader may guess that her name has been changed to preserve her anonymity. For the reader or listener, this fictional name, Farida, renders the story more like traditional fiction where the main protagonist is nominally identified. Yet simultaneously, it makes the story seem more like real life, in that we identify and empathize with a named person infinitely more than an anonymous one. Farida had referred to herself by name more than once in her interview; I highlighted her ‘name’ to make a wider point. I wanted people to remember Farida and her story; I simultaneously wanted Farida and her story to stand as a metaphor for anonymous people whose stories had not yet been heard.

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About the Author

Patience Agbabi is a freelance poet and novelist who has been a Fellow in Creative Writing at Oxford Brookes University since 2009 and is currently Associate Member of the English Faculty at the University of Oxford. Her writing often focuses on representations of the underprivileged in literature, including women and girls’ issues, Black culture, sexuality, and neurodiversity. She is the author of four poetry collections, including the twenty-first-century retelling of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, *Telling Tales* (Canongate, 2014). She is also the author of *The Leap Cycle*, a middle-grade time-travel tetralogy. The fourth book, *The Past Master*, is due in February 2024.

Notes

- ¹ The author would like to thank Comma Press for granting the permission to reprint ‘The Refugee’s Tale’ from Herd, David and Anna Pincus (eds.), *Refugee Tales*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2016, 125–132.
- ² Cf. Agbabi, Patience, *Telling Tales*, Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2014.
- ³ Chaucer, Geoffrey, *The Canterbury Tales*, New York: Everyman’s Library, 1992, lines 731–736.
- ⁴ *Idem*, 22.
- ⁵ In 2015, people fleeing conflict and persecution predominantly in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq meant larger numbers of asylum seekers in Northern Europe. The UK tabloid press printed incendiary headlines which influenced public opinion against refugees: Cf. Fisher, Max, ‘Nothing Captures Western Hypocrisy on Refugees Like these British Tabloid Front Pages’, *Vox*, 3 September 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/9/3/9252649/syrian-refugee-boy-british-tabloids>, date accessed: 6 December 2022.
- ⁶ A recording of ‘The Refugee’s Tale’ is also available: Agbabi, Patience, ‘The Refugee’s Tale’, *28 Tales for 28 Days*, <https://www.28for28.org/videos/the-refugees-tale>, date accessed: 6 December 2022.
- ⁷ Qtd in Cron, Lisa, *Story Genius*, Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2016, 12.
- ⁸ *Idem*, 16.
- ⁹ Szirtes, George, *Portrait of My Father in an English Landscape*, Oxford: Oxford Poets, 1998.

¹⁰ For other work on this metaphor, apropos refugees and empathy, see, for instance: Kendall, Edward, ‘Plight of Refugees Illustrated by Hundreds of Shoes Outside Cathedral’, *The Tablet*, 17 August 2018, <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/news/9599/plight-of-refugees-illustrated-by-hundreds-of-shoes-outside-cathedral>, date accessed: 1 March 2023; and Anonymous, ‘Walk in My Shoes: An Alternative Journey to Alterity’, *Playing Identities*, 30 October 2016, <http://www.playingidentities.eu/news/walk-shoes-alternative-journey-alterity/>, date accessed: 1 March 2023.

¹¹ Agbabi, Patience, email to N.N., 1 June 2017.

¹² Herd, David, ‘Afterword’, in: Herd, David and Anna Pincus (eds.), *Refugee Tales*, Manchester: Comma Press, 2016, 142.

¹³ *Ibidem*.