

Internal Migration: The Letters and Adages of Erasmus

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Did Erasmus long for home? Or was he always avoiding going back? In July 1514, in one of his most confessional letters, he wrote from near Calais to the Prior of his old monastery, Servaas Rogerszoon. It is well over twenty years since Erasmus left the cloister, but Servaas has suggested it may be time to return. Servaas, it appears, has urged that Erasmus belongs with his brethren, his countrymen, and that it would be to serve God in one place. “But I know the Dutch climate,” Erasmus replies — literally the “Dutch sky” (*et novi coelum Hollandicum*).¹ Home made him ill: the diet disagreed with him, as did the cold and wet; he got fevers, or the stone (the priory is at Steyn).² Holland will be the death of him. Maybe, he suggests slyly, that is

1 Epistle 296, Erasmus to Servatius Rogerus, Hammes, July 8, 1514. *Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterdami* [EE], 12 vols., ed. P.S. Allen, H.M. Allen, and H.W. Garrod (Clarendon Press, 1906–1958), 1:567. Translation from *The Collected Works of Erasmus* [CWE], 86 vols. (University of Toronto Press, 1974), 1:296.

2 The Latin word for gallstone is *calculus*; the Dutch (*steen*) is morphologically identical to the placename.

Servaa's motive: preparation for death by means of a return to the place of birth. Yet perhaps migration is a more natural human estate than home, Erasmus counters. Did not Solon travel, or Pythagoras, and Plato? Were they not praised for it? The apostles were endless vagabonds, especially St Paul. Even the monk Jerome turned up now in Rome, now in Syria, now in Antioch. Like Jerome, Erasmus lives *nunc alibi atque alibi*, now here, now there. He is welcome everywhere: "There is not a single realm, neither Spain, nor Italy, nor Germany, nor France, nor England, nor Scotland, which does not invite me to be its guest."³

No region is foreign to him: he can live anywhere in Europe, from Skye to Salamanca, from the Atlantic to the Danube. Yet Erasmus in this passage represses something as well as proclaims the virtue of cosmopolitan experience and political neutrality. Although he paraded under the patrimonial designation "of Rotterdam," it is possible he never saw his city again after infancy. Indeed, he barely stayed overnight in the northern Netherlands after 1500. Meanwhile he lived in Brussels, Paris, Louvain, and then in England several times (in Oxford, London, and more often Cambridge). Yet it is hard to call anywhere his "home" till Basel in his fifties, followed by Freiburg-im-Breisgau in his sixties. He is the twentieth-century migrant before its time. His letters migrate as well, sometimes written in one city and posted in another.

Παρεπιδημία τις ἐστὶν ὁ βίος, *id est Peregrinatio quaedam est vita*. "Life is a time of exile": thus *Adagia* IV x 74.⁴ Erasmus added the adage in 1533, the penultimate edition of his lifetime, although the idea is proverbial in him from the first experimental edition of Paris in 1500 and the expanded one from Venice in 1508. It is a difficult line to translate. The word *peregrinatio* sug-

3 CWE 1:297; Nec vlla est regio, nec Hispania, nec Italia, nec Germania, nec Gallia, nec Anglia, nec Scotia, quae me ad suum non inuitet hospitium, EE, 1:568.

4 *Adagia*, from vol. 2 in Erasmus, *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera omnia* [ASD], 9 vols., ed. J.H. Waszink et al. (Brill, 1969–), 2/8:258; CWE, 36:527. The full text of this adage is supplied at the end of this chapter, in the original languages and in translation.

gests a context from the Hebrew scriptures, as Erasmus quickly elucidates via 1 Chronicles 29:15, Psalm 119:19, and in the New Testament, 1 Peter 2:11 and Hebrews 11:13. “For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers”; “I am a stranger in the earth: hide not thy commandments from me.”⁵ The Jewish language of eternal exile fitted into the early Christian self-image of persecution in the temporal state. In an adage of just seven lines, Erasmus creates a miniature prose poem of dislocation, alienation, or inevitable exile: *vitam hanc esse exilium, esse incolatum et peregrinationem*.⁶ Human beings do not belong anywhere. They are born out of nowhere and die into nowhere. Meanwhile they patch out an existence that is homeless and placeless.

The *Adagia*, printed all over Europe in ever larger and more complex collections, are the lifework of Erasmus, his last published work in 1536 as well as his first in 1500. They provide a kind of encyclopaedic knowledge of the ancient world, citing an eclectic range of sources from Hesiod or Sappho to the church fathers. What lies within is a storehouse of metaphor combined with a subtle and playful commentary. Erasmus twists and turns, encouraging the reader to do the same, in the process creating a source for self-invention (for author and reader alike) along with an imaginary of the other, in the endless encounter with the peoples, myths, quirks, anxieties and desires of literature, history, politics, as well as the pagan, Jewish, Persian, Zoroastrian, or Christian religions. A constant lodestone of self-identification for Erasmus is Ulysses the wanderer, the home-loving home-avoider, the trickster, the mind’s interior inventor. Θάλασσα κλύζει πάντα τάνθρώπων κακά, “the sea washes away all mortal ills” (*Adagia*, III iv 9).⁷ Or we are like Ulysses’s crew — *Ulyssis remigium* (*Adagia*, II x 62), who “did not abstain from Circe’s

5 Erasmus freely paraphrases a cento of these verses, picking up words from the Latin Vulgate translation without quoting exactly; here I give 1 Chronicles 29:15 and Psalm 119:19 using the κτν.

6 “This life is life as an exile, life as an alien, life in a land that is not our true home,” CWE, 36:527.

7 ASD, 2/5:245; CWE, 35:8.

drinks, who could not be torn away from the Lotus-eaters, who would not keep their hands off the oxen of the Sun.”⁸ As with Joyce, Erasmus makes Ulysses the carrier of an intertextuality of almost indeterminate temporality, from Homer until today. Our folly is our undoing, in the endless Joycean swell.

Poetic meditation and mystic speculation, however, takes place alongside a much grittier political and religious context. *Peregrinatio* (or “pilgrimage”) in the world of Erasmus has a specific resonance very different from its Hebrew roots. It conjures up the cult of the saints, a world that is highly rooted and full of a sense of place. The relics of the martyrs have been translated all over the world, and pilgrimages map routes in a religious line of purposeful direction. Erasmus is ambiguous at best about this sense of pilgrimage. *Peregrinatio religionis ergo*, or “A Pilgrimage for Religion’s Sake,” his *Colloquy* first published in 1526, makes ample mockery of the world of Chaucer’s pilgrims. Indeed, it is based on actual English visits Erasmus made to Our Lady of Walsingham in the summer of 1512 and with John Colet to Canterbury sometime before 1514. In a fabricated letter, he makes the Virgin Mary complain of her endless travails from pillar to post, conjured into apparitions of virginity and childbirth, becoming reembodied in her afterlife in an endless metonymic stream of transitional relics, her clothes or her milk, then prayed to by pilgrims whether for continence or fertility, financial success or abstinence. What would she give for a settled place of burial and permanent monumentalized retirement.⁹

Pilgrimage involves a paradoxical relationship between the translation of the body of the saint and the fixedness of the cult once established. Prayer can be done anywhere but appears more meaningful in some places than in others.¹⁰ Erasmus approves the omnipresence of devotion while demurring an insistence

8 ASD, 2/3:316; CWE, 34:151.

9 CWE, 40:624–28. There are of course no bones of the Virgin, following her Assumption; her surviving milk is described in flowing prose by Erasmus in CWE, 40:632–6.

10 Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 90–91.

on sacred sites. His vision of religion as of knowledge in general is one of mobility. Translatability of sacredness corresponds to translatability of texts: unlike other religions, the Bible has moved between languages, something Erasmus imitated in his parallel texts of Greek and Latin in the 1516 New Testament. A third meaning of the Latin word *translation* — metaphor — suggests another Erasmian piece of thinking. Knowledge is carried across (the literal meaning of the Greek *metaphora*) from person to person, place to place, just as it is translated from one language to another. Yet he sees the ambiguity of this. A rare trilingual adage (I ix 26) notes that proverbs, like wines, do not always travel well: “For it is a property of most proverbs that they require to be uttered in the language in which they originated, and if they migrate into another tongue, they lose much of their charm.”¹¹ The migration from one language to another (*quod si in alienum sermonem demigrarint*) is perhaps untranslatable. Yet he says this while translating Hebrew into Greek and then Latin.

The satire in Erasmus of the religious sense of place is highly controversial and his humour shows an anxiety and suppressed violence that demonstrate how exile and pilgrimage are not at all entirely figurative. Meanwhile, the Greek word chosen by Erasmus to exchange for the Latin *peregrinatio* in the 1533 adage, Παρεπιδημία (*parepidēmia*), has a wholly different but equally pressing context. It refers to a practice in ancient Greece of providing temporary residence to aliens from foreign cities. In a world of city-states political exile was commonplace, with the need for migrant domicile (we might say pre-settled status) a concomitant necessity. This was absolutely the sixteenth-century world Erasmus came to occupy. His eternal vagrancy was not fancy free. He first settled in Basel when his associations with incipient Lutheranism made life in Louvain uncomfortable. The imperial legate in the Netherlands — ironically his former bed mate from Venice, Girolamo Aleandro — began a full-scale inquisition which threatened books and increasingly lives. Yet as

11 CWE, 32:196.

Erasmus aligned increasingly against the Lutheran heresy, Basel became too forthrightly Protestant for him. Even though he rather despised the *Gemütlichkeit* (warmth or home comforts) of Freiburg — complaining of being stuck in the Black Forest far from the Rhine (the river is really only a few miles away) — he welcomed Catholic anonymity. Yet by the end of his life, he moved back to Basel seeking another alternative neutrality. All over Europe, as religion changed back and forth, confessional migrants moved too, from place to place.

The term *innere Emigration* — “internal emigration” — William Outhwaite writes, seems to have been coined in Germany, for obvious reasons, soon after 1933. Many were forced to leave, many were pressed to stay. Many who stayed died as a result, although some died through leaving. This was the terrifying fate of German Judaism. Yet there was also a weird fate for non-Jewish anti-Nazi Germans in staying. As Outhwaite writes: “In the years following World War Two, the term *innere Emigration* was the focus of acrimonious exchanges in West Germany between exiles and those who had remained in Germany or Austria, notably Thomas Mann in the former category and Frank Thiess in the latter.”¹²

Asked whether he was an exile, W.G. Sebald later wrote, “you cannot call it exile when Europe has become such a small country.”¹³ It is a deeply ironic statement, based around ideas both of speed of travel and yet also a narrowing of political ideology. Sebald, a voluntary migrant from Germany to England, implied that exile is never exactly an act of free will. His choice of language — he wrote his novels in an old-fashioned German, while teaching in English — became part of this ambiguous recognition. This mirrored the legacy of the wartime generation of

12 William Outhwaite, “Internal Emigration Revisited,” conference paper, Sussex Centre for Migration Research, University of Sussex, Falmer, UK, October 2017.

13 “Von Exil kann man nicht reden, weil dieses Europa ja ein so winzig kleines Land geworden ist.” In a 1993 interview with Sigrid Löffler, quoted in Robert C. Hauhart and Jeff Birkenstein, eds., *European Writers in Exile* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 233.

his parents. Whether to remain in an abandoned Germany of the memory while fleeing to the UK or USA, or else to maintain a position of internal exile while living on inside the Reich, were both positions of imprisonment and alienation.

Something like this became the life of Erasmus. The Dutch regarded him as a foreigner. He disowned his own Dutchness, while retaining a sense of *nostos* in adages on the theme — most famously in *Auris Batava*, “a Dutch ear” (IV vi 35), which for long occupied the last space in the *Adagia*.¹⁴ The Dutch are hopelessly common and vulgar, the adage begins, as if Erasmus is not a Dutchman. But he includes himself, before then claiming the Dutch as superior to the Greeks and Romans, precisely because they are not so sophisticated, or politically superior.¹⁵ They know their own place and do not invade other countries as a result. Meanwhile he said ruefully that the English think I am German, while the Germans think I am too French. He lived in a kind of *tussenland* — one of the places in between. Politically the Netherlands lay between the kingdom of France and the German Empire. The counts of Holland historically were party to the Empire; in 1433 they devolved to the Burgundian Netherlands, and from 1481 the Habsburg hegemony. Burgundy itself is a fertile in-between-land, an alternative geopolitical space that has been written out of nationalistic modern history yet in Erasmus’s time was Europe’s richest and most powerful place. Ulysses the imaginary Burgundian avoided the sea (fearing seasickness and pirates, drowning and pickpockets) and instead made his life a river journey, a migrant bird of the Rhine on the wing from the delta at Rotterdam to the falls at Schaffhausen to the lake at Constance.

In 1522, offered the citizenship of Zürich through the mediation of Huldrych Zwingli, Erasmus replied (ironically) that he was already *mundi civis* (citizen of the world).¹⁶ It is a boast,

14 ASD 2/7:36; CWE, 36:235.

15 CWE, 36:235–7.

16 Epistle 1314, Erasmus to Huldrych Zwingli, Basel, September 1522; EE, 5:129; CWE, 9:183.

but not an idle one; for it carries with it the modern threat that a citizen of the world is also a citizen of nowhere. Homelessness endows him with disempowerment and statelessness, wanderlust with willed *Auswanderung* (emigration). Partly this is belligerent choice. Someone else put him in late childhood in a monastery meaning for him to stay forever. Evading the cloister became an existential quest. Freedom is impossible in the monastery, he stated. It regulates your food, your dress, your sex life, imprisons you socially and geographically. As a Calais migrant in 1514 he writes back to Prior Servaas that he is still better off out than in, since: "I had been forced into the kind of profession which was utterly repugnant to my mind and body alike: to my mind because I disliked ritual and loved freedom, and to my body because, even had I been wholly satisfied to live such a life, my bodily constitution could not tolerate its hardships."¹⁷

Yet his defence of personal freedom contains its own ironies. Although he fought hard to be freed from the habit, he clung to it in private dress so much that it became a cliché of his appearance. While claiming no longer to be an Augustinian Canon Regular he often chose to reside within the walls of one of the order's houses, such as in Haarlem or Oxford. While he knew where he did *not* want to live, he was less good at deciding where to go. In the letter to Servaas he excused himself from returning to Gouda while also expressing a powerful will never to return to Cambridge, despite earnest entreaties. He carried on telling everybody into the 1520s that he was wanted urgently in Rome, but despite writing about Italy as his destiny before and after his three-year stay from 1506 to 1509, he never went back. He never got to Spain at all.

The reason for that was obvious enough: if he went to Spain he might never get out. This is where internal migration became a useful excuse for him. Erasmus was wise enough to know that the charge of heresy was permanently possible for him. To the Lutherans he was a Catholic and to the Catholics a Lutheran. Enemies on both sides accused him of temporizing, fence-sit-

17 CWE, 1:295.

ting and fudging. He showed cunning in this. For several years, he claimed not to have read more than a few lines of Luther. Yet he also evinced a kind of courage in defending the rights of others accused of heresy. He was accused of bad faith in writing against Luther, although he replied that he owed Luther nothing, and was never thanked by Luther's opponents either. Erasmus managed to please nobody but he hardly cowered from the fight. The list of his formal opponents in print is a dictionary of Reformation biography on all fronts. The schools in Paris, Louvain and Valladolid denounced him, and in the end, after his death, his name was included in the Index of Prohibited Books. Yet conspicuously, he never came close to dying for his faith, for which posterity has barely forgiven him.

Meanwhile his letters show an extraordinary sensitivity to exile, internal and external. One of the most remarkable survives only in a holograph draft, found by P.S. Allen in Erasmus's surviving papers in Copenhagen Royal Library.¹⁸ It is dated March 22, 1525 although it is only through Allen's detective work that its recipient can be named: Jean, cardinal of Lorraine and Bishop of Metz. A young friend of Erasmus, Pierre Toussaint, a canon in Metz, had migrated from cloister to various universities in order to study scripture and theology. Now Pierre is a guest at the house of the heretic Oecolampadius in Basel, while fellow canons in France petitioned the bishop for his urgent return to Metz, with obvious enough implications. Erasmus appealed emotionally to the bishop to allow exile to continue and to forbid the brother from returning home. Pierre is called a heretic; but by that standard, Erasmus replies, *sum hereticus*, "I am a heretic myself."¹⁹ It is not something Erasmus says lightly. The only evidence against Pierre took the form of notes he made into books. But notes in books mean nothing, he says: Erasmus had to make notes from Luther in refuting Luther. Now Erasmus comes home to his theme via a digression in ancient Ath-

18 Copenhagen, Kongelige Bibliotek, MS GKS 95, fol. 241.

19 Epistle 1559, Erasmus to Jean de Lorraine, March 22, 1525; EE, 6:54, CWE, 11:78.

ens: "When Alcibiades was summoned to face trial before his fellow Athenians, he chose to leave the country; and when he was advised to trust his fate to the jurors, he said he would not trust himself to his own mother for fear she might substitute the black pebble for the white by mistake."²⁰ Alcibiades chose exile in order to protect himself from his fellow citizens. It is clear that Erasmus was telling Jean de Lorraine that he was asking the same freedom of migration for his young friend Pierre. Pierre was lucky, and grateful: he never went back to Metz. He was still alive forty years later in Montbéliard near the Swiss border. He outlived Michael Servetus in Geneva, although the fate of Servetus shows how close he was to death.

By writing about Alcibiades Erasmus shows another side to internal migration: irony and allusion. Ancient Athens is his parry to avoid any talk of modern Paris. Just let Pierre be, he argued, while reserving judgement on the charge of heresy. *Non hec eo tendunt vt damnem necessaria quibus opprimuntur heretici deplorati* ("This does not mean that I condemn measures to suppress the incurable heretic"). In this wording, Erasmus resorts, as so often, to *praeteritio* (a rhetorical device where the speaker mentions a topic while claiming not to). Erasmus avoids saying what he means by asserting he does not mean the opposite. Rhetoric is another kind of internal exile. In this way, if exile is metaphor for him, metaphor is also a short cut to exile. I am like Ulysses, Erasmus keeps saying. Not only because is he always on the move, but also that he shares with Odysseus another feature: he is a shape-shifter, a user of tropes, or as the first line of the *Odyssey* puts it, πολύτροπον (many-turning). This is cited in the adage *Proteo mutabilior* ("More changeable than Proteus," *Adagia*, II ii 74).²¹ Adagiastic writing is always digressive, elusive, fragmentary. Perhaps the most beautiful figure for Erasmusian self-disappearance is the adage *Gygis anulus* ("The ring of Gyges," I i 96). The story is taken from Lucian's *Wishes*, merged with a passage in Plato's *Republic*. Gyges the herdsman has a

²⁰ CWE, 10:79.

²¹ ASD, 2/3:188; CWE, 33:113.

ring which he discovers has magical properties. “If he happened to turn inwards the jewel set in the ring,” he becomes invisible, although he can still see everyone around him.²² If he turns it back, he becomes visible again, “and they all talked about him just as if he had not been present.” In all his portraits by Holbein and Dürer, jewelled rings are highly prominent. In his will, Erasmus left dozens of them, including one still in the museum in Basel. Did Erasmus turn the bezel in his ring whenever he did not want to be seen? Or is it a metaphor for the way that reading and writing offer temporary internal space, even when external authorities wish to find us? Erasmus never wants to be found. He is never at home. But if he allows, we can wander into the room with him, in his figures of speech, as he decides whether to let us in or keep us out. We should let him stay there, allowing him to speak for himself:

Παρεπιδημία τις ἐστὶν ὁ βίος, id est Peregrinatio quaedam est vita. Socrates in *Axiocho* Platonis adfert hanc sententiam ut vulgo apud omneis decantatam, quanquam is dialogus habetur inter nothos. Videtur esse potius hominis Christiani qui Platonem voluerit imitari. Haec enim sententia frequenter occurrit in sacris voluminibus, vitam hanc esse exilium, esse incolatum et peregrinationem, quanquam et Socrates Platonius narrat animas hominum e coelo fuisse delapsas, quo sibi per philosophiae studium parant reditum.²³

Life is a sort of time in exile. In Plato’s *Axiochus*, Socrates adduces this sentiment as a popular saying known to everybody— though this dialogue is considered spurious. Its author was more likely a Christian who wanted to imitate Plato, as this sentiment is often found in Holy Scripture, namely, that this life is life as an exile, life as an alien, life in a land that is not our true home. Though even Socrates as depicted by

²² CWE, 31:138.

²³ ASD, 2/8:258.

Plato does say that the souls of men have fallen from heaven and endeavour to return there by the study of philosophy.²⁴

²⁴ CWE, 36:527.

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Out of Place: Migration, Knowledge, and What Remains

Supriya Chaudhuri

In late March 2020, the start of what became the pandemic year, a series of surprising images began to circulate in India, and soon achieved global visibility. Against a nationwide lockdown announced at four hours' notice on March 24, with public transport withdrawn; interstate movement banned; schools, universities, and workplaces closed; and a population of 1.38 billion people urged to shelter in place, long lines of men, women, and children formed along national highways and railway tracks, heading out of India's crowded cities. Images of these travelers—on foot, precariously balanced on bicycles, crammed into auto-rickshaws or trucks, dragging bundles or cheap cases on which the odd baby might be perched—brought home, as nothing else could, the reality of migrant labor in urban South Asia. It was the largest population movement the subcontinent had witnessed since the 1947 Partition of India, when 16.7 million people, displaced by religion, had crossed, over a period of four years, the newly-formed borders of independent India and Pakistan. Nearly seventy years later, similar numbers were

in transit within India's borders during six months.¹ On September 14, 2020, India's Labour and Employment Minister stated in Parliament that nearly 10 million migrant workers had attempted to return home during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown. Asked about the numbers who had died in the attempt, the Minister said that the government had no data on this, though Right to Information (RTI) applications filed by independent news agencies indicated that the railways and other ministries *had* collected data on migrant deaths. Real migration numbers during lockdown were probably far in excess of official estimates.

But was this migration? In fact, it was the reverse. Termed a "migrant crisis," a tragedy of epic proportions that drew public attention to the plight of migrant workers, these heart-breaking processions on India's highways, crowds held back by police at state borders, were actually people attempting to *return* to their homes in distant villages. They were migrants, but they were not migrating. Stranded by government fiat in places that had overnight become unproductive and hostile, their only hope was to go back to where they had come from. Around 120 million of India's 470 million workforce (of which nearly 80% belong to the informal, or unorganized sector) are seasonal or longer-term migrants from rural to (largely) urban markets, without assured wages unless they can work. Unprotected by contracts or labor laws, they either lack or leave behind in their native districts the "ration cards" that might entitle them to subsidized grain under India's public distribution system. Despite official reassurances, most received no wages during lockdown and could not pay rent or buy food. The Modi government's promises of free meals and shelters proved largely illusory.² Shortly

1 *Citizens and the Sovereign* (Migrant Workers Solidarity Network Publication, November 2020), and S. Irudaya Rajan, P. Sivakumar, and Aditya Srinivasan, "The COVID19 Pandemic and Internal Labour Migration in India: A 'Crisis of Mobility,'" *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics* 63 (2020): 1021–39.

2 Hari Vasudevan, "Food Is a Necessity, So Is Making It Available," *News-click*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.newsclick.in/Food-Necessity-Making->



Fig. 11.1. Migrant laborer's scarred feet, May 2020. Source: Shome Basu.

after the lockdown was announced, huge numbers of migrant workers, with their families, embarked on the long walk home.³ Such was the public outrage at the appalling scenes in print and digital media that the Supreme Court of India demanded a status report. On March 31, the Solicitor General, Tushar Mehta, stated on oath that not a single migrant was on the road any longer: all had received food and shelter.

Not only was this untrue, but it grossly ignored the human cost of the crisis. By early May, forty-two migrant workers had been killed in road accidents alone. On May 7, Krishna Sahoo and his wife Pramila, trying to ride a bicycle home with their two young children from Lucknow to Bemetara in Chattisgarh, a distance of 700 kilometers, were run over and killed almost immediately by an unidentified vehicle. Many others died of heat and exhaustion on the road, like twelve-year-old Jamalo

Available.

3 See Ishan Chauhan and Zenaida Cubbinz, eds., *India's Long Walk Home* (Paranjoy, 2021).

Makdam from Chattisgarh, who had been working in the chilli fields of the southern state of Telengana. After walking 150 kilometers, she collapsed on April 18, in sight of her native village. Migrant workers were detained in camps, picked up by police and crammed into container vans, stopped at state borders, stranded at railway stations, and forced to pay enhanced fares for the few buses and trains that started running from May 1. Unsurprisingly, protests and violence erupted at transit points. Mounting public anger was transformed to horror when on May 9, press photographs showed charred *rotis* (flatbreads), slippers, and clothes, strewn on the railway line between Jalna and Aurangabad where sixteen Adivasi laborers, having dozed off on the tracks during an 850 kilometer walk home, were run over by a freight train.⁴ Tragically, they had used the railway line for direction, assuming that trains did not run during lockdown. Migrants who managed to reach their villages said they would never go back to the brutality and exploitation of urban labor contractors.⁵ But when the season turned and the lockdown eased, the logic of want forced them to return. Always temporary, “contractual” yet unlegislated, and in ever-changing, distant locations, they went back to work as masons on urban construction sites, as artisans in small manufacturing units, as hired porters or cleaners, or as agricultural laborers in alien fields.⁶

The point here is not the migrant crisis itself, but the nature of migrant life, defined not by purposive travel for work and

4 Supriya Chaudhuri, “The Working Person’s Right to Life,” *The Economic Times*, May 12, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/policy/view-the-working-persons-right-to-life/articleshow/75683761.cms>.

5 Roli Srivastava and Anuradha Nagaraj, “I Will Never Come Back’: Many Indian Migrant Workers Refuse to Return to Cities Post Lockdown,” *Scroll.in*, May 30, 2020, <https://scroll.in/article/963251/i-will-never-come-back-many-indian-migrant-workers-refuse-to-return-to-cities-post-lockdown>.

6 The rights of migrant workers in India are still covered by the Inter-state Migrant Workmen Act 1979, one of the most poorly implemented of all laws in the country. Four new labor laws, passed by Parliament, have not yet been implemented.

livelihood, but by political and psychological *abandonment*. Migrancy is an estranged condition, as Julia Kristeva puts it, “Toujours ailleurs, l'étranger n'est de nulle part” (always elsewhere, the stranger belongs nowhere).⁷ A migrant life is *always* out-of-place. It is marked as much by arrest as by movement, by a periodic blocking, and by being stranded or left behind as an unexamined surplus in contemporary narratives of citizenship and the state. The entirely avoidable tragedy of migrant labor in India during that pandemic year was one of internal migration within the country's borders, not a crisis of cross-border refugees driven by political oppression, climate catastrophe, or economic hardship. It was a tragedy uniquely produced by the lockdown, which robbed citizens of the right to free movement, and trapped migrant workers as outsiders and aliens *within* the nominal framework of citizenship. In India's federal system, even interstate borders posed a legal barrier. Returning workers were forcibly stopped at state borders, sprayed with disinfectants, and confined in camps. Such events are powerfully depicted in the film *Bheed* (“Crowd,” 2023), directed by Anubhav Sinha, about a police officer charged with stopping a crowd of migrant workers from crossing a state border.

The plight of migrant workers in those terrible months, from March to September 2020, cast more than one retrospective political shadow. Just before the lockdown, India had witnessed country-wide protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC), through which the Hindu majoritarian Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government sought to link citizenship to religion. Made law on December 11, 2019, the CAA focused entirely on cross-border entrants into India from neighboring countries, facilitating citizenship for some categories of asylum-seekers, but excluding Muslims. The NRC proposed draconian measures to check the citizenship papers of all Indians, with the threat that resident

7 Julia Kristeva, *Étrangers à nous-mêmes* (Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1988), 21.

Muslims might be rejected as illegal immigrants.⁸ Ironically, the first NRC exercise in the eastern Indian state of Assam ended up excluding far more Hindus than Muslims, with 1.9 million residents unable to prove their status, and facing the prospect of imprisonment in newly constructed detention camps. Country-wide agitations against these repressive laws culminated, just before the pandemic was officially proclaimed, in the North East Delhi riots of February 2020, killing fifty-three persons (mainly Muslims), and destroying their properties and businesses.

Thus the figure of the migrant as bogey and scapegoat had been vividly present to the national imagination even before the lockdown. In a country that still bore, seventy years after political independence, the unhealed trauma of its 1947 Partition — the drawing of borders across a living and working population — citizenship was already a critically fraught concept. Citizenship involved questions of history, geography, and political will, entangling *time* (different “cut-off” dates for entry into India), *place* (of birth or domicile), and *law* (different Citizenship Acts applicable in each case). In late 2019, these questions assumed an ominous urgency, even foreboding, that brought thousands of people (this writer included) out on the streets to protest what seemed a gross violation of India’s secular Constitution. The paranoia and animus against migrants deliberately stoked by the government affected even the COVID-19 climate. When attendees at an international Islamic gathering, the Tablighi Jamaat, were stranded in Delhi in March 2020, they were accused of carrying the virus and infecting the local populace. Hysterical outrage over this event was not replicated for larger political gatherings elsewhere, like the welcome for Donald Trump in Ahmedabad on February 24, political rallies during state elections next year, or the 9.1 million devotees at the Hindu Kumbh Mela. The bogey of the “illegal” migrant was replaced

8 Supriya Chaudhuri, “La question de la ‘nation hindoue’ est au coeur des manifestations,” *Le Monde*, December 23, 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2019/12/23/inde-la-question-de-la-nation-hindoue-est-au-c-ur-des-manifestations_6023874_3232.html.



Fig. 11.2. Mother and child by roadside during long walk home, May 2020. Source: Shome Basu.

during the pandemic by another figure, a figure that India appeared to have forgotten or never recognized. This was the migrant worker, a stalled, arrested, abandoned *internal migrant*, both *at home* and *far from home*: a citizen, but a citizen without rights. It was as if a huge, critically important part of the country's workforce, rendered invisible by political and economic neglect of its vital function, had suddenly begun walking down the highways or squatting by the roadside in full public view, forcing its *stay-at-home*, *work-from-home* counterparts to look at it for the first time. Given that 70% of internal migrants in India are female, though their representation in the paid workforce is much lower, there was a troubling parallel here with the state's failure to "see" women's labor.

That failure was itself inscribed within the visual imaginary created by public art, when, during the Hindu festival of Durga Puja in Kolkata, the sculptor Pallab Bhowmick and the artist Rintu Das depicted the goddess Durga herself as a migrant worker with her children, gazing back at the worshipper-spectator as if to remind us that this huge, popular festival celebrated the homecoming of a "migrant" goddess, visiting her natal home,



Fig. 11.3. Partition transport, part of the Durga Puja installation by Pradip Das, 2021. Source: Pradip Das.

children in tow.⁹ The following year, 2021, Das collaborated with Debayan Pramanik to produce an openly political piece of anti-NRC religious art, representing the goddess as a displaced woman with her four children, confined, in a posture of profound abandonment, between the barbed-wire fences and watchtowers of the India–Bangladesh border, with a small golden image of the Dhakeswari Durga (transported from Dhaka to Kolkata during India’s Partition) in her lap.¹⁰ For the same festival, the

9 Durga Puja, Barisha Club Kolkata, 2020. See Tapati Guha-Thakurta, “The Migrant Worker and the Goddess,” *Indian Cultural Forum*, October 30, 2020, <https://indianculturalforum.in/2020/10/30/migrant-worker-goddess-durga-puja-sculpture/>.

10 “Durga Puja 2021: When Pandals Depict Political Themes,” *Outlook*, October 13, 2021, <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-durga-puja-2021-when-pandals-depict-political-themes/397565>. For a discussion of these and other images see Subha Mukherji, “‘Footfalls Echo in the Memory’: Displaced Durgas and Migrant Forms,” *Humanities Underground*, October 2021, <https://humanitiesunderground.org/2022/02/22/footfalls-echo-in-the-memory-displaced-durgas-and-migrant-forms/>. See also Mukherji’s Introduction in this volume.



Fig. 11.4. Abandoned suitcases, part of the Durga Puja installation by Pradip Das, 2021. Source: Pradip Das.

artist Pradip Das also drew upon memories of India's Partition, evoking the railway carriages and abandoned suitcases that bore silent witness to the migrants' trauma.

In *Border as Method* (2013), Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson argue that the material proliferation of borders in today's world invites a rethinking of the nature of borders "between inclusion and exclusion." Borders do not obstruct the flow of global capital, blocking "global passages of people, money, or objects," but sort, filter and articulate them. Arguing that, "Borders play a key role in the production of the heterogeneous time and space of contemporary global and postcolonial capitalism," they posit multiplicity and heterogeneity as crucial to the composition of Karl Marx's "contemporary living labor," and instance the complex systems of bordering that internally divide the Indian labor market. Thus the "dyadic figure of the citizen-worker," that had so long monopolized the political imagination of the Left, is progressively diffused by processes of division and multiplication initiated by the movements and struggles of internal and

external migration.¹¹ The sedentary metaphysics of colonial geography are paralleled by the sedentary politics of the nation-state, its linking of citizenship with place. Yet, by a paradox, the emergence of that nation-state coincides with the spread of global capitalisms that require the extraction and movement, not just of raw materials and goods, but also of human bodies. The migrant worker, whether citizen or non-citizen, determines the contours and internal structures of globalization, producing both transnational and transregional social spaces, and complicating relations between migration, citizenship, and labor markets. The authors therefore contest both the new globalizing vision of a borderless world (like that of the Internet) and that of repressive state boundaries (the Wall, Brexit), proposing instead a complex interplay of markets and labor where borders define subject-positions, articulate time, and configure the world.¹²

Mezzadra and Neilson's notion of differential exclusion, through which they consider the varying temporal experiences of, say, the commuter, "the detained migrant, the former peasant who runs a tea shop, or even the benched body shop worker," allows them to project migrants not as marginal subjects, but as "central protagonists in the drama of composing the space, time, and materiality of the social itself."¹³ However, the authors' main concern is not that drama, but the figuration of borders as both geo-political and epistemological, showing how they shift, overlap, cut across, and undermine each other in an era of global capitalism. As a result, the figure of the migrant, whether domiciled in the Parisian *banlieue* (suburb), huddled in the Indian refugee slum or "service village," confined in the detention camp, herded behind a barbed-wire fence, holding on to a sinking boat, or stranded on the long road home, is relatively less vivid and urgent than the theorization itself. So too, Thomas Nail's philosophical and historical study, *The Figure of the Mi-*

11 Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method: Or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Duke University Press, 2013), viii–x.

12 *Ibid.*, 243–80.

13 *Ibid.*, 158–59.

grant (2015), offers a powerful abstraction of the migrant, the human being-in-motion, not as a “type of person” or fixed identity but a “mobile social position or spectrum that people move into and out of under certain social conditions of mobility.”¹⁴ In this history of human movement, new subjectivities are engendered, with migrants as stateless, mobile, surplus populations. In consequence, as Arjun Appadurai suggests:

The spectacle of the precarious migrant endangers the “host body” of the Heimat [homeland], bringing liquidity, formlessness, and vulnerability into the nation, threatening to turn the phantom limb into the phantom Heimat. Guests, strangers, and migrants expose the precarity of the nation, its fabricated kinship, its ersatz solidarities, its derivative sacrifices, and the artificiality of all its limbs.¹⁵

But how can we know the texture of actual migrant experience? Acts of experiencing and witnessing are our sole recourse here, like the Kurdish journalist Behrouz Boochani’s *No Friend but the Mountains*, written in Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island detention camp as a series of WhatsApp texts in Farsi on a smuggled mobile phone. Translated into English in 2018, it won a number of major literary awards despite the author’s continuing incarceration by Australia’s infamous border protection forces.¹⁶ Much literature, art, documentary, and narrative film draws upon migrant experiences in borderlands like those of eastern India, witness to prolonged population movements across as well as forcible confinements along political boundaries — from the huge two-way migrations during the 1947 Partition to the

14 Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford University Press, 2015), 235.

15 Arjun Appadurai, “The Phantom Heimat,” in *Whose Land Have I Lit on Now? Contemplations on the Notions of Hospitality*, ed. Federica Bueti, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, and Elena Agudio (Savvy Contemporary, 2020), 102.

16 Behrouz Boochani, *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison*, trans. Omid Tofighian (Picador/Pan Macmillan, 2018).

more restricted entry into India of Chakma and Hajong refugees, members of the “Chittagong hill tribes” (so described by British colonial administrators) from East Pakistan/Bangladesh, and Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar. Malini Sur’s recent work on the borderlands of eastern India indicates that the time experienced by border dwellers is not linear.¹⁷ The migrant’s life and the migrant’s time are thus a new political, social and aesthetic configuration. If time and space are compressed and speeded up for the privileged global citizen, they are stalled, prolonged, and disjointed for the migrant who inhabits a precarious non-space and non-time.¹⁸

Boochani’s narrative, documentary and cryptic in equal measure, a poetic, philosophical bricolage creating new epistemologies out of the experience of incarceration and statelessness, is exemplary for another reason as well. Borders or interfaces, and the figure of the migrant (a category both mobile and arrested) bear witness to the instability of artistic form as well as the fragility and impermanence of expressive medium, as it transitions between paper or electronic book, still or moving images on film, digital representation, video, sound, and installation art. As art struggles to interpret a world marked by conflict, catastrophe, and state violence, where prisoners, detainees, illegal migrants, and asylum-seekers must daily work out new equations between risk, survival, and the law, the aesthetics of representation are also under stress. Thus the exiled Chinese artist Ai Weiwei’s German film on the European refugee crisis, *Human Flow* (2017, shown in the main competition section of the 74th Venice Film Festival) offers a politics of witnessing from locations in at least twenty countries. It shows Ai and his film crew as they travel around the world documenting refugee life (with iPhones, drones, and film cameras) but also simply being with the refugees. Ai appears on screen intermittently, directing, cooking, using his cellphone, cutting a man’s hair, walk-

17 Malini Sur, *Jungle Passports: Fences, Mobility, and Citizenship at the Northeast India–Bangladesh Border* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 8.

18 Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant*, 235.

ing to a makeshift graveyard; at the same time, there are aerial shots of destroyed cities and expanses of water to be crossed. The film is an open call to action on the migrant crisis, and Ai Weiwei is himself a refugee, confined in a camp in China until being allowed to leave in 2015, living then in Berlin, and, from September 2019, in Cambridge, England.

Migrant knowledge is not a knowledge that travels, so much as it is an epistemology bred in the experience of the migrant, “the new political figure of our time,” an experience of being — whether static or in motion — *out-of-place*.¹⁹ Such forms of knowing require new ways of seeing, an alter-aesthetics. One of the most distinctive of these forms is the film or video installation, viewed in an art gallery on endless loop, unmooring narrative through the mechanics of repetition, and fitting Ranajit Guha’s categorization of migrant time as “a whirlpool for the strangeness of the arrival to turn round and round as a moment of absolute uncertainty.”²⁰ Instead of the static viewer and moving image of classic cinema, we have the moving viewer and bounded screen of video, as well as a completely altered sense of blocked or arrested time. This was my own experience of viewing two very different films. The first, *Passage*, was a twenty-six-minute video installation by the UAE artist Nujoom Alghanem at the Venice Biennale (2019), depicting the journeys of a displaced woman, Falak, and of the director (Alghanem) and actor (Amal), through a two-channel video on opposite sides of a shared screen and soundtrack. The other was the Bangladeshi artist Naeem Mohaiemen’s feature film, *Tripoli Cancelled* (2017, ninety-five minutes, Documenta 14 Kassel/ Experimenter Gallery Kolkata, shortlisted for the Turner Prize, 2018) about a man stranded in Athens’s abandoned Ellinikon airport. The actor Vassilis Koukalani’s brilliant solo performance took off from the experience of the director’s father, who once lost his passport en route to Tripoli and was stranded in Athens for nine days.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ranajit Guha, “The Migrant’s Time,” in *The Migrant’s Time: Rethinking Art History and Diaspora*, ed. Saloni Mathur (Yale University Press, 2011), 5.

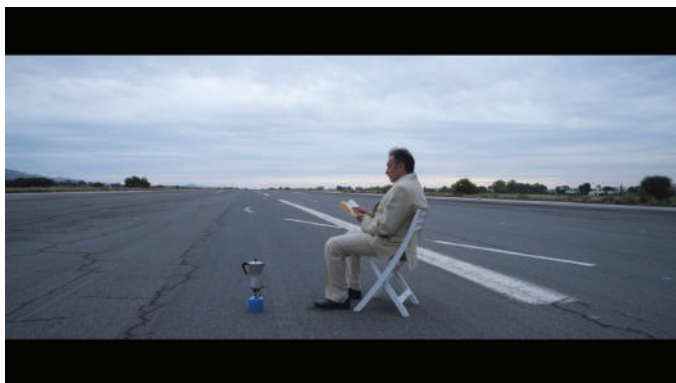


Fig. 11.5. Still from Naeem Mohaiemen, *Tripoli Cancelled* (2017), commissioned by Documenta 14. Source: Naeem Mohaiemen.

In Mohaiemen's rendering, the episode becomes an extended, non-naturalistic take on the refugee-migrant's state of suspension outside national borders, in an airport, the chronotopic paradigm of postmodernity. The protagonist writes to his wife, enacts charades, identifies himself to an imaginary bartender as a Mussalman — implicitly, *der Muselman* of Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947) — carries a stewardess-mannequin on a grounded aeroplane, boogies to the song "Rivers of Babylon" (1979), and reads aloud from Richard Adams's novel about migrant rabbits, *Watership Down* (1972). While Adams's allegory explores collective liberation struggles through flight, heroic survival, and resettlement, Mohaiemen's stranded protagonist invites reflection on the liminality of migrancy itself, its stateless, placeless stasis.

Viewed, as I saw it several times, endlessly looping on a wall at the Experimenter Gallery and on a larger screen at the Tate Britain, as audiences milled around, stayed to watch or left midway, it offered a sense of time quite distinct from that of the traditional cinema hall, one of Michel Foucault's modernist heterotopias.²¹ In the gallery, the "emancipated spectator" (the

21 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27, and Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x A Second: Stillness and the*

phrase is Jacques Rancière's) can choose her mode of looking, whether stationary before the screen or wandering away at will, to take in other scenes or objects.²² On screen there is stalled or arrested time, an endless vacancy inhabited by the protagonist, who fills it with activities that are alternately banal and quirky; in the gallery, there is the spectator's viewing time, mentally apportioned according to interest, curiosity, and leisure. Temporarily, the two are drawn together by the immersiveness of the screen experience, projecting its stasis, its being "out-of-place," profoundly unlike the heterotopic viewing time of the cinema theater. Just so, we may feel, do we glance at press photographs in a newspaper, or watch television footage about drowning migrants off the coast of Lampedusa, herded behind fences on the Mexican border, stranded on a national highway in India, or leaving rotis on a railway track: figures inhabiting a time that is not ours, a placelessness that only the migrant can know. This is migrant knowledge, a knowledge towards which art can gesture, yet one that it can never reproduce.

Moving Image (Reaktion Books, 2006).

22 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (Verso, 2009), 17.

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One and Three Knowledges: Displacement, Art, and Anthropology

Olga Demetriou, Efi Savvides, and Akid Hassan

Three Knowledges

Migrant knowledge can enable and oppress. As knowledge that migrates, it creates bridges between disciplines, experiences, and practices that enable action and resistance. As knowledge about migration and about migrants, it mobilizes those connections in the determination of how lives are lived. And as knowledge possessed by migrants, it becomes an object entangled in the power relations that determine those lives. This contribution is a sketchy attempt to grapple with these various migrant knowledges by foregrounding different media and different connections that produce it, and assembling them in a common space of authorship. It integrates artworks, depictions of artwork, and textual commentary on artworks, in asking what such assemblies mean (assemblies we often find in both art and social analysis related to migration), and what authorships and collaborations they may entail, imply, or obscure. We do this by tracing the connections between knowledge fields that these formats speak to: between displacement and art, between art

and anthropology, and between anthropology and displacement studies. Through these connections, this contribution proposes a pondering on forms of knowledge that might be placed against oppressive regimes of migrant knowledge. Previous work,¹ which showed how mechanisms of knowledge production in the migration regime utilize data such as statistics and complex legal instruments to account for restrictive policies and excuse failures to protect people, is used as a springboard for the exploration of art as a resistive possibility.

In 1965, Joseph Kosuth produced *One and Three Chairs*, an iconic piece of conceptual art, hosted at the Museum of Modern Art.² The work is an assembly of a wooden chair, a photograph of a wooden chair, and a dictionary definition of “chair”: three things that he did not actually produce but instead brought together in the exhibition space. The installation is meant to invite contemplation on the nature of art: not merely whether this is art, but how we know art, where to locate it between thinking and making, and what to make of the thinking of these questions. The title of this essay takes its inspiration from this exemplary artwork and its simultaneous querying of positivism (what is a chair?), institutions (what is art?), and knowledge regimes (how do we know either?). Knowledge of the chair migrates from object to image to text, and in that migration, materiality, interpretation, and definition, the three knowledges, simultaneously merge and remain separate. The three “chairs” pose together the question of what and who makes a chair, really, and in posing it under the sign of “art” also pose the question of the role of art and, more importantly, our position towards it. In this essay we borrow Kosuth’s technique in an attempt to trace connections between ways of knowing “migration” and to pose the question of what “migrant knowledge” might be. In the process we also

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- 1 Olga Demetriou, “Complementary Protection and the Recognition Rate as Tools of Governance: Ordering Europe, Fragmenting Rights,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48, no. 5 (2022): 1264–85.
 - 2 Museum of Modern Art, “Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965,” https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/joseph-kosuth-one-and-three-chairs-1965/.

reflect on the positionalities that migrant knowledge might attempt to shift — and, in failing, expose productive disciplinary discomforts.

The three of us have each come to know displacement in different ways: an artistic theme, the focus of academic enquiry, the result of statelessness and a hunger-strike cause. These experiences are “partial truths” as anthropologists might say,³ but in being so they are also (b)ordering devices. They maintain the differences between refugee and citizen, knowledge and experience of the law (and its functions), empathy and corporeality in the claiming of rights. Our first encounter, during a solidarity march at the height of a hunger strike by the Hassan family in 2017, exposed these separations: interaction was minimal. Later encounters represent attempts to acknowledge and speak across these divides; however, they cannot purport to undo them. Indeed, in assembling these knowledges here, we do not propose answers to the Kosuthian question. The knowledges we seek to assemble do not necessarily blend into a whole that is more than its parts. They do not necessarily complete each other. They rather show the fissures as well as the inevitably insufficient attempts to fill them — much like our writing is punctuated by the visuals that represent the different contributions.

They also stunt the writing between the first person the anthropologist (Demetriou) would have otherwise used and the depictions of conversations that produced them. These conversations, with the authors of the visuals below, as well as the artworks themselves and their depictions in print, are an integral part and not complementary to the text, the reason for its existence — and hence, they call for acknowledgment of collective authorship. The written text frames the visuals, which are themselves produced through the interactions of the video-artist and photographer (Savvides) and the protester-artist (Hassan). But this collective creation also results in uncomfortable uses of the

3 James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (University of California Press, 1986).



Fig. 12.1. Akid Hassan, *untitled*, 2017, site-specific installation, variable dimensions. Source: Efi Savvides.

third-person and passive voice, punctuates conventional forms of writing, and arrests the flow. The effort in “co-production,” a term mired by the neoliberal connotations of academic funding cultures, is centered on exploring the discomforts of traversing fields: describing an artwork, retelling a memory, framing a still. Under academic conventions, these are often practices we take in our stride as anthropologists, for example, anonymize informants by default⁴ and consider the ethics of participant observation. In this short intervention, we have instead tried to experiment with the assembly of these knowledge forms, placing the artworks more integrally into the text and into the authorship of this assembly. The result is more punctured than seamless, and for that reason less assertive. But in precisely this sense, it occasions a contemplation on the difficulties of migrant knowledge as the tracing of a journey punctuated by power barriers, imperfect translations, and discomforting displacements.

4 Jason De León, “The Indecisive Moment: Photoethnography on the Undocumented Migration Trail,” in *Photography and Migration*, ed. Tanya Sheehan (Routledge, 2018).

Displacement and Art

Akid produced this untitled piece in 2017 while on hunger strike outside the Ministry of Interior in the Republic of Cyprus, in the parking lot of which he had camped, together with his parents and siblings, demanding citizenship after years of their living and working in the country as stateless persons. Inspired by conversations with Efi on *arte povera* (the artistic movement named after the Italian phrase meaning “poor art”) and the significance of using cheap, everyday materials in the production of art, it was an attempt to create an imaginary space, a space of respite from the stresses of the strike and the inescapable anxiety it created. The piece also marked the beginning of an engagement with the art scene in Cyprus in general, and Nicosia in particular, a place experienced as quite distinct from the rest of society, a place where racism seemed not to exist. This art had been difficult to recreate elsewhere, after the end of the strike and the return to the village (where the family had initially settled on arrival to Cyprus in the 2000s), where this milieu was absent.

The work was created at the height of the strike, which Efi followed closely on a daily basis and supported in various ways, one of which was through conversations with the family and Akid in particular, contemplating the condition of being stateless and the impasses of living in Cyprus in that insecurity. Art here provided a space to think outside this impasse, an opportunity to create a space other than the grounds of a governmental building and a time other than the hunger strike.

The piece recreated another space, the village that had been left in Syrian Kurdistan, where holidays were spent with grandparents. Under a tree like this, one of the old eucalyptuses in the Ministry’s parking lot, childhood parties were held with friends from the village. There was an open fire in the vineyards outside the village where the group of boys were allowed to play; there was roasting of onions, potatoes, cracking of pecan nuts produced in the area, sharing of bread, and talk. Never meat; that was a goal for the group that never materialized. Pinecones were



Fig. 12.2. Efi Savvides, *Judgment Day*, 2017–18, single-channel video, color, with sound, 50' [still at 12.20]. Source: Efi Savvides.

used as kindling, similar to the ones found around other trees in the parking lot. There was no money to buy pecan nuts; a friend would steal them from home and offer them — everyone would bring something from home. Were the piece to be given a title it would be “Talaswad/Gire Resh,” after the name of the village (in Arabic and Kurdish).

The photograph reproduced here is missing a coat that was later hung on the tree trunk. It was a representation of grandparents’ overcoats that they wore in the fields. The grandmother’s coat continued to hang on the tree in Gire Resh long after she died, a reminder of her presence and an interlocutor in silent conversations of private moments.

The eucalyptus in the Ministry grounds was singled out almost on arrival at the spot and Akid’s chair was placed there as soon as the protest tents went up. Its shade that summer became a personal space for contemplation. Later, as the grounds became more familiar in the development of the protest, a bed was assembled between two other eucalyptus trees and that became a resting spot.

The shade of the tree made exposure difficult for the representation used here, making the left side of the photograph much darker. The day the work was made was strangely overcast, exacerbating the problem. This image is therefore corrected. Of all the photographs of the art piece, this one contains a background that includes the sign of the Ministry and the Republic's logo in the distance, at once locating the context of the piece in the strike and echoing the shift of focus and priority on the art and its recuperative potential over the context that produced it.

Art and Anthropology

Efi produced the film *Judgment Day*, from which the still is taken, while the protest was ongoing. The film is an attempt to document and artistically present the everyday processes involved in the hunger strike. It was assembled as a triptych of scenes unfolding in parallel over the sounds of the setting and interviews with the family, mostly Akid. The materials that sustained the hunger strike, both in the enabling sense of sustaining life (water, tents, boiling pots, family interactions), and in the suppressive sense of sustaining its cause (governmental structures, unresponsiveness to claims, societal indifference) are meant to be juxtaposed in these parallel scenes.

Much of the film records Akid's thoughts on the condition of hopelessness that spurred the protest, his contemplations on stateless as a state of being that feels less than human, and the injustices of forever waiting for a decision — a judgment on “status” that places life on this side of citizenship or that. A tree becomes a point of identification: “I felt that if I was a tree, a tree would have a better life than me. The gardener comes and looks after it, trims it, waters it,” he says of these injustices in the film. The thoughts recorded then articulated an emptiness, the evacuation of dreams and expectations: the sole focal point in the future became that day of judgment, which would bring at least some rest.

The conversations provided relief, of sorts, but also a pivot point for the despair that seemed ever present in those days.

They offered diminishing room for escape as that judgment day moved further away. They also prompted a contemplation of the complicities that such definitive separations between citizenship and its lack create: tents on this side, homes to return to at day's end on that.⁵ Reflections on these complicities of un-care were discomforting, as they prompted an unwelcome affinity with a society perceived by the protesters as unconcerned with their lives and frailties: the society of Greek-Cypriots who drove past, shielded in their cars, on each of the sixty-seven days that the hunger strike lasted.

Art offered respite from an ever-draining cycle. The eucalyptus providing the setting elicited an ambivalent relation: "I relax, with these trees — why do I relax with these trees? Because on these trees they come sit, I see the birds that come sit on them; I mean the bird, it has its freedom, I'm a person and I don't have my freedom," Akid says at seventeen minutes (17:15–17:56). The childhood scene the piece recreates perhaps allowed some possession of that elusive sense of freedom. The work of the film aligns with and amplifies the installation piece, emphasizing its conceptual premises as it elucidates them.

Displacement and Anthropology

An important aspect of Kosuth's conceptual art was his work — across domains of knowledge, and particularly his employment of anthropology to aid artistic reflection — on remedying the threat of marketization that photorealism was suggesting in the 1970s. For Kosuth, art could learn from anthropology how to reflect, and on that basis it would then engage with the culture it was situated in. Kosuth advocates an art that makes culture abstracted and rethought anew as unfamiliar but for that reason better understood, for an audience that is a public: a politically aware and thinking public. Kosuth's essay could be described as a text of art. It is a depiction of thinking in process — made up

5 Also, Efi Savvides, "[Untitled Chapter]," in *Drone Vision: Warfare, Surveillance, Protest*, ed. Sarah Tuck (Art and Theory, 2022).

of selections of passages from anthropological and other texts, interspersed with the author's thoughts, organized in note form and developed through critical and self-reflexive statements. A notebook and manifesto at the same time. The assemblage of knowledges in this note form provides an escape from the liberal conundrum which makes of art an assembly line of consumer culture.

Fast-forward two decades, and these connections across disciplinary knowledge became themselves integrated into the assembly line, instead of providing answers. In a scathing critique of site-specific art, Hal Foster⁶ found fault with the proliferation of art that attempted to speak to other cultures by studying them superficially and treating ethnography as something to be consumed. The study of others had been roped into the mechanized process of flying in the artist, setting up local encounters, and coming out the other side with site-specific art as the product. Otherness had been commercialized. In this context, it could no longer function as a platform for thought. The implication of art in capitalist production and alienation, Foster argued, had spread across knowledge domains and instrumentalized the knowledge of the other.

This worry has particular relevance for a consideration of "migrant knowledge" as applicable to the anthropology of displacement today, not least because of the emergency frames within which migration has emerged as a major political issue. Even though these framings are not necessarily new,⁷ what is happening in recent years, and particularly since 2015, is that migration and displacement policy has been developing and relying on ever more complex instruments of knowledge.⁸ While this knowledge is created through fields such as statistics and law, there is a parallel proliferation in ways of knowing migra-

6 Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer?," in *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, ed. George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers (University of California Press, 1999).

7 Saskia Sassen, *Guests and Aliens* (New Press, 1999).

8 Demetriou, "Complementary Protection and the Recognition Rate."

tion from perspectives that mobilize the visual, particularly art. And thus, the industry of migration works through images instrumentalized for funding for development⁹ but it is also questioned and resisted by images that can instrumentalize otherness for similar reasons, even if causes are nobler.

In the face of this impasse, perhaps one thing we can do is to acknowledge the difficulties of migrant knowledge, and to experiment with ways of making interactions more visible, knowledge journeys more complex, and processes of production more open. From the safe distance of citizenship now acquired, and the hunger strike now an ambivalent memory of pain and perseverance, the contemplation of the interactions that happen in emergencies and their significance to very different projects that may be indeed, ultimately, self-interested, serves at least to underscore the discomforts of appropriating knowledges. The politics of migrant knowledge entail that we become uncomfortable in our disciplines and perhaps welcome that discomfort for what it can allow us to see.

9 Ruben Andersson, "Europe's Failed 'Fight' Against Irregular Migration: Ethnographic Notes on a Counterproductive Industry," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42, no. 7 (2016): 1055–75.

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Migrants' Narratives: Challenging the Border Logic of the United States

Valerie Forman

In October of 2018, a migrant caravan that started in Honduras was dominating news headlines. It had crossed through Guatemala and was making its way through Mexico to its southern border with the United States. Reports containing images of crowded bridges and thousands of people walking together on roads flooded mainstream media. It was not the first caravan; caravans had been coming to the us from Central America since at least 2017. But it was the largest, with estimates of up to 10,000 people. One of the primary reasons people who migrate travel in a caravan is safety. In their journey of over 2,700 miles from Honduras to Tijuana (about 2,500 miles of which is through Mexico), people who migrate confront many threats, from cartels and gangs to corrupt police and military. The trains that thousands of migrant people ride on top of every year, com-

monly known as *la bestia* (the beast), claim numerous lives and limbs.¹ The caravans are thus a means of collective survival.

The journey of people migrating, however, is far from over when they reach the border with the United States, and the safety they create within caravans is challenged when they finally arrive at the US border. In January of 2019, I decided to go to Tijuana, not sure what I would be doing, but hoping that my ability to speak Spanish would allow me to support the migrants' pursuit of justice and greater safety. I found my way to Al Otro Lado, a legal services organization in Tijuana that was expanding its border rights projects to provide "know your rights" workshops and consultations conducted by volunteer advocates and lawyers. The project's primary goal was to provide participants with more information about both the risks they would face in the United States and the strength of their asylum cases. They could thus make informed decisions about whether or not to wait in Tijuana, considered one of the most dangerous cities in the world—a wait that, at the time, was about two months due to illegally imposed metering systems.²

What follows are reflections and concerns based on that and other more recent experiences that have transformed my understanding of not only migration from Central America and Mexico to the US, but also of the immigration system within the US.³ At first, my primary role at Al Otro Lado was to translate

1 For a detailed and insightful discussion of the dangers and complexities of the journey through Mexico for Central Americans, see Óscar Martínez, *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trails*, trans. Daniela Maria Ugaz and John Washington (Verso, 2013).

2 According to international and US law, migrants have the right to cross the border and state their fear of returning to their home country. This metering system, which relies on a list of those waiting, was first implemented under the Obama Administration in 2016.

3 I want to express my gratitude for the following organizations for the work that they do and for allowing me to participate in it: Al Otro Lado, Cara Pro Bono Project at the Dilley Family Residential Center (a detention center for woman with children), New Sanctuary Coalition (especially their Accompaniment program), The Ark Immigration Clinic at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, Freedom for Immigrants, and NYC DSA Immigrant Justice Working Group. My deepest thanks go to the many

what the person planning to seek asylum was saying into English, and then translate what the volunteer lawyer said back into Spanish. I quickly realized, however, how forms of translation not only of language but also of experience and forms of collective knowledge would be central to this process.⁴

All of these forms of translation are necessary from the first and central question asked of people seeking refuge: Why are you afraid to return to your country? Past persecution, or a well-founded fear of persecution, is central to asylum laws. In 2019, Yolanda told me that she was afraid for her and her son's life because her husband had been tortured and murdered two years earlier by gang members.⁵ Given the length of time between his murder and when she left her home, I thought there might be more she was afraid of, and a strong asylum claim would likely require more recent threats or harms. When I asked, she added that gang members came to her home asking her to sell drugs for them. She refused. They came back. They threatened to kill her and her son if she said no. She still said "no." As a mother, she could not get involved in that kind of activity. When she said "no" the second time, they grabbed the son. After a tense stand-off, they let the son go. But their threat before leaving was clear: They would be back and kill the son if she refused them again. Yolanda and her son fled as soon as they could get the money together to make the journey to the us.

Asylum laws and regulations provide a much narrower window for refuge than we might expect. Being in the clear, explicitly life-threatening danger Yolanda faced is not enough. To be granted asylum in the us, past or future persecution needs to be the result of five protected grounds: nationality, race, religion,

people on the move who have shared with me their histories, experiences, and concerns.

- 4 Over time, and at some of the other places mentioned above, I would speak with people seeking asylum one on one and then consult with a supervising lawyer afterwards.
- 5 I have changed the names of those with whom I spoke and combined or altered details in order to prevent anyone from being identifiable. For this reason, I have also not provided their country of origin.

political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. To determine the connection between the threats and a possible protected ground (the “nexus”), I asked Yolanda why she thought the gang had chosen her to sell drugs, and why they threatened her in particular. This question is often the most difficult, and answers are rarely simple or straightforward. She returned to what she said at the beginning of our conversation: “because they killed my husband.” When asked about why he was afraid, her nine-year-old son gave a similar answer: he said he feared the people who killed his father would kill his mother too. For both of them, the recent threats by the gang and the murder of their husband/father in the past are not just linked; they are part of the same experience. After more conversation in which she continued to foreground the husband’s death, I realized that from her perspective a question about why she was targeted that is not related to his death was inscrutable. But foregrounding his death in her claim would require a detailed explanation of how his murder was explicitly connected to the threats they were currently receiving.

My role then was to “translate” the narrow logics of the asylum system to her. I explained that asylum for her and her son would depend primarily on threats or harms they received directly. While trying to be respectful of her experience, I also had to communicate clearly that she would have to translate her experience into a narrative that would be legible to a US asylum officer. The new version went something like this: she feared returning to her home country because the gangs threatened to kill her when she refused to sell drugs for them. When she refused a second time, they threatened to kill her son and even tried to kidnap him, because she had refused on the grounds that as a mother she could not sell drugs. Only then would it be relevant for her to add that her husband was murdered by the gangs two years ago. She, therefore, knows that the gangs act on their threats. This account deemphasizes her husband’s death and disaggregates what is a single source of fear for her into two distinct events. Essentially, none of the “facts” had changed, but to attempt to meet the legal requirements, she would have to

offer a narrative that did not match her felt experience and discredited her memory and knowledge regarding her own safety. Under the stress of the interview, would she remember to provide a linear account of a layered experience in which the profound connections between life-threatening events do not conform to the logic of cause and effect?

Many scholars and advocates who have written about asylum have spoken of the ways it problematically demands a narrative of victimization — of suffering and desperation — to prove merit of humanitarian relief.⁶ People seeking asylum or other forms of relief also face additional narrative challenges. People who migrate must transform histories that are experientially complex, even within their own contexts, into a coherent narrative that makes sense to an official outside their context.⁷ But how can they seem “credible” when they are translating their experiences into a form that might not feel immediate? How do they recount their stories, as Yolanda needed to do, while deemphasizing something so painful and significant like the murder of a family member? To shift the burden, how do we match a legal system with the realities and fears of those actually in danger and how they understand their experience? How can we create an asylum process, and one of migration in general, that values the knowledge and experience of the very people it is set up to engage?

Many people who migrate, especially those traveling from what is referred to as the Northern Triangle (Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala) have resisted one of the two main gangs, MS-13 and Barrio 18.⁸ They might have refused to pay extortion,

6 For a thoughtful engagement with the complexities of asylum, see John Washington, *The Dispossessed: A Story of Asylum at the US–Mexican Border and Beyond* (Verso, 2020).

7 In addition, more often than not, they do so without lawyers, who are allowed but not provided.

8 Since the writing of this essay, the presence of gangs in El Salvador in particular has changed dramatically. In March of 2022 President Nayib Bukele declared a state of emergency that has reduced considerably the amount of gang violence, but did so through the dismantling of demo-

join the gang, work for the gang, or be the girlfriend of a gang member. They might have refused to accept the gang's authority by denouncing them, or by trying to find out what happened to a loved one at the hands of the gang. "Requests" from gangs are effectively demands. They come with a threat. The choices are: do as they say, leave, or suffer the consequences.⁹ In Mexico, the same is often true, though the source of the threat might be the even more powerful cartels.

Gustavo, a young man traveling with an adult nephew, told us that gang members had approached him and two of his nephews, insisting they allow the gang to use their newly inherited home for its meetings. They refused. Within a couple of days one of his nephews was shot and killed while running an errand. Knowing they were in the same danger, Gustavo and his other nephew joined the caravan. At the end of our conversation, Gustavo showed me two photos: one of his nephew when he was alive and another of his memorial. The photos could serve importantly as a form of proof. But I do not think that is primarily why he showed them to me. He was showing me a material representation of his memory of his cousin and his own relationality to family and neighborhood networks. That relationality forms a primary basis of his knowledge — the knowledge that he needed to flee his home.

When I consulted with one of the volunteer lawyers, she told me Gustavo did not have a strong case. Maybe he would pass his credible fear interview (CFI), but she thought it just as likely that he would not pass. Refusing the request of a gang does not provide a clear protected ground. I explained this to him and also needed to tell him that if he did not pass the CFI, he would

cratic institutions and human rights violations on a grand scale with over 85,000 people swept up and arrested without due process. In March of 2025, US President Donald J. Trump deported without due process over two hundred Venezuelans accused of belonging to gangs, though most had no criminal records. Trump's government will be paying that of Bukele to keep them in his notorious mega-prison, CECOT, which he opened in 2023.

9 See Óscar Martínez, *A History of Violence: Living and Dying in Central America*, trans. Daniela Maria Ugaz and John Washington (Verso, 2016).

likely be deported. His immediate response was that he would be killed if he were deported. A short while later, we waited as another volunteer made sure he would be able to access a copy of his documents in case they were lost, stolen, or taken from him by Custom and Border Patrol. I noticed a slight tremor in his hands; he looked at me with incredulity and said, "they will deport me if they know I will be killed." It was partially a question and partially a statement of disbelief—something that to him seemed implausible, absurd even. His incredulity is, of course, warranted. What does it mean to have an asylum system that will send someone back to certain death? How as a country can we accept these norms as "natural"? How has it come to be that offering refuge to people in life-threatening danger, regardless of its source or why someone was targeted, is a radical position?

All of these experiences are complex, and in some cases, with further probing, a "nexus" between the persecution and a protected ground can be found. But this is often "luck" or arbitrary. Not finding one doesn't necessarily mean someone's life is in less danger, or that they have less reason to fear returning to their home country. Thus, for us asylum law to function for refugees, it needs to shift its focus away from the hard line around nexus, to instead address the problems of those who are seeking asylum, and acknowledge the role of the us in producing the conditions from which people are fleeing. This is stating the obvious. Yet, the logic of borders and nation states based on the sovereign right to exclusion discourages countries who "receive" refugees from imagining themselves in this kind of relation to people seeking refuge.

I want then to reframe the way we think about this process. There is an important question which countries need to ask refugees individually and also collectively. What is it about their lives and the context of their lives that they want those making decisions about their migration status to understand? How do they understand their fear of persecution and its relationship to their subject positions and the reasons they are being targeted? This kind of shift would unsettle at least one of the fictions that

serve as the basis for asylum law: that the “receiving” country is the source of knowledge.

Lack of knowledge of larger structural issues often has severe negative impacts on people who are seeking asylum. Even the ways structural issues are engaged derive from our self-beliefs as a nation: for example, that there are not systemic problems with the police or other authorities here as opposed to “over there.” While I am not equating our conditions, I make the connection to raise questions about what happens when we represent the contexts of people who are migrating as radically outside our own conditions of possibility. Holding the difference as absolute exacerbates misalignments and can increase the burden of proof (by law, on the refugee) and even undermine credibility. Doing so also scripts “sending” countries as violent, chaotic, and “underdeveloped.” These representations matter because they allow the us to perpetuate its self-narrative as separate from “sending” countries and thus their citizens who seek refuge here, as if we live in completely different worlds.

This narrative of separateness functions in very problematic ways. It allows the us to frame granting asylum to individuals as an act of generosity, as humanitarian rather than as a form of justice. Doing so perpetuates the disavowal of complicity with the root causes of migration.¹⁰ People who migrate are thus seen as victims of a context far removed from our own, rather than potential actors in our world.¹¹ Moreover, the resulting reliance on a narrative of victimhood serves to create a division between deserving and undeserving migrants. This latter distinction produces a number of harms, but one of the most common is the production of the category of “economic migrant.” Politicians and mainstream media alike often make the distinction

10 The gangs that have spread through Central America are native to the us, having first formed in Los Angeles. The United States also plays a primary role in creating the conditions that propel migration through political, military, and economic intervention in the Northern Triangle and elsewhere.

11 See E. Tenday Achiume, “Migration as Decolonization,” *Stanford Law Review* 71, no. 6 (2019): 1509–74.

between people seeking refuge and those who are *just* seeking economic opportunity. Economic need or the impossibility of providing for oneself or one's family does not in most instances provide people migrating with a "legitimate" claim to refuge, nor any path to residency. Claiming an opportunity to make *a living* is denigrated as choice and opportunism, rather than actively seeking a life with possibilities, the latter of which is paradoxically at the heart of the ideology of being "American." That ideology, however, exists alongside the right of "Americans" to determine who has access to those possibilities.

What is the difference between fleeing poverty that does not allow your community to thrive or survive, and fleeing violence? Is it even possible to disentangle economic conditions from other forms of persecution? Diego said he had come to the US because he could not make a living at home. This response places him in the category of "undeserving" migrant. Part of the informal economy in his lakeside community, his business could no longer support his family. Like other small businesses in his town, his was regularly vandalized. In addition, some of the owners who organized to form a watch had been threatened with violence if they reopened their businesses. When we asked more questions about why people would want to get rid of these businesses, we found out that the threats came from parties who wanted to privatize the desirable land and develop it, thus connecting his struggle with a long history of expropriation and exploitation of land. Finally, we could tell him that his case aligned with asylum regulations after he spoke of the involvement of members of local government in these privatization efforts and his own participation in local community organizations. Clearly the poverty he is fleeing is inseparable from the persecution at the hands of the government that provides him with possible grounds for asylum. Though the details of the case might be relatively unique, the entanglement is not.

Our challenge is to find a way to reframe how we think about migration and the dangerous restrictions that impede it by centering the knowledge and experience of people who migrate. Can unveiling the absurdity and incongruity of certain require-

ments for asylum from the perspectives of people who migrate lead to a transformation of both law and discourses of migration? Can Yolanda's understanding of the relationship between past and present challenge the temporality by which asylum claims are adjudicated, while also foregrounding the importance of memory and local knowledges? Can the experience of Diego interrogate the very idea of dividing people who migrate into discrete categories by which they will be judged? Does the incredulity of Gustavo, who questions the rationale behind deporting someone to their certain death, challenge the right to exclude? He insists upon a claim to well-being as part of a collective that acknowledges the interdependence of nations and of our interconnectedness as beings. How might the knowledge of people on the move demand a rethinking of the world and its beings as divided into discrete units?

The caravan, as a whole, models solidarity that makes visible its members' collective claim as a political group to migrate. When as a group they chose to go through Veracruz because the terrain would be less arduous for the children, even though it was more dangerous, they put out a public statement holding the government of Veracruz and federal authorities responsible for their safety.¹² People imprisoned in migrant detention centers, too, challenge the abominable conditions and their lack of freedom collectively through hunger strikes and by sharing knowledge they gain while fighting to be free. They file complaints and petitions individually and jointly, while articulating the connections they have to communities within the us and outside of the us as well, thus challenging the exclusionary logics of belonging that the border instantiates. Within the caravans and detention centers, people who migrate center themselves as collectives, interconnected and interdependent with those who inhabit the spaces they leave, travel through, and to which they arrive and stay — either temporarily or permanently. As we as a

12 Jesús A. Rodríguez, "How the Migrant Caravan Built Its Own Democracy," *Político*, December 12, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/12/12/migrant-caravan-tijuana-border-government-222856/>.

country navigate the complexity of our relation to people who migrate, we need to center their forms of knowledge and, in particular, their collective ways of knowing and acting.

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“You’re Back in the Room”: Theatrical Borders in a Post-COVID-19 World

Pip Williams

In March of 2020, about a week before the first COVID-19 lockdown in the UK, I began work on an article for my website, in which I intended to review three shows I had seen at Camden People’s Theatre (CPT), one of my favorite London venues, as part of their Sprint festival. The shows were Shepard Tone’s *Coming Out Of My Cage (And I’ve Been Doing Just Fine)*, Nathan Ellis’s *work.txt*, and Anorak’s *Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow* (henceforth *EPCOT*). I enjoyed them all hugely, and they were all made by people I’m lucky enough to be able to call friends and acquaintances. My review article was supposed to be about audiences, the roles these shows cast their audiences in, and the degree to which those roles presented dramaturgical or more broadly political challenges to us. It was going to begin with an observation about an amateur production of *The Winter’s Tale* that I saw two weeks before life froze, which featured a child actor who kept looking at the audience and grinning, despite all the grown-ups doing their best to pretend we weren’t there. I thought this was a neat way to look at audience interac-

tion, and what we understand by the audience-performer transaction, the border that exists between the two parties.

However, I did not write this article. Because, as we all know, a week or so after I saw those shows, the government called a lockdown, all the theaters shut, my livelihood and the livelihood of most of my friends was thrown into complete chaos, and suddenly it seemed churlish and insensitive to be writing about audiences, about the importance of being in rooms together, of sharing space. Because there were no longer spaces to share.

In the piece I did end up writing, I went through those three shows and tried to consider what they might have to offer us going forward, in a moment of collective uncertainty, fear, and loneliness; how we could use their provocations and challenges to reflect on what it was we actually wanted theater to do, when it came back, and whom we wanted ourselves to be within it.

It is nearly a year since I saw those shows, and therefore nearly a year since I've actually been to a theater. Those considerations are even more pertinent and pressing now—the arts are fighting for their very existence every day, with countless theaters closing for good, freelancers hemorrhaging money and time, and certain government figures advising us, helpfully, to “retrain.” Especially pertinent is this idea of a border—the “fourth wall”—separating us from the action onstage. In this COVID-19 world, we live within any number of borders, borders which mostly atomize and isolate us, even if they are totally necessary for our safety—borders both ideological and material. Very real. How are we to rebuild and rethink ideas of audience, of how we make meaningful exchanges between viewer and performer, in a world where it is dangerous to go anywhere near each other? How are we to reach out to each other, as we certainly need to do in these strange and trying times, when every exchange is mediated through masks, plastic screens, and hand sanitizer?

I'd like to look again at the three pieces of theater I saw at CPT, a year ago, in 2020, before the end of the world, and reconsider what they might have to tell us in the coming years.

Shepard Tone’s *Coming Out...*, I suggested, was sort of theater-as-party, with the audience as guests. It was a show without a bad bone in its body, an ongoing exercise in finding commonality and shared experience. It was a show about song, and specifically about people singing, together. It was a show about community. It set out to explore the reasons for the enduring popularity of the song “Mr. Brightside” by *The Killers*; it included karaoke, throwing things at the actors, and the audience deciding what the name of their band would be (which changes every night). In a series of gentle instructions and provocations, we were told to close our eyes, then “open up [our] eager eyes” (in a nod to the lyrics of the song) in response to certain questions — to open our eyes if we’d prefer to be remembered as kind rather than successful, for example, or to look at someone in the room you’d like to say hi to. They were exercises in finding common ground — they emphasized the fact that we had all, separately, made the decision to come to this building at this time because of a thing we all liked. Fundamentally it emphasized the fact that, actually, it should be *fun* to be in a theater — that we were sitting there because of what we shared. We were in a room where we could play loud music, watch videos, and make the lights go all flashy. It was right and proper for the theater to be fun. And, as one of the performers suggested at one point, “the theater can be a good place to meet people.” It’s a social activity, and *Coming Out...* really emphasized that idea. It was a show geared towards our, the audience’s, enjoyment — we were rewarded generously for simply being there, and guided gently to look at what we all had in common and to sing. The show ended with a sound clip of Brandon Flowers (lead singer of *The Killers*) talking about how “Mr. Brightside” doesn’t belong to him anymore, but to all the people who sing it with him every night, to the crowds who chant it. It was a show about how art belongs to communities, not to individuals. A piece of art is a baby we raise together, that we unriddle and share and live with together, in the theater building, yes, but in bars and bedrooms and seminars and coffee shops, together, for hours and days and years afterwards. It is enough for a show to bring a group of

likeminded people together and establish that we are all there for the same reason.

It is vital, going forward, that we remember what we share. The theater should be a space for play and freedom, and a place where we can own something together. Sadly, one suspects that this aspect of the theater, the act of congregating, will be one of the last aspects we regain post-COVID-19, but at a time where our experiences as humans are so vastly differentiated, when we are so separate, when we are wrestling with so many different kinds of grief and misery, theater's capacity for creating shareable, communal joy must not be overlooked. The theater of the future must be an exercise in community, and in the joy of that. God knows we've missed it.

Nathan Ellis's *work.txt* presented a very different spin on the idea of "audience participation." Taking the form of a series of prompts and instructions, projected onto the back wall of the theater, it was a play for no actors, performed entirely by the audience. Ostensibly about the gig economy, about how late capitalism has effectively blurred the lines between work and pleasure, how technology has rendered the two inseparable (we can check our social media at the office, we can shop for clothes on our work computers), the piece was also a subtle and wry look at the place art has in that world. Should art be the absence of labor, something distracting and relaxing in a busy and hectic time? Or should it be something we wrestle with using our creative brains, something we really have to engage with, something we work to understand? Like *Coming Out...*, *work.txt* presented a series of provocations to find what the audience had in common — pieces of text to be read by "People Who Like Swimming," or "Geminis," or "Someone Who Doesn't Like Experimental Theatre." This switched between groups and individuals in an exciting and often very funny way, gradually inching us towards a place where we were given the instruction, "A member of the audience comes onstage." To introduce this element too early would be to scare us off, to prioritize only the most confident or stage-happy audience members, but Ellis managed to cook the room at just the right temperature and for

just long enough to create a truly collaborative and ultimately playful atmosphere.

But why should we participate? It is one of the piece’s central questions — why should we have to work for art? Shouldn’t art be doing the work for us? “Yes,” seemed to be the show’s answer, but then we live in a world where *everything* is work. Where we are doing work every second of our days, be that financially, be that physically, be that mentally. Like a mantra, we are instructed to repeat, “Work is being done.” All *work.txt* did was lay this reality bare, reminded us that even in a theater we were doing work of a sort, the work of not working. The work of having fun.

However, one of the piece’s central images was of an act of protest. An individual (with the name of an audience member, of course) lay down in the lobby of a big building and refused to get up. It baffled her co-workers and prompted a rhapsody about modern art and meaning from an art critic. And still, all around them, relentlessly and eternally, “work was being done.” So what we took from *work.txt* was that we, the audience, were a powerful body. We were not made just for work. It was an act of power to stop and opt out, and it was our right to lie down — our right to protest through rest. In *work.txt* we, the audience, were given the means of production. And though we were invited to play an active part in a pre-existing structure, written by someone else to be performed by us, it became incumbent on us to move things forward, to drive the action of our enjoyment. It empowered us to feel as though we were sufficient; that we could rely on ourselves and each other to create something meaningful. The power to start something was as present within us as the power to stop it.

The theater reminds us, then, not only of our commonality but of the energy that rests within it. Particularly at a time when more and more people are recognizing the problems inherent in so many structures, the evils present in so many of the systems we lived by, pre-pandemic, the power of groups and congregations must not be underestimated. Likewise the knowledge that has come for many over this time is that we are not just creatures

made to work — that we have the potential to be sufficient, full individuals on our own terms.

It is also, I think, worth considering what it is we want from art, moving forward. Are we looking for escapism? Are we looking for plays and pieces that allow us to forget the miseries of 2020–2021, to pretend that what’s happening outside the theater isn’t happening? Or should we be seeking to make plays that can change the world? The two probably aren’t mutually exclusive, but this is another vital question that *work.txt* posed — are we willing to work, or not? And what form should that work take?

At the end of *work.txt* we watched the world end. God took voluntary redundancy; the universe retired because “it has become too big.” But in Anorak’s *EPCOT*, we were invited to rebuild the world, together. And it is this piece I think that has the most to teach us about the borders we need to cross together, when all this is done. More a thought experiment than a play, the start of a conversation rather than a thing we experienced as observers, *EPCOT* cast the audience as a kind of focus group, a collective of creators, as, under the gentle guidance of James Nash and Hannah-Louise Batt, we were invited to picture the future, a future that takes place in our individual imaginations after we have left the theater and gone to bed, and yet seemed to come to life before our very eyes. The whole show was addressed to “you” (that is, us), couched in a state of provisionality, an endearingly deferential future conditional. “What do you think the future looks like?” we were asked, and later, more clearly, and maybe more angrily, “What do you want?” Nash and Batt lay out a collection of objects (empty bottles, floppy discs, cardboard boxes) and we were invited to map our version of the future onto them. It was a slyly efficacious device, and certain images still stay with me: a Perspex box slowly filling with steam from a humidifier; the shock of a cardboard tower suddenly falling; the glowing white orb that took center stage, a warm little electronic planet. We realized how quickly we as humans map stories onto things, how fast and adaptable the human imagination is. There was beautiful care in the way Nash and Batt set out these per-

fectly ordinary little objects and created their world, and it was a care that radiated through the piece, short as it is.

But while the piece was intimate and even, to a degree, soothing, it never let its audience off the hook. While it did not inscribe audience participation, it gave us the tools for active reimagination. Nash and Batt told us two subtly different stories about the future we could wake up in. Nash’s future was a sort of endless, carbonless, socialist utopia, where destructive systems had been toppled and humanity was reconciled to itself; Batt’s was no less politically idealistic, arguably, but was socially lonely, a far-off and alien time dominated by lost friendships and a befuddled nostalgia for a barely remembered past. In one desperately sad image, Batt, in a futuristic museum, looked into a glass case and saw a polaroid (itself, even in 2020, a relic of a past most of us don’t remember) of her and her friend, the friend now long gone, hundreds of years in the past, their friendship now an artifact. “What do you want?,” we were asked at the end, “What do you want?” It was the most confrontational and forceful part of the show, but it was only right that we were asked it; if we were being asked to imagine the future, and indeed to collaborate imaginatively in the creation of it, it was right that we asked serious questions of ourselves. Is it progress that we want? The exponential advancement of the human race, the creation of a politically, ecologically perfect superworld that we tend like gardeners? Or is it something a bit more like the present? Is it a safe place where we have all the things we have now but don’t have to worry about them—forward motion, but getting to keep polaroid cameras and vinyl records?

I would argue that this is the most important thing a piece of art can give to us; perhaps it is too much to ask for change to happen in the theater building, contingent as that is on the congregation of certain people, at certain times, in a certain place. Perhaps it must happen in our minds in the days, months, years afterwards. Perhaps it is enough for a piece of art to suggest to us a way that we might co-imagine, a way to map meaning onto meaningless objects, a way to create rooms that are big enough to hold all of our futures.

But this is the problem we face, at time of writing. We cannot create rooms, as we recognize them. We cannot congregate, and we cannot share art in the way that we're used to doing. What will the audience-performer border look like when the world emerges looking different? How willing will we be to pretend that we are looking into a room, containing people who cannot see us? To pretend that there is an invisible wall, separating us from other people, when we have spent so long in the company of walls? Will we be up for sitting quietly and pretending we're not there? The theater must, surely, expand and open its arms, create space, like the little girl in *The Winter's Tale*, to look into the audience and smile. It must face us, and address us with the energy and vitality of our shared, finally reunited humanity. To make the responsibilities and motions of the play the responsibility and motion of the whole theater, of its very brickwork, of all the people in it. We must leap over the border that separates us, and create art that draws us all together. We must be allowed to have fun; to sing, dance, and throw things; to make active change and decisions; to imagine together the world we could live in.

When we are allowed back in the room, it must be big enough for all of us, and all of our futures.

IV.

Conversations

Communities and Stages: Conversation with Good Chance Theatre

Mohamed Sarrar, Joe Murphy, and Joe Robertson

MOHAMED SARRAR: How did I end up in the Jungle? That's a long story.

When I left Sudan, I didn't have a specific target. I ended up in Paris, via Italy. I'd heard people say Paris is a beautiful city and France is a beautiful country and good for human rights. Lots of high hopes. But no. Same police as in Italy. Same treatment as I used to get back home. I met someone in La Chapelle — a neighborhood where lots of refugees live on the streets — and he told me about the Jungle. He told me, just go. It's easier, it's better when you get to the UK.

So I went. When you get there, it's difficult to go back when the target is really close and you can see the white cliffs, but it's difficult to stay because it's not a great place to be. And you just keep trying.

JOE ROBERTSON: We ended up in the Jungle because we'd been watching the news images in summer 2015 of people arriving in Greece and Italy in the tens of thousands. We saw the picture

of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian boy whose body was washed up on a beach in Bodrum. The news at the time was hysterical; the basic questions about who these people were, why they were travelling, where they were travelling to weren't being answered.

So we decided to fill the car with clothes and pots and pans, and drive to Munich to find out. We planned to stop for a day in Calais on the way, and ended up staying for eight months.

We knew that there were people waiting while they tried to cross to the UK, but we didn't know that there were restaurants, cafes, churches, mosques — but no government agency, no United Nations, no big NGO running things. It was a huge, makeshift, self-governing shantytown of about 8,000 people, twenty-two miles from Dover. We couldn't believe it. After a few hours of wandering around, meeting people, it started to get dark and a few nice Kuwaiti guys built us a tent and cooked for us, and we sat around a campfire and told stories until they went to try for the UK. I'll never forget that day.

JOE MURPHY: When you arrived, Mohamed, what was that like?

MS: Tents everywhere, and of course restaurants, like a city, and you can find everything, even night clubs. I didn't expect that. You want a drink, you'll get it; you want a night club, you go, you want mosque, you go, I even found a shisha bar in one of the restaurants. It was amazing.

JM: What shocked us was seeing people from over twenty-five different countries. Not just Syrians, who we had expected to find there, but also people from Sudan, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, Iran, Kurdistan, Ethiopia, Kuwait, Palestine, Somalia....

JR: What was it like being surrounded by different languages, different kinds of people, different colors, backgrounds, religions?

MS: A bit scary. I'd never met Afghan people or Kurdish people. I thought, "OK, it will be Syrians, it will be Iraqi, it will be

Sudanese and maybe Eritreans.” Then when I found out there were more than twenty-five nationalities, I thought ... wow.... So many people have travelled. Not only me.

JM: We heard so many different stories. It seemed to us that the need to tell stories, the need to express what was happening, was fundamental. Before you even found out someone’s name, you’d heard about their journey, their hopes for the UK, their families back home. Being playwrights, who live in stories, this really affected us. We thought about how we could contribute. There was already a community of European volunteers providing food, clothes, medicine, shelter materials. And because winter was drawing in, and the nights were getting closer, we thought that a place where stories could be told and shared in warmth and safety could be genuinely useful. And of course, for us that place is called a theater. So we raised enough money to buy a geodesic dome, the strongest temporary structure. But it’s also a democratic space which can’t be built without the collaboration of many people.

We spent a whole day building the Dome with 100 people from different countries. So by the time it was finished, it was already owned by everyone. And then the first night, we had a party. People came from all across the camp to dance to music from every different country. People passed their phones to the DJ table to play songs from their country. A huge release of energy.

JR: Then we were in all the British newspapers the next day — “British Activists Build Night Club in the Jungle” — and we said, “no, it’s a theater, we promise!” And they published pictures of refugees dancing — as if they didn’t deserve that one moment of enjoyment.

MS: We came from different places and had terrible times travelling, so they think we are traumatized and we can’t have fun. Even if you are traumatized you need sometimes just to forget, to live in the moment.

JR: That sums up for me what the Dome was for. I had some of the best nights in a theater in my whole life there. So electric, people doing music or dance or circus, and it wasn't about charity, it was about having an amazing time together as human beings.

MS: I'll tell you something, I sometimes miss the days there, everyone dancing, having fun with everyone. Obviously, we've done it here (in the UK) since then with the Jungle family.... But you know, when it was there — because everyone was welcome, and you would meet different people, you could find new friends and new members of the family; new songs and music, hearing stories, seeing performances....

JR: What was it like when you first came across the Good Chance Dome?

MS: When my friend Halaf and I used to go to Jules Ferry (a French-government-run center on the site) for food, we would pass the Dome and wonder, because it was one of the biggest tents, "what is that"? And the shape of it — in Sudan, in Khartoum, we have many buildings similar to the dome. One day we decided to go in. And I found people singing and dancing, so I went again, and I found Milan (a musician from Iran who has since collaborated with Good Chance many times) with his guitar, singing Iranian songs. I loved this.

JM: And you were already writing songs in the Jungle?

MS: I was writing and singing some traditional Sudanese songs. I had a few songs that I had already composed, or hadn't finished writing which I wrote back home. But some songs like "Abbas Hallas" I wrote in and about the Jungle. I kept writing whatever came into my mind, just typing on my phone.

JM: I remember you telling us how you wrote "Abbas Hallas."...

ms: So, one day with some friends we went to try. It took three hours to walk from the Jungle to the train station. If you don't find good chance, this will be six hours of walking, plus the time you stay there, trying. Your day is gone. And that day we went and we managed to get across the first fence, and then the second, the third, the fourth.... Twelve fences we crossed, one by one. And after the twelfth — the security guard saw us and came at us with dogs, and we started running, everyone in different directions, and I hid in a kind of big underground drain, with dirty and disgusting water. We stayed there for hours. We tried to leave, and when we couldn't reach the train, we went back to this place, and ended up staying there two whole days.... So when we couldn't do anything, with no food and water, I decided to deliver myself to the security and let them call the police. I thought the police would take me back to the Jungle, but they just left us outside the train station instead. So during the three-hour walk back to the Jungle, I made up the song. "Abbas Hallas, adeena chance." Hey officer, give us a chance. We were hiding ourselves for a day, and then another day came.... All this with the security guard walking around, and he caught us before the train was leaving. So yeah, then I mentioned that I was missing parents, brother, sister.... That's how I made the song. It was a long walk. My phone was dead so I couldn't write it and so I was just doing the song in my head, and singing it, and when I arrived at the Jungle, I forgot half of it! So what I remember is what I sing now.

jm: What was the point of art in the Jungle and the art that we do together now? Why are songs important? What does it mean to step out of reality into art?

ms: In the Jungle people were from more than twenty-five countries. Although some people, maybe half, speak more than one language, there's still a lot who won't understand if you want to express something. But through art they can express whatever they want. So Yasin (another friend and collaborator of Good Chance whom we met through the Jungle) — he's Kurdish and

Iranian — can express what he wants through his martial art. I'm Arab Sudanese, and I can say it through the music. Milan speaks through the music too. Or you can do it through a play. Everyone can do their own thing, express their feelings through their art, it connects everyone.

JM: So you arrived in England in November?

MS: I arrived December 17, 2015. That was the day I was born in the UK. I was supposed to perform in the dome in Calais that day, with my friends, Halaf and everyone! Instead, I sat in the truck all night, till we crossed over. When we arrived at Dover at 7 a.m., touching British land, I knew there is no way they could take us back, even if we were caught — it was a really small chance to get caught because of the noise of the trucks and the sea and the sheep. No one was going to search the back of the truck while it's there. So I called Halaf and said: "I've got it. I'm in UK." And he said to me: "Oh, but you've got your performance today!" I said I didn't care!

JR: [Laughing] It absolutely ruined our show, that you got safely to the UK!

MS: We got caught in Birmingham. But we just got on with the process, waiting for the interview, and another one, the brown letters coming — what is it, do they trust you...? It was scary because you don't know what's going on and what's going to happen, it's just waiting; they send you a letter by post, and then you just come to the place at the time. I stopped in Birmingham for just twenty-four hours, at the police station, and then got moved to Croydon for a week, and then Wakefield for another two weeks, then Bradford, where I got my asylum.

JR: And while you were going through this we were still in the Jungle. We stayed until March, until it all burned down. It was terrible, traumatic, and the police came in and evicted people,

we left, and took the dome down and quickly got out. I think we met again — maybe May, June 2016?

MS: I think May was the first workshop for *The Jungle*, for the play. I was still in Bradford—I went to Manchester for the workshop.

JM: So you've arrived in the UK, you're going through the asylum process, and then we all get together and you see people again whom you haven't seen since the Jungle. What was that like?

MS: You know, through the time I was in Bradford, I had a Burmese person next to me. Neither of us spoke perfect English, so we couldn't understand each other well. But there was another Eritrean guy who spoke Sudanese Arabic, so we could communicate. And then another Kurdish guy who had perfect English. So it was a bit difficult for me to click with everyone. All of a sudden I got invited to the workshop, and it meant everyone was there, I had such a good and lovely time. It was my first time in Manchester. I hadn't been out at all, just staying in Bradford. On the way out I didn't even know where to go, I had no friends there, some of my friends were still in Calais. And then I got invited to the workshop. You booked my tickets and everything and I thought, ok, let's go. And for the first time, I met people I hadn't met in a long time.

JR: And then we spent maybe two years workshopping, meeting up again and again. Joe and I would go away and write and then we'd do a workshop and find out how much work we needed to do, and then we'd go away and write more. And then we performed it, *The Jungle* play, at the end of 2017. That was at the Young Vic, and then the play was transferred to the West End in summer 2018, New York later that year, and San Francisco in 2019. It was due to return to New York in spring 2020 and embark on a tour of the US, but then the pandemic struck.

JM: What was it like telling that story to a London audience — because the set was very like one of the restaurants, maybe quite similar to the one where you smoked shisha in the Jungle? What was it like, having to recreate that every night?

MS: When you get on the stage of the play, *The Jungle*, you feel like there's a spirit taking you to the real Jungle, not just a play, because of the nature of the stage and the theater and the floor and everything.

JR: The floor. That always made me really think I was in the camp again because the floor was mud and like, rubbish in the mud....

MS: And the only thing that tells me that I'm not in the real Jungle is that I can have a shower every day after the play! Because back then the Jungle was just tents with your mud.

JM: And then you were meeting audiences every day and we often thought how weird that must be: you've always been a star, but actually being a *star* and people coming and wanting your autograph and asking about your experiences, all very much in your face. That must have been overwhelming.

MS: You know some people just watch what's in the media. The media doesn't give you everything. And when you don't get the full image you can get a negative idea about what it is. In the play we showed the reality. When people come and talk about that, I feel like they care now and want to know what's going on. And of course, I keep telling what I always want to tell, what they need to know, and they can talk about this and keep working and offer a helping hand. After the play, many people decided to go there.

JR: That was weird, when I went back to Calais when the show was on, and Help Refugees (a grassroots NGO which also formed in the Jungle) was being funded by donations made by audience members after the play. Seeing all these volunteers who were

there because they had seen the story you were telling on stage was amazing.

MS: I think that's the success of the play, when you have more people who think about what's going on there, and they try and work on that.

JM: Let's talk about Sounds of Refuge, because we also made an album together. In Abbey Road.

MS: When I arrived, I never thought that I would really carry on doing music, because I write songs in Arabic, though I am willing to write in English. At that time my language didn't help me. I got other Arabic songs as well, they were ready just to record and I didn't know how to do it, and how to start. And then I remember when Joe and Joe and John Falsetto (an actor and musician who was in *The Jungle*) said to me that we need to do something after we met in *The Jungle* workshops; that we need to sing together. Then all of a sudden we were going to do something and Good Chance was joining us — and that was it! We made it there in Abbey Road. And that was like the biggest thing that happened to me in my life. I never thought I would be in that studio. For me, starting in Abbey Road studios meant getting me to do other things, getting me writing more in English.

JM: How does it feel writing in English?

MS: It's completely different. Sometimes when I write something in Arabic and then I try to translate it into English and make a song of that, it's difficult to get it the way you want it to be. I can change the rhyme and put in different words with the same meaning, but this depends on my vocabulary. The expressions I use in Arabic, they don't work in English. And then, second thing, writing in English is difficult and of course I'm scared to make something that doesn't ... show where I am now.

JM: Could you ever imagine writing in both English and Arabic?

MS: I've done something like this, actually. When I started with John I did an Arabic bit, and he did a Shona bit, so I represented the Arabic and my culture and my language, and John represented his (from Zimbabwe). But for me, when I do the Arabic one and the English together, I'm representing the English identity as someone who lives here and got into English culture, and at the same time I'm bringing my Arabic self to the UK, and mixing them together and doing the same work on my own.

JR: It's been a true privilege knowing you and working together over the last six years, Mohamed. We can't wait to hear your next album, and to carry on collaborating for the next six years and beyond.

Stories in Transit

*Dine Diallo and Clelia Bartoli in conversation with
Marina Warner, transcribed and translated
by Valentina Castagna*

MARINA WARNER: I first met Saifoudiny Diallo, who goes by Dine, in September 2016 when he had just arrived in Sicily on one of the boats making the crossing from Libya, and was taking part in a Stories in Transit workshop in Palermo. With two of his friends — Ibrahim Ture and Gassimou Magassouba, known as Maga — he gave a talk about their hopes and ambitions; they also introduced the other workshop participants to the concept of *giocherendan*, a Fula word for an ideal principle governing civil life, social and personal responsibility, and justice. The three of them were impressive — eloquent and ambitious and determined. They were in a school where Clelia Bartoli, one of their teachers and a campaigner for human rights, found there was as yet no furniture or books. Clelia and other colleagues from the University of Palermo had argued passionately about what needed to be done in their region, which was receiving thousands of men, women, and children fleeing to Europe from



Fig. 16.1. Saïfoudiny (Dine) Diallo on stage. Courtesy of the artist.

civil conflicts, border wars, famine, and drought, all of these consequences of ecological devastation.¹

Valentina Castagna, a university lecturer, had worked as an interpreter in the law courts for asylum seekers. Her experiences of hearing their stories inspired us both to organize the Stories in Transit project as a series of story-making, storytelling workshops with local schools and young migrants like Dine, Maga, and Ibrahim. Dine and several others threw themselves into the process with imaginative exuberance. The word “giocherenda” sounds as if it could be formed from the Italian *giocare*, to play — a fortuitous connection — and so Giocherenda became the name of their group.² During the very first Stories in Transit workshop in Palermo, which we held in the atmospheric set-

1 See Carola Rackete and Anne Weiss, *Il est temps d'agir*, trans. Catherine Weinznorn (L'Iconoclaste, 2020) for an impassioned argument about the ecological causes of displacement and migration.

2 See Marina Warner, “Living in a Country of Words,” in *Others: Writers on the Power of Words to Help Us See Beyond Ourselves*, ed. Charles Fernyhough (Unbound, 2019).



Fig. 16.2. Saïfoudiny (Dine) Diallo on stage. Courtesy of the artist.

ting of the International Puppet Museum Antonio Pasqualino,³ Dine told a story he had heard during his childhood; this fable inspired later performances, with puppets and live action and animation, “The Huntsman and the King’s Son” (fig. 16.1).

Dine also starred as Gilgamesh with Maga as Enkidu when the Stories in Transit group worked on the Babylonian epic during another three-day workshop⁴; the result⁵ — a kind of pageant — combined music, masks, costumes, and procession and took place in the Botanical Gardens of Palermo, and later in the grounds of a primary school. (fig. 16.2)

Since those days, the approach of Stories in Transit and the success of the workshops inspired Dine and Clelia, and several other colleagues and friends, to set up Giocherenda, an asso-

3 Antonio Pasqualino Museo Internazionale delle Marionette, <https://www.museodellemarionette.it/en/>.

4 “Stories in Transit VI: ‘One for You, One for Me’, ‘The Old Man and the Serpent’ & ‘The Huntsman and the King’s Son,’” *Stories in Transit*, <http://www.storiesintransit.org/workshops/storiesintransitvi/>.

5 Stories in Transit, “Stories in Transit IV - Giocherenda Workshop September 2018,” *YouTube*, October 22, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXdtrPkEoE>.

ciation where they carry on their work. They make storytelling games on the premises, as well as laptop sleeves, backpacks, and bags. The pandemic has curtailed the group's activities, but Stories in Transit has managed to hold two workshops online, in collaboration with Compass Collective⁶ and some new members of Giocherenda. As Stories in Transit, we are also developing an exhibition exploring methods and ideas for playing and generating stories which will feature Giocherenda's games, artifacts, and animations. Dine presented Giocherenda to the Migrant Knowledge event and led a very engrossing game of *La Ronda dei Desideri* (The Wheel of Wishes).⁷ For this interview, Dine Diallo, Valentina Castagna, and Clelia Bartoli joined me on February 20, 2021. Valentina has transcribed and translated the conversation, which I have edited for publication.

mw: Can you tell us something about your story?

SAIFOUDINY DIALLO: My name is Saifoudiny Diallo but I am always called Dine. I was born in Conakry, Guinea, on May 2, 1999, and I grew up there, and studied French, Arabic, and religion. I worked with my father and had the opportunity to meet many important people. When I was in Fouta Djallon [a mountainous region of central Guinea], I met many with a deep knowledge of both culture and religion and was able to sit with them and gain some experience from their hands. Meeting other people allows you to confront different cultures. So I didn't only learn at school, but also through meeting different people.

mw: That's how you first heard about this principle of giocherendan?

sd: Yes, giocherendan means real sharing, a human exchange. Making giocherendan is making a network that you can't see,

⁶ Compass Collective, <https://www.compasscollect.com/>.

⁷ Giocherenda, "Scopri la Ronda dei Desideri," *Facebook*, August 31, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=344753083317460>.

but we are all connected by it. We should live our lives feeling each other's happiness, even each other's sadness. The world of giocherendan is not a world of selfishness, of violence, of evil: it is a world that creates great good. I'll tell you about an episode in which giocherendan even saved my life. One night, while I was in the desert on my way to Libya, I fell off the pickup. The car drove directly over my foot, after ten seconds my foot became as big as two feet. The people in the car didn't know me, but they told the driver to stop and come back for me. They said that if he didn't stop, they would all rather get off the pickup and die with me in the desert. This strong solidarity that they showed they had inside, their sharing of the pain I felt, really made me understand the strength of giocherendan. And afterwards, when they took me back into the pickup, I couldn't even sit down. All these very tired people let me sit on top of them. They accepted this suffering to help me. That's an incredible thing that happened to me.

mw: Do you still hear from them or have you lost touch with them?

sd: Of those people, there's only one person I still have contact with. All the others, I don't know if I'll ever hear from them again: even if I saw them, I don't think I'd recognize them. Only giocherendan can do this kind of thing: imagine a person you don't know at all, you meet them by chance, and immediately you put yourself in their place, you defend them, you save them. They could have easily gone ahead and not given a damn, but they stopped. And then one day I returned the favor: I was in Libya and about to leave in a dinghy. However, just before we left, some criminals came and attacked the place where we were. They were shooting at us. I wasn't hurt, but one boy was badly wounded, they shot three bullets in his hands and feet. That evening a trafficker arrived and said we had to leave immediately with the dinghy. Even though I was weak, I picked up this boy on my shoulders who couldn't walk and carried him to the dinghy. I was supposed to get into the dinghy and leave, there were

three of them that had to leave that night. All my friends got into the first dinghy. The first group of wounded people, those who had been shot at, all got on the first dinghy. I was supposed to get on that one too, with my friends. But one of the traffickers said to me: "Wait, you won't embark here. Wait for the second one." While waiting for the second boat, I asked him: "My friends have all gone there, why can't I go up?" I had that boy on my back, who couldn't even walk, couldn't even put his feet on the ground. The man said, "Look, I'm not putting you in the first one, I'm not putting all the wounded on the same boat. I'm putting this wounded man in the second boat." The first boat left, made it across. My boat, the second boat, couldn't go. After an hour we came back, but the dinghy was taking on water, it was full of water. Luckily, God made sure we could get back, otherwise I would have died. But there was no way I could leave there. I had to stay in that place for three months, with all the suffering of that place. But I did not regret what I did: that injured boy had to get back. He didn't come to Europe, though — the next day they had to take him to Niger to extract the bullets from his body. In all this suffering, people would come up to me and ask: "Are you still alive, are you still here?" It was almost as if I belonged there. But in the end, I really managed to get through it. They would ask me, "Why don't you go back?" I would reply, "I have nowhere to go back to, my only option is to move on. As long as I am alive, I'll go forward." These are some of those moments when you live *giocherendan*, not only in times of peace and tranquility: that's when you really have to commit and show this thing that you have inside, even if it's difficult. A lot of those guys didn't care about injured people. But there were volunteers, too, five of us, who took it upon ourselves to bring these people, to help them.

mw: Thank you, Dine, for telling us these difficult things. At the beginning of *Stories in Transit*, Dine, Ibra, and Maga gave a presentation about the principle of *giocherendan*. Clelia, you were very instrumental in forming the group which took the name *Giocherenda*. When did you first hear them talk about it?

CLELIA BARTOLI: It was when we started this beautiful educational experiment, Polipolis, which contained this principle without knowing it. One of the goals we had set ourselves was to create a link between the students and the city, not just to transmit knowledge. Not only for the benefit of our students but also of the city. One day we were going to see some students from a local high school, to get them to do things together and create an opportunity for young people who were mainly born in Palermo to meet our school, which was mainly attended by young migrants who had recently arrived here by crossing the Mediterranean. While we were on the metro train, I remember Maga saying, "there is a real need for *giocherendan* here." And that intrigued me. He explained something that I've heard from all the young people from West Africa: that in Europe there's a bad habit of not greeting people you don't know, as if there's little willingness to create new relationships. Trying to explain what this *giocherendan* was, they explained that it is not simply solidarity: solidarity can have the meaning of "I who have more give to you who have less," affirming a moral superiority through giving ("I have more money, I can give to you, and I am also better than you, I can afford to be good to you"). And "taking care" often entails controlling the lives of others. Instead, *giocherendan* comes from the awareness that there is an invisible network that binds us, as in Dine's story. I receive from someone or I give to someone, and it is a wider exchange between humanity and perhaps beyond. I give and then I receive, but also from others, third persons. There is an awareness of an immense, joyful power that comes from being able to do things with others. They realized that this awareness was lacking in Europe, leading to a lot of loneliness and depression. There may be poverty, but there's also a form of wealth that doesn't make you profoundly happy, because it lacks this element of sharing. So they felt somehow invested in the need to become ambassadors of *giocherendan* and thus we created the association. Westerners have often had the presumption of wanting to export values, such as democracy or development, without realizing (or without having the humility to see) how much they have to learn.

This is an inversion of the typical way of seeing Africa and its inhabitants, as the ones who should receive help, charity, and knowledge. Instead, the members of Giocherenda realized that there are people in need in Europe, and that young people with sensitivity, depth, and solid experience can really bring values that make the place where they have arrived grow.

mw: I have seen examples of this. Dine, can you tell us about a case in which Giocherenda's work has been effective in Sicily? For example, when you went to these schools in the difficult areas of Palermo?

sd: Yes, for example, as Clelia said before, for us who come from Africa, not answering greetings is a very strange thing, because for us it is not just a duty. When one says hello, the most joyful way of interacting is to say it back. If I see an African person, he or she will say hello to me: we will make a reciprocal gesture. So we felt it was a very important loss of value.

mw: Have you managed to get the people of Palermo to say hello even if they don't know each other?

sd: Many of them have now understood the mission of Giocherenda. We put a lot of effort into it. Maga and I used to organize meetings. We've been to the Galileo Galilei high school and various other schools, even the ZEN district in Palermo [the most disadvantaged part of the city, with multiple problems]. With Anna Starapoli of the Pedro Arrupe Institute, we've worked a lot in difficult neighborhoods in this city where many Palermo residents don't go easily.

Some people come to the shop and say, "A friend of mine suggested I come." We explain what we do and so these people are now helping to spread giocherendan. A lot of people today are living according to this principle. I can see the fruits of what we have brought together with Clelia. Many people in different areas remember us. If we look at this pandemic, it has made us

reflect a lot on how important giocherendan is. We often say that if I am ill, it means that you also feel this pain that I have inside. If it doesn't matter to you whether I'm well or not, it's no good: COVID-19 was only carried by one person at the beginning, but this person transmitted it to the whole of humanity. This is the human connection that we were talking about: without knowing it, we depend on others, we are connected. Without others we have no strength. Our paths are connected. This is the most practical way of defining giocherendan.

CB: I agree with Dine. During the lockdown, if I went down to throw out the rubbish and met strangers in the street, we would say hello and smile at each other, even behind a mask. And why did you say hello when before you didn't pay attention to others? Because somehow this situation made people more aware that this giocherendan, this invisible thread that unites us, is there. You recognize in the other someone involved in the same adventure and this makes you greet them even if you didn't know them. Now it is fading a little, but when there is a common fragility greeting one another is instinctive.

mw: When you go to these places, Dine, with people who are in very difficult situations, what do you do? Do you use games or do you just talk? Do you create stories?

SD: We use our cooperative games to show this thread that connects us. They are tools we can use. We have also studied the methodology of Philip Zimbardo's Heroic Imagination Project (HIP). By going to these places, we encourage people to play, we play together, we share experience. For example, with our *Cubi Contafiabe* (Storytelling Dice), when I roll the dice and start the story, the others must listen. If they don't listen, they can't connect their story with the previous part. They have to pay attention to the others; they can't get distracted. We always say you need to turn on the engine that connects us and helps us capture the stories of others so we can tell something together. Sometimes we meet people who are desperate, who can no

longer cope with their daily difficulties. They think that their life is ruined. So we intervene at that moment by giving examples from our own lives, we tell them about the obstacles we have encountered. People like Philip Zimbardo, Clelia, many of you in *Stories in Transit*, have managed to achieve success but it was certainly not easy. If one also talked about the difficulties, all the pressure, others would understand. I met a girl in the ZEN neighborhood. She had a dream of becoming a singer. Her father had died, she only had her mother, and their economic situation was not very good. She said to me: "I've thrown my dreams away. I know they are no longer feasible." So I said to her, "Listen, we can compare ourselves a little bit. Because I haven't thrown my dreams away, and if I tell you about them you won't believe me. I'll tell you about myself and what I've had to face. If I'm here in front of you now, talking to you, it's because I never thought 'I can't make it.' No way. I always have to try to move forward. Maybe you could reach top levels. As this HIP module shows us, there are always higher levels. In order to reach them you must never give up." When I finished explaining a little bit about what I had to face, the girl was crying. She thought that no one had been in the situation she was in. She was crying, she came to hug me. She told me: "I'm going to start studying again, from now on I'm sure I'll make it, I'll work hard to make it." That strikes me very much when there are these moments of sharing.

mw: Bello. Dine, can you tell us a bit about the workshop, what you do there, the things you are making. Can you also tell us something about your grandfather's stories?

sd: As Giocherenda, even during this pandemic, we have managed to get closer to people. First of all, we tried to make some face masks, which we initially gave away for free to help people when there were none available. We also started making online connections with people who were far away so that we could be close by playing together online. It was a great success — we played with the *Carte Acchiapparicordi* (Memory Catcher Cards). We are continuing with this plan, but at the moment,

we are working more on the making of the masks, which must still be worn.

As for the stories, we have collected many. I also did an on-line workshop with a middle school during the pandemic. With Clelia, we got in touch, we organized the materials on gender education, discrimination against women. I was one of the facilitators of this workshop. It went well. At the end, I also transcribed the story of the first Black African woman pilot for the students, Fatoumata Binta Diallo, who was always known as Binta Pilote. She had to wait so long. She died in Paris two years ago. I think she was born after the Second World War; she was quite young but she was not well. She is one of the women who fought for our independence.

MW: As you know, I am very interested in the stories you told us, that you know from your grandfather, like the one about “The Huntsman and the King’s Son.” They’re traditional but you have developed them, taken them in different directions.

SD: Those stories I heard from my grandparents always offer something to learn. I didn’t understand that before, as a kid, but when I got older, I realized that there’s a big lesson behind what seemed to us like just an evening story, to put us to sleep. We listened to lots of stories — it’s a moment of sharing, when you finish dinner. Before they used to tell stories, now you watch television.

MW: Tell me a bit about all your friends from Giocherenda. How many of you are there now?

SD: There are twelve of us now.

MW: How many countries?

SD: At present, we represent six countries — Guinea, Gambia, Mali, Sierra Leone . . . and there’s a girl who’s originally from Morocco but raised here. And there’s Italy.

mw: Have any of them now left Palermo?

sd: Maga is now in France but still part of Giocherenda. We travel for the association, too. Last April I was supposed to go to Orleans in France for Giocherenda, but this has been postponed because of the pandemic. We are now planning a trip to Senegal, to train teachers in a school there, show them how to teach children using these tools, how to create a job starting with these artistic ideas.

mw: When you arrived, not everyone spoke the same language. Now what language do you speak among yourselves?

sd: Most of us now speak Italian, that's how we communicate.

mw: You speak Italian very well but do you have nostalgia for your mother tongue?

sd: I do, but you know we don't all have the same mother tongue. If I'm with Amadou [Diallo], we speak Fula (also known as Pular, spoken in twenty countries in west Africa), because we both know it. But learning the language of the place where you live is essential to be able to express yourself and make yourself understood. That's why we chose Italian. But you know what, Marina, we've lost a lot. Colonization, globalization have made us lose a lot. Our ancient languages are no longer spoken, they have been mixed with the languages of the colonizers. That is why we are now often trying to teach our mother tongues more in schools.

mw: Also the cultures, the stories.

sd: That's why I say I live in 1800 BCE. I am no longer part of this era because I remember the values, the stories, the cultural principles of the past. I see that all this globalization is making everyone lose many things.

mw: Do you think that in this moment of such a serious situation in the world with all these dictators, the murders of people in America, such upsetting events, do you think Palermo is a good place compared to North America, or have you suffered racism in Palermo as well?

sd: Yes, not physically, but I have had friends who have also been attacked because of racism. As far as racism is concerned, I always repeat what Nelson Mandela said: racism hurts the person who is racist the more. The racist person is affected with a bad disease, so we have to free racists from racism.

The problem is not only what happened in the us, the death of George Floyd. The problem is historical. Until today the white person still thinks that the Black person has to be subaltern, that we have less value. I said before that all people have flaws, but do you know what they say in Africa about whites? That they never tell lies. When you make an appointment with a person, in Africa they say to you, "please be like a white man." They think that white people respect their commitments, that they would never be late. But when I came here, I met a boy who had had so many difficulties in Palermo: he was from my country and wanted to be repatriated and the lawyer told him that I could help him, explain some things to him. And this boy told me that since his arrival here in Europe, the only real thing he ever heard was: "Lunch is ready." He said that nobody had ever told him anything true. When this guy goes back to Africa, and they'll tell him again, "you have to be like a white man," he will answer, "I am as I am. Where I have been, no white person has been able to tell me things to my face, directly." I think it is very important to understand these diversities, the values that we are losing. We are connected. But on the other hand, globalization is damaging us too much.

When Sekou Touré, former president of Guinea, went to France, he said that he was not there to extend his hand to be helped, but to make real agreements, to relate as a human being. He said that the image of Africans abroad is of those who always extend their hand to beg, because without that they cannot go

on. No country can make it on its own. So humanity must remember that we are all equal and we must all put our cultures together, our knowledge, to fight hatred and hunger. We all have to put ourselves at the same table, knowing that nobody is perfect and that we all have to see each other as people.

mw: Clelia, as founding member of Giocherenda, do you want to comment?

CB: Yes, I myself feel that I have benefited so much from my experience with Giocherenda. They have nourished me, they have made my life much more exciting than it would have been. We are making a mistake by putting migrants in the category of those who need to be helped. We are getting it completely wrong. People don't just need bread, they need fantasy. That's the beautiful thing about Stories in Transit. People don't just need to receive; they always need to give. And if you really remove the obstacles so that everyone can give to each other, then you get much more out of it and paradoxically even economic development is much greater if you allow people to give. Those who carry out development cooperation see that the benefactor gets rich, not the beneficiary. We should reverse this process: we should give money to the poor so that they can help people who may be well off but in a situation of senselessness and depression. The poor will be better off because they will have dignity. The rich will be better off because they may be richer in the world. There has to be an exchange. Giocherenda is pioneering this role reversal. Dine said a few days ago, "I want to give; I don't want to receive." He knows that he has plenty to offer, but if this remains inside you, you become disheartened because you know that it is an asset that will perish if you don't share it with others.

mw: I agree, these are the ideas that underlie our work on Stories in Transit and I am very happy that our collaborators and friends in Giocherenda are continuing in this spirit. Dine, you have hopes for the future?

SD: Sometimes I also have moments of difficulty to overcome. But there is hope, it's always with hope that we can move forward. If we are alone, we lose ourselves. Each one of us is very rich, but to be able to contribute you have to be listened to. If you imagine that I am useless, that I am of no use, what can I give you? What can I tell you? If, on the other hand, you go beyond that, as with Giocherenda, if we reverse the roles, there will be mutual enrichment. At all these meetings, I do not only go there to teach, people also teach me, in these neighborhoods where many never go. As I told you at the beginning, if I share my life, I am enriched by others. Today I am talking to you and this has come from a desire for mutual enrichment. Otherwise we would never have met, but we were all willing to.

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“Sea of Hope”: The Poetry Circle of Melissa Network’s Women

Nadina Christopoulou and A.E. Stallings

I cannot hope, I cannot think of that. It has been so long that all
I experience is difficult and hard, that my brain cannot hope.

— Nozi, 15, Afghanistan

In the beginning I wondered: what was I, a Filipino maid,
doing here in a poetry class? What would I have to contribute?
Shouldn’t I be doing something else in my limited free time?
But now, if I were to describe it, I feel as if I am speeding on my
bicycle, with wings on my back.

— Karen, 24, Philippines

There’s a red, rectangular table in the heart of Athens, where
women from around the world sit, read, write, talk to one an-
other, eat, knit, thread their eyebrows, and pick up the threads
of lives interrupted. It stands in the middle of a 1928 neoclassi-
cal building, now the home of Melissa Network. Every second
Tuesday afternoon, it becomes a secret bridge.

After 3 p.m., the living room beside the hidden, leafy terrace is cleared of all other action, strong coffee is brewed, herbal tea is prepared, and fresh cakes and biscuits are set on the table beside flowers, pens, pencils, and colorful writing pads. The women who take their places around the red table are not always the same—though some have been constant presences throughout their time in Greece—nor are they similar to one another. Khadidja, an English literature teacher from Latakia, started coming in by train from the very beginning, when she lived in a tent at the port of Piraeus, while Nuha, a hairdresser also from Syria, walks in from the “assisted accommodation” next door, because she feels isolated and wants company. Suha runs in after her restaurant shift. She is usually the first to finish writing, ready to recite. Then she packs up and runs to catch the next bus home, where her elder daughter babysits three younger siblings. Alia brings in the pages she has already written and kept hidden, Roya writes about the wedding veil she never wore. Fereshteh brings in the freshly baked flat bread she made for her brother who died suddenly in Kabul, while Elize, owner of a small restaurant in Gabon, shares the cake for her baby’s first birthday. Maryam writes about the mountains of Afghanistan, and Mahboubbeh about her blind mother’s recipe for fragrant rice, while Razie, who has decided to become a writer, today stands on an empty page.

In the course of that hour, they pour their hearts out on paper, and then recite in their language, voicing their desire. Pages fill with calligraphic writing and ornate patterns and colors, the words transferred to the whiteboard by long-time Greece resident, American poet Alicia E. Stallings, with the help of the interpreters—mostly refugees themselves—to be shared in the group. For some of them, in whose country poetry is forbidden for women, this is an act of rebellion and resistance, while for others it is an act of gratitude and self-love. The common denominator is uprootedness and nostalgia, uncertainty, anxiety, and fear mixed with limitless hope. And then the page—and the whiteboard—become a mirror of their souls, and of the world to come. Every Tuesday afternoon, in that brief hour be-

fore dusk, they open the window of their imagination and take a leap of faith into the world they want to be in.

Crossing Paths and Building Beehives

Greece itself is a bridge between the West and the East and South. For over one million refugees on their way to Europe, Greece is not a destination but a crossing.

Since its launch in 2014, Melissa, a small organization co-founded by women of diverse origins, sought to bring together, support, and empower migrant and refugee women arriving or living in Greece, promoting integration and social cohesion. Amidst the haze of the overlapping crises that Greece has witnessed in recent years, and the open-ended cycle of precarity faced by women on the move, this quiet and safe space—a garden of forking paths in the words of Jorge Luis Borges, a castle of crossed destinies in Italo Calvino’s words—serves as a sanctuary and a reminder of humanity, hope, and desire.

The name “melissa”—the Greek word for honeybee—was chosen as a metaphor for women coming from all over, bringing along their countless stories of uprooting, pain, and separation but also of strength, hope, and resilience, as well as their dreams, their talents, their skills, and their commitment to building a better future. Melissa was created first and foremost with the purpose of sharing stories—the stories of women settling in, permanently or temporarily, and contributing to the well-being of the host society in countless ways, visible and invisible. Its social vision was that of an open beehive of communication and creative exchange, instead of a set of isolated cells: a safe space where women learn and share, seek strength and support in each other, build trust and community.

Located near Victoria Square, a central but now rundown part of Athens with a cosmopolitan past and a tense and polarized present—at once a multicultural neighborhood and a stronghold of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party—Melissa’s building has lived many lives. It was previously home to a film production company, a gambling salon, and a maternity clinic,

before becoming a safe womb. The opening of the small day-center coincided with the massive influx of refugees in 2015–2016, and the subsequent humanitarian emergency. Victoria Square became the first continental stop in the long journey that brought to the doorstep of Europe the largest number of displaced people since World War II. In those days, it was the Casablanca or Ellis Island at the dawn of the twenty-first century—a place at the crossroads of fear and hope. The almost one million people who passed through Greece in that first year, and all those who followed, were coming from blazing war zones or sites of protracted oppression—places that turned into “the mouth of the shark.”¹

Melissa Network responded to the urgent needs in the surrounding streets. Solidarity was created spontaneously between women who were underprivileged and doubly marginalized and women who had even less. In the words of one of Melissa’s co-founders, Deborah Carlos Valencia, “you give not because you have more but because you know how it is not to have anything.” Women from all communities, religions, and ethnic backgrounds took to the city streets and squares that had turned into makeshift camps, delivering aid. Cakes baked overnight were handed out in the early morning with milk and hot tea. Backpacks for the journey were packed with a mother’s care, filled with essentials along with things that may be less—or more—essential: a torch, a tube of hand lotion, a hand-knit toy, a card with words of welcome written in different languages. They also contained pens and notepads, in the hope that when the time would come for the history of this journey to be written, it would be in their own words.

Soon after the closing of the northern borders and the Balkan route in 2016, with thousands bottle-necked in the country, refugee women started arriving at Melissa’s doorstep, seeking sup-

1 Verse from British Somali poet Warsan Shire’s poem “Home”: “no one leaves home unless / home is the mouth a shark.” Warsan Shire, “Home,” *Amnesty International*, <https://www.amnesty.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/home-by-warsan-shire.pdf>.

port or a moment of peace. The newly arriving women entered with broken wings and unsmiling faces, uncertain about what they would encounter, devastated from their ordeals and carrying the heavy burden of their anxiety about the future. They came from countries including Syria, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq, and violence was the grammar many had learned throughout their lives. In passing through the sanctuary of Melissa, they started remembering themselves, resuming their lives, reclaiming their future, gathering their thoughts, standing on their own, and moving forward.

Amidst the escalating efforts of the international humanitarian community, Melissa Network realized that they had a unique potential: a combination of experience and community resources that allowed them immediate access, feedback, and insight into the needs and hopes of the women on the move. Backed up with academic and clinical expertise, they came up with a unique, innovative integration scheme, in order to facilitate the first steps of a new life in a new place. The aim was to shift the focus from aid to agency, from victimization to resilience, and from addressing urgent needs to building sustainable life strategies for integration. Education modules were designed and taught interactively, combined with mental health support, art, information, leadership, advocacy and media training, self-care, and community engagement. Activities and workshops ranged across drama and movement therapy, music, dance, poetry, writing, film and photography, storytelling, crafts, and cooking. Melissa's program developed into the first and longest culturally-aware, trauma-informed integration program in Greece, bringing together approximately 150 women and children from over forty-five countries every day; employing people of twenty different ethnic origins; relying on the skills of community leaders as well as a vast range of experts, artists, and intellectuals; earning international recognition and awards; and building a robust, transnational beehive buzzing with creativity and coexistence.

Empowerment was thus conceived as a winding path, where trauma can only begin to heal through building a sense of be-

longing and community. Migrant and refugee women are active agents in the co-creation process, not passive recipients of aid. The purpose was to forge a compass and a toolkit they could carry along the journey. In mere weeks, the newly arriving women started expressing and affirming themselves, proposing ideas, opening up to one another, going out in the community and in the city, and claiming a role and the right to be heard. Most importantly, they transitioned from recipients of emergency services to “givers” — supporting one another through mutual understanding. It was in this context that poetry came to play its part, not only as expression, but also as a liberating practice.

Found in Translation: Poetry at the Crossroads of Languages and Experience

A poetry workshop might seem an unlikely way to develop mutual empathy among women from various cultures who have undergone historical and personal trauma, but it proved popular and successful. Women navigating asylum services must fill out bureaucratic forms; subject to prying interviews, they must repeat over and over the most traumatic details of their life history, and make personal narratives conform to the narrative of fear that narrowly defines the asylum seeker. Poetry offers another way to define the self: poetry gets to ask the questions, and to speak in the first person singular; poetry does not tick the boxes of preconceived categories, but explores all aspects of human experience, including pleasure, humor, and joy. If the language of bureaucracy is dehumanizing, the language of poetry is subversively human.

Translation itself — literally, to “carry across” — became a bridge for understanding. The poetry course was taught in English, but women, from Syria, Iraq, Congo, Palestine, Afghanistan, Iran, and elsewhere were encouraged to write in their mother tongues. Some of the most interesting, and laughter-filled, conversations around the red table involved attempts to define words, discover universal metaphors, and also acknowledge what was stubbornly untranslatable.

Yet if poetry is, as Robert Frost says, that which is lost in translation, how can it be found in the borderlands between languages? We began with list poems. In lists, there is no grammar or syntax to navigate, yet the simple accrual of items builds meaning and narrative. Working as a group, with translators and whiteboard on hand, but also with Google Translate and online dictionaries, each woman's phone a powerful tool, we began with “home.” What must it contain? At first, it was basic necessities — a shower, a bathroom — then other kinds of needs: school, English lessons. Soon, however, the women understood this as an exercise in the imagination. The list for “home” included television, music, books, make-up, kisses. Home had a goldfish, and birdseed (“for the bird”).

Another of our early exercises were acrostic poems. The letters of a thematic word would be thrown out, and we would play a game of coming up with words beginning with those letters. “I” was sometimes the first person, sometimes “island,” and often “ice cream.” “G” might be “Greece” or “gratitude” or “generous” or “God.” “F” might stand for “freedom” or “fear.” “W,” “wonderful,” or, more often, “war.” Consider the concision of the poem “Safety,” by Zahra: “Still Afraid For Everything? Trust Yourself.”

Acrostics of the women's own names were often among the most moving artifacts, as women produced brief self-portraits, catalogues of fears or hopes, and personal narratives. Witness the playfulness of 16-year-old young Sakina from Afghanistan,² a fan of rock-and-roll and Jackie Chan movies:

Suddenly—
Action!
Kung-fu
In the

2 The women at Melissa give informed consent that in participating in the poetry workshop their work may be shared. I attach first names to the poems, but not always family names, as many of the women were or are in the middle of delicate legal proceedings, or in other precarious positions, where a degree of anonymity is prudent.

Night
Am I a good girl?

Sometimes we used our names to discuss other topics, such as the self we are today, or the self we hope to be tomorrow. For this, Fatemah had written these lists: Today: “Free Alone Tent Education Music Eager Happy”; Tomorrow: “Fate America Top Embassy Mother End Happy.”

Punning upon one’s name is a feature of traditional Persian and Arabic poetry. We were reminded of this when, one rainy day, the prompt was the rain: rain, that recognizes no borders, and that falls everywhere on everyone alike. An Afghan woman named Hashti Hashemi wrote a poem in Farsi that, with the interpreter, we translated as:

Rain

I am like the rain
because rain is the start of deep feeling
because rain is clean sadness
because rain is filtered weather
because I am the universe
because I dance on glass.

In the penultimate line, the workshop leader wondered, did Hashti perhaps mean “because I am everywhere”? During the conversation, we came to understand that her name, “Hashti,” means “existence,” or the “universe.” She had “signed” the poem with her existence, her name.

Becoming the author and subject of one’s own narrative is about recovering a range of memories, not simply trauma. In a workshop based on smell and memory, Alicia brought in an array of items: coffee, chocolate, lemon, cumin, oregano, rose petals, nail polish, jasmine, saffron, cinnamon, and other distinctive aromas. We passed these around the red table in a darkened room, inhaling the scents.

Baran wrote of the Iranian brand of “Fahramond Chocolate” from her childhood. Another woman wrote of “Ghorme Sabzi that my mother cooks and it reminds me of rice fields and orange and lemon trees of my grandfather’s garden, where we used to drink saffron tea under the lemon tree.” An Arabic speaker confessed simply that, “The smell of the food reminds me of the days of the war — in that time the food was less. The smell of the garden reminds me of my childhood and the smell of my children reminds me of my mother.”

Another woman wrote:

Unforgettable memories:

Roses

I miss my home and my family and being together

Coffee

The sea

Sweet and sour

I am waiting for it.

The donation of a huge stack of postcards of famous paintings and images inspired another successful prompt, for ekphrastic poems: poems based on art work. Each woman selected an image of a painting that “spoke” to her.

By far the most popular images were of the sea (almost all of the women had come over the dangerous sea route from Turkey to the islands of the Eastern Aegean), in particular Hokusai’s iconic print of the “Great Wave off Kanagawa.” The women put themselves into the picture.

Mujabe wrote:

I see the refugee life in this picture.

When they decide to travel, they don’t know

about the dangerous ways

and the other things coming

after this event,

They drowned in this sea.

Another woman reacted to the same image:

The first time I saw this boat I was afraid.
I thought I would die with this unsafe boat,
Because it was the first time I saw
This kind of transportation and that kind of sea.

Sakina, the same poet who had written the playful acrostic poem about Kung Fu, flooded a full notebook page with blue ink, including the following words:

Fear, terror, anxiety, death but hope...

...

Remember your goal wasn't to shipwreck and die;
You came to make your future.
This picture reminds me of the day
We wanted to come to Greece from Turkey in the boat.

For most of the women, Alicia titled the poem on the white board after the Hokusai print, "The Great Wave." But Sakina titled her own poem "The Sea of Hope," a metaphor where the vehicle of the sea conveys its fragile vessel onto another shore and a new life; the sea of hope is the crossing, and the bridge.

As the participants became more confident in self-expression and more trusting of group projects, we embarked on writing collective pantoums. The pantoum, originally a Malay form, is written in quatrains, braids, and pairs of lines; each line is repeated in a new context, down through the poem. Everyone in the class had to come up with two lines about a chosen topic. As women contributed their lines to the poem, it grew and deepened, pivoted, and prised. Somehow a real poem would happen, with only the slightest nudge or reordering from the workshop leader. The pantoum had room for private griefs and gnomic statements, but always added up to more than the sum of its parts. Consider these stanzas about autumn:

The third autumn in Greece is coming. I miss autumn in my country

Autumn is the season of many colors — red, yellow

O wind, take me to Iran

It is the season of my daughter, when she came

Autumn is the season of many colors — red, yellow

The war — I hope it will fall from my country like the yellow leaf.

It is the season of my daughter, when she came.

I hope to meet my old love, like leaves that stayed on the tree.

The war — I hope it will fall from my country like the yellow leaf.

Autumn is the happy season.

I hope to meet my old loves, like leaves that stayed on the tree.

I hope to leave for another country.

Or a stanza from this Spring pantoum:

Hyacinths, we put on the tablecloth of New Year to welcome the spring.

My childhood memories have the smell of my grandmother's chador, with its flower-print design.

Flowers make me feel happy

The smell of the damask rose next to the fish pool

Somehow, the text of the pantoum, woven seemingly at random out of specific, individual memories, general statements, and lyric images, takes on its own life. The form itself — taking one step forward, two steps back, but always expanding and deepening — becomes almost a metaphor for the women's own journeys. Even the seemingly unpoetic topic of International Woman's Day produced some startling lines: "In Farsi, the first letter of 'woman' means 'life,'" and "Woman is the myth of stamina."

Poetry — the process of *poiein* (making) — has become a sacred hour at Melissa, a way of creating life anew. Ultimately, this is what Melissa Network is: a bridge to cross, and the first solid ground underneath the feet. It connects, opens windows, and reignites the capacity to imagine. It explores how meaning is created when language — literally and metaphorically — is broken. It is an attempt to pick up those broken pieces, and to trace the ways in which desire is gently, quietly, almost secretly nourished.

Curating Migration: A Conversation with The Migration Museum

Aditi Anand and Sue McAlpine

ADITI ANAND: The purpose of the Migration Museum is to reflect, in a moving and inspiring way, on the long history of migration that has shaped the United Kingdom from its beginnings — its culture, politics, economics, and physical landscape. Discussions about migration tend to focus on contemporary, postwar migration, but we are interested in putting that into perspective. We wanted to create a place for a historical and contemplative, rather than polarizing, discussion of it, driven by the ethos that migration is a story that belongs to all of us. To explore that shared heritage, we collect personal testimonies, and use a number of different formats. Early on, we asked people to contribute their stories by filling out disks to record their family's history of migration.

Here is a sample response: "My parents brought me here from Afghanistan, they paid a smuggler and carried me across borders. It took us 3 years to reach Calais, and we arrived in Dover in 1999. I still have the backpack I was wearing on the journey. I am now a medical student at UCL." Another traces



Fig. 18.1. Migration story discs filled in by visitors. © Migration Museum.

the route taken by the respondent's ancestors from Jamaica and Ireland to Britain. We've collected a huge range of these stories, nearing 10,000. From the beginning, our focus on ordinary stories is what set us apart from other museums. Sharing these makes people feel that they belong to the fabric of this country.

The oral histories, on the other hand, feel fresh because there's no real formula for how to make it happen. When we collect oral histories specifically for an exhibition, we ask fairly targeted questions rather than asking for an entire life story. But the impetus is to enable people to remember that emotion that's related to those spaces and memories, rather than just deliver a narrative.

Alongside our exhibition *Call Me by My Name* about the Calais Jungle camp, we organized a day with music, art, food, and performance around experiences of the Jungle. PSYCHEdelight Theatre Company presented "Borderline," a satire on the camp performed by a group of people who had lived in the camp and European actors. We do things that are unusual for a museum, engaging people and letting them tell their stories. For example, we held cooking classes inside our exhibition *Room to Breathe*,



Fig. 18.2. Norma's penny. Source: Migration Museum.

working closely with Migrateful, a charity who organize cookery classes run by migrant chefs. Because the story of migration exists all around us, we take our work outside the walls, doing multiple walking tours around London, looking at all the fabric of migration stories on our streets and buildings. But migration is not just a London story, so we partner with the National Trust and the Museum of Liverpool, among others, to have it told in a variety of institutional contexts.

We are a museum without a permanent collection. We set out to visualize the theme of migration by running a competition with *The Guardian*, based on an open call for people to submit images that spoke to them about migration. We received about 700 submissions, from a mix of professional photographs, amateur photographs, and family album items.

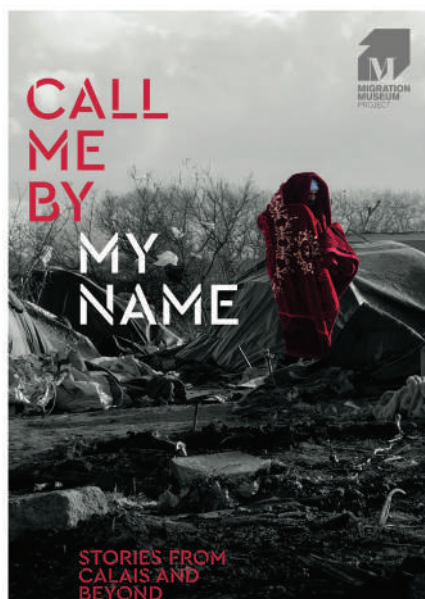


Fig. 18.3. Poster for the exhibition *Call Me By My Name*. Photo by Paul Evans.

A different project in our early days was around keepsakes that people carry with them. Its proposition was that some of the most incredible stories and objects might not be in museum collections, but hidden in people's attics and in their drawers. I love this one.

The penny shown in figure 18.2 belongs to a woman called Norma from the Caribbean. Her mother gave it to her on the ship, wrapped up in a handkerchief, a sort of lucky penny to ensure she would always have riches when she arrived in Britain. She kept that penny in her handbag for fifty years and this was the first time it had ever left her bag, to be part of our temporary display.

SUE MCALPINE: We don't actually have a permanent venue. Like migrants, we move from one meanwhile space to another. We



Fig. 18.4. Portrait of Ahmad Al Rashid. Source: Hannah Thomas.

have done three major exhibitions in the time that we've been thinking about setting up our permanent site, and because we have no collection, we have to start from scratch each time. Because we're not an accredited museum, we also want to explore how far we can go with making exhibitions experimental and rebellious. We want to make sure our contributors get their voices heard, and that our visitors can be included and involved.

Call Me by My Name — our first exhibition, in a warehouse in Shoreditch — was about the Calais Jungle refugee camp. This was designed to give the people who lived in the camp an opportunity to tell their stories in the way they would want their stories to be told. The media headlines were talking about refugees in derogatory terms, as “swarms” and “floods” and “vermin.” We wanted to humanize them. We wanted our visitors to understand that refugees have professions, they have families,



Fig. 18.5. *The Wanderers*. © Migration Museum.

they have love stories, they have children, they have aims and ambitions. This exhibition gave refugees the opportunity to tell us their name. But we wanted the stories to be told from every angle. So we explored the idea that sometimes refugees cannot tell their real names. We asked smugglers what it was like to be a smuggler, and lorry drivers what it was like to have refugees in the back of their lorry. We asked paramedics, cooks, and volunteers to tell us stories. We wanted to show the camp in Calais as a complex social structure with a transient population, with people who are courageous, strong, and ambitious, suffering and surviving. Thus, the exhibition acted as a vital platform for us as a museum to question our national responsibility towards refugees. We did not want to present a kind of voyeuristic, emotionally laden exhibition. We tried, rather, to represent the subjects in the way they would want to be represented. On our several visits to the camp, the question we asked was, “what would you like people in the UK to know about you?” giving them choice of what they wanted to tell us.

Like all exhibitions, we used all media, photography, art, presenting the oral histories that we collected in the forms of text,



Fig. 18.6. Painting by the Mauritanian artist ALPHA. © Migration Museum. Source: Migration Museum.

audio, and installations. We commissioned portrait artists, as with this oil painting of Ahmad Al Rashid, a Syrian refugee (fig. 18.4), showing that oil paintings are not just for rich and settled people.

We were also very fortunate to be able to show the work of the Danish artist Nikolai Larson.

Figure 18.5 is a piece called *The Wanderers*, consisting of over 400 human figures made of black, plasticine-like material, was the first thing visitors saw as they entered the exhibition. It had an immediate emotional impact. It was also important that we showed the art of the inhabitants of the camp, including children, who would not consider themselves as artists but were making art.

In figure 18.6 you can see a painting by ALPHA, an artist from Mauritania, saying “my art can go to the UK, but I can’t.”

The piece shown in figure 18.7 is made up of the gas canisters that the French police chucked at everybody in the camp.

And in figure 18.8 is an artist from Afghanistan called Habib, painting a temple right in the middle of the dome, which was



Fig. 18.7. Gas canisters. © Migration Museum.

where the Good Chance Theatre — fellow interlocutors in this book — had located themselves within the camp.

While the fires were burning around him, and the French police were doing what they were doing, Habib continued to make his art. When we unpacked his Sudanese camp-mate Yasin's paintings for the exhibition, we could smell the fire.

Among the many telling oral histories we collected, here is an example — from a Sudanese man called Samer upon his arrival in this country: “I went back to Calais at the end of March this year. It’s crazy what a passport can do. With that little book in my hand I made the crossing in twenty minutes, a journey that once took me ten months. It seemed to me that these little books control our lives, more than humanity, more than kindness, more than right and wrong. Without them, we are like pawns in a game of chess.”

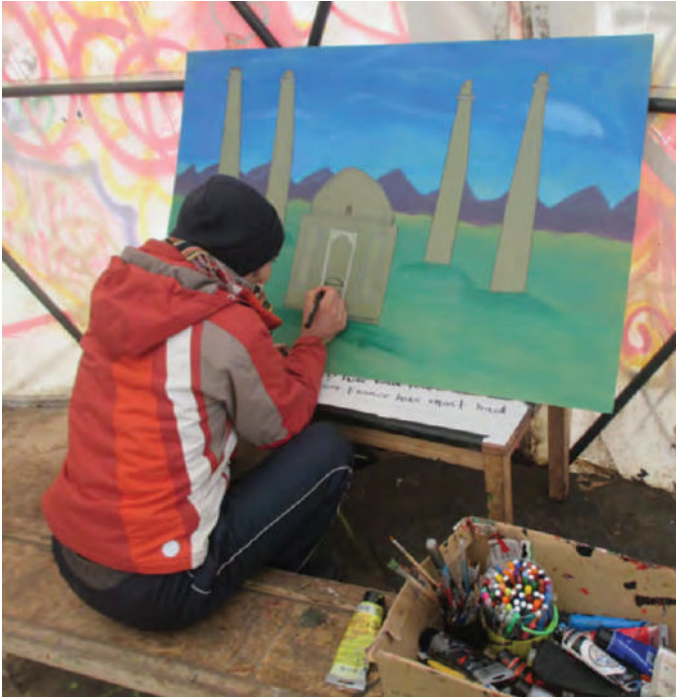


Fig. 18.8. Habib painting. Source: Suzanne Partridge.

Our second exhibition, *No Turning Back*, took its seeds from the Brexit referendum. We decided to use the Brexit moment as a springboard for looking back in history. How far have migrants been welcomed into Britain, and to what extent they have been rejected? We took seven moments, kind of random yet not really, to explore historical junctures in which people have come in or gone out, which still reverberate today. We feel that exhibitions should be at once about history, today, and the future.

Among the historical moments we looked at was 1290, when the entire Jewish population was expelled from this country; 1607, which marks the first East India Company voyage from England to India; the arrival of the Huguenots — the first refugees — in 1685, so that we could compare their experiences with



Fig. 18.9. Humanae. © Angélica Dass. Photo © Juan Miguel Ponce.
Source: Migration Museum.

those of the Kindertransport children and their reception here in 1939; bringing it up to date, with Syrian children and their experience of not being welcomed immediately into this country. We showcased art which offers the perspective of those who suffer — such as the colonized or the alien. We looked at the 1905 Aliens Act, when people were first officially labelled as “alien,” “illegal,” and “good immigrants” and “bad immigrants.” And we explored the Rock against Racism movement of 1978.

In the 2011 census, which we examined, there were a great number of people defining their ethnic origin as mixed. So we worked with a Brazilian photographer called Angelica Dass whose *Humanae* project takes photographs of people and compares the color of their skin with a Pantone color, making you see that everybody has a slightly different color-tone, and nobody is just black or white. Our invitation of people from local communities to talk about the extent to which they identify themselves with the particular color of their skin took off from Dass’s work and extended it to generate revealing conversations about identity.

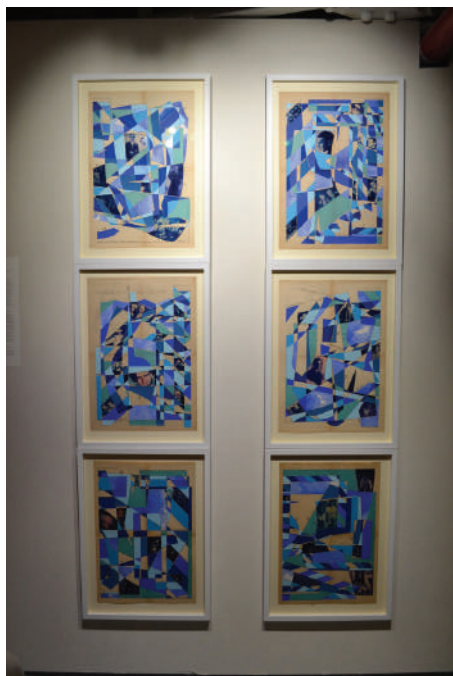


Fig. 18.10. *Bands of Colour*. © Hormazd Narielwalla. Source: Migration Museum.

Hormazd Narielwalla is an Indian artist whose art uses tailoring and old sewing patterns. We showed Hormazd an illustration of the yellow pieces of felt Jews were forced to wear by Edward I in 1274, and asked him to create a work for us to illustrate the 1290 expulsion of the Jews. That badge, after all, was the heritage of the Nazi yellow star which Jewish people were forced to wear. He went away to think about it, and came up with a multimedia piece, *Bands of Colour*, which has no yellow in it at all. He said:

I didn't want to work with yellow because I didn't want to celebrate that decree. I came across the blue city Chefchaouen in Morocco, where Jewish settlers painted all the houses in



Fig. 18.11. *The Chart of Shame*, by Liz Gerard. © Migration Museum.
Source: Migration Museum.

shades of blue, and I decided that the artwork would be made in shades of blue, to celebrate Jewish culture and contributions.

He added, “the 1274 decree could have been aimed at any peoples or race, and as a minority, being a Zoroastrian Indian gay immigrant, it could easily be me forced to wear a badge of shame, instead of celebrating my contributions to British culture.” An artist never does exactly what you want them to do.

In figure 18.11, you see an image of the “Chart of Shame,” which had a real effect on our exhibition.

This bar-chart was compiled by Liz Gerard, a journalist who put together all the national newspaper headlines on immigration for the year 2016 — 297 by her count. And most of them — like the *Sun* and the *Star* — feature horrific, racist headlines.

We like to engage our audiences in conversations in our exhibitions. An interactive event in 2011 began with someone saying that they were having a mixed-race child, and asking the assem-



Fig. 18.12. *Room to Breathe*. © Migration Museum. Source: Migration Museum.

bled group how they should bring this child up. This led to an extraordinary sharing of personal experiences.

Figure 18.12 is our exhibition, *Room to Breathe*.

It was intense and emotional, and brought people to tears. This is probably the exhibition of which I, as a curator, am most proud. Here, we wanted to encourage people to tell their ordinary stories of settling into this country, what it was like when they first arrived, how they managed without a word of English, negotiated the Home Office, found somewhere to live, found somewhere for the kids to go to school, and found work. *Room to Breathe* comprised a series of rooms, which visitors walked through. We wanted to make the first room an uninviting place—one we jokingly called the Home Office—by using some of the incomprehensible bureaucratic jargon like “non-suspensive appeal,” “non-compliance grants”—and other categories that you are placed in during your immigration journey. At the other end of the room, there are hundreds of files with numbers on them, each representing a person. But we also wanted visitors to really immerse themselves in the exhibition. So, unlike most museums where you can’t change, move,

or even touch things, we wanted our visitors to sit on the bed, at the desk, in the chair, and at the kitchen table; to make art, to contribute their story, to open drawers and read others' stories. They had the agency to change the exhibition if they wished.

We had an art studio in this exhibition: six artists-in-residence made it their own and brought the place alive. We also turned a part of the space into a barber shop, where people could sit in the chair, and instead of seeing their own face in the mirror, see someone else and hear their stories. We wanted to include the barber because immigrants and barbers — and barbers are often immigrants themselves — have a curious rapport, which can generate conversation.

We also had a school room where we asked children about their experience of arrival. And then there was a kitchen — where we put the plates on the table and projected an animation of food stories. We hope we can continue to make such exciting projects and work closely with many people who have come and gone from the UK well into the future.

Response to The Migration Museum

Clair Wills

A few days before the Migrant Knowledge event in Cambridge in September 2019, I returned from the island of Lampedusa in the southern Mediterranean, where on a clear day you can see Tunisia. It was my second visit to the island. Eighteen months previously I spent Easter there, and I was struck by how similar the place seemed to a small West Ireland town I knew in the 1970s — bar the weather, of course, and the food. At mass on Easter Sunday the old women sat towards the front, the kids turned somersaults, and the teenagers chatted and checked their hair. The men hung around in groups at the back of the church and didn't wait for communion — the only difference I could see was that in Skibbereen the men were farmers in their Sunday suits, and on Lampedusa they wore the uniforms of the coast-guard, the military police, and the border patrols.

Returning in the tourist season in the summer of 2019, the population had swollen from 6,000 to 25,000, but the military presence was still palpable. Several times a week the coastguard picked up small groups of migrants, often travelling in their own boats from Tunisia, and sometimes in smugglers' rubber dinghies from the Libyan coast. They were (and still are) landed in the militarized section of the harbor, a few feet from the tour-

ists — mostly from northern Italy — queuing for their dolphin-watching tours. When I was there no one seemed to notice.

One of the boats that often docks in the harbor by day is a small fishing boat that was used to save forty-five migrants on the night of October 3, 2013. It's a boat that usually holds six people. Most of the migrants crossing that night — 350 of them — were not saved. And this small fishing boat, and a man who was out fishing — Vito Fiorino — who piloted it, have become the storytellers for the people who died that night. I mean this quite literally: journalists from around the world turn up to cover the “migrant crisis” and they like to get the human story. But Lampedusa is not a place where migrants stay for any length of time. So the journalists hire translators and interview Vito to get the story of how he and a few friends had decided to sleep on his boat that night because of the fine weather, how they were woken up by cries in the night, how they alerted the coastguard and the coastguard didn't come, and didn't come, and how they tried to save as many as they could. It's a story about migrants, certainly, and it needs to be told. But it is not the migrants' own story.

The Migration Museum — Britain's first national institution dedicated to the history and experience of migrants and refugees — seeks to come at experience from the other side. Curators Aditi Anand and Sue McAlpine explain that their exhibitions start from the conviction that migration is a story that belongs to all of us. It is ordinary. This in itself is a challenge for any commemorative project, and perhaps a museum in particular. How can an experience that is not only part of everyday life, but forms the deep background to contemporary British society, be made visible in a manner that remains true to its unexceptional nature? How can we document and represent the histories and experiences of migration to Britain without creating exceptional characters, or focusing too much or disproportionately on remarkable narratives? This is only one of the difficulties facing an institution dedicated to the movement of individuals and populations. To many people, who consider themselves settled, that movement in itself is to be decried rather than explored

and commemorated. There is a strong media-driven narrative around migration, and vested interests that don't really want the narrative to change. The story of migration is personal and subjective as well as public and political, yet there are ethical challenges to collecting, editing, and displaying peoples' personal stories for public display, or even for entertainment. How can a museum break down the barriers between those who visit, and those whose stories are represented? In the current, highly polarized, political atmosphere around migration, exacerbated by the manner in which immigration to Britain was weaponized during the Brexit referendum, these are not theoretical or abstract questions, but have real-life effects.

The Migration Museum curators have chosen not to depoliticize the history of migration, but to tackle underlying prejudice directly. Their first exhibition, on the Jungle in Calais was, they explain,

designed to give the people who lived in the camp an opportunity to tell their stories in the way they would want their stories to be told. The media headlines were talking about refugees in derogatory terms, as "swarms" and "floods" and "vermin." We wanted to humanize them.¹

And, as they say explicitly, such "humanizing" was aimed at helping visitors to the exhibition question national responsibility towards refugees. The exhibitions have employed a number of imaginative practices for situating the contemporary experience of individuals and families travelling across the Mediterranean (from Turkey, Libya, or Morocco), through Lesbos or Lampedusa, to Calais and then across the English Channel, within the long history of migration to Britain. These include gathering nearly 10,000 personal testimonies from both individual migrants and their descendants, encouraging visitors to the museum to become involved by adding their own stories to those represented in the exhibits, setting up events, workshops,

1 See the conversation with the Migration Museum, in this volume.

and walking tours to break down the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the museum. A large part of the attraction of the exhibitions lies in the dynamic relation between oral history and personal testimony on the one hand, and artistic transformation on the other. Paintings, photographs, poems, sculptures, videos, and stories, created by migrants, or by others in response to migrant testimonies, shape the experience of the visitor to the exhibitions. And the museum itself is currently a migratory project — without a permanent site — so that the exhibitions can respond to and be shaped by local contexts, and local communities.

Still, the practice of “humanizing” migrants is fraught with difficulty, as the curators themselves acknowledge. Recent research commissioned by the museum has emphasized the challenges such institutions face in resisting stereotypes of “good,” or deserving migrants and refugees, those who will contribute to British society in positive ways. Museums, argues Domenico Sergi,

have participated in the construction of an ambivalent moral economy around asylum: on the one hand romanticising the “heroic” nature of refugee displacement, and on the other pathologising refugees as “traumatized” subjects. This extreme formulation has effectively placed refugees “outside the ordinary,” subjugating human rights discourses to a form of conditional belonging whereby refugees may exert their right to protection so long as they are mentally fit and can positively contribute to British society.²

It’s the double bind of the migrant success story. Even though stories of achievement (from contributions to the NHS, to sport-

2 Domenico Sergi, “Exploring the Potential of Museums and their Collections in Working Practices with Refugees” (PhD diss., University of East Anglia, 2016), quoted in Hannah Tendler and Cathy Ross, *Migration and Museums*, 2020–2021, https://www.migrationmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Migration-and-Museums-%E2%80%93-A-review-for-the-Migration-Network-2020_21_compressed-3.pdf.

ing prowess or entrepreneurial drive) undercut the negative portrayals of refugees often seen in the media, the negative stereotype itself is left untouched. It may be precisely through reaching for the “human” or personal element in migrant or refugee experience that broader legal questions of human rights and responsibilities become harder to access.

One of the books I had with me in Lampedusa in 2019 was Amelia Gentleman’s *The Windrush Betrayal* — an account of the effect of the policies designed to create a “hostile environment” for illegal immigrants on long-term legal residents who do not have all the papers to prove their right to remain in Britain. Gentleman is good at describing the deliberately dehumanizing processes that people caught up in the hostile environment are subjected to — from the practice of describing individuals as “Migrant” in official documents, rather than using their names, to the tortuous requirements to report to officials at various centers and the officials’ refusal to listen, to the experience of detention itself. It is easier to deny someone citizenship if you no longer regard them as a person. Yet the very notion of a betrayal of Windrush migrants suggests an immigrant hierarchy. It implies that postwar migrants who came to Britain from the Caribbean because they were British citizens should not have been treated with hostility — not that hostility in itself is a problem.

Several meanings get attached to the idea of the “good” immigrant, and very often they contradict one another. Good can mean the most “desirable,” the most like us, or the most “deserving,” those who have suffered most. Today’s stereotypes and prejudices tend to foster sympathy for refugees from war and conflict over economic migrants, but that wasn’t always the case. In the late 1940s there was a debate in Britain about whether the displaced persons in refugee camps on the continent would make “better” or “worse” immigrants to the UK than economic migrants from southern Italy, India, Ireland, and the Caribbean. People expressed fears that a camp mentality meant that the refugees would find it hard to be “productive” members of so-

ciety.³ They preferred the idea of economic migrants, and even here there was a hierarchy—Germans, Latvians, Lithuanians were considered hard workers (which was often code for more middle class and Protestant), and likely to be more productive members of society than, for example, southern Italians.

On Lampedusa I discovered that those currently designated “good” immigrants are the ones from Somalia or Eritrea, who have struggled through famine and war and the hellhole of the Libyan camps. They elicit sympathy. By contrast the Tunisians who arrive under their own steam are more strongly disliked. They are reasonably well-dressed; they arrive with backpacks; they look remarkably similar to Italy’s regular inhabitants. In effect they are perceived as being “too Western” to be truly “deserving” immigrants. They haven’t suffered enough. It is a failure not so much of sympathy, but of empathy—a failure which in Britain was encapsulated in the United Kingdom Independence Party’s 2016 “Breaking Point” poster.

Britain is patting itself on the back for belatedly waking up to the effects on its own citizens of the active government policy of creating a hostile environment for immigrants. The popular outrage over the Windrush betrayal is read as proof that, despite the racism experienced by Black immigrants to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, they are now accepted—by their neighbors, if not by the government. On this reading, they were “good immigrants” all along. It is of course the wrong lesson. It should be read instead as proof of the need to treat migrants with dignity, however they arrive, and wherever they have come from.

By focusing on the ordinariness, and the ubiquity, of Britain’s story of migration, the Migration Museum attempts to avoid the trap of turning the migrants of fifty years ago (the Windrush and other postcolonial and Commonwealth migrants, as well as refugees from the Second World War and the postwar Communist bloc) into good migrants, whose successful assimilation and contribution to British society retrospectively legitimates them.

3 See Clair Wills, *Lovers and Strangers: An Immigrant History of Post-War Britain* (Penguin, 2017).

In the 1950s and 1960s, migrants from the Indian subcontinent and from the Caribbean who came to Britain and found work as cleaners in Heathrow Airport, or in mills and foundries, or in the NHS, were not fleeing for lives. They were economic migrants. But the other legitimating factor for Britain's postwar, postcolonial migrants is that they were citizens of the British Empire, who had the right to live and work in Britain — a fact highlighted in many of the vignettes in the Migration Museum's *Room to Breathe* exhibition. Although the legal definition of British citizenship was progressively narrowed during the 1960s and 1970s, nearly all the migrants who now come to Britain through Calais (or who get stuck in Calais) leave countries that were at one time under British rule. There is still a feeling of belonging, even if it is denied by Britain.

It is divisions like these between deserving and undeserving, and between refugee and economic migrant, that the work of Migration Museum and its Migration Network seeks to undercut, by placing the stories of contemporary migrants in dialogue with Britain's long, complex, and shared history of migration. Perhaps the hardest division to break down is that between migrants whose journey is over — who have arrived, whether that was in 1850, or 1950, or 2000, and settled, and made a home in Britain — and those who are still travelling. It is the division between a story of successful immigration (successful simply because it has been completed), and one of hope for a new life. It is a division encapsulated in the painting by the Mauritanian artist ALPHA, of his art travelling across the Channel from Calais to Britain (planted with oak trees) while he remained stuck on the other side of the border. In a culture and an environment where the Royal National Lifeboat Institution has to put out a video defending its humanitarian work in rescuing migrants in danger in the English Channel, and explaining why individuals and families should not be left to drown,⁴ the Museum has its work cut out for it.

4 Rachel Hall, "Donations to RNLI Rise 3,000% after Farage's Migrant Criticism," *The Guardian*, July 29, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/>

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“Don’t Wash Your Hands”

*Issam Kourbaj in conversation with Simon Goldhill,
curated by Subha Mukherji*

SIMON GOLDHILL: Issam, you describe yourself as an artist from Syria, not as a Syrian artist. Could you explain what you mean by that?

ISSAM KOURBAJ: I prefer to think of the multiplicity of identity, rather than its oneness. I am, of course, Syrian-born, but being Syrian is not one thing. So, Syrian-born, Cambridge-based, I am equally a visual artist and a painter, a walker, a cyclist. There are many adjectives that could describe me, but having that geography somehow limits the description.

SG: Your uncle took bombs and beat them into spoons, a lovely biblical image of how the ploughshare can be made out of weapons. Do you see art, then, as a form of transformation of identity?

IK: Definitely. My studio in Cambridge is next door to the ADC Theatre. I collect props that are thrown away and I make things out of them. My uncle was incredibly resourceful, thinking in the time of hardship, how one could use whatever is available.



Fig. 20.1. is am. © Issam Kourbaj.

To transform bombs to spoons is to turn a weapon of destruction into a tool of nurturing. If I could achieve that quality of resourcefulness in my artwork I would be very delighted.

SG: Yet one of your most moving pieces is a print with two feet of different sizes, and next to them are two words: “is,” and “am” (fig. 20.1). This seems to me to be a strong statement of identity. So are you, in some senses, moving away from transformation

into assertion, perhaps to a political statement, or, in this case, a statement about family life?

IK: Actually, the minute you have a child, suddenly you become a child again; your child-self surfaces. This was my first exhibition with my son Mourad, who was three at the time. The privilege, for me, was to follow in his footsteps, with his freshness, without boundaries — and not being confined by the rectangular. For three weeks, he was the master, and I was the technician. I was taken by his primal vision of the world, and then I exhibited my work next to his. To my delight, visitors were confused whose was whose. I called the show *Is/Am: Is, Am*.

SG: Every parent in England will know that one of the first things you do with a child and paint at school is put their hand or foot in the paint and then put it on the paper. The print marks identity. It has two existential statements, “is” and “AM.” You’re the third person *and* the first person. The second person is missing in that there’s no address. But the first and the third person *also* spells your name, Issam. So you have put your name, divided, in the middle of the picture, and you tell me that it’s not a statement of anything?

IK: I like the way you read things! But this piece is really to do with journeys — to go backwards, to become a child again, to excavate the lost self. He is, therefore I am.

SG: Do you think, living in Cambridge — which many people would regard as a bastion of privilege if not entitlement — that making art is a form of washing your hands?

IK: Arriving in ’89 as a Syrian and an artist, not knowing a word of English — there cannot be worse ingredients for coming to Cambridge. The ground was not paved with gold! But I met a few people who made my life here worth living, and now I see that deficit was my strength. I felt, “I am now here. I can go nowhere else.” The only tool I have is my art. I had my first studio

behind the Round Church—a fantastic place where I invited people to come to work, and make, and think, and converse. I learned my English from others by ear, not from books.

SG: So your English is spoons made out of bombs!

IK: I was teaching and communicating with people through drawings. And to my astonishment, I actually found a way to stay in this place. I don't feel at all that I belong here. I am not from this geology. It's one of my stations—just happens to be the longest one, but this place is not me. I am interested in collaborating with other disciplines, and with my modest tools, I managed to connect with a few people who nurture creativity.

SG: I suppose it's a question about how we understand that sense that you're not a Syrian artist. Do you think, in your art, Syria is a fantasy? The kind of half-remembered fractured dreams, mixing desire and fantasy, that childhood is for many of us? Because if it is, it makes the politics hard.

IK: Now I am able to see that my work was seeded from the place where I grew up. I used to make my toys from rusty wire, and build sculptures from the volcanic soil. My DNA definitely has been constructed from that mud, but equally it is mixed with muds from other parts of the world. Like us all, I am a palimpsest, and a work in progress. Though it is a privileged place to occupy as an artist, but also a curse. Hearing the stories of Syrian refugees in camps and seeing their reality, such as the paralyzed young woman left with no legs to stand on.... I just felt, "how would I? How could I? How dare I? Who am I to actually work on something as painful as this?" I never had the experience of being a refugee, but I feel what it is like to leave home, to be an alien in a place, to be lonely: it is the only thing that I feel strongly about, and my humble weapon is my art.

SG: You're on a journey, you're between places, you're on a boat, but you can't resist lighting the fire, burning the boat, as you go!

And that’s a very interesting moment. But what I don’t know is whether your burning is a sense of “I’ve left the past,” or “I’m ashamed of something,” or “there’s violence in me that I need to express somehow.” So what does the burning mean for you?

IK: I will tell you where the burning came from. I did an installation called *Another Day Lost* in five simultaneous locations in London. Every day I used to go to these places and burn one match and add this to the installation as a metaphor of a day lost. Also, I was giving a talk in a church — St. James’s, Piccadilly, which happened to be one of the five sites for *Another Day Lost*. At the end of the talk I said that I wanted to honor all people who were forced to flee their homes, and I struck a match, and held it until its light was gone. The time between the birth of the light and its dying, the tension in the whole church was palpable. In this case, the burning is to do with light: light is my tool. But my spent matches could be read as a metaphor of spiritual light and physical light. It also could be read as a form of counting days, in the case of *Another Day Lost*; as a form of burning cities, in the case of *Strike*; as a form of trauma, in the case of *Dark Water Burning World*. A stratum of questions.

SG: I’m not finished with religion. Because I have seen your work often in religious settings. I’m looking at a piece called *Unearthed*, which you chose to exhibit for Kettle’s Yard at St. Peter’s church — a series of objects made up of mourning ribbons and book covers. Obviously, mourning has a place in church, but this is also a disruption. Can you say a bit more about how you think about ritual and disruption as part of your art?

IK: Disruption, destruction, and transforming established norms and materials are deliberate acts in the creative process. When I was given that space, I immediately responded to the floor because it is made up of gravestones. Yes, my floor piece *Unearthed* is a disruption, because you can no longer reach the overflowing font in the center.



Fig. 20.2. *The Dark Side of the “Unknown” Ray*. © Issam Kourbaj.

sg: The picture is beautiful. It’s about coming up from the earth, it’s about mourning, not about burying; about maintaining a sense of doing and saying. It’s also about words—again. Words are in your pictures everywhere, and here we have books marked as mourning.

ik: The hardback covers of the books were gathered from what the bookbinders had thrown away. I found that each of them could be a portrait of a person who had never had the chance to be identified. While gravestones are always identified with this glory of carving, there is no carving, there are no names. Instead, I filled the font with water absolutely to the brim.

sg: Could I ask you about one other piece of work? That you’ve exhibited in Dilston Grove in London, which is called *The Dark Side of the “Unknown” Ray* (fig. 20.2).

“Unknown” is in quotation marks, for reasons that you will have to explain. It’s a piece from 2015 and it would be obvious to describe this too as a religious work of art. Because you constructed a beautiful circle and inside you have a clock. You’ve

talked about journeys, you’ve talked about being “are you here, are you not here?” And here you have a clock that clicks to the moment, and stops and clicks to the moment and stops. So, is this a journey? Is this a failure of identity? Is this the moment at which you say, “is this the temporal version of an inability to speak?”

IK: Beautiful, I really like that. Yes, Dilston Grove (formerly known as Clare College Mission Church) and my work stood for the altar that was absent, but with a twist, so that it was not immediately legible. My son had a clock that had stopped working — out of three arms, the only pulsing one was for seconds. This was something like a heartbeat — still alive, but almost forgotten. It became a silent performance where the unknown ray was the literal translation of the X-ray. I cut the X-ray plates into pieces so when you come close to them you see different body parts. This is why it’s called *Dark Side of the “Unknown” Ray*: all the people buried into oblivion in Syria.

SG: Let me ask, then, about the politics of your art. One of your works is this wonderful piece called *Aleppo Soap*, with a mirror, a tap, a basin, and a piece of soap set against a white wall and the slogan “Don’t wash your hands” (fig. 20.3). Now this is a very good example of how art and words go together. “Don’t wash your hands” is not something you see by a sink, especially today under COVID-19. We are encouraged all the time to wash our hands. Yet you are saying, “please, don’t wash your hands.” I take it you are making a political statement?

IK: Yes, it is a big ask! It was the last piece you’d see in an exhibition in the Penn Museum called *Cultures in the Crossfire*, where you could see the destruction of the different cultures in Iraq and Syria. I set it against glass from Aleppo that is 3,000 years old. It’s a very ordinary object, but the way it was put was the surprise: What I’m asking people to do is not to wash their hands of the destruction of Syria’s cultural heritage. Immediately afterwards there was actually a sign where you could take



Fig. 20.3. Aleppo Soap. © Issam Kourbaj.

a piece of paper and ask us Senators to act against what's happening in Syria and to the Syrian people. We all have agency and we ought to use it. I was trying to invite people, after "touring" the past and rich heritage, to revisit the present. Making soap was an ancient tradition in Aleppo. Each family had their own stamp, stamping their name into the soap. You are confronted by a dysfunctional mirror, a dysfunctional tap, a dysfunctional basin, and a piece of soap with its reflection.

sg: This beautifully looks like a very small gravestone. To me — a Jew aware of the Holocaust — the turning of human bodies into

soap is a very present and powerful image. To restamp soap with a family name is to say, “You know what? You can’t wash this out.” You seem to have become more engaged with the world as you’ve got older, rather than more aesthetic. I mean, moving from your beautiful stage set of *Gilgamesh* to “Don’t wash your hands” — that’s a journey!

IK: The journey, believe it or not, actually started in Cuba in the mid-1990s. I went there and saw how the Cubans took their furniture and made boats out of it. I came back and I made my *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Again, in 2003, I did a piece about the Baghdad library during the invasion of Iraq, called *Sound Palimpsest*. But when it comes to home, to Syria, it suddenly became very painful. For two years I couldn’t do anything. It just felt impossible to bring the news to my studio. I’m always engaged, but how could one articulate the engagement? I found that I always prefer to keep things a little bit hidden, not quite as they appear. Aesthetic versus political is for others to judge; regardless, one needs to spend time with artworks, and be rewarded: attention is the best gift. When I used to have an exhibition in my own studio, somebody coming to spend time with my work was the most beautiful thing. The collectors of my work are given one condition: that I can come and visit and see the way my work has been influencing their life. An artwork is a mobile altar.

SG: So back to migration and religion together — the mobile altar — perfect! So let me ask you about two last works. The first is a piece that I find particularly moving, *My Mother’s Note to My Son Sami Kourbaj to Teach Him Arabic Letters and Numbers 2004*. It’s a long time since, your son is a lot older, you’re a lot older. I want you now to look back at this, sixteen years on, and tell me: Do you now regard this as sentimental? Or do you see this as something crucial and political or religious?

IK: My mother only had one month of schooling, and when I came back to visit Syria, I thought it my duty to teach her to read and write. When I was young, I was always fascinated by the

first letter of my name which, in Arabic, means “eye.” It does not mean “I,” it means “eye.” She used to hold my hand as she drew that letter — drawing, not writing — because she was looking at it as a picture. When we arrived at that letter when, later, I was teaching her, I said, “Do you remember that event?” She said, “No, I don’t remember, carry on teaching me.” She was a keen learner and managed to write the alphabet of my tongue. When my children came to visit years later, she wanted to share her knowledge with them, and teach them the Arabic alphabet and numbers. Not only did she do that, but she also did the powerful thing of trying to convey her feelings. For my two boys she drew two birds, the letters and the numbers. I felt there is so much there that I could learn as an artist from the way she could articulate. If you read Arabic you would see how in her drawing/writing she was trying to express her love to her grandchildren; you would see she was struggling, as she did not have the tools to articulate it with letters. I needed to celebrate the moment of uncertainty, that tension between what one is feeling and what one is articulating.

SG: Let me ask you about the last piece which you are still working on, which is beautiful little lead boats that you’ve taken from Syria, and turned into little boats with matches, which you set fire to. I find it very moving: that transition into something precarious. Tell me about how you thought about what you were doing with this.

IK: I was looking for an object from Syria, at the Fitzwilliam Museum, a model boat made out of lead carrying three goddesses. In response, I took bicycle mudguards to make my boats and put matchsticks inside. Setting these boats on fire turned into a performance. Spent matches speak about the people in the boats, with burnt parts to reflect the trauma that those women, children, and men carry with them, while water-like resin holds these burnt matches together, just as we all hold and support each other in desperate times. This piece is called *Dark Water, Burning World*—currently travelling in different parts of the

world. I’m interested in its simplicity, and its smallness — you can hold it in your hand. Boat is a metaphor, and a metaphor is a boat too, as one is used to transport things and the other to transfer ideas.

sg: One piece I didn’t understand perhaps so well, I think, is *Strike*. I wonder whether your destruction of flame, of matches, was the moment at which you were most depressed about the possibility of such metaphor?

ик: The number of days since the Syria uprising has to match the number of matches I burn. The more I burned matches the more they formed a nest. Nest, cities, the burning of the cities — leave to remain. This kind of the nest is being built and burnt at the same time: a tension between two different energies.

sg: Ha — I would have said before what you just articulated that this was the only piece where I didn’t see a tension between the desire to say “I am here, Issam” and the burning. This one seemed to be a moment when you were perhaps putting more emphasis on the burning than on the nest?

ик: No this is not about me or about “I am here, Issam.” *Strike* is about the barrel bombs that devastated many cities and communities in Syria. A simultaneous performance of construction and destruction.

sg: One last question: I’ve asked you if you see your work as religious, I’ve asked you if you see your work as political, I’ve asked if you write your name on the wall. Issam, where do you see your personal expression in your work?

ик: Let me tell you an interesting story. Once I was in my darkened studio attic in Christ’s College, and for the first time I saw a camera obscura — I knew nothing about it then. I immediately thought, there is so much I could play with, so much I could make. I had grants from both the City and the University to pro-

duce a feasibility study for building a spire on top of Great St. Mary's in the form of a camera obscura, to celebrate the 800th birthday of the University of Cambridge. Sadly, it didn't happen because of fire regulations. But the concept proposed a place for contemplation: for sitting behind one's eyes to see the world. I am fascinated by science and have a particular interest in light and optics: it has to do with being present in the moment. I transformed my studio at one stage into multiple camerae obscurae. Syria is just what happens to be an inescapable part of my daily landscape. But if I'm given a space where I could really be myself, I would play with light.

SG: So you hide the I — the ego — behind the eye, the first letter of your name, and yet the politics is drawing the eye out. I find it very interesting how art becomes the expression of that.

IK: I wrote a chapter on that — the eye and I — and you can see it online: "Magic and Poetry – 'Eye' and Other Magic Moments" (2011). It was around the time when I was given my first Syrian passport and the passport office confused my name in English. Instead of starting my name with the letter "I," they started it with the letter "E." I was so upset that they had to scratch it out.

SG: You lost an eye/I? And that too on a passport which defines the I/eye!

IK: No, I reclaimed my "I" back! But an "I," like an eye, contains multitudes and a palimpsest-in-progress.

“Loving Justice”

Regina M. Schwartz

The United States recently hit a new low in its demonstration of inhumanity. During relief efforts in the Bahamas, in the wake of hurricane Dorian, individuals who did not have a visa to the us were told to leave a rescue ship. It would not take them to Florida. Even temporary suspension of document requirements was not in force during the crisis of a deadly, category-five hurricane. The Trump administration is also trying to cut drastically, again, the number of refuge seekers who may enter the United States. The supreme court has allowed it to bar most migrants, particularly from Central America, from seeking asylum in the us. Migrants cannot apply for asylum unless they have already tried, and failed, to receive it in one of the countries they passed through on their way to the us. People from El Salvador, for example, would be returned to Guatemala, hardly a safe place. ICE agents are forcibly apprehending migrants in the fields, shoppers in parking lots, students leaving schools. “Immigration detention facilities have been the sites of serious and repeated allegations of abuse, including allegations of sexual assault, violations of religious freedom, medical neglect, and the punitive use of

solitary confinement.”¹ Preventable deaths have been reported. With overcrowding and inadequate food and water, “conditions in ICE custody have been described as ‘barbaric’ and ‘negligent’ by Department of Homeland Security experts.” The president of Refugees International, Eric Schwartz, reports:

At a time when the number of refugees is at the highest level in recorded history, the United States has abandoned world leadership in resettling vulnerable people in need of protection. The result is a world that is less compassionate and less able to deal with future humanitarian challenges.²

Trump’s henchmen cite expense — for processing refugees, for helping them resettle from the war-torn and famine-ridden environments they flee. The irony that America is a country of refugees — marked by their flight from life-threatening persecution and poverty — is no accident. My own grandmother fled pogroms in Latvia, and her sisters, who could not make the arduous journey with their young children, were murdered with their children. I know of no one in America who lacks a traumatic past.

And now the traumas being fled in the present are deepened, sometimes even exceeded, by the outrageous response at hostile destinations. In America, children are forcibly separated from their parents and put in cages, without beds, without even adequate clothing and nourishment, with no guaranteed end in sight for their plight; the nation’s pediatricians have published collective petitions about the psychological damage to these children — to unhearing ears. So-called illegal residents are

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- 1 American Immigration Lawyers Association, “Featured Issue: Immigration Detention and Alternatives to Detention,” AILA Doc. No. 24121300, March 14, 2025, <https://www.aila.org/library/featured-issue-immigration-detention-and-alternatives-to-detention>.
 - 2 Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Michael D. Shear, “Trump Administration Considers a Drastic Cut in Refugees Allowed to Enter the U.S.,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, September 6, 2019, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/nation-world/2019/09/06/trump-administration/>.

ripped from their families, jobs, and studies at universities, held as criminals and deported—to places they have never lived, where languages are spoken that they do not understand, to dangerous places. Immigrants have perished crossing rivers, deserts, and oceans; they have been abused, attacked, and, after they have been deported, many have died.

What is going on here? Where is justice? So much thinking about justice relies on economic models: the price of an injury, the price of violating a contract, the distribution of resources according to formulas. When the measures are made, they presuppose scarce resources. Lines are drawn, borders are sealed, to secure those resources for some and deny them to others.

But mark how radically different another idea of justice is, one that is over two millennia old. “The stranger that dwelleth with you *shall be unto you as one born among you*, and thou shalt love him as thyself.”³ That radical language is in Leviticus. Here, justice is not an economic principle that apportions scarce resources; rather, as care or “love” that we owe another, it issues from an unlimited, ever-renewing supply. This remarkable vision, the so-called “love command” in the Bible, joins commands about loving the neighbor (a better translation of *re’a* would be “fellow human”), and loving the stranger, to loving God, with the implication that one cannot love God without loving the stranger. Clearly, if Donald Trump is going to claim, as he has, that he is “the chosen one” he’s going to have to change his immigration policy.

In Leviticus, the widow, the orphan, and the poor are especially singled out for this love. Our “fellow human” is described as someone who does not have enough, and so we must feed him, and someone who is away from home, and so we must be hospitable to him. The fellow is also depicted as including someone who can be exploited, lied to, robbed, someone whose wages can be withheld, someone who can be slandered, who can be hated, and someone, moreover, from whom that hatred can be hidden instead of having his offense openly explained

3 King James Version, Leviticus 19:34. Emphasis mine.

to him, defining “harm” far more broadly than contemporary liberal rights does. The list also includes someone who cannot speak and someone who cannot see. In short, one’s fellow human is not figured here as a fortress of strength, self-sufficiency, or autonomy — the modern imaginary subject whose right to freedom must be protected. No, the fellow human from the poor to the stranger, from one who is speechless to one who is blind, is the very portrait of vulnerability. What then does it mean to love such a fellow human? To respect him, indeed, but far, far more: to help him.

This biblical model is a long way from the mentality of nations, like the US today, that make it illegal for the vulnerable to cross their borders and make it even lawful to dehumanize those who do.

Importantly, this biblical account describes *all* humans as in need, and all humans sharing the obligation to help. The *universality* of the human condition of exile is underscored in the midst of this very command to love the stranger: “the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; *for ye were strangers* in the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 19:33–35, emphasis mine). This single verse, that the stranger among you shall be as one born among you, for you were strangers, is given wider compass in the biblical story of ancient Israelites exiled in Egypt and exiled again in Babylon. And such exile is not confined to one people.

In the story of the first man and woman, all of humanity is described as separated from their homeland.

Here is John Milton’s rendition of this forced exile:

They looking back, all th’ Eastern side beheld
Of Paradise, so late thir happie seat,
Wav’d over by that flaming Brand, the Gate
With dreadful Faces throng’d and fierie Armes:
Som natural tears they drop’d, but wip’d them soon;
The World was all before them, where to choose
Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:
They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow,

Through Eden took thir solitarie way.⁴

Would that their heirs could choose a place of rest. Instead, refugees are often in flight, never resting. Never home. The injunction to treat the stranger as one born among us — the love command that Christ said was the sum of the law (Matthew 22:36–40) and that Paul endorsed as fully, “Love does no wrong to another; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10) — seems to have been tragically forgotten by so many world leaders and many of their populations. Instead, people have fallen back on the principle of scarcity, and, believing their resources are scarce, they want to hoard them, or are afflicted with fear of difference. And underneath it all, they want, desperately, to live in denial about their own condition of exile. Migrant knowledge is knowledge in denial.

For when we fail to respond humanely to individuals in flight from crises, we are not only in denial about their vulnerability, but also about ours. This includes not facing up to the fleeting nature of life on this planet, the ceaseless movement through time and space that characterizes life itself, with the loss, that inevitably haunts it, of loved ones, of loved places, of cherished moments. We are in denial, too, about the fragility of our homeland. At a time when we know there are no Indigenous peoples, that everyone outside of Africa is a migrant from there, at a time when we know that global warming will increase the numbers who must migrate from tens to hundreds of millions, we would rather not know of our fundamental exilic condition. This denial has devastating consequences, for the victims of that denial are our fellow humans who need our help, now. Chris Abani writes:

There is something about the way that refugees, more than any other kind of displaced peoples, haunt the assurances of stability that modern statehood aspires to. Perhaps because

4 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alistair Fowler (Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), XII.641–649. Emphasis in original.

this body is proof that we have advanced much less in our “humanness,” than we would like to believe.⁵

William Shakespeare addresses this poverty of humanness. *Sir Thomas More*, a play penned by many, includes a passage that has survived, remarkably enough, in Shakespeare’s own hand. It is a speech given by More in his capacity as Sheriff of London, when he addresses a violent mob, hostile against foreigners, during the Ill May Day riot of 1517.

Grant them removed, and grant that this your noise
Hath chid down all the majesty of England;
Imagine that you see the wretched strangers,
Their babies at their backs and their poor luggage,
Plodding to the ports and coasts for transportation,

And you in ruff of your opinions clothed;
What had you got? I’ll tell you: you had taught
How insolence and strong hand should prevail,
How order should be quelled; and by this pattern
Not one of you should live an aged man,
For other ruffians, as their fancies wrought,
With self same hand, self reasons, and self right,
Would shark on you, and men like ravenous fishes
Would feed on one another.⁶

The haunting image of exiling “wretched strangers, their babies at their backs and their poor luggage, plodding to the ports and coasts,” searching for a place to go, is, in our time, realized in photo journalism: images of refugees ever moving. But here, More does not only prophetically conjure the brutal treatment of

5 Chris Abani, “The Road,” in *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives*, ed. Viet Thanh Nguyen (Abrams Press, 2019), 15.

6 Henry Chettle et al., *Sir Thomas More, Original Text by Anthony Munday and Henry Chettle, Revised by Henry Chettle, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Heywood and William Shakespeare*, ed. John Jowett (Bloomsbury, 2013), 6.83–98.

“others.” He knows that if a code of self-interest prevails — “self same hand, self reasons, and self right” — the victimizers will also be victimized.

Alas, alas! Say now the king
 Were but to banish you, whither would you go?
 What country, by the nature of your error,
 Should give you harbour? go you to France or Flanders,
 To any German province, to Spain or Portugal,
 Nay, any where that not adheres to England,
 Why, you must needs be strangers: would you be pleased
 To find a nation of such barbarous temper,
 That, breaking out in hideous violence,
 Would not afford you an abode on earth,
 Whet their detested knives against your throats,
 Spurn you like dogs [...]
 What would you think
 To be thus used? this is the strangers case;
 And this your mountainish inhumanity.⁷

Ironically itemizing foreign lands that are not English allies, “nay, any where that not adheres to England,” More’s deeper logic is to break down the very categories of foreigner and native, for we are all potentially displaced, all strangers. He warns the locals, “Why, *you* must needs be strangers” (italics added). We saw that the Bible broke down that stranger/native distinction too: “Treat the stranger as one born among you” (Leviticus 19:34). This command had resonance in the early modern period, not only intoned in the frequent readings of the *Book of Common Prayer*, but dramatized on the early modern stage.

For instance, in his oblivious self-righteousness, King Lear “others” his daughter Cordelia:

Here I disclaim all my paternal care,
 Propinquity and property of blood,

7 Ibid., 6.138–56.

And as a stranger to my heart and me
Hold thee from this for ever.⁸

Then, having estranged her, he heaps on more:

The barbarous Sythian
Or he that makes his generation messes
To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
Be as well neighbored, pitied, and relieved,

As thou my sometime daughter.⁹

This echoes, but perversely, that biblical injunction to love the stranger, to pity and relieve him. And Lear will not grant this even to his daughter. In this way, the play weaves the command to love the stranger into the core of its plot about a family. Lear must learn to love the stranger or he will never more be Lear. Ultimately, his love of this very child is the only goodness in a world achingly bereft of it. He readies himself for his reunion with her in a poignant scene where, through his experience of being exiled from the homes of his other, self-serving daughters, he becomes aware of the plight of homelessness. No more denial is possible. Lear learns compassion for the vulnerable, and he regrets not addressing their plight:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this!¹⁰

8 William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. René Weis (Longman Annotated Texts, 1993), 1.1.111–14.

9 Ibid., 114–18.

10 Ibid., 3.4.1831–36.

It seems the cure for the rulers who have been unmindful of injustice is for them to suffer themselves:

Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just.¹¹

Is Shakespeare recommending that Trump spend some time in a detention camp to learn his duty? Or worse, have his child put there? My irony only stresses the brutality of imprisoning vulnerable people, an imprisonment that California has just courageously outlawed.

So what about our immigration policy? We need to begin with this baseline obligation to take care of those in need, and go from there, negotiating about the best way to meet those needs. Policy needs to serve justice. Julián Castro made the moral sentiment behind immigration explicit: Humanism must take precedence over nationalism. “When we see families seeking refuge, we don’t see criminals, or an invasion, or a threat to national security,” Castro writes. “We see kids. We see parents. We see people. We see people first. Because we are people first. And it’s time for an immigration policy that puts people first.”¹²

I want to conclude with the exquisite biblical metaphor for care, not with a border line that cannot be crossed, but with the enduring image Leviticus gives to us for how to respond to the stranger: “You are neither to strip your vine bare nor to collect the fruit that has fallen in your vineyard. You must leave them for the poor and the stranger” (Leviticus 19:10). In this version of justice, giving is not an option, but an obligation. The stranger needs the fruits of our vineyard; and justice demands that we give them. The only human response to human need is to give. And to replace “mountainish inhumanity” with humanity, we

¹¹ Ibid., 1836–39.

¹² Julián Castro, “Putting People First,” *Medium*, April 1, 2019, <https://medium.com/@JulianCastro2020/putting-people-first-eof765cee00c>.

need to acknowledge our human condition of need, of vulnerability, indeed, of exile.

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Response to Regina M. Schwartz

Rowan Williams

One of the most valuable insights in Regina Schwartz's brief essay — as in her recent book on Shakespeare¹ — is the linkage of justice with *imagination*. The language we normally use about justice assumes that it is primarily to do with the things that are true of human beings and their claims, independently of anyone's choice or convenience — and that's a valid and significant perspective. But it is, as it stands, a somewhat rootless one. It occludes the need for an imagined structure of relation in which we recognize in one another a shared predicament — a predicament which Regina identifies as a common *need*.

I have hesitated to use the fashionable term “empathy” to designate this “imagined structure”: empathy as an emotional identification with the situation of others as if it were my own is an ambiguous moral category, despite the ambitious claims made for it by writers and publicists. It can dissolve into forms of cultural and emotional appropriation, strategies for absorbing what is disturbingly other into a comforting sameness: “Look, they're so different, yet they feel just what I feel!” The

¹ Regina M. Schwartz, *Loving Justice, Living Shakespeare* (Oxford University Press 2017).

point is not that there are “really” no differences and that all human beings are fundamentally equipped with a fixed set of claims to justice. Rather, our human condition is one in which we are constantly being challenged to see in the other not a subject possessed of exactly the same set of claims as myself — nor for that matter a potential rival competing with me for limited social goods — but a stranger whose identity I need to contemplate and (so far as humanly possible) welcome if I am to live humanly myself. I am to recognize them as a partner in the work of “humanizing” — humanizing of both us and our social and global milieu. And since recognition is deeply bound up with sharing language, we have to find a means of speaking together in which neither voice is programmed to drown out the other.

The paradoxical thing about this is that we have to learn to imagine ourselves as — in an important sense — beyond our own imagining, or, to put it less teasingly, to imagine ourselves as always lacking, and not knowing what we are lacking. On such a foundation we can begin to think of our relations, socially and individually, as permeated by a willingness to see our identities as always in construction and never under our controlling “panoptic” surveillance. Working for the mutual recognition of shared language is a liberating of both self and other from models of dominance and simple, home-based normativity.

In such a light, justice begins in the “*doing* justice” (as we say) to the particularity of each situation as it arises, each new variety of otherness. Regina is right to make use of the opposition between “humanism” and “nationalism” in one sense, but I’d want to interrogate this a bit further, to avoid the risk of seeing the “essentially” human as rootless or abstract. The “humanism” we seek or try to enact is not best understood as a straightforward universalism, in which local difference is subsumed. Just as with “empathy,” there is an ambiguity lurking, to the extent that any universal identity will inevitably be a version of what this or that group regards as normal or standard human identity and human rationality. To argue for a more questioningly interactive journey towards an ethic that is not just local and self-serving is by no means to abandon all aspirations to an unconditional mo-

rality, a universal “protocol” of respect and gratitude for humanity as it is. This is not about a bland cultural relativism incapable of addressing imbalances and patterns of unjust domination in the life of societies we encounter as other. It is about attending seriously to what we cannot instantly digest and own, and acknowledging our own incompleteness.

Regina notes that there is a sense in which we are all migrants: the human race is nomadic from the first, and the idea that there is a simple “natural” level of territorial belonging is a myth. Put more positively, the truth is that we have all learned over long periods how to live in various local ecologies, and the history of that learning itself becomes part of the ecology inherited by new generations. Inhabiting such a history and geography — without which specifics, as noted earlier, we are not human at all — we may well find, in the typical consciousness of modernity, that where we live — the past we remember or recite, the physically changing landscape we experience — becomes both familiar and foreign. Indeed, if we don’t find this to be the case, we collapse the entire process of historical learning into an uncritical “presentism,” as some call it, the lazy assumption that what we now experience is simply how things “just are,” timelessly. And this in turn means losing that sense of contingency and possibility that nurtures a critical engagement with the ecology we live in, the critical engagement which makes possible a fuller “doing justice.” Thinking critically and imaginatively about where and who we are shows us how fragile are the constructions of “being at home” that comfort us. Such thinking involves a sort of inner displacement, the recognition of a selfhood or identity that is always in motion, becoming strange to itself and finding new settlements, unsettling itself and arriving at new kinds of connectedness. This is why the crude liberal dream of a single global culture, a simple overcoming of local identities, is a dream and a dangerous one: if there is any realization of this fantasy, it is in the malign form of the universal market of advanced capitalism, in which every kind of particularity is exchangeable, capable of being traded for something else. Michael Sandel’s discussions

both of justice in general and of the culture of pricing every experience explore just this set of dangers.²

But the “migrant knowledge” we are concerned about is, as Regina suggests, something that recognizes and works with the basic reality of displacement — the displacing of a protected and agenda-setting ego, the displacing of a single normative culture, the displacing of all kinds of assumptions about social and ideological power. It does not seek to erase difference and turn us all into Esperanto-speakers or the equivalent; it assumes that knowledge is a “migratory” reality, the life of a subject always encountering what it cannot absorb and being challenged by it, enriched by it, simply puzzled by it, but never just coinciding with the boundaries it has inherited. That on its own, however, can sound a bit Panglossian, focusing on the “enrichment” of specific experience by otherness; we are slipping towards the dangerous territory of self-help books on “adventures in empathy.” Rather, the migrant knowledge we are seeking to attend to here is the knowledge of real and often violent disruption, the pain of loss: loss of home, language, leverage in society, access to education, hope in a future for yourself or your children, and much more. Simply to recognize and attend to what the migrant knows is to let ourselves (those with the resources and good fortune to be able to organize conferences and create books) be disrupted. Regina quotes King Lear’s exhortation to “expose thyself to feel what wretches feel”: not as an exercise in imaginatively sharing the frisson of loss from a safe distance, but taking one’s own knowing body to where it can sense the other’s pain for what it is, not absorbing or aestheticizing it — a warning to us as participants in this project. Ultimately, the doing of justice we are thinking about here is inseparable from a certain sort of bodily encounter, finding a physical place where even if only for the most fleeting moment we (those with the resources, etc.) stand alongside and begin to sense the perspective of loss. Per-

2 Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?* (Penguin, 2010), and Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (Penguin, 2013).

haps in the long run it helps us go back to our conventionally “native” territory to see some of our own losses and displacements more honestly, but what it must entail above all is the willingness *not* to hurry back to that territory, instrumentalizing the loss and displacement of the other. That would be a sure way of keeping the stranger a stranger. We (those with etc.) have the hard task of staying with the very specific strangeness of another’s pain and exile, recognizing ourselves in it, recognizing our own flights from this recognition, but also staying with the resistant mysteriousness of the stranger’s suffering, “abiding” it, as might once have been said, until some sort of common language is born of this.

Earlier on I wrote of imagining ourselves as beyond our imagining. The Shakespearean world into which Regina invites us with such sensitivity is one where the unimaginable self is displayed in all sorts of ways. Lear’s troubles are grounded in the fact that he has never known himself, according to his elder daughters, so that he does not know the difference between being loved and being paid a debt. Macbeth seeks to hide from heaven the suddenly exposed ambition that will drive him to murder. The dying Iago taunts the horrified witnesses to *Othello*’s bleak end with the words, “What you know, you know” — as if they are being invited to imagine an evil in themselves beyond imagining yet hideously familiar, invited like Macbeth to own their terrible dreams as theirs, as, like *The Tempest*’s Caliban, native to their own imagination. We are not the triumphant proprietors or conquerors of our own inner territory; we do not have ourselves in possession. And as long as we do not or cannot recognize this, we cannot do justice — see clearly, wait on the strangeness of the stranger without hurrying to absorb them, learn the rhythm of response which may shape a new language. Shakespeare, as Regina and others have read him, does indeed prompt us to sit with our imagining so that we imagine the darkness we do not want to name as ours, the urgency with which we try to dispel darkness and powerlessness by “filling

the void,”³ as Simone Weil observes in her notebooks, the resistance to knowing our own need of recognition. If we can learn from this sitting-with, we may find the freedom to sit with the stranger too, and sitting with the stranger will liberate us further for sitting with our unimaginable and elusive personal situatedness, our “self.” Out of this comes a justice that is more than distributive fairness: an urgent pressing towards fuller and more self-forgetting attention, and a willingness to let go of whatever attitude, possession, prejudice, or status that would impede this.

3 Simone Weil, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, vol. 2, trans. Arthur Willis (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), 491.

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V.

Interlude

In the Fertile Land¹

Gabriel Josipovici

We live in a fertile land. Here we have all we want. Beyond the borders, far away, lies the desert, where nothing grows.

Nothing grows there. Nor is there any sound except the wind.

Here, on the other hand, all is growth, abundance. The plants reach enormous heights, and even we ourselves grow and grow, so that there is absolutely no stopping us. And when we speak the words flow out in torrents, another aspect of the general fertility.

Here, the center is everywhere and the circumference nowhere.

Conversely, it could be said — and it is an aspect of the general fertility here that everything that can be said has its converse side — conversely, it could be said that the circumference is everywhere and the center nowhere, that the limits are everywhere, that everywhere there is the presence of the desert.

¹ This piece was previously published in Gabriel Josipovici, *In The Fertile Land* (Carcanet Press, 1987). It is reprinted with the kind permission of Carcanet Press.

Here, in the fertile land, everyone is so conscious of the desert, so intrigued and baffled by it, that a law has had to be passed forbidding anyone to mention the word.

Even so, it underlies every sentence and every thought, every dream and every gesture.

Some have even gone over into the desert, but as they have not come back it is impossible to say what they found there.

I myself have no desire to go into the desert. I am content with the happy fertility of this land. The desert beyond is not something I think about very much, and if I occasionally dream about it, that contravenes no law. I cannot imagine where the limits of the desert are to be found or what kind of life, if any, exists there. When I hear the wind I try to follow it in my mind across the empty spaces, to see in my mind's eye the ripples it makes in the enormous dunes as it picks up the grains of sand and deposits them in slightly altered patterns a little further along — though near and far have clearly quite different meanings in the desert from the one they have here.

In the desert silence prevails. Here the talk is continuous. Many of us are happy even talking to ourselves. There is never any shortage of subjects about which to talk, nor any lack of words with which to talk. Sometimes, indeed, this abundance becomes a little onerous, the sound of all these voices raised in animated conversation or impassioned monologue grows slightly disturbing. There have even been moments when the very abundance of possible subjects and of available directions in which any subject may be developed has made me long for the silence of the desert, with only the monotonous whistling of the wind for sound. At those times my talk redoubles in both quantity and speed and I cover every subject except the one that obsesses me — for the penalty for any infringement of the law is severe. Even as I talk though, the thought strikes me that perhaps I am actually in the desert already, that I have crossed over and not returned, and that what the desert is really like is this, a place where everyone talks but where no one speaks of what concerns him most.

Such thoughts are typical of the fertility of our land.

VI.

Sound Crossings

Sound Crossings: A Poetry Reading

Angela Leighton and A.E. Stallings

ANGELA LEIGHTON: Searching for a title for this reading I plucked one, as you do, out of thin air, and hoped for the best: Sound Crossings.¹ Weeks later, thinking about the phrase again, it began to stir with strange life, in the way words can. For sounds — those straits or inlets of the sea — can be crossed. Or we might sound out crossings, meaning we might listen to their sounds, or fathom their depths. Or to cross might be a sound way to behave, ensuring we hear all sides of a question. Or we might get cross at sensing nothing but sound in a poem or passage of prose. Or sound might always remain at cross-purposes to our formal conventions of rationality, sanity, sense, grammar, in order to confound us — to make what is sound, unsound, by means of ... sound. But this might be where madness sets in, or poetry begins.

¹ “A Poem,” from *The Messages* (2012), and “Harbour,” from *Sea Level* (2007), are both reproduced by kind permission of Shoestring Press, Nottingham, UK. “Bog Asphodel,” from *Spills* (2016); “A Cricket for Pirandello,” “Landings,” and “By the Bitter African Sea,” from *One, Two* (2021); and “Launched” and “Sea Level,” from *Something, I Forget* (2023), are all reprinted by kind permission of Carcanet Press, Manchester, UK.

So what is a poem? Perhaps indeed a crossing of sounds: from word to word, phrase to phrase, from mouth to ear, ear to memory — or all of these happening at once. As a child friend once asked me, crossly and curiously: “But what is it for?” Her question was about my pouring olive oil into a jug as she watched, bored and restless, in my kitchen. But it stayed with me, and some years later found its way into this sonnet, simply titled “A Poem”:

What is it *for*? the curious child enquired.
 Who knows? To handle snugly as a glove,
 to fit by chance, to change by word of mouth,
 to dream to in a moment’s carelessness —

perhaps to hold or hold by, all the world
 a cover to discover how a word
 might make a listening listened to, not heard,
 and nothing come of it but just itself —

or else to pour like oil, an amber slick,
 a liquid ingot from its nutty stock,
 olivary, expressed from green or black
 and solar-golden in the winter light.

It is for *this*, or *this*, a careless blessing:
 words, by the way (no message) ... cold pressing.

A poem is a queer multi-dimensional thing: something touched and seen, understood and heard; a still shape on the page that is also constantly on the move; a thing that mixes, mimics, echoes, and deflects what we think we understand. But to consider poetry’s crossings, and all the crossed senses and etymologies that lie deep in the language, is perhaps also to recall the crossings that make up the course of human history, and still do. For all languages are live and diasporic. Libraries of exile, to use de Waal’s phrase, are at work in the very words we use: like “oil,” from the French *huile*, the Latin *oleum*, the Greek *elaion*, with all their

viscously liquid vowels — and then who knows which unwritten, sea-crossing languages before these. Here, I too will do a bit of crossing, between my critical self and my poetry-writing self, while also being aware, as we all are, that the privilege of being in this beautiful gallery of finely curated works of art must touch on other crossings, matters of life and death sometimes, that go on elsewhere. The poems I'll read hint at those, but usually indirectly, since my knowledge of such experiences remains in imagination, at several removes. What is also fascinating about this whole project is that it constantly crosses from one form to another — visual, aural, tactile, historical, topographical, even culinary and sartorial — perhaps in order to ask what we mean by knowledge at all, and in what sense it might be “migrant.”

I was lucky to have one of those mixed upbringings, as many of us do today, learning my mother's Italian before I learned my father's English — so the sing-song of the Latinate always pulls at my English, sometimes muddling my idioms. I recall an old man up in Yorkshire who, not understanding my BBC English once, muttered an aside in disapproval: “it coomes to summat when we have eyeties teaching English in our universities.” Thinking in two languages can be a tongue-tying business — but at some level it's what we all do, as we make those first crossings from thoughts or feelings into words. And then language itself is of mixed heritage, a cross-breed of derivations and a rich preserve, therefore, of historical knowledge that has crossed continents, seas. The next two poems are about something that has always crossed readily from place to place in the company of migrating human beings: plants. The first is about a wild flower, which I first saw in the peat bogs of the Isle of Skye, in Scotland. It's a stunning gold color, but my sense of the indigenous and local was quickly dispelled when I found its name, “Bog Asphodel”:

Once, by Elgol,
under ikat sunsets, driving affluent rain,
my two-ply tongue,
tongue-tied for weeks, word-stuck in kind, recognised:
bog asphodel.

To a cold conditioning ground, unpastured space,
 its Delphic heavenly
 ring brought sandalled toes, Elysian meadows,
 Athens, Rome —
 gilding the peat bog, winning a pot of gold.

 Asphodel —
 long echo. Here on the bare, bone-breaking heath
 my tongue's bell,
 bi-lingual, local, levies a name from elsewhere,
 and finds its place.

Asphodel grows wild on the mediterranean maquis. But it also, you remember, carpets the meadows of the classical underworld where its roots were eaten by the shades of the dead — in particular, the dead whose lives were insignificant, un-momentous: “the weak souls among the asphodels,” as George Seferis puts it, quoted by Derek Mahon. They were also, by the way, eaten by the hungry poor of Greece and Sicily during the second world war. It's a word with a “long echo,” therefore, into history, myth and story, so that finding it, or its near-relation, on a boggy northern heath took me on a little journey of crossings in the language. Names from elsewhere are always, perhaps, how we find our place.

My own “two-ply tongue” is not, however, a natural translator, and crossing from one language to another is something I find difficult. I tend to inhabit either one or the other, as well as the different personalities that go with them. As Iris Origo puts it in her late autobiography: “it began to dawn on me that [...] I myself did not say quite the same things and was not the same person, in Italian as in English.” So when I started to translate Italian poetry, it was like trying to put together two halves of my brain which didn't quite match. Alicia and I have both been involved in a project to translate Dante's *Purgatorio* — a maddening enterprise, trying to put that easily rhyming and endlessly inverting Italian into “bog” English. Anyone who translates knows that the task is endless, impossible, yet necessary. It is

also closely related to what we do all the time: cross over from thought to word, memory to writing, from stories long ago to this here and now. Translating “Visita,” a poem by Luigi Pirandello who is generally better known for his short stories, novels, and plays, turned out to be a reminder of the point where translation will not work. This was the impossibility of translating his phrase: “Nascere grilli è pure qualche cosa” — literally, the birth of crickets is also something. But “grilli” are also fancies, whimsy, a creature that hops off the top of one’s head. The poem took off from there. On the way it recalls the story of another wild flower: namely, Oxford ragwort. This plant was brought to Oxford’s botanical gardens in the eighteenth century from the slopes of Etna in Sicily. But it hopped over the walls, as plants do, and with the development of the Great Western Railway it began to seed happily along the cinder tracks, from there spreading to most of Britain. Flowers, like languages, are natural migrants. But translating, too, is a hopping over walls and barriers: from one language to another, one context or world-view (often contained in a single word) to another. Pirandello, by the way, asked to be buried in a rock in the garden of his childhood home where his ashes are to be found. This poem is dedicated to the French scholar and translator, Roger Pearson, “A Cricket for Pirandello”:

Our trade’s translation, whether poems or prose —
 and here in Rome
 struggling to render Pirandello’s “crickets”
 I must lose the creature or else the dream,
 meaning’s gravity or else the grace.
Nascere grilli, he writes, to signify
 fancies, daydreams, born on the hop...
 but no insect makes a leap that’s fit
 for Englishing that device of wit.

So here’s a leap-poem, Roger. It goes
 channel-hopping
 from me to you, scrambling the frontiers —

since we who traffic from tongue to tongue,
 mother to other, native to strange,
 must make thought's impulse dance to the tune
 that words call, by whims of their own:
 idiom or pun, some self-stranging homonym,
 the distant phones that ring in a phoneme.

Now skip: think ragwort, that hardy immigrant,
 taking root
 in Oxford's first botanical garden,
 later, on Isambard's cinder-tracks
 riding westwards, seeding the dry ways —
 but remembering still in the rails' sapped clinker
 how once it rode the charcoal flows
 of Etna's pyroclastic scree —
 one hop ahead, gold-gracing earth's gravity.

So *Nascere grilli*... On a Sicilian plain
 small jumping jacks,
 blue and orange in the hot afternoons,
 would gleam beside his rockfast tomb —
 flashes of insight, lost as seen.
 We'll dream — so words go jumping free
 from page to eye, from mouth to ear,
 to hatch wild fancies in translation —
 cricket-strangers on the ground's foundation.

All his life Pirandello returned to the place of his childhood on the south coast of Sicily, by "the bitter African sea," as he called it — bitter even then. Alicia and I share a fascination with the classical seas of story and history, as well as with their languages — Greek in her case, Italian in mine. The seas of Magna Graecia extend to Sicily and all round the south of Italy, up to Naples. They carried some of the first trade routes of the Mediterranean, the first routes of story and myth, as well as routes of human exodus, migration, and war. Sicily, which lies at the heart of these sea passages, has been in its time Phoenician, Greek, Arabic,

Norman, and Spanish, and its extraordinary cosmopolitan history is recorded in some of the street names of Palermo, written in Arabic, Hebrew, and Italian. I've been returning to Sicily for many years now, fascinated by its layer on layer of history and story, of archaeological evidence and mythic memory, as well as its modern problems of migration and emigration.

So I'll now turn to a series of poems about the sea — that element which recalls our evolutionary beginnings, which marks boundaries and breaks them down, which challenges our national, rooted natures, affects our balance, tunes our sense-perceptions, but drowns us too. There are thin lines everywhere on the sea, and crossing it means risk and knowledge, danger and new-found lands. These two poems, one quite early, the other more recent, I suppose hint at an ongoing obsession. Putting them side by side, I realize that the first contains the story of the second in embryo. It is called "Harbour":

From creel-pots' crochet, dumped networks of nets,
staggered crates, a trailer, bales of twine,
bit and knots and art and old sea stench
under the nightly floodlight's yellow halo,

saints' wrack, livings, rot, planking, buoys,
rounding guts of rope, oarlock, airlock,
with aquapac and VHF, and luck,
light, weather, balance, ebb, flow,

something draws us out beyond the jetty's
throw, its sea-sliced steps and stop, its checked
halt, systoles of dulse, litter, scum,
to falls of sea-room falling wide as we come.

The second is called "Launched." It is set, like "Harbour," on the edge of land, and carries the same outward impetus of daring and desire, risk and failure:

A wish as Odyssean, as old as time,
drives this child's one toy of a thousand ships:

a rickety craft of sticks in binder-twine,
a white-rag sail to twitch in the onshore wind.

From a stubby pin of cane, a mast aspires.
The knotted joins are frayed, the flat hull gapes.

Millennia before the wheel a log was launched
when some mute human mounted a dream to leave —

just so this primitive mock-up bobs and turns,
bounced on the waves' small hobbles, rocked and trialled

like a saint's coracle trusted to weather and luck
yet carried by some momentum the spirit craves.

It rides one level slack, then rafts a rhythm
that will play catch-up, but now only taps ... taps

as the ocean's covert incalculable pulse upholds
this tacky throwaway, a ropey panpipe of twigs.

Then one wave risen out of sync just swivels the thing
and it surfs, backed up by the roll, to an easy landing.

A slake of mudflats shines in the noonday sun.
Wet sand, raked by a tide, displays what must come.

But the child, driven by hope, and passion, and faith,
wades deeper in to speed her wish, test-launch

her self's way out from safe and steadying ground
to a space (at heart) as wide and free as the world.

Perhaps the sea, that infinite, polylingual tongue, reminds us of our evolutionary, watery beginnings, while remaining at once an inviting singer and a dangerous siren. I've always, till recently, lived near the sea, and when far from it I miss its deep resources of sound. Poems seem rather like islands in a sea — they snag noises from the welter of rumors that lie around us. But if sea marks our origins, and can become a place of playtime and holiday, it can also kill. As Joseph Conrad puts it: "The most amazing wonder of the deep is its unfathomable cruelty."² Any sea shore, perhaps like any shore of a poem, is therefore haunted by what the tides might wash up.

As in this next poem. There's an afterword, I should explain, which refers to the *Quinta del Sordo* — that is, the house of the deaf man, on whose walls Goya painted his late, terrible paintings, one of them of a dog drowning in a quicksand. This is another poem about watching a child at play, burying herself in the sand, but it's also about something else. It's called "Landings":

Tucked to the chin in the sand's worn grain,
 cradled fast in its stony crumble —
 waves, her ancient lully, birth-wail,
 earth, her bedding, mineral domain —
 these take her in, unaccustomed comforters,
 and she, a settler in their sandy wastes,
 smiles and plays. I dust the last
 yellow granules on her flat-out hand —
 a hard packing, ticklish embrace.

Yet fearful, too, having watched that child
 scoop hillocks of sand over herself
 to make a mummy-mound (Anubis, embalmer,
 dog of the dead), but leave exposed
 one talking head — old joker to the end —
 smiling, smiling, across the tumulus

2 Joseph Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea* (Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1928), 137.

of her new hot bed? Look, she cries,
 outwitting her own disappearing trick:
 I'm drowned, buried. No kidding. I'm alive.

And I see (see still) a beach of small mounds,
 the dumped refuse of a wrecked cargo —
 each body barrelled to a rounded vault,
 wrapped, absolved, in its hummocky pad;
 and children's faces smiling, smiling,
 like lively headstones sharing a joke.
 It might be a dream's wild animation:
 the sand's soft-fall, light as a plaything,
 now heavy as a stone slab to lock them in.

Afterthought:

Could Goya hear — in his painting's dark wit
 on the white walls of the Quinta del Sordo —
 that listening-drowning dog, ear cocked
 to catch some voice (from a lord gone deaf)
 to halt or explain the unending desert,
 the ochre void of an engulfing quicksand?
 To drown, landing, is a curse to the sky.
 She breathes, and sand-falls trickle either side.
 Whose home-ground waits to take so many in?

I'll draw to a close with a few last thoughts on sound and crossings. The way that poetry goes from page to eye, from eye to brain, from brain to ear, involves a kind of perpetual migration of sense, through tactile, visual, intellectual, aural, sensible — and back again. It also goes from then, when it was written, to now, when it's read, from poet to reader, reader to other readers, accumulating meaning from each new context as it goes. It thus puts knowledge, if that's the right word, in process, since knowledge of a poem is never arrived at, never complete. It is a sea journey without an end. But maybe that's why we want the arts in our lives — to have our wisdom confounded, our knowledge

nonplussed, and so have to start again, making sense of what plays noises against meaning, soundings against narrative, as if seas were always lying behind the articulate separations of our languages. This next, more recent poem, is called "Sea Level":

Exhausted — in sleep so deep it trawls
a depth of still, to feel for the sea's

push and leave, hush and slither,
the slack of a thing inching to take

sticks, stones, shell, weed,
and braille the sand beneath each wave

like the last touch of a blind man's hand
reading a page of the earth's lost ground.

*

For here's the fault-line of an old contention:
sea draws, withdraws, a creature steeped

in itself, no hurry, and heaves like breathing —
then spills, and leaves its secrets torn

to pieces, cut-work bridalling the rocks,
and falls, collapses, stiffening to froth

as the drag sings and circles, winning
its dream of us, returned to beginning.

Migrant knowledge; sound crossings . . . I'm very aware that having time and place in which to compose and then publish poems is a lucky privilege, and that outside any one poem's comfortable boundaries lies the world we inhabit. In that world the ground we stand on, the passports we hold, the freedoms we claim, might come at a cost, both to ourselves and to others. And this

ought to tell us, also, when to shut up — when, for instance, the world might press too much on the limits of what can be said.

So I'll end by returning to Pirandello, and his "il mare aspro africano." It is still bitter today, and its killing powers have underlain the story of many recent migrations, as well as many of history's sea stories. This last poem, and last word, was written close to Pirandello's birthplace, and its repeated end-stopped rhymes express something of that necessary speech and silence, the crying out and the shutting up of poetry, in the face of life's real disasters. Points of silence are as important in any poem as its sound-crossing words. So I'll end with "By the Bitter African Sea":

Limestone. Flatlands. A deserted beach.
Aleppo pines tormenting the skyline.
This is not a poem I can write, or refute.

A big sea heaves, too bitter to swim.
The keel of a boat draws a line in the sand.
My tongue's in trouble at its very root.

For the long night crossings, too many to count.
Sigh of a keel. Dead children. Landings.
My tongue's unskilled to speak, or confute.

Sea, a strong drink. Sand, soft touch.
What was washed up has been covered, removed.
This is not a poem to sound, or mute.

A.E. STALLINGS: I love Angela's title for this reading — "sound crossings" — for many of the reasons she has already elucidated. "Sound" is the medium of poets, of course, and crossings are the essence of translation, which means, after all, to carry across: trafficking meaning over the borders of language. "Sound" is itself such a strange word in English, many different definitions coming via different routes and languages into the same deep, round syllable: As a noun, the music we hear

is sound (from the Latin *sonus*), but a sound is also (from the Germanic side) a swimmable or seemingly swimmable stretch of water. As a verb, it might mean “resound,” or it might mean to plumb the watery depths. As an adjective, it means safe, whole, or complete — safe and sound is a watertight formula. To sleep soundly is to sleep deeply. Sound is also handy for the rhymers in English — it rhymes with “round” and “found” and “bound,” but also “frowned” and “pound,” “ground” and “drowned.” One of Homer’s favorite epithets for the sea — the Aegean Sea — is *polyphloisboio*: the loud-roaring sea, a sea full of sound. The stretch of water between Turkey and Greece — the background to so much of the *Iliad* — is a crossing, it turns out, that even at its narrowest is not swimmable, nor easily measurable, nor safe.

I have been spending a lot of time thinking about poetry and language and that sea — a sea that is ultimately linked to Pirandello’s “bitter African sea” not only as part of the greater Mediterranean, but as a modern border, a historical place of cultural exchange, and one of the most lethal routes of migration.

As a poet, a translator, a mother, and a Classicist living in Greece, I little thought that the refugee crisis, which reached its nadir in 2015–2016, would come to radically alter my relationship to classical literature, translation, and poetry. These seemingly separate aspects of my life, though, all ended up being touched by the crisis washing up on Greek shores, and in Piraeus and Athens itself. 2016 began with a spate of drownings on eastern Aegean shores, often of children (Alan Kurdi, the boy in the famous photograph, was one of scores), many of these reported in the local news — I should note that my husband is a journalist — but barely reaching the awareness of international media. One morning I realized, after dropping my own children off for their school bus, that forty-five people — at least seventeen of them children — had drowned that same morning in two separate shipwrecks: a classroom full.

January 2016 alone claimed the lives of 250 people on that particular sea crossing. The rector of the University of the Aegean (based in Mytilene), Stephanos Gritzalis, distressed at the tragedies unfurling almost daily in the nearby waters, quoted

Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, hoping that (in Greek) "we would cease to see 'the Aegean blossoming with bodies.'" But he was also quoting Seferis, who himself borrows that line for his famous poem of exile, "In the Manner of G.S." — a poem that contains the line "Wherever I go Greece wounds me." I began to see several things at once: that children the age of my own children were drowning in the same waters we swam in for recreation; that this migration was part of a continuous history of Aegean migration, war, violence, and exile that stretched back farther than the *Iliad*; and that poetry had long been its witness. Could I read the *Iliad* the same way again, realizing that the violent backstory to the wrath of Achilles had to do with the raiding of towns on Lesbos and on the shore just across, in modern Turkey, this same stretch of water?

But then a second issue arose: How do you write about such things — assuming you are moved to address them in poetry — without exploiting the stories of others? How do you achieve the necessary distance and perspective while confronting what were current events? As news stories from local Facebook volunteer groups about drowned children infiltrated my subconscious, seeping into my dreams, I also began thinking about the word "empathy" — a word coined in English in 1909 on the model of the German term *Einfühlung*, but which in modern Greek still carries a negative sense — to feel passionately *towards* or *against* someone. This poem tried to position my family's own luck with respect to the plight of families we were reading about, or, in the case of my husband, reporting on:

Empathy

My love, I'm grateful tonight
 Our listing bed isn't a raft
 Precariously adrift
 As we dodge the coast-guard light,

And clasp hold of a girl and a boy.
 I'm glad that we didn't wake

Our kids in the thin hours, to take
Not a thing, not a favorite toy,

And we didn't hand over our cash
To one of the smuggling rackets,
That we didn't buy cheap lifejackets
No better than bright orange trash

And less buoyant. I'm glad that the dark
Above us, is not deeply twinned
Beneath us, and moiled with wind,
And we don't scan the sky for a mark,

Any mark, that demarcates a shore
As the dinghy starts taking on water.
I'm glad that our six-year-old daughter,
Who can't swim, is a foot off the floor

In the bottom bunk, and our son
With his broken arm's high and dry,
That the ceiling is not seeping sky,
With our journey but hardly begun.

Empathy isn't generous,
It's selfish. It's not being nice
To say I would pay any price
Not to be those who'd die to be us.

Another way of achieving some distance was form itself: the "asbestos gloves" Adrienne Rich speaks of in picking up materials that cannot be touched "bare handed." The drowned often ended up in unmarked graves, and I began to think that the form for dealing with the almost daily shock and horror of learning of new deaths was that ancient form from the *Greek Anthology*: the epitaph and the epigram. The *Greek Anthology* was itself full of epitaphs for the drowned, for instance for a maiden, Lysidice, from Cyme, a city on the coast of Asia Minor, washed up on a

beach after a shipwreck, or a fisherman, swamped in a storm, whose body washes ashore with his hand eaten away by fish. These events were not only the stuff of history or legend, but, as so much of the literature of the Aegean, things that were simply still happening.

Epigrams also often had a wry twist to them, as the fisherman nibbled by fish: A grim irony often struck me as the only way to deal with the bureaucratic absurdities that led to such senseless loss of life. I began writing these every few days, a way of noting down and processing and marking these events. The best of these I eventually compiled into a single “poem,” using the *Agamemnon* quotation as an epigraph, and ending on a parody of Simonides:

Aegean Epigrams³

“We beheld the Aegean blossoming with bodies.” — Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*

Upon an unseaworthy wooden vessel

Call it a tub, call it a casket,
(And all their eggs tucked in this basket.)

The woman from Leros

The woman from Leros said:
“Small bodies wash ashore,
Sea-chewed, a few days dead.
I don’t eat fish anymore.”

3 A.E. Stallings, “Aegean Epigrams,” Section 3 of “Refugee Fugue,” in *Like* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018). The translation of Aeschylus is my own.

From an autopsy report of an unknown drowning victim,
Ikaria:⁴

Female. Nine years old. Found wearing a blouse,
And a pair of sweatpants patched with Minnie Mouse.

Duties

Which one seems more chilling:
Copenhagen willing
To confiscate cash and bauble
From Mosul, Homs, and Kabul;
Or smugglers making a killing
Palming Charon's obol?

Fathomless

A fathom deep, the body lies, beyond all helps and harms,
Unfathomable, unfathomable, the news repeats, like charms,
Forgetting that "to fathom" is to hold within your arms.

Word problem

The 21-foot-long dinghy can hold up to 30 people, max.
If you squeeze on 64, wave a 9 millimeter at their backs,
In 6 Beaufort, 2 nautical miles out into international waters,
Which do you not save first — infants, sons, mothers, fathers,
daughters?

Paradox

Of the ones that happened to die, the little ones and the old,

4 I should note that the doctor who performed this autopsy, John Tripoulas, is himself a poet and has written his own poem on this, "Faces Are Silent Words," in *Polytropos: Poems* (Dos Madres Press, 2024).

By hypothermia, or drowning, all died of cold.

Nothing to declare

As if in a sea of red tape
The faulty life-jackets tossed:
There is no custom house, no guards,
At the border these have crossed.

Proposed epitaph for drowned refugee children

Go tell the bureaucrats, passerby, that all is shipshape, fine.
The stuff that trickles from your eye is only a little brine.

Another form that suggested itself to me, that also works by a wry, ironic twist, was the literary blues form. Perhaps I had been thinking of it because of Auden's "Refugee Blues," although Auden's poem does not really strictly adhere to the American form. But it was also the blue of the Aegean itself—those gorgeous, wine-bright, intense blues, where my children would splash, and make and destroy sandcastles (whenever I would watch them doing this, I would also think of that striking simile in Book 15 of the *Iliad*, where Apollo casts down walls like a child kicking over a sandcastle), that same water that ribboned round the limbs of drowned refugee children. "Aegean Blues" came out of these thoughts, and was even set to music, by musician and poet Andrew Shields of the Human Shields:

Aegean Blues

The sea is for holidaymakers, summer on the beach,
Surely there is space enough to spread a towel for each;
Dry land isn't something you should pray to reach.

Look, how glad our kids are, making their sandy town,

And how they build the battlements the laughing waves tear down.

But it's the self-same water, where some swim, and others drown.

The sea is full of dangers, the shallows and the deep.
The sea is full of treasures, down there five fathoms deep,
The sea is full of salt: there are no more tears to weep.

The ferryman says we cross tonight; and everyone pays cash.
Charon don't take Mastercard, you have to pay him cash.
The water seems so calm tonight, you hardly hear the splash.

There was a boy named Icarus; old Daedalus's son,
Turned into a waxwing, black against the sun.
He drowned because he tried to fly. (He's not the only one.)

Why would a kid lie in the sand, and not take off his shoes?
Why would he lie there face down, the color of a bruise?
The sea can make you carefree, nothing left to lose.

There's indigo and turquoise, there's cobalt, sapphire, navy,
And there's a dark like wine, my love, out where things get wavy.
Listen, that's the worry note, reminds me of my baby.

As I became involved in volunteer work with refugees in Athens, and I became more personally involved with people and their stories, I was often struck by the place names, often part of the wider Greek world of Cavafy's Levant. I sometimes felt that we had all become characters in Cavafy poems, as when I spoke with a Syrian sculptor living in squalid conditions in one of the refugee "squats" in central Athens. I found myself putting his story into the form of a Cavafy poem, dividing the lines as Cavafy does in some poems that are about divisions and broken lives:

Days of 2016

He'd been a sculptor on a small scale
 In a town south of Damascus. He'd worked in stone.
 His masterpiece, he said was a mother and child
 no bigger than this and showed his fingernail.

The tools he needed were like the tools used
 by opticians, tiny screwdrivers little files;
 rubble, stone he could find even here in Athens,
 in this shabby neighborhood. Sometimes he mused

in front of the figures, marble and white-eyed,
 on days when the museum was free statues larger than
 men
 but broken-limbed youths magnified with Time
 older by aeons than many who have died.

His children, his wife were safe: praise be to God!
 But so much had been destroyed his life's work lost.
 The Lion consumed all! Lion, he said.
 That's what it means, in Arabic: Assad.

On another occasion, I was speaking to a young Syrian man, whose graduate studies in English literature had been interrupted by the war, at the same squat, and he exclaimed, in English, exactly this: "I want to go to another land!" How could I not hear it as the opening of Cavafy's "The City," in Evangelos Sachperoglou's translation. Cavafy's poem, about how life and youth leaks away in waiting, had come for me to embody the despair of the young refugees in their twenties, their lives stalled right at the point they should be blossoming. I ended up versifying this conversation (perhaps not very successfully) as a kind of adaptation of Cavafy's poem, beginning, "I want to go to another land. I want to cross the border."

In some ways I think the form that most defined this era for me in the refugee crisis and in volunteer work was the list — one

of the most ancient forms of poetry there is, if we grace it with the Homeric “catalogue,” as his list of ships that crossed the sea on the expedition to Troy. Lists might include what ships were coming into Piraeus from the islands, what times, how many refugees were aboard, and from what countries.

Lists also became needs lists. When the border with Europe shut on March 20, 2016, Piraeus suddenly became a tent city. And needs changed as the weather changed, and as people stayed longer: first sleeping bags and tents and food, then laundry soap and lice shampoo and medicine, then diapers and milk for newborns, short-sleeved shirts, sunscreen, flip-flops. As a poet, it was hard not to read the lists as poems, and in the end I ended up borrowing one almost wholesale as a found poem, “APPENDIX A: USEFUL PHRASES IN ARABIC, FARSI/DARI AND GREEK, from the Guide to Volunteering in Athens, as updated for March 17, 2016.” “Welcome to Greece!” it begins, and after a litany of many needs and potentially useful phrases, concludes:

What country is your family from?
 pharmacy
 medicine
 hospital
 doctor
 tent
 sorry, it has run out
 we do not have it now
 new shoes only if yours are broken
 wait here, please
 I will return soon
 Follow me / come with me
 Come back in...
 5 / 15 / 45 minutes
 one hour
 quarter / half hour / half day
 today / tomorrow / yesterday
 How many people?
 Sorry

Stay calm
One line, please

Next person

The Aegean crossing remains among the most dangerous refugee routes in the world, and a terror that nearly ever asylum-seeker in Greece has undergone. At the squat where I volunteered, very young children would sometimes draw harrowing pictures of the sea crossing, sometimes with brown, lifeless figures face down in the water, or with a Turkish coastguard boat trying to sink them with a fire hose. Or a girl drew female figures in the water struggling to swim, pulled down by their long robes and veils. Women at the poetry workshop I was running at Melissa often returned to the subject of the perilous sea voyage.

One news item in particular got my attention in 2017 — a Turkish music student, Baris Yazgi, had drowned in the crossing, his body washed ashore with his violin.

Unusually, this was a case where the name and something of the life of the drowning victim was known. The poet in me knew there was a poem there, but it was not an epigram, or a list. In the end, I started thinking of the myth of another musician, Arion, who, being trafficked by pirates, was thrown overboard, only to be saved by dolphins who had heard his beautiful singing. It had been a while since I had researched this myth, but I was immediately struck by the fact that he was “Arion of Lesbos.”

Baris Yazgi was not saved by dolphins of course, but part of the magic spell of poetry is holding ajar the door to a universe where, contrary to fact, such a miracle could have happened.

I hope it is not just the myth at work here, but the vocabulary of instrumental music that has so much resonance with the crossing of water — “sound” here doing its double duty, as well

as scales, vessel, pitch, and bridge, and even, at least on the page, “bow.”

This poem appeared, under a slightly different title, in the *New York Review of Books*, and was shared over Twitter. As a result, it caught the eye of some exiled Turkish journalists who, in turn, translated the poem into Turkish and shared it online again. As the poem crossed over from English to Turkish, with its cargo of music and myth (inevitably shedding the multivalence of the English puns), my hope was that perhaps someday it might travel to the young man’s family, letting them know that his death was noted, he was not another nameless among the numbers.

For a Young Turkish Violinist, Drowned on the Aegean Crossing (4 May, 2017)
(i.m. Baris Yazgi)

Reports said you were found
Clutching the case
Containing your instrument as well
As music of your own composition.

You knew what it was to place
Faith in a hollow wooden vessel,
Carried on waves, lilting in harmonic motion,
Scales like water running through your fingers.

I think of Arion of Lesbos, and his harp,
Saved by a dolphin in the legend;
Of accidentals, flat and sharp,

Of pitch, and yaw. I think of the deep sound,
Of the bow rolling across arpeggios,
No bridge but the violin’s bridge.

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Where does an image begin? A poem end?

Suppose I were to begin by saying you will never know me. Will you listen anyway?

He painted me in Venice,
city of crossings.

Before Constantinople's fall in 1453, the only Venetian architects to go further east than Byzantium were the boatbuilders aboard the galleys. Some scholars believe one of these men used his knowledge of shipbuilding to transcribe the pointed arches he saw everywhere about him in the Arab world.

I remember windows.

he was a little on the dark side... since Jews tend to be dark and she was a Jewess.

He knew this. Whitened me anyway.

Listen to my shawl, the whisper of its warp and weft.

Blue new world.
Whole blue world.
Brave blue world.

Hues were not equal, were not perceived as equal.

Nothing is equal.

There are three levels of adoration: latria is the ultimate worship due only to the Trinity; dulia is what we owe the Saints, Angels, and Fathers; hyperdulia is a more intense form of this due to the Virgin alone.

Only ultramarine would do.

Most of it came from a single source—the Sar-e-sang mines. Tucked in the mountainous folds of Afghanistan. The Venetian explorer Marco Polo, who visited in 1271, wrote of a high mountain out of which the best and finest blue is mined.

Sometimes I'd throw my mind out of the studio
onto the *fondamenta* that bordered the lagoon.
The Dolomites like smoke or ash.

Beyond the sea.

Wrong sea. Wrong mountains. Wrong blue. But still,
a whiff of elsewhere. Cooling as iced water in August
when Venice curdles.

The Silk Road, which runs through the mountains of the Hindu Kush, was used by the caravans that shuttled goods between East

and West. Ultramarine was first bumped along the Silk Road by donkey and camel in the forms of lumps of lapis lazuli.

Almost everyone comes from somewhere else. Erasures like a palimpsest. One forgetting layered on another. Absence becoming its own foundation. The ground beneath your feet a disappearing act. Your life a work of levitation. Unwritten. Unmapped.

When these reached the Mediterranean coast in Syria they were loaded onto ships bound for Venice.

Syria.

For those few hours, there was not even a sea between us.

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After an Unspeaking¹

Anthony Vahni Capildeo

This is the circus for dead horses only
We are in a tent but there is no outside
no breathable outside
There is mud and stars but no ticket-seller
and no in-between atmosphere
Somebody uncertainly approaching certainly could not stand up
The mud would suck him down
The stars would suck her up
This is the circus of exclusions, not approximations
The dead horses canter at a soft pace
satin around their hooves
The dead horses jump from buckets, landing softly
taffeta over the sawdust
This is the trick of assertions without any ground
no overlap with anywhere
Your city exists and is unaffected by the circus
don't be mean about the ribbons

¹ This poem was previously published in Vahni Capildeo, *Like A Tree Walking* (Carcanet Press, 2021). It is reprinted by kind permission of Carcanet Press.

*If they mean nothing to you, they should mean nothing to you
What if the ribbons are in this temporary atmosphere
in the only atmosphere*

The symbol of grace

But I am breathing sawdust and I cannot see sawdust
and my pockets are full of receipts
But twigs are clinging to my clothes and the tent-pole is not a
tree

leaves are on my shoulders like
expired tickets

And I am fond of horses, even these ones grinning without
stopping...

*How did you get here? You did very well to get in
We have to muffle their hooves. They might have to cross a frozen
river*

*Hooves muffled as if with eastern basketwork, yes eastern
enclosed horses
far-distant horses*

I was in an airport and a man said it was all about him
He was the colour of a number of ladies' perfume boxes
duty-free, rosy with broken veins
He was lyrical, it was only him and the girl behind the counter
His instant love went into a box and into another box and into
would you guess it

A third box

But by the final couplet he was alone again
His solitude took up all the lounging space in the airport
paid and free
And none of the security cameras, only the girl's insecurity
non-cameras

Occupied themselves with him
Throughout the numerous terminals
Ignorable special gift displays, his timeless well-stacked gift
replay

So long dead, so often in translation
as not to be political
I suppose she did look forward to being history
Which is not the same, cantering at a soft pace
Which is not the same, reaching down for the stars in a sky-
facing bucket

tented over
 void-filled to the rim
 I wanted at least a blanket to give her in this cold and quilted
 circus
 But she already was holding out the purple veil she kept for
 spare
 And I had given away my sword, a real-life event
 best left without record
 For so long its curvature had been my security though now I
 hold

to other things
And couldn't prove what was gone, having no proof in my
possession
No proof of the bird-head hilt and sharp curve as ever in my
possession
and it was the wrong kind of sword
The trick of disappearing was neither hers nor mine
only words
For to point out what isn't there in a gently textiled circus
is political if ever under review
A good review at minimum three days' work, how beautiful
without pay

*This is why please do not mention the ocean except as bluegreen
Whaleroad swanroad path of exile only for domesday-booked
living bone
excise such crossing times as might be political
You must see it without the wrong ships in mind because
The ocean in a poem must not become political
and further
bluepurple*

*It is unfortunate your friend's book was political before it was born
Because of where he was born*

some places are political

Also his body thunders politics, let it remain dark in text

some bodies are political

From their conception

let them not imaginatively conceive

Though you know nobody brighter in love

In the camp as in the city, across the sea and across the desert

no prizes for loving

We feel his love launched as if the political were personal

But haven't your missiles already landed?

How is your personal not political?

free and spacious

fine and small

*Your poetry has the biggest free trade deal the world has ever
known*

unilateral and non-reciprocal

*I am tuned in and hearing you musically the while you refuse
to know*

When Fay Weldon's team came up with the slogan

'Go to work on an egg', did the Holy Spirit move them?

When some underling did the drapery for the luxury photograph

*And leftover children at the hairdresser glimpsed infinity in the
purple waves*

Who dare say the Holy Spirit did not move them?

Why are you bringing the Holy Spirit into this?

I didn't and if you did, I didn't understand you

*I understand you didn't mean me to do this after you
didn't bring, didn't dare bring...*

*As most people reading wouldn't
wouldn't believe*

Far less advertise the Holy Spirit

*like Duane Dove's fine flavour chocolate
or a bar of Dove soap*

And the signpainter who ought to have died but persists

In embarrassing and luckily undocumented environments
Shakes involuntarily in every part of his body except his brush-
hand

And the typographer who is much too young and persists
In collecting the signpainter's art for never-to-be-
commercialized fonts

Is too close to the edge of the forest and too far into the city
To be a true artist. This is not true
Art. Make no mistake. True art
is otherwise

And on the curriculum and not without citation
And has a studio without needing a studio
nor dreams of demanding a studio

And the curriculum from which this poet learnt is cancelled
By time passing
and now not without citation

Don't touch me
this is no kind of office
Even if I walk to the lighthouse I only walk to the lighthouse
You have a card that opens the way to the river
The way to the river is closed
I don't have a card

Some movements are truer and more co-operative than others
Just look how
I've lost form

A Swelling Is Time

Yousif M. Qasmiyeh

The past, out of all times, is what can be seen in eyes long gone.

To see the past as a happening in its shade, my mother would carefully sieve our UN-gifted seeds... The dry for us and the hovering bits for the birds that never were.

What we ate was what she planted in secret under her pillow: remains of nothing in the shape of distant prayers.

I was not alone.

*My mother, with a cane and her poor eyesight, was to my right
[Nothing to our left]*

Now I hold her by the hand like a drifting sound

heart to heart, throat to throat

to walk together as incomplete selves

Bodies hung by thin air

The sweat of old age and time

Suspended returns to the eyes that once saw.

You say to the clock hung adjacent to all religious things in the only room: my time is a swelling, my mother's yeast for the aged bread left aside as proof for time.

Nothingness, hide not in imagination. Nor ascend the psalms of night. What is left, for you and me, is the suspicion in suspicion.

When the sky is just a crow, with air raids as infinite as their ruins, the body's task is to ponder its body: here, in this place, people ascend to normality on crutches.

Only a body feasts on the body.

I shall imagine my tongue drowning in languages that are not mine so I would speak in water.

Seeing is the thing's substitute. What is deferred in seeing is the thing for its only time.

To pretend not to see what is amassing in your hands while what you carry is just a heart barely attached to your body. To pretend that all is well for once while they prod you from the back to remind you that it was time to look.

I ask — a question for me: What it is in writing that has no such thing as a present but is written — solely written — for a future subject to many pasts?

They would normally write their names in graphite so they would rub them out and write them again as names for suspected names.

I begged her to take me with her. Then, I could see what she could do to her eyes in wakes: tears in the aftermath of tears, her veil slowly unravelling, two edges caressing the dead's face.

What the eyes could see was not all. There were many. Some carrying what they could in haste: sponge mattresses, plastic bags stuffed with memories, kids on backs and in slings...It was in the dead of night when almighty shrieks were heard. As recounted by my mother, it was my father who first ran to find out. When he returned, sweat pouring down his face and elapsed body, he uttered no words. Instead, he pulled the bed sheet over his face to sob alone.

Whose eyes are forever stones? In Arabic, tombstones are also witnesses.

Tears are gifts to the blind.

The bird that lost its way into the camp was chased by screaming children until it died.