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Abstract:

This Forum is concerned with refugee life writing. It explores the discourses that shape public perception of forced migration and sheds light on the intricate relationship between the collective fate of refugees and the uniqueness of each life lived in transit.

Key Words:

Refugees, Forced Migration

The Placing of Displaced Lives: Refugee Narratives.

Clare Brant, Tobias Heinrich, Monica Soeting

The refugee crisis facing Europe involves millions of people in dangerous forms of transit.

Displaced, dispossessed and traumatised, refugees leave behind lives they know to face uncertain futures. Media reports refer to ‘waves’ of people arriving: in this sea of troubles, all have stories to tell.

From a life writing perspective, these stories raise urgent questions. What forms of listening are meaningful to those telling? What pressures on identity do refugee experiences foreground? What contexts affect refugee stories – often shaped in relation to digital impressions about destinations - and what must refugees navigate in order to reach safety? What languages, literal and figurative, accompany their transition from one life to another? How does the verbal and visual language around refugees contribute to seeing them in negative ways, or not seeing them at all, or hearing them in negative ways? How do hostile or indifferent discourses compound the difficulties refugees face in reaching safety, making new lives and healing from trauma? How can the academic community help narratives and personal accounts to be received with attention, care, respect and constructive action? How do we sharpen and apply the intellectual tools of life writing so as to assist people whose lives have been forced into upheaval? What do we learn from the stories of refugees which changes

our thinking so as to prevent and remedy more human tragedies? What sorts of listening do refugee stories need? What narrative forms besides stories can communicate experience and restore subjectivity?

It is questions like these that our Forum on ‘Refugee Narratives’ addresses. Many of the contributions deal with the current events in Europe, but stories of forced migration and refuge from and in Africa, the Americas, and Asia help to shed light on the global perspective of the topic.

A common motif that binds the eight contributions to this Forum together is the tension between the collective character of the term “refugee,” currently attributed to more than 21 million people by the UNHCR,¹ and the individual fate: each a unique story of plight and departure, of hardship and transit, of fear and hope. It is this contradiction between the subjects of unique stories and the objects of immigration policies, of media coverage and public scandalisation that refugee life writing wants to address: the often incompatible aspiration to document a worldwide phenomenon while at the same time retaining the individuality of each person that is forced to leave home.

Alice Cati, Maria Francesca Piredda and Elsa Lechner in their articles are concerned with the conditions under which migrants can become autonomous subjects within processes of documentation and memorialisation. While Elsa Lechner examines the setting as well as the specific premises and limitations of her own narrative research in Portugal, in their joint article, Alice Cati and Maria Francesca Piredda critically examine two online projects as examples for the collection and the archiving of multimedia refugee testimonials in Italy.

Aline Lo continues the inquiry into the issue of narrative self-empowerment when she demonstrates how Kao Kalia Yang’s memoir *The Latehomecomer* serves as an act of narrative re-appropriation. By telling the story of her family’s escape from war-torn Laos to a

¹ <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html> (4 March 2017)

refugee camp in Thailand and eventually to the United States, Yang is able to explore events that took place long before her birth and are yet most relevant to the construction of her own identity. The camp in which Yang was born becomes the central nexus of this narrative investigation of the past, as the meeting-point of her own recollection and those parts of her story that rely on other people's memories.

Refugee camps, as non-places of constant transition and temporality, are another recurrent motif in this Forum. In particular Candida Rifkind engages with the representation of space in "Refugee Comics and Migrant Topographies". Examining graphic novels including Joe Sacco's *Palestine* and Tings Chak's *Undocumented*, Rifkind shows how the visual artificiality of the narrative serves to scrutinise the conventional images in which refugees are portrayed and the colonial gaze they entail.

The investigation of space in relation to forced migration is continued in a piece by Helga Lénárt-Cheng on the often unconscious underlying assumptions of virtual refugee archives. The omnipresence of maps in our virtual environment carries with them a universalist notion when they are used for the digital representation of refugee routes and migrational dynamics. As Lénárt-Cheng asserts, it is the narrative exploration of space through autobiographical storytelling that needs to accompany such visual depictions, in order to entail the uniqueness of forced transit.

Eleanor Paynter picks up the theme of the refugee's own voices within the discourse when she discusses Jonas Carpignano's *Mediterranea*. The feature film tells the story of a young man from Burkino Faso and his journey to Italy, where he becomes involved in the violent tensions between migrants and Italians. In its portrayal of historical incidents from the year 2010 and its choice of actors who themselves had been refugees to Italy, Carpignano's film gains the status of a re-enactment. Through altering critical elements of the original events, fiction is challenging a reality that is brought about by the disequilibrium of power between migrants, natives and state institutions.

David Hadar takes the same topic from a different angle when he examines Lore Segal's autobiographical novel *Other People's Houses* and explains how Segal consciously avoids the traditional sensationalist perspective that is shared by many accounts on forced migration and consciously refrains from portraying herself as the victim of her story. Thus Segal's book becomes a powerful statement of how autobiographical narratives can retain a sense of selfhood and act as a counter-weight to the homogenizing and de-individualizing tendencies in the representation of refugees.

Finally, Leigh Gilmore discusses the prevailing discourse and the often problematic implications of the public debate on forced migration. By referring to Black residents of New Orleans as 'refugees' when Hurricane Katrina hit the city, the media, it has been argued, deprives them of their status as citizens. In her analysis of narrative projects that address this issue, Gilmore exposes the hypocrisy of a nation that is yet deeply marked by its long history of slavery and ongoing struggles with discrimination and inequality. The shelter promised in the term 'refugee' is at the same time a place of exclusion, one that is simultaneously within and outside society. It seems therefore that only when people escape the objectification of such attributions can they ultimately become subjects of their own life stories.

This Forum aims to demonstrate that forced migration is not just depriving people of places they have called their home. When individuals are displaced by war, famine or for economic reasons, they are usually referred to in terms of hundreds, thousands, sometimes millions, employing the imagery of natural collectives like waves or streams. Thus Life Writing, with its focus on the singular, non-interchangeable nature of each individual's history, does not only serve as an act of re-appropriation, but is also able to question the modes in which the debate as a whole is framed. Claiming a voice as a refugee also means exposing the continuing and evolving forms of colonial gaze that permeates the discourse of forced migration. Life Writing counteracts the tendencies to characterize migrants merely by an attributed placelessness or depictions of them as the opaque other. Rather it compels us to

enter in a dialogue of equals through one of the strongest forces by which selfhood can be asserted: the narrative.
