In Another's Shoes?
Walking, Talking, and the Ethics of Storytelling in *Refugee Tales* and *Refugee Tales II*

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Introduction

In 2015 the Refugee Tales project began with a group walk across the English countryside, which was designed to draw attention to the existence of indefinite detention in the UK. During the walk, writers told tales closely based on the experiences of someone who had suffered under the UK immigration system – a refugee, detainee, or asylum seeker – or someone closely connected with the asylum process – an interpreter, lawyer, or visitor to those detained. Those tales were published in 2016 in a collected volume, *Refugee Tales*. In 2017 a second book, *Refugee Tales II*, was published following another storytelling walk across South East England. This intersection of movement and narrative reflects the overall aims of the Refugee Tales project. As has been highlighted by David Herd, who co-edited both volumes with Anna Pincus, the UK asylum process works by regulating the movement and speech of those seeking asylum. Refugee Tales is an attempt to develop a collective response to these dual infringements by bringing those who have experienced indefinite detention into contact with those attempting to change the system, providing an opportunity to walk together and talk together in ways which can create understanding, empathy, and connection.

In this essay I explore the ways in which the three fundamental elements of the project – 'a culturally charged sense of space, the visible fact of human movement, and an exchange of information through the act of telling stories' (Herd, 2016a, p. 133) – are mobilized into an ethical response to the asylum crisis. I begin by discussing the importance of the two forms of collective encounter at the heart of the project: walking and talking. Drawing on the writings of Arendt and Levinas, I explore the ways in which these encounters – one physical, the other verbal – work to create a space, both literal and symbolic, in which the marginalized bodies and voices of those seeking asylum in the UK can be recognized.

I then turn to the third element of the project: the exchange of stories which culminated in the tales published in the two volumes of *Refugee Tales*. The collaborative nature of this storytelling process is highlighted by the paratext of each story, which states that it is the tale of a detainee, a migrant, a refugee 'as told to' an established author. But that 'as told to' is deceptive, for each of the tales has been modified in its conversion from the voice of the original tale teller into the words of the named author. These modifications draw attention to the ethical questions raised by the process of telling someone else's story. For Levinas, in telling another's tale we risk ignoring their alterity in our attempt to define their essence in our own words. Yet Arendt has suggested that it is through storytelling that we can truly reveal another person, simultaneously inscribing the private into the public in ways which allow for forms of collective recognition.

Do the stories told in *Refugee Tales* provide an opportunity to walk in another's shoes, to gain insight into indefinite detention and create a collective challenge to its existence? Or does the fact that these stories have been rewritten in the words of an established author diminish the ethical potential of this narrative impulse? In the second part of the essay, I bring Levinas and Arendt into conversation to explore the relationship between ethics and storytelling. While Levinas and Arendt offer very different approaches to this relationship, this difference, I argue, does not diminish the ethical potential of narrative. Rather, it highlights an ethical imperative at the heart of the narrative impulse, staging the ways in which telling someone else's story always requires us to consider our own ethics of relation. In *Refugee Tales*, this ethical imperative emerges through the narrative strategies deployed by several stories in the text, which foreground their own mediating practices to explore the responsibility involved in telling someone else's story. In so doing, *Refugee Tales* not only gives value and density to the lives of the individuals whose stories are told in its pages but also demands that we, as readers, recognize our own responsibility to approach those stories in the spirit of solidarity and hospitality.

Collective Encounters – Walking

Since 2015 there have been four Refugee Tales walks, each moving across parts of South East England which are 'culturally charged', in that they both resonate with current events concerning the asylum crisis and embody some of the most significant moments of British political and cultural history. Each of these walks has an ethical impetus: through the visible act of movement, the collective nature of that act, and the space in which that act takes place, each walk seeks to challenge the hostility of the political discourse surrounding the asylum process.

The first walk took place in the shadow of three of the UK's Immigration Removal Centres and drew attention to the key purpose of the Refugee Tales project:

to demand an end to 'temporary indefinite detention' in the UK. Unlike other European countries, the UK sets no limit on the length of time an individual can be held in one of these facilities. The government cannot legally detain someone for longer than is 'reasonable', but the ambiguity of this designation means that individuals have been detained for periods ranging from a couple of days to over four years (*Lumba (WL) v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2011]; Home Office Immigration Statistics, 2017).

The inhumanity of this policy is dramatized by several of the stories in the *Refugee Tales* volumes. 'The Detainee's Tale', as told to Ali Smith, focuses on the dehumanizing nature of the detainment system, which forces detainees to live in rooms with barred windows, behind multiple locked doors, and under constant lighting and to suffer constant invasions of privacy from security officers, who check on them every fifteen minutes. As Rachel Holmes explores in 'The Barrister's Tale', this physical distress is accompanied by the mental trauma of never knowing when this experience will end, as the oxymoronic term 'temporary indefinite detention' renders time elastic:

> How do you measure time that's both temporary and indefinite? […] [O]ur detainees face unlimited days that can only be counted upwards without the end in sight. […] Waiting indefinitely to be removed imminently. It's like Beckett and Orwell met for a bender on Bloomsday in The Kafka's Head. (Holmes, 2017, p. 55)

While this linguistic manipulation and labyrinthine bureaucracy would not be out of place in *1984* or *The Trial*, temporary indefinite detention is not a fiction. Nor are the violations of human dignity and freedom at an end when those detained are finally released. Depending on the decision of the Home Office, a detainee can be forcibly 'returned', either to their home country – where they may face arrest, torture, or death – or to the country where they originally entered the EU, where the whole process of application, questioning, and possible arrest and detainment begins all over again. Alternatively, a detainee can be released back into the community to continue their application for asylum. As Amnesty International (2017) notes, this is the case for more than 50% of the detainees who were released in 2017, a figure which only serves to highlight the arbitrary nature of the detainment process. Even if released, ex-detainees are still constrained: they cannot work, must rely on a government-issued Azure card to buy groceries, and must regularly present themselves to be registered by the Home Office, a process which often involves walking long distances, as public transport is not covered by the Azure card (Herd, 2017a, p. 114).

In an essay in the *Times Literary Supplement,* Herd (2016b) explores this abuse of basic human rights by turning to Arendt's discussion of statelessness. Shut out of the 'common world' (Arendt, 1958, p. 53) – a public space which recognizes and supports them – the refugee is prey to a unique type of suffering, a violence 'without

bloodshed' in which statelessness becomes a reason to deny them the consideration and respect due to every individual (Arendt, 1943, 76). The detainment centres in the UK are an example of the dispossession of which Arendt speaks: as spaces created within a nation to contain and hide those perceived as unwelcome within that nation, detainment centres remove individuals from the 'common world' in order to deny them the most basic human rights.

In making the 'visible fact of human movement' one of its key elements, the Refugee Tales project seeks to highlight and challenge the erasure of those rights. Herd refers to Arendt's 'space of appearance': as an individual emerges into public sight, they simultaneously demand recognition as a human being, a 'who' rather than a 'what' (Herd, 2017, p. 122; Arendt, 1958, pp. 198, 186). The Refugee Tales walks are one way to create such a space, to allow bodies that have been hidden to appear in the very places designed to hide them from view. Arendt's 'space of appearance' is, crucially, always collective: individuals come together, acting independently but with a shared purpose, creating a plural moment of 'power' which Arendt suggests can begin to effect political change (1958, p. 201). In Refugee Tales, too, it is through the collective, Herd suggests, that a challenge to the erasure of individual rights can best be mounted. The walks bring together people with very different life experiences – the refugee alongside the resident, those denied their basic human rights alongside those who have never had those rights queried – to create a space of appearance in which difference can begin to be mobilized into solidarity (Herd, 2017a, p. 114).

If the visible act of movement is a critical element in generating such a space, the geographical spaces through which the walks pass are no less important to the ethics of the Refugee Tales project. As Herd (2016a) notes, asylum seekers have a 'deeply compromised relation' to the geographical space of the UK: crossing the UK border initiates the possibility of refuge within that national space, yet it is also the act of border crossing which enables a denial of refuge, a denial often presented as essential to the preservation of the integrity of that national space. For Herd, this compromised relation is a product of the ways in which we, as communities and as individuals, understand our national identity as formed in relation to national space: in seeking to preserve that connection, he suggests, we have chosen to respond with hostility rather than hospitality to the refugee crisis (2016b, p. 138).

For Levinas, an ethics of hospitality takes shape precisely in relation to our concept of 'home' – those elements that are fundamentally embedded in our sense of who we are, as nations and individuals. In *The Time of Nations* he writes, 'To shelter the other in one's own land or home, to tolerate the presence of the landless and homeless on the ancestral soil so jealously, so meanly loved – is that the criterion of humanity? Unquestionably so' (1994, p. 9). To be hospitable, according to Levinas, we must encounter the other in those spaces which we guard so jealously as 'ours'. Only through such an encounter can we apprehend that our responsibility towards

the other arises precisely in the moment we recognize that other as fundamentally, irreducibly *not us.* To recognize the fundamental separation of the other from the self is to acknowledge that we can choose to close our doors, turning hospitality into the hostility which is both its complement and its converse. But that recognition is also the moment when we can choose to share what is ours with another, the moment when ethics, understood *as* hospitality, takes shape (Smith, p. 249; Levinas, 1991, pp. 172-3).

The locations chosen for the Refugee Tales walks draw attention to the ways in which 'ancestral soil' can be mobilized in the name of both hostility and hospitality. The walks cross spaces which reflect the hostility of contemporary immigration policy. Kent, a county often described as the Garden of England, is now the site of several Immigration Removal Centres, and Westminster is where the hostile 2016 UK Immigration Act was passed by Parliament. But these walks also traverse landscapes which have historically resonated in more hospitable ways. The 2017 walk, for example, began in Runnymede, where in 1215 King John signed the Magna Carta, beginning the process of enshrining the rights of the individual into law. And the 2015 walk followed the Old Pilgrim's Way towards Canterbury, thus mirroring the fictional walk taken by Chaucer's pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales.* For Herd, *The Canterbury Tales* introduces a connection between hospitality, movement, and narrative into the English language, creating 'a whole new language/Of travel and assembly and curiosity/And welcome' (Herd, 2016c, p. viii). Following in Chaucer's footsteps, Refugee Tales highlights this expression of welcome and curiosity at the heart of our cultural history; in so doing, Herd suggests, we may find ways to recapture these qualities now, to turn a hostile language and landscape into a manifestation of hospitality (Herd, 2016a, p. 139).

The Refugee Tales walks, by juxtaposing the past and present, challenge us to reflect upon our contemporary responses to immigration, to think through our relation to our 'ancestral soil' and how we might mobilize this relation hospitably. To walk from Crawley to Dover via Canterbury is to ruminate on the hospitality at the heart of one of the foundational texts of English language and culture while moving between Immigration Removal Centres that reveal our contemporary hostility to those from 'straunge strondes' (Chaucer, 1974, l.13). To walk from Runnymede to Westminster is to travel from the time and the place where the right to due process was enshrined in law to a time and place where those rights were removed from some individuals by the current UK parliamentary system. To walk in these places is thus to create a 'constellation' between past and present which brings these disparate moments together in illuminating forms (Benjamin, 1973, p. 265). In illuminating the connections between these different temporalities, these constellations offer us an opportunity to recognize that progress is not linear and to accept that sometimes we need to look to the past to find ways to challenge our contemporary experience. In so doing, Herd suggests, we may begin to find ways to act with

recognition, responsibility, and hospitality towards those who seek shelter on our 'ancestral soil', to walk in solidarity with those who are *not us* as part of a collective movement for recognition and change.

Collective Encounters – Talking

A similar desire to turn hostility into hospitality motivates the other element of the Refugee Tales project: 'an exchange of information through the act of telling stories' (Herd, 2016b, p. 133). In his 'Prologue' to *Refugee Tales II*, Herd insists that telling stories is a fundamental human right:

> Think of it as
> A basic entitlement
> Like walking
> Telling stories
> […]
> Not stigmatised
> For seeking asylum
> In this straunge stronde
> But listened to
> As they tell their tales. (Herd, 2017b, pp. 1-2)

Herd's emphasis on the importance of giving individuals the right to speak and, crucially, to be heard echoes Arendt's argument that our freedom to speak is a vital constituent of our human agency, another way to reveal 'who' we are beyond the 'what' of the labels which are used to define us (Arendt, 1958, p. 186).

And yet, for those caught up in the asylum process, the right to speak is indelibly bound up in 'what' that individual is considered to be – an illegal immigrant, an asylum seeker, an appellant – and 'what' they might become – a refugee, a detainee, an individual voluntarily or forcibly returned. In this sense, the decision to use storytelling to challenge the hostility of current immigration policy reflects the fact that the right to speech, like the right to movement, is compromised by the UK asylum process. On the one hand, the asylum process demands that those seeking asylum tell their story in a way that is sufficiently credible to warrant asylum. Yet that credibility is constantly called into question by a system that operates through a guilty-until-proven-innocent approach designed to meet arbitrary net migration targets with limited recognition of the human lives at stake (Grierson, 2018).

The limitations of this approach to storytelling are made explicit in 'The Soldier's Tale', as told to Neel Mukherjee. The tale is narrated by a Home Office employee who is reading the application submitted by Salim, a soldier from Eritrea. Salim's story begins when he escapes from an army prison. From this moment

on, Salim suffers horror after horror: forced labour in Sudan; a journey across the Mediterranean in a leaky dinghy; abuse on his arrival in Italy; detainment when he reaches the UK. But for the official reading his tale, the truth of these experiences is called into question by elisions or gaps they perceive in the narrative:

> my suspicions, honed by years of Home Office training, cannot help but be aroused. These are the things that we've been trained to winkle out of applications and use to demolish the arguments for refugee status. [...] sometimes the arithmetic is not quite accurate: the date of birth changes, the number of years on the run [...] can be variable, the accounts contradictory or inconsistent [...] things not adding up properly. (Mukherjee, 2017, p. 86)

The language of this excerpt – to 'demolish', to 'winkle' – combines aggression with a subtle slyness. The onus here is on the individual to ensure that the necessary figures and facts have been provided to create a coherent and verifiable sense of the life they have lived. Storytelling, in this context, operates as a dehumanizing mechanism, one which demands an individual summarize the complexity of a human life in a series of facts which are then judged on their (in)consistency.

Herd refers to this dehumanizing approach as a 'hollowness within', a form of linguistic and narratorial violence which exceeds the obvious (if hidden) existence of indefinite detention or forced detainments or returns (2017a, p. 120). People seeking asylum repeatedly suffer this form of linguistic disenfranchisement: they are 'locked out of' or 'outside the skin of' the language (Herd, 2017a, p. 119; Herd, 2016a, p. 140). For Herd, creating a welcoming environment in which those who have been marginalized can share their stories with other people is one way to begin to combat this exclusion: through such conversations the space between those inside and those outside the language can be, if not eliminated, at least reduced (2016b, p. 142).

Each of the tales in the *Refugee Tales* volumes began as just such a conversation, one between someone with a personal experience of the asylum process and a professional writer. Jackie Kay explores the ways in which such a conversation might operate as an 'act of welcome' (Herd, 2016c, p. v) in 'The Smuggled Person's Tale'. In this tale, the conversation between Kay and 'The Smuggled Person' is described as the access point into a literal moment of hospitality: 'She opened the front door. It was a simple enough thing for her [...]. But to him it was quite something. Over the years travelling, he'd not often been invited into many homes' (Kay, 2017, p. 105). In this narrative, welcoming 'The Smuggled Person' into her house is only the beginning of a more symbolic act of hospitality that emerges, Kay suggests, via conversation. Having shared his story and, crucially, been heard, 'The Smuggled Person' leaves feeling 'beautifully light': '[W]elcome was all that was in his head now, and the rest of the terror for the moment had lifted' (Kay, 2017, p. 112).

Kay's imagined understanding of the thoughts in her interlocutor's head is an example of the ways in which narratives appropriate as well as illuminate the lives they recount, a point I will return to below. Nonetheless, her story highlights the link between conversation and hospitality which, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas identifies as central: '[T]he essence of language is hospitality and friendship' (1991, p. 305). Levinas's comment suggests that there is an intimate connection between linguistic exchange and the possibility of hospitality, a connection which he elucidates by suggesting that language enables an opening out of the world to the Other: every conversation 'offers things which are mine to the Other. To speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces' (1991, p. 76). Levinas's words here intersect powerfully with Arendt's contention that it is the loss of a place in the 'common world' that leads to loss of rights for the refugee. If conversation is an opportunity to 'make the world common', it is also an opportunity to bring another into that world, to share an experience in ways that might begin to challenge the dispossession which Arendt suggests statelessness always entails.

In his 'Afterword', Herd suggests that sharing a story with another is always an opportunity to connect and, in so doing, to begin to challenge the hostility which characterizes the asylum process (2017a, 123). These conversational encounters are not only connective; for Herd, they can also be transformative:

> [T]o tell another person's tale one has to listen at length and very closely; at such length, in fact, that the experience being relayed grafts onto and alters the listener's language. This is what the writers reported; that having collaborated in the ways they did their relation to the language was significantly changed. (2016b, pp. 141-2)

While Levinas proposes that language offers an opportunity to share the world, Herd suggests that the experience of sharing that world can alter language itself. In Herd's reading, conversation becomes collaboration: one person's 'world' is shared with another and in the process, the language of that other is transformed. Crucially, for Herd, that transformed language can then be used to share that world elsewhere in a narrative circulation which, he suggests, is essential to the 'Real/Comprehending welcome' (2017b, p. 2) which the project attempts to create.

Herd's contention that circulating stories can operate as an act of hospitality gives an ethical value to the collaborative storytelling in *Refugee Tales;* in this collaboration, two individuals come together in a conversational encounter which aims to transform the hostility currently faced by (certain) immigrants. But the ethics of this collaborative process are not straightforward. While bringing the story of one person into the language of another can help to share that story, there is also the risk that that re-telling might come to erase the voice it seeks to allow to speak. In the next section, I engage with this risk and this possibility by turning again to

the work of Levinas and Arendt to explore how their discussions of the ethics of storytelling intersect with the narrative strategies employed in Refugee Tales.

An Ethics of Storytelling

The collaborative process at the heart of the stories in *Refugee Tales* involved two elements. Firstly, the stories which emerged from those encounters 'had to be grounded in the reality of the experience that the person's original telling presented'. Secondly, 'the writer was invited to take the necessary formal decisions' to shape that tale to be shared with an audience both verbally and, later, via publication (Herd, 2016a, p. 141). These 'necessary' formal decisions emerge in different forms in each tale. Some employ a chronological, first-person structure: 'The Arriver's Tale', as told to Abdulrazak Gurnah, narrates the Arriver's experiences: the 'crime' he committed – describing female circumcision as genital mutilation; his escape to the UK and hopes of asylum; and the moment he is finally granted permission to stay and realizes that the right to remain does not grant him the right to work. Others are more formally experimental, merging prose and poetry, drawing on multiple languages or combining first- and third-person perspectives. Ian Duhig's 'The Walker's Tale', for example, mingles references to Kafka and Yeats and intertextual excerpts from Galeano and Szymborska into a poem which explores the Walker's experience of seeking asylum.

Herd states that the collaborative process was necessary to protect the anonymity of those still caught up in the asylum system who fear reprisal, living as they do under the constant threat of re-detainment. The decision to create these collaborative tales is, then, a reflection of a hostile political climate in which asking an asylum seeker to tell their own tale publicly remains a risk. To change this climate so that 'anonymity is not a shaping conceit' (Herd, 2016a, p. 142) is one of the central aims of the project. Paradoxically, this enforced anonymity is also what gives the act of collaborative storytelling its ethical resonance in the Refugee Tales project, for in requiring someone else to step in and tell another's tale, the project echoes Arendt's suggestion that storytelling is the best way to give value to an individual life. Arendt argues that while an individual can reveal 'who' rather than 'what' they are through speech and action, only when another person tells the story of that individual's life can what is truly unique about that individual emerge. In telling someone else's story, the complexity of that individual life is illuminated, shaped, and revealed as worthy of recognition (Arendt, 1958, p. 184).

In *Refugee Tales*, this illumination is presented as the ethical impetus for the project: as Chakrabarti notes on the book jacket, the tales attempt to rehumanize 'some of the most vulnerable and demonised people on the planet' (Chakrabarti, 2016). Nonetheless, the changes made to the tales in *Refugee Tales* also raise ques-

tions about the ethics of telling someone else's story, particularly in contexts where the right of that 'someone else' to tell their own story is already significantly diminished. It would be possible to provide anonymity without involving established writers, for example, simply by removing identifying features from the tales told. And anonymity does not necessarily require that formal changes be made to a story. Herd argues that this collaborative process is essential if the voices of those currently marginalized by the asylum process are to be heard. And yet in deciding to alter those stories, Refugee Tales also risks erasing those voices in the very ways it attempts to enable them to speak.

In *Reality and Its Shadow*, Levinas suggests that this erasure is the risk of all representative art, including storytelling. As discussed above, for Levinas (1991), it is in the face-to-face encounter that the other interpolates us – through expression as much as word – and it is in this encounter that our responsibility to that other emerges. This responsibility develops at that moment in which we recognize the other as fundamentally irreducible to and incomprehensible within our sense-making frameworks: only through acknowledging this absolute difference can we confront the limitations inherent within our ways of knowing the world. To convert that encounter into a narrative is, Levinas argues, a failure to recognize those limitations. If we believe that we can reveal the essence of someone else in a narrative, we suggest that it is possible to understand another sufficiently to reproduce that essence in our own words. In telling a story about someone else we turn those whom we narrate into 'beings that are shut up, prisoners' (Levinas, 1989, p. 139), their alterity constrained for eternity by the framework of the story we have selected for them (Davis, 2017, p. 26).

Levinas's conception of storytelling poses problems for a project like Refugee Tales, which seeks to use narrative practices to reveal the individual lives of those dehumanized by the asylum process. Can storytelling be conceived as an act of illumination, as Arendt suggests, if, as Levinas insists, narrative practices always risk imprisoning the narrated subject? For Hannah Meretoja, storytelling is always caught up in this tension between responsibility and appropriation, elucidation and reductionism, as embodied by the difference in the perspectives taken by Arendt and Levinas (Meretoja, 2016, p. 112). But, Meretoja argues, it is precisely the tension between these two conceptions of the task of the storyteller that allows us to begin to establish what *is* ethical about the act of narrating someone else's tale. Meretoja acknowledges that some modes of storytelling do function as Levinas suggests, 'subsuming singular experiences under culturally dominant narrative scripts'. These 'subsumptive' modes reduce the individual to an abstract conception, perpetuating 'the tendency to see individuals as representative of the groups to which they belong according to gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, class, and so on' (2016, p. 112). But the narrative impulse does not have to function in this way, Meretoja asserts, and not all narratives do. Some storytelling modes

'problematize simplistic categorization of experiences, persons, and relationships'. These 'non-subsumptive' modes 'function as counter-narratives that consciously challenge stereotype-reinforcing hegemonic narrative practice' (Meretoja, 2016, p. 112). For Meretoja, it is this conception of storytelling that underpins Arendt's discussion of the subject in *The Human Condition.*

The distinction Meretoja draws between subsumptive and non-subsumptive modes is a valuable one in discussions of the ethics of storytelling in relation to *Refugee Tales.* In Meretoja's reading, storytelling is neither innately ethical or non-ethical; rather, it is in the ways that we narrate, our narrative strategies and frameworks, that we choose to respond ethically or otherwise to the individual life which we recount. For a narrative such as *Refugee Tales,* which is concerned precisely with giving dignity to the individuals whose tales it tells, these strategies are particularly critical. As will be illustrated below, several of the stories draw attention to their own narrative strategies and mediating practices, highlighting in the process the ethical risks and possibilities of the narrative impulse.

'The Student's Tale' and 'The Refugee's Tale'

As Helen Macdonald explores in 'The Student's Tale', narratives told about refugees often operate in 'subsumptive' ways by reducing the complexity of the lives they narrate to simplistic generalizations:

> I think about all the stories we tell of refugees and how they are always one story or another, never both at once. Tragic stories or threatening stories. Victims or aggressors. Never complicated, always simple, always with clean edges. Easy pigeonholes to fit people who have been forced to take wing. But a hole is not just a pigeonhole. It's the space between two things. [...] It's the space between past and future, between old lives and new. (2017, p. 8)

To recognize a refugee as a victim is a valid response to the experiences we might understand as implicit when the term 'refugee' is used. Yet to conceive of a refugee as *only* a victim is to focus on one end of a continuum that also allows, at its other end, for the conception of a refugee as *only* a threat: it is a simplistic response to a complex situation. Such simplistic responses subsume the individual beneath whichever culturally dominant narrative of the refugee experience we, as readers and writers, seek to reproduce.

Macdonald's play on the word 'pigeonhole' highlights one way in which narratives of the refugee experience might move beyond simply replicating such reductive conceptions. To challenge political and cultural narratives that simplify complex histories requires a narrative approach that focuses on the holes, spaces, and gaps within these pigeonholes: those elements of a lived experience which are

surprising, incomprehensible, or challenging to our assumptions. In *Refugee Tales*, this narrative approach takes shape through a contrast between the simplistic labels deployed as the paratextual framework of the text and the complexity of the stories told within that framework. While the title of the text suggests these are 'refugee tales', very few of the tales told actually belong to those who have been granted refugee status in the UK. Instead, as the titles of the individual stories – 'The Migrant's Tale', 'The Voluntary Returner's Tale', 'The Detainee's Tale' – suggest, most are told by those whose claim to be a refugee has not been considered sufficiently valid for the status to be granted. And the stories that follow these labels demonstrate precisely how dehumanizing, limiting, and inconsistent the use of such terms can be. Why is the story of Aziz, 'The Migrant', who was arrested and imprisoned in Syria for criticizing the regime, less of a justification for refugee status than that of Farida, 'The Refugee', who is fleeing religious persecution in Sudan? Why is 'The Detainee' detained for several years despite being a victim of human trafficking? Why is 'The Appellant' forced to prove his immigration status despite living legally in the UK for nearly 30 years?

In highlighting the limitations of such labels, the tales told in *Refugee Tales* attempt to bring to life the complex individual who exists beneath the immigration status. While issues such as labels and stereotypes are not themselves narrative concerns, how narrative strategies respond to, challenge, or affirm these labels and stereotypes reflects the distinction between subsumptive and non-subsumptive practices which Meretoja discusses in *The Ethics of Narrative*. In 'The Refugee's Tale', as told to Patience Agbabi, this distinction is the focus of the text, which explores how stereotypes can be generated or undermined by the narrative approach of the storyteller. The story is narrated by Farida, 'The Refugee'. As was the case in Kay's 'The Smuggled Person', the author imagines the thoughts of the person whose tale is being told. This narrative approach highlights the ways in which a storyteller can attempt to dramatize the internal world of another person in ways which, for Levinas, are fundamentally appropriative. In 'The Refugee's Tale', however, this imagined thought process becomes a way to turn the focus around in order to explore the assumptions of the author herself:

> first time meeting; maybe you say the word
> 'Refugee' in your head when you call me Farida,
> Refugee what is that burn mark on your hand?
> You already have a story of the torture
> I suffered in my war-torn homeland.
> But these marks are from cooking bread for my family,
> this is the first time I'm cooking in my life!
> I never even made a cup of tea
> back home. (Agbabi, 2016, p. 125)

The disjunction between the imagined story of the burn mark and its real origin is the disjunction between the abstract and the concrete, between a general conception of a refugee and the individuality of Farida's experience. For Farida, this disjunction not only reflects but also sustains the experience of becoming a refugee, which is, by definition, an experience of separation from those elements which once constituted her identity: "'[I]t pains me more/than everything to cut myself from my home,/my country, with every section of my claim/" she says. "Now I'm underclass, my head covered with shame. How am I begging when I can't remember my name?'" (2016, p. 131). The term 'refugee' both describes and circumscribes those to whom it is applied: designating an individual as a refugee recognizes that this individual needs to leave behind a previous life to be safe; it also, Farida suggests, results in this individual being subsumed by this new identity in ways which limit how that new life can be lived.

If 'The Refugee's Tale' begins with the failure of the storyteller to recognize the individual behind the label 'refugee', it ends by emphasizing the ethical imperative that they find ways to achieve this recognition. 'The story ends where you put the frame', says Farida, 'but however it begins, remember my name' (2016, p. 132). As Levinas suggests, the storyteller has the power to shape, delimit, and define the life that emerges in the text. There is always the risk that the framing of a story will work to create or regenerate reductive narratives. But Farida's words also suggest that these challenges do not need to present an ethical impasse. Precisely because they have the power to shape the life narrated, the storyteller also has the power to enable that life to emerge in its density and complexity, to ensure that it is not the label 'refugee', but the name of Farida herself that is recognized and remembered. For Arendt, 'no one has a life worthy of consideration about which a story cannot be told' (Arendt, cited in Cavavero, 2000, p. 129). We might, in the context of *Refugee Tales*, reverse this formulation: it is in telling a story about someone's life that we insist that it be recognized as worthy of consideration. In taking a metatextual approach to the narrative she tells, Agbabi confronts and draws attention to the frameworks she, as storyteller, has imposed on the experiences, the thoughts, and the voice of Farida. But she also insists on the importance of making space for that voice and for some of the complexity of Farida's life to emerge from within the anonymity which is the precondition of the text.

'The Lover's Tale'

The ways in which narrative frameworks can operate to illuminate rather than reduce the complexity of a human life is the subject of 'The Lover's Tale', as told to Kamila Shamsie. This is the story of John, a soldier who flees his home after being forced to witness and participate in a series of appalling atrocities. Shamsie

records her perceptions of John as he tells his story, noting that his words seem ordered and coherent: she later discovers that he learnt to shape his experiences into narrative as part of cognitive behavioural therapy. For Shamsie, narrative can be a powerful tool in the mediation of traumatic memories:

> Stories allow us to structure our experiences into beginning, middle, end […]; stories allow us to put forward our own points of view and interpretations; stories, in short, allow us a measure of control over our memories. In lives such as John's, when control is so often in other people's hands, the value of that must be enormous. (2017, p. 12)

In 'Recapturing the Past', Cathy Caruth suggests that, through storytelling, survivors of traumatic events can begin to integrate those events into narrative memory and gain some control over the flashbacks which characterize traumatic recall. But it is precisely because of the force of that traumatic recall that this narrative framework may prove insufficient (Caruth, 1995, p. 153). As John continues to tell his story, his memories overwhelm the artificial coherence of the narrative structure he has imposed upon them: '[T]he ordered re-telling began to fracture, gaps appeared, the story doubled back on itself' (Shamsie, 2017, p. 12). The difficulty of converting the overwhelming and fragmentary nature of traumatic recall into a coherent story highlights the inhumanity of an asylum process which uses consistency as a gauge for truth. It also highlights another reason for the collaborative approach taken by *Refugee Tales.* As Herd notes, in several cases the people whose stories were to be told were so traumatized by the events that had led them to seek asylum in the UK that it would have been inappropriate, if not impossible, to ask them to tell those stories in front of an audience (2016a, p. 141). Mediation through the voice and words of a storyteller is a way to share those stories which might otherwise not be heard.

But how does one narrate an experience which, precisely because it cannot be told in a coherent manner by those who have experienced it, exceeds conventional representational frameworks? In 'The Lover's Story', Shamsie approaches this task by marking not only the descriptions and the details which constitute John's story, but also the gaps. These gaps are highlighted in the content of the story: Shamsie notes when John skims over parts of his story or when specific details are absent. But she also integrates breaks into the narrative framework, cutting John's story into short paragraphs with gaps between each one. At certain points, these gaps are marked by an asterisk; at others, they are simply a white line on the page:

> '[the Captain] put his life at risk for me. He let me go.'
> For the third time, John returned to his country of exile.
>
> *
>
> How could this possibly be the end of the story?

*

Because he allowed John to escape, the Captain's hands were placed in wet cement, which was left to dry, and he was dropped into the sea. His dead body washed up on a beach. John received news of this when he was in exile.

*

(2017, p. 19)

The blank spaces incorporated into and surrounding the narrative of this atrocity fracture the supposed logic which traces the Captain's death back to the fact that 'he allowed John to escape': the cause and effect suggested by the word 'Because' is undermined by the fragmentary narrative which precedes it. As Caruth discusses, many survivors are reluctant to create a coherent narrative from their traumatic experiences because such coherence robs that experience of 'the force of its *affront to understanding*' (1995, p. 154). Finding a way to render such experiences true without suggesting they are coherent is a dilemma inherent in the attempt to narrate a trauma, whether one's own or another's. But in the lacunae which punctuate John's story, Shamsie makes space for this incoherence, allowing that the traumas which have marked John's life may be revealed as much by these gaps and breaches as by the events told.

As Levinas suggests, narrative form can risk overpowering the alterity of another's life, creating an illusion of understanding where none exists. But in 'The Lover's Story', formal strategies also work to highlight the limitations of understanding, to insist upon what cannot be narrated as much as what can be. In this sense, Shamsie's approach reflects Arendt's conception of storytelling in 'Isak Dinesen', in which she writes that 'the story reveals the meaning of what would otherwise remain an intolerable sequence of events [...] without committing the error of defining it' (2001, p. 106). While Arendt highlights here the link between narrative and meaning, she does not position storytelling as a way to *give* meaning to what is intolerable or incomprehensible. Rather, by separating meaning from sequence, Arendt's words suggest that the power of storytelling lies not in its ability to create a linear coherence between disparate parts but in the value it can give to what may be fragmentary or unclear: storytelling illuminates the impenetrability of another life. In 'The Lover's Story' Shamsie uses her narrative frame to highlight those elements of John's life which remain disparate, fragmented, and ultimately incomprehensible, but which, nonetheless, need to be told.

In Another's Shoes? Recognition and Responsibility

The three tales which I have discussed here highlight ways in which responsibility can emerge through narrative strategies that foreground the ethical risk of medi-

ating another's story. As Arendt suggests, however, this responsibility is not only the job of the storyteller: the potential for narrative to reveal the individual life as worthy of recognition requires not only that a story be told but also that it be heard and recognized by an audience that can collectively engage with, witness, and retransmit the story told (1965, p. 198). At the end of *Refugee Tales*, Herd offers a similar assessment of the value of the collaborative storytelling process at the heart of the text: 'What perhaps it means is that a story that belongs to one person now belongs, also, to other people; that other people acknowledge the experience that constitutes the story, but also that in making that acknowledgement they register responsibility' (2016a, p. 142). To register responsibility requires that we collectively recognize what is often kept from view: the stories of those who have been repeatedly marginalized, dehumanized, and villainized by the asylum process.

But to register responsibility also means that we hold ourselves accountable for our own responses to the stories we read. Martha Nussbaum suggests that reading a story about someone else 'means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of someone different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have' (2010, pp. 95-96). Nussbaum's comment positions ethics as understanding: if we can place ourselves imaginatively in another's shoes, we can understand and empathize with them and, therefore, respond with compassion to their situation. But to attempt to stand in someone else's shoes requires us to eliminate the gap and the difference between us and them, to occupy their unique place in the world.

For Arendt, it is in this distance between us and the person whose story we encounter, in the ways that we are *not* them, that we can make space for their unique identity to emerge. Similarly, Levinas argues that it is in accepting that we cannot understand another fully and completely that we can recognize the limits of our sovereignty and, through this recognition, begin to develop an ethics of responsibility towards the other. As Colin Davis notes, Levinas's critique of representative art poses problems for any critic who wishes to suggest that reading might offer an encounter in a Levinasian sense (2017, pp. 25-6). Yet, in one regard at least, the responsibility which can emerge via reading is not so fundamentally estranged from Levinas's ethics of the encounter or from his critique of narrative. If we imagine that we can truly step into someone else's shoes by reading a narrative of their experiences, erasing the distance between us and them, we fail to acknowledge their difference and the limits of our own perspective. It is this limit, this difference and this distance which, for both Arendt and Levinas, allows us to acknowledge the unique, irreducible individuality of another.

In her essay 'Fiction as Restriction', Dorothy Hale refers to Spivak's comment that reading always requires us to 'take a step with' another person (Spivak, 2002, p. 23). For Hale, '"Taking a step with" is to take a leap into the dark: both are predicated

on the will to believe in alterity, in the possibility of a law outside and different than the self' (2007, p. 201). To see reading as taking a step *with* someone else as opposed to stepping *into* someone's shoes is, in the context of *Refugee Tales*, to acknowledge the distance that remains between the lived experience and the read experience, between self and other. But it is also to suggest that the experience of reading might hinge upon the question of solidarity rather than similarity. We do not need to stand in someone else's shoes to be able to stand up for their rights. It is, perhaps, in the very ways that we are not able to adequately identify with or understand their experience that the importance of standing up for that individual might manifest itself.

Conclusion

The Refugee Tales project is concerned with establishing an ethical and hospitable response to the asylum crisis by enabling different forms of encounter. The collective walks, which are a key element of the Refugee Tales project, are one way in which such an encounter can occur. Those who walk and talk together, '[n]etworks of visitors and friends' (Herd, 2016b, p. viii), come together to recognize and articulate a responsibility to those who, precisely because they are not us, are marginalized and alienated by our language and our politics. And yet, as Herd insists repeatedly, such encounters are a rarity for those caught in an asylum system which sustains itself by preventing dialogue and keeping people from view. In a political context which deliberately limits the opportunities for us to meet face-to-face with those detained, we need to find other ways for such encounters to occur.

As I have discussed, mediating an encounter through narrative always involves forms of appropriation as well as illumination. Yet this disjunction does not nullify the ethical potential of storytelling. If we define ethics as the attempt to understand the difference between good and bad responses, an ethics of narrative lies precisely in the region between appropriation and illumination, hostility and hospitality. There is no ethics without responsibility and no responsibility without accepting that there is no preconditioned response to any encounter: whether enacted face-to-face, through speech or action, or mediated via a textual narrative, every encounter is a task, an interpolation by another which demands that we choose whether to respond with hospitality or hostility. In the Refugee Tales project, we come face-to-face with this ethical task: through the challenging encounters of walking, talking, and storytelling, the project asks us to reflect on our responses to those seeking asylum and to try to shape these in the spirit of solidarity, hospitality, and responsibility.

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