

Representing and Narrating Flight, Refugeeism, and Asylum

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The cover image of this Special Issue, a photo of Guillermo Galindo's installation "Fluchtzieleuropahavarieschallkörper" from the 2017 documenta 14 exhibited in the 'documenta Halle' in Kassel, Germany, is striking in several ways. This art work, on the one hand, aesthetically combines the relics of wooden boats, fiberglass, lifebelt and paddle. These materials are remains from the Greek island of Lesbos, where millions of stranded refugees, fleeing wars, prosecution, and poverty in their home countries, have been coerced into waiting while at the same time also trying to make the dangerous boat crossings to Italy. On the other hand, it provides a different perspective on the European migrant crisis, as the artist uses harpsichord or piano strings, goatskin, metal tubes, elastic band, and scrap metal, to turn the installation into a musical instrument which is supposed to echo out into the world. This combination of materials creates an iconic and even cultic representation, which stands in contrast to the current debate surrounding refugees, and asylees. It opens up a new space of imagination that focuses on an optimistic outcome of the 'influx' of refugees, re-defining the current debate around refugees and asylum seekers, and calling for an ethical obligation (Butler, 2011) as well as for an ethnically and culturally diverse approach to the crisis. Instead of perceiving refugees as a burden, Galindo seems to suggest that they are, if we read this installation closely, metaphorically speaking the "music" that will help facilitate inter- and transcultural as well as transnational encounters. As a musical instrument, the installation invites viewers to rethink where the refugees come from, what their cultural backgrounds and traditions are, and how they make their crossings to "us" – in a boat too shabby and derelict to transport even one single person. Therefore, the art installation might pose the question of how best to help and thus facilitate the doing away of the "us"/"them" binary construct that is still prominent in human encounters.

As far back as Aeschylus' tragedy *The Suppliants*, written in circa 463 BCE, in which the fifty daughters of Danaus flee in order to escape forced marriages to their Egyptian cousins and thus seek protection in Argos, refuge-seeking and sanctuary, ethical obligation (Butler, 2011) and hospitality, racism and xenophobia have been addressed, as these issues have always been part of human life. The concepts of diaspora and exile, too, refer to both the *realities* and the *narrations* of flight and expulsion, especially in connection with the

Jewish experience. More recently, those concepts have been related to the experiences of many other dispersed peoples around the world, since the term “diaspora” has been used in an even broader sense within the framework of Diaspora Studies, which emerged in the early 1990s, especially in connection to Black and Asian British literature and culture.

Recent history, however, shows that colonialism, decolonisation, and, in particular, processes of globalisation, along with neo-capitalist structures (resources, finances, economy, traffic, or travel), have increasingly contributed to mass migration. This mass migration has also resulted from “poverty, famine, or persecution on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, language, gender, and sexual preference”, as well as from “ethnocide, genocide, civil war, earthquakes” (Benhabib 2004, 137), floods, and the like—thus highlighting refugeeism and questions of the political rights to asylum: a human right that grants political protection. This situation generally, however, also probes the concept of citizenship (Agamben, 2000).

The ongoing war in Syria, the refugee crisis, and the rise of neo-fascism in the US and Europe are only some instances of the present increase in inhuman behaviour and atrocities at borders, and, in processes of asylum-seeking, the bringing forth of subjects into most precarious circumstances. Therefore, in the wake of emergencies, crises, and diaspora, the present situation calls for a new theoretical plexus in postcolonial studies. The war-torn Middle East has generated the recent refugee exodus across Europe, resulting in the emergence of what might be called ‘war-subalterns’ in the process of border-crossing, redefining issues of citizenship, and engendering new concepts of insiders/outsideers, emerging nationalism, and restrictive border politics.

Drawing on the theoretical interventions of Postcolonial Studies, the papers in this Special Issue of *Postcolonial Text* thus seek to make a case for “Representing and Narrating Flight, Refugeeism, and Asylum” that takes into account the marginalised agonies and voices of the ‘war-subalterns,’ who challenge our conventional notions of identity—both communal and national. In 2015, the image of the dead body of Ailan Kurdi, the Syrian refugee boy found floating on the shore of Europe, gained an immediate agency that changed the migrant/refugee discourse and that led Germany and other European countries to open their borders. This mediated macabre spectacle of death, encountered while frantically undertaking a perilous journey in the quest for safer abodes, problematises existing ideas of culture and rootedness. What would be the contour of Postcolonial Studies in the aftermath of such forms of neo-precarity? This trans-border desperate out- and influx of refugees also demands a re-invigoration of the concepts of hospitality, responsibility, and sanctuary. Postcolonial Studies is committed, since its inception, to envoicing the peripheral, marginal, and the other, and must revive this ethico-political agenda in order to foreground a trans-border global ethics that will be able to

support the transcendence of the prevalent dialectics of the insider and the afflicted other – a task that must be envisioned, theorised, and, ultimately, put into action.

To be more precise, the law of hospitality, which, according to Jacques Derrida, requires the unconditional accommodation of the arrival, be it of a stranger, an immigrant, an invited guest or an unexpected visitor (Derrida 60), is often in conflict with legal regulations of the state (Friese 34). Derrida stipulates that there is a dichotomy, or even a rift, between human rights and citizenship rights (Benhabib, 2004, 22). Seyla Benhabib's assertion is therefore, "to incorporate citizenship claims into a universal human rights regime" (22) as part of a "normative theory of global justice" (2). Taking my cue from her, I also depart from her, since one must, as Benhabib herself points out later in her study, accept "the right of democracies to regulate the transition from first admission to full membership" (221). Therefore a common European or world-wide approach to asylum seeking and refugeeism is doomed to fail, because of the establishment and the creation of the nation-states' strict border regulations. Borders, e.g. as created by European Union member states as well as Schengen treaties, restrict easy entry to European territories. Thus, access and free movement are permitted only to particular groups of people, which Heidrun Friese also implies in addressing the "limits of hospitality" (Friese).

With the creation of *Frontex*, the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union, in 2004, the EU established an instrument that systematically supported the member states in controlling and fortifying their external borders. However, the activities of this organisation have been in conflict with Article 14.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that "[e]veryone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution." In addition, Benhabib describes the manner in which asylum seekers wishing to enter the EU are criminalised:

Even in one of the most developed rights regimes of our world [the EU], refugees and asylum seekers still find themselves in quasi-criminal status. Their human rights are curtailed; they have no civil and political rights of association and representation. The extension of full human rights to these individuals and the decriminalization of their status is one of the most important tasks of cosmopolitan justice in our world. (2004, 168)

Thus the concept of the 'borderisation' of the outer margins of Europe, and the prevailing images of refugees in the media as those who, on the one hand, need to be saved and, on the other, are perceived as an 'invasion,' characterize the overall discourse surrounding refugeeism, asylum seeking, and sanctuary. As a matter of fact, high border walls and push-back operations prevent asylum seekers from applying for asylum in the first place, as exemplarily demonstrated with the building of the "Great Wall of Calais," as it has been nicknamed, in the French port town. Britain spent 2.3 million pounds on this wall, thereby refraining from providing adequate safety for those in flight by preventing them from entering the country to apply for asylum, as

would be their right, on the one hand, and, on the other, by abstaining from confronting the root causes of this flight (rather than just building a wall).

Roger Bromley's notion of "territorial imagination" implies the idea of an *authentic* national identity that prevails, rendering all that exists on the outside "inauthentic" (105). He further asserts that "European governments talk up the nation and the national through a rhetoric of 'core values' but also, and more importantly, use the concept of sovereignty to re-seal and control their borders while, at the same time, exercising the prerogative of determining who to exempt and who to include in their territory" (106).

Additionally, NGOs have complained about further violations of human rights that correspond with *Frontex* activities (Frontexit). These human rights violations have not only been linked to EU border regime policy, but also concern other countries' migration policies (e.g. the US and Mexico border, the Australian border control towards Indonesia, and many others worldwide). Possible answers to questions of asylum seeking, sanctuary, and refugeeism need to be found on a global scale. Benhabib therefore suggests that what is required are "complex processes of public argument, deliberation, and exchange through which universalist rights claims and principles are contested and contextualized, invoked and revoked, posited and positioned, throughout legal and political institutions, as well as in the associations of civil society" (2004, 179). Looking, in particular, at asylum seekers and refugees, who are most often without their legal documents, entails, as Benhabib confirms, that "[n]ot having one's papers in order in our society is a form of civil death" (2004, 215), which leads to exclusion.

This brings me to the incident in which, more recently, in a court in Hungary, eleven suspects were placed on trial because seventy-one refugees whom they were smuggling suffocated in a refrigerator truck that was found in Austria in August 2015. Since smuggling has now become part of the overall global economy, it is possible to assume that the very lives of refugees, as people *sans papiers*, have also been turned into mere commodities. This event not only represents the tip of the iceberg within the contemporary "refugee crisis" that followed the incident in 2015 – especially with the ongoing war in Syria and wars, famines, and emergencies in African countries (e.g. South Sudan, Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria, Somalia, or Niger), Yemen, Afghanistan, and Iraq. It also led to a variety of measures being implemented to keep refugees 'out' and instituted in the European (but not only) border control system and asylum regimes, including the sometimes unjustified detainment of refugees and asylees. Those measures were accompanied by increasing racism and xenophobia arising from a rhetoric based on a 'culture of fear' that has been taken up in the media coverage, accordingly. In this context, Benhabib puts forward the idea that "[n]ot only politically, but theoretically as well, the incorporation and acceptance of immigrants, aliens and foreigners into liberal democracies touch upon fundamental normative and philosophical problems concerning the modern nation-state system" (2002, 160).

Bromley goes even one step further by arguing that “[d]isplacement helps us to think about place and belonging, and the displaced embody the movement of exile away from symbolic structure, the national fiction, which is why the national(ist) narrative is designed to stop the ‘native’ from meeting the displaced, literally and metaphorically speaking” (107). Deducing from Bromley’s quote that, due to state-regulated structures, asylees and refugees do not have the opportunity to even encounter the ‘native,’ visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzhoeff sees the current process in an even more negative light, stating that “[...] the current moment of globalization is [...] based upon a reactionary redefinition of identity that, from the point of view of government, requires new modes of surveillance and internment” (137).

Taking up this idea, it will be maintained that the notion of ‘illegality’ today does the work which ‘race’ did in the nineteenth century, in that it defines inclusion or exclusion of the ‘Other’. Refugees and asylees, as a consequence, have experienced traumatic situations at home, on their journeys to expected safety, as well as in the receiving countries, during the application process for asylum status. In addition, they have at times experienced xenophobia and racism in the host countries. As a consequence, it is often difficult for them to precisely recount their stories, as “[s]eeking sanctuary is an act of storytelling” (Farrier 1). However, narrating and giving an account of their experiences and of themselves is part of the procedure for applying for asylum and being granted sanctuary (ibid.), which relates to what Lauren Berlant has termed “cruel optimism” : “a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic” (24). In this context, “[t]he asylum seeker is a figure of time and movement” (Bromley 105), in in-between spaces and places, who hopes to be able to get into a safe country and have her/his asylum application eventually accepted. “Cruel optimism,” thus, “is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (Berlant 24). The “significantly problematic object” is epitomised in flight, arrival, and asylum.

This has triggered a decision to engage in the more recent ‘literary output’ of asylees and refugees, as part of what we might refer to as their ‘coping mechanism’ for their traumatic experiences. An engagement with refugee writings therefore raises the question as to whether asylum accounts, refugee narratives, and/or other performance forms and depictions—outside current media representations—potentially help to create the practice of a politics of intervention or whether “asylum seekers are charged with [the burden of] narrating themselves into a condition of sanctuary” (Farrier 1). More specifically, the question should be posed as to whether their literature and art subvert, critique, re-recount, and re-conceptualise the established stereotyped images of the “refugee”, thereby productively contributing to refugee agency and the notion of what Benhabib (2004) has termed “the rights of others.” Reading refugee narratives through

an explicitly postcolonial lens, I will ask—by focusing on the aesthetics of the works – whether the narratives of refugees provide a vehicle for marginalised and subaltern voices to gain not only subjectivity but also ethical and political recognition.

Therefore, the papers in this special issue address the representations of asylum seekers and refugees in contemporary literature and related art forms, including issues surrounding asylum. In particular, the papers focus upon the relationship between asylum/refugee discourse, media representation, and Postcolonial Studies. What the papers collected here demonstrate is that within internal and external discourses on race, class, and gender, the refugee, as Other, “othered,” is perceived of as a new or ‘war subaltern.’ The refugee narratives (plays, poems, short stories, memoirs, life-writings, autobiographies, and other related art forms) and their specific aesthetic configurations, structures, and modes of intervention show the figure of the refugee as someone who has taken voice, subjectivity, and perspective—in clear opposition to the common media representations. Thus, representational practices and devices that contest and/or reify stereotypical images of refugees are foregrounded in line with theoretical and political conceptions of asylum seeking and refugeeism: border control, citizenship rights (Agamben, Benhabib), ethical obligation (Butler), and political intervention in/of refugee narratives. Notions of hybridity (Bhabha), limbo condition, racism, and xenophobia in the selection of refugee narratives also come to the fore. Furthermore, mobility/immobility is addressed with regard to journeys, camps (e.g. Calais), detention, and other routes, sites, and spaces in refugee narratives. Within this framework, representations of precarity, the abject, trauma, and memory in asylum accounts and refugee narratives are read using the concepts of hospitality, and belonging/un-belonging.

The various permutations and manifestations of asylum, refuge, and sanctuary, as discussed in the “Introduction,” are explored in the following contributions. In her article “Precarious Urbanity: ‘The Jungle’ (Calais) and the Politics of Performing the Urban,” Caroline Koegler provides an innovative perspective on the themes of urbanity and performance as they relate to Postcolonial Studies. She incorporates Michel Agier’s theoretical approach in her case study, in which she scrutinises the politics, debates, and the notion of agency within the “performing the urban” that the refugee camp in Calais, nicknamed “The Jungle,” made possible. In doing so, Koegler most convincingly redefines the idea of “performing the urban” as part of refugees’ claim to urban space and environment, a claim which allows articulate subjectivity and agency to emerge.

The second article by Hayatte Lakraa also investigates Calais’ ‘Jungle,’ but she focuses on the concepts of human im/mobility and in/visibility when being confined to and stranded in the camp. Lakraa’s starting point is inspired by the theoretical approaches to refugees, asylees, power and (im)mobility as discussed by Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Frantz Fanon, and Natasha King,

which she then relates to the specific situation of the refugees and asylees in the camp. Furthermore, Lakraa investigates the refugees' social and cultural circumstances from their personal perspectives as her article is based on interviews and creative writing material collected in Calais. She thus provides a fresh and important look at this material, (re)contextualising and making visible refugees' and asylees' voices and possible agency while also highlighting apparent impasses.

Kanika Chowdhury's article on "(En)countering the Refugee: Capital, Óscar Martínez's *The Beast*, and the 'Problem' of the Surplus Population" is an instructive paper that takes up Karl Marx's concept of the "surplus population" from *The Capital*, and applies it to current political issues related to the refugee crises around the world. Subsequently, Chowdhury analyses Óscar Martínez's non-fiction report, *The Beast* (2010), which discusses the repulsive refugee situation in Mexico and, in particular, the journeys of Central American migrants across Mexico, reading it most convincingly through a Marxist and postcolonial lens.

In "The Border Spectacle and the Dramaturgy of Hope in Anders Lustgarten's *Lampedusa*," Lidia de Michelis turns to the drama genre, examining the representation of the "borderised" southern margins of Europe and, in particular, the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa, by focussing on the short play *Lampedusa* (2015) by the British playwright Anders Lustgarten. This imaginative and ethical appropriation—this reclamation, even—of the southern borderscape of Lampedusa within the ethical battleground of British political drama, represents in itself a challenge to the public opinion on the neoliberal borderisation of Europe across the continent. De Michelis discusses Lustgarten's daring act of 'unbordering' as an explicit condemnation of the British government for "leading the way in ending *Mare Nostrum*" and callously backing its low-funded "replacement program, Triton," which Lustgarten defines as "an official policy of deliberately letting migrants drown in order to deter others from coming" (2015, "Introduction"). Therefore, De Michelis' paper explores the politics of *Lampedusa*, a play which was met with great success when performed across Europe (the German première took place at the Schauspielhaus Bochum on March 16, 2016). It also explores how the play is further complicated by a parallel plot unfolding in the UK against the backdrop of a neoliberal policy. As De Michelis claims, Lustgarten's avowed aim is to open up "a proper conversation" about "what kind of society we want to be," perhaps one in which, as he advocates, "we will have the courage and the dignity to ask the right questions" (Lustgarten 2015, "Introduction").

Cecile Sandten's article on "Representations of Poverty and Precarity in Contemporary Refugee Narratives" engages with the topics of poverty and precarity through a selection of non-fictional texts that address flight, refugeeism, immigration, and limited access to decent living conditions, as well as agency, and self-representation. Specifically, her paper focuses on Gulwali Passarlay's *The Lightless Sky* (2015) and the short story collection *Breach* (Holmes and Popoola 2016). Since the narratives generally make the point that globalisation

has shattered the illusion of home, Sandten reads refugee precarity as a paradoxical condition which, on the one hand, reveals the dire consequences of socio-cultural exclusion, and, on the other hand, contributes to the questioning and/or redefining of transnational political space and actively calls for a politics of intervention.

In her article on “Novels of Flight and Arrival: Abu Bakr Khaal, *African Titanics* (2014 [2008]) and Sunjeev Sahota, *The Year of the Runaways* (2014), Janet Wilson focuses on a comparative reading of the two notions of “flight” and “arrival,” as represented by the affective moments which these two related concepts entail. Drawing on Judith Butler’s theories, Wilson therefore discusses *African Titanics* and *The Year of the Runaways* with regard to precarity and the “grievability of life.” In doing so, she identifies the particular aesthetics and narrative techniques pertaining to each novel.

Serbian-born poet, playwright, fiction writer, translator, performance artist, scholar, curator, and critic Nina Zivanevic’s personal written testimony entitled “Memory of the Recent ‘Avangarda’, Does it Spell ‘Resistance’?” is concerned with the Serbian art scene in the US during and after the Balkan wars. In this vignette, she reflects on the ambivalence of the ‘home space’ and the necessity of ‘living outside of this home space,’ thus pondering the flipside of the notion of refugee in relation to the artists and their art works. A selection of poems by Babak Inaloo, Olivier Vanderaa and Nina Zivanevic adds fittingly to the topic of this Special Issue.

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