

Representations of Poverty and Precariousness in Contemporary Refugee Narratives

Cecile Sandten

Chemnitz University of Technology

Introduction

I first met Mohammad at the Chemnitz Mosque. While assisting Mohammad (30) in applying for legal support at the Chemnitz District Court in March this year, I learnt that he receives 605.00 Euros of state allowance per month, from which he has to pay a rent of 180.00 Euros for a small apartment in an apartment block on the outskirts of Chemnitz. In addition, he has to pay 150.00 Euros in child maintenance for his two-year-old daughter, apart from some other expenses (phone contract, fitness studio). I learnt that his wife divorced him after arriving in Chemnitz from a refugee camp in Turkey and that he has not seen his daughter for an entire year. When we met for tea in his apartment for the first time, he opened his computer and showed me Syria via Google Earth. He pointed out his hometown to me, the place where he grew up and lived, and where ISIS is currently raging. He told me that out of his eight siblings, six have left for Europe. And he gave me a detailed account of his flight and journey from Syria to Germany. This account is a narrative of precariousness and poverty, both physically and mentally, and a story of exclusion, where home is no more and where in refugee camps incommensurable insecurities and vulnerabilities cause lives and marriages to break apart. In these narratives precariousness becomes an existential determination.

In her paper, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," based on a lecture given in the Nobel Museum in Stockholm in 2011, Judith Butler calls for an alternative framework for political life in a global world. This framework centres on the "ethical obligations that are global in character and that emerge at a distance and also within relations of proximity" (134). "We are," as Butler claims, "solicited by images of distant suffering"—often through the media—"in ways that compel our concern and move us to act, to voice our rejection and register our resistance to such violence through political means" (135). "What is happening 'there,'" Butler asserts, "also happens in some sense 'here'" (138). Butler does not give any hints as to who this "we" is (white, Western, male/female, educated, middle-class), or how the "political means" she addresses should be

put into action, and whether this kind of prescriptive ethical obligation is needed. Yet this version of “cohabitation,” whether we desire it or not, has been brought about by globalisation, which Butler envisions in her paper.

Using Butler’s reflections on cohabitation and ethical obligation as the starting point of my analysis, I will focus on a selection of accounts from asylum seekers and refugees. These accounts in many ways and unsurprisingly centre on the “bareness” (Agamben 88) and “fragility of human life, as well as the perils and misery to which it can be exposed” (Korte and Regard 7). In addition, both “stateless people” and “undocumented immigrants” have frequently been referred to as the “citizen’s other[s]” (Kerber), whose lack of citizenship rights prevents them from participating in social, political, and cultural life. The fact of being stripped of their political rights to citizenship (Agamben *Homo Sacer*, *passim*) often puts them in an acute state of poverty and precariousness. Moreover, illegality, statelessness, and forced removals point to current political processes, the roots of which are found in historical and postcolonial forms of belonging and non-belonging, as well as definitions of citizenship and accounts of exile and forced migration, deportation, and expulsion. These phenomena are in several ways linked to, as well as constantly challenge, the paradigm of the modern/‘Western’ nation-state and, by extension, the present European border politics.

According to the UNHCR official website, in 2015 there were 65.3 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, of which 21.3 were refugees and 10 million stateless; 107,100 refugees were resettled. 53.5% of refugees worldwide came from three countries: Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia (UNHCR “Figures”). Accordingly, the UNHCR has criticised the lack of legal pathways and facilities to enter safe countries:

The ongoing conflict and violence in Syria, Iraq and other parts of the world is causing large-scale displacement and refugees are seeking safety beyond the immediate region. The lack of an increased number of legal pathways leaves so many people fleeing persecution with few choices, including many trying to reunite with family members in Europe. In 2015, and the first months of 2016, almost 1.2 million refugees and migrants reached European shores, most fleeing conflict and persecution. Many lost their lives or saw loved ones perish at sea in their attempt to reach safety. An increasing number of families, women, and unaccompanied children undertook perilous journeys across several countries and often faced exploitation at the hands of smugglers. (UHCHR “Europe Emergency”)

Taking all these ideas into consideration in my analysis, I will engage with the topic of poverty and precariousness as found in a selection of non-fictional and fictional texts that address flight, refugeeism, immigration and the limited access to a decent life, agency, and self-representation. Specifically, I will focus on Gulwali Passarlay’s *The*

Lightless Sky: My Journey to Safety as a Child Refugee, a memoir (2015), and the story collection *Breach* (2016), by Olumide Popoola and Annie Holmes. The eight short stories in this volume explore and reveal the experiences of people who are stranded in the refugee tent city in Calais – the border town between France and Britain, where every single night hundreds of refugees try to cross the channel illegally by life-threatening means until the camp was cleared in October 2016 by French authorities. In this light, the analysis of the selected “refugee narratives” (a term which I will use as generic markers) will be informed by the following concerns: Do the refugees and asylum seekers in the narratives appear or speak for themselves, realising that they are physically removed from the social frames they have inhabited? Do the narratives provide a vehicle for the marginalised voices that lack, or are denied, subjectivity (i.e. the right to citizenship)? Are the depictions of the conditions in which the refugees are forced to live mimetic representations of their real-life experiences? In other words, how ‘authentic’ is the rendering of the depiction of poverty and precariousness in the stories of displacement? “How,” as Barbara Korte and Frédéric Regard ask, “can precarious and injured lives be represented and thus become recognisable – even when their circumstances seem unspeakable in both the literal and metaphorical sense” (7)?

In fact, I will read refugees’ precariousness as a paradoxical condition that, on the one hand, shows severe shortcomings in the socio-cultural exclusion of refugees who are driven by what Lauren Berlant has termed “[c]ruel optimism,” which she defines as “... the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (Berlant 24). In the case in point, the problematic object is the attainment of safety and protection in a European nation-state – a goal not easy to reach for people *sans papiers*. On the other hand, this paradoxical condition, as I will show, contributes to the questioning and/or redefining of transnational political space.

Refugee Stories as Narrative Forms of Precariousness and/or Political Intervention

Generally, autobiographical writing, such as the memoir, can be perceived as a “mosaic of memories that re-created certain experiences, transforming lived experience into narrated experience” (Davis, Aurell, Delgado 11). Thus, writing an autobiography is “a privileged way to access personal and collective forms of subjectivity” (ibid.) and serves as a coming-to-terms with past events “because it functions itself as the instrument of this negotiation” (Eakin 139). Life writing, therefore, implies both a reconstruction of the past and a documentation of processes of identity formation, negotiation, and

search. Refugee accounts, primarily written in the narrative form of the memoir, and refugee short stories (which are semi-fictional) are concerned with various manifestations of the ‘displaced,’ or ‘precarious,’ body of the undocumented migrant. Since Gulwali Passarlay’s *The Lightless Sky* is written by a young adult and from the perspective of a child, it becomes even more pertinent that children and unaccompanied minors are the most vulnerable in many respects. According to UNHCR statistics for 2015, of the 65.3 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, over half are children. “Unaccompanied or separated children in 78 countries—mainly Afghans, Eritreans, Syrians, and Somalis—lodged some 98,400 asylum applications in 2015. This was the highest number on record since UNHCR (2017) started collecting such data in 2006 (UNHCH “Figures”).

Plainly put, I have treated *The Lightless Sky* and the short stories from *Breach* as literary manifestations of real situations that are personal and therefore challenge hegemonic or state representation of refugees. Rather, the writers assume agency over representation (see Spivak 66-111) and, as Spivak famously phrases, ‘can speak,’ and thus attest to the “accountability” of “precarious existence” (Korte and Regard 11) while being attentive to the potentials and limitations of this accountability that are implied in the autobiographical text.

Apart from their tales of economic and social poverty, the refugees’ narratives of flight and precarious journeying provide additional accounts, as true stories that come “in the form of testimonial material and personal historical records” (Helff 103). By giving personal accounts of their lives, refugees and asylum seekers actively gain a voice that challenges the notion of them as displaced people or as being perceived as “refugees,” which reduces them to an abstract matter and to a life outside of *our* reality, “outside of history” (Malkki 398). When confronted by images of those represented by the media coverage, Butler has aptly argued that “... we are in such moments affronted by something that is beyond our will, not of our making, that comes to us from the outside, as an imposition, but also as an ethical demand” (Butler 135). Butler suggests, “that these are ethical obligations which do not require our consent, and neither are they the result of contracts or agreements into which any of us have deliberately entered” (135). Instead, she argues that it is our human condition that makes ethical obligations a necessity.

This leads me to the question of how (and if) the concept of precariousness can potentially be harnessed within a politics of intervention that probes and re-draws the established lines of racial, ethnic, gender, and class identifications and senses of belonging that are purported in refugee narratives. In line with the notion, identified by Daniel Schwarz (Schwarz 3), of the “ethical turn in literary studies,” the portrayal of refugees and asylum seekers is often characterised by precariousness, since, in addition to relating extremely traumatic experiences, writers show “that their lives are

insecure, unpredictable, endangered, on the edge, and out of balance, threatened in their corporeal and mental integrity” (Korte and Regard 7). Accordingly, as Roger Bromley (108) maintains, the asylum account helps “... reduce the alterity of the asylum seekers by making them the focal point of the narrative, bringing them in from the margins of silence and invisibility, breaking down the representative category of ‘refugee,’ and making them the subjects of vision and speech.”

Gulwali Passarlay’s *The Lightless Sky* (2015)

The child refugee is – in most cases – not able to compose a story for her/himself. Out of the need to address and recount the experiences of flight, asylum, and acculturation in his memoir, Gulwali Passarlay does so in retrospect and by using flashbacks, thereby continually juxtaposing the adult’s perspective with that of the child’s. Nadene Ghouri, a journalist who has been working in the areas of human issues and human rights issues, helped voice certain parts and aspects of the memoir. By reconstructing his asylum-seeking journey in detail, the book depicts the demanding efforts that Gulwali made to come to the U.K. Within this framework, the memoir through its narrator illustrates and critically reviews the disorientation of the child protagonist by addressing the ways in which he perceives time and space throughout the narrative (see De Fina 368). Gulwali, as a twelve-year-old child refugee, is often stuck in limbo as he loses “control over [his] own displacement” (De Fina 380). Passarlay writes: “Even now, I have only half an understanding of the routes that I travelled; my memories are often a blur of faces, landscapes, half-formed thoughts” (Passarlay, *The Lightless Sky* 176). In another instance, his disorientation is expressed as follows: “I’d been running so long I had no idea. I had stopped thinking further ahead than the next minute” (179). In particular, the analysis of the “construction of time and space as orientation elements in narratives that recount disorienting experiences” (367) is most characteristic of Passarlay’s memoir as both an aesthetic as well as a sense-making device. The writer uses a confessional mode of narration that, in effect, is reciprocal, since the ‘local addressee’ (the child protagonist from whose perspective most of the text is written) and the ‘(Western) reader’ learn from each other, leading the reader to feel empathy and comprehend what it means to be a refugee today.

The 350 or so pages of photographs, maps (showing Gulwali’s flight route) and text that follow the “Prologue” are an attempt to render visible and make tangible, via the aesthetics of the literary account of the memoir, the complex nature of refugee journeying. Even the title of the book, *The Lightless Sky: My Journey to Safety as*

a Child Refugee, which is a testimonial act, also reflects on the writing process of the refugee narrative itself. Gulwali Passarlay, from an adult position and perspective, recollects his traumatic past and the difficulties he experienced as a child refugee, seeking to turn his memories of flight from an oral into a written account in order to be able to make sense of his life, losses, and traumatic experiences. Thus, the “testimonial material,” as “authentic storytelling” (Helff 106), provides us with an immediate, enhanced, and even affective, understanding of this account.

In order to make sense of the disorienting process of migration, refuge and search for asylum that he had to endure for more than one year and 12,500 miles, including the recounting of extremely traumatic experiences, Passarlay constantly presents the way in which his individual identity is constituted in relation to his family (see De Fina 368). He leaves his mother, and loses his older brother Hazrat right at the beginning of his journey after fleeing with him. He meets other refugees, and gives a recount of his personal history as well as a brief account of the national history of Afghanistan. In the first four chapters of the book, Passarlay tells about his happy childhood, the Taliban regime, the Russian and US invasions and occupation, and British colonialism, paired with his, at the time, very traditional views on Afghan life, including that women should wear burkas, and that wearing jeans “was the cultural uniform of the enemy” (44). The first traumatic instance in the memoir is the rendering of his father and grandfather’s murder by the US military and his mother’s decision to send him and his brother away because “Taliban representatives began to visit more and more often. They wanted my brother and me to become fighters or even suicide bombers—martyrs—to avenge our father’s death” (39). He also states that he was never able to imagine that his mother’s plan to send her two oldest sons away “would involve paying human smugglers thousands of dollars to Europe” (42). Throughout the memoir, Passarlay speaks most critically about the human smugglers by using the recollected voice of the Political Science student that he is today. He also explains in detail the entire capitalist system that this type of business entails.

His most traumatic experience occurs when his mother eventually sends him away and tells him ““however bad it gets, *don’t come back*”” (48, italics i.o.). From that point on, the book relates his twelve-month odyssey to Europe, spending time waiting, being squeezed into a rooster coop crammed with others, being in prison because he is caught by the Bulgarian police and sent back to Turkey and Iran, from where he has to start his flight all over again. Often he is suffering from hunger and thirst. He has to make a terrifying journey across the Mediterranean in a tiny, packed, and dilapidated boat, and he nearly drowns. He flees from a children’s home in Italy where he feels safe, but is most depressed and cannot tolerate the limbo situation in which he finds himself – displaced by language and culture. He has to endure

a most dreadful month, stricken with poverty and illness, in the makeshift refugee camp in Calais, “that living hell they called the Jungle “ (314), where every night he tries to catch an illegal lift across the Channel to England. Eventually, he gets across in a refrigerator lorry carrying bananas. He survives and makes it to Britain (Bolton and Manchester) where officials mistake his age (of 13 by then, to 18) so that the asylum process is endangered. There he is often depressed and tries to commit suicide twice. Being fostered, he is sent to school, and wins a place at Manchester University to study politics, before being chosen to carry the Olympic torch in 2012. He recounts his positive experiences of encounters with people who are helpful and supportive but also with people who exploit the most endangered and precarious bodies, those of refugees.

Throughout the memoir, Passarlay negotiates his personal experiences through the act of recollection that the discourse of a witness implies. Thus, his account is marked by the use of the past tense, by verbs of direct experience such as “see,” “hear,” “feel,” “smell,” “taste,” or by epistemic verbs like “know,” “realise,” and “believe,” and by declarative speech. Thus, Passarlay “creates existential immediacy for both the writer and the reader” (Bruner 45), quite frequently including his fellow refugees in his narrative and speaking of all of them in the first-person plural and showing their immense helplessness and powerlessness at the hands of the smugglers: “Like lambs to the slaughter, we carried on down the mountain” (Passarlay, *The Lightless Sky* 189). The next passage elucidates how the violation of basic human needs and dignity compels the articulation of memory. It is set in Istanbul:

We were taken to a huge sprawling complex of industrial buildings, situated by a noisy main road. Whatever industry had once happened in these buildings had long been replaced by a new trade in humanity, our bodies replacing the goods kept inside the store rooms. ... I stank. And I was soaked in sweat. I hadn't washed since leaving Iran. That was a whole week ago: one night and day to cross the border ... then five days in the truck. In that week I had climbed mountains, fallen over in mud, ridden a horse for several hours and slept next to a hundred other unwashed bodies. All in the same set of clothes. ... For Muslims, being dirty is a great shame. The reason we take ablution before our five daily prayers is to stand clean before our Creator. Not being able to wash myself was a great source of distress for me, as I'm sure it was for all the other human cattle kept in that vast, damp room. At that moment, I felt less than human. (Passarlay, *The Lightless Sky* 199-200)

Later, when he eventually makes it to England, Passarlay recalls the sublime moment of being able to access basic human supplies, while at the same time questioning why not everyone has access to those basics:

A shower, clean clothes, freedom and a place to stay. That was all I had, and I felt like a king. Why couldn't everyone have access to something so simple? Why

were human beings given as little value as the fleas that bred in the makeshift tents that I had, less than forty-eight hours ago, called home? (320)

In addition to the bodily constraints and hardships, Passarlay and his co-author Nadene Ghouri constantly address the time-space confusion and severe feeling of displacement in a limbo-situation:

We have sought to be as accurate as possible, but it must be stated that these are the sometimes hazy memories of a twelve-year-old child. Dates and times blurred into one another on the road. Gulwali had a sense of the months based on the weather, but his journey took him from high mountain passes to stifling basements, making it hard for him to tell at times. ... Often it wasn't clear to him where he was kept, only that he was incarcerated. (Ghouri in Passarlay 363)

Even though the memories of a twelve-year-old boy might be fallible in retrospect, I nonetheless read the precarious journey of Gulwali Passarlay as a rhetorical strategy that can be identified as a means of reclaiming subject status from an experience of continued displacement. The constant journey in *The Lightless Sky* apparently does not come to a real closure at the end of the book, because home has been lost forever and the refugee crisis is not yet resolved. This signifies, therefore, not only the potential for the displaced person to redefine himself but also underscores a condition of perpetual displacement mixed with severe feelings of depression, which is channelled into the need to call for a politics of intervention, as the last chapter of the book unmistakably makes clear. Passarlay, now a 21-year-old young man studying politics in England, often functions as an ambassador to quite a number of projects on refugee issues. As he states with a sense of urgency:

The refugee crisis, the greatest global crisis since World War II, has been caused by conflict, wars, poverty, injustice and oppression. It is our moral duty to treat these fleeing human beings with dignity and respect. We cannot shy away from the fact that recent wars in Iraq, Libya, Syria or Afghanistan have exacerbated this crisis. Nor can we pretend that the Western desire to buy cheap products or possess the latest must-have items at a bargain price does not contribute to poverty and inequality. (355)

Thus, Passarlay's memoir, *The Lightless Sky*, can be perceived as a mode of life writing in which the author has set out to come to terms with his traumatic past and help prevent historical erasure. It can, therefore, also be seen as an emancipatory and epistemological act, in which the individual returns to his psychological experiences of trauma, powerlessness, suffering, pain, nightmares, dreams, and aspirations.

Breach (2016) by Olumide Popoola and Annie Holmes

Both Passarlay's memoir and the short stories collected in *Breach* evoke many disturbing asylum and refugee realities that claim a documentary truth. The eight refugee stories gathered and rewritten by Olumide Popoola and Annie Holmes, specifically commissioned as fiction, are "engaged with unfolding political crises" as they "explore, not through reportage but through literature, the lives of those on the run" (Kassabova 2016). This collection claims to be the first full-length book of fiction about the refugee crisis since the crisis began. Popoola and Holmes went to the refugee camp in Calais and collected stories that they then rewrote into works of fiction about escape, hope and aspiration as well as fear, loss and poverty. Correspondingly, the stories "Counting Down," "Extending a Hand," and "Expect Me" were written by Popoola, and "The Terrier," "Paradise," "Ghosts," and "Oranges in the River" by Holmes. Other collected volumes of stories are *Refugee Tales* (2016), edited by David Herd and Anna Pincus. They put together retold stories by poets and novelists who adapt the tales of individuals who have had direct, frighteningly common experiences with Europe's new underclass – its refugees. *The Good Immigrant* (2016), edited by Nikesh Shula, comprises stories about the representation of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic writers in Britain today. There is also *Give Me Shelter: Stories about Children who Seek Asylum* (2007), edited by Tony Bradman.

All of the stories in *Breach* are written in the present tense, thus invoking immediacy. Some of the stories are written from the refugees' perspective and some from the perspective of the people living in Calais who host refugees or assist as volunteers in the camp. In addition, some stories use a multi-perspectival mode of narration. Generally, all eight stories are about those who became stranded in the refugee camp in Calais and who try to survive as best as they can, including including engaging in the preliminaries of prostitution, becoming smugglers, having an affair with one of the volunteers, and trying to get out as soon as possible. The major themes of exile and displacement, fragmentation and a dispersed (national) identity—but also a sense of playful irony and introspection—echo and reverberate throughout the eight short stories of the book.

In the following, I will turn first to the story "Extending a Hand" (49-64), which is written in the second person and is about two young women from Africa: Habina, who is the focaliser, and Mariam. They attempt to arrange a telephone call home, while reflecting on the situation in the camp. The second-person narrative draws the reader directly into the action. It also appears to give us immediate access to the protagonist's private thoughts and concerns:

You sit on the side of the road, Mariam and you. The reception isn't working inside today. Just that annoying crackling you get when someone is on the line,

and most of the time there are no bars at all. Outside, here, passing the bridge that hangs over the side of the camp, with the towering fence, it is easier to get a signal. It's also quieter. The kerb is a little cool but dry. A few people are walking up and down the street that leads straight into the camp. Mainly volunteers, mostly Brits, who park their cars or vans and then move on to the show inside. And it is indeed: the display of poor refugees, the lack of humane conditions. They, the ones who give up their time, are here to extend a helping hand, to help make things survivable. But you don't need a hand; you have two of those. What you need is opportunities. (49)

Seeing that Mariam's mother is in hospital for treatment and needs financial support from her daughter, who is now stranded in Calais but does not dare tell her mother about it, the theme of prostitution comes up, as the young woman needs money. Additionally, Habina is critical of the current situation in the camp, especially related to the restricted material conditions and the seemingly hegemonic behaviour of the helpers:

Why people think they know what's best for you when they are not you, you don't understand ... You had asked for leggings, tighter jeans, something that would make you feel like you were still twenty-four and not just a refugee squatting in a camp that the locals want gone. Leggings are in fact more comfortable, more practical. You don't have to remember to pull them up when stepping over the endless mud. They won't flap around and you know where they are: close to your body. (51)

In the camp, all of the refugees feel utterly humiliated. Habina and Mariam, who are from Eritrea, speak Tigrinya. Like many other characters in the other stories, they constantly feel misrepresented: Habina's mother is reported to have said on more than one occasion:

'There are no other pictures. We are always the famished skeletons with the kwashiorkor belly only. It's not enough, it's not right, that this is all there is to us' ... You wonder what the pictures are now. Of people like you, here, in the camp. What will stick this time? The muddied clothes you try to keep clean but which hang drab and damp on your bodies? The queuing?' (53)

When Mariam learns that her mother's ulcer has ruptured, she persuades Habina to try to earn money with her by offering themselves to the lorry drivers who park outside the camp, awaiting their turn. For Habina, it turns out to be a disgusting experience, for which, moreover, she is paid only 10 Euros for a rather unsuccessful job. When her friend Mariam responds to this with: "It's a start. But you can't make it this way" (64), it is left open as to whether or not this will, indeed, be a first step into prostitution for the two young African women. By directly addressing the reader in the second person, Popoola is driving home the indelible point that poverty and precariousness play a pivotal role in the creation of humiliation and help to foster an accompanying climate of fear for personal safety in the makeshift refugee camp in Calais. The latter is fatefully called "the Jungle." Here poverty and precariousness reign and safety turns out to be an illusion.

Also set in the refugee camp in Calais, the short story, ironically titled “Paradise” (65-85), is characterised by a multi-perspectival narrative mode. By not focussing on one character alone, the story demonstrates the constant movement and transience of characters, volunteers, and the space they inhabit, thereby depicting the uncertainty and temporality of illegal refugee camp life. The narration switches back and forth between four characters. There is Muhib (the name means ‘loving friend’ and is not his real name), who is a young, very handsome refugee, perhaps from Ethiopia. His friend is Isaac, a young refugee from Sudan who will be leaving the camp to be relocated by the French government, which is “offering new chances to Sudanese refugees” (76). Another character is Julie, a young volunteer girl and student from England, who falls in love with Muhib and who, in her mind, constantly talks to her father—who would be opposed to her volunteer work with refugees. Then, there is Marjorie, a volunteer who helps with sorting donations, and Julie’s aunt, who brought Julie to the camp, hoping that she would “fall in love with justice, with activism, not some boy” (74). Finally, there is a female volunteer from Germany, with pink dreadlocks, who has taken on the job of flute teacher, and who also teaches Muhib the flute and organises a concert in the camp’s “Dome.” Julie and Muhib fall in love after the concert, but are not able to find each other again the next morning, as the camp is too crowded and Muhib is busy helping his friend Isaac to pack his clothes and to say farewell.

Thus, the story “Paradise” presents snippets of each of the characters and juxtaposes descriptions about the refugees with depictions of their own ideas and thoughts as well as the refugees’ and characters’ dreams and missed opportunities. In addition, and most prominently, the concept of the “volunteers” who come to help and who are requested to constantly smile stands in stark contrast to the unhappy “*involunteers*” (79) stuck in the squalid setting of the camp. Lack of opportunity becomes one of the story’s leitmotifs and is addressed critically throughout the story and in the depiction of the camp’s precariousness and poverty in particular, as Muhib and Isaac sit in “camping chairs, hunched against the cold, sleeping bags around their shoulders.” On another occasion we learn that when:

Muhib first arrived in the Jungle, a few months before, he was horrified by the dirt, the tents, the taps to be shared by so many, the stinking toilet cabins. But Isaac had lived in Darfur before Calais, had stayed in a refugee camp there from the time he was eight years old. “For me,” Isaac told Muhib in those early days, “the Jungle is much better.” “It’s like a heaven to you?” Muhib asked him. But Isaac is not a romantic like his friend. He’d raised his eyebrows, looking round at the garbage holes, the mud, the plastic bags and rags entangled in the branches of dune shrubs. “No, not heaven,” Isaac had said. “But still better.” (65)

Overall, the story shows that the camp is only able to offer a most rudimentary form of everyday life, where friendship and love can only

be temporary, due to the makeshift, cold, and dirty environment that denies its residents a place to stay. The latter are uprooted, dislocated, and in an in-between situation. In contrast to this bleak reality, Julie, who lives a rather sheltered life in England, and who is fairly naïve and carefree, would like her “inner Dad” to “see how everyone gets along, how considerate people are of each other” (67), while she goes around smiling. At the end of the story, Muhib asks his flute teacher whether she will “go home soon, to Berlin, ...?” She shrugs. ‘Sometime I will.’ ‘Yes, you will go,’ Muhib says. ‘All the volunteers go. And you leave us here in the Jungle, thinking about you, missing you. It’s painful,’ he says, ‘so please, don’t love us so much’” (85). Thus, Muhib addresses the inability to find love and lasting friendships in the camp, in spite of the fact that at the beginning of the story we learn that “of all the many people in the camp Muhib loves, he loves Isaac the most” (65). Unfortunately, saying farewell to Isaac is the reason he misses out on his date with Julie. And when, after a time of restless waiting, Julie disappointedly leaves the camp the next morning, she paradoxically wants to “tell Dad he was right,’ ... ‘They’re all liars and cheats and we must keep them out of our country’” (84).

Conclusion: Refugee Narratives and the Politics of Intervention

Passarlay uses the particular genre of the memoir as a mode of self-representation while Popoola and Holmes, with their fictional re-writes of real-life stories, call attention to both the discursive poverty and precarity surrounding the current experiences of refugees, mimetically reflecting asylees’ anxieties and dislocations. In addition, these refugee writers present alternative narratives that negotiate and revise the current picture, which has otherwise primarily been represented by the hegemonic media coverage. The human condition as “an exposure to precarity,” as Judith Butler writes, “leads us to understand as a global obligation imposed upon us...to find political and economic forms that [help] to minimize precarity and establish economic political equality” (Butler 150).

The autobiographical and based-on-real-life fictional perspectives offered in the texts under discussion do not merely reflect a method for negotiating personal, historical and present contexts and situations. They are used aesthetically as a tool that illuminates, in one respect, the creative activity of the writers and, in another respect, their need to address their own subjectivity, dignity, humanity, and, ultimately, their human voice. Especially within the context of debates surrounding refugeeism, refugees and asylum seekers are repeatedly exposed to the experiences of precarity, loss of home and sense of belonging, trauma, and the politics of departure, arrival, and acculturation, as

demonstrated in the initial short account of my meeting with Mohammad as well as my discussion of the *The Lightless Sky* and *Breach*. For those forced into illegal lives, their narratives of seeking refuge and their precarity and poverty help to make “suffering at a distance,” as Butler argues, “proximate” (Butler 137). Accordingly, the stories of refugees and asylum seekers demand that we “commit ourselves to preserving the life of the other” and “struggle for a conception of ethical obligation that is grounded in precarity” (Butler 148). Framed in this way, refugee narratives productively contribute to a politics of intervention and a redefinition of transnational political space as they bring into question and re-draw the established lines of racial, ethnic, gender, and national identifications and senses of belonging, as the title *Breach* already implies. Passarlay makes this unmistakably clear in his memoir when he tells of being stranded in Calais in the Jungle, where “people were barely human” (301). His face and body are covered in a rash, the result of an accident he experienced in one of the lorries while trying to cross the Channel and as a consequence of the poor hygiene in the camp. Passarlay imagines himself “running up to some high-ranking French official and shaking them to demand answers. It wasn’t my fault I wasn’t born in Europe. My home was a war zone—did that somehow make me less human?” (301).

In conclusion, I propose that refugee narratives foster an engagement with experiences of illegality, statelessness, and forced removals. These narratives point to current political processes from the perspectives of those whose historical roots are found in postcolonial definitions of citizenship and accounts of exile and forced migration, deportation and expulsion. Refugee stories function as confessional narratives on the postcolonial theme of cultural and linguistic displacement. They embody the interplay between fiction and non-fiction, belonging and up-rootedness, self-representation and hegemonic misrepresentation. They work at the intersections of the private experience of the individual refugee and asylee and the public, socio-political contexts they reflect. In this framework, the texts actively contribute to and call for a politics of intervention.

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