

Writing the Refugee:

Labelling, Literature, and the Shifting Imaginary of a Field

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**Abstract**

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This dissertation addresses how the politics of representation and social imaginaries have impacted books by and about refugees migrating to the West since the late 1990s. Beginning with three popular publications from 2006/2007 and moving through today, I argue that the genre of modern refugee literature that coalesced around narratives of flight and a sympathetic appeal has been transformed by Western conventions of co-authorship and demands for authenticity. The result is a near vacuum of novels about recent refugee experiences even as population models for the next twenty five years predict an exponential growth in human migration due to climate change and political instability. To understand this shift, I consider the American publishing industry's role (and responsibility) in national conversations about migration and nation building by reading refugee novels and non-fiction through lenses of sympathy, trauma-centered care, and humanitarian ethics. Using the work of political scientists

and sociologists from Hannah Arendt to Liisa Malkki to Didier Fassin who critique humanitarian intervention as a method of engagement that relates to people who suffer but does not necessarily put an end to suffering or even establish systems that will, I ask what sort of transformational reading is expected from its readers and what sort of futures—both intimate and societal—books about refugees might help Western readers imagine and enact.

This project also tracks the limits of sympathy as a reader response—despite its role as an authenticating feature of the genre—and follows how history and politics transform what is acceptable for publication. Chapter One presents three books that give voice to a new generation of refugees through layers of publishing and reviewing patterns that, I argue, norm readers to look for certain narratives within refugee stories in much the same way that the process of seeking asylum norms refugees to tell immigration agents the stories of their lives the agents want to hear. Chapter Two interrogates co-authorship and authenticity and discusses how both are bound up in the dangerous process of seeking refuge. Chapter Three centers Behrouz Boochani's account of seeking asylum in Australia and explains how he marks a shift in the genre by including politics, history, and a demand for Western accountability. Chapter Four looks at texts engaged in genre experimentation that circumvent questions of voice and authenticity and open new narrative possibilities for refugees. My research shows how practices within the publishing industry both produce and replicate narratives that obstruct the fullness of refugee voices and limit readers' ability or interest in questioning their involvement in the narratives that compel their sympathy.

## **Dedication**

For my beautiful family: Rob, William, Caroline, and John,

Thank you for changing your lives so I could go back to school.

Thank you for talking to me about the dissertation.

Thank you for listening to me talk about the dissertation.

Thank you for tolerating me while I talked and wrote and researched the dissertation.

Thank you for your seemingly endless patience. I love you.

“We cannot live for ourselves alone. Our lives are connected by a thousand invisible threads, and along these sympathetic fibers, our actions run as causes and return to us as results.”

—Herman Melville

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Stephanie Clare's probing questions and indispensable memos have shaped every aspect of my project. Time and again, her comments have winnowed my wide and rangy ideas into disciplined throughlines that shaped this dissertation for the better. I may yet spend the rest of my days striving to match her skill for concise memos!

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## Introduction

In the late 1980s, a young boy named Achak Deng was driven from his village in Sudan by Janjaweed fighters. Seeking to make Sudan an Islamic state, Janjaweed militias encircled villages in the Christian and traditional African areas in the south of the country, set straw-roofed huts on fire, and shot indiscriminately. Shooed away by his mother who knew she couldn't carry him and save them both, Achak ran for a day through brush and thicket until he came upon a larger group of boys who had also run from their villages. Their ragged group walked more than seven hundred miles to a refugee camp in Ethiopia, a band of children that would become known worldwide as the Sudanese Lost Boys. After three years, the boys were violently driven from the camp in Ethiopia and forced to walk to another camp in Kenya. Deng spent a decade in the Kenyan camp before being offered relocation in America. Three years after arriving in Atlanta in 2001, he collaborated with the American writer Dave Eggers to tell his story. In his preface to their book, *What Is the What* (2006), Deng writes that "I am blessed to have lived to inform you that even when my hours were darkest, I believed that someday I could share my experiences with others. This book is a form of struggle, and it keeps my spirit alive to struggle...since you and I exist, together we can make a difference!" (xv).

Much of the accumulated work in this dissertation emanates from questions that arise from this quotation. Who is Deng writing to, rather, who is "you"? What kind of reader does he conjure with his writing? What are readers to make of his darkest hours? The book describes his violent separation from his family, his encounters with quiet and brutal deaths during his

journeys and in the camps, a period of temporary blindness caused by malnutrition, his social death caused by his extended existence in refugee camps, and his inability to thrive in Atlanta where he was unequipped to navigate his path toward college admission while working low-wage jobs. His story demands sympathy from readers as its opening gambit, but I argue in this dissertation that sympathy is inadequate for the action Deng calls for at the end of his quotation. What kind of difference does he hope for us to make together? In other words, what kind of transformative reading does he hope readers will engage in? Finally, Deng is a storyteller and a speaker, not a writer. Without Eggers, still a darling of American publishing, his voice could never have found the audience it did, and he would not have been writing a preface to a book about his personal story. Yet their collaboration prompts questions of voice and authenticity. The book is both a novel *and* an autobiography, fiction and non-fiction combined, the only way Eggers could accommodate the memories of a young person, long past conversations, and horrific events. It is the coordination of a black African's stories told to a white Western writer who crafted it for Western audiences. Is it, then, an authentic account or have the translations across format, geography, time, and experience contributed to Deng's erasure so Eggers could make the story palatable for "you," its readers? Their collaboration gave Deng the access he needed to norm his story for the dominant discourse of Western publishing, the culmination of an extended struggle that left him thinking "the whole world had turned blind eyes on the fate that was befalling me and the people of southern Sudan" (xiii). Yet today, more than thirty years on, South Sudan and Sudan have erupted in more violence, causing more death and displacement. Have we made a difference together? Is it reasonable to expect that stories can or should?

These questions course through each of the narratives discussed in this dissertation and, importantly, through their reception in paratexts and reviews. I start with *What Is the What*

because I argue that its publication in 2006 marks the beginning of a particular type of refugee narrative, one that contains an appeal to sympathy and then a demand for readers to ask more questions, specifically, questions about their involvement in the narrative: What caused the situation about which the reader sympathizes? What part do “we,” the readers, play in that geopolitical situation? What might we gain from keeping political, environmental, and spatial relations as they are, despite the suffering detailed in the narrative? What sort of cosmopolitan caché do we gain by consuming narratives that cross our own borders into global hot spots or, more appropriately, global hell holes?

The reception of refugee narratives belies this complexity as publishers’ promotional materials and reviewers often flatten accounts like Deng’s into simple narratives that I term “the refugee imaginary.” In the refugee imaginary, which I consider a reading practice marshalled by cultural mediators that extract a single—usually dehistoricizing—narrative out of complex texts, a triumphant (and often lucky) individual leaves savagery and precarity elsewhere, has a hard journey, and is eventually “saved” by a successful arrival here in the West. That lens shifts the Western savior model only slightly toward a less individuated West-as-savior model that disappears the reasons why the person is seeking refuge, ignores the process of arriving, and reinforces the imaginary for Western readers. It also obscures the fact that only a small percentage of the world’s refugees seek refuge in the Global North. The vast majority—75%—are hosted by low- and middle-income countries and “the Least Developed Countries provide asylum to twenty percent of the total” (“Refugee Data Finder”). By marketing and managing readers’ receptions, the publishing industry reproduces simplified, unnuanced versions of human struggle and geopolitics even as the books they publish address both. I argue in this dissertation that a new corpus of refugee literature that begins with Eggers blew up the refugee imaginary by

presenting an unignorable balance: forced to leave one cruel, precarious situation, migrants engage in dangerous journeys over long distances only to arrive in the West to border restrictions and poverty that are equally cruel and uncertain. To understand the tensions inherent in the refugee imaginary, this dissertation tracks the evolution of narratives by and about *recent* refugees, those who have been displaced since the 1990s, the reception of those narratives despite the multifaceted stories told within, and their abrupt disappearance after the publication of Jeanine Cummins' 2020 novel *American Dirt*.

*American Dirt* was excoriated for appropriation; critics charged that a white American author had no right to tell the fictional story of a Mexican mother and son fleeing drug cartels for the American border, especially when Mexican writers telling similar stories were not considered commercially viable. Even though the book went on to sell more than three million copies, which would normally create a flood of similarly centered publications, only two novels about recent refugees have been published since: Omar El Akkad's *What Strange Paradise* (2021) and E. Lily Yu's *On Fragile Waves* (2021), both of which are discussed here. The chapters that follow both complicate and sympathize with concerns about appropriation but make the point that the process of seeking refuge, particularly away from recent conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan, Venezuela, and Ukraine, precludes narrative production—the journey is too emotionally uncertain, physically dangerous, and materially lacking. Any narrative composed while in pursuit of an arrival is always mediated by someone else somewhere else.

For fear of another publicity and social media disaster over appropriation like *American Dirt*, the American publishing industry has virtually ceased publishing fictional refugee narratives even though political instability, war, economic need, and climate change are predicted to increase the number of displaced people worldwide to a billion by 2050 (Vince 209).

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports 110 million forcibly displaced people worldwide in 2023, a number that comprises refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants who are classified as internally displaced people due to war, political instability, gang violence, climate disaster, or economics (“Refugee Data Finder”). There is no internationally accepted legal definition of a migrant and Amnesty International reports that many people “don’t fit the legal definition of a refugee but could nevertheless be in danger if they went home (“Refugees...”). Legal distinctions between the three categories are determined by receiving countries, which means Western governments control who is allowed entry based on shifting definitions of groups of people that serve the receiving country, not the needs or rights of individuals fleeing persecution, poverty, or instability. While I am careful to make distinctions throughout this dissertation, the terms are often used interchangeably, especially by politicians seeking to sow fear and confusion. In addition, bureaucratic backlogs are so long that a person seeking to claim asylum or gain refugee status can wait in a homeless, stateless, label-less limbo for years. In 1951, Hannah Arendt despaired of a similar situation post-WWII, writing that “what is unprecedented is not the loss of a home but the impossibility of finding a new one. This [is] a problem not of space but of political organization” (1951, 293). Arendt’s observation gains in prescience as crises brew at the border between Mexico and America today and politicians continue to use immigration reform as political dynamite. Amidst his own party’s calls to shut the American southern border and expel all migrants in the country illegally, Mike Johnson, the current Speaker of the House, declared in early 2024 that “now is not the time for comprehensive immigration reform” (Brooks). With millions on the move and millions more predicted, will the right time be when the only politics left available are what Christian Parenti terms “the politics of the armed lifeboat” (11)? I hope not and throughout this dissertation, I look to novels and non-

fiction narratives to offer new ways of considering refugees beyond criminals or child-like beggars in need of Western relief.

Wrapped into my recitation of numbers, terminology, and politics is my belief that reading can be transformative and that literature can move people to make change. Martha Nussbaum writes that “the literary imagination is an essential part of both the theory and the practice of citizenship” and Berthold Brecht urges that “art should not be a release valve, but a combustion engine” (42). Yes! Yet the revolutionary zeal I invest in the power of books and reading is tempered by reality and technology. In her blistering essay “The Banality of Empathy,” Namwali Serwell asks “if witnessing suffering firsthand doesn’t necessarily spark good deeds, why do we think art about suffering will?” Good point, proven over and over again by political inaction and bankrupt imaginaries packed with solutions that begin and end with higher and longer walls that force me to ask, with Wendy Brown, “What fantasies of national purity and innocence do walls hope to gratify?” (115). Walls, of course, perform illusions of strength that keep “them” out while protecting “us” inside, performative artifice that presumes unresolvable differences between them and us and the possibility of an impenetrable barrier. Brown argues that the desire for and reliance on walls signifies, instead, fear and weakness, a position that contributes to understanding the resistance to reading refugee narratives beyond ways that fit the refugee imaginary. I attribute this resistance to multiple limiting and engrained challenges that occlude the fullness of refugee voices and limit readers’ ability or interest in questioning their involvement in the narratives that compel their sympathy. In the series of questions that follow, I address these challenges as the framing elements of this dissertation. Said in a less elegant way, they are the sticks I use to prod each narrative and its reception.

## What are the limits of sympathy in refugee narratives?

Starting in 2006 with Deng and Eggers, the default mode for reading and reviewing refugee narratives has been through sympathy. Nussbaum defines sympathy as akin to compassion, “a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person’s undeserved misfortune...[which] includes a judgement that the other person’s distress is bad” (2001, 301-302). Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* provides a useful comparison here. Although the novel was deeply racist and reinforced stereotypes about Black Americans, it also marshalled sympathy, which had a powerful and positive effect on the attitudes of White Americans toward Blacks that swelled the Abolitionist movement and helped lay the foundations for the Civil War.

Refugee narratives have been written and reviewed to evoke sympathy, too, yet they also duplicate ideas of savagery and precarity tamed or ameliorated by Western aid and institutions. Rather than serving to help precarious situations like Deng’s, books received through sympathy tend to replicate the need for more of it or, as Craig Calhoun writes, reading and discussing refugee narratives emit the trappings of cosmopolitan citizenship because sympathy and empathy, like charity, “are seen as a moral way to relate to people who suffer, but not necessarily a way to end suffering” (35). By definition, a cosmopolitan citizen believes that citizenship transcends national boundaries, that we are all part of a world community, so we bear a responsibility to do something about our fellow citizens suffering in, say, Sudan. Reading books like *What Is the What* make us more knowledgeable about geopolitics and about the human capacity to endure under dire circumstances but, as I argue in Chapter One, this sort of sympathetic understanding is not enough. It does not get us to the point where, as Deng writes, “together we can make a difference!”

Sympathy and its adjacent emotion, empathy, which Nussbaum defines as “an imaginative reconstruction of another person’s experience,” are doors in, not final resting places, an observation that the writers covered in this dissertation realize even as book reviewers often do not (302). To be sure, sympathy and empathy are tools used by writers and reviewers to pique readers’ interests in tragedy and human suffering, but they also paper over historicity while creating literary value and meaning. As such, the very conventions of the genre depoliticize the narrative and a book becomes “good” because of the horrific story it tells and the sympathy it elicits. The conditions that prompted the horrific story evaporate into sympathy. Take, for example, *A Long Way Gone* (2007), Ismael Beah’s story of being a child soldier during Sierra Leone’s civil war, which I discuss in Chapter One. Published in the same season as *What Is the What*, it was one of the first accounts of a civil war in Africa written by an African. Writing in *Newsweek* (then still in print with a nationwide circulation around three million), Malcolm Jones exhorted his readers to “read [Beah’s] book and you will be haunted...It’s a high price to pay, but it’s worth it” (Matsa). Jones invests value in the book’s shocking story of the slaughter of Beah’s village, his escape, and eventual cooption into the army. At thirteen years old Beah was given enough drugs to keep him high for weeks at a time and a machine gun with instructions to shoot anyone who moves, something he did in towns and villages for more three years before being rehabilitated and escaping the country. Letting this story into your head is a high price to pay, according to Jones. Once seen, I presume he means, it cannot be unseen, and readers can no longer sit idly knowing what is happening in another corner of the planet; the knowing is worth it. This is the piece of Jones’ review that haunts me and, in turn, this dissertation. What, exactly, is the knowing worth and where is the knowing invested? Is it enough to know or does the knowledge place ethical demands on the reader? What feelings do reading about a small boy

high on chewable cocaine killing his fellow countrymen indiscriminately as a member of his country's army make me feel? What effort is required to move from feeling to sentiment to action to enact my cosmopolitan citizenship or am I being normed by extra-textual forces to, instead, eschew action for more stories of the same?

Even though Jones' review alerts readers to tragedy, it comforts them by making the distinction between "here" and "there" so, well, haunting. There is no challenge to readers, rather, his spatial distinction reifies the asymmetry that feeds national, institutional, and religious ideals of Western civility and humanity. We sympathize with Beah and his story and that cognitive response obscures our temporal and spatial relationship to his experience. Far from being a catalyst for action, sympathetic reading leads readers and reviewers to stories and acts of self-representation done in a certain way, thus replicating the refugee imaginary without asking deeper questions about what contributed to the civil war in Sierra Leone, why children were forced to fight it, and how Western appetites for diamonds may have fueled it. To read in a way that calls the reader to account challenges ideas of national purity and innocence that can elicit fear. As I describe throughout Chapter One, the apparatus of publication and reviewing that norms readers to look for certain narratives within refugee stories operates in much the same way that the apparatus of seeking asylum norms refugees to tell immigration agents the stories of their lives that "work," i.e., the ones that move agents to the right conclusion of a migrant's status. Reading (and processing a claim) as such is a hands-off experience that haunts the mind but goes no further.

My concern throughout this dissertation is to look to refugee narratives published since 2006 to find a mode of sympathetic appeal that does not reproduce a humanitarian appeal, meaning one that provides aid *and* works to change the conditions that cause people to need it.

Some version of sympathy is necessary. Why? Because it captures attention, but refugee narratives include much more than sympathetic appeals. In Chapter Three, I examine Behrouz Boochani's account of his time in extra-territorial detention in Papua New Guinea as he awaits asylum in Australia called *No Friend but the Mountains* (2018). Readers cannot help but sympathize with Boochani, who fled political violence in Tehran and survived two wrecks at sea only to be detained by the Australian navy after the country's conservative government passed laws prohibiting anyone arriving by boat from seeking asylum. Australia's draconian policies left Boochani in a prison camp without charge, without representation, and without hope for six years. In his book, he demands sympathy, but not the decontextualized, speechless, depoliticized type readers have become accustomed to. He uses his own voice—through a hidden cell phone, connections with friends in Iran, and a translator in Sydney—to implicate the Australian government in his precarity and Australian citizens in his exclusion. Reading his book cultivated more than sympathy. It prompted the Australian literary community to award him their highest honors for an Australian writer, even though he had never set foot in the country. It inspired Aboriginal citizens to sail a flotilla of support to the refugees being detained in Papua New Guinea. It provoked a weakening of stringent laws and the eventual closure of one of two offshore detention centers. *No Friend but the Mountains* collapsed the distance between “us” and “them,” using political and personal action. This dissertation is deeply concerned with what might happen if refugee literature was able to take down the refugee imaginary and what kind of movement its dismantling would enable. The efforts of organized Australians give some ideas of possibility but also call into question what types of interventions into governance are possible by individuals.

Boochani exposed readers to the Australian system but what kind of narrative is required to force change in American or British systems? As I write, Britain is trying to push a plan for extraterritorial detention in Rwanda through its political and legal systems despite Australia's failed human experience. (Once boats were intercepted around Australia and migrants sent to Papua New Guinea or Nauru, the number of migrants attempting the journey plunged, making the policy, called Operation Sovereign Borders, a strategic success at great human expense.) At America's southern border, migrants are corralled into unsafe border camps or risk travelling dangerous routes and giving all their savings to unscrupulous smugglers for a chance at arrival in an America ill prepared to receive them. Throughout this dissertation, I consider how different versions of a sympathetic appeal are needed to call readers to account and what more is needed to broaden affective engagements with refugee narratives that move beyond sympathy. I also explore how emerging genres that combine fiction and non-fiction and prose and poetry prompt new forms of knowing that mirror expanded ways of considering citizenship and belonging in the world.

### **Tell us your story...we can't! Can appropriation ever be appropriate?**

Critics claimed that Dave Eggers' "literary ventriloquism could hardly be bettered" because he made Achak Deng's "an authentic and affecting voice" (Jaggi). How did Eggers make Deng's voice authentic? And for whom? The very act of making someone's voice authentic seems, instead, to undercut claims of authenticity. Might the reviewer mean that by speaking with his Western voice in a Western form, Eggers made Deng's voice authentic for Western readers? That is a very different process and one that plays an important part in what kind of refugee stories can be told today and by whom. Surely, Achak Deng was authentic before he met Dave Eggers, but the conditions of possibility for reading about his life

overdetermine what he can say and constrain what can be published. In Chapter Two, I examine the constraints on voice that have evolved since *What Is the What* was published. So much has changed in the publishing industry in the intervening twenty years that if *What Is the What* landed on an agent or editor's desk today, it would never be published, not even with Eggers' imprimatur. In fact, his involvement in Deng's story, his attempt at literary ventriloquism, the skill for which he was lauded in 2006, would render the book unpublishable in the current publishing climate where demands for authenticity have cut the field of refugee narratives off at its knees. Today, the entire apparatus of telling a refugee's story interfaces with politics of representation in such a way that creating an "authentic" account is nearly impossible.

Why put the word in quotes now after using it so many times already? I tackle this question extensively in Chapters Two and Three as I try to tease out what it might mean for someone seeking refuge to write a wholly authentic account, one that would acceptably convey a "real" refugee's essential ethnicity, but would also transcend that ethnicity, one that would capture the hardship of the journey while suffering through it, one that would, despite that challenge, conform to norms of Western publishing models and so fit a genre for marketing purposes, one that would be unique but still correspond to other authenticating narratives, and one that would be written by someone who can speak about it in interviews thereby giving a personal story universal appeal. What writer could possibly fill all these requirements? In Chapter Two, I discuss how Matthieu Aikins' attempts to in his non-fiction account of seeking refuge called *The Naked Don't Fear the Water* (2022). To help his Afghani friend and translator leave Kabul for a better life in Europe, Aikins, a Canadian American journalist, disguises himself as a migrant so they can make the passage from East to West together. Twice during the journey Aikins uses his Western passports for safer travel because the smuggler's routes are too

dangerous and twice during the journey his narrative is soaked with fear: when he has to cross the Aegean Sea in a patched raft carrying three times the number of people it was made for and when he has his retinas scanned for entry into Moria, the notorious refugee camp on Lesbos in Greece. To give the most authentic account possible, Aikins disguises himself as a refugee and submits to frightening situations but, I argue, he is still in full possession of the English language, has knowledge of Western publishing norms, and has access to agents and editors. In short, he is fluent in the dominant discourse, so while his may be an authentic account of travelling *with* refugees, it is not an authentic refugee account. In my work with the book, I try to understand how that slippage impacts reception and understanding, which leaves me feeling a kinship with Aikins. We are both thinking about what it means to move with the refugee both literally and textually in ways that are not controlled by identification or sympathy, yet still acknowledge the responsibility of mediation within publishing milieux that demand it.

Aikins and Eggers are both disguised as refugees, a situation that lays bare a more concealed truth: conditions for narrative production are not present when someone is seeking refuge; some form of mediation is always necessary. Cellphones offer opportunities for fragmented narratives but even then, the actual narrative has to be constructed elsewhere, which norms it again. There is no authentic testimony from the place of the refugee; different mediations do different work so demands for authentic accounts do not create a space for more and better voices; instead, they create the situation we find in 2024, a vacuum of voices. In Chapter Three, I examine Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains* as a rare feat of production by a refugee seeking asylum from within detention. Boochani used his contraband cellphone to type out thousands of texts in Farsi via WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. The texts went to friends and refugee advocates in Tehran who forwarded them to Omid Tofighian, an Iranian-

Australian philosophy professor and translator, who formed them into English prose and poetry for publication. Boochani's deeply affecting first-person narrative was mediated by multiple voices across languages and carceral conditions. Should we question its authenticity given the journeys his texts made prior to publication? My point here, made extensively in Chapters Two and Three, is that the refugee speaking does not guarantee truth or authenticity; in fact, in order to be heard, refugee voices must be ventriloquized, squeezed, and trimmed as a condition of publication within dominant Western discourses, whether in publishing or film. These alterations create abstractions and losses to accommodate Western consumption and, in the process, violate authenticity. Maybe then, as I discuss in Chapter Two, the current genres within the industry require rethinking or expansion as a first step for bringing more voices to the market.

If conditions for narrative production are not present when one is seeking refuge, the story can only be told after the fact or in fiction, which is what Jeanine Cummins did in her novel *American Dirt*. While Eggers and Aikins acknowledged the way they spoke for and about the refugees they portrayed in their books, Cummins did not. Her omission raised a firestorm around the book's publication that I also discuss in Chapter Two. Criticism over a white author earning millions of dollars off a book about brown precarity raised hackles, as did the fact that although Mexican writers are writing stories of Mexicans fleeing violence in Mexico, they are not considered commercially viable in the American publishing industry. In effect, the publishing industry has ceded authenticity to the market so that authors outside of the dominant discourse *need* mediation to be authentic, a situation that often replicates stereotypes and repeats patterns of power. The publishing situation would almost be comical if the result was not violence in the form of erasure. Today, and for the past three years, the market is nearly devoid of novelized refugee narratives because the current standards of authenticity are impossible to

achieve and publishers will not risk what is now known in the industry as “Another American Dirt Situation,” or one that puts its author and publishing house in the line of criticism (Paul).

Even so deep into my study of refugee narratives, the vitriol and subsequent cowardice over *American Dirt* is astonishing. In her book *Appropriate*, the poet and critic Paisley Rekdal writes that reading it made her feel manipulated on all sides: “If I like the novel, does that mean I’m an easy mark for its sentimentality, or that perhaps I harbor racist fantasies about Mexico? If I dislike the book, what does my anger do but bring me into community with other like-minded critics on the internet?” (84). The book and the author were easy targets for arguments neither could ever solve—liking or not liking it did not force new immigration policies or reunite migrant children imprisoned at the border with their parents. Oprah Winfrey devoted an entire episode of her show to a discussion about whether or not a white author should be allowed to write about brown suffering without *also* discussing the problems of political organization Arendt identified, the conditions that force people to move, or the danger inherent in the journey. Notwithstanding the furor around the book, it sold a staggering three million copies. It was, as Pamela Paul wrote in *The New York Times*, “a book that resonated” despite being a problematic narrative that simply handed readers the refugee imaginary. But as I discuss in Chapters Two and Four, the refugee imaginary can often function as a doorway into different types of social action; after *American Dirt* was published, those doors were never opened.

I focus on the types of refugee narratives that have been shut down in Chapters One, Two, and Three. Certainly, refugee narratives are not a new phenomenon and many literary accounts of fleeing the ravages of WWII and Communism were published in the second half of the twentieth century. But since 2006, they have loosely coalesced into a genre that describes the flight and movement of a particular type of depoliticized, dehistoricized protagonist, usually a

young African or Middle Eastern man. They are typically co-authored with a Western writer who, like Eggers did in *What Is the What*, norms the story toward emergent genre conventions that fulfill the refugee imaginary. Although Chapter Three focuses on narratives that align with some of the genre's authenticating conventions, it also marks a turn in 2018 toward books that demand accountability from the West. By that I mean that the protagonist is newly historicized and politicized and has, as Edward Said might say, taken "permission to narrate," even if through a Western interlocutor (2019, 245). The result is narrative *and* indictment that disables the warm fuzzies of any sort of self-congratulatory ending. Perhaps this alteration of the refugee imaginary is one reason more books within the genre are not being published? Maybe they tell a story readers are uncomfortable reading? By way of an answer, Chapter Four looks at texts outside of the genre that imagine new futures for refugees and their fictional representation. Books that sidestep the genre and slide into others, like science fiction or speculative fiction, are still being published. In Chapter Four, I examine the places where genre experimentation circumvents questions of voice and authenticity and opens new narrative possibilities.

### **Who is the reader, or rather, "the reader"?**

Throughout this dissertation I conjure "the reader" as if I know who this person is. I do not; the reader is always a construct, though I can look for her in two places: in internet comments and in the text itself. Online comments in places like Goodreads or Amazon offer personal reactions to books and in Chapter One I quote some of them to mark distinctions between the way readers and reviewers discuss what they have read. While internet comments can be useful for understanding readers' attitudes toward a certain book, I am cognizant that I can find an online comment to corroborate any point I want to make. Further, concerns about authenticity and appropriation have led to a trolling trend where commenters trash a book and its

author before publication, long before anyone could have read it. So while I use comments to take the pulse of reactions to a title, they are imprecise, and sales data from publishers, another way to know the reader, is also imprecise and rarely made public. Harvard Library posts that “strange as it may seem, we know of no reliable, publicly available way to get comprehensive statistics for book sales at this time” (Where can...?).

This paucity of data leaves the publishing industry with limited options, hence their efforts to mold the market for one mode of reception—say, sympathy—via one group of gatekeepers, meaning agents, editors, publicists, and now algorithms, that are ever massaging book buyers to think about a new title as it compares to an older one. For example, because you bought *What Is the What*, you will love *American Dirt*! Implicit in this piggybacking style of marketing is the fact that your buyer has purchased books before, which means she probably has extra cash to spend on books and probably has time to read them. In addition, since your buyer reads books she probably has a higher level of education, which paints a loose but useful portrait of today’s readers: Educated, middle-aged or older, skewing female, and with access to disposable income. Again, this way of deducing readers is highly imprecise, but it offers a way to make likely assumptions about readers’ interests and buying habits.

Alternatively, I can look for the reader within the text. Wolfgang Iser argues that every text has an “implied reader.” By that he means that every text constructs a reader who “embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect—predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself” (34). Looking back at the communion Achak Deng writes into his preface—“since you and I exist, together we can make a difference!”—the reader is constituted as an active participant in Deng’s story, in Sudan’s story, and in America’s story. The predisposition Deng imposes is quite broad;

he imagines that our existence together, now, on this planet, is enough for making change, so the reader is someone presumed receptive to take what is written and find a way to act on it. The implied readers for refugee literature within this dissertation are also fluent in the dominant discourse within which the authors are writing, know what efforts are necessary to move from feeling to cognition to action, and are adept with the textual formats used to convey the story—they are consumers of narrative in book form. In short, the implied reader for refugee literature is a person in a position of privilege, someone with a passport and a vote who can use what is written to make change. Constituting the readership thus sharpens the audience Deng conceives without closing the possibility for other types of readers to come to refugee stories, including refugees themselves, but the utility of these narratives for refugees is debatable.

In Chapter One, I introduce the South African writer Jonny Steinberg. In his book *A Man of Good Hope* (2015), Steinberg chronicles the life of Asad, a Somali forced from Mogadishu at eight years old who, over a span of ten years, made his way through Africa down to Cape Town. When Steinberg read what he had written back to Asad, Asad did not like it all, did not like the idea of his life on the page and out of his control. Steinberg confesses that although he felt he had given Asad “this enormous attention, this enormous care, this enormous recognition, having created a record...[Asad] didn’t like the record at all. He didn’t find the record untrue. It just wasn’t useful for him” (Hoffman 47). While Asad’s reaction in his written narrative does not exclude anyone from the ranks of readership, his disinterest contributes to the conclusion that the implied reader is not a refugee but, rather, a person with citizen privilege.

In the chapters that follow I acknowledge these privileged readers, but I also allow for differences. Might texts imply more than one type of reader and might knowledge in one reader produce a different response than in another? Iser’s methodology can help me answer the first

question because I can extract different readers from the text, but to answer the second, I have no choice but to turn to internet comments that display how readers make meaning based on language and reception. Both offer ways to imagine the reader as a receptor at a time when new ways to conceive solutions to current global problems—beyond slapping on a label of “crisis”—must come from ongoing creative understandings of writers’ offerings. Amitav Ghosh writes in *The Great Derangement* that future generations will blame leaders and politicians for failing to address climate change and the crises that surround it, “but they may well hold artists and writers to be equally culpable—for the imagining of possibilities is not, after all, the job of politicians and bureaucrats” (135). Art that imagines possibilities thus conjures readers receptive to them. In this moment in publishing where concerns about voice and who can speak for whom have muzzled refugee narratives, readers implied or otherwise are left only with the words of politicians and journalists to constitute their imaginaries, a sorry state not only for refugees but for the idea that together we might make a difference.

### **What kind of transformative reading can refugee narratives inspire?**

Work on this dissertation has been transformative for me; I hope that by identifying and extrapolating from the identified corpus of books and films discussed, I can generate conversations that move beyond the refugee imaginary. I started with the idea that my dissertation would construct a refugee body through literature, that each body part integral to a refugee’s journey and revealed through storytelling would lead to a greater understanding of the whole in much the same way that a medical humanities book I admire, *Adventures in Human Being*, illuminated both radical and quiet aspects of the human condition. I also started with the thought that borders should be abolished, even if only as an imaginary horizon. Both ideas gradually shifted as I learned more about immigration policies worldwide and read more

narratives by and about refugees and those receiving and caring for them. Following Wolfgang Iser, Catherine Belsey writes that “the formal properties of the text construct a role for the reader” (31). With the accumulated knowledge of the texts contained in this dissertation, I needed to figure out what role they were constructing for me. Rather than building another refugee image or waging a Sisyphean battle against bureaucracy, I found two roles: First, I am teaching English to refugees and new immigrants at the Refugee Women’s Alliance (ReWA), a weekly endeavor in praxis that brings every piece of writing about a refugee’s arrival into sharp relief. Second, I am using this dissertation to build an indictment against a failed and tired refugee imaginary in which the West is a monolith of care and relief and refugees, and by extension their countries of origin, are monoliths of cruelty, pain, and despair. Both ideas engage in social norming that constitute a particular readership by a thoroughly normed industry that professes to act for marginalized voices while ossifying the power dynamics that replicate marginalization.

Refugee narratives contain multiple perspectives and, often, multiple indictments that construct varying readers and roles, few of which conform to the imaginary grasped at by publishers and reviewers. In Chapter Three I describe two books and a film that overtly address the refugee imaginary then focus on their shifting media coverage. Many reviewers of one of the novels, Omar El Akkad’s *What Strange Paradise* (2021), expressed surprise at the dire situation he presents of a young Syrian boy chased from his home by government forces, then chased across the Mediterranean by hunger, then chased across the Greek island of Kos for being a refugee. This surprise despite the fact that just six years prior, the world was shocked by the photograph of two-year old Alan Kurdi lying dead on a Turkish beach. As millions of Syrians poured into Europe in 2015, outrage was intense and welcoming, but it was eventually replaced

by xenophobia and political apathy while instability in North Africa and the Middle East spread and the journeys away from danger grew more dangerous. In El Akkad's fiction, a young boy lying face down on the beach hops up and runs into the woods, an act of poetic license that imagines a "What If?" for Alan Kurdi. Writing in *The Washington Post*, Ron Charles observes that even though the novel "celebrates a few radical acts of compassion, it does so only by placing those moments of moral courage against a vast ocean of cruelty." The paradise invoked by El Akkad's title is the West and it is very strange, indeed, for the boy, Amir, whose every encounter with Western authority is as brutal as the authority he encountered in Syria.

In Chapter Four, I ask what kind of change stories like *What Strange Paradise* can incubate. As a fictional refugee narrative, it cultivates transformative ideas so readers can contribute to imagining solutions for the future. Literature rarely changes political conditions—even though Boochani's *No Friend but the Mountains* inspired changes in Australia—but it can imagine non-apocalyptic ways forward so that when climate change and political instability force massive demographic shifts from Global South to Global North in upcoming decades, readers in the Global North do not meet the change on the barricades ready to shoot. It can also contain moments of transcendence, as in Boochani's narrative, which is filled with Persian ghazals, an ancient form of poetry of longing and loss and his narrative form of choice when the emotions of what he wants to convey overwhelm his prose. Rita Felski describes literary work "as a form of aesthetic particularity that is also a threshold, opening out onto other levels of cultural and sociopolitical life" (9). In equal measure, she warns that "conflating revolution in art with revolution in life is a peculiarly modern mistake, guaranteed to inspire absurdly high hopes for the transformative energies of texts" (109). Within the next four chapters, I try to understand how narratives about refugees negotiate crossing thresholds into other aspects of readers' lives to

create, if not revolution, then altered relationships to humanitarian action and to the kinds of identities refugees must produce to be heard.

Changing political conditions requires all sorts of imaginaries and in my writing of this dissertation on culture and narrative, I devote considerable attention to how narratives attempt cultural and geopolitical repair, both at the level of the psyche and on a large social scale. In Chapter Four, I look at the residue of trauma after arrival as it manifests in narratives in the form of ghosts. The trauma of seeking refuge lingers for the characters in one of Viet Thanh Nguyen's short stories from *The Refugees* (2017) and in E. Lily Yu's novel *On Fragile Waves* (2021), and yet their fictions use ghosts to form narrative sutures that sew deaths from the past together with the living characters' need to fully inhabit their present. Each story offers readers a glimpse at the brutality of refugee journeys and the baggage those forced to take them carry into their arrival. They also offer a glimpse at repair by narrating characters who make peace with past memories and so transform them from anchors to reconciled partners. Arriving is no guarantee of settling into a new place. Nguyen and Yu write of the lingering trauma of seeking refuge that extends deep into arrival.

At the end of Chapter Four, I consider two novels that operate on a societal level to both envision a world with transformed borders that repair traumatic journeys and offer alternate ideas for refugee futures. What will happen when so many people are on the move that borders can no longer contain them? Mohsin Hamid suggests freedom of movement facilitated by magical doors that let anyone journey to and settle wherever they want. His novel, *Exit West* (2017), uses magical realism for readers to envision a world of blended colors and cultures mixed and managed by abundant housing and political regrouping. In his speculative fiction novel, *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), Kim Stanley Robinson imagines housing—and a living wage—as

human rights. His version of the not-so-distant future is devastated by climate change, but he maintains existing national borders for the sake of strong central banks and stable currencies. Countries can have immigration quotas but the number of spaces available for people fleeing political instability or climate disasters always exceeds the number of people desiring them.

These are inventive futures, to be sure, but they serve as a spark for the impoverished creativity of today, which Amitav Ghosh calls our great derangement. Ghosh's main concern is climate change, and he contends that part of the blame for our collective inaction can be put on authors of serious fiction who are overly concerned with character interiority yet pay no mind to the environment. This lack of creativity in literature bleeds over to culture writ large. Interestingly, Ghosh contends that the biggest hindrance to fighting climate change is the nation state, devoted as it is to the interests of a particular group of people. He considers climate change "an unresolvable problem for modern nations in terms of their biopolitical mission and the practices of governance that are associated with it" (160). As if answering Ghosh's call for serious literature that concerns the environment, Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* is consumed by it, and what the near future holds for our current ways of living. In his future imaginary, Robinson considers the nation state an essential building block from the past, something old on which to hang the new. His reasoning is in tension with Ghosh, but both are thinking creatively about transforming the world order into something sustainable and livable and thus they constitute an implied reader with similar concerns for the future. Nevertheless, literature is a limited catalyst for change. Viet Thanh Nguyen argues that literature "changes the world of readers and writers, but [it] does not change the world until people get out of their chairs, go out in the world, and do something to transform the conditions of which the literature speaks" (2018, 20). Again, yes!

Nguyen's charge ripples through this dissertation, which seeks to extend to readers the onus Ghosh put on artists and writers. At a time when millions of people are on the move, when the principles that enshrine definitions and protections for refugees are being sorely tested, and when environmental and financial precarity force movement, the time for interventions is now. The books discussed here elucidate the conditions that must be seized in this "moment of danger," as Walter Benjamin writes, despite the current climate where demands for certain types of voice, production, and reception have drowned out the danger of the moment. Today's trickle of narratives intensifies the need for new imaginaries that buck traditional modes of publication and smash the mirrors erected around authenticity. My hope is that the chapters that follow spark interventions that turn readers—editors and reviewers included—into active relays coaxed toward different types of being, new modes of social action, and new imaginaries that lay to rest illusions of scarcity.

## Chapter 1 The Literary Imaginary: Constructing the Refugee through Genre

### 1.1 Who is a refugee?

Who is a refugee? In his essay “Reflections on Exile,” Edward Said wrote that refugees are “the creation of the twentieth-century state,” so formed by a word that has become political, “suggesting large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance” (2000, 181). Said time-stamps refugees not because there were none prior to the twentieth century, but because politicians and governments honed them into a political tool over the course of the century in the service of other aims, particularly nation building around like-minded and like-colored individuals. He conjures a powerful image with his definition; there is never just one refugee, they come in herds, like animals, detached from history and agency, and always in need of some material thing the Global North can provide, even though the Global South harbors the vast majority of the world’s refugees. Throughout the century, refugees were relatively voiceless. Their stories were told by people peering into their situation with the capacity to retreat once the moment of emergency that called attention to their plight was stabilized and little was left to report but the wait for a new home. This wait often took place—and still does—in refugee camps. The twentieth century has been called the “century of camps,” and while that appellation immediately brings to mind the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, the French anthropologist Michel Agier writes that “what is happening on the world scale today is the extension and greater sophistication of various forms of camps that make up a mechanism for keeping away undesirables and foreigners of all kinds—refugees, displaced, ‘rejected’” (3-4).

The pairing of Said and Agier gives one idea of who a refugee is and how the scale and nature of their containment extends and often worsens the precarity from which they originally

fled. The people they describe are undesirable and unknowing, blown by forces outside of history and incapable of existing without the aid of others, or so political rhetoric informs us.

According to the United Nations, a refugee is someone who,

“owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.” (“Convention and Protocol” 3)

This definition, enshrined in the UN’s 1951 Refugee Convention and reinforced by its 1967 Protocol, delimits an individual human through varied layers of fear. It is a political line of demarcation temporally situated in the twentieth century that recognizes a person’s right to live free from fear, thus making “refugee” a political and juridical term that affords its bearer legitimized protection from fear. The person the label describes is neither bewildered nor aggregated, he is, above all, frightened and in need of refuge; his situation requires two actors: one that creates fear and one that assuages it. The latter is in short supply. By mid-2023, the UNHCR counted 36.4 million refugees, roughly one third of the nearly 110 million forcibly displaced persons world-wide (“Refugee Data Finder”). The other 74 million are defined by what Roger Zetter calls the “fractioning of the label ‘refugee’ [which] conceals the political agenda of *restricting access* to refugee status in the seemingly necessary apolitical bureaucratic processes” (2007, 189-90, emphasis in original). Zetter notes that this bureaucratic naming amounts to more labels and fewer refugees, thereby using language to make “economic migrants” less deserving or less urgent than people fleeing war (depending on which war and

where) because the term implies they made a choice to leave poverty and were not forced out of their homes. Used in this way, the label of “refugee” has to work in a political ecosystem that categorizes based on legal status as determined by receiving countries, not based on need, so who can and cannot be counted as a “real” refugee is detached from the originating fear and, I argue, the intent of the original UN definition. To be an “official” refugee means protected bureaucratic status; to be a migrant, forced or otherwise, means very little.

In this chapter I want to know what Refugee Literature tells us about refugees. Who do refugees say they are in their own writing or through their western interlocutors? What challenges and connections do they reveal to readers that are different from narratives conveyed through political sound bites, bureaucratic definitions, or humanitarian solicitations? The three books discussed in this chapter introduce readers to three young African men, each a victim of his country’s civil war and each now American after dramatically different journeys. Their narratives complicate refugee status as a safe arrival and expand readers’ understandings of current refugee crises. Beyond political rhetoric, I look at another layer of mediation between the writer and the reader: the publishing industry. In what follows, I interrogate the publishing industry’s presentation of refugee literature as a collection of triumphant personal stories, a description that diminishes collective problems, occludes the nuances of desperate journeys, and creates further separation between the Western reader and the foreign suffering “other,” a person already lensed through deeply layered bureaucratic labelling. Between industry paratexts and commercial book reviews, refugee literature is pitched as a type of “trauma porn,” art created and commodified around the exploitation of marginalized people’s trauma for which the only reader response is sympathy and then a resumption of life as normal. In response to this limited framing, I show the nascent genre of Refugee Literature to be a call to action for refugees *and* for

readers. The books discussed collapse geographic distance and lived experience as marginalized writers use narrative to write themselves into existence despite the way they are “officially” categorized.

In addition to refugees, the UN recognizes internally displaced people (IDPs) and asylum seekers, those who need international protection but whose refugee status has not yet been legally determined. It also recognizes a category of “other” people in need of international protection; they are stateless from myriad causes, whether environmental catastrophe, violence, economic need, or political fear. Unless this broad group has access to official refugee status, they are “just” migrants or any of a number of marginalizing terms such as asylum seeker, failed asylum seeker, forced migrant, illegal migrant, undocumented immigrant, economic refugee, illegal alien, overstayer, or various permutations of all these terms. Throughout this dissertation, many of these terms will appear based on the labels the writers and their characters use. They will often be paired with political rhetoric to show how labels are used to create an aura of fakery and malintent on the part of those fleeing fear. Whatever the cause or the label, 110 million people have left or been forced from their homes in search of new ones, a greater population than all but thirteen nations. Just 25% of those are seeking refuge in Western countries (“Refugee Data Finder”). The UN acknowledges that there is a diminishing number of prospects when it comes to quick resettlement—the problem of displacement is far outstripping solutions, especially after more than six million refugees fled Ukraine after Russia’s invasion in February 2022. But as Hannah Arendt wrote, pre-dating Edward Said by more than a quarter century, “What is unprecedented is not the loss of a home but the impossibility of finding a new one. This [is] a problem not of space but of political organization” (1973, 293). Arendt’s quote courses through the rest of this dissertation, highlighting the individual toll of forced migration, labeling,

and precarity on the homeless and stateless that began in the early twentieth century and continues through today, with numbers that portend looming disaster.

The ballooning number of today's homeless and stateless populations make Said's comments all the more prescient. Even though they are all over the world, with more than 75% in low- and middle-income countries, the "imaginary" of refugees in the aggregate matches the rhetoric used to describe them ("Figures..."). From "herds" and "swarms," to "hordes" and "caravans of criminals" part of an "invasion" that has "injured" and "attacked," the pejorative labels pinned on refugees are meant to invoke fear and achieve political results (Yaxley, Yen). Shifts toward conservative and nationalist governments across the Global North over the last two decades show that these words work because they inform a "social imaginary." Charles Taylor's idea of a "social imaginary" is essential for understanding the politics of refugee management and migrating people. Taylor defines it as the way people collectively imagine their social existence, their place in the world, their relationships, and how they fit in in ways that are both normative and complex. It incorporates the expectations we have of each other in society to facilitate how we work together. Our imaginary, then, "is a sense of how things usually go...interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go, of what missteps would invalidate the practice" (24). Politicians use the rhetoric above to convey that allowing refugees into their country would be the misstep that would invalidate the process of building a nation as it ought to be according to their social imaginary, which is generally limited to skin tone and religion. Using imagery, language, and labelling, refugees are painted as invading hordes for which borders, walls, and patrols must be amped up and reinforced to protect those "inside." The individuality of the UN's definition is lost to tactics like these that elevate border security against

groups, consequently transforming the fear of the individual refugee into the receiving nation's fear of the refugee horde.

Humanitarian organizations present refugees and the crises that force them with their own form of political speech in order to keep money, medicine, and material aid flowing. They, too, stereotype with language and create “controlling images,” often in an effort to elicit sympathy (Collins S17). Craig Calhoun calls this the “emergency imaginary,” a strategy in which situations are curated to show human suffering as the cause of an unexpected event that can be remediated with aid, even if the event was the consequence of long simmering tensions or long predicted environmental upheaval. The emergency imaginary presents an event viewers are accustomed to seeing because the imagery used in news sources is “selected in ways that conform to iconic templates and norms—not least about what men should be shown doing and women should be shown experiencing, of how to represent violence, suffering, and need” (33). This tactic reinforces representative norms, and it also reinforces norms of response that contribute to Taylor's social imaginary. In an emergency, stories of need, told in the way we are used to hearing them, elicit the sympathy we are expected to feel and the charity we are expected to extend. And while sympathy and charity differ in nature and impact, they are often used as ways to offload guilt. We pray, make care packages, send money, and count on governments and NGOs from the Global North to do the work of setting up camps and administering care. The image of “the white savior” dominates this imaginary and though immediate need is often assuaged, Calhoun writes that “charity is typically seen as a moral way to relate to people who suffer, but not necessarily a way to end suffering” (35). In addition, there are limits to sympathy's efficacy and the ability to rely on it if compassion fatigue sets in. On a population wide scale, Agier contends that “every policy of assistance is simultaneously an instrument of

control over its beneficiaries,” a nicer form of colonization that establishes permanent givers and receivers, those free to come and go as they please, and those confined to zones (camps) where they receive enough to sustain life at its most minimal (12).

## 1.2 What is Refugee Literature?

Granted, this is a grim look at humanitarianism and the politicized refugee, but it establishes the milieu for the stories by and about refugees that I am concerned with here. Until publishers in the Global North started signing and widely releasing refugee accounts, their readers had these two ways to understand a refugee’s plight. I would like to say they are conflicting ways—the one meant to invoke fear, the other to evoke sympathy—but, in effect, they have similar ends. Both establish the refugee as “other,” both dehistoricize individuals and events, and both create asymmetrical relationships between “us” here in comfortable Western lives and “them” wanting entry. In that configuration, those in the West are always elevated as the givers and “they” are always receivers, a neat imaginary that presumes wholistic fulfillment with material aid from one end and perpetual gratitude from the other with no room for complexities that might arise from, among many other things, a maxim Dina Nayeri presents in *The Ungrateful Refugee*: “Accepting charity is an ugly business for the spirit” (117). The refugee narratives that started appearing in Western bookstores around 2006/2007 took the first steps toward complicating fear/sympathy binaries, mediating between the two by writing the individual refugee into existence with stories that inspired fear *and* sympathy, and a range of other feelings, not least shock, recognition, and the power associated with expanded knowledge. In this regard, the literary appeal is allied with humanitarian solicitation through sentiment and sympathy, modes Western readers recognize and have some comfort with, but refugee literature diverges from humanitarianism when it presses for other structures of connection and other

manifestations of sympathy. This effort is further challenged by patterns within the publishing industry and norms of book reviewing that constrain the emergence of new structures and understandings and in so doing, contribute to current crises, rather than to prompt new imaginings.

Prior to this particular moment in publishing, American literary accounts of modern refugee journeys outside of anthropology and ethnography were scarce. Accounts of the immigrant experience *within* the United States over many centuries were readily accessible, and many look back at life in another country while recounting trips to Western shores, but in the fledgling field of Refugee Studies, academics had few literary or first-person narratives to pair with the post-1965 immigration period, a time when migrations to the United States reached and exceeded the peak immigration periods of the first two decades of the twentieth century (Martin). The field itself only coalesced when the Refugee Studies Centre (RSC) was founded at the University of Oxford in 1982. Then as now, its goal is to integrate the production of knowledge within the social sciences concerned with forced migrations in order to end or prevent the suffering of those torn from their homes by powers out of their control regardless of the labels applied by shifting bureaucratic winds. The field has expanded in the intervening forty years, taking up residence in various university departments, including International Studies, Law, Anthropology, Sociology, and Global Health, and has become the subject for conference of bachelor's and master's degrees. Literature of forced migration has taken longer to come together. Given the intensity and hardship of the journeys considered in Refugee Studies, literary accounts seem almost impossible to produce. How can a person compose when they are running for their life, maybe with a family in tow? Or maybe they are just a child only knowledgeable of oral traditions? Where could they write? And on what? Should they write a linear narrative

typical of the West? How would they know that style would appeal to Western publishers who make books for Western readers? These questions point to the fact that producing a literary narrative as a migrant requires more than the experience and a way with words. It also requires a Western interlocutor, a computer or cellphone, and connectivity with or immersion into wider systems of knowledge, all of which have evolved since Refugee Studies came into being. Broadening access to the internet in the late 1990s and the explosion of cell phone ownership around 2005, made the latter two things possible and facilitated the former. In addition, waits for asylum or relocation have stretched into decades, allowing time for reflection and transcription, even if the writing is in the Notes app of a cellphone.

Some of the first modern stories of the crises that precipitated fleeing, migration, and their ensuing arrival appeared on bookshelves in the mid 2000s and Refugee Studies got narratives to accompany statistics and field work. Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone*, Dinaw Mengetsu's *The Beautiful Things The Heaven Bears*, and Dave Eggers' *What Is the What* were published within six months of each other and now, with almost twenty years of hindsight, I use this chapter to argue that they carved a narrative triptych of existing as a modern refugee: the being that requires leaving, the waiting that grinds life to a standstill, and the arriving, a deceptively decisive term that never lives up to its clipped connotation of closure.

Beah's memoir recounts his childhood in Sierra Leone before the country erupted into civil war and warring armies recruited, then drugged, children into committing its worst atrocities. At thirteen, Beah became a child soldier. With minimal training, he was given an AK-47 and abundant quantities of "brown brown," a mixture of cocaine and gunpowder meant to keep him high and trigger happy indefinitely. He cannot figure how many people he killed, though his blood-soaked story details enough to horrify the most hardened reader. Eventually

recognized as intelligent and worth saving by his company commander, he was sent to a UN rehabilitation program in Freetown and later represented Sierra Leone in New York City as part of a UN children's delegation warning of the effects of war on children. A chance encounter with a storyteller hired by the UN to entertain the delegates in New York sparked a friendship that facilitated his immigration to the United States, where he earned a college degree at Oberlin, and found publishing success. In *The New York Times*' review of *A Long Way Gone*, William Boyd asks how "anyone comes through such unrelenting ghastliness and horror with his humanity and sanity intact," but Beah's broad smile in the book jacket photo shows that clearly he somehow has. His is a unique account—as an African witnessing and participating in an African war, he tells a harrowing tale of luck and survival at a grave cost.

The memoir details Beah's individual story, even though other lives can be pieced into existence based on his interactions with them: the terrified residents of the war torn villages he and his band of boys pass through before being forced into the army, the village chief and elders who lets the boys go (as opposed to beheading them) because Beah break dances to a cassette tape of early rap by LL Cool J and Naughty by Nature, the therapist at the UNICEF rehab center in Freetown who patiently administers to boys damaged from years of being juiced on amphetamines and trained to kill everything that moved. Beah's experiences of massacres, genocide, and mutilations are almost unimaginable, though he writes with such lucid, matter-of-fact prose, the reading experience is grounding. His story is easily received as a tragedy far away, and Beah as having been rescued and brought to safer shores, but he opens the book with such a prescient observation, looking away is complicated. He writes that "there were all kinds of stories about the war that made it sound as if it was happening in a faraway and different land. It wasn't until refugees started passing through our town that we began to see that it was

happening in our country” (5). The dawning reality Beah describes is familiar to the stories in Refugee Literature as an emerging genre: first there is a whiff of trouble from afar, then the frightening tales are from closer places, places you can call up in memories and images from a visit or a telling, then displaced people start appearing with reports that make your hair stand on end, then it is time for you to grab what you can and join those fleeing! I contend that the books discussed here also function as initial harbingers that make the refugee crisis seem distant and faraway, although the stakes for the Western reader are much lower—we are not being displaced, only being prodded to wake up.

Using a sampling of books that form an archive of Refugee Literature, I make the case throughout this chapter that we are in the early stages of a new reality, but reviewers and the media surrounding this book and the two others below mediate their reception through a limited lens. Rather than heeding Beah’s comment as a warning, the book is presented as a far off tragedy, something that could never happen here. Readers are urged by reviewers to devour it because it “takes us behind the dead eyes of a child-soldier in a way no other book has,” “is a high price to pay, but...worth it,” and is “a must for every school collection,” all praise in the effort of forming cosmopolitan citizens who are cognizant of the wider world (Grossman, Matsa, Patton). This refracted vision shortchanges a refugee’s full story and directs readers toward partial understanding. Readers are made more knowledgeable about another place and maybe more worldly for the effort of reading, but the engagement is empty of self-reflection on an individual or national level. This chapter will look at the result of that shortened view, which tends to end with sympathy as a limited, replicating reaction. To echo Calhoun, it is a way to relate to suffering, not a way to solve it. Beah gives no coda to his story except that some years after escaping Freetown in the fall of 1997 and returning to New York he went on to college; we

know what happened before he came to America—it really is about a faraway land—nothing about what happened after.

Mengetsu's novel, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, situates the reader in the after, the time after escape and immigration when the “saved” life is supposed to bask in its newfound safety and thrive. The opposite is true for his main protagonist, Sepha Stephanos. Seventeen years after fleeing the Ethiopian Civil War, he and the small convenience store he has owned for a decade are disintegrating in Logan Circle, their scruffy Washington, DC, neighborhood on the cusp of gentrification. Sepha is depressed by his regression but not surprised, as he tells readers, “I did not come to America to find a better life. I came here running and screaming with the ghosts of an old one firmly attached to my back. My goal since then has always been a simple one: to persist unnoticed through the days, to do no more harm” (41). This acknowledgement of the weight immigrants can carry with them, the way it drags on their relocated lives, and how it gets mixed up with the racial baggage ever at play in America punctuates the novel. When Sepha's repetitive life is interrupted by a wealthy, white woman and her biracial daughter who move into the neighborhood, snap up a crumbling old house, and embark on a gentrifying renovation, sparks of hope and possibility come alive in him. Even though he asks how he is supposed to live in America when he has never really left Ethiopia, his relationship with Judith and her daughter, Naomi, offers an unexpected tethering to DC. Judith abruptly ends their flirtation and sends Naomi to boarding school after their newly renovated house is burned to the ground by a squatter, but this gutting forces a rebirth for Sepha. Riffing off an Ethiopian parable, he acknowledges that “a man stuck between two worlds lives and dies alone. I have dangled and been suspended long enough” (228). The opening and closing of relationships, colored by skin-tones and desire, force him to settle into one world, his American

now. To mark the shift, he uses a brick thrown through his shop window after 9/11 to prop open his door to a beautiful fall day, a sign of the tentative peace he makes with his Ethiopian past and the presence of America's dulled promises.

Critics praised Mengestu's writing, calling it "a great African novel, a great Washington novel, and a great American novel" for walking a literary tightrope between foreigner/citizen, black/white, rich/poor binaries and for illuminating the immigrant experience (Nixon). Mengestu plays with family and belonging, and how to have the latter without the former when you have no choice but to come running and screaming toward somewhere else. The uneasy feelings of existing between two worlds, the "eternal half other" typical of the immigrant experience but differently centered for Western readers from an Ethiopian perspective, add layers to what Beah begins in *A Long Way Gone* (Benhabib 2018, 4). The Ethiopian Red Terror is described through Sepha's flashbacks, so pieces of the fear and senseless killing that dominate Beah's account also dot Mengestu's, but the focus is on urban despair and silent loneliness. Sepha explains,

There are those of us who wake each morning ready to conquer the day and those of us who wake only because we have to. We live in the shadows of every neighborhood. We own corner stores, live in run-down apartments that get too little light, and walk the same streets day after day. We spend our afternoons gazing lazily out of windows.

Somnambulists, all of us. Someone else said it better: we wake to sleep and sleep to wake. (35)

The public invisibility of Sepha's existence is deeply embedded in his inner persona, a second liminal space that requires constant negotiations of expectation and reality. Mengestu illuminates immigrants' shaded negotiations using Theodore Roethke's poem "The Waking" to

convey life's plodding regularity, and while his writing is praised for the effort by reviewers, readers offer differing opinions.

Reviewers called it a “deeply felt novel that deserves to be read” and one that “moves the conversation forward” (Abbott, Abani). But what is the conversation? In his *Los Angeles Times* review, Chris Abani thinks it concerns immigrants and “how to be loyal to two ideas of home: the one they’ve left and the one they’ve made in America.” Sepha is suspended between the pull of his old life and the push of his new one; the result is a lifeless present that runs afoul of the triumphant immigrant stories readers are accustomed to. One Goodreads reader posts a very different response from Abani. He writes that “Sepha is such a refined, Dostoyevsky-munching languid deadbeat...He lets everything fall into graceless decay, and that’s okay by him because—well, because of a ghastly trauma suffered back in Addis Ababa when his father was shot by an imperialist lackey” (Bryant). This reviewer suggests that mopey Sepha should be a minor character in “some other Ethiopian immigrant’s story,” presumably one a bit more lively and more grateful for the opportunity to be in the west. These present as parallel judgements—certainly from differently credentialed writers—wrangling with competing observations but rooted in the tensions of Refugee Literature that this dissertation also struggles with. What about the refugees that are not exceptional? Should they be literary also-rans? What is loyalty for an immigrant? What is loyalty for a reviewer or for a person within the publishing industry for whom these stories are also business? And what of the reader whose access to information expands with the same tech that refugees access, too? How does access change the conversations? I use the books under examination in this dissertation to answer these questions in an attempt to understand the genre and the conversations. My concern is with what is occluded and what is revealed, both in the original storytelling and in the mediated paratexts that aim to

situate these primary texts within finite genre conversations even as they press against literary borders. To a one, these books are cultural mongrels, and their resulting thick stories reveal as much about the America their characters reach as they do about the places they have fled.

### 1.3 Refugee Literature's Challenge to the "Refugee Imaginary"

*What Is the What* is the center of the triptych, curiously both an autobiography and a novel that anchors the early characteristics of Refugee Literature by balancing the story of a refugee's life before, during, and after arrival. Like the two books above, it is also centered on a young African man, this one a casualty of Sudan, who at seven years old, walked eight hundred miles from his village in what is now South Sudan to Pinyudo, a refugee camp in Ethiopia. Valentino Achak Deng survived there for three years before getting chased out the country by the Ethiopian army. At ten, he walked another three hundred miles from Ethiopia to the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, where he lived for ten years before until he was offered a chance to relocate to the United States. His story is narrated from Atlanta three years after he landed at JFK Airport just a few weeks after 9/11. This chapter centers *What Is the What* not only because it covers the breadth of the other two novels, and not only because it establishes many of the authenticating gestures now familiar in Refugee Literature, but because its reception in book reviews and other mediating press so determinedly ignores parallels the author creates between violence, care, access, and precarity in the Global North and in the Global South. These omissions, discussed at length below, are an outgrowth of America's demanding amnesia and condition readers for an affective reading experience that summons disgust, sympathy, and astonishment at the main character's incredible personal narrative even while so much more lies within. Like Amitav Ghosh, who lays part of the blame for the climate crisis on serious fiction and its obsession with bourgeois individuals, I contend that the *misrepresentation* of refugee

novels has contributed to a misunderstanding of today's refugee crises. Incomplete readings by interviewers and reviewers that spread the word about the novels perpetuate "the refugee imaginary," that idea Western readers have of where refugees are and what they should be thinking and doing. *What Is the What* deliberately fractures the refugee imaginary and the particularly American social imaginary yet the paratexts around it glue things together, nudging readers back toward sympathetic reactions at the expense of a broader understanding of geopolitical entanglements.

Of the three books, *What Is the What* is the most self-aware. It addresses those who are listening and the vast majority who are not. For most of nearly six hundred pages, Deng tells his story to people who are otherwise occupied, busy in their lives as tragedies unfold around them both near and far. "When I first came to this country," he explains, "I would tell silent stories. I would tell them to people who had wronged me. If someone cut in front of me in line, ignored me, bumped me or pushed me, I would glare at them, staring, silently hissing a story to them. *You do not understand*, I would tell them. *You would not add to my suffering if you knew what I have seen*" (29, emphasis in original). He believes in the power of stories and uses them to verify his own existence, shocked that the people in Atlanta are entirely oblivious of what is happening in the world around them. His desire for listeners permeates the novel, even as he acknowledges they are not listening and worse, not hearing when they do. He feels obligated to keep talking past distancing tactics and past the initial impulse for sympathy so that the conversations ignited in all three books continue.

These three accounts convey stories of trying to arrive amidst multiplying bureaucratic hurdles to entry, increased catastrophic climate events, whether predictable or sudden, and war. I consider them the start of contemporary refugee literature because they are the first books to

appear after the internet became widespread and after cellphones provided international connectivity. Technology makes it easier to see how things are elsewhere so the extreme global inequality between, say, Colombo or Aleppo and Munich or Melbourne make the decision to move in the direction of the latter an easy one. The movement toward a better life, or at least the idea of one that is on display through digital connectivity, makes for similar geographic routes and, likewise, initiates similar patterns of experience. These three books, then, create stereotypes and controlling images in the service of their own aims, which are often to create sympathy *and* understanding in a “yes, and...” mode: *Yes*, dear reader, you should feel sorry for us; what forced us to leave, how we had to flee, and how we had to wander to find a place to land has been hell. *And* you should realize that that hell may have been caused by government policies you support. *And* you should realize that arriving and belonging are separated by an ocean of internal and external adjustments. *And* you should know that we just want to be safe so we and our children can learn and grow. Each book is a bridge between Global North and Global South binaries to show that events in different halves or quadrants of the world are interconnected. Because the three books here present characters both sympathetic and alien, mainly young men deserving of aid but outside the confines of the Western reader’s social imaginary for a fellow citizen given the horrific experiences they have been a part of or witnessed, the nudge toward separation and sympathy is easier to swallow—readers can more easily believe that the sort of violence and disorder the authors describe does not, *could not*, happen here! Yet, in fact, the narratives show that different forms of violence are happening everywhere and persist throughout the varied stages of a refugee’s journey. The archive in this dissertation makes those forms of violence visible by showing what forces—political, material, and social—benefit from their creation. Even as the resulting view frays Western social imaginaries it has done little to

change policy. And even as a transnational publishing genre germinated and took root from these books, almost twenty later the extreme geopolitical upheavals that predicated their validation have increased, leaving us to wonder what work is being done.

Refugee Literature has been published successfully, meaning to strong reviews and sales. In a time of exploding numbers of forcibly displaced people—and a commensurate number of shifts to the political right opposing them—what does Refugee Literature do? Dr. David Turton, one of RSC’s founders, argues that “there is no justification for studying, and attempting to understand, the causes of human suffering if the purpose of one’s study is not, ultimately, to find ways of relieving and preventing that suffering” (“About Us”). But as books by and about refugees have proliferated, responses to mass migrations have become less creative, more border walls have been proposed or erected, and rhetoric against refugees has become increasingly violent and vitriolic. This situation forces me to ask if the nascent genre of Refugee Literature gives Western readers a new way to address the crisis of being a refugee or familiar ways to avoid it? Are readers conditioned to read these culturally “other” texts as entertainment devoid of the urgency that Turnton demands or are they creating a crisis of conscience? Veena Das writes that narrative plays a central role in the reconstitution of self and the remaking of a social world. The resuscitation of narrative—as refugees find their voices, whether solo or through an interlocutor—is “the first step toward recreating functional social selves” (Wilson and Brown 21). In the books this chapter takes up, the refugee is resuscitated and so is the reader. Creating the precarious lives of refugees by broad bureaucratic strokes and sharp individual cuts is not happenstance; it is calculated and purposeful. The results of those actions are on display in these books and so is the West as a place of arrival, and it is not always as advertised in ours or the refugee’s imaginary. Thus, the Western reader is also resuscitated as a functioning social being,

which complicates distinctions between worlds conventionally separated as Global North or Global South, or first, second and third.

#### **1.4 *What Is the What* Begins a Conversation**

In the fall of 2006, Dave Eggers' publishing company McSweeney's released *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng: A Novel*. The book grew out of a four-year friendship and thousands of hours of conversations between Eggers, the celebrated American novelist, and Deng, a Sudanese Lost Boy who befriended Mary Williams, the adopted daughter of Jane Fonda, after she started The Lost Boys Foundation in Atlanta, Georgia. Six years earlier, the Lost Boys were a national cause célèbre; 3,600 of them were resettled in the United States in the early 2000s. They were the consequence of the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005) between the Muslim North, which imposed sharia law, and the non-Muslim south, which led an armed rebellion against it. The fighting and destruction led to famine and disease. Roughly two million people were killed and four million were displaced, including 20,000 boys (and girls, but far fewer) who were separated from their families and forced to flee their homes. Without families or tribal connections, the boys wandered on foot for months, and some for years, through war zones, deserts, hunger, and thirst, constant prey for government forces from the north, recruiting militias from the south, and animals with only a meal in mind, before being settled in massive refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya. *What Is the What* tells one boy's story, and in doing so, tells the story of thousands, a purposefully expanded representation expressed by Eggers and Deng. Although Eggers is the author, Deng's voice narrates.

The idea of co-authorship and the ways it presses against the perceived purity of the "Own Voices" movement is explored in depth in Chapter Two of this dissertation. Here, I will look at how *What Is the What* developed as hybrid storytelling using Gayatri Spivak's idea of

“strategic essentialism,” which recognizes the need to essentialize some parts of a silenced or marginalized person’s identity in order to convey the story of a larger group. I use the term hybrid because Spivak discussed strategic essentialism as the work of the silenced or marginalized group but in *What Is the What*, the work is done by Dave Eggers, a successful American author writing the voice of a Sudanese man marginalized in both East Africa and America. His was a thorny act of representation in 2006 and one that might actually be impossible today as Refugee Literature has aged and modes of self-representation have been facilitated by technology. I will also look at how the book had a strategically essentialized reception, and by that I mean that the paratexts accompanying *What Is the What* responded to Deng’s life in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya with horror and sympathy without thinking beyond the significantly larger constellations of cause and effect that Eggers writes into the story. I use the term “paratexts” following Gerard Genette’s definition, which identifies them as the elements that surround a literary text but are not part of the main body of the text itself. They are things like reviews, reading group guides, and promotional copy, which are used to influence readers to buy books and interpret them in a certain way.

Readers, of course, have their own receptive autonomy, but reading as mediated by paratextual directives creates a sense of accomplishment and admission into what Sara Ahmed terms “affective economies” of like-minded readers who experience similar emotional responses to the text (15). The “correct” affective response to *What Is the What*, based on the paratexts, is outrage, sympathy, and sheer admiration for human resilience occurring elsewhere, in this case, East Africa. Later books, which I will discuss in Chapter Three, challenge these responses as inadequate and ineffective, but in this nascent stage of genre formation, they are powerful (and familiar) marketing and consciousness raising tools that essentialize the refugee experience to

particular effect. Deng could not have written the book without Eggers, and its material success is entangled in the cultural hegemony of American publishing, but its impact on the lives of Deng, readers, and reviewers, is undeniable. Their pairing was essential for telling Deng's story to readers from the Global North—they represent a hybridization of voice and, if paratexts are set aside, a recitation of human experience that collapses the divide between first world and third world. In an interview with *The Washington Post*, Deng says, “Dave [Eggers] is an artist. I’m not only about myself in the book. The idea was to tell the most accessible story possible about the devastation so many had endured” (Thompson). In telling an aggregated story through a singular voice, Eggers’ artistry courses through the three parts of the book: Deng’s exodus from Sudan, his time in Kakuma, the Kenyan refugee camp, and his new life in the United States. This chapter seeks to understand why only two of those stories—the African ones—are elevated in paratexts and how those choices condition publishers and readers alike to essentialize refugee experiences and perpetuate a genre filled with contradictions.

Eggers and Deng play with truthful representation by calling the book both an autobiography and a novel. Their interview with *The Washington Post* makes as curious a claim in its headline as the book does with its subtitle: “In a New Novel, Dave Eggers Tells Sudanese Victim’s True Story” (Thompson). What are readers to make of this “true novel?” Deng, Eggers, and Bob Thompson at *The Post* seem to be asking a different question: does the distinction matter? Even if some dialogue was concocted—and how could it not be? —the story persists. In *The New York Times Book Review*, Francine Prose provides an answer that gives some clue about the fuzziness of veracity. She writes: “Intense, straightforward, lit by lightning flashes of humor, wisdom and charm, Valentino’s story—novel, autobiography, whatever—is an account of what it was like to be one of the Lost Boys of Sudan...an extraordinary work of witness, and of art”

(Prose). Whatever indeed! In other words, this approximation is good enough to understand who the Lost Boys are, why they became lost in the first place and, perhaps most importantly, why they have not shaken their moniker, even after relocating to the United States. Judging by the economies of the book's reception, however, the idea of a true novel is not good enough to represent things outside of the established imaginary of African stories and America's position as a "first world" nation. The Lost Boys were lost in Sudan but, in *What Is the What*, they are also lost in modern America. As refugees in a strange land, detached from the culture they knew as children in Sudan and as denizens in Ethiopian and Kenyan refugee camps, they live here with so much more than they have ever had but still not enough. Even in America they are forced to wander through dangerous terrain, prey to forces larger and more adept than themselves. This novel, then, is full of truths both harrowing and uncomfortable, a mirror of modern refugee policy acutely revealed in the way Eggers balances Deng's story as a Lost Boy and as poor citizen of Atlanta.

Eggers evokes a collective suffering by pivoting the book on an unlikely fulcrum of indignity and despair. Three years after arriving in the States, Deng's small, spare apartment in Atlanta is broken into. "I have no reason not to answer the door," he says, "so I answer the door" (3). An African American woman barges in asking to use his cellphone as a ruse to steal his electronics. She is aided by a large, armed man. As Deng pleads with them to leave his apartment, the man strikes him on the side of the head with the gun. It is the first time he has been hit this way. He narrates his incredulity and hopelessness:

In my life I have been struck in many different ways but never with the barrel of a gun. I have the fortune of having seen more suffering than I have suffered myself, but nevertheless, I have been starved, I have been beaten with sticks, with rods, with brooms

and stones and spears. I have ridden five miles on a truckbed loaded with corpses. I have watched too many young boys die in the desert, some as if sitting down to sleep, some after days of madness. I have seen three boys taken by lions, eaten haphazardly... And yet at this moment, as I am strewn across the couch and my hand is wet with blood, I find myself missing all of Africa. I miss Sudan, I miss the howling grey desert of northwest Kenya. I miss the yellow nothing of Ethiopia. (7)

The fact that a man who has seen so much violence and death in a war-soaked country is experiencing a new form of it in the place that was supposed to offer safety and security reorients the story and offers an additional leg of the refugee journey: the arrival. In this passage, there is no break between the viciousness of “over there” and the harshness of here. Though he is no longer technically a refugee, Deng’s reveals the fungible abject status it implies: it means being poor, just scraping by, and invisible. It means being at the mercy of anyone with a bigger stick, as he was when escaping Sudan as a child. Later in the book, he remarks that America was not the jackpot he hoped it would be, calling it “a miserable and glorious place” as he stumbles along the side of the road after waiting fourteen hours for a doctor to check the head wound caused by this pistol-whipping (351). Since a doctor never arrives, he is forced to leave the hospital to make it to his early morning job checking members in at a local gym. The danger he calls to himself—a tall, black man stumbling through central Atlanta before dawn—reminds him of his walk from Ethiopia to Kenya. Then, barely ten years old and stricken with a temporary blindness, he walked holding the shirt of whoever was in front of him, already disillusioned to the prospect of his next arrival: “I knew that the world was the same everywhere, that there were only inconsequential variations between the suffering in one place and another” (349).

Being vulnerable prey is not confined to Africa and does not end with a passport. Twice more during the robbery, he experiences new degradations. The armed man calls Deng a “fucking Nigerian motherfucker!,” then delivers a gut punch to get him to stop talking (9). The distinction between African countries and their territorial civil wars is meaningless to his American tormentor who only wants to go about this assault and robbery in silence, free from words that might get him to reconsider his plans or consider his solidarity with his victim. The man, who Deng calls ‘Powder’ because of his powder blue tracksuit, is a metaphorical place holder for a range of global ills, from colonialism to crime to materialism, and a marked distinction between African Americans and Africans in America. Powder also embodies Western ignorance and the ways—sometimes violent—in which it avoids inconvenient truths. Deng’s voice is quite literally subdued by Powder’s might, and he is the first character of many who does not listen when Deng speaks.

After this second blow, Deng recounts that “for the first time in my life, I am struck in a way that I think might kill me” (24). Instead of death, he awakes to find something he finds even more intolerable. Because the robbers cannot fit everything into their car, they take what they can then return with a young boy to keep an eye on the bound and gagged Deng while they figure out how to rob Deng and his roommate of the rest of the household goods a local Methodist church has donated. They prop the boy, named Michael, in front of the television with a cellphone, and leave him alone with Deng for hours. When Deng is able to rub the tape off his mouth to plead with Michael to untie him, Michael rustles around in the kitchen until he finds a telephone book then mounts the couch and drops it on Deng’s head to, again, shut him up. And again, Deng experiences a new mortification as he tells readers that “it is the first time in my life that I have seen something coming toward me and have been unable to properly react” (50). His

narration of Michael's phone book attack is intertwined with pre-war recollections of his life in the (now) South Sudanese town of Marial Bai, the place he was born and raised before it was burned. He narrates his idyllic days as the son of his father's first wife, his time in school learning English and Arabic, playing with his friends, and collecting water for a neighbor he finds pretty. Someone in town is the owner of a new bicycle and Deng and his friends spend afternoons debating whether or not the owner should—or is even supposed to—peel the protective plastic off its frame. In his memories he is about the same age as Michael, something he considers in his narrative: "Surely his years have not been idyllic; he is currently an accomplice to an armed robbery and is staying up much of the night guarding its victim. I will not speculate about what he is or is not being taught at school and at home" (29-30). When Deng tries to speak after the phone book drop, Michael maneuvers off his chair to make the television louder. As Eggers writes them, the parallel experiences of two little boys deliberately stunt the flow of sympathy expected in a book about African suffering and send it back toward an unexpected but deserving source. Michael is conditioned to drown out the noise of something he does not want to hear, a coping mechanism amplified in the book's critical reception that also serves to condition the buying market and an industry that thrives on reproducing what sells.

Even at this early stage of the book, the reader is given hints of other hardships Deng has endured. It hardly seems possible that worse could befall him or that there are terrible things he has yet to experience. He watched rebel fighters shoot up and burn his town, he vividly describes losing sight of his mother as she dodged bullets in her bright yellow dress, he watched army soldiers punch his father to the ground for questioning the stores of sugar and wheat they "liberated" from his shop in the name of national service, he sat in a tree looking down as the girl he had a crush on was burned alive in her hut. But here in low-income housing in Atlanta, he

suffers anew, and he is, he says, “so tired of this country. [He] is thankful for it, yes...but [he] is so tired of the promises” (7). The Lost Boys came to America for the promise of peace, college, and safety, but menial jobs, slow transitions, and their own infighting stymie their progress so the imaginary of suffering “over there” and finding relief over here is complicated by Deng’s story. What he tells is neither what people expect or want to hear. That predicament is written into each of the instances above—Deng’s efforts to speak or say what his robbers do not want to hear are greeted with physical responses. Whether from “fucking Nigeria” or Sudan, his story does not matter. His robbers are idiots, that much is made clear in the book, but they are dangerous idiots, and dangerous idiots punctuate his entire story—they make life miserable in Sudan, Ethiopia, and America. The three times he tries to speak during the robbery, he is silenced with crushing physical force. He speaks, but no one is listening to the story he needs to tell, which is that living in low-income housing without the funds to make a change is as life threatening to him as fleeing war or living in refugee camps. Eggers constructs multiple comparisons that are hard to ignore, unless, of course, readers are instructed to by the book’s myriad paratexts that attempt to control its reception. In subtle and overt ways, the paratexts gloss over Deng’s life in Atlanta for the more dramatic and alien stories of his life in Africa.

### **1.5 Reception and (Mis)Direction**

The jacket copy for McSweeney’s first edition of *What Is The What* calls it “a testament to the courage and resilience of ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, and a call to action for all those who would stand up against injustice and oppression.” In the *New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani praised the book as “a testament to the triumph of hope over experience, human resilience over tragedy and disaster.” In a twist, *The San Francisco Chronicle* called it “a sweet and sometimes very funny story of one boy’s coming of age” (Freeman). And in *People*

*Magazine*, Jonathan Durbin called it “compelling, important, and vital to the understanding of the politics and emotional consequences of oppression.” This list is by no means exhaustive, but it is representative. Reviewers frame the book as something new that demands the attention of American readers, and that technique is nothing new—it is what reviewers do to call attention to their talent for bringing readers what they need most right now—but the dual nature of the novel is elided in almost every review. In the *Portland Mercury*, Erik Henriksen’s review is almost physical: “In paring another’s life down to its stark, hard bones, Eggers has created a novel full of horrible, beautiful, life-changing stuff. I know how melodramatic that sounds, how adulatory, how it has all the subtlety of me grabbing your shoulders and shaking you. But I can’t figure out how else to say it, how else to impress this upon you: Read this book!” The insistence in the aggregated reviews positions the book’s reception and response. It is a must-read because it is an improbable tale of depravity and survival. It is also a remarkable piece of storytelling about injustice and oppression...in Sudan. The reviews promise that readers will be moved when they learn about this man and the horrific things he endured in Sudan and Kakuma, which conditions readers to buckle in for horrible things happening somewhere else, a posture that leaves little room for geopolitical causality or the reality of things happening right here.

This insistent focus creates controlling images for refugee literature; the focus is not untrue, it is just not complete, and it bends to appease the reader, stoking “the refugee imaginary” that imagines a suffering person “over there” finding safety and relief “over here.” With a nod back to Craig Calhoun, the refugee imaginary also focuses on what refugees should be experiencing, suffering, or needing. And like charity, this imaginary offers a moral way to relate to suffering, not to end it; it is limited. By way of example, Deng writes that “when we were proving our case to UN officials in Kakuma or are now trying to convey the urgency of the

situation in Sudan [from Atlanta], we tell the most dire stories” (28). He confesses that if any readers have heard of the Lost Boys, they have probably heard of the lions. As his group of hundreds of boys walked through Sudan, five were killed and eaten by lions. He describes the smell of the animal as it approached, the sound of breaking sticks, its silhouette in the night, a boy walking in line, then in a flash, in the lion’s jaws. A brief wail, then silence. The stories of the boys’ encounters with lions “helped garner sympathy from [their] sponsors and [their] adopted country in general...the lions enhanced the newspaper articles and no doubt played a part in the U.S. being interested in [them] in the first place” (Eggers 30). Detailing horrifically frightening conditions and reaping the sympathy they engender make good calling cards and do valuable work. Despite also being called “aid bait” and “trauma porn,” such stories produce urgent outpourings of sympathy and money or material aid. They are the beginning of the conversation for refugees, but too often the final word in the refugee imaginary. In reality, as Eggers and Deng urgently try to convey in *What Is the What*, these stories are an opening gambit. Vicious, often brutal, and seemingly unbearable, they demand sympathy and then—hopefully—a reckoning with immediate causes and underlying, long simmering ones. If sympathy is the only response, the conditions that demand it are destined to repeat because they create sanctioned ignorance that precludes, and even discourages, deeper understandings of causality or global connectivity. Paratexts feed this ignorance by encouraging affective economies that trade in parts of a story but not others. Stated more simply, they stoke the idea that refugee literature takes place somewhere else to a certain type of other whose near-death experiences are also a world away from our own and can be consumed as entertainment.

Eggers seems to play with this critical shortcoming when he describes the beginnings of Deng’s relationship with Phil Mays. Mays came into Deng’s life in Atlanta after reading about

the Lost Boys in the newspaper. He reached out to the head of the Lost Boys Foundation with the intention of donating \$10,000 because he felt an affinity for their plight. Deep into middle age as a successful real estate developer, Mays spent much of his life feeling like a lost boy after his mother abandoned his family and he found out he was adopted. The stories he read of the Sudanese affected him deeply and he was determined to help. Mary Williams introduced Mays to Deng and in a small office in downtown Atlanta, Deng told Mays a short version of his story. Deng relates that,

It was obvious that [Mays] was struggling with the predicament we both found ourselves in. He had not originally planned to become my sponsor, but within minutes he knew that if he left that day and simply wrote a check, I would be exactly where I had been before—lost and somewhat helpless. I felt terrible for him, watching him struggle with the decision, and in any other situation would have told him that money was enough. But I knew that I needed a guide... (172)

Mays and his wife, Stacey, do become Deng's sponsors, and weekly dinners in their gigantic house help him navigate American rituals and culture. Each week Stacey, who could not bear to hear Deng's story, would clean up dinner while Phil and Valentino would spend hours talking in their baby's nursery about Deng's past and future, a fitting location for their work of raising Deng. Mays' check was huge but inadequate; financial sympathy was not enough. Eggers relates the hesitations in the encounter, the impulse to help in an expensive but hands-off way, and the necessity of shifting to meet a different, more personally demanding need. He is plain about the challenge of pledging help for another individual's life, especially one as scarred as Deng's. There is tension in Deng's delivery, too, because he needs the help Mays can give. After the conversation, he thinks, "The poor man. I suppose I put it on too thick. He was near

tears when he finally stood up and shook my hand” (173). Deng’s story creates an internal struggle for both men: how far can you push sympathy to achieve the result you want? Too much information from Deng and he would scare Mays away, but financial help was not enough. No matter the size of the check, if it was all he gave, Mays would leave without making the impact he desired. Mays agrees to help Deng get a car, an apartment, a job, and on a path to college, but even with a mission plan, he leaves the encounter shaken: “He sat down behind the wheel, put his hands in his lap and he cried. I watched his shoulders shake, watched him bring his hands to his face” (173). Mays’ response fits. It is a humane response to the human suffering that unfolds throughout the book.

The hard necessity of getting entangled into other lives and of moving beyond stories as entertainment should be the work of refugee literature. Instead, each story increases the commercial appetite for more of the same, which creates a base of readers who experience the catharsis of reading traumatic stories and then the moral uprightness of the reading, as if just ingesting the words could provide a salve. If readers move beyond reading toward donating to a humanitarian organization, they can provide material aid for band aid-like fixes. This cycle works for publishers and readers (and aid groups) but provides little in the way of long term solutions for refugees.

Trade publishing in America works like the Amazon algorithms that offer you products based on the products you’ve purchased before, or books based on the books you’ve bought before: If you liked *What Is the What*, you’ll like *A Long Way Gone*! As a marketing director and publicist in the industry for twenty years, I observed and embraced this strategy throughout my career. Why? Because it works; it effectively situates a title by providing a knowing foundation upon which a unique construct can be built without having to start from scratch. It contributes to

the work of genre building—similar story, different angle. Authors might pitch their work to agents by describing their manuscript as like Eggers’ but with a twist. Agents make their own comparisons when they pitch to editors and editors, once a manuscript is purchased, will prep their sales, marketing, and publicity teams with comparable titles to make sales, whether of a certain quantity to book sellers or of a certain impact to ensure interviews, reviews, and book signings. This is a simplified version of the book buying and selling process, but comparable titles situate a book for the multiple fiscal transactions it experiences during its viable life as a front list book, which usually lasts about three to four months. If *The New York Times* calls *What Is the What* “a startling act of literary ventriloquism,” a similar phrase is bound to repeat on flap copy and sell sheets when the next book like it comes to market (Kakutani). Using liberal descriptive ethics, that next book might be billed as “A startling act of literary ventriloquism in the style of Dave Eggers,” and in this way, paratexts shift the genre’s center of gravity. Agents and editors go on the hunt for more startling acts of literary ventriloquism, other books in which a Western writer seamlessly tells an African story. The hunt is not for a book *like* Eggers’, it is for a book like the one that was reviewed, one that gives “painfully intimate renderings of what war does to a human soul” or “an emotional primer about the impacted recent history of the Sudan” (Miller, Jaggi). The figures being written into existence are a mix of what the author wants to convey and what the reader—and the industry behind her—wants to receive as she situates the book’s characters into her refugee imaginary.

Within a market-based industry where reviews drive sales, how books are reviewed matters. When reviewers home in on particular parts of the refugee experience, those parts become tropes of the genre, key markers that validate the refugee experience and, thus, the book. Agents and acquiring editors, cognizant of the importance of the perception of authenticity in the

book's reception, develop a suspicious perspective—to fit the refugee literature genre, certain elements must be present, even if the thrust of the book is, say, an indictment of immigration policies in the Global North. But if readers perpetually come to refugee novels as mediated witnesses to the trauma of a single faraway other who succeeds against the most inhumane and improbable odds, they are further banishing the ballooning global refugee crises from their realm of consideration, perhaps with the thought that if someone like Valentino Deng can escape Sudan, the same path must be possible for others. The story of the exceptional individual obscures the scale of the crisis—it is possible to conceive a few thousand lost boys, less so 110 million people. Paratexts create tension between what is written and what is taken away, thus expanding notions of global separation and collapsing possibilities.

### **1.6 The Perils of Individual Understanding**

Parsing the complex layers of book publishing and assigning causality presumes literature has some sway over public attitudes and national policy. I am hard-wired to hope it does, but when I read refugee literature alongside its paratexts, I admit to some despair. Receiving these stories and accounts only as individual feats of survival in the face of extraordinary odds blinds readers to the plight of the collective in worsening crises. If readers are continually encouraged to assess levels of crises through the lens of individuals, which is what reviewers pluck from the books in their enthusiastic reviews, refugees are seen only as objects of pity in a way that robs them of their political agency and removes them from participating in the economies their stories entertain and enrich. Deng's story was meant to convey the suffering of many but is lensed through his individual account. He got to leave the refugee camp for a new life in America, but hundreds of thousands more were left behind in situations more precarious than his. At the very least, Deng was able to get a job in the camp,

one of only two Sudanese who were, as jobs were something reserved only for Kenyans or NGO employees. But at the close of the book, the others left behind are an afterthought. What remains, what reviewers encourage readers to remember, is the life of one man.

Published accounts and the UN definition of a refugee that I provided above are centered on the individual. Selah Benhabib notes the same of human rights law, which is centered on the individual person and “neglects the interdependence of economic, climate related, military, and other factors” (2018, 114). Without an understanding of the way forces beyond individual control press on individual experience, how can we remove the need for the subhuman conditions they force, like refugee camps, climate migration, and war? Calling attention to the highlights that reviewers propose occludes history’s causality and perpetuates what Frederic Jameson calls first world “epistemological crippling,” which leaves western readers unable to grasp their place in the structural totalities of literature (Jameson 85). But the western reader is very much a part of the conversation in *What Is the What*. For Valentino, this reader is intimately resuscitated as a functioning social being, so much so that he asks of the reader, “How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist” (535). Even as he spends the length of the novel speaking to people who are not listening, he speaks as an individual for the collective and asks readers to be open to all aspects of the reading experience, the parts that encompass larger social and environmental forces and the parts that force self-examination, the parts that separate our experiences and the parts that join them. Writing in *New York Magazine*, David Amsden wrote that *What Is the What* is “a portrait of a character that forces us to examine our world and ourselves, and how our struggle for identity is more of a collective battle than we’re often willing to admit.” Yes, this is a good start, but with

its headline, which reads “Truly Heartbreaking,” it is hard to know what the reader will take away from the review.

Amsden directs readers to make internal connections, but larger, collective reckonings are also necessary. Without them, the issue the United Nations raises about the problem of displacements far outstripping solutions will compound, as evidenced by the global numbers of displaced persons. And yet, stories of the refugee experience have multiplied as the number of refugees has expanded raising two essential questions about readers in the Global North: How does the Western book buying audience’s appetite for trauma porn preclude its desire to end the policies that induce it? And do the books examined here, which elicit sympathy, also reinforce separation, thus skirting new ways to address refugee crises while providing familiar ways to avoid them? By way of an answer to the latter question, Deng describes a time in *What Is the What* when a respected Sudanese elder, a man who had been educated at the University of Khartoum, came to Kakuma to plead with Deng’s friend Noriyaki about Chinese intervention in Sudan. Noriyaki worked for a Japanese NGO tasked with coordinating sports and recreation teams for the children at Kakuma. Valentino was his right-hand man and best friend; their partnership provided Valentino with an NGO salary and a computer, a rarity in the threadbare camp. The Sudanese elder begged Noriyaki to talk to his people and his government because the Chinese and the Malaysians owned sixty percent of the oil interests in Sudan. Their appetite for oil was making the war worse. Agitated, he explained that “China wants the south insecure, because this keeps out other countries who don’t want their hands dirty with the human-rights abuses around this oil extraction! Your government is providing arms that are used against civilians, and they are also buying the oil that is ill gotten and is the reason hundreds of thousands have died! (438). When Noriyaki has a chance to speak, he explains that he is

Japanese, not Chinese, and cannot help. The man goes away dejected. Valentino, however, has an awakening during this exchange, one of hope and anticipation: “the more we understood how we were connected to so many of the problems of the world, the more we understood the web of money and power and oil that made our suffering possible, the more we felt sure that something would be done to save southern Sudan” (438). The idea of connection buoys Deng in ways that are elusive in the Global North—no, no, I can’t help, I’m Japanese, not Chinese, we don’t like the Chinese either; or, just come to the United States where everything is good—an unnecessary outgrowth and consequence of Jameson’s epistemological crippling.

Seen in this light, literature as it is reviewed and discussed, is the fiddling while Rome burns. As I write in 2024, twenty-six years after the conversation Eggers recounts above, Sudan is aflame again, stoked by foreign interests in a proxy war for control over its oil reserves. And again, civilians pay the price. But we read *What Is the What!* We know the suffering! It’s horrible! —yet little has changed. When Deng describes Noriyaki, another young man at the start of his life, he writes about how much Noriyaki misses his girlfriend back home:

When he would pine for her, I would listen until I could not listen anymore.

--Your *girlfriend*? I would say. --You’re complaining about missing your girlfriend?

I don’t have a family!

He would laugh and say, --Yeah, but you’re used to it.

We found this very funny, and it became a refrain between us: --Yes, but you’re used to it. And though I laughed about it, it also caused me to wonder whether this was a truth.

(436, emphasis in original)

Each time they repeat the refrain, Deng has to think: Am I used to having no family? To living in a camp? To owning only a mattress and a second shirt? He had no idea if his family was dead

or alive, in Sudan or not, while Noriyaki knew where his family was and talked to them often. As a solution, Noriyaki declared that his family was Valentino's, too, and plopped a photo of them on Deng's desk for reassurance, a thin substitute for questions that remained unanswered but a hint into a mindset that considers a photograph of strangers answer enough.

Are readers, too, used to African suffering? Does reading about it mean things are in their proper place for the Western social imaginary? With blistering mockery, the Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina describes one piece of Africa that must be included in a Western writer's book: "Among your characters you must always include The Starving African, who wanders the refugee camp nearly naked, and waits for the benevolence of the West. Her children have flies on their eyelids and pot bellies, and her breasts are flat and empty. She must look utterly helpless. She can have no past, no history; such diversions ruin the dramatic moment" (327). Why must this omnipresent character populate "authentic" books about Africa, and why must Valentino be used to daily degradations caused by aggressions far beyond his doing? Because to give The Starving African a history would situate her within forces beyond her control that sympathy can only ameliorate not cure. To focus on the effects that Valentino is just "used to" forces an unpleasant examination of causes that implicate the Global North. Accentuating the triumph of the individual resolves this effort and restores the social imaginary that, in a creep of self-realization, Valentino wonders if he might share as well. Even if the books within a central archive of modern Anglophone Refugee Literature write against what Global North readers are used to, the way they are pitched and reviewed confirm stereotypes that concretize beliefs.

Perpetuating this mindset is crippling; it creates an untenable delusion akin to what the anthropologist and critic Amitav Ghosh terms our "great derangement," in which we ignore the presence of one thing in literature—in his theory, climate change—by focusing on something

else or by projecting control over some of its conceivable challenges. In his series of essays called *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh interrogates the connections between literature and climate change and lays part of the blame for climate inaction on serious fiction. He believes that books matter, that they help shape public attitudes and open creative spaces for possible futures, but because the serious fiction of the last 150 years is mainly concerned with the highly probable “regularity of bourgeois life,” the non-human, the uncanny, and the irregularities of weather patterns have become unimaginable, or at the very least, only imaginable for some far off other or in some distant speculative future (25). Ghosh’s assertions about literary fiction and the environment have bearing on recent works of refugee literature because environmental disasters and resource scarcity due to climate change are often the cause of displacement today. His novels frequently take up the thick stories of ecological refugees, people whose precarious lives leave them at the mercy of climate disasters, then unwanted in their aftermath. He writes that,

the ongoing changes in the climate, and the perturbations that they will cause *within* nations, cannot be held at bay by reinforcing man-made boundaries. We are in an era when the body of the nation can no longer be conceived of as consisting only of a territorialized human population: its very sinews are now fully revealed to be intertwined with forces that cannot be confined by boundaries.” (144, emphasis in original)

Ghosh challenges the perceived comfort of separation based on territorial boundaries and the idea that environmental disasters happen without global reverberations. Climate irregularities, which have become regularities, cause human migrations that are complicated and exacerbated by sovereign territorialization. Ghosh’s prediction of the inevitability of open borders points to a great derangement in the current state of refugee management, in which 75% of the world’s

displaced persons are funneled into low and middle income countries in the Global South, placing burdens on weak (or nonexistent) infrastructures that can scarcely handle the excess. The nascent genre of Refugee Studies is born of this derangement as the process of fleeing one place in search of another to call home has become so fraught that the journey and the waiting to arrive have compounded the refugee's initial crisis into collective crises that last far longer than the originating trauma.

The acceleration of climate change and the increase in displaced people have occurred concurrently; Ghosh peers back into 150 years of literary history and finds that stories incorporating improbable climate events were “banished from the manor house in which serious fiction has long been in residence” (24). Only from the outbuildings known as “science fiction,” “fantasy,” and “horror,” could weather phenomena be conceived, a flaw he sees as a crisis of imagination and creativity. I am frequently at odds with Ghosh over this characterization of serious literature because I believe it is a misreading. The climate events were there in many books (for example, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, Conrad's *Lord Jim*, and Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, among others), but an environmental reading of them was not the order of the day. The literati focused, instead, on these novels and others like them as realist fiction, books about real things that happen to real people: the cyclone or flood or tiger attack was not the story, the triumph or demise of the person experiencing it was.

This focus persists, not filtering out catastrophic climate events, but obstructing global connectivity and causality in favor of an easier story to digest, one that celebrates individual achievement as a form of exceptionalism, a posture that also essentializes refugee experience and creates an idea of good and bad refugees, or refugees in control of their destiny, separate from larger human and non-human forces. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh decries exceptionalizing as a

sword that forces a distinction between “‘worthy’ refugees and migrants who are forced to fit into this narrative of exceptionalism (and who must accept being instrumentalized in different ways), and the ‘unworthy’ refugees and migrants against whom they are explicitly and implicitly compared and contrasted” (2). Celebrating Deng’s ability to make his way through his horrible conditions clears a path for readers to ask, well, why can’t others do the same? Are they trying hard enough? This narrow lens, and its accompanying baseline of expectation, lies not with the author nor the book, but with the paratexts that frame it and direct readers toward a form of paranoid reading that closes possibilities and foreshortens creativity. With reviewers’ guidance, readers are trained to search out the triumphant story; having found it, they need not ask more of the text, a process that might bring them into relationship with the complexities of the characters and the historical forces that situate them.

### **1.7 Connecting Questions**

In addition to recognizing the hardships in Deng’s life, readers could ask: Why is Sudan so poor? Why did so many children have to trek across three countries to find safety? Why was Deng stuck in the refugee camp for ten years? Why am I drawn to this story? What makes me want to recommend it to others? What do I know about Sudan? Questions like these, which Rebecca Dingo defines as understanding derived from modes of thinking associated with transnational feminist literacy, blur and complicated the divide between first world and third world and the notion that “oppression happens ‘over there,’ disconnected from our comfortable home and seemingly enlightened nation” (147). They fight against the mind’s gravitational pull for simple answers and force a sort of “actionable literacy” that moves readers beyond assuming that “consuming narratives of oppression stands for real action and that recirculating the narratives (via social media, for example) is going to transform oppression” (Dingo 147). Like

sympathy, reading refugee narratives allows readers in the Global North to engage in global participation, not as participants but as voyeurs. The affective knowledge gained allows readers to feel like cosmopolitan citizens of the world who can circulate repetitive narratives of the refugee's plight and derive their own solutions, whether effective or not. Even with the best intentions, the passive relationship of engaging without questioning is fraught with unintended and empty consequences. In her book *The Need to Help*, Stanford Anthropologist Liisa Malkki considers the work of affective belonging in a study of Finnish knitters who, moved by stories of the plight of refugee families, make plush bears for refugee children as a form of humanitarian aid. For the Finnish givers, mostly older women, the knitting, tagging, and shipping off creates a connection to the wider world. Malkki describes the knitters' feelings of accomplishment and belonging after having sent off a small but important object meant to empower its receiver. The reception of the bears, however, is not as intended.

Writing in 2019, Dina Nayeri, an Iranian refugee who spent her teens in Oklahoma, describes a visit she made to a family of Syrian refugees living in an Isobox—essentially a retrofitted shipping container—in a Greek refugee camp. Her eyes are drawn to a peculiar feature of the shelter: there are plush bears everywhere. They are mounted to walls and ceilings, tied to banisters, and arranged around door frames. Seen in one place in such eerie abundance, she starts to notice them all over other shelters in the camp, flowing out of Isoboxes, and filling donation bins. Her reaction to these useless gifts illuminates the consequences of acting from incomplete knowledge, or solving the wrong problem, albeit with good intentions:

What can I accomplish here when there is such distance between good people? When a heartfelt gift can twist into a gruesome reminder of all that you still need? When you're forced to make use of it anyway? Why weren't the bear donors told to send calculators

or tablets or English workbooks, dictionaries, and box sets of Roald Dahl and Beatrix Potter and Julia Donaldson? No one wants a bear. (134)

The power object so lovingly crafted is powerless in times of displacement forced by war, climate change, or extreme poverty, and the affective economy it creates across the Global North is detached from the needs of people engaged in resettlements around the globe. This prompts an urgent question: What are we learning from refugee literature?

The South African writer Jonny Steinberg was forced to confront this question after he published *A Man of Good Hope* in 2015. In it, he tells the true story of Asad Abdullahi, a Somali man who was only eight when his mother crumpled to his feet in their doorway. A Hawiye militiaman fired a bullet into her chest for trying to keep him from opening the door to their house in Mogadishu. From that day in 1991 until he reached Cape Town in 2007, he was on the move. Home for Asad is now Blikkiesdorp, or Tin Can Town in English. Steinberg writes that it has been described as “Cape Town’s asshole, the muscle through which the city shits out the parts it does not want” (x). While working on a story about Somali and Congolese migrants in Blikkiesdorp, he was introduced to Asad and became fascinated by his story. *A Man of Good Hope* is the result of a deal whereby Asad would sit in Steinberg’s car and tell him how he came to Cape Town and Steinberg would pay him seven thousand rand, enough to open a trading store in the ghetto of the ghetto he was living in. Shortly before publication, Steinberg gave the pages to Asad who found the story within painful and alien. In an interview from 2019, Steinberg says Asad,

did not like, at all, the idea of his struggles and his life laid down on a page. He could talk to me about them because the very process of speaking has agency. He could anaesthetize the experience as it was coming out of his mouth. Whereas to see it by somebody else’s

hand, not in his control, the whole catastrophe of it was not just painful, but also not useful. Here is somebody thinking about the present and the future. He only thought about the past insofar as it could be used as a pragmatic resource. He wanted bits and pieces of it, not a clear sighting of the whole thing. And so here was I, thinking that I had...given him this enormous attention, this enormous care, this enormous recognition, having created a record, and yet he didn't like the record at all. He didn't find the record untrue. It just wasn't useful for him. (Hoffman 47)

Steinberg's book, then, is his own, not the story of Asad, but the story of a South African writer lavishing his version of care on someone who performed a service to get the cash he needed to buy the permits and supplies for a venture that would give him and his family a modicum of stability in Cape Town's worst slum. Asad's reaction gives insight into need, an alien orientation for Steinberg. For Steinberg, paying for the story was a footnote to the care he lavished; for Asad, the cash was the story, the only part of the bargain that mattered today and in his future tomorrows.

By historicizing Asad as a pawn in geopolitical ideas and power structures, Steinberg created what Malkki describes as "the figure of a refugee as an object of concern and knowledge for the 'international community,' and for a particular variety of humanism" (1996, 378). This type of suffering figure serves not to help the refugee but to reconstitute the international community. As for Asad and the refugee families receiving plush bears, the help offered is just not useful. Steinberg is disappointed that Asad wanted only "bits and pieces of [the past], not a clear sighting of the whole thing," but I would argue that Steinberg wanted the same, insofar as it, too, could be used as a pragmatic resource for his research as it contributed to a South African social imaginary.

Both examples point to the perils of misreading and good intentions. They are detached from the realities of need and the omnipresence of interconnectivity, which Ghosh points out, has been present all along, something we would realize were it not for our great derangement. Other lenses also function to enhance separation. Writing in *World Literature Today*, Kevin Brooks argues that *What Is the What* is a paragon of world literature using the literary historian David Damrosch's definition, which is that "it gains in translation," it "functions as an elliptical refraction of national literatures," and it is a form of "engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time" (Brooks 36). Convinced that it meets these criteria (excepting translation), Brooks declares it not an American novel but a world novel, despite the definition of elliptical refractions that would demand that the medium of the novel produces a distorted image of both countries, Sudan and America. Brooks contends that "the novel's goal is to turn readers' attention toward Sudan rather than America" even though half of the book takes place in Atlanta (37). Damrosch, though, starts his definition with this concept: "A crucial feature of world literature is that it resolves always into a *variety* of worlds" (9, emphasis in original). It seems to me that the point of world literature is its resolute variety—it carries the adjective "world" because it transcends borders and resists the separation that a label like "World Literature" confirms. Since this is Deng's story, does the label translate? Are Deng and the millions of displaced others "World Citizens," meaning they can roam as they please? The idea is preposterous, I know, but literary labelling is another hindrance to deeper understanding. Brooks is intent to define the novel as world literature because it gives Western readers intimate knowledge of a country about which they are, in Jameson's term, "epistemologically crippled." With hope, world literature can offer some epistemological repair because it provides a window on the world of Sudan (and Ethiopia and Kenya) through two interlocutors, an American and a

Sudanese. Jonny Steinberg wanted to provide the same window though Asad, and the Finnish knitters, having already peered through a window, were so moved by looking out, they took action, albeit misplaced. But by claiming the label of world literature, there is an unspoken presumption that we are not a part of “the world,” which is a different place where bad things happen that we can solve with money and bears. Claiming world literature status and declaring this not an American novel is antithetical to the definition Damrosch establishes, and a move that shuts down the questions required of a text that relates a story like Deng’s. The derangement, then, lies in peering out and not looking back in or peering out and seeing what fits comfortably with preconceived or expected notions, both dualities that relocate foreign and sensational suffering to the foreground and familiar suffering to the background. Although this inverts Ghosh’s lament that serious modern fiction relocates “the unheard-of toward the background...while the everyday moves into the foreground,” the effect of separation by obscuring reality and complicity is the same (17). This is resolutely not the definition of world literature; indeed, it belies the idea of a connected world as the gestures used for authentication conceal Western involvement in the world’s totality. A richer definition includes more from Damrosch, who writes that,

World literature is thus always as much about the host culture’s values and needs as it is about a work’s source culture; hence it is a double refraction, one that can be described through the figure of the ellipse, with the source and host cultures providing the two foci that generate the elliptical space within which a work lives as world literature, connected to both cultures, circumscribed by neither alone. Works of world literature can very well be understood as windows on the world, so long as we understand that they serve as windows on two worlds at once: the world beyond us, and our own world as well. (14)

Using these criteria, *What Is the What* could be called world literature because it illuminates Sudan *and* allows Sudan to illuminate America, a non-dual engagement of shared connection and responsibility. The recognition of two foci is missing from the paratexts surrounding *What Is the What*, an omission that complicates its mediated reception and serves to disconnect America from the rest of the world.

### **1.8 Are You Listening?**

Eggers almost begs readers and reviewers to snap out of Brooks' narrow definition and consider Damrosch's wider one by writing Deng into relationship with so many other characters in the book. Deng comes into existence as he describes himself and his predicaments and also as he is reflected off other characters, and he is not blind to their shortcomings of knowledge. He does not take offense, for example, "at the fact that many young people here in the United States know little about the lives of contemporary Africans...I did not know of the existence of Kenya until I set foot in it" (30). In this one line early in the novel, the ignorance of young Americans and young Africans are set on equal footing; it is the first of many comparisons that create the book's structure, which is balanced on the central event of Deng's arrival in the United States. A reading of the paratexts would suggest this is an African novel of human resilience; a reading of the novel itself reveals it as a story of living in precarity in two loci—a developing country and a developed one. Throughout the novel, the elliptical space within these loci is in play: In the refugee camp, Deng owned a mattress, a second shirt, and a bicycle. When he finds out he has been accepted for resettlement in the U.S., friends and acquaintances in the camp came to "book" his things, meaning each thing he would not take with him would be passed along to someone staying. In Atlanta, he is beaten and robbed of the things gifted to him as necessities: television, microwave, clock radio. Knocked out by a phone book, hidden under his couch cushions, and

bound by the packing tape used to prep food for his freezer, he realizes his “voice and movements are restricted by the things [he] owns” (26). The recycling and resourcefulness camp life demands is set against the weight of accumulation required for life in the Global North, a window onto the Western world that should not be overlooked as it sets a strategic precedent for the refugee novels that will follow Eggers and Mengestu.

Aid is also set in balance: Living in the refugee camp was a constant source of discussion. “What was life in Kakuma? Was it life?,” Deng asks,

“There was debate about this. On the one hand, we were alive, which meant that we were living a life, that we were eating and could enjoy friendships and learning and could love. But we were nowhere. Kakuma was nowhere...there was little in the way of grass in that land; there were no forests to scavenge for materials; there was nothing for miles, it seemed, so we became dependent on the UN for everything” (373-74).

While the camps kept their inhabitants alive, the lives were bare in the extreme, in both material and hope. By removing the prospects for work and creating a childlike dependance on the UN, Deng explains that “life was a kind of purgatory” in which they received one meal each night and spent the rest of the day trying to conserve their energy before they could eat again. Is this construction, which is shaped and perpetuated by levels of humanitarian aid, life? How does it compare to living off government assistance in the West, where low income housing is in dangerous neighborhoods, where food stamps do not cover necessities, and where healthcare is too expensive? At the very least, the conversation between Deng and his camp compadres should prompt questions that echo into Western conversations, but these topics are not mentioned in published reviews.

When he is chosen for relocation in America, Deng and the other refugees also chosen are required to attend classes in the International Organization for Migration Center in Kakuma, and willingly do. There, American instructors talk about life in the States, about how to find a job, how to save money, and how to find an apartment. Deng explains that “They helped us with the math—most of us, they said, would be making \$5 or \$6 an hour. This seemed like a great deal of money. Then they told us about buying food and paying rent on an apartment. They had us do the calculations, and we realized we could not afford to live on \$5 or \$6 an hour. No particular solution was offered” (514). To avoid dwelling on details, the orientation shifted to the spectacle of a huge cooler wheeled into the classroom so the refugees could, quite comically, be introduced to ice. These financial details, though, would significantly hinder Valentino’s life in America. His dream of college was on hold because he could not afford the tuition and could not take time off from his menial jobs. His dream of safety was delayed because he could not afford to move out of the low-income housing unit he had lived in since arriving in Atlanta. In a moment of frustration and dejection, he declares: “I am tired of needing help. I need help in Atlanta, I needed help in Ethiopia and Kakuma, and I am tired of it” (355). Francine Prose’s *New York Times* review declares that “Dave Eggers has made the outlines of the tragedy in East Africa—so vague to so many Americans—not only sharp and clear but indelible,” but nowhere does she mention that Eggers has also outlined a tragedy in Atlanta, which is equally vague to so many Americans. The inclusion—and obvious parallel Eggers creates—could open up questions of relationship: Why is Deng’s life in America as financially hard as it is in Africa? Why does Deng face as many safety issues in Kakuma as he does in Atlanta? What are the parallels between precarious lives worldwide? The point is not to see *What Is the What* as a Sudanese novel, but to notice the parallel sufferings that illuminate shared experiences and prompt

connection. Seen through this broad—yet personal—lens, the distasteful conversion of trauma into entertainment can evolve toward informed action for people living precarious lives.

Eggers' many parallels should blur and complicate the ideas that suffering only happens elsewhere or that third world suffering is something everyone is just used to, part of the social imaginary that divides the world on a descending scale. Paratexts of refugee literature make use of this imaginary to stoke interest and sales, but the result is a response devoid of responsibility for the other or creativity for new solutions. Moreover, notes sociologist Alice Bloch, "around two-thirds of the world's refugees live in protracted situations of extended exile [so] current solutions are not in fact solutions" (445). But readers are not prompted to think about solutions because they are directed to a single story, the one happening far away to someone else who is ultimately triumphant for surviving its ravages. Paratexts keep that narrative in place, extending the list of people who come in contact with Deng's story and do not listen. Powder, the robber, is not listening, he just wants Deng's stuff. Michael, the young boy, isn't listening; he just wants to be safe. Julien, the attendant in the hospital, is not listening; he's just getting through his job on the night shift. The gym members Valentino checks in each morning aren't listening; they just need to get through their workouts and on with their days. And reviewers are not listening, but why? Would a broader discussion of the book's themes make for a poor review, one that would not sell copies of the publication that contains it? Would it annoy readers and turn them off the book? In *What Is the What*, Eggers delivers a provocation; paratexts defang it by aligning it to the sympathy induced by humanitarian solicitation. This move creates a limited literary call to action so that where a consideration of interconnecting global issues and bureaucratic harm could have been mustered for the collective based on an individual's account, a donation-based response prevails, one that reestablishes separation and reinforces global hierarchies. Because I

agree with Amitav Ghosh that books make a difference, I see this response as contributing to his lament of a great derangement in which too many readers read through a narrow lens, missing an opportunity for refugee literature to support new forms of “nonlinear change...in ways that are perhaps closed to the forms of reason deployed by contemporary nation-states” (Ghosh 161). In other words, how can readers extend *all* the conversations started in refugee literature to see beyond the current, and inadequate, solutions of border walls, territorial sovereignty, refugee quotas, and offshore processing?

In his review of *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears*, Chris Abani suggests that Mengestu’s novel covers an immigrant’s work of straddling two cultures. Yes, and.... Yes, it does; it also covers conversations of race, proxy wars, depression and gentrification, and arrivals and departures, conversations that can—and should—bring readers into larger conversations that might start with sympathy and empathy and then move to recognition that contributes to self-formation. Consumed only as entertainment amounting to trauma porn, refugee literature provides the same fleeting stimuli as porn; seen as evidence of a larger interconnected trauma, it can open the path for sorely needed solutions. In *What Is the What*, Deng’s solution is to keep talking. Eggers concludes his novel with this final conversation between Deng and the reader:

Whatever I do, however I live, I will tell these stories...It give me strength, almost unbelievable strength, to know that you are there. I covet your eyes, your ears, the collapsible space between us. How blessed are we to have each other? I am alive and you are alive so we must fill the air with our words. I will fill today, tomorrow, and every day until I am taken back to God. I will tell stories to people who will listen and to people who don’t want to listen, to people who seek me out and those who run. All

the while I will know that you are there. How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist. (535)

Western paratexts facilitate ways for readers to pretend humans like Deng do not exist, a crisis at a time of catastrophic refugee *mis*management and despite the many ways that being the subject of the novel and putting the words to the page allowed Deng, through Eggers, to write himself into being. Literature has this capacity, writes Rita Felski, “when other forms of acknowledgement are felt to be lacking, when one feels estranged from or at odds with one’s immediate milieu” (33). Deng’s precarious status on two continents is a comment on the state of estrangement induced by his predicaments, a status also apparent in the West through rising suicides rates and deepening economic insecurity. I feel blindly optimistic thinking that literature can be a panacea for those distressing social ills, but when Veena Das contends that narrative plays a central role in the reconstitution of self and the remaking of a social world, I am buoyed by its possibilities (Wilson and Brown 21). In the passage above, Deng writes us—a collective “us”—into being as caring, desirable fellow travelers brought into connection with him through stories that collapse time and distance. He cites listening as optional, but I do not agree. It is an ethical essential for understanding the quieter messages and broader impacts narratives about refugees enact to remake a better social world.

**Chapter 2**  
**Co-Authoring, Co-Suffering:**  
**The Ethics of Representation in Place and Space**

I have had a vacillating relationship with Mathieu Aikins' book *The Naked Don't Fear the Water* since it was published in early 2022. At first, I wanted to throw it against the wall and curse Aikins for his hubris. Over time, I have come to a better, less antagonistic, understanding of his project, which is an outgrowth of frustrations we both share. A longtime journalist reporting from the Middle East and Afghanistan, Aikins found a kindred soul in his Afghani translator, Omar, and vowed to help him to a safe life in the West, a promise made more difficult after a series of bureaucratic snafus and missing paperwork left Omar ineligible for asylum and stranded in the economic insecurity and political instability of Kabul circa 2016. Without legal channels to leave and new laws that closed Europe's borders, Omar's options were limited to staying in Kabul or paying smugglers to traverse a dangerous route across the land border with Iran and over the mountains to Turkey. Once in Turkey, he would need to pay another smuggler to get him to Greece and yet another to move further north into Europe. The journey would be treacherous, risky, and...staggeringly commonplace—this is the cheapest, but longest, route into Europe from Afghanistan. After Syrians and Ukrainians, Afghans are the third-largest displaced population in the world and “one of the largest and most protracted displacement situations under the UNHCR's mandate” (“Afghanistan Refugee...”). Four decades of war and political instability have forced millions to flee the country and have left millions more on the brink of

hunger and starvation. Knowing the conditions within Afghanistan and the struggle to leave it, Aikins wanted to help his friend. To do so, and to truly understand the rigor of the refugee's journey, he left his American and Canadian passports with a friend in Italy, brushed up on his Dari, and used his dark complexion and almond-shaped eyes to leave Kabul with Omar as another *mosafarin*, or traveler.

Omar does not wear his role as Odysseus well and rarely behaves how Aikins hopes: he spends too much time doom scrolling on Facebook, he loses the bravado he had when moving soldiers and journalists through Afghanistan, and he is prone to listening to weepy Celine Dion songs on repeat. His behavior frustrates Aikins' expectations of a determined traveler, a feeling he owns up to as unfair—Omar is in a deep depression, estranged from both Afghanistan and Iran, the only two homes he has ever known, separated from his girlfriend and the family he loves, and headed into the unknown. Maybe he would land in Sweden where his brother lived? Maybe Greece? Maybe Turkey? Maybe he would not live through the journey; thousands die trying. Aikins, in contrast, is reunited with his passports at the end of his story, a conclusion that allows for a wholly different orientation during the journey. His outcome is never in question and his fallback plans are deep and well-padded so during my readings I had a lot of trouble with his confessed altruism. Why did he make this dangerous journey? To be in solidarity with those forced to migrate because empathy is not enough? To verify refugee status as if veracity was the key to resolution? To get glowing book reviews and accolades for turning the 60,000 words he wrote on his smartphone along the way into a published account? His was not a voice from a marginalized group nor did it meet the standards of the influential #OwnVoices movement that emerged from Twitter in 2015. That hashtag, which would have a broad impact across many genres in the publishing industry on and offline, clarified that authors could claim their work as

own voices “as long as the protagonist and the author share a marginalized identity” (Lapointe). Although the #OwnVoices movement mainly concerned itself with fiction and has recently been supplanted by other, less personally invasive protocols for writing about marginalized people, its initial impulses stuck with me. I could not shake the feeling that Aikins’ project reeked of coopted representation through the questionable subjectivity of the writer. Aikins was not just writing about Omar; he was disguising himself to be Omar but without any of the very real pressures of identity or national belonging!

In his Afghani alter ego Habib, Aikins capitalized on the fact that Afghanistan has many languages and dialects, and many people return from exile with changes to their speech. He did his best to scrub the American ring from his voice, changed his clothes, stopped making eye contact, and instead, worked on passing. Any slip up and smugglers might kidnap him for ransom. In Iran he would be arrested as a spy, and if his real identity was discovered in any other country they were moving through, he would quickly be separated from Omar and funneled into Western channels of detention. He reports that Afghan friends were undisturbed or unoffended by his transformation. Some, he writes, “even saw it as self-improvement if I learned to speak the language of Hafez, if I could sit cross-legged and break bread, if I understood the rituals of Islam—‘*Afarinet*,’ they’d say. Good for you” (74). I, however, was still unconvinced, and my blood boiled when Aikins set a personal rule: he would only “lie or break the law to keep [he and Omar] safe, and if it didn’t harm anyone else” (74). How would he know, I silently fumed? What if he took the last seat on a bus or an inflatable heading to Lesbos that could have gone to someone in real need? What if his lie meant someone else suffered an unintended consequence? Would this story ever be authentic with Aikins causing “butterfly effects” on the events?!

Yes, dear reader, I made it to the end *The Naked Don't Fear the Water* before I had to interrogate my own assumptions and the possibilities for Refugee Literature. What would “officially” authenticate Aikins’ account for me? If Omar wrote it? That would not have been possible, a situation made clear throughout this book and each book under examination in this chapter. Living as a refugee is a constant balance on a razor’s edge, sometimes deadly, but also rife with periods of boredom and waiting that continually lure the mind into existential abysses. This state makes the act of documenting itself nearly impossible. Behrouz Boochani’s feat of it while being held in a Manus Island prison—made possible with the help of advocates and translators on two continents and a smuggled cell phone—make him an outlier; he was a journalist by trade, most refugees are not. His account, *No Friend But the Mountains*, is detailed at length in the next chapter. In this chapter, I will examine the varying roles of Western interlocutors in refugee accounts and discuss the ethics of telling someone else’s story when they cannot. Within the archive of Refugee Literature that concerns this dissertation, determinations of authenticity and voice have to be loosened or shifted to accommodate situations of precarity. This chapter wades into the murky waters of representation evident in conflicting statements contained within Aikins’ *New York Times* book review. First, the reviewer concedes that “it has become a cliché to state that a book is ‘urgent’ or ‘necessary’ when it touches on a critical humanitarian issue.” Second, she describes the book as “exceptionally well done...a meticulously told story the world needs to hear now more than ever,” thereby adding to the cliché she bemoans (Goudeau). What is the correct response from the reader? Should we pay attention to the gripping story here or give it a pass knowing another urgent plea will come along shortly? While Aikins’ book has frustrated me, his impetus for writing seems to spring from the

very cliché the reviewer laments and then ignores: Humanitarian crises around human migration are unending and all too often tragic...who is listening? What voice or voices can change that?

By way of an answer, I begin with a tremor that shook the American publishing industry in 2020 and has since determined what voices are chosen by agents and editors within the industry to circulate in the marketplace. The controversy over the novel *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins, which I originally considered as a sidebar to my research, moved into the forefront when I realized how many of the accusations lobbed at its publication mirrored my project and also course through the process of seeking asylum: What is the standard of authenticity? Does the identity of the author guarantee the veracity of the narrative? Is the voice of the refugee ever unmediated? Does the search for the “truthiest” truth of refugee experience occlude the voices the very search is trying to amplify? Questions about who can speak and what they can say guide this chapter and are in constant tension with the *need* to speak about crises of displacement instigated by larger crises of war, climate change, political pressure and instability, and economic precarity. And yet, the refugee’s story is ultimately untellable and over-produced, untellable because of the conditions of seeking refuge, the unnarratability of trauma, and the losses in translation, and over-produced because of the compulsion to be representative and the necessity, as well as the risk, of co-authorship. Efforts to render the refugee’s story are always fraught even as there are better and worse versions. Throughout this chapter, I will address the differences that force a distinction between better or worse as a way to think about how refugee voices are manipulated into forms that suit dominant discourses and are then judged lacking or acceptable based on their fit—a damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don’t system that favors every entity but the refugee.

In the first part of this chapter, I will write about three non-fiction accounts that address refugee voices in different ways: Aikins' story of posing as a refugee to leave Kabul with his Afghan translator for a better life in Europe; Ben Rawlence's *City of Thorns*, a book of reportage about living in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, itself modelled on WWII concentration camps and filled with generations of refugees who have known no other home; and author and artist Victoria Jameson's *When Stars Are Scattered*, written with Omar Mohamed. *When Stars Are Scattered* is a graphic memoir of Mohamed's fifteen years in Dadaab and eventual resettlement in Arizona, a collaboration for young readers to understand what it means to be a refugee. In each of these narratives, Western authors speak for the refugee and attempt to convey the conditions of fleeing, waiting, and negotiating life.

The second part of the chapter engages Dina Nayeri's *The Ungrateful Refugee* and Valeria Luiselli's *Tell Me How it Ends* to focus on voice and how it is forced and twisted in immigration interviews to accommodate predetermined outcomes. Where the arranged co-authorships in the first part of the chapter aim, however unevenly and imperfectly, to amplify refugee voices, the writers in the second part show the varied ways immigration bureaucracies have institutionalized stifling them. A close reading into the controversy around *American Dirt* combined with a consideration of co-authorship and the stories of asylum interviews contained in all of these titles show that the apparatus of publication norms stories in ways similar to the apparatus of seeking asylum, which forces refugees to wear certain identities to appeal to immigration officers. Truth or authenticity, then, is determined not by the refugee, but by the reader or the listener so that the very conditions of publication overdetermine and constrain what can be published. Likewise, the conditions of possibility of what the reader hears determines what refugees can say and, accordingly, what can be published. But should refugees have to

produce themselves in certain ways as certain sympathetic figures to capture attention? And what does that twisted demand on representation say about the apparatuses erected to perpetuate it?

The inquiries above force another question: what is lost when stories of forced migration from the Global South are repackaged into Western forms by Western authors for audiences in the Global North? Does this sort of co-authorship actually produce the voice of the refugee? G. Thomas Couser writes that “all collaborative autobiography ‘speaks with a cloven tongue...because it conflates two consciousnesses...in one undifferentiated voice” (208). While the co-authorships here are not all collaborative autobiographies, they are all mediated texts that produce material and rhetorical ambiguity the reader has to negotiate. They provide ample evidence to ask, with Gayatri Spivak, “Can the subaltern speak?,” and immediately respond that the subaltern—here a refugee—cannot, but that quick answer blurs the conditions of seeking refuge and the circumstances migrants emerge from (78). Finally, this chapter looks at what the books here tell readers about seeking refuge and living in a refugee camp. Using text and illustrations, they show how camp life makes time pass differently and they make clear that moving away from harm and toward the unknown is a journey of scarcity and fear that precludes reflective writing.

## **2.1 The Uneasy Demand for Purity**

In her 2009 poem that has become a rallying cry for refugees, Warsan Shire writes that “no one leaves home unless / home is the mouth of a shark.” Where Aikins’ 330-page book adds flesh to the story of seeking refuge, Shire’s brief poem is its skeleton, with minimal and terrifying descriptions that form the core of virtually every refugee account published since the 1990s. Shire writes:

you have to understand,  
that no one puts their children in a boat  
unless the water is safer than the land  
no one burns their palms  
under trains  
beneath carriages  
no one spends days and nights in the stomach of a truck  
feeding on newspaper unless the miles travelled  
means something more than journey.  
no one crawls under fences  
no one wants to be beaten  
pitied  
  
no one chooses refugee camps  
or strip searches where your  
body is left aching  
or prison,  
because prison is safer  
than a city of fire  
and one prison guard  
in the night  
is better than a truckload  
of men who look like your father

no one could take it

no one could stomach it

no one skin would be tough enough

Her raw images are not rare occurrences, nor are they exaggerations, they are commonplace in the search for refuge. They urge readers to understand that “migration is simply not a choice, but rather a matter of survival,” and that being in a state of survival, fleeing with the clothes on your back while “home” stains your search for another place to live, provides no centering self from which to methodically and linearly lay out a story (Ahmad). Shire’s poetry complicates the problems that make refugees—war, rape, unrest, starvation—by balancing them with their modern “solutions”—flight, refugee camps, and detention. There is no rest or safety even after fleeing what felt like the worst nightmare; leaving is an unending flood of degradations that whittle down the strongest body, but it is still the best option for survival.

I quote Shire at length because she, like the authors of all the books in this chapter, is an interlocutor. A Somali born in Kenya and brought to London at a year old, her viral poem was inspired by conversations with refugees who, out of desperation, turned the abandoned Somali Embassy in Rome into a makeshift residence. Like Aikins, she gathers stories and amplifies them because they *need* to be told, but should there be rules about who is allowed to tell whose story to guard against erasure? Can there be? Given the current conditions for publication and the conditions of seeking refuge, a refugee cannot write without a Western interlocutor, or many, who provides access to publication precisely because they speak a certain hegemonic discourse, one that is produced by and for the West. But there is an inherent risk in this collaboration since discourse by and for the West is unlikely to move the needle on policies also formulated by and for the West. In addition, the utility of purity is lost if a voice cannot find an audience, despite

imperatives like #OwnVoices and other movements that attempt to elevate some voices for greater representation. Representation, though, is also vexed—there is no way out of the compromised position it imposes on Western writers covering refugee crises, especially as they, as Global North citizens, are entangled in the ways their own governments reject and limit migrants, asylees, and refugees. The publishing debacle of Cummins’ novel *American Dirt*, which I will discuss below, is one high profile example of this vexation. The novel about a Mexican mother and son fleeing gangs in Acapulco to find safety in the United States was excoriated by Mexican and Mexican American writers for cultural appropriation; Aikins, on the other hand, acknowledged his adoption of Afghan culture, looks, and customs and appropriated for what he considered a good cause. Where is the line here? What is appropriation and who decides? Although comparing Cummins’ to Aikins is not an apples-to-apples equation—Aikins is accountable to Omar and Cummins has no such grounding, which releases her from limits on her imaginative identification—the thornier aspects of telling another’s story, especially a marginalized person like a refugee, necessitate pushing boundaries of representation and form.

Aikins, I finally understand, embedded himself into Omar’s journey to conflate the two consciousnesses Couser identifies above—the conscience of a refugee and the conscience of a grounded citizen—to get the attention of the latter who may not understand the hardship of fleeing “the mouth of a shark.” He seems to be making a plea throughout the book that if readers will not understand the problem in the broad journalistic strokes of newspaper and television reporting, he provides something better: a view from the refugee trenches. He differentiates his voice from Omar’s as much as possible, but since Aikins’ narration is primary, Omar is as much an object of knowledge for the reader as he is for Aikins. Liisa Malkki writes that objectivity is always used against the refugee and despite Aikins’ efforts to give him voice, Omar is still what

Malkki would call a “speechless emissary” (377). Aikins’ frustration with Omar’s caution or his impatience with Omar’s heartsick longing for his girlfriend, Laila, serve to make Omar an unreliable informant, someone for whom Aikins’ needs to speak. In practice, Aikins’ altruistic co-authorship falls into the same traps Malkki observes with NGOs and other development initiatives in that “these humanitarian representational practices and the standardized interventions that go with them have the effect, as they currently stand, of producing anonymous corporeality and speechlessness” (389). Omar becomes one of millions, his story both singular and representative in Aikins’ telling, but no less urgent or necessary.

*The Naked Don't Fear the Water* illuminates an aspect of Aikins’ project that he plainly identifies: “Sometimes the lens we train on others shows us ourselves” (73). This realization echoes many of the points I made in Chapter One but also begs another question: must Westerners use the needy and helpless as a mirror for self-revelation? If we do, the subaltern in the form of the refugee is forced into purposiveness, her image of bare existence necessary to signify and organize the Western citizen’s bounty. Remediating her position runs the risk of threatening the way we know ourselves—rather than looking out for self-definition, we would have to look in, a much harder prospect. This posture of using the other to form the self requires the other in constant asymmetry—us always at the top, them always below—a reproducing pattern that reveals people who suffer but does not end their suffering. Aikins is trying to end the suffering by exposing it from the inside; his writing is a plea to make readers listen by showing what becoming a refugee looks like, as though a change of clothes and accent could approximate the fear of the mouth of the shark. He engages in cultural appropriation *and* makes Omar speechless, but his efforts can be viewed from another center of gravity: he is a Western writer writing within the Western publishing industry for Western readers on subjects that

concern the West. Though fraught with problematic objectification, he believes that urgency and necessity prevail. His efforts, then, are well-meaning proof that there is no way out of the power dynamics of representation for refugees because the very effort of finding refuge is a muzzle that mutes its participants with fear and exhaustion.

Gayatri Spivak famously concluded in 1988 that “The subaltern cannot speak” (104). At the time she was using Antonio Gramsci’s definition of the subaltern as a person socially, politically, and culturally oppressed by dominant structures, cut off from centers of power without the means for self-representation. In an interview twelve years later called “The New Subaltern,” Spivak relocates subalternity based on Giorgio Agamben’s categorizations of life inside a state of exception as either *zoe* or *bios*: *zoe* being bare life, a life barely indistinguishable from other animals, and *bios* being the qualified life of a citizen with political awareness. Caught in extended states of exception that render the refugee homeless, stateless, and confined to a camp, the refugee qualifies as *zoe*, possessed of a life that is narrated by someone else in a voice subsumed by dominant discourses that impose valuations and hierarchies. Co-authored refugee narratives attempt to disrupt the reductions of subalternity by providing pairings that cut into the problems Spivak and Malkki identify, among them, “patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation,” and representation and power (Spivak 1988, 102). The subaltern as refugee negotiates these problems with every step and at each border crossing, performing the role of supplicant over and over to move further away from one type of danger and closer to another. The authors here are conscious of the subaltern status of their subjects and use their work to expose the conditions that force it. Much like this dissertation, their finished products cannot transcend representational problems, but they can play a part in dismantling the

multiple systems at play by recognizing the impossibility of authenticity as a standard to adequately respond to problems that are urgent and pressing.

## **2.2 *American Dirt* and the Perils of Representation**

At the Manhattan launch party for *American Dirt* in January 2020, a novel for which Flatiron Books paid a seven-figure advance after a bidding war with multiple other publishers, the floral centerpieces were designed to match the book jacket. To prepare for the evening's event, the author, Jeanine Cummins, got a manicure and tweeted a photo of it. It, too, matched the book jacket: a stark white background crisscrossed and bound by barbed wire over stylized blue birds from Mexico's Talavera tiles, a design brought to the country by the Spanish. The efforts of Flatiron's publicist, their hired designers, and the author offer a monumental lesson in tone-deafness: the same barbed wire that keeps people out of restricted places, including the United States, and injures anyone or anything that gets tangled in it adorned tables and nails in celebration of publishing's book of the moment. The executives at Flatiron, which is owned by Macmillan Publishers, one of the five largest American publishers, itself owned by the behemoth Holtzbrinck Publishing Group in Stuttgart, Germany, had much to celebrate. *American Dirt* was set to drop with a 500,000-copy first print run (the vast majority of books have runs far south of 20,000), early trade reviews raved, and an obscure online review outlet compared it to *The Grapes of Wrath*, an encomium that led heavy-hitter blurbs from Stephen King, Sandra Cisneros, Kristin Hannah, and John Grisham, among many others. *The New York Times* published an excerpt, did an author interview, and ran reviews in the daily paper and the book review, an almost unheard amount of coverage for one book. And if all that was not enough, on the day before publication, Oprah chose it for her Book Club, a coronation that guarantees commercial success. There was just one small fly in the ointment...

A few weeks prior, in an equally obscure online outlet—an academic blog called *Tropics of Meta*—the artist and writer Myriam Gurba tore the book to shreds in a review titled, “Pendeja, You Ain’t Steinbeck: My Bronca with Fake-Ass Social Justice Literature.” She writes that the book “aspires to be Día de los Muertos but it, instead, embodies Halloween” and cringes at its grotesque stereotypes and the “white gaze taints of [Cummins’] prose, Mexico: bad, USA: good.” Gurba uses her review to insist that Cummins had no right to write the book. The review went viral, gathered more and louder voices, and changed the trajectory of the publisher’s plans. The author tour was cancelled, and Oprah pulled back her support. *American Dirt* remained a book club choice, but she shifted coverage to a series of conversations with those on “both sides” of the issue, meaning the issue of writing brown while white, not immigration (Grady).

To preempt further criticism, Cummins’ added an Author’s Note to digital and subsequent print editions in which she detailed the crisis of migrant deaths at America’s southern border during the 2010s and the painstaking research she did over four years to write her novel. She writes about the fear she felt when her husband, then an undocumented immigrant, was pulled over by police for a broken taillight, though she neglects to mention that he is Irish. She also confesses that she “wished someone slightly browner than me would write” this story, but then thought: “If you’re a person who has the capacity to be a bridge, why not be a bridge?” (378). The Note, though earnest and impassioned about the need for broader conversations about immigration and a greater understanding of the lives and humanity of the people desperate to come to America, stoked the voices against her. Her use of the term “these people” was held up as damning and a Twitterstorm raged over cultural appropriation, its fires stoked by ever moving targets: the research was shoddy, it was a white savior story, it did not accurately reflect Mexico, the advance was too big, the blurbs were too effusive, it was nothing more than trauma porn, and

always the nail polish and centerpieces, confirmation of everything wrong with the book and the industry behind it (Cummins 378). Why was the American publishing industry throwing all its money and support behind a *gringa* when so many Mexicans were writing a similar story? Why couldn't they get seven-figure advances or, for that matter, five- or six-figures? How was it okay for Cummins to make millions from other people's trauma? Critics complained that the main character in the book would never describe Mexico as she did if she was a "real" Mexican, calling into question the book's authenticity. The conversation raged about publishing, not about immigration or the people caught in its barbed wire.

Parul Sehgal's review in the daily *New York Times* moved the criticism in a different direction, asking in conclusion if the book's "shallowness paradoxically explains the excitement surrounding it?" She decried what was missing from the book, writing that "the deep roots of these forced migrations are never interrogated; the American reader can read without fear of uncomfortable self-reproach. It asks only for us to accept that 'these people are people,' while giving us the saintly to root for and the barbarous to deplore—and then congratulating us for caring." While this is an astute criticism, and one that I have lobbed myself, I wonder if Sehgal means that the American reader—herself excluded—does not think too deeply and, in fact, would reject the book if it forced self-examination? That freights one novel with a heavy weight, dismisses its millions of readers, and neglects a larger question of active engagement that often *has* to start with sympathy, empathy, and finding a way into hearts and minds. Cummins became a pariah and people in the publishing industry, even three years later, were scared to speak out on her behalf for fear of retribution on social media. And yet the book sold more than three million copies and was translated into thirty-seven languages making it a worldwide commercial success (Paul). It debuted at number one on *The New York Times* bestseller list and stayed on the list for

thirty-six weeks. That, as former *New York Times Book Review* editor Pamela Paul wrote, is ‘the power of a book that resonates.’ Readers devoured it and praised it effusively. On GoodReads, the vast majority of reviewers commented in its favor and in favor of novelists writing whatever they want. Many asked if books like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or, particularly, *The Grapes of Wrath*, could have been written if similar barriers had confronted Stowe or Steinbeck. The comparison is disturbing and apt as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is as deeply racist as it is passionately abolitionist.

The effects of *American Dirt*’s criticism have changed the publishing industry—if it landed on an editor’s desk today, it would not be published. It has made agents and editors extremely cautious in an industry that, while it has many problems, has a history of taking ideological risks and shifting public opinion. Critics in the *American Dirt* debate landed, for the most part, on the fact that it is possible to write about a particular group without belonging to it, “you just have to do it well—and part of doing it well involves treating your characters as human beings, and not luxuriating in and fetishizing their trauma” (Grady). So, who is the arbiter of doing it well? The industry? The market? The critics? All three were set at odds over *American Dirt*, and while the fight escalated over cancel culture and appropriation, with many on the right reveling at the spectacle of lefty elites devouring each other, the millions of readers affected by the story—right, remember? there’s a story in this novel—have not gotten another one like it. Who is authentic enough to write it? Which publisher is prepared to take the social media risk? Why is so much required to tell stories—imagined or ripped from the headlines—about crises affecting us *right now*? At a time when their numbers are rising almost exponentially, a lack of knowledge about the stateless and homeless contribute to our collective derangement over American safety, isolation, and innocence. Three problems converged over *American Dirt*. First, Mexican writers complained that although they are tackling the horrors of (im)migration,

the American publishing industry does not see them as critically or economically viable. Second, writing a book “well” is an aesthetic and individual judgement. Sehgal panned it; readers disagreed. And finally, refugees and migrants, those who can write faithfully and authentically from lived experience, can rarely write while living the experience. As I will show below, and as Cummins’ viscerally describes in *American Dirt*, the road is not a place for reflection, it is only a place for survival, and it is often populated by the poor, because migrants with deeper pockets can pay for easier passage.

How can a critic speak about a writer who speaks for people whose voices cannot be amplified? The novelist Lauren Groff spent most of her review of *American Dirt* handwringing over this question, wrapping any sort of criticism in a cloak of anxiety that would allow her to retreat:

I was sure I was the wrong person to review this book. I could never speak to the accuracy of the book’s representation of Mexican culture or the plights of migrants; I have never been Mexican or a migrant. I was further sunk into anxiety when I discovered that, although Cummins does have a personal stake in stories of migration, she herself is neither Mexican nor a migrant... .. Perhaps this book is an act of cultural imperialism; at the same time, weeks after finishing it, the novel remains alive in me. When I think of the migrants at the border, suffering and desperate, I think of Lydia and Luca, and feel something close to bodily pain.

What are readers to make of Groff’s ambivalence, which summons the power of an affective appeal while fretting over the privilege to feel it? She is so knotted up about writing a review she seems to wonder if she is even qualified to read the book. Is she suggesting that it should only be read by migrants or Mexicans? Groff feels sympathy, the feeling is intense and long-

lasting, perhaps a doorway into knowing and doing more about immigration—a start. Her review and subsequent response prompted an article in *The New Republic* called “How Not to Write a Book Review” (Shephard). She was taken to task for her praise *and* her ambivalence, then she apologized for her review’s inadequacy, and apologized again for an early, unedited review that was quoted out of context and had to be retracted. Her final tweet on her involvement is an adequate summation: “Fucking nightmare” (Groff).

This controversy frames the books that follow here, and the many that do not, but how can I know what has not been written or has been rejected? Groff’s clipped summary, Spivak’s brief summation (“The subaltern cannot speak”), and Malkki’s label of speechless emissaries seem unlikely companions but each address who can speak and who is muzzled by which pressures and powers. In the case of the refugee, voice is muzzled by circumstance; for those who can speak, voice is muzzled by fear of appropriation. While this is a simplistic reduction that centers Western publishing, it is *realpolitik* during a time of crisis because it reduces options for readers and writers and forces burdens of proof on desperate and desperately needed stories. In *The Naked Don’t Fear the Water*, a work of non-fiction, Aikins’ subject position is at least marked and the question of his appropriation and management of Omar’s story is on display throughout. In a work of fiction, the author’s relation to the material risks becoming transparent but should issues of voice entirely occlude issues of urgency? Aikins’ is reviewed as a “story the world needs to hear now more than ever” but *American Dirt* is not (Goudeau)? One concerns critical humanitarian issues and the other—somehow—does not? This disconnect, though paraded as well-meaning, doubly reinforces the privileged gatekeepers in Western publishing while simultaneously disappearing issues of grave importance. The result is that the paratexts

surrounding *American Dirt* strangled the book without resuscitating the issue that compelled it, essentially throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh writes that “if the urgency of a subject were indeed a criterion of its seriousness, then, considering what climate change actually portends for the future of the earth, it should surely follow that this would be the principal preoccupation of writers the world over—if certain literary forms are unable to negotiate these torrents, then they will have failed” (8). He is primarily concerned with climate change, but climate change forcibly displaces people; it makes resources scarce and fighting over them abundant, and it is one of the reasons why nearly 110 million people—40% of them children—have been displaced from the place they call home (UNHCR). Gaia Vince reports in *Nomad Century* that “disasters already displace up to ten times more people than conflicts and war worldwide” (xv). Ghosh is secondarily concerned with the novel and the cultural crisis of imagination we must confront if we are to wrap our heads around truly existential crises like climate change, which will render cities from Kolkata to New York to Bangkok, and their populations of roughly thirty-five million people, uninhabitable. What will the residents of those cities face when they seek refuge? Will they be received after they are forced to flee? Limiting novels that imagine the experience, whether realistic or speculative, limits considerations of adaptability and possibilities for alternate outcomes. Worse still, it diminishes the potential for empathy for the millions engaged in journeys right now.

Even though Ghosh was himself caught in a freak cyclone in New Delhi that killed thirty and injured seven hundred in 1978, he resisted writing about it in his fiction for fear that a redescription would “impoverish the experience” (15). When contemplating what he would think if he came across his cyclone experience in a novel, he confesses his response would be

“one of incredulity, [he] would be inclined to think that the scene was a contrivance of last resort” (16). His decades long hesitation to weave his own experience into his fiction denotes an impoverishment of a different sort, one more incredible because it denotes an alienation from the novelist’s power of observation and of the work of literature. *American Dirt* was decried for being trauma porn, but nothing Cummins wrote veers from experiences in other refugee accounts, real or imagined. Indeed, the indignities and fear her characters repeatedly experience are quick and commonplace, if not tame in comparison, and her characters are always on the move, a situation that belies the reality of damning waits in liminal spaces like refugee camps and safe houses.

### **2.3 The Conditions of Seeking Refuge**

Matthieu Aikins writes at length about how borders concentrate violence, which makes the Mediterranean Sea the world’s deadliest border. He calls it “Europe’s moat” as he narrates from an empty beach north of Istanbul waiting for the moment smugglers will shove him and fifty other humans, mostly young men, into a 25-foot long patched inflatable helmed by a young Syrian chosen for the job minutes prior (160). Whimpers and groans blend with the sound of the water lapping the sides of the raft as Aikins “became aware of the utter terror that surrounded him” (160). He grew up on the water and was a strong swimmer; Omar, like everyone else in the raft, had never been to sea. They did not buy life jackets in Turkey for \$35 each, probably a smart gamble since most are rumored to be fakes that absorb water and aid in sinking. If anything went wrong, they would drown, and despite his strength, Aikins knew he could not swim the five miles to Lesbos, their destination. This is one of the few moments in the book that Aikins expresses his own fear. At every other step of the journey, his English, his passports, or his credit cards could be instant safety nets. Out in the Mediterranean, there was no net and no

Plan B. Lesbos is just ten miles off the Turkish coast, its lights visible in the night, but to reach it, the migrants had to escape detection from the Turkish navy and coast guard—so much effort to land and be immediately transferred to Moria, Europe’s most notorious refugee camp.

What happened next fills the fiction and non-fiction of almost every account of trying to reach Europe: disaster, or near disaster, at sea. The Missing Migrants Project reports that since 2014, 29,313 people have died in the Mediterranean while seeking refuge, “and that is understood to be an underestimate,” writes the Irish journalist Sally Hayden in her book, *My Fourth Time, We Drowned* (xxvii). Aikins and Omar lived to retell their trip, but thousands do not, victims of all the dangers in the moat. Their small inflatable had been spotted by the Turkish navy, which sent a coast guard boat of similar size to intercept them. The Turkish boat rammed them amidships, sending passengers flying. The migrants pulled away and the Turkish boat circled for another hit, getting close enough to throw a line around the migrants’ motor and throw punches at the migrants to force them back into Turkish waters. The Turks even tried to slash a pontoon with a boathook, doing all they could to sink the inflatable. The migrants were able to outrun the Turks for the short time it took to get into Greek waters where they encountered another boat that seemed to want to intercept them again. This second manic confrontation finally subsided when the migrants saw a Norwegian flag flying from the boat’s quarterdeck. This was a Norwegian rescue vessel operating with Frontex, Europe’s border patrol. Omar communicated with the crew in English and everyone on the inflatable was taken on board the rescue cutter. The Norwegians in charge, grateful for Omar’s help, learned that he had served with coalition forces in Afghanistan and was escaping the Taliban. They explained the process of waiting in Moria while people were sorted out. “Many migrants [are] coming in search of a better life,” one Norwegian explained to Omar, “and Europe [doesn’t] have room for

all of them. They want to take the place of *real* refugees like you” (162, emphasis mine). Grateful for Omar’s help with translation, the Norwegian said, “You’re acting like a European. You’re being calm and quiet. Europeans don’t like it when people start shouting and acting crazy. Why was everyone so worked up? It’s very unusual for us” (163). Omar responded that it was because of the fight with the Turkish coast guard, but that meant little to Norwegian who was set on the qualifications of a real refugee and how one should act.

The conditions required to bring these two men into conversation were, to borrow Ghosh’s term, incredulous, the very opposite of calm and quiet. By this point in his journey, Omar has left behind everyone he knows. He made it to an Afghani border town only to return to Kabul fearful of a proposed route that might divert him through Pakistan. Back in Kabul, he and Aikins decided to split up and reach Istanbul separately because the journey through Iran and on foot into Turkey was too dangerous for Aikins, who would travel to Istanbul through Italy, Croatia, Serbia, and Bulgaria instead. Omar and another friend went by plane, bus, and smuggler’s van through Iran then over the Zagros Mountains on foot. Turkish and Iranian soldiers chased them back and forth over the border in the mountains; they were beaten and had their money and clothes stolen by soldiers and other migrants. It took them three attempts to reach a crowded safe house on the Turkish side of the border. Once there, they were locked inside the house with minimal food and left at the mercy of smugglers. Days later, only after payments to their smugglers could be wired and confirmed, they were crammed into a bus with dozens of other men and dumped in Istanbul. Aikins writes that “like war, life on the smuggler’s road was mostly waiting punctuated by moments of terror” (136), but he can only report back on this most dangerous section of the journey since he did not take it. Omar and his friend Malik arrived in Istanbul sunburned and ravenous, their feet torn up after having their boots stolen

enroute. Shortly after filling their bellies, they began meeting with smugglers to plot their next move from Turkey to Greece, the journey that would bring them onto the Norwegian boat, but still only part of the way to Europe. The demeanor the Norwegian praises belies Omar's experience and reverts to narrow definitions of purity and need for others escaping fear and desperate living conditions.

Definitions of "real" plague the perception and execution of every aspect of seeking refuge, including both non-fiction and fiction accounts. The tension an agreeable truth creates is always borne by the refugee—the person most in need. I will discuss its intrusion into immigration interviews below, but its presence in this exchange has nagged at me since my first reading: Does Omar remember the Norwegian's comment or is it something only Aikins caught? Did it naggingly replay in Omar's mind after the terrifying night in the water or was it a relief to know that he, too, could pass using the tools he had honed? I also wonder what is missing from refugee accounts that would allow someone—especially someone whose work involves rescuing migrant boats in the Mediterranean—to have an expectation of calm and quiet.

In my reading of this part of his account, Aikins is overwhelmed and loses his focus as he comes to know the shocking realities of fear and danger and the knowledge that very little can coexist with them, not even Omar, his "plot." The book, of course, was reconstructed from Aikins' notes and extensive research—"the principal source for our journey was the more than sixty thousand words of notes I took with my smartphone" (297). Yet even writing from a presumably safe spot as a seasoned, educated journalist aided by an editor, there is evidence of chaos, lost focus, and a single-minded need to stay alive in the narrative. Omar may be his reason behind it, but *The Naked Don't Fear the Water* is Aikins' story. When he is overwhelmed, as he will be again when they are bussed into the Moria refugee camp, Omar fades

and survival comes to the fore. In addition, when Aikins incorporates geopolitical ethics, and philosophy into his book, Omar also fades, or becomes the subject through which Aikins' concepts find form. These fades or slippages force deeper questions about whose story matters and who is the subject of the refugee narrative, the latter a question I take up in Chapters One and Three of this dissertation to make the point that the identity of the author does not predetermine or guarantee answers to either question. In fact, as evidenced in Aikens' account, demands on identity can muddy or even preclude knowledge of seeking refuge—here we have a journalist disguised as a refugee telling the refugee's story through the journalist's eye, which, in the end, is the journalist's story *not* the refugee's. Finding footing as a reader is dizzying as there is no central identity to rest into, a situation that repeats over and over as refugees and their co-authors negotiate some level of belonging.

In her article about documentary storytelling and Middle Eastern refugees called “The battle of truth and fiction,” Valerie Anishchenkova writes that in film documentaries, Refugees are cinematically constructed as talking bodies, serving as props to frame the ‘Middle Eastern refugees in Europe’ narrative. They are allowed to exist only as stories. They are nothing but their stories, their identities reduced to an act of storytelling on camera. But even these stories are chaperoned, edited and fragmented by the film-makers. In other words, the subjects' existence is defined exclusively by the western gaze. (816) Anishchenkova writes this as criticism that could be applied to Aikins' project and other written works that try to convey the refugee narrative; it also echoes the complaints surrounding *American Dirt*. Omar is literarily constructed—he is formed by the fragments Aikins reassembles to intervene in and disrupt the border industrial complex. He drifts in and out of the account, an object of Aikins' observations. To patch this mix of perspectives, Aikins slips into

the role of refugee, but his execution is always lensed through the western gaze; Aikins cannot see any other way *except* in the moments of existential terror when he is also reduced to an abstraction, i.e., the other side of the Norwegian's comment, "all of them," where "they" can only be presumed as charlatans, undeserving and outside of protection (162). The disconnect in the retelling for any writer is that for a refugee, every moment is one of existential bargaining, they are not able to pick and choose. Any representation of the journey, whether historicized, philosophized, or put into documentary format requires an editor who splices the fragments into a whole for consumption elsewhere. The demand for the "truthiest" truth is rendered impossible by the limits of representation and the harsh conditions of the journey.

The documentary film *Midnight Traveler*, released in the United States in 2019, wrestles with some of these issues. After the Taliban put a price on their heads, Afghan filmmakers and husband and wife Hassan Fazili and Fatima Hussaini, chose to flee to Europe with their two young daughters. The four of them filmed more than three hundred hours of footage on their cellphones as they moved from Afghanistan through Turkey, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Hungary, where the film ends, although they are currently in Germany. Fazili wanted the film to show a family story, something different from journalistic accounts and films by outsiders explaining what was happening inside the 2015 surge that brought more than one million people into Europe. He calls his project "the other side of the story" and documents his family in their liminal state, moving from country to country with the pressures of seeking refuge and raising children (Horton). In one scene his older daughter is playing in the ocean in Turkey, in another she is sobbing with boredom. In one scene his younger daughter is playing in the snow, in another she is covered in boils from the filthy conditions in their refugee camp. One of the daughters captures Fazili and Hussaini fighting, each member of the family a subject of the

other's gaze throughout. When their SIM cards were full, Fazili sent them to Emelie Mahdavian, an American filmmaker in California, who catalogued the scenes and assembled the most moving ones, a job she described as "no small feat of post-production" (Horton). The producer, Su Kim, similarly remarked that "the film is really built on the editing and the extensive post-production" required to turn cellphone footage into something that could be shown on a large screen (Horton). The work of representing the family's journey to the wider world in a format that would be taken seriously required a cross-continental partnership and equipment inaccessible to a family on the move. Fazili suggests he is providing another side to the story, but I contend here that this is the story—that the very people going through it cannot tell it on their own. And when they do, when they get so close to it as to be in it, they and their collaborators come up against ethics of coverage: Is their collaboration changing the story? Is a recorded action simultaneously the action and a consideration of how the action will play out in its retelling? Does that effect its truth? Would a definitive answer to any of these questions change the reality or severity of leaving, moving, waiting, and arriving? In other words, does collaboration change the veracity of the project, a question similar to the one I asked of Aikens at the start of the chapter when I first encountered his plan to disguise himself as a refugee.

My answer to all these questions is emphatically no. Moreover, clawing back the layers of post-production to find kernels of truth feels pedantic and privileged—an effort of suspicion that would lead me to discredit an account because it required collaboration when, in fact, I wish for more collaborations and broader circulation of refugee hardships, whether real or imagined. There is privilege inherent in being able to criticize as well, so if the method of representation is questioned and discredited when refugees speak out to criticize their treatment by the West, their projects can also be questioned and discredited as not real... again, that loaded word. Perhaps

the gravity of the crisis requires new forms to disrupt the power dynamics of the conversation? As is, circulated refugee accounts are strained by normalized containers: *What Is the What* is a novel and an autobiography; *Midnight Traveler* is over-produced to accentuate its minimalism; frustrated by his options, Matthieu Aikins tries to become a refugee in *The Naked Don't Fear the Water*. The crisis of migration is bigger than the forms that can hold it; it pushes against temporality and cultural production, disrupts literary geographies, and demands new assemblages. In an article about refugee literature and post-colonial theory, Claire Gallien argues that “refugees are ‘the human face’ of climate change, economic and environmental inequalities, and armed conflict” and she contends that “moments of ecological crisis and population displacement are also periods of intense linguistic activism and literary creativity” (723). Given these conditions, and predictions that they will only intensify in the coming decades, Gallien suggests that “refugee literature acts as a mode of resistance and resilience against the perpetuation of colonial control, predation, and destruction, in ‘postcolonial’ times” (723). The ways authors and filmmakers are stretching normalized containers with hybridized productions—non-fiction and fiction in one book, cell phone footage produced for large screens, Aikins’ unique form of italicizing quotes and providing citations and notes at the end of the book rather than breaking the flow of the narrative—support Gallien’s contentions even as those containers run up against neocolonial unimaginativeness. Why, indeed, should Jeanine Cummins be publishing’s darling of the moment when many Mexican writers have written the same story? Can the industry business model shift to allow its marketing juggernaut to attach similar but smaller releases to one mega-release—same subject, different angle? Can e-books contain digital footage for a multimedia experience? Without shifts in what the industry can

accommodate materially and creatively, refugee stories are limited by the conditions of seeking refuge and the industry-wide myopia of what forms and voices are available.

## **2.4 The Conditions of Waiting for Refuge**

Speaking from the road is nearly impossible; speaking from a refugee camp is replete with other problems. After their rescue at sea, Omar, Aikins, and the rest of the migrants on their boat were packed into buses and taken to Moria, a refugee camp best described as a hell on Earth that, thankfully, no longer exists. In September 2020 it was burned to the ground by refugees protesting the desperate conditions, UN threats to return them to Turkey, and the relentless boredom of being caged. Inside the razor-wired perimeter, inmates had to compete for food, shelter, and medical care amidst open sewage, burnt out containers from constant fires, and eternal shortages. UN security was present, but only to protect the western workers in their inner compound; at night, the refugees were left alone, and crime was rampant. The first bit of advice Aikins and Omar received from another inmate was clear: “Don’t trust anyone, OK? Don’t even trust me right now while I’m telling you this,” a warning that drapes every interaction with suspicion (177). Aikins writes that “having to constantly wait in line for something you desperately need and might not get can change a person for the worse,” a change that hastens acting from the fear and distrust in the earlier warning (183). In short, refugee camps change people in ways both subtle and obvious, the obvious because they are so constant. Including a laundry list of the physical miseries inside a camp does not seem to me a useful exercise in this chapter as those descriptions are readily available and the task would bring on fatigue for the reader. What is harder to find, and what I will focus on below, are descriptions of how camp life strips away the sense of being human, how it precludes the desire and ability to write oneself into

existence because it creates an existence no one living it wants to reconstitute or replicate. My research so far has revealed only one book written from inside a modern camp and that is Boochani's *No Friend But the Mountains*. Any other was written after residents shared their experience verbally with someone else who formed it into a narrative, or after release, when reflection mixes with contemplation, confusion and, often, anger.

Recall Valentino's queries from *What Is the What*. He confesses that two questions were constant topics for discussion over the ten years he lived in Kenya's Kakuma Refugee Camp. He and his friends wondered, "What was life in Kakuma? Was it life? There was debate about this," he explains. "On the one hand, we were alive, which meant that we were living a life, that we were eating and could enjoy friendships and learning and could love. But we were nowhere" (Eggers 373). Place is an integral part of what constitutes their humanity so to exist in a place that was nowhere refuted a claim to existence in ways they could not fully express. And yet their physicality confirmed their being, thus establishing a tension between physical proof of life and its mental hypothesis: Was it life? This tension and the liminal state it engenders push residents into a sort of sub-humanity in return for survival. Hannah Arendt recognizes this as a paradox, that the moment a person becomes a human in general, "without a profession, without a citizenship, without an opinion, without a deed by which to identify and specify himself—and different in general, representing nothing but his absolutely unique individuality which, deprived of expression with and action upon a common world" is the moment that person loses all significance (1951, 302). So at the very moment an individual must trade their unique individuality for life in a camp, they are also trading their claim to human rights, a bargain that undercuts the humanitarianism for which the camps exist. Arendt is writing about the loss of human rights, but I show here that in accounts of camp life, residents are methodically turned

into something less than human, the camp itself a zone of non-being where narrating one's existence is neither possible nor palatable. By creating a lower form of humanity, camps engage in what Didier Fassin calls a "politics of life," in which humanitarian testimony, a term I would apply to all of the books in this dissertation, whether fiction or non-fiction, that address the struggles of refugees, "establishes two forms of humanity and two sorts of life in the public space: those who can tell stories and those whose stories can be told only by others" (2007, 518). The books here show that in the politics of life, those in camps can only speak through others, if they can speak at all; in the quest for human rights, those in camps are made into something less than human, thus extinguishing their qualifications when demanding such rights. The paradox Arendt identifies is writ large in refugee camps where the need to rely on others to maintain life closes down the ability to proclaim one's humanity.

In his 2016 book *City of Thorns: Nine Lives in the World's Largest Refugee Camp*, Ben Rawlence describes entry into a refugee camp as the "moment of the bargain," the moment when you "traded your name for a ration card number [and] when you traded your autonomy to be processed into the faceless bureaucracy of the UN system" (90). Isha, a Somali mother of six that he tracks throughout his book, willingly makes this trade; her animals had died in drought, al-Shabab had taxed her crops so heavily she had nothing left, and she had walked with her children with little food or water for eighteen days to reach Dadaab. She needed what the camp provided. Her life and the lives of her children depended on it so hers was an easy bargain to make. As Aikens and Omar approached Moria, the bargain was much harder. Aikens' legs felt "wobbly," and he writes about the inner conflict of knowing what he was heading into: "I don't have to do this, I thought: I could just cry out in English that I was a journalist and that I'd been tricked by the smuggler into coming to Lesbos" (170). He did not cry out, though, knowing he

would be immediately separated from Omar and might cause harm to the other refugees in their group if smugglers knew a spy was in their company. Instead, he stayed quiet and let a UN worker fasten a serial number around his wrist, then immediately set to figuring out how to get out of the system he had just submitted to.

Legally, the path out of Moria started after a preliminary interview with an officer from the EU's Hotspot program. Pass that interview and a person could get moved to the mainland for a final assessment. Fail it and depending on the agreements the EU had with the country of origin, a person could be sent back, a legal action called *refoulement* that complicates international law (Stutz and Trauner). This system created tension in the camp because it allowed some to jump the lines and leave faster than others. Syrians had preference and begrudged others who rushed toward Europe after borders were opened just for them. Syrians were given priority for interviews and housing even if others had waited far longer. Aikins tries to sort out the grudges that arose from this preferential system explaining that "the Afghans were bitter that the Syrians got more sympathy, when their own war had lasted decades longer, but were quick to say that Pakistanis were not real refugees. An Eritrean...resented the West Africans, who weren't escaping a dictatorship like him" (186). The list of slights was long and created sparks for much of the internecine fighting inside, making Moria a powder keg of national grievances and instilling a Western hierarchical logic that set the refugees against each other. Aikins points out that the whole system forced the migrants to see each other through Western eyes, a subtle introduction to what might await them in Europe that added a palpable cloak of dread to everyday life.

The illegal path out of Moria offered a different type of fear. Aikins and Omar learned that the only way off Lesbos was hiding in a truck bound for Athens. There were holes in the

fencing that allowed them to take a bus into the nearby town of Mytilini during the days but the problem, long-timers told them, was getting off the island, which made trucks the only solution, but a nearly impossible one given the local chatter that Aikins recounts:

“We’ve all tried [the trucks], and we’ve all given up. You’ll give up too, once you understand.”

“But we know a smuggler who says he can get us documents for twelve hundred euros,” said Omar.

The youth snorted in disgust and went back to his hut.

“Won’t work,” said the gray-haired man, dragging on the last of his cigarette.

“You’ll never get off the island,” said the other from his chair. (181-182)

The hopelessness delivered by those already in the system extended the hopelessness of existence in the camp. Aikins and Omar tried to find a workaround to the trucks right away, their minds in a constant scramble for a way to be anywhere else but where they were. Rawlence notes that this mindset creates two types of dispositions in camp residents. First, life as a process of waiting with little hope for change loses its meaning, which makes “people more inclined to act without consequences, without limits, to be caught by a hedonism of the senses or the indulgence of emotion, or the violent righteousness of religion” (Rawlence 107). Fights in camps are more vicious, drugs use more pervasive, gangs and religious violence more tempting, and even school, which provides optimism and distraction in long-established camps, more futile with little hope of taking the education beyond the camp fences.

Second is a type of despair called *buufis*. The term was coined by Somalis in Dadaab to express “the longing for resettlement out of the refugee camps. It is a kind of depression rooted in an inextinguishable hope for a life elsewhere that simultaneously casts the present in shadow”

(Rawlence 192). *Buufis* makes people act without fear of consequences, as above, and provides a reason for people to change their identities for any chance at resettlement, something that Rawlence calls “identity reconstruction,” in which you rewrite a history for yourself to align with the ethnicity, discrimination, or violence the UN considers most egregious in the moment and therefore offers the best chance to be picked for resettlement (193). The odds are terrible. Rawlence writes that about 2,000 people per year are chosen for resettlement from the half million that live in the three camps that comprise Dadaab and the process can take years. One of the men he tracks in *City of Thorns* was listed to come to the United States then heard nothing for two years. He quotes the man’s comments on the waiting: “My mind is infected with resettlement. Sometimes I cannot even remember my name. I have to go to the market and do research and ask people who am I?” (194). This stands in contrast to the idea of identity reconstruction and represents a sort of identity disruption or identity disorientation that leaves refugees flailing blindly amongst existential questions and finding no answers within themselves or from those around them. The shadow of life in a culture where leaving is the only form of success makes those who stay seem failures. Rawlence quotes a young boy in Dadaab who says that “real men are those who go to the USA,” as if staying or leaving was a matter of choice, but the implication damns those sentenced to live in the eternal stony present of a camp (195).

Within this environment where identity is fungible or negligible, the capacity to write oneself into existence is rendered undesirable and unnecessary. Why do it? If it doesn’t result in a chance at resettlement, what is the point? The same ethics of representation surrounding *Midnight Traveler* apply here: Would the writing be an account of what occurred mixed with a consideration of how the account will impact the writer and reader in its retelling? Does this double consciousness affect the purity of a story? In reality, the entire apparatus of refugee

management interfaces with politics of representation and in each moment, the refugee's voice is silenced, whether by the psychological conditions of long or short term containment or by the material possibility for capturing a story.

*When Stars Are Scattered*, Victoria Jameson and Omar Mohamed's graphic memoir for middle grade readers of the fifteen years Mohamed, a Somali refugee, spent in Dadaab, makes distinct points about material production within the camp. Dadaab is so big it has three separate camps, Hagadera, Dagahaley, and Ifo. Mohamed lived in Ifo camp, "which in English roughly translates to 'City of Light.' Don't let the name fool you, though—we don't have electricity here" (14). The narration begins after Omar and his nonverbal brother Hassan have been in Ifo camp for seven years; Omar is eleven and Hassan, who also suffers from seizures and insomnia, is a little younger. In a text box over the star-filled sky, Omar says, "For me, the first years are lost" (257). They are the years Somalia erupted into civil war, their father was killed, and the two young boys were separated from their mother. Omar would spend the rest of his time in Ifo, and after in Pennsylvania, caring for his brother and searching for their mother. These double tasks gave him reason not to attend school until one of the teachers recognized his intelligence and helped make provisions for Hassan's care. To encourage him, the teacher gives Omar a blank notebook and a pencil, possessions that made him unique and much envied among the other students: "Wow! Where'd you get those? That's not fair! You just started school! How come you got a pencil?" (41). Realizing his good fortune, Omar took notes in class—he learned to read and write from a friend who went to school and taught him in the dirt—and "wrote really tiny to try and save [his] paper" (47). No electricity, no paper, and little food, atop the dread of indefinite confinement course through the book creating a sense of enclosure amplified by the panels containing Jamieson's illustrations.

Omar describes “the empty days,” the days when students stay home or fall asleep in class or start fights at school because they are weak and irritable from hunger. “When you’re a refugee,” he writes, “you get food every fifteen days from the distribution center. For about the first ten days its ok and everyone eats. But the food we’re given is never enough. During the last five days, the food starts to run out. And...everyone...is...hungry” (61). Jamieson’s soft, rounded illustrations and Iman Getty’s dessert-toned palette make the story engaging even as Omar struggles with the boredom, waiting, and *buufis* that make his life unbearable at times. While he could collaborate with Jamieson ten years after resettlement, the possibilities for written work while he was in the camp were nonexistent.

Without electricity to write, without paper to write with, and without hope for something beyond the camp, narration was difficult for a boy. For a girl, the prospects were worse, and even in a story for young readers, Jamieson and Mohamed are explicit about the problems girls in the camp face. Omar’s friend Maryam is the best student in their class but on the eve of exams when students compete to move into middle school, she is married off by her father at age twelve for his immediate financial gain. By the time Omar graduates from high school, Maryam has a child in preschool and another on the way, her goal to become a lawyer in Canada cut off. “It’s not fair. It’s not fair. It’s not fair” is a constant refrain in the book.

When Omar is given a UN interview for resettlement, he cannot believe his good fortune, but at the same time, his interview with a UN officer forces him to confront the memories of his early life. Advice on his block is rampant: “Make sure everyone knows the same story. When did you leave Somalia? Why? Make sure everyone has the same answer. They’re looking for you to trip up, so they can say your story is false and you’re not a true refugee” (163-164). The advice for the interview and the prospects of it fill Omar with dread; the fact that Hassan is non-

verbal is nearly a relief. He narrates that he “had been trying to **forget** the past and to think about the future instead. Now [he] had to remember all the terrible things that had happened. [His] nightmares came back” (166, emphasis in original). The panel with this text also includes an illustration of a cry of “Mama!” coming from his hut. The story that could be his ticket away from Dadaab was also one that would damage him in the retelling, another challenge of narrating oneself from inside a camp. To speak requires efforts of composure, recall, and what Arthur Frank calls “reassemblies of fragments on loan” (14). In the case of refugees, they are reassembling and assembling, putting together pieces of traumatic experiences that defy retelling and conjuring pieces of identity to appease the listener. For the assembled character, there is no safe central identity to write into being and no organizing logic that does not conform to Western models. This splitting of the self is not confined to passive assemblies required in interviews but also lives in the immediacy of social media and the active identity fracturing it demands. In describing the effect of Facebook on the youth of Dadaab, Rawlence writes that they are tormented every time they look at their phones. “Some cope by inventing parallel lives online, imagining that they are already there; listing their hometowns as ‘Cleveland, OH’, or ‘Minneapolis, MN’, posting photos of cars and urban skylines that they have never seen” (195). Who they are is detached from who they wish to be, which allows *buufis* to cast a shadow over their present and shades all the ways they represent themselves in moments that they have a choice, as on social media, and in every other moment when they are reduced to a serial number within the UN bureaucracy. Refugees who do have a voice, it seems, only have it if it acquires the malleability necessary to submit to the forms available to it—losing one voice is a factor of gaining another.

## 2.5 When? Where? Why? Are you telling the Truth?

Omar's dread at having to remember traumas from the past is one layer in the complex organization of an immigration interview. The interviews are also laden with unknowable or invisible pressures that include UN quotas, storytelling expectations, the mood of the interviewer, and the preponderance of advice given by well-meaning friends and acquaintances. Jamieson devotes a page to the terror that washes through Omar when he finds out his interview will be conducted in English. His fears are somewhat relieved when he is appointed an interpreter, but that does nothing to smooth the process. He explains that "It took a while to talk. First the UN guy asked a question. Then the interpreter repeated it in Somali. Then the interpreter repeated it in English" (176). At the time of his first interview, Omar had been living in the camp for ten years. He was a fourteen year old retelling the story from when he was four and watched his father shot dead, was separated from his mother, and walked for weeks with a group of villagers to escape civil war. When he and Hassan arrived at Dadaab in 1993, they spent months in the camp hospital recovering from malnourishment, dehydration, and malaria. Nurses had to teach Omar how to walk again, which he recounts as "funny, after we'd walked so far, I had to learn again," although the humor is hard to perceive as a reader thrown into his escape from Somalia rather than the author considering it twenty-five years later (189). The conditions of the interview are stacked against the refugee at almost every turn, and always lurking is the fear of not presenting a story that would confirm you as a "real" or "true" refugee.

Assembling memories from a split state of anticipation and trepidation when your life depends on the answers is fraught almost beyond understanding. I have assembled a raft of quotes and material to support how refugees' ruptured autobiographies are pressurized into narratives that must be meticulously released into interviews, but they feel inadequate, because

the form of the dissertation and the measured, linear contemplation of a chapter barely hint at the power dynamics and frailties of an immigration interview and can never approximate the fear and weight for the person struggling to be heard *in the right way*. The task is akin to describing trauma, which Elaine Scary contends can only be done by omission or redescription, yet within immigration interviews, leaving anything out or answering inconsistently can lead to a rejection of your claim (64). Within a dissertation, it feels grasping and lacking, so that whatever I lay out here only touches on the terror and performativity required in an interview and makes my observations and criticism feel tepid and doctrinaire. I feel trapped: How can I *just* write about this? I should do more! I am not an immigrant; I've never been through an immigration interview, never suffered a moment of hesitation at the many borders I have crossed. Against better judgement, I feel like Lauren Groff reviewing *American Dirt*.

Valeria Luiselli, the Mexican journalist and author of *Tell Me How It Ends*, offers some encouraging perspective. Her short essay, written after working in New York City's federal immigration court translating the questions and answers on intake questionnaires for unaccompanied child migrants, identifies the inanity, frustration, and misguided expectations for children to answer the forty questions on the questionnaire. Nevertheless, she concludes that while the story of migration continues, "the only thing to do is to tell it over and over again as it develops, bifurcates, knots around itself. And it must be told, because before anything can be understood, it has to be narrated many times, in many different words, and from many different angles, by many different minds" (97). Although Luiselli's plea feels like a coda to this chapter rather than a point to be made mid-section, I want it here to guide my discussion of the immigration interview, which is a process of co-authorship devoid of the ownership in the books discussed above. Even in Rawlence's thoroughly journalistic *City of Thorns*, the Dadaab

residents who shared their lives verbally also heard the narratives he wrote read back to them or read them for themselves. They were given the opportunity to intervene in the narration at various stages of the writing, inserting their voice if they chose. The creators and subjects of other books and films in this chapter willingly collaborated on a finished product but the immigration interview offers no such collaboration. Even though migrants and refugees willingly submit to their interview, in this highly charged moment of autobiographical narration, the power dynamic is such that the storyteller has no power. Italo Calvino wrote that “It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear,” and nowhere is that more evident than in an immigration interview where the dynamic is not an answer to ‘What is your story?’, it is, rather, ‘What story does the listener want to hear?’ (135). This shift in emphasis runs against Luiselli’s conclusion above and adds to Spivak’s guiding question about whether or not the subaltern can speak. The books and paratexts under examination here show that the answer is yes, so long as they say the right thing and they say it well, which is another way of saying no, and also, maybe.

The darkest parts of *When Stars Are Scattered*, in the story and in the tone of the illustrations, are Omar’s UN interview and its aftermath. He describes the stuttering, delayed process of his interview that looped fractured, painful memories out of his mouth into the interpreter then back to the interviewer. After hours of questioning, the UN officer said he had everything he needed to open a file and told Omar he would be hearing back about resettlement in two to four months. In the first six months of waiting, Hassan’s seizures returned, and Omar describes the depression that took root inside himself: “I slid deeper and deeper into a dark hole. Not only that, but I felt like I had a darkness growing inside me too. It made me feel angry and mean, and I took it out on the people I loved most” (206). Four *years* later, he got word that he and Hassan would be resettled to Phoenix. The delay created dark conditions inside an

intelligent, thoughtful boy that pushed him toward extremism and despair. Why the delay? Did the translator mean to say two to four *years*? Bureaucratic inefficiencies? Something lost in translation? The small spark of hope lit with the first interview deepened Omar's state of *buufis* so that anytime someone had a bit of good news, he thought it might be word of his case.

Instead, the goats were calving or someone else was chosen for resettlement, each crest and depression a new wave of disappointment that, instead, illuminated that fact that “**every single person** in this camp was waiting for something better. Waiting. Waiting. Waiting. How long can you wait before you lose all hope?” (201, emphasis in original). The interview, like the images from Facebook described by Rawlence, brought what was lacking in the camp into sharp relief.

In Luiselli's interview experience with unaccompanied children in New York, the stakes were equally severe. Tasked to do an intake questionnaire with a seven year old from rural Guatemala, for whom Spanish was a second language, Luiselli was hamstrung and distraught because the girl did not know the words necessary to secure legal intervention in her favor and Luiselli was barred from interpreting their conversation into something that might help. “For children of that age,” she writes, “telling a story—in a second language, translated to a third—a round and convincing story that successfully inserts them in legal proceedings working up to their defense, is practically impossible” (66). Luiselli gives some examples of how the interview can go. In one, the same little girl tries her hardest to be clear and precise, smiling throughout to please Luiselli:

Why did you come to the United States?

I don't know.

How did you travel here?

A man brought us.

A coyote?

No, a man.

Was he nice to you?

Yes, he was nice, I think.

And where did you cross the border?

I don't know.

Texas? Arizona?

Yes! Texas Arizona. (55-56)

After several months working in the court, Luiselli realizes that she needs to write the children's answers in a notebook before committing them to the intake questionnaire. Answers like the girl's above do not create "a round and convincing story" for her to narrate onto the questionnaire and they leave Luiselli unable to answer her own daughter's titular question: How does the story end? Luiselli does not know, nor can she figure "where translation ends and interpretation starts" for herself or for anyone else involved in the decision process (62). Once the children leave her, she does not see them again. She can translate their cases but cannot do anything to help them. She describes the experience as akin to watching a child walk across a busy street, her own hands and feet tied as speeding cars and trucks race by too fast to feel the impact of hitting the child. How do you get a seven year to create the right story through dual lenses of memory and translation? How do you get an adult to? And how could you when the right story is an ever shifting target?

Luiselli expresses frustration at the system for wanting more than the interviewees can provide, especially the youngest children; in *The Ungrateful Refugee*, Dina Nayeri expresses anger. She is infuriated by Global North immigration processes and the expectations for

interviews. An immigration lawyer Nayeri befriends in Amsterdam confesses with exasperation that “showing someone the truth of your past is so complicated” (256). She muses in response that,

Memories are full of inconsistencies. I can see why he despairs of this particular battlefield: memories. It’s like fighting on clouds. The Dutch, all they listen for is inconsistency: is the time or location you gave at the start of the interview different from the end? If you fumble and give two answers, this is proof of dishonesty, not human error. (256)

Nayeri does not mention that what may have come between the questions of time or location might have been the story of terror in some form, a village burned, a child killed, a spouse taken, then the journey far and fast enough away from the mouth of the shark, the hunger, the unknowns, and the terrifying possibility of being returned to a life that no longer exists or that guarantees more danger. If a refugee’s story contains a rape or LGBTQ concerns, certain cultures lack the language for description beyond shame and humiliation. In a first interview, before meeting with an immigration lawyer, a person may be unable to describe what happened to them or what they are fleeing. After learning Western terms and understanding cultural language for their second interview, they can explain their predicament more clearly. Nayeri complains that the Dutch will then say, “‘You went off and learned the system. You’ve been coached. ‘You’re lying.’ They don’t think maybe, maybe you’ve had some therapy. A raped Iranian man isn’t like a raped Dutch man. They will never understand this” (258). What happens next? Nayeri’s lawyer friend explains with anger that “these victims of atrocities stick to that first generic story they told, they stick to the bullshit about becoming a Christian after

their child's miraculous healing" (258). With this conversion, they are, they think, performing the story immigration officers want to hear.

Performance courses through each of these books and begs the question: how does one perform the role of a refugee? Luiselli explains that the answer is simple, just answer the questions on the intake questionnaire. In short order, she realizes how futile this is. "The children's stories," she writes, "are always shuffled, stuttered, always shattered beyond the repair of narrative order. The problem with trying to tell their story is that it has no beginning, no middle, and no end," which is exactly what the intake questionnaire is trying to establish (7). Nayeri corroborates Luiselli's frustration and layers it onto refugees from Iran, like herself, and other cultures where story telling does not follow a linear tradition. She asks, too, why asylum seekers are required to perform a story to fit a predetermined narrative. What, then, is the expectation of the poor and uneducated? Nayeri mockingly considers the demands on such a person by immigration officials: "Sound natural, human, but dazzle me with your prose. Make me cry, but a whiff of sentimentality and you're done. Stay in scene, but also give compelling evidence of internal change. Go ahead. Try it. It's not so hard, you penniless, traumatized fugitive from a ravaged village, just write a story worthy of *The New Yorker*" (229). Her sarcasm, though biting, represents the mindset of immigration officers who are trained to search for a lie within an individual's pain, which is a radically private experience that is forced into public performance. The immigration officer's success depends on the skill he or she has in hearing the fragmentary language of trauma and determining its veracity through consistency. Elaine Scarry identifies this as an alarming phenomenon of human experience that also emerges in medicine with doctor/patient relationships. She writes that "to have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt. (The doubt of the other

persons...amplifies the suffering of those already in pain)” (7). The immigration officer’s job is to have doubt, to nose into the story to (in)validate its root cause. Consequently, the job of the interviewee is to allay that doubt, to tell the story the ear wants to hear.

But that ear is fickle, too. Sharon Bala’s novel *The Boat People* is a fictional account based on real events of five hundred Sri Lankan refugees fleeing civil war who arrive in Vancouver harbor in a rusty cargo ship. Told from the alternating perspectives of one of the refugees, a second generation Sri-Lankan Canadian assisting in their legal defense, and the Japanese Canadian adjudicator who, by law, decides the fate of those seeking asylum, the novel aims to illuminate the Canadian immigration process from each of the sides involved. Grace, the adjudicator, arrives to one hearing yawning and irritated. The barrage of what she calls “war porn,” the stories she listens to and must rule on every day, are taking their toll—the atrocities play on a loop in her brain each night, keeping her awake and making her jumpy at loud noises (173). Four hours into a day of testimony in the third week of admissibility hearings, which determine whether or not the refugees can even apply for asylum, she is enraged by the interpreter. The woman giving testimony “used the word *caught* instead of *recruited*. Or the interpreter did. It was impossible to determine who was saying what” (127, emphasis in original). The confusion leads Grace to focus on the fussy way the translator enters each day with his things, including a legal reference guide and a Tamil-English dictionary, and lines them up just so. Bala writes that Grace “was irritated by this fair-haired man and his obsessive compulsions, this interloper who had no real role in these proceedings, no tangible responsibility, yet was the only one who understood every word...[he] held the whole room in suspense, at [his] mercy until he translated whatever he thought fit to repeat, with whatever commentary he chose to add or delete” (127, 128). His power and the way he wielded it made Grace want to “knock

his sanctimonious little stack of books and pens right off the table” (128). The scene Bala describes is one of confusion and power, exhaustion and suspicion. The room is sweltering, and the woman pleading her case is telling a story full of inconsistencies that she covers over with force of speech and utter conviction. The translator, not a native Tamil speaker, can barely keep up with the testimony, yet her fate lies in his faithful translation and the way Grace receives it. When the woman is finished, the entire room is mentally depleted, save for the press, which plucks one line from the woman’s extensive testimony and uses it as front-page evidence that no one from the boat deserves asylum in Canada. Another refugee in the story who is also seeking asylum leaves the room with only one remark: “What is important is not what is true or false. The important thing is what these people, the Canadian authorities, *believe* is true and false. What *they* want to believe” (254, emphasis in original).

Given this syllogism, the refugee, in this case the asylum seeker, must become attuned to the truth of the Canadian authorities and so adjust themselves and their story for maximum believability. Nayeri writes from experience that “changing identity is a wallowing, self-loathing business,” yet the command to change is a requirement of seeking asylum (307). This change is the performativity demanded, so the asylum officer “who appropriates the rules of good storytelling, fails to realize, when sitting across from a petitioning refugee, that [they] are speaking to a *character* in the story, not the *author*” (Nayeri 247, emphasis in original). The author is the system that asks the refugee to perform the correct version of “real.” How does a traumatized person—educated or uneducated—present the right story to advance their case past this hurdle of authenticity and doubt when the system of deciding rewards itself by finding the hole in the story that invalidates your claim? And how different is this demand from Parul Sehgal’s *New York Times* review of *American Dirt* that stipulates that while the act of imagining

oneself into other subjectivities is an “ethical urgency,” the caveat to those authors who do this work of representation is to do it “responsibly, and well?” Well according to whom? Who is the judge?

## 2.6 Tell Me How It Ends

Who *is* the judge? Or maybe the better question is, what are the criteria? Western juries in the Global North—within the immigration system, publishing, and the news media—have replaced arguments over the criteria for representation as a stand-in for action but in the case of the refugee, these disputes rage while millions are turned away from Western borders even as millions more make their way toward them. Speech and its correctness are secondary concerns when the conditions of seeking refugee preclude voice—if refugees cannot speak, can anyone speak for them? The American publishing industry, which John Thompson describes as “merchants of culture” with both respect and contempt, cowered after the controversy surrounding *American Dirt*. Their answer appears to be no because of a demand for authenticity that is itself a form of violence. The narration of refugee experience, overwritten as it is by incredibly high-stakes genres of self-production, requires complex and imperfect collaborations within new genres whose creation require industry shifts. The industry has not yet adapted. In the interim three years, I have found only two works of fiction that center a refugee: Omar El Akkad’s *What Strange Paradise*, published in 2021, which I will discuss in the next chapter, and E. Lily Yu’s book of speculative fiction, *On Fragile Waves*, which I will discuss in Chapter Four. When I stop to think about how *What Strange Paradise* made it through publishing’s gauntlet, I wonder if it was not El Akkad’s name that eased his way. Might publishers assume readers would think he was a refugee, too, because of his Middle Eastern name? I cannot know that answer to that, but the question lingers. I want to believe the book was published because it

is a critical imagining, incisive and timely, but is that enough anymore? El Akkad was born in Cairo, raised in Canada, and now lives in Oregon. Is he qualified to write about Syrians or Greeks or refugees? Should he be? Reviewers praised the book effusively, one saying in *The Washington Post* that “Nothing I’ve read before has given me such a visceral sense of the grisly predicament confronted by millions of people expelled from their homes by conflict and climate change” (Charles). Three years ago, agents and editors would have pounced on the opportunity to publish into that review; now, no, a situation that prompts me to echo Amitav Ghosh’s question in *The Great Derangement*: “What does this tell us about culture writ large and its patterns of evasion?” (11).

As a crisis in publishing, questions about who can speak for whom reveal a timidity that privileges Western priorities: we can argue about voice, which allows us to avoid engaging with migration. Alternatively, the anthropologist Cindy Horst suggests that experiences of refugees “cannot be grasped by others, because that would entail a most dramatic confrontation with the arbitrariness of fate and the fleeting nature of life. Being in a refugee situation means an annihilation of the substance of a world, a culture, a history, and a livelihood” (13). In short, contemplating a refugee’s situation is an existential threat for Westerners and an embarrassment to the idea of the nation-state.

Maybe refugee literature also details a problem too large and too far away for a reader? Yes, America’s border policies are harsh, but they are affecting people far away from me at the southern border. And yes, the deaths in the Mediterranean are tragic, but they are happening an ocean away and what can I do about it anyway? The problem is too big with too many root causes for me to make an impact on it. Evasive thoughts like these allow us to think about the problem as a thing, not a thing that impacts individual lives. Yet fiction offers interiority; a

novel can take us into the mind of the refugee, even if the scene is imagined, and the shock of the scene can offer what Rita Felski describes as “a violent rupture of continuity and coherence, as time is definitively and dramatically rent asunder into a ‘before’ and ‘after’” (113). Before, we knew there was a crisis; now, the crisis has a face and thoughts and, as Lauren Groff wrote in her review of *American Dirt*, “Now, when I think of the migrants at the border, suffering and desperate, I think of Lydia and Luca, and feel something close to bodily pain.” The crisis, then, is no longer distant, but affectively residing in the reader.

## 2.7 Narrated Lives and Waning Solutions

There is no shortage of written reportage about refugee crises from journalists, a good sign, but these accounts relegate human migration to the news cycle when, like climate change, it is bigger than that. There is more to the story than what a reporter can glean from interviews, even in this meta-observation from *The Naked Don't Fear the Water* when Omar and Aikins are camped out in an abandoned warehouse in Patras, Greece, hoping to hide in a lorry heading north. In the many warehouses that surround a shuttered ferry terminal, they befriend other groups of migrants hoping to do the same, among them many unaccompanied minors. One, a boy in his early teens who has attempted to hide on a truck twelve times, talks about the reporters and aid workers who pass through the warehouses. “It pisses me off,” he says. “They come here and go, ‘Oh, how horrible, you poor things,’ and take pictures and then they show them to their boss and he says, ‘Good job, here’s your salary’ (266). The boy is astutely complaining about his subjectivity and his place in Fassin’s “politics of life,” where he is only *zoe*; he cannot tell his own story, it can only be told by others who reap financial rewards for doing so.

Nested inside his complaint is the role he plays in the refugee stereotype—the precarious figure who moves donors through sympathy that he may or may not benefit from. Can fiction

solve that? My answer is yes and no. It will not aid the boy's immediate search for refuge, but it may move the people who can vote for or against laws that allow him to arrive. It could provide more insight into who is seeking refuge and why. It could marshal sympathy in the cause of empathy; it could reveal a common humanity. It could provide a complement to scenes like this one narrated by Aikins that does not offer Omar any sort of touché. Winter is upon them in Athens and Omar despairs of ever leaving Greece. Aikins writes,

Increasingly, I found him listening to Céline [Dion]:

*Near, far, wherever you are*

*I believe that the heart does go on*

Each time I came in and saw Omar lying there, his face in Facebook, I felt a prick of annoyance. What kind of protagonist was he? (282)

Omar is, admittedly, Aikins' protagonist but I want to know what he would write here. Could a novel from the perspective of a refugee offer some response? I think it could, which would make Omar more than a scripted subject to be acted upon, and more than the object of Aikins' irritation—Aikins, holder of not one *but two* Western passports, whose final destination is never in doubt. No matter what guise the authors of the books here slip into—Aikins into Afghani dress, Cummins into Mexican experience—their view is fractured, but the limitations of their efforts do not negate their experiments, nor can they at this stage of migration.

Statistical models sourced by Gaia Vince predict that more than one billion people will be on the move by 2050, ten times more than the crisis numbers today, and beyond the utility or feasibility of quotas (209). Ghosh writes that the migration climate change will cause represents “an unsolvable problem for modern nations in terms of their biopolitical mission and the practices of governance that are associated with it” (160). Without stories to conceive and

understand the perils of migration, where does that leave the Global North when the inevitable occurs? Ghosh contends that patterns of evasion within the publishing industry presage larger patterns of ignorance that are tacitly sanctioned in the silence. Without access to publication and no one speaking for them, migrants and refugees can be defined by political nationalists who deny their individual humanity and define them as invaders and criminals. Why hasn't the publishing industry been able to find more than two voices to offer a refugee's account in the last three years. Is no one authentic or real enough? Might that be a sign that the barriers are too high and that they are doing more harm than good? Looking back on what she calls the "debacle" surrounding *American Dirt*, Pamela Paul identifies the controversy as,

a harbinger, the moment when the publishing world lost its confidence and ceded authority to the worst impulses of its detractors. In the years since, publishers have become wary of what is now thought of as Another American Dirt Situation, which is to say, a book that puts its author and publishing house in the line of fire. This fear now hangs over every step of a fraught process with questions over who can write what, who should blurb and who can edit permeating what feels like a minefield. Books that would once have been greenlit are now passed over; sensitivity readers are employed on a regular basis; self-censorship is rampant.

The result is another way of banning books; conservatives attempt it through libraries and school boards and liberals through this minefield of censorship that produces the same outcome and the same ignorance. In each case, voices are silenced, and the machinery of Western culture limits the very people who most need a voice by sorely misrecognizing the conditions that shut down their capacity to speak. Paul identifies the politics of representation that stifle refugee voices at the highest levels of publishing where they can be loudly amplified, but the stifling is present in

every step of seeking refuge, from the conditions of escape to the squalor and depravation of refugee camps. It continues into the stories demanded in immigration interviews that hue to someone else's version of truth through to the now unlikely chance of finding an outlet for telling the story of how impossible it is to tell the story! Saying the system is vexed only scrapes the surface when one part of the bureaucracy demands assemblies of identities, and another is obsessed with the truthful authenticity of just one. Further, I feel forced into flattening "the refugee experience," as if there was just one, in order to advocate for more of them across genres and modalities.

The criticism in this chapter toggles between fiction and non-fiction to mirror the problem at hand—where does one end and one begin? Does the "incredulous" truth Ghosh confesses to avoiding bear relationship to what critics deride as "trauma porn?" Does fiction that incorporates non-fictional trauma and sells for money diminish the writer and the project? Time and again I want to repeat Lauren Groff: "Fucking nightmare." Each account discussed here is full of imagined "true" scenes and true imagined scenes—details filled in years later, scenes fleshed out by others' imaginations, and memories plumped up for wider consumption. Are these still truth? William James writes of thought that "we never descend into the same stream twice" and "often we are ourselves struck at the strange differences in our successive views of the same thing...from one year to another we see things in new lights" (233). James conjures a richness of impression and experience, an observation extended and subverted by Nayeri, who observes how time spent waiting affects thought in more dramatic ways. As time accumulates, she writes, "the refugee behaves less like an honest petitioner. He grows frantic, a risk to a new country... Waiting *compels* melodrama. So, if in desperation the exile decides to take a breath, learn the rules, and make a true thing appear true, is that a lie?" (263-264, emphasis in original). Strands

of authenticity, truth, and realness compel each one of the accounts in this chapter in different ways, but none so different that they miss the gravity of migration and its effect on individual lives.

Maybe, though, this is a fool's pursuit. In just the last two weeks during the late summer of 2023, *The New York Times* has devoted substantial editorial space to migration stories. In one, Lydia Polgreen reports on a Human Rights Watch allegation that Saudi Arabian border guards gunned down Ethiopians fleeing war in their country. Her article is a round-up of the brutal policies enacted around the globe to keep unwanted migrants out, from the Texas governor's floating anti-immigrant device in the Rio Grande, to the Libyan Coast Guard's rough tactics to keep migrants from crossing the Mediterranean, to Britain's plans for extra-territorial detention in Rwanda. In another editorial, Irish reporter Sally Hayden laments that mass death has become commonplace in the Mediterranean. She writes that "migration—and the West's reaction to it—is one of the defining stories of our age. At the moment, it's a tale of disaster and death, cruelty and complicity. We urgently need to find a better approach." While she does not offer a better approach, hundreds of people who commented on her piece do, and the vast majority responded that Europe has every right to intercept and return refugees. Some asked if Europe was obliged to become a suburb of Africa and Southeast Asia and if Europeans have a right to something that is their own. Many others gasped at rising birth rates in Africa and called for birth control. Others asked why migrants don't go to China, Russia, wealthy UAE, or Saudi Arabia then complained that the West is too empathetic. These were not the comments I expected in *The New York Times*, but it seems that the job of defining the story has been ceded to journalism and politics, and the imagination required to conceive a better approach subsumed in other arguments. In contrast to the panic of those trying to find refuge, Nayeri sees responses

like these as “the actual hysteria, the insidious nativist rhetoric shouted down from safe perches [that] doesn’t sound like a lie at all—it sounds clever, rational, calm” (263). How would the refugee respond? At this critical moment, we cannot know.

## Chapter 3 I Am Not Your Refugee: Waiting, Labelling, and the Reverse Gaze in Recent Refugee Accounts

### 3.1 A New Type of Refugee Emerges

Early in his 2018 book *No Friend but the Mountains*, before he was held in an offshore detention center on Manus Island for six years, Behrouz Boochani details his second rescue from the Banda Sea. In prose and poetic Persian ghazals, he narrates this second attempt to reach Australia by boat in a style that reads like the scenes he describes: words batter the pages in a written assault that mirrors the waves' relentless pounding on one small boat in a blinding nighttime sea. As in so many other narratives of refugee journeys, Boochani describes giving over the last of his money to a shady smuggler and joining a group of ragged people in a rickety boat. News of boats recently sunk hang in his mind, as do reports of children sinking with them. His hope is tinged with fear when he writes how "one always thinks that such fatal incidents only befall others – it's hard to believe you may face death" (3). When his boat leaves the coast of Indonesia, Boochani and the fifty other migrants escaping with him are elated, but when the boat's pump dies and sea water starts flooding in, they are enveloped by despair. The captain suggests they return to Indonesia, but the migrants will not allow it. They continue into the night sea, bailing the engine room until waves rupture the front of the boat. At this point, Boochani shifts to Persian ghazals, and the roiling sensations brought on by his text are abruptly halted by measured poetry that transforms an overwhelming individual experience he describes as "worse than death" into a slow-motion disaster for all (27):

*This whole mess /*

*In the darkness of midnight /*

*Looks like death /*

*Smells like death /*

*Embodies death /*

*The cries /*

*The screams /*

*The swearing /*

*The knocking about /*

*The sounds of the small children /*

*The heart-wrenching and painful sounds of the little children /*

*These sounds transform the chaotic boat into hell. (26)*

Inside his prose, readers are tossed about in the boat; inside his poetry, the view is bigger, but no less acute, as if both he and we, the readers, are floating above, able to look down with a wider lens that captures the collective experience of terror and chaos. All of our senses are engaged—we are a part of the scene, but the experience is no longer ours alone, which makes it bigger and even worse. As the waves indiscriminately crush the boat and terrify its passengers, the migrants spy a small light coming closer and closer, reaching them just as the last piece of their shattered vessel sinks into the water. Boochani and all but one of the migrants travelling with him, a young man he calls The Blue Eyed Boy, are rescued by a crew of Indonesian fisherman.

When the migrants wake on the deck of the fishing boat after the trauma of the previous night, they realize that they are in the shadow of an enormous British cargo ship “packed with red and blue containers, arranged so that they could reach up to the ceiling of sky” (Boochani 46). Blond-haired British sailors peer at the migrants from above then shower them with fresh water to remove the salt and sea from their tired bodies. Moments later the sailors lower a small platform of biscuits, cigarettes, and bottles of water. “The whole encounter with the British

ship,” Boochani writes, “[is] characterized by extraordinary kindness” (46). The migrants descend on the provisions like wolves, the stronger men taking all they can grab in their hunger, until a fellow traveler, a mother from below deck, ascends and demands the spoils be equally apportioned. The packet of biscuits is the only thing Boochani will eat for the next four days—the Indonesians have no food to share and nothing else is lowered down by the British sailors.

This scene is a metaphor of Western humanitarianism and I argue in this chapter that it presents a shift in refugee writings from the books examined in chapters one and two. The earlier books I discussed created a controlling image of refugees based on certain publishing discourses—the triumphant and extraordinary refugee, the refugee’s story in isolation, devoid of Western involvement in narrative and paratexts, and the refugee voice silenced by form, fear, and the trauma of migration. In this chapter, I argue that two recent books and a film wrest control of prevailing images and make distinct moves that push back against Western declarations of “refugee crises” by reversing the narrative gaze, pushing into new forms, and interrogating humanitarian benevolence as a durable or even benevolent solution. The conditions these books describe reframe literary and political discussions about refugees because they are written from the refugee’s perspective during migration with minimal mediation. That perspective dramatically alters the subject/object relationship by making Western actors and actions the object of the narrators’ observations and by introducing new understandings of the feel of being a made less than human because of those actors and actions. This chapter centers Boochani in particular because of the unique way he assembled his book and because of its unique response that brought about slow but effective change in refugee policy in Australia. He reverses the narrative gaze, incorporates poetic Persian Ghazals to stop a scene or push deeper into it, and uses his own naming technique to bite back against Western naming tactics that blur

with malintent. The cumulative effect of these new trends in refugee writing forces an inquiry into what constitutes a crisis: Is it the fact that people are migrating to safer places or is it the efforts to keep them out? The new trends also demand an active and reflexive posture for readers that foreground additional questions when the gaze is reversed: Is the author writing about me? Am I part of the crisis that I lament with some actions and stoke with others?

### **3.2 Reversing the Narrative Gaze**

Despite the size and stores of the British ship in Boochani's account, the migrants remain on the Indonesian vessel without food for four more days, a mirror of the global refugee crisis in which 75% of the world's refugees reside in low and middle income countries of the Global South ("Figures at a Glance"). The Indonesian sailors rescue the migrants but have nothing to share. The British have a container ship full of things to share, but do not. Dazed with hunger, Boochani threatens other passengers to give him something to eat but soon recognizes his folly: "Just imagine my behaviour, imagine my gestures, imagine me making that pronouncement. Imagine me, whose ribs are protruding from his body. Imagine me, a man whose ribs are so visible you could count them. Imagine me in this state, trying to assert myself in this way. What a ridiculous scene" (51). He is powerless and without the physical strength to demand a morsel even as he is tethered to a boat that towers with commodities. His scene calls to mind the moment in *The Naked Don't Fear the Water* described in Chapter Two when the author and his Afghani friend Omar are rescued by a Norwegian Frontex vessel in the Mediterranean. After a short but panicked chase for fear that the Norwegians were Turks trying to turn the migrants back to Turkey, one of the Norwegian sailors praises Omar for being calm and quiet and "acting like a European. Europeans don't like it," the sailor says, "when people start shouting and acting crazy" (163). But here is Boochani—and his fellow migrants who pounced and hoarded as soon

as the platform descended—doing just that, acting crazy. And here, too, is his incredulity at his own response, his disgust and self-awareness at his powerlessness and the fury his hunger provokes. His situation—severe hunger, fear, exhaustion—has altered his behavior and caused him act out of the norm, and while he can look on at the British ship, he cannot make demands of the sailors aboard, cannot force them to share. The two vessels are tied together, there is plenty for all, including the fisherman, but instead of lowering more food, the British sailors lean over their decks to snap pictures with their cell phones.

At this moment in Boochani's narrative, the gaze is reversed. Here is the soaking, starving migrant newly rescued from disaster being photographed by a sailor standing atop a floating mountain of commodities. What images do the sailors capture? Boochani acting crazy? As a reader, I wonder how the British sailors will narrate these photos to others or to themselves. How would I? Would I point out how that guy, the skinny tall one in the picture, was acting like a nut, proof that we don't want those types of people in our country? Would I feel satisfied knowing that I'd helped give each person rescued from the sea a shower, one pack of crackers, one bottle of water, and one pack of smokes? Or would I snap the photos and delete them just as quickly, each one a sore reminder that the temporary help I'd given would not make a dent in the migrants' extended precarity? Boochani's written encounter with the British sailors and the responses it provokes present text and imagery that shift the gaze from the refugee, a known subject, to Western actors often in compromising or embarrassing positions that prompt readers to consider, Is this me? Is the author identifying my behavior? I contend that the British sailors are caught in an embarrassing spot and in Boochani's text, they offer parallels to Western humanitarianism in general. Yes, it is marked by extraordinary kindness, but it is unable to fill current and future needs in its present form, so its temporary humanitarianism is only that,

temporary and partially effective, a fact borne out by Boochani's outburst and by what happens to him after the British hand him and the other migrants over to the Australian navy.

Boochani does the one thing that has been nearly impossible for other writers: he writes while being imprisoned for being a migrant. His testimony is immediate and personal—the book was published *while* he was detained. Unlike Matthieu Aikins, he is not pretending, nor does he have to adopt characteristics to pass as anything other than what he is. Since he was held indefinitely in offshore detention and his life was ground to a halt, he had the time, education, and support to send videos and writings from the camp on a contraband cell phone, which eventually became his book. His writing is visceral and intense as it broadly and bodily challenges Western notions of human rights and individual dignity. Moreover, as I will show below, Boochani's perspective from incarceration challenges ideas of what constitutes geopolitical problems and crises. The anthropologist Cindy Horst writes that “refugees are always related to problems, and not so much those that caused them to be refugees but rather the problems they themselves are causing simply by existing” (13). Boochani's writing identifies the challenges of existing once you have been classified by the ever-shifting range of labels for migrants and interrogates the refugee crisis as a manufactured problem exacerbated by Western “solutions.” He is joined in this work by Omar El Akkad, whose short novel, *What Strange Paradise*, imagines the frenzy around one young Syrian boy who evades capture after his smuggler's boat wrecks near the beach on the Greek island of Kos, and the Danish filmmaker Jonas Poher Rasmussen, whose documentary *Flee* follows an Afghan boy to eventual asylum in Denmark. Although Boochani is centered in this chapter, El Akkad and Rasmussen also lens refugee experiences by showing refugees observing Westerners who, in turn, either act or do not in the presence of great need. This flipped view forces new urgencies for Western readers

regarding sanctioned border policies that treat migrants worse than criminals—at least criminals have rights, as Hannah Arendt has argued—and Western attitudes toward humanitarianism and migration (1951, 286). Readers are also forced to ask who and what are served by framing the refugee as an unassimilable swarm that must be cut off, diverted, or contained? Who gets richer and who claims power when this is the narrative?

Incorporating so much into one telling strains the limits of genre and form, a characteristic shared by many books about refugees. Boochani breaks traditional prose throughout *No Friend but the Mountains* to write in poetic Persian ghazals that are force multipliers to his mood. They appear in moments that defy narrative and in others that envelop a sense of sublimity in solitude. Each ghazal, though disciplined in form, conveys a sense that what he is telling cannot be neatly contained from a singular perspective, in the same way that his story encompasses so many subjects: migrants and captors, refugees and politicians, citizens and the stateless, writers, translators, and readers. In Boochani's telling, these interwoven facets of his experience and larger refugee crises find wider breadth in the two forms he uses.

Originally an ancient Arabic expression of loss and the pain of separation from place or love, the ghazal was embraced by Persian poets nearly a thousand years ago and transformed over the centuries to encompass love, loss, melancholy, and existential questions. The Persian form of layered couplets has been absorbed by poets all over the world and adapted through translations.

Today, critics describe the ghazal as akin to looking in a broken mirror, with “each couplet like one of the shards of glass,” reflecting a different perspective, and disrupting unities of voice and narrative (Hall). From this point of view, ghazals are a symbolic addition to *No Friend but the Mountains*, since Boochani's intention with the book was “to hold a mirror up to the [Australian] system, dismantle it, and produce a historical record to honour those who [had]

been killed and everyone who is still suffering” (397). Each ghazal disrupts the unity of Australia’s offshore refugee management scheme and reflects back to readers what is being done in their name as Australian citizens, and citizens in the Global North. For Boochani, the ghazal is a release and a protest that decolonizes his text by injecting a Persian art form from his past into carceral stateless present. The result is hybridized storytelling—and another example of a refugee account that must push at the limits of genre to approximate the intensity of the story—part poetry and part prose that layers meaning into narrative. The ghazals often break a scene down or pull back from it to capture its fullness, a technique that ties the form to the arrest or freezing of time and Boochani’s profoundly tortuous loss of it in detention. When time interacts with his poetry, the broader experiences of all the migrants and their collective trauma of seeking refuge unfold into an excruciatingly slow motion crisis that, to a large degree, is caused by stupefyingly expensive schemes of border policing and criminalization of migrants.

While I am determined to show the work these three sources do to shift conversations around migration, I am also concerned with each as a transformative experience for the reader (and viewer) that can be manifested into action. Both books and the documentary determinedly disrupt Western social imaginaries around humanitarian action, especially in scenes widened to show the full scope of each participant. The British sailors, for example, offer a type of aid that braces current legal and political structures for helping refugees—it is just enough to keep the migrants alive but nothing more. It is aid marked by kindness, but often with no ability to effect long-term change or even sustained short-term relief. Instead, it creates a sympathetic person ever in need of asymmetrical assistance, a system in which *I* (the giver) donate from my largesse without considering my role in creating the situation that positions *you* (the receiver) as the perpetual debtor. Didier Fassin argues that this type of asymmetry passively establishes

hierarchies of humanity that allow us to make sense of an unjust world where some lives are valued more than others. This valuation facilitates patterns in literature that Joseph Slaughter identifies as “triangulations of humanitarian sentiment” between savage, victim, and savior (102). In such a triangle, the savage is a barbaric authoritarian state that chokes off civility and human rights, the victim is the human whose dignity and worth have been violated, and the savior is Western governments or NGOs and their promise of freedom that forms “the victim’s bulwark against tyranny” (Matua 204). Slaughter argues that this arrangement allows for recurring ethical lapses that generate the hierarchies Fassin describes and perpetuate inequality (102). Boochani, Rasmussen, and El Akkad offer accounts that collapse the savage-victim-savior triangle by revealing parallels between savage and savior and questioning states and institutions that stake their claims to human dignity. After fifteen years of representation in roles at the bottom of the hierarchy, the writers here actively evolve the story and its dominant characters with the help of more sophisticated advocacy networks and with cellphones, which allow for fresh immediacy in reporting and a repositioned subject for the camera’s gaze. The cellphone wrests control from the dominant discourse because it allows its user to generate knowledge about what it means to be “saved” and to show what it means to be accountable to migrants fleeing savage situations only to find savage receptions.

How that knowledge can be converted into action matters to me and to all the authors whose writings weave through this dissertation. Their writings add new urgency to migration crises that show no sign of abating, and demand economic accountability by presenting many forms of inequality. One form is the visual and written pairing of haves and have nots, which is grossly evident in the size of the boats in Boochani’s scene with the British sailors. Another dimension of accountability is geopolitical, with writers making clear in their work that if

tyranny, fear, or environmental damage makes a place unlivable, people fleeing somewhere safer require justice. And yet another dimension is human rights and the ethical implications of demoting migrants into a shadowy nonexistence as they search for new homes, a situation Boochani methodically exposes in *No Friend but the Mountains*.

The act of seeking refuge precludes voice, as I discussed in Chapter Two, so Boochani's extraordinary account from inside detention delivered information usually walled off from greater publics. Indeed, the Australian government barred journalists and medical organizations from visiting its detention centers or speaking to detainees, even imposing prison sentences on medical professionals who revealed the conditions of the facilities or the patients. Boochani's writing makes it plain that he left one repressive, brutal regime (Iran) in search of a place to write freely, and he pinned his hopes on Australia. Intercepted at sea by the Australian navy and confined to six years in offshore detention in horrific conditions, he found Australia no better—an equally repressive and brutal regime intent on breaking the minds and bodies of those daring to enter the country by boat. Because he found a way to project his voice beyond detention, many Australians were moved to action because of his writings. I will discuss some of the strategies they enacted below and consider them as models for converting transformative reading into action that has the capacity to impact politics and human rights. And while I use the term transformative reading, I argue that Australian readers' efforts build on Eve Sedgwick's idea of "reparative reading," which she explains as "knowledge that *does* rather than simply *is*" (124, emphasis in original). This expansion of knowing, facilitated by literature that offers new truths about refugee "crises," moves beyond sympathy, which is completely reproductive of the precarity it is trying to settle and burdens its actors *and* its readers to perform in a certain way.

The unique way *No Friend but the Mountains* was published, and its powerful afterlife, exemplify knowledge that *does* for readers and complicates ideas of how a refugee should act.

If a certain type of refugee was determined by market forces around 2006/2007, this chapter shows that a very different type emerged in 2018, ushered in by Boochani's creative and visceral account. Boochani describes the stench of being stateless, homeless, and imprisoned in extraterritorial detention and joins other writers in using a variety of techniques to push back at the refugee figure constructed by politics in the Global North and Western literary sensibilities. The refugee camp, the smuggler's boat, and the psychological damage done by waiting are, in these books and movie, not separate modalities or emplacements, but intricate connections between state policy and individual bodies. The writers make the phenomenology of "refugeeness" explicit through odor, taste, touch, and witness. They challenge the state practice of labelling refugees into layered categories of abjection by illuminating how labels force precarity and exacerbate periods of waiting that amount to physical and mental torture. And they rotate the view that objectifies the refugee to, instead, focus it on those enforcing or passively observing state policy. Rita Felski writes that literary texts are often called in "to illustrate what has been adjudicated in other areas," but that understanding comes with the proviso that the text will do more than just adjudicate what has already been presented; the text also has the capacity "to bite back...to challenge or change our belief and commitments" (7). The books considered in this chapter bite back sharply and challenge the characterization of "savior" in Slaughter's triangulation of humanitarian sentiment with new demands for accountability from governments and from readers.

### 3.3 Flipped Views and Expanded Understandings

While Boochani was existing in the barest conditions in offshore detention on Manus Island, a small island off the coast of Papua New Guinea, he used Facebook and WhatsApp messaging on a series of hidden phones to tap out thousands of texts. With the help of refugee advocates and translators, the texts were forwarded to Omid Tofighian, an Iranian-Australian translator in Sydney. Boochani texted in both prose and poetry when he could. Together, they decided that Tofighian would edit the texts into a narrative for publication, a process that would be convoluted at best while Boochani was held in a place where communication could be suspended by Australian authorities at any time and a cellphone was a rare and forbidden commodity. *No Friend but the Mountains* was the outcome, and just seven months after its publication in 2018, it won both the Victorian Prize for Literature and the Victorian Premier's Prize for Non-Fiction, Australia's highest awards *for an Australian writer*. At the 2019 award ceremony in Melbourne—that Boochani could not attend because he could not leave Manus Island after six years of detention—the nominating committee called him a great Australian writer, though he had never been in the country and was barred from entry.

Limited in their ability to effect political change, the Australian awards committee used the power they did have to amplify Boochani's voice and make a powerful gesture of symbolic inclusion. Because of the publicity surrounding the awards, *No Friend but the Mountains* was reviewed in every major British and Australian newspaper, Australian bookstores moved it to places of prominence, and readership swelled. It has since been published in eighteen languages in twenty three countries. Scores of individuals, journalists, aid organizations, and politicians also fought for the rights of the detainees, fuel for their efforts coming from Boochani's reportage and poetry. His texts, and a documentary he produced while detained, contributed to

Papua New Guinea's Supreme Court declaring the camps unconstitutional and their eventual closure.<sup>1</sup> In 2020, New Zealand granted Boochani refugee status, allowing him to stay indefinitely and apply for permanent residency. He currently holds professorships at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand and the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. As of July 2023, the Australian Refugee Council reports that the last refugee on the island nation of Nauru (Australia's second location for offshore detention in addition to Manus Island) was flown to detention in Brisbane ending eleven controversial years of offshoring, although the center on Nauru will remain open and be run by an American prison management company at a cost of \$350 million annually (Westerman).

That he could tell his story is extraordinary, and the arc of his life since escaping Iran in 2013 is extraordinary, too, but Boochani is unwavering in his commitment to describing the ordinariness of the people in his book. The migrants, himself included, are fleeing poverty and fear in search of a better life; the British sailors are just doing their job carting goods around the world. He explains what he imagines are the sailors' thoughts as they watch the migrants:

The sailors are still looking down at us from the deck of their ship, up there beside their containers stacked to the skies. They look down at our boat and its passengers. At those who were beset by chaos and commotion but who are now calm yet exhausted. A few of the sailors are taking photos; they want to record images of we survivors. They share our anticipation, no doubt...we anticipate the arrival of the Australian Navy, they anticipate handing us over, our little boat taken off their hands. The sailors aboard the ship must want to resume their own journey, to get their vessel back on course. (56)

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<sup>1</sup> In 2017, Boochani and the Netherlands-based Iranian filmmaker Arash Kamali Sarvestani released the documentary, *Chauka Please Tell Us the Time*, a film shot entirely in the Manus Prison on Boochani's hidden smartphone.

At this moment, Boochani's gaze is on the sailors and what they might be thinking now that they have rescued, showered, and fed the small group of migrants. His musings create another metaphor for those who fund Western humanitarianisms by asking what they and other passported citizens might be thinking after the critical period of a disaster passes. Readers are again prompted to identify with the sailors by considering themselves as participating in similar actions that proceed something like this: *There's been a horrible trauma, look at those poor people! I'll make a donation and hope that an NGO or a government will clean up this rare catastrophe. My heart goes out to those poor people but now I need to get back to my regularly scheduled life.* Boochani seems to understand the way the Western, or maybe the human, mind works in what might be seen for the British sailors as a one-off. Yet, I'm embarrassed. Is this me? Have I been seen tossing a tiny fraction of what I possess toward a problem that requires more of me? I sent a donation and moved on with my life. But the news tells us migrants dying at sea is not a one-off at all and as Boochani's reader, I am forced to see myself, camera in hand, peering over the rail of my boat of plenty, tossing down a bottle of water, then motoring away, something that Boochani writes as, well, normal, but a normalcy that is unsustainable and not very charitable.

What is it about being seen that makes Boochani's observations so impactful? His narration of flipped subjectivity shows the refugee or migrant looking at Westerners—of the other observing, something rare until his publication. He casts a wider lens, one that decenters refugees as problems by centering other causalities. Boochani is on a boat with fifty migrants from places like Iran, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka because war, political instability, or crushing poverty have forced them from their homes. They are starving because, as migrants in Jakarta's Kalibata City and on Kendari Island, they could only dash out for food under cover of night or

risk being rounded up and imprisoned by police. They are also starving because the British ship does not share anything more after their initial distribution of some biscuits and cigarettes.

Boochani's desperate demands for food require readers to envision his physique and evaluate his presence as part of an "invading hoard" or a threat to national stability, which is how refugees are often characterized by those who want to turn them away (Ford).

My first reading of Boochani's encounter with the British ship caused me to shift in discomfort; each further reading has deepened the sting of his scenes because they upturn the normal attitude that a donation or a gift of aid constitutes a solution or marks the giver as a different, better person. That Boochani marks the encounter as "characterized by extraordinary kindness" seems a narrative kindness, and one that recognizes the inadequacy of temporary humanitarianisms that salve immediate needs without contributing to lasting change or effect (46). His Sydney-based translator, Omid Tofighian, writes in an essay that accompanies *No Friend but the Mountains* that "in contrast to the thriving 'refugee industry' that promotes stories to provide exposure and information and attempts to create empathy (if that is at all possible), Behrouz recounts stories to produce new knowledge and to construct a philosophy that unpacks and exposes systemic torture and the border-industrial complex" (Boochani 396-397). I would argue that Boochani also starts to unpack sympathy and temporary aid as durable solutions for long-range demographic shifts. The kind encounter he describes produces new knowledge by narrating an expanded view of the limited efficacy of both, which also highlights the limited knowledge contained in writings that emanate from larger systems that also have the capacity to designate what can be termed a crisis. Looking at only the refugee leads to limited ideas of the varied refugee crises around the globe, what Frederic Jameson would call an "epistemological crippling" that allows Western readers to reduce characters "to the illusions of a host of

fragmented subjectivities, to the poverty of the individual experience of isolated monads, to dying individual bodies without collective pasts or futures bereft of any possibility of grasping the social totality” (1986, 85). That crippled view is what might be contained in the stories the British sailors tell as they thumb through the images in their phones back in port: swipe and, maybe, delete. With Boochani’s narrative, though, deleting is complicated because the images he creates have a wide angle. They contain the emaciated homeless migrant drenched in the violent waves *and* the well-provisioned sailor aboard a boat so sturdy it barely sways in a storm. They contain the residue of frightened, screaming children *and* the invasive act of recording their images. They contain the migrants’ anxiety about an arrival in Australia *and* the sailors’ need to leave this human disaster behind for someone else to deal with. Once rid of this diversion, they can get back on course, deliver their containers, and collect their pay. Boochani includes all these images to force readers to adapt their vision so that they can start to, in Jameson’s terms, “grasp the social totality” of what is termed a crisis (1986, 85). Although a full totality is not present in here—M.I.A. are the American intervention in Iran, the Islamic Revolution, conversations about “border security,” among many other things—but the effect is still startling because the makings of the crisis seem not to reside with the refugee, but with the machinations of countries in the Global North trying to keep them out. Readers, then, are left to ask if we would have a crisis if governments did not use borderlands as sites of state-sanctioned violence in our increasingly globalized world.

Boochani is not the only writer to present this disquieting flipped gaze. In Jonas Poher Rasmussen’s 2021 animated film *Flee*, Amin Nawabi describes his family’s escape from Afghanistan to Denmark. When he is twelve, Nawabi’s family hikes through a nighttime forest to reach a rusted smuggler’s boat that will take them from Russia to Sweden in the middle of

winter. After the migrants spend the night bailing freezing water from the engine room, a Norwegian cruise ship emerges from the fog and passes by. The size difference is striking, as are the colors. The migrants are weighed down by their drab, damp clothes on a grey metal boat; the vacationers are on a gleaming white ship replete with lifeboats and lifejackets wearing brightly colored clothes and jewelry. Maybe they have just come from a buffet? Vacationers and migrants look at each other from their respective decks, migrants waving for help and thanking God for their good fortune, vacationers snapping pictures and waving back in response, blind to anything more than an exchange of greetings. Amin stands joyless and still on his grey boat and as he gazes up at the cruise ship, he remarks only that he is “embarrassed and ashamed of his situation” (50:18). The scene closes in on one cruise ship passenger, a woman who observes the migrants with growing dismay. Moments later, she turns away and leaves the deck, unable to take in any more of the scene. She, too, is visibly embarrassed and ashamed of the situation. Instead of stopping to help, the cruise ship alerts the Estonian police who evacuate the migrants from their boat then imprison them in an abandoned hotel for six months before they are returned, penniless, to Moscow.

The scene in *Flee* sets up economies of scale similar to those in *No Friend but the Mountains*. Boochani notices the disparity but gives no impression that the British sailors do. In *Flee*, Amin notices and so does the one cruise ship passenger. Maybe this is progress, or maybe the subtlety of noticing resides with the reader or viewer? In each instance, feeding or sheltering the migrants in need, the ones suffering right in front of the large ships, would not change the bounty available to the combined whole. Instead of helping the big ships administer minimal aid or pass the problem along. Except for the one woman who turns away, the cruise ship passengers do nothing more than wave, one vessel to another. The British sailors could be observed as

bearing some form of witness—as might Westerners who consume books about refugees—but Boochani’s description evokes, instead, a kind of voyeurism that perpetuates an asymmetrical economy of aid and allows everyone with a phone to bear witness in roles as photographer, observer, record keeper, and spy. These modes of observation create a disconnect identified by photographer and documentarian Suchitra Vijayan, in which “the capacity to see does not automatically become the capacity to act. Or even a road map to justice” (Poddar). Even though the cellphone allows refugees to bear witness, too, their capacity to enter their view into the dominant discourse is diminished by their access, which is duly recorded by the same technology so that images of dead or drowning migrants have not sufficiently altered border policies or nationalist sentiment.

The idea of bearing witness for justice is diluted by the ease of looking that has become detached from acting. What does it mean to represent a suffering person in a photograph or in a book? What are the function and ethics of documenting another person’s trauma? Vijayan contends that “representing people on film, photographs or paper is a political act,” which draws me to again consider how the British sailors will narrate the photos they take. Will they describe the photos with some bit of sympathy that reveals the helplessness of those caught in their lens? Will they describe the scene with satisfaction because they helped out, albeit minimally? How will readers bear witness to the act of reading Boochani’s book or seeing *Flee*? When describing his impotent demand for food, Boochani implores readers to see and imagine his powerlessness. He is not the dangerous character constructed by political speech; he is, in fact, powerless to demand even a dried fig. His narrative forces readers to reckon with scenes of aid that barely sustain life, and ultimately, confront humanitarian imaginaries. As kind as aid may be, and as much as it helps those who are suffering, it cannot keep pace with need in a bordered world

where some humans are afforded rights and others are not. Likewise, bearing witness to that type of inequality, whether through books or images, can create some change, as in the case of the Australian awards committee, but not enough to mobilize broad public sentiment toward the massive changes the future will demand.

Under the present configuration of sovereign powers with the capacity to withhold or deny rights, citizens—those with rights—are fated to observe what the anthropologist Peter Redfield calls “minimalist biopolitics,” which he defines as the temporary administration of survival within wider circumstances that do not favor it” (344). Boochani and Rasmussen facilitate this observation by orienting their narratives from the open mouth instead of the helping hand. What they reveal is aid that, in Boochani’s case, from his rescue to his biscuits, is just enough to maintain bare existence. Rasmussen reveals a more carceral form of aid, the type Boochani would receive once he was handed over to the Australians. Amin’s family, and the others aboard his ship, are taken from their smuggler’s boat by “men in camouflage, with balaclavas and face paint [who] scream and shout like crazy” (52:09). Amin narrates over screaming voices that he has no idea what is going on. The colors of the cruise ship passengers fade to black and grey tones while the faces of the Estonian soldiers form into more frightening versions of the face in Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*. Amin narrates over these stark images and actual film footage that he is crying and crying and cannot stop, that he “can see the fear in the adults’ eyes. They are terrified! Even the big men...you can see in their eyes. They’re petrified” (52:38). He and everyone from the boat are taken to an abandoned building surrounded by barbed wires and patrolled by guards and locked inside. Television crews interview the refugees and film the deplorable conditions but, he narrates, “They get their footage of poor refugees and go home to do their TV shows...” (53:37). After six months the migrants are given two choices,

“stay [there] to rot or go back to Moscow” (54:09). Amin was returned to Moscow with nothing. The minimal “aid” offered by the cruise ship in *Flee* seems to contrast with the aid Boochani received in *No Friend but the Mountains*, but how different were these encounters? And is minimal aid better than no aid at all? When Boochani writes that his encounter with the British was marked with kindness, the only answer can be yes. But new modes of narrative reversal and the temporary relief they reveal is jarring for readers accustomed to the neatness and comfort of humanitarian or emergency imaginaries. Instead of a happy ending that accompanies a helping hand—the savior from the Global North—readers are offered a glimpse of systems that render the poor and disenfranchised powerless and dependent.

### **3.4 Assessing the Danger of New Arrivals**

In Omar El Akkad’s *What Strange Paradise*, readers get yet another glimpse of refugee status: hunted. In this short novel, ten-year old Amir is the sole survivor after his migrant boat crashes off the coast of Kos. Yes, Amir is at the center of the book, but only inasmuch as his are the eyes that observe the panic that erupts after he is mistakenly added to the death count of migrants washed up along a tourist beach. When he jumps from his sandy grave and dashes for the woods before officers in baggy white containment suits can check his neck, wrists, and fingers for anything sparkly to pocket, he sets off an island-wide manhunt worthy of a serial killer and led by a colonel in the Greek army hell-bent on capturing Amir and making him an example for anyone who thinks they can seek refuge on Kos. As the sun rises and the bodies become visible, police are quick to drape plastic sheeting along the beach, so tourists’ breakfasts are not disturbed. Despite their efforts, tourists and locals alike “climb on top of parked cars and sweep their cameras across the width of the beach, some with their back to the carnage, their own faces occupying the center of the recording. The dead becom[ing] the property of the

living” (5). This narrative of taking photographs is more encompassing than the others above; here, we, the Western observers, are in the picture, too, as the focus of the image while the dead and dying are blurred in a panoramic sweep in the background. Even in death, we are shown manipulating representations of the refugee, but in El Akkad’s telling, the central figure is the photographer. As readers, we are forced to reckon with this scene by asking, once again, Is this me? Am I the broad face focused in the foreground privileged to decide how I represent the lifeless bodies behind me? Am I the viewer whose delicate sensibilities and deep pockets are shielded from unpalatable scenes and images to maintain a status quo that benefits some? This provocative new trend in refugee writing that forces Western readers into the narrative is repeated throughout *What Strange Paradise* in creative ways.

El Akkad also uses skin color to counter ideas of national purity and in his writing, not one shade or hue is untouched by the motion of bodies over water and across borders. The bronzed army colonel gives chase as Amir sprints off the beach. A local teenaged girl, observing the scene, intercepts Amir and whisks him into her barn before the armed colonel can catch up. This young Greek girl has everything Amir has been taught of luxury and possibility: “white skin, blue eyes, and blond hair” (62-63). In El Akkad’s novel, “native” Greeks are a global mash-up. The milky-white, blond teen who rescues Amir is Vänna, a Kos-born child of a Greek father and Norwegian mother. The Army colonel is Syrian, just like Amir, though a migrant from another, gentler, time. The director of the island’s refugee camp is Algerian, born on Kos to immigrant parents, and an Arabic, Greek, and French speaker. Each a different shade, each a polyglot by birth, each marked by shifting national allegiances. If the army colonel and the camp director constitute modern Greece, what is it that Amir lacks for entry? He arrived by boat, but Kos is a small island, everyone arrives by boat. He is the right hue, as are so many of the

migrants arriving by sea day after day. To Vänna, Amir's skin "matches the shade she subconsciously associates not with a country or an ethnicity but with the entire middle belt of the earth. He looks like an islander" (142). And when she peels a piece of sunburned skin from his back and holds it to the light, she is surprised to find it is not brown at all, but "a translucent thing," clear and transparent and free from deception (166). Yet the migrants arriving by sea rupture civility and set the islanders who cater to tourists on edge. Their color, their mode of arrival, and their language mark not only their illegality, but their nature and moral worth. El Akkad uses tonal distinctions to show how useless the varied shades are in attempting to define who is native and who is the necessary "other." As such, he unsettles racial determination by blurring it as a marker of national purity. When the Army colonel finally corners Amir in an abandoned shed, Amir is shocked that this man who has been viciously hunting him with teams of armed men speaks his same language and has his same skin color.

The comparison El Akkad arranges in the novel is another that is repeated in new refugee writings: the organized, well-funded army of a sovereign nation is arrayed against a ten-year old with nothing, no family, no money, and in Amir's case, without even the clothes on his back. As he tore through the woods to escape the beach, they were torn, too. To find something to wear, he and Vänna sneak into a hotel room and nick an outfit from a young tourist's pile of them then finish a discarded meal left for room service to clean up—a mostly uneaten lamb roast. In small cuts and large blows, El Akkad forces readers to think about their overflowing plates and closets. The family that lost the outfit fumes to hotel management—the top was a favorite jersey, a must-have; they demand payment for it in equal measure. The Greek-Algerian director of the local refugee camp, which locals call a zoo, is struck by Amir's image: "She has seen so many over the last year: Alone, malnourished, orphaned by war or by the sea; made into the undercurrents

of themselves, broken in ways that rendered them unable to continue as children and yet a part of them left childlike forever” (96). The process of seeking refuge, one they are forced to make or willingly led into by beloved guardians, stunts their childhood and forms their adulthood. Amir, the child here, is hunted by the army colonel and a team of young soldiers armed with rifles who eventually question—as readers also must—why they are in such vicious pursuit of one small boy. They do manage to catch Vänna at one point in the story but do not harm the blond teenager because, “like all soldiers,” El Akkad writes, “they maintain a subconscious ledger of who they are free to hurt and who they are obliged to protect, and if they are not to protect a girl such as this one—a girl born of this place and this language and this skin—they protect no one at all” (221). That Amir is someone they are instructed to hurt—and might know they can in their subconscious anyway—lends another, more structural layer, of reversed gaze to the novel, which prompts readers to question their part in migration as individuals and as part of larger institutional systems that create crises.

The refugee center director tries to persuade the Army colonel to temper his exaggerations and leave Amir alone by pleading that “it’s not a colonization, it’s just a bunch of people on boats.” The colonel responds that “Every colonization is just a bunch of people on boats” and resumes his hunt despite the fact that he, too, had once been a Syrian who came to Greece in search of a better life (153). The accumulation of perspectives in *What Strange Paradise* firmly places readers in the narrative. Like Boochani and Rasmussen, El Akkad presents a terrible story and makes sure readers know that they are in it. He offers two endings for the novel. In one, Amir and Vänna escape the island by ferry, Vänna vowing to stick with Amir until he is safe. In the second, two men in the puffy white hazmat suits kick a small boy who has washed up on the shore. Getting no response, one of the men lifts the dead boy’s head,

slips off his necklace, and pockets it before the soldiers or photographers on the scene turn their attention his way. It is a sad, silent ending that forces readers to ask what *really* happened? But this is a novel, and El Akkad refuses his readers a tidy ending. What really happened is happening every day: migrants are moving, many die, a very few slip away, many are hunted and punished for existing, like Boochani, who was imprisoned in an offshore detention center without charge, without charge, without conviction, and without trial. Writing in the foreword of Boochani's book, the Australian novelist Richard Flanagan recalls the treatment of Australians in Japanese POW camps and asks, "What has become of us when it is we who now commit such crimes?" (xiii). In turning the gaze, Boochani, Rasmussen, and El Akkad reveal the work anti-immigration policies do to individuals and force readers and viewers to wonder if the problem is migrants at all. This new vision amplifies one of Dina Neyari's most insightful observations from *The Ungrateful Refugee*: "Nativist fury, not an exile's plea for rescue, is the irrational spectacle, the unearned reaction, in today's refugee narrative" (263).

### **3.5 Necropolitics and the Torture of Waiting**

Waiting is hostile to narration. It is most easily represented by its absence, but few refugees can avoid one wait, or many, on their journey to a place of arrival. For an individual waiting in a liminal state of unbelonging, waiting can act on the psyche like water eroding a canyon—it becomes a persistent corrosion that forms (and shuts down) future possibilities. Refugees and migrants bide their time in refugee camps, hide out in cities working for cash in vast informal economies that offer no healthcare or protection, and sit in tent camps at borders, prey for all forms of smugglers who offer the chance to move for a steep fee. They wait for years—often decades—for asylum, long periods of inertia and slippages of time that create narrative holes. But in recent refugee narratives, waiting is not elided, its physical and mental

presence is felt as a form of human-inflicted slow violence that transforms those subjected to it into something else, something worse. A recent report from *Frontiers in Sociology* on the experience of time on refugee's mental health and well-being quotes Adem, a well-educated Syrian in his late twenties, waiting for his asylum application to be processed in Norway. "Before, I was thinking about my future," he explains, "right now I am not. Why do I have to think? I feel like I'm a cow. Just eating and sleeping. I feel like a chicken, on the freezer. I am frozen...UDI [the Norwegian Directorate for Immigration] killed me" (Sagbakken et al. 6). Adem envisions himself transformed into a lesser being because of his empty wait, damned to do nothing more than eat and sleep and sapped of the intelligence and capacity for labor that girds his identity.

The three works discussed in this chapter move Adem's frustration out of academic reports and into refugee writing where the conditions of seeking refuge and the challenge of spinning nothing into narrative something occlude descriptions of waiting in earlier accounts. Boochani addresses waiting most directly, regardless of how hostile it is to narration, to reveal the extent of its punitive and oppressive nature. His words construct waiting as a character that interacts with every person in his account yet draws different responses: some devise tactics to endure it, some give in to its pressure, collapsing with violent mental breakdowns or going silent, and some try to fight it physically, lashing out until the effort consumes them. He calls waiting "a mechanism of torture used in the dungeon of time," a description that presents vivid imagery of medieval chains and racks and feelings of twisting, pressing, slow anguish (62). In a second description, this one in ghazal form, he creates an image of power that wields crushing physical force. Waiting, he writes, is

*A power that strips me of the right to live life /*

*A power that tosses me aside and alienates me from the very being*

*that I was supposed to be /*

*A power that tortures me /*

*A power that torments me. (62)*

In Boochani's words, waiting is not the passivity of empty boredom, it is something active and corrosive that jettisons people from time, making it impossible for them to locate themselves inside themselves. They are transformed and diminished, removed from the inalienable right to live life. When deployed under the auspices of state bureaucracy, waiting mixes the potency of slow seeping poison with the quick strike of a truncheon. Those forced to wait are subjected to its repeated blows while this transfer is made, or that form is filled out, or the backlogs in immigration courts recede or, in the case of Boochani, none of those things occur because nothing was said or done for him or the other migrants he was detained with. Boochani presents a phenomenology of waiting; the result is not an observation of time slipping by, but of time as a power that destructively presses down, a sense that saturates each of his pages with an urgency of pain, loss of self, and forced alienation from the rhythm of days.

Deployed with the knowledge that it has such destructive outcomes, I contend that waiting is a form of necropolitics using Achilles Mbembe's definition, which describes it as the use of political power and authority to decide who lives and who dies, in effect, the politics of death instrumentalized as a tool of government. Books published from 2018 on, Boochani's in particular, foreground refugee management tactics to describe the ways state power can "define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not" (Mbembe 27, emphasis in original). I wish I could say that Boochani *reveals* this function of the state, but this reality is not a revelation; it is not even a dirty little secret since Donald Trump's presidency made the public

denigration of migrants and refugees political sport (although he is certainly not the first to use the tactic to whip up nationalistic fervor). Rather, the use of necropolitics, as Boochani and other writers describe it in practice and from the perspective of those deemed disposable, has collapsed the savage-victim-savior triangle by equating the savage and savior. This new arrangement cripples claims of Western benevolence by exposing the dangers of tying human freedom and dignity to state actors that shift positions on who deserves them and who does not. Thus, literary exposures of humanitarianism's unfolding narrative force a reckoning with a second triangle for consideration: freedom, dignity, and rights-bearing citizenship. At this dangerous moment in history when the rights-bearing citizen is all but reduced to their ability to consume, cutting people off from earning wages while they wait, as refugee camps and immigration backlogs do, or denying them status for "only" being economic migrants, amounts to a disqualification from access to freedom and dignity, thus removed from the natural order of things and disposable.

Anthropologist Cindy Horst quotes a Somali school headmaster at the Hagadera refugee camp in Kenya who explains that he has adapted to life in the camp, to being "spoonfed," but after ten years "with no hope of getting citizenship and no hope of equal human rights...[his] country of origin, which belongs to the Third World, has demoted [him] to the Fourth World of being a refugee" (77). Although the terminology of first, second, and third worlds has fallen out of favor because it suggests hierarchy, in practice, as the headmaster describes, the hierarchy is very much present, whether spoken or not, and his long-term existence in a refugee camp has demoted him to the sub-basement of the lowest level. Mbembe's term for places like the refugee camp as a component of necropower is "death worlds," which he calls "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (40, emphasis in original). Boochani's account details how it

feels to be one of the living dead and reveals—this part of his account *is* a revelation—how the Australian government used time, heat, food, filth, and lack of healthcare to create death worlds out of extraterritorial detention. In the ghazal above and throughout the book, being one of the living dead means always feeling power imposing on you, but never having any of it. Boochani describes how indefinite imprisonment without charge, without recourse, cut off from reaching out to contacts outside of the camp, injures him like torture and torment. Waiting for a change in status, he writes, “*tosses me aside and alienates me from the very being / that I was supposed to be*”—alive, but detached from self, merely existing in a death world created by the Australian government to dissuade migrants from attempting to reach the continent by boat to claim asylum.

### **3.6 Criminalizing Migration and its Mental Effects**

Just four days before Boochani’s rescue at sea in 2013, a newly elected conservative coalition in Canberra put a harsh program called Operation Sovereign Borders into effect. The program forced offshore processing, stricter barriers to citizenship, and stiffer penalties for illegal entry. In a message to smugglers and asylum seekers, then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd warned, “If you are going to put someone onto a boat to come to Australia, we, the Australian government, are not going to allow you to settle in Australia. Everything else is secondary to that. That is the absolute core message” (Yaxley). The asylum seeker was characterized as a dangerous invader and a drain on state resources, and advertisements authorized by the government declared “No matter who you are or where you are from, you will not make Australia home” (“Stop the Boats”). Asylum seekers captured at sea after Operation Sovereign Borders was enacted, as Boochani was, were sent to offshore detention on Manus or Nauru and left there with no information about their requests for entry. A consortium of physicians writing about the care of prisoners in detention on Nauru stressed that despite the horrendous migration

journeys the refugees had endured, “it was the indefinite nature of their detention that had the greatest mental impact. The profound sense of hopelessness, fear for the future and enforced family separation, including from pregnant women and children, were among the factors that led to the collapse of people’s mental health” (Greaves). Suicidal thoughts, attempted suicide, depression, anxiety, and PTSD in more than 80% of those treated on Manus and Nauru were the highest recorded in medical literature to date (Greaves). These statistics are anything but ordinary, which is why journalists were repeatedly denied access to the centers. In the introduction to *No Friend but the Mountains*, the Australian writer Richard Flanagan struggles to describe what was so disturbing about Boochani’s experience. Australians, he wrote, “pride [themselves] on decency, kindness, generosity, and a fair go. None of these qualities were evident in Boochani’s account of hunger, squalor, beatings, suicide and murder,” and each of these afflictions were the outgrowth of waiting, the physical manifestations of the mental torture of being detained and cut off from access to society (Boochani xiii). Since Boochani’s book was published, the “hidden” torment of waiting has become clearer, revealing an emergency created out of artificiality—although the expulsion or desperation to leave one place is trauma enough, it is compounded by inaction and status upon arrival at a place better termed “no place.”

Refugees are repeatedly informed that they must wait, but often are not told what to wait for. Like Boochani, they are kept in a camp or held in detention—a state of emergency that keeps them on high alert for what purpose? In *The Ungrateful Refugee*, Nayeri describes how a profound sense of hopelessness takes root in conditions of waiting that create a state of internal emergency. During the waiting, she asks, what else is there to do:

Any ordinary person, if instructed to wait five hours, will find something else to do. But for ten minutes, most people sit and wait. If that ten minutes becomes twenty, they might

still find it pointless to try and accomplish anything substantial. In this way, a rational person can be made to squander those five hours, minute by minute. This is the life of a refugee. Madness in increments, by an ever-shifting endpoint. (210)

Seen in this light, deciding who waits and who does not is a powerful political tool used with increasing regularity even after an intense period of globalization in that began in 1990. From that time forward, goods and capital have moved across borders with relative ease, but human mobility continues to be criminalized and curtailed (Benhabib 2018, 101). When Hannah Arendt fled Germany in 1933, it took eight years for her to arrive in New York in 1941, a passage of time that took its toll on her mental and physical health as she tried to exist in France without papers as an “enemy alien.” She described German refugees—herself included—as a new type of human being created by contemporary history, “put into concentration camps by their foes and in internment camps by their friends” (1943, 265). The internment camps, akin to today’s refugee camps, are forms of humanitarian benevolence that have lost their benevolence and, with increasing numbers of migrants, their efficacy. Situations that began as emergencies and were stabilized by humanitarian interventions meant to be temporary have evolved into another type of emergency for which there are diminishing viable solutions.

The books in this chapter interrogate the critical precipice on which refugee management is balanced today, revealing its contradictions and unsustainable practices in the hopes of nudging the international community to new solutions. They show the effects of hopelessness, the outgrowth of waiting, and fear, which Boochani calls “the mother of all tortures” (155). Seyla Benhabib’s examination of the refugee situation today finds that little has changed. As refugee numbers have increased since the early 1990s, “not only has the number of camps grown but camps have ceased to be places where people are held temporarily; rather, they have become

semipermanent. The largest refugee camp in the world, Kenya’s Dadaab, is twenty years old and houses 420,000 refugees. The Palestinian refugee camps in Southern Lebanon are in many cases seventy to fifty years old” (2018, 102).<sup>2</sup> Places that began as temporary humanitarian solutions now house generations of living dead that know of no life outside of the camps. Humans either adapt to the slow death of waiting or succumb to the effort, which withers them from the inside out. Either choice is corrosive, yet both have been normalized by current refugee management plans like those in Kenya, Lebanon, and Bangladesh. The UNHCR considers any situation in which at least 25,000 refugees from the same country have been living in exile for five years or more a Protracted Refugee Situation or PRS—Mbembe’s death worlds standardized with an acronym.<sup>3</sup>

But Boochani does not allow this linguistic compression to stand, and I argue that his book had the impact that it did because it expands on why his situation was protracted, who benefitted from it, how it impacted individual bodies, and how the Australian scheme circumvented international law to avoid designating the migrants it kept offshore as refugees. The politicians who supported Operation Sovereign Borders could point to their continued success because the number of people attempting to reach Australia by boat plummeted. The security forces running the detention centers kept extending their lucrative contracts and the governments on Nauru and Papua New Guinea also kept collecting money from Australian

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<sup>2</sup> As of this writing in September 2023, Benhabib’s numbers are dated. Dadaab opened in 1991, making it 32 years old. Due to pressures from the Kenyan government, the number of refugees in its three camps has been reduced to about 240,000, a number expected to rise with a new influx of Ethiopians and Sudanese fleeing recent unrest. The world’s largest refugee camp is Kutupalong, or Cox’s Bazaar, in Bangladesh. Nearly one million Rohingya refugees are hosted in 33 highly congested camps in the Cox’s Bazaar district after their large scale displacement from Myanmar in 2017. For additional statistics, see <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/bgd>.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, “Protracted Refugee Situations Explained.” <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/protracted-refugee-situations-explained/#What%20is%20a%20protracted%20refugee%20situation?>

taxpayers for housing the centers and detainees. The scheme worked because the detainees were, for all practical purposes, disappeared from view and cut off from contact. The decision to control who can enter into a sovereign nation under a program like Operation Sovereign Borders is both destructive and creative: it destroys the self-evident truth that all men are created equal and creates death worlds full of the undead who are cut off from citizenry, society, and time. Before Boochani started reporting from inside the prison on Manus Island, Australian citizens were not aware of the conditions in the centers, nor the disorienting security measures guards were taking to ensure their absolute domination. Boochani's contraband cell phone, acquired via a cigarette trade with one of the Papua New Guinean prison guards, allowed him to reappear and contest his social death by transcribing the radically private torture of being someone for whom there is no sense of urgency and no geopolitical need to take responsibility or care. He and Dina Nayeri characterize waiting and losing hope so that these particular types of torture that erode from the inside and leave no physical mark can "begin to enter the realm of public discourse" (Scarry 6).

### **3.7 Time as a Weapon in Modern Refugee Schemes**

Akin to Nayeri's description of madness in increments, Boochani describes "killing time" in detention on Manus where the daytime heat in the metal structures that house the inmates "reach temperatures that could cook a human body: Prisoners are like meat in a metal pressure-cooker" (152). In a corner of his prison compound, plastic chairs are clustered under the sheltering branches of one thick old tree and the small bit of shade it provides. The prisoners spend hours there, leaning back in their chairs as the time passes. Boochani describes the increments involved in this wait:

*Killing time involves a simple trick /*  
*Reach out and hold another sunset /*  
*Another one of the thousand-colour Manusian sunsets /*  
*Then, reach out and hold another night /*  
*Another one of the dark island nights /*  
*A futile cycle... /*  
*Night and day revolving /*  
*Under the shade of an old tree. (152)*

The scene almost sounds idyllic—the chance to observe a beautiful sunset day in and day out—until Boochani describes the current of tension that courses under this inertia, a spark that could ignite at the slightest provocation. His use of the phrase “killing time” cuts two ways: it is the strategy he must employ to trick his brain into surviving one more day even as each passing day is like another small death. He writes that “As suffering becomes normalized, people experience...a twisted satisfaction in chaos and destruction” (173). They lose the ability to calibrate their behavior amidst structural boredom and overarching tension and run the risk of becoming the unhinged invaders they are characterized as by politicians and passported citizens who want to keep them out. Yet, in detention facilities of all types, Maurizio Albahari writes that “the ‘guests’ must be given palliative care by the very institutions that create pathologies of injustice” (124). Detention requires extra-human capabilities of people who, in many cases, have lost everything and have already expended super-human strength arriving. Some have only a basic education and some arrive already traumatized so when Boochani writes that “the only people who can overcome and survive all the suffering inflicted by the prison are those who exercise creativity [and] who can trace the outlines of hope using the melodic humming and

visions from beyond the prison fences and the beehives we live in,” he is talking about the creative coping mechanisms required to withstand permanent damage from enforced waiting.

Adem, the young Syrian in Norway, describes the difficulty, even with an education, of finding that creativity. Sometimes it exceeds human capability, especially when waiting affects so many other aspects of life: “I will just say to you, what would happen to you if you would stay without anything (to do) for ten months? What would happen? You can? You can’t? I mean, like, maybe, but for me, I can’t...I go to sleep at five o’clock in the morning and I wake at four o’clock in the evening. Do you think that is a life? It’s not!” (Sabbakken et al. 6). Helen, a young Eritrean also in the Norwegian system, describes her waiting as detached from Earth, on a different plane. “It’s like I am drifting in the air. I am doing nothing” she laments. “Let me go to the school, at least. Let me do something” (Sabbakken et al. 6). Adem and Helen are both detached from time and floating away from the selves they were until they had to leave their homes. Day and night are switched, “*Night and day revolving,*” as Boochani writes in his ghazal, in a way that summons motion to describe its absence (152). The prison-like conditions of the Australian system differ from an outwardly benign Norwegian system that houses asylum seekers in country, but these writings show that the effects on individuals are similarly damaging. They call into question the humaneness of some aspects of humanitarian action that decide which lives are worth bringing into citizenship and, by consequence of that decision, which lives are not. Didier Fassin writes how humanitarianisms consider “the evaluation of human beings...and which existences it is possible or legitimate to save” (501). Since humanitarianism takes up the defense of causes and, conversely, sets others aside, it also manufactures public representations of who is worthy of saving by showing those helped “as victims rather than combatants and by displaying their condition in terms of suffering rather than the geopolitical situation” (501). The

power to decide who should wait, then, becomes a form of necropower that, like humanitarianism, can hide the choice of who is worth saving and who is not behind the public representations of those saved, or in the case of waiting, of those admitted.

Those not rescued, not admitted, and not saved become denizens of Mbembe's death worlds. As one of those denizens, Boochani reveals that necropower used against refugees is more like a war waged against the world's most desperate people, those who are most in need of human rights because they have been stripped to bare humanity. Giorgio Agamben rails at this paradox, noting that "precisely the figure that should have incarnated the rights of man *par excellence*, the refugee, constitutes instead the radical crisis of this concept" (1995, 116). What Agamben describes in theory, Boochani describes with details. What does it mean to be the embodiment of a radical crisis to the rights of man? It means to wait, to be probed, to be separated, to be handled and then left to rot. He explains in a ghazal:

*A war waged with numbers /*

*A numbers war /*

*The frisking hands of the Papus /*

*The imposing stares of the Australian officers /*

*The prisoners trapped in a tunnel of tension /*

*A huge feature of everyday life for the prisoners /*

*Day to day... /*

*A monstrous part of life /*

*This is what life has become, after all... /*

*This is one model constructed for human life /*

*Killing time by leveraging the queue as a technology /*

*Killing time through manipulating and exploiting the body /*

*The body left vulnerable /*

*The body an object to be searched /*

*Examined by the hands of others /*

*The body susceptible to the gaze of others /*

*A program for pissing all over life. (307)*

This ghazal is from a moment in his account where Boochani tries to make sense of the routines in the prison, which he knew was a fool's pursuit. The carceral system he was bound by was designed to make sure no daily patterns were regularized and no routines were continual, keeping the detainees in a constant state of tension and confusion. His ghazal repeats the trope of "killing time" to convey the way time is used to injure the detainees in a death by a thousand cuts, although in the prison, they suffer death by a thousand queues. Every need requires a wait—each meal, each distribution of, say, laundry baskets, or flip flops necessitates two or three hours in line, sometimes five times a day. As detainees, the migrants in detention could be bodily searched whenever the guards deemed it necessary—their bodies belonging to the prison, not themselves. And they were constantly surveilled by cameras, Australian guards, and the Papua New Guineans employed by the prison, their gaze a stream of internal and external violations. The ghazal describes surveillance that is distant and impersonal *and* close and invasive so that every boundary of each individual was violable and violated while being simultaneously ignored by the state.

Waiting and surveillance were tactical partners in the temporal regime of the detention center. If, for example, a detainee needed to visit the health clinic, they filled in forms and waited in lines for days to be placed on Schedule A, B, or C, depending on which doctor would

visit when. The doctors, Boochani explained, never “set foot on the island or in the prison. They are scheduled to come next month. But they never arrive” (312). If an injured detainee was actually admitted to the clinic, he was subjected to twelve body searches a day, each an examination to prepare for the arrival of a doctor who never arrived. The detention center was designed to crush the detainees so when given an option, they would accept an offer to return to their country of origin rather than staying in detention. Boochani’s hidden cellphone, and his creative use of it, created a porous border because it opened access to the intent and the effects of Operation Sovereign Borders and altered control of the narrative of the offshore detention, which were deliberately punitive and degrading, and deliberately kept sealed. Armed with the new knowledge he provided, Australians successfully protested the offshoring tactics of Operation Sovereign Borders, and even though Australia’s harsh line against illegal immigration still stands, the detention centers are not currently holding detainees. Moreover, Boochani exposed the Fourth World intricately created by and connected to border control that is not limited to Australia and Papua New Guinea’s offshore dirty work.

Nayeri reveals tactics of detention in The Netherlands that do similar damage to people already traumatized and desperate with descriptions as invasive as Boochani’s. She explains that:

In detention, they look in every hole in your body. It’s crushing humiliation, and it retraumatizes all the rape victims. There’s a rape victim screaming and four guards pour onto her, their hands everywhere. They have no sense of how a traumatized person behaves when touched...And let me ask, why not use airport scanners? Because they want to humiliate; the law is designed to crush people from Eastern cultures. Imagine a

life spent between the streets, the camps, and the jail, not because you're a criminal or have no skills, but just because no country wants you! (255)

Nayeri gets right at the ways detention strips migrants of their dignity and disregards their humanity. In practice, asylum seekers are prisoners of war treated with all the presumed hostility of enemy combatants. Boochani and Nayeri's writings make readers in the Global North question how the war for secure borders is waged and against whom. Traumatized refugees? Emaciated migrants? Terrified victims of war? Is sympathy an adequate response if it is we who are inflicting the pain? In her seminal book *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry writes that "war is injuring [and] though this fact is too self-evident and massive ever to be directly contested, it can be indirectly contested by many means and disappear from view along many separate paths" (64). In their books that write against the savior narrative that celebrates the triumphant, exceptional refugee, Boochani and Nayeri bring the effects of the war against migrants into view in ways not seen in other narratives until recently.

While Australian politicians celebrated the success of Operation Sovereign Borders by pointing to the dramatically diminished number of arrivals by sea after 2014, they omitted mention of the human and financial cost of the program by controlling all the information flowing out of the camp, an effort that was picked up by Boochani. In his ghazals and prose, he describes the many ways this war injured powerless and defenseless people to make sure those pieces of the Australian effort did not disappear: waiting, bodily violations, intense heat, lack of privacy, lack of care, lack of working toilets. Because journalists were barred from Manus and Nauru, Boochani's account was one of the first to make its way into public circulation and began a national—and international—conversation that is still ongoing in recent refugee texts. These texts foreground vital questions about protracted detentions, who benefits from them, and what

levels of sub-humanity are created when nations “protect” themselves from migrants. The refugees arrived on Manus shaken from their journey; when they finally left, they were scarred mentally and physically and twelve were dead. *No Friend but the Mountains* edged its way into the rhetoric of border protection to show that the ultimate expression of sovereignty, what Mbembe terms “the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die,” is also its darkest shadow.

### **3.8 Relabeling and Taking Control**

The last ghazal in *No Friend but the Mountains* stops time with a cry of pain that repeats the naming structure Boochani uses throughout his book. It conjures two distinct men in his camp: The Hero, an Iranian prisoner “with the characteristics of true leaders” who is kind and courageous in a naive way, something the other prisoners take advantage of but also admire (323). And The Gentle Giant, a huge, generous, polite, and protective Iranian who is an anomaly in a prison system constructed to leach all those things out of those it detained. The Gentle Giant was admired for sharing the mangoes that dropped from the mango tree—the only food not rationed or blocked by a constant queue. Others caught a mango and devoured it alone, but the Gentle Giant modelled something different. Boochani wrote that he confronted the unsharing prisoners with “a different way of being, he offer[ed] them new horizons, access to a better reality” (241). He was an antidote to the prison’s poison, but on a violent night in February 2014, he was beaten to death by Papu guards at just twenty-three years old. His death marks the end of Boochani’s account: “They had killed Reza. They had killed The Gentle Giant” (356). Because he is dead, his full name is revealed. Reza Barati, Boochani’s best friend in the prison, was one of twelve people who lost their lives in the prison while Boochani was detained. In the ghazal below, The Hero wails at the death of The Gentle Giant, a tragedy that occurred during a

brutal raid on the camp after an uprising. The Hero's wail is picked up by Chauka, a small bird native to Papua New Guinea pronounced—appropriately for the men in the prison—“choker.” It denotes a moment of anguish when prose will not suffice:

*We can hear The Hero /*

*His voice echoes in the distance /*

*He is wailing /*

*His grief poured over the prison, pounded down on the prison /*

*Chauka falls silent /*

*We can only hear the voice of The Hero /*

*The entire tent descends into silence /*

*All the men inside become silent for a moment /*

*No-one is around him /*

*The Hero is alone /*

*Lamenting /*

*Wailing.*

*Chauka flies down from the summit of the tallest coconut tree in the prison to  
unite with The Hero /*

*Chauka laments /*

*The Hero laments /*

*The chant of a bird and the chant of a man /*

*Both chants blend into one /*

*This lament...of nature...this lamentation of nature /*

*This lament...of a human...this lamentation of a human being. (355-356)*

Boochani's grief overflows as he makes a vital connection to the natural world to mourn The Gentle Giant. Even the birds lament the murder, which links the indigenous land the Australian government has co-opted for their offshoring to the indigenous people co-opted into the dirty work of the prisons to the tragedy of this murder of a single human. In his written reckoning, Boochani uses prose and poetry to show that nothing escapes notice or complicity and there is no way to hide what is happening at remove—nature is watching, the camera is recording, the participants are observing and creating stories to be retold. The Hero's wail extends throughout the camp and while The Gentle Giant is named because he is killed, The Hero is not, a technique Boochani uses throughout to de-singularize his characters with universal traits.

His unique form of naming pushes against bureaucratic labeling that minimizes the need and humanity of refugees and complicates the Western default strategy of humanizing characters by exceptionalizing them. In effect, Boochani makes a double move: he singularizes while universalizing and humanizes without giving into a compulsion to make each prisoner remarkable and therefore worthy of being treated humanely. In his telling, each *regular* prisoner is deserving of humane treatment, a narrative that runs against the grain of the refugee story that has been normed by Western publishing and its reviewers. He deliberately resists their mode of individualizing by employing a strategy that pushes a wedge into equally normalized ways of determining who counts and who does not. His characters are The Hero, The Gentle Giant, The Blue Eyed Boy, The Toothless Fool, The Penguin, The Guy with A Ponytail, and The Robust Muscular Guy, among others. Each is named with a capital T "The," rendering them both singular and universal and replete with recognizable characteristics for readers. They are gregarious, warm, arrogant, selfish, chatty, and sullen—the same range of characteristics as people who live outside fenced enclosures and carry passports. Just folks, Boochani impresses

on his readers, with all the idiosyncrasies of anyone else but so defined to deny readers the sort of warm human stories used with such utility in journalism and so praised by book reviewers and publishers in Chapter One.

There are no triumphant accounts here and readers in search of one—including Boochani’s own—are denied a particular, representative story with a neat ending, a technique also deployed in El Akkad’s novel. In Boochani’s double move, labelling is a tactic and a form of protest because those in need are almost always rendered as voiceless, suffering masses or women and children, two groups that tend to induce sympathy from donors. Here, Boochani introduces refugees who intentionally disrupt this image of crisis; his characters are men who do not fit the regularized image of those deemed more deserving or more exceptional, a form of cherry-picking that elides reality and accountability. We know some characteristics and the pain of The Hero, but he is never fully realized with a name. He is though, Boochani seems to implore, one of many in the crowd, a crowd composed of individuals, each unique in his own way. He understands that if he gives a character a name, readers are compelled to assign that character’s unique traits away as a one-off, but by assigning his characters minimal descriptions, their traits could fit any number of people, which does the work of individualizing and universalizing all at once and humanizes without fanfare—one should not have to be exceptional to be treated with humanity. This form of naming also scrambles what sociologist Craig Calhoun calls our “emergency imaginary,” or our encrusted way of imagining emergencies based on the way media outlets carefully curate a few images from the thousands available to them to present an idea of emergency and aid that viewers and readers already know (31). Western media, NGOs, and governmental aid organizations present images that show their capacity to alleviate suffering during a situation that is narrated by someone else at remove, an observer half

a world away, or someone at the scene with the luxury to retreat. It is also narrated as an immediate need with a material solution, not a constellation of problems and crises brought on by the inaction or actions of the same governments coming to the rescue. But Boochani is not half a world away, nor does he have any luxury to retreat. Those in crisis with him are not nameless or faceless, but neither are they named or made fully individual, a complication he introduces to contradict norms of publishing and humanitarian narratives. He saves the tactic of narrative blurring for the Australian officers who are depicted as sweaty, over-fed, gun- and walkie-talkie-wielding thugs. In a flip of an emergency imaginary, the nameless guards perpetrate and enforce the depravity experienced by the suffering refugees. With Boochani's complex renderings, the reader's "ecology of knowing" is expanded and the emergency imaginary is ruptured (Sedgwick 145). Readers no longer see what they already know or are accustomed to seeing and, once again, the image is unsettling.

Boochani uses naming to make a claim on "refugee," a term that shifted possession in the early 1990s, around the time the events the books from 2006-2007 recall. Until the early 1990s, humanitarian organizations and NGOs labelled people based on their needs, what Roger Zetter calls their "*distributional consequences* of different categories (i.e., labels) of need—food, water, shelter, medical assistance" (2007, 189, emphasis in original). That changed when Global South-to-Global South migration expanded to include more Global South-to-Global North migration and state bureaucracies stepped in to flow the northern tide. Labels were expanded and took on pejorative connotations. In Australia, "irregular maritime arrivals" became "*illegal* maritime arrivals" (Phillips, emphasis mine). In Europe and America, new labels multiplied. Roger Zetter writes that asylum seekers or refugees became "'spontaneous asylum seekers' (with implications of fecklessness and presumably different from a planned asylum seeker), 'illegal asylum

seekers’, ‘bogus asylum seekers’, ‘economic refugee/asylum seeker’, ‘illegal migrant’, ‘trafficked migrant’, ‘overstayers’, ‘failed asylum seeker’ (note not failed refugee), ‘undocumented asylum seeker/migrant’” (184). Regardless of the label, the intent is the same: to convey a marginalized life, illegality, or unwelcome status, a tactic that flattens historicity, accountability, and the life of the refugee before their attempt at arrival.

Naming and language matter because they affect individual refugees and perceptions around the movement of millions. Without purposefully affective language from writers, refugees are characterized in other ways, not all nefarious but often cloudy because they overlook the fact that the moment a person steps into a dinghy to cross a sea with her children, or the moment a person leaves everything they know behind, they are telling a truth unacknowledged in names that concretize status. Liisa Maalki writes that their individual stories can be occluded with “clinical humanitarianism,” which she describes as an emergency summed up as a series of facts that reduces those suffering to “their numbers, their diseases, their nutritional needs, their crops, and their birth and mortality rates” (1996, 390). This form of clinical detachment loses sight of the person in lieu of what Malkki calls their “raw human needs,” but even that aggregation is preferable to the language of disaster often used (390). Dina Nayeri decries the loss of individual stories when the terms used for incoming refugees are “*deluge* or *flood* or *swarm*” (262, emphasis in original). The world is not pouring into Europe or America, and she insists that “these words are lies, [that] an honest image isn’t a flood or swarm. It’s a small stream, or a thin, dying herd, finding its way to a vast, fertile land” (262-263). Advocating accountability, she demands that “what few broken and wretched lives the richest nations take in, they should do so graciously, as the chief consumers of the world’s bounty” (263).

Boochani makes deft use of terms that aggregate information as a way to winnow humanity. He describes his fellow prisoners so readers can associate with them and their suffering, thus prompting a recognition between *this* Robust Muscular Guy and *every* robust muscular guy. He also uses the materiality of clinical humanitarianism to add the flesh and stench of raw humanity to numbers, as with this ghazal that describes his prison dorm:

*Two open entry-exit points /*  
*Twelve small rooms, approximately one-and-a-half meters by one-and-a-half meters /*  
*Flyscreened windows /*  
*Four imprisoned individuals, in bunk beds /*  
*Forced to adapt to each other's sweaty bodies and the elimination of personal space /*  
*Twelve rusting fans facing the same direction /*  
*Forty-eight individuals /*  
*Forty-eight beds /*  
*Forty-eight foul-smelling mouths /*  
*Forty-eight half-naked sweaty bodies /*  
*Frightened /*  
*Arguing. (149-150)*

Reading this ghazal, I have to resist the urge to measure out one-and-a-half meters and imagine how, even squared, it can hold the bodies of four men. The descriptive poetry evokes a torpor that makes me wonder how Boochani could put so much energy into writing when escaping the heat and the stench had to be primary. And I know he is describing the bunks at night because during the day, the temperature inside is too hot to bear. Another ghazal just below this one describes the collective smell of the men in the bunks: “All together they stink like a fast-rotting

corpse,” a scent that reflects their physical presence and their lack of it in their death worlds constructed by the Australian state (150). His visceral immediacy is an uncomfortable reminder of the deficiency of clinical humanitarianism—it tells only part of the story. What he names in the ghazal using a series of facts—the smells, the continuous sweat, the oppressive jungle heat, the crowding, the irritation—aggregates conditions with the same methods employed to hide them. In using his own form of clinical description, Boochani coopts the tactic to display raw humanity from the perspective of need.

### **3.9 Writing the Self into Existence**

Naming these conditions, identifying the traits of his fellow prisoners, and enmeshing himself into the nature of the prison do important work for Boochani as author. Each allows him to flex his creativity and write himself into existence, a life affirming action that keeps him alive during the years of waiting. Writing in an essay that follows the main text of the book, translator Omid Tofighian notes that “for Behrouz, renaming things is a way to affirm his personhood and establish a sense of authority; naming is a way of reclaiming authority from the prison, disempowering the system and redirecting sovereignty back to the land” (374). Naming also allows him to control a piece of his life that is entirely controlled by other forces. Although he is not a victim of a designated conflict, Boochani writes as a combatant in the war being waged against migrants and refugees fleeing violence, repressive politics, climate change, or poverty. He intentionally disrupts narratives that center the success of state programs with a text that centers the prisoner perspective. The refugees in Manus were deeply transformed by their experience, a comment that feels inadequate in the extreme. In an interview with Tofighian, Boochani explains that they “have modified their perception and understanding of life, transformed their interpretation of existence, [and] matured their notion of freedom...they have

become distinctly creative humans, they have unprecedented creative capacities” (387). The creativity he recognizes is a foundation and outgrowth of the epistemological shifts that emerge from extended detention, shifts that cannot be perceived from a clinical humanitarian perspective or from a bird’s eye view. New ways of knowing inspired Boochani to write, and he contends that they will also inform the prisoners’ lives long after they find a place of arrival. Likewise, readers with citizen privilege are offered new knowledge and a new lens through which to see the strategies necessary for survival within systems erected by governments working to curtail it.

Boochani wanted his work to endure as writing that focused on the effects of the off-shore system—not just what it was but how it altered its detainees as a form of torture. He presents many characters, and one of the most vividly drawn is the prison itself. By renaming the Manus Island Regional Processing Centre to “Manus Prison,” he defines and analyzes it on his own terms. Tofighian contends that because of this work, “Conceptually, he owns the prison” (375). Ownership notwithstanding, he exposes its carceral system that drives the men inside nearly mad, as it is designed to. He names it a Kyriarchal System, a term introduced by the theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in 1992 to represent intersecting social systems “that reinforce and multiply with the aim of punishing, subjugating, and suppressing” (Boochani 375). The discipline and organization of the prison was meant to strip the humanity from the prisoners and turn them on each other. Although he named it, there was no way to control it. There were queues and rules for every aspect of the prisoners’ lives and every scrap of food they ingested, if there was any left by the time those at the end of the queue got to the food table. Games were forbidden. When someone drew a backgammon board on a tabletop, the guards scrawled “No Games” across its ordered squares. No reading material, no notebooks, and definitely no phones.

As soon as the prisoners determined a twisted logic or pattern to any of the daily workings, the system changed. Boochani describes the instability thus:

*Trying to understand the conditions of micro-control and macro-control /*

*Trying to understand the perpetual flux of everything /*

*Trying to avoid tipping over the edge /*

*Trying to avoid tipping into insanity. (208)*

The work necessary for survival is woven throughout this ghazal. It harkens back to Nayeri's description of "madness by increments," by describing the effort required to exist within systems designed to create and continually remind prisoners of their debased subjectivity (210).

Boochani's braided intent of exposing readers to the stories and people inside the camps and constructing a philosophy behind its mechanisms embed a record into Australian history. His aim was to make Australian readers cognizant of the effects of Operation Sovereign Borders. In doing so, many recognized themselves as perpetrators, complicit in a scheme intended to break the will and spirit of the detainees precisely because offshore detention dehumanizes and dehistoricizes. Liisa Malkki contends that dehistoricizing "creates a context in which it is difficult for people in the refugee category to be approached as historical actors rather than simply as mute victims. It can strip from them the authority to give credible narrative evidence or testimony about their own condition in politically and institutionally consequential forums" (378). Boochani, though, uses dehistoricizing as a tool for sharpening his critique. Although the reader learns that he grew up in a disputed Kurdish zone during the Iran/Iraq war and that he is "a child of war," he shares little about his past choosing, instead, to focus on his present (264). The effect of this decision is a spotlight on Australia and Operation Sovereign Borders, which prompts a series of questions: What does it mean to be Australian? What is sovereignty? What

does it mean to be bordered? *No Friend But the Mountain* answers by documenting images, feelings, and smells, a strategy that Tofighian writes, positions “the issue of indefinite detention of refugees deep within Australia’s collective memory” (378). To say that the strategy paid off is cold comfort to those who were detained, but the response to Boochani’s writing altered Australian conversations. The literary awards he received were national news that bored into ideas about national identity. Aboriginal leaders rejected the authority of Australia’s government to deny entry to anyone at any point along their national border. In protest, they sailed a flotilla to Manus Island in 2019 to distribute Aboriginal First Nations passports to the refugees, claiming that the current government did not have the authority to decide who could or could not enter the country along any of its coastline (McNevin). In the *Sydney Morning Herald* review of *No Friend but the Mountains*, the Australian intellectual Robert Manne confessed that,

During my lifetime, no act of the Australian state has been as terrible as the abandonment, the virtual imprisonment, of 2000 innocent and desperate refugees and asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus Island. To understand the true nature of what it is that we have done, every Australian, beginning with the Prime Minister, should read Behrouz Boochani's intense, lyrical and psychologically perceptive prose-poetry masterpiece.

Each of these protests expose the way politics plays refugees as pawns in intersecting power struggles. All at once the refugees on Manus Island were foils for the political might of Australia’s conservative government, bodies co-opted in protest by the literary community, symbols of resistance for Aboriginal leaders, and the debris of sovereignty taken to its extremes. Even as their standing as a group was essential within these dynamics, the majority of them could only observe and be acted upon—individual refugees have few ways to make claims on

their own behalf. With the help of many intermediaries, Boochani defied his role as prisoner #MEG45 and adapted in the only way he could, through writing and video. His clandestine communication made readers witness to state practices that not only violated Australian and Papua New Guinean law but undermined international law. In the process, he defanged criticism of Iran as a brutal, punitive regime as myopic; Australia was equally deserving of that criticism as the efforts of both regimes enact policies that create a Fourth World populated by people forced into precarity as living dead.

Although many of the protests sparked by Boochani's book were symbolic, they had an impact. His book contributed to pressure that closed the prison on Manus and halted further people being imprisoned on Nauru. Boochani's second book, *Freedom, Only Freedom*, was published in November 2022. In December 2022, he flew to Sydney to promote the book throughout Australia, his first time there after being barred from entry as recently as 2019. He noted upon arrival that "some of the politicians who barred me are gone. But I am here" (Rachwani). Indeed, people will always be on the move, but politicized borders, which increasingly decide who is worthy of human rights and who is not, are temporary, no matter how well fortified they are. Rather than shoring up sovereignty and strength, borders display a country's weaknesses and create spaces for states of emergency where vigilantes can take liberty with the very laws they claim to uphold (Brown). The cellphone makes this vigilante work visible, especially if it is work sanctioned by the state, as Australia's was. Each note taken, each text sent off, and each video shot is a piece of resistance, "and when you resist," Boochani contends, "you create something" (Rachwani). Boochani created a piece of art that is embedded in Australia's collective memory. It endures as art, as exposé, and as memorial, and represents a turning point in refugee writing.

## Chapter 4

### Future Home: The Ghosts of Journeys Past, Present, and Future

#### 4.1 “In the first place, we don’t like to be called refugees.”

Hannah Arendt starts her 1943 essay “We Refugees” with a simple line: “In the first place, we don’t like to be called refugees” (264). And yet, in the intervening eighty years, industries have been erected around the word: from Refugee Studies in academia to Refugee Narratives as a genre within publishing to Refugee Care and humanitarianisms enacted by thousands of governmental and non-governmental agencies to the title of this dissertation, *Writing the Refugee*. The word is used with a certain degree of settled uptake, meaning that when I write it, you and I understand it to mean a certain type of individual living precariously and in need of help. In the same essay, Arendt wrote that “we ourselves call each other ‘newcomers’ or ‘immigrants,’” terms that wrote Jews displaced within and outside of Europe during World War II into existence in their new countries. Instead of “refugee,” which evokes the need for a savior to offer a place of refuge, Arendt’s preferred terms attempt an imagination of different forms of human and political belonging to suggest a shared experience that might ease newcomers into their arrivals and altered futures. “Refugee” has sticking power, though, and with each passing year the pejorative imaginary it conjures belies the refuge its bearers hope to receive, the humanity they might be afforded, and their smooth transitions toward settling.

Fifty years after Arendt’s essay, Giorgio Agamben wrote another with the same title. His essay is a conversation across decades and a reflection on Arendt’s analysis that Agamben contends “has not lost any of its currency” (114). He laments that “the refugee should be considered for what he is, that is, nothing less than a border concept that radically calls into question the principles of the nation-state and, at the same time, helps clear the field for a no-

longer-delayable renewal of categories” (117). Agamben decries, after Arendt, the paradox that the very figure who is human in his most naked form and should incarnate the rights of man “*par excellence*” constitutes instead a radical crisis of the concept (116). After spending six years in offshore detention for attempting to seek asylum in Australia, Behrouz Boochani explains what Agamben means when he acknowledges that he “is a refugee and will always be a refugee. [He] has no problem with that. [He does] have a problem with how people refuse to treat you as a human if you are a refugee, with how people reduce you” (Toremans 469). Even apart from external considerations, the label on its own denotes subhuman status. Arendt attempted a renewal of categories, Agamben demands one, but the term “refugee” is controlled by political and cultural entities that then, as now, benefit from calcified understandings of seeking refuge and the burdens those understandings place on refugees to tell their story correctly, which, as I have shown throughout this dissertation, means telling stories listeners want to hear.

At a recent academic conference, I spoke on a panel about this frustrating word that has changed intent and ownership so dramatically since the end of World War II. My talk created a throughline from Arendt and Agamben’s dissatisfaction with the term to today. I also used two other terms that will be familiar to you at this point in my dissertation: the Fourth World and death worlds. The former was uttered by a Somali school teacher after ten years in a refugee camp in Kenya. He despaired of ever getting citizenship or equal human rights after his own country, a member of the Third World, demoted him to its dank sub-basement, the Fourth World, a term he coined from his own experiences. The latter, death worlds, are liminal states envisioned by the Cameroonian historian and political theorist Achilles Mbembe that contain the victims of what he terms “necropolitics,” his supplementary theory to Michel Foucault’s biopolitics that distinguishes the range of administrative modalities in which people are

maintained in a state of living death. Denizens of death worlds, which include people in refugee camps and extraterritorial detention, have “the status of *living dead*,” caught as they are out of time and place with no claim for protection or assistance from sovereign states (Mbembe 40, emphasis in original).

After delivering my paper, the first question for our panel was from an academic in the back row who insisted that these terms I had used were insufficient to describe the process of seeking refuge, that even the term “death worlds” could not contain the depravity of the conditions so many migrating people experience, nor the mental state brought on by living in a place that is no place. His frustration was met by a robust conversation between equally frustrated panelists and audience members in search of better, more apt terms; “a no-longer-delayable renewal of categories,” to use Agamben’s phrase. I wish I could tell you we landed on the perfect way to describe a refugee’s abjection, but we did not. I wish I could tell you that we found some other word that could contain the state of being homeless and stateless, but the very effort pointed us, instead, to the limits of language and the untellable nature of seeking refuge. To compensate, we defaulted to the language of trauma and to Elaine Scarry’s contention in *The Body in Pain* that trauma can only be narrated by omission or active redescription, a loophole of sorts that returned us to the initial challenge of the professor in the back row (Scarry 64).

I left the conference encouraged by the passionate interest of other scholars who want to transform language into action yet dissatisfied by what felt like linguistic anesthesia: Are we deadened from feeling the pain of the refugee crisis because words are lacking? Is something *really* missing, and would another word offer just the right descriptive sensation to capture it if even “death worlds” is inadequate? I don’t think so, and resting in unnarratability feels hollow to me; it subverts a problem (the impossibility of finding a new home) with other issues (the limits

of language and voice) as a means of avoidance—it goes around instead of going through. This chapter aims to go through by using the words available in current novels and stories as an invitation and provocation to consider refugee futures and negotiated identity as it pertains to arrival in a new place. Offered a little differently, this chapter looks to fiction in a reparative mode to identify how writers are imagining refugee arrivals at the level of the individual and at the level of society. Implicit in this work is the question of when—and if—a refugee stops being a refugee and what processes of assimilation are required to transit from “refugee” to “immigrant” to reach a settled sense of arrival and belonging.

At so many reckonings in this dissertation thus far, words fall short, are manipulated, deemed inauthentic, or not spoken by the right voice. The result is a paucity of recent books on refugee experiences even as Lyndsey Stonebridge writes that “the history of placelessness is everybody’s history” (3). The refugee narratives that have been published since 2020, though few in number, make clear that placelessness is also everybody’s future. The UNHCR counts 110 million forcibly displaced people worldwide as of today (“Refugee Data Finder”). That number is expected to reach one billion by 2050 (Vince 209). When one in every eight or nine people on the planet needs refuge, the terms used to separate and demote migrants will be stupefyingly insufficient, as Arendt and Agamben have long determined. Throughout this dissertation, I have quoted Arendt’s overarching contention that “what is unprecedented is not the loss of a home but the impossibility of finding a new one. This [is] a problem not of space but of political organization” (1951, 293). Not only was Arendt’s observation about political organization as true seventy years ago as it is today, organizations outside of politics, even the ones that would seem open to refugee voices, like the American publishing industry, are closed unless the writer is a “real” refugee who can tell their story “well” (Grady). But who is a “real”

refugee and who determines whether or not a story is done well? Boochani argues that “the main-stream media do not want a refugee to speak up like an intellectual, or to challenge the system...[so] in that way there is a silent war against refugees.” (Toremans 459). Rather than a silent war, though, I believe there is a war *for* silence and at this moment, institutions like publishing and mainstream media are winning. It’s no wonder Arendt turned against the term; the label makes breaking out of the death worlds it produces wholly dependent on bureaucratic determinations, political whims, and cultural currents. Those forces perpetuate the stickiness of “refugee” as a negative label and force further questions about which words we use. Would a different term or the “right” language change the precarity of a refugee’s situation? Do labels determine a refugee’s destiny or do the structures of necropolitical governance that produce them and then rationalize their use do that work? I do not think different labels would be a panacea, but I do believe that the words we use and narratives we tell have bearing on the political futures we are able to imagine. Despite the dearth of narratives on the market today, and despite Boochani’s comfort owning the label, current accounts of being a refugee subject are also accounts of necropolitics at work.

By demanding authenticity and veracity from the words in refugee narratives, both fiction and non-fiction, we diffuse the political causes that produce refugees. I suggest we think of refugee narratives more like images subject to understanding in the way Susan Sontag describes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Images, she writes, “cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers. Who caused what the picture shows? Who is responsible? Is it excusable? Was it inevitable? Is there some state of affairs which we have accepted up to now that ought to be challenged? (117). This expanded inquiry encompasses Arendt and Agamben’s concern about

the ecology of the term “refugee” and brings Roger Zetter’s work back to the fore. In Chapter Three, I quoted Zetter’s description of how refugee labels have shifted ownership: until the early 1990s, refugees were categorized based on their distributional needs like food, medical care, and housing, but when more migrants started moving from Global South to Global North, labels multiplied and took on pejorative overtones to reflect political and bureaucratic needs. Terms like “illegal migrant,” “illegal asylum seeker,” “economic or climate migrant,” “illegal alien,” or “overstayer” dominate news reports today and elicit the nationalist venom intended (Zetter 2007, 184). Bearing in mind the shifts Zetter identifies and heeding Sontag’s summons for examinations that are both broad and deep, the narratives under examination in this dissertation tell multiple stories and beg others that are not told: Who caused what this novel describes? Why can’t the author tell his own story? What happens next, after arrival? How long will the criminalization of movement last until the systems that uphold it break? This chapter takes up the latter two questions in an effort to consider what’s next for refugees and how writers are imagining their futures. It attempts the work Arendt and Agamben call for, if not with a renewal of categories, then with a renewal of ideas at the scale of the individual and at the scale of the collective.

In Chapter One, I discuss how Dave Eggers wrote Valentino Deng’s life in Sudan into balance with his life in Atlanta in *What Is the What*. While reviewers focused on Deng’s story of survival in Africa, they largely ignored his story of arrival and bare existence in Atlanta. Chapter Two centers Matthieu Aikens’ flight from Kabul to Athens with his Afghani friend, Omar. Aikens’ voice fills the pages while Omar’s is silenced by the circumstances of seeking refuge even as his desire to reach the West propels the narrative. In each example, being a refugee denotes a representational aporia—you exist and do not exist at the same time, you can speak but

you cannot be heard, you are a human, but you are not treated like one. Yet getting the chance to arrive and assimilate does not immediately repair these reductions and contradictions. What happens to the death world and its inhabitants left behind? Is a newly arrived person fully reconstituted after receiving a resident visa? How do refugees transition into new existences after tragedy or erasure? Viet Thanh Nguyen's short story "Black-Eyed Women" and E. Lily Yu's novel *On Fragile Waves* take up this transitional period that moves from arrival through tentative assimilation and into settling. Both writers use ghosts to animate the split psyche that holds on to traumas of the past while adjusting to spaces of arrival, their ghosts the mark of death worlds that will not dissipate without confrontation. I use their fictions to think about arrival at the level of individuals and intimate relations and explore how both give readers an understanding of the protracted process of repairing the psyche after trauma.

Without losing Sontag's grounding in imagery, the first half of this chapter will consider the two ghosts in Yu and Nguyen's fictions. Both are figures drowned at sea while seeking refuge whose presence keep the living people they are attached to from fully arriving, even after being in Los Angeles for twenty five years, as Nguyen's main character has. The ghosts linger with the living, their presence dampening carpets, bedding, outfits, and the ability of those who see them to settle into their new lives. They complicate "safe" arrivals with varying intensities so that assimilation, whether forced or desired, can only be partial. The ghosts in these two narratives are plainly visible, less scary than heavy, less insistent than reminiscent, yet they are tethered to a time that continually nips at the minds of the characters. When Sontag asks if there is some state of affairs that we have accepted up to now that ought to be challenged, these spectral images offer answers that have less to do with the life left behind and everything to do with the precarity of the journey. Should the attempt to find refuge be so traumatic that arriving

requires a shared existence with PTSD in ghost form? Can refugee writings offer some narrative repair?

By way of an answer, the second half of this chapter engages with two novels that offer images of arrival at the level of the collective. Because they follow individual characters, their work is not cleanly distinguished from the novels of interiority above, but here the scale is societal and communal to portray individuals living and finding ways to thrive within new world orders. Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* and Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* are novels of transition concerned with large-scale arrangements for future social and geographic refugee reception. In *Exit West*, Hamid offers a twist on refugee journeys by replacing them with passages through magical doors. Refugees pay smugglers for access to the doors. Sometimes Hamid's characters know where their door will open and sometimes they do not—for a lesser price, going through a door is a game of roulette. Hamid's main characters repeatedly arrive in cities overflowing with refugees. Their numbers push the receiving governments toward dangerous confrontations because they are unable to manage the megacities made possible by the doors. In London, local police advance to the brink of slaughter; in San Francisco, the sprawl of refugee squatters changes the landscape of the city. These paradigmatic urban shifts raise fears of cities teeming with massive underclasses excluded from formal economies and dangerous because of their numbers and their nimble adaptations to crowded and compressed terrains. However, Hamid's main characters, two young Middle Eastern refugees, find an ordered existence among the chaos and settle into pared-down lives working odd jobs among millions of others in a vast tent city that encompasses Marin County, an idea that is a call to pay attention *and* a glimpse at possibility.

Finally, the science fiction writer and eco-futurist Kim Stanley Robinson, imagines future megacities and refugees amidst a sharp drop in population and worldwide basic income and housing guarantees. His refugee imaginary on a dramatically altered Earth circa 2050 winnows refugee issues to something more akin to concerns of the neighborhood. The new neighbors in his future vision are five Middle Eastern families who have spent decades homeless and stateless in refugee camps. Now settled in a small town in the Swiss Alps known for its nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiments, the families learn first “that it’s best to avoid attention. Part of that means not gathering in groups with other refugees, looking together so dark and strange. *Unheimlich*” (Robinson 549, emphasis in original). With a bit of money and their new permanent residence, two of the families open a restaurant serving Middle Eastern specialties, negotiating the uncanniness of their dark skin one meal at a time. The Syrian matriarch of one of the families declares that although they do not have much money and they are still registered as *ausländer*, or foreigners, they do have dignity, “and this is what I think everyone needs” (Robinson 551). Hamid repairs present refugee realities by eliminating the treacherous journey, Robinson does it by injecting the conditions for restoring dignity. Although they structure differing futures using distinct ideas about the geopolitical realities of sovereignty and bordered nation states, both bring creativity to seemingly impossible problems.

Things have changed for refugees in these two futures to be sure, yet they are still related to problems, “not so much those that caused them to be refugees,” as the anthropologist Cindy Horst bemoans, “but rather the problems they themselves are causing simply by existing” (13). The problem of movement clings to the frameworks of these speculative futures and continually limits the conceptual parameters of those forced into displacement—they are always somewhere they do not belong using up resources they have not funded. Future imaginaries do not (cannot?)

shake the stigma of forced movement, but they do suggest ways people attend to it. Here I consider how Mohsin and Robinson ground identity in places that both bristle at and accommodate movement and migration. The characters in their novels tangle with what constitutes identity: is it a function of who you are, where you are, what you do, who you do it with or, more likely, a combination all of these and more? Using the language of trauma, identity viewed through the refugee lens could be conceived as a version of “the eternally half-other,” a concept Seyla Benhabib (2018, 4) takes up, or a state of “permanent duality,” which Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart discuss (448). Both ideas suggest two ways of being that will never integrate, but these terms have limited utility because refugee narratives, especially those projected into the future, push at the durability of simple binaries. They just do not hold up because at every turn, the authors embed complexity into negotiated identities of both receiving citizens and new arrivals.

To wit, when she is released from a refugee camp in Switzerland, the first thing Robinson’s unnamed Syrian matriarch does is buy a ticket to Damascus; decades earlier she had promised herself she would one day return. But as she reaches her departure date, she no longer wants to go and does not understand her hesitation. She asks readers, “Who can tell the riddle of their own true self? So all right, [I am] a new person. Old but new. I think about what I have now, as this new person in her life, not quite my life, it seems, but I’m trying to get my head around it” (551). Old but new, not quite the self she imagined but no longer compelled to be “of” Syria. Not quite Swiss but somewhere in between, liminal but not detached. By her own admission, she has become a different person in Switzerland to get by, “and more than once. But this new person standing here now is not so bad,” a predicament that Robinson uses to address negotiated assimilation and attitude in place (552). She is, perhaps, a hybrid, a term that I have

landed on often in this dissertation as it relates to refugee narratives that combine two forms in one reckoning. Whether the mode is writing or film, the media I examine here is often fiction and nonfiction (see Dave Eggers' novel that is also an autobiography), poetry and prose (in Behrouz Boochani's lyrical account of offshore detention), overproduction to accentuate minimalism (in Hassan Fazili's film *Midnight Traveler*), and a shared voice, usually a Westerner parsing the refugee's story for the dominant discourse of Western publishing or filmmaking (every book in this dissertation!). This chapter explores hybridization as it manifests in and around individual refugees and causes complexities that involve internal conflicts that take the form of ghosts or external conflicts that force new ideas of what being a citizen of a certain place entails. Yu and Nguyen approach identity at the level of the psyche, Hamid and Robinson at the level of the collective. Taken together, their four fictions offer narrative repair for the act of arrival and the work of settling at different scales that cross and interact throughout.

#### **4.2 The Ghosts of Journeys Past in E. Lily Yu's *On Fragile Waves***

In Chapter Two I wrote about a Somali man stuck in a Kenyan refugee camp who, after his initial interview with immigration agents, grew so desperate waiting for news of resettlement that he forgot who he was. He had to go into the marketplace and ask people to remind him of his name (see page 106). That desperate sense of displacement grew from waiting for something he desired so intensely, it overtook his entire present. An incomplete piece of his imagined future occluded his present and created outward manifestations of *unsettled* feelings that were, perhaps, a precursor to the identity arrangements required upon being *resettled*. But how does one *settle* and can settlement be adequately portrayed in literature? In "We Refugees," Arendt writes of the Jews fleeing Europe that "our identity is changed so frequently that nobody can find out who we actually are" (270). Their efforts to assimilate as perfect German citizens, then

perfect French citizens, then perfect American citizens drove many Jews to suicide, which she describes as “the best and supreme guarantee of human freedom” (268). By Arendt’s reckoning, settling requires the freedom to be oneself and to form a new, though altered, identity of one’s own making, not in someone or some institution’s image. Minus those possibilities, hope can provide temporary sustenance. E. Lily Yu writes in *On Fragile Waves* that hope often does “triple duty as amulet, tonic, and prophylactic” (102). For the Somali man, the possibility of freedom in the United States was prophylactic, it obliterated his present identity, even as he was living it. For Arendt’s Jewish refugees, hope was amulet and tonic until neither were possible within the impossible pressures to be a certain type of citizen. After repeated assimilations that were often contradictory and always unrequited, their present existence was, for some, erased by suicide. Even native Jews in the countries European Jewry fled to required of their new neighbors an unattainable identity, or the lack of one in particular: refugee. Arendt writes that

the mere fact of being a refugee has prevented our mingling with native Jewish society, some exceptions only proving the rule. These unwritten social laws, though never publicly admitted, have the great force of public opinion. And such a silent opinion and practice is more important for our daily lives than all official proclamations of hospitality and goodwill. (1943, 271)

Unwritten social laws that shape public opinion have the power to extenuate the precarious position of new immigrants, thus making the label of refugee linger long beyond arrival. How new arrivals negotiate these social laws offer some clues as to how those who wear the refugee label negotiate settling to avoid obliteration.

In both of their fictions, E. Lily Yu and Viet Thanh Nguyen use ghosts to represent that which is unbearable or unprocessed, those feelings that keep the main characters from navigating

the unwritten social laws of Melbourne, Australia, and Los Angeles. The ghosts in their stories represent acute incompleteness that haunts the characters as they struggle to move into new identities in new locales. The haunting is not frightening or scary; the characters function day to day, but their ghosts obstruct settling by anchoring their psyches to the most traumatic moments of their journey as fleeing refugees. The term ‘anchor’ takes on great significance as the most frightening scenes in each narrative take place at sea and each returning ghost drips with kelp and seawater. Even though the characters have arrived in places that offer the capacity for resettlement, in the lingering presence of their ghosts, the feeling of being settled sits just beyond a gauzy apparition—visible but unattainable. The characters cannot hold on to their journeys *and* arrive—something has to fall away to allow them to become different people in a new place, even people that are “not so bad” (Robinson 552).

In Yu’s *On Fragile Waves*, “the walls between worlds are thin,” which allows Nasima into Firuzeh’s life long after Nasima falls off their smuggler’s boat in a storm at sea (272). But even as Firuzeh matures into her life in Melbourne, the dripping ghost of Nasima will not leave her mind, it has to be cast away. Both just ten years old, both daughters in families with boys, and both tentatively navigating their upended lives as their parents, too, lose the rhythm and culture that bind them to their family roles, Firuzeh and Nasima meet once in a musty compound in Peshawar after fleeing Kabul for better lives in Australia with their families. After a flight to Jakarta with fake Hungarian passports, they meet again on a crowded boat and navigate the dull days playing together, talking to other refugees, and observing the diminishing food. In her brash bossy way, Nasima—while still alive—declares the boredom worse than the circling sharks before squeezing promises from Firuzeh: “Promise me that wherever you go, you’ll stay in touch...Even if we end up on opposite sides of Australia. Write, or call, or send a pigeon or

something...I have you [as my friend]. And I promise you won't get rid of me. Even if you move to the worst place in Australia. Even if you move to Adelaide" (33-34). Nasima's words bind her to Firuzeh even as Firuzeh quietly observes how Nasima injects herself into friendships and conversations without invitation or reciprocation—she is a lonely girl in need of a friend after her two older brothers, the apples of her parents' eyes, went ahead of the family only to find themselves in Australia but hidden and illegally exploited in Perth.

On their sixth day at sea, the girls' boat is caught in a typhoon and the refugees aboard need to batten themselves down into the sides of the boat or risk getting pulled into the water by the waves or the wind. Nasima wriggles free from her mother's protection and is lost—no one sees her go overboard but no one can find her. She is presumed drowned, a terror made worse when their boat is intercepted by the Australian navy and the refugees are put into indefinite detention on the island nation of Nauru, a sister prison for the offshore detention of illegal arrivals to the prison on Manus Island where Behrouz Boochani was detained for six years (see Chapter Three).

In one of the long days of waiting in detention—"weeks or months or centuries later, time flowed thick as honey in the camp"—Nasima's ghost sits on Firuzeh's bunk to check on her friend (123). The ghost pities Firuzeh, bragging that she died quickly while Firuzeh will take ages, then becomes testy, declaring herself "not ready to forgive [Firuzeh] yet" but giving her permission to go back to sleep (62). The interplay between the two girls is complicated as the ghost stakes its claim to Firuzeh in the same way that Nasima bound the two girls in friendship on the boat. The ghost is a piece of Firuzeh's past embedded into her being and she is, for the time, unable to extract herself from it. At one point, Firuzeh asks if Nasima's ghost came just to gloat about dying, and directs her, instead, to go haunt her parents. Nasima confesses that she

tried but they did not see her. In life as in death, she laments, she is invisible. She was, she tells Firuzeh, “a daughter-shaped space in the universe. You feed it. You put shoes and dresses on it. You raise it properly, like a sheep, so you can take it to market someday. But you don’t see her...not really. Not the way you see your sons. Who are worth something. Who’ll work someday” (62). When Firuzeh asks why she can see Nasima, Nasima responds: “You saw through [my] bullshit” (62). Visibility is attached to understanding between the girls: I understand you and you understand me, we see each other for who we are. For Firuzeh, Nasima’s ghost is a comfort and a nuisance for similar reasons: they have the ability to see each other’s truths in a world that disappears them. Nasima can only situate herself in the “daughter-shaped space” of the past; Firuzeh must adjust herself to invisibility time and again in the endless present of detention where she is unseen by the world, by Australia, and by her parents. As such, she exists in a layered death world out of time and place. Hanging on to a ghost, even one as annoying as Nasima, keeps her afloat.

Nasima’s ghost appears again when Firuzeh’s family starts fraying; her parents turn to pills to manage their despair of ever leaving Nauru and so bear their imprisonment in sleep. They are drugged and empty, no longer cognizant of their children, which leaves Nasima’s ghost to remark to Firuzeh that she, too, is like a ghost because her parents do not see or hear her—the status of living and dead defined not by physical presence but by whether or not that presence is seen by others. Nasima’s ghost is provocative, she wants to know if no one sees you, are you alive? Firuzeh keeps Nasima alive by thinking about her; Firuzeh, though, feels like she is dying since she is no longer a presence to her parents and she and her younger brother are constantly at odds, each dealing with their own demons of detention and parental disinterest.

When Firuzeh's family gets a temporary protection visa (TPV) to reside in Melbourne and life starts to find an even keel, she tries to push Nasima's ghost away, but it resists. It insists that it is keeping Firuzeh's nightmares at bay, a curiously conceived blockade that positions the ghost of a drowned friend as Firuzeh's protection from memories of fleeing Kabul and detention, as if one bad thing could keep all the others at bay. Nasima's ghost insists it is the only real thing in Firuzeh's life: "Am I real. Firuzeh?" asks Nasima. No answer. "Tell me. Say that I'm real," insists Nasima (187). And even though Firuzeh feels a wet spot on her bed, she will not respond, somehow sensing that validating the ghost will negate her future possibilities. Their argument is interrupted by the presence of her younger brother, Nour, with whom she is becoming closer to as her parents fight about bills and the impending expiration of their TPV. Nasima's ghost has been an imaginary friend, a necessity when Firuzeh felt ethereal and unable to find firm grounding in real and unreal, present or disappeared. But as Firuzeh gains confidence in her school friendships and as she and her brother warm to each other's shared unsettling, the ghost recedes, no longer needed. During a school field trip to a local aquarium, Firuzeh sees her reflection in the glass of an underwater exhibit at first as Nasima's reflection, with "Mouth like nightmares [and] eyes lamped with hunger" (193). With a blink she sees herself again, but with new confidence and a stronger desire not to live in the reflection of the drowned girl who does not want to be forgotten.

Nasima's presence in and out of Firuzeh's life creates a tension between the past and present by constantly nagging Firuzeh to remember and construct her life around memories, the things the ghost swears compose a nightmare and are truly real. A nightmare is made, Nasima's ghost contends, when "you put bits of stories together to make a home or a family. Some you're given, and some you make by living. A nightmare is when the ugliest, most ferocious pieces

clump together and go hunting for other stories to eat” (201). So defined, Firuzeh realizes that rather than keeping her nightmares at bay, Nasima’s ghost is keeping them alive to erase or forestall Firuzeh’s ability to establish herself in the present. When Firuzeh figures out that the ghost is all about memory and, moreover, memories that want to eat the present, she knows that to exist in Melbourne, she must find a way to release Nasima’s ghost.

Small repairs and new stories knit Firuzeh’s Australian life into place. Her father is killed in an accident, but the death gives the family a reprieve from deportation. As she nurses her mother through the grief, her relationships with both her mother and her brother deepen—she no longer needs Nasima’s ghost. To banish it, she must bid it go three times, mimicking a right reserved only for men who want to end Muslim marriages and cementing her presence beyond the “daughter-shaped space.” The absence of the ghost leaves her feeling empty, but she learns how to refill her empty spaces by joining with her brother to be a lifegiving presence for their mother and negotiating her school friendships through fits and starts. With a fullness of relationships, she says her final goodbyes in a dream. Nasima is waiting in the dream, her personality as big as ever when she confronts Firuzeh for the first time after being cast away: “Bitch don’t say you’ve forgotten me” (271). Her father is also in the dream astride a horse like the Persian hero of myth, Rostam. This time, Firuzeh extracts promises, from her father to love Nasima like a daughter and from Nasima to make sure her father is never alone. When Firuzeh awakes with “seawater drying on her face” she knows she has found a way to keep the memories of her refugee past from puncturing her Australian present (273).

Nasima’s ghost weights Firuzeh down with her past trauma and even as a child, she has to figure out how to manage it within herself and within the unwritten social laws that govern public opinion, or more challenging, the social laws that govern the opinions of middle school

girls. How does a child negotiate the harrowing experiences of being a refugee while hanging out with friends and being chill? Yu's ghostly imaginings enliven Robert Jay Lifton's contention that "trauma creates a second self [and the struggle in recovery] is to reconstitute the second self into the single self, [to] reintegrate itself" (Caruth 2014, 11-12). This doubling in the service of survival is part of a pattern in refugee narratives. One person or one character cannot contain the trauma of the refugee experience; to move forward there must be adaptations of sorts. Many of the other narratives in this dissertation also form one whole by combining disparate pieces: fiction and nonfiction, prose and poetry, overproduction to create an appearance of a rough cut. Each piece is insufficient without the addition of the other and the whole is still an approximation but, as part of a literary imagination, the product packaged for Western readers creates conditions for understanding how refugees negotiate their existence long after they arrive. Seeking refuge and negotiating arrival defy categorization and call upon a range of narrative techniques to approximate the experience. Within Yu's novel, Firuzeh is both dead and alive, Nasima's ghost a second self formed to manage the unnarratable and unrepresentable. When Firuzeh casts the ghost away and, in the end, holds it to an important job of accompanying her father, she is carving out some autonomy and freedom for herself. Instead of assembling bits of stories in a "daughter-shaped space," she ends the novel narrating from her newfound presence (62). I hesitate to call it a happy ending because her story is full of tragedy, but free of her ghosts, Firuzeh has the freedom to determine her own future, albeit within the confines of the Australian state.

#### **4.3 The Haunted Self**

The unnamed main character in Viet Thanh Nguyen's short story, "Black-Eyed Women," has a different problem: she needs the ghost of her brother, drowned twenty-five years earlier, to

release her from the ghostly existence her parents encouraged, and she lived into. Nguyen's story contains a palimpsest of ghosts, each layer of the character's life a blank space open for her further disappearance. Long an American citizen in Los Angeles with an established career, she has been lashed to her experience of seeking refuge for a quarter of a century and has formed a life to accommodate the trauma that encases her. She is a ghostwriter currently writing a book for the sole survivor of a plane crash that killed 173 people, including the survivor's wife and two children. The survivor is a ghost in his own skin who can't imagine why he lived and the others did not. His survivor's guilt mirrors the guilt of the ghostwriter, perhaps one of the reasons she slides so easily into the profession. She "lives together politely" with her mother, the two of them alone after her father died a few years ago as a changed man who never recovered from the events on their refugee boat (3). A polite coexistence is what remains between the two women, and though her chatty mother shares Vietnamese ghost stories and plenty of gossip, both still live in the shadow of the moment twenty-five years prior when pirates boarded the boat they were on after fleeing Vietnam. The pirates took everything valuable from the boat people, including their girls. Thinking quickly, the ghostwriter's brother ripped his t-shirt so she could bind her chest and escape notice. His plan almost worked until one of the pirates thought she was an overly pretty boy. When her brother protested, the pirate cracked his head open with the butt of a gun, then raped the ghostwriter in front of her parents and everyone else on the boat. The sun beat into her eyes as she was being raped. Since then, she writes, "I avoid day and sun," shrinking into a nighttime existence in the basement of her home and never speaking of the day that ended when they had to push her dead brother's body overboard (16).

The mother encourages her daughter's disappearance; she thinks being invisible is the only way to stay alive. When the daughter says she would not mind being acknowledged in

some of the books she writes, her mother tells her a story of a Vietnamese reporter who wrote a story claiming the government tortured people in prison. The moral? “The government [did] to him exactly what he said they did to others. They send him away and no one ever sees him again. That’s what happens to writers who put their names on things” (1). The ghostwriter’s childhood is full of cautionary stories: Don’t open the door to people you don’t know. Don’t be like the neighbors down the street. Don’t, don’t, don’t. The lesson the ghostwriter grew up with was that she did not fit in, that this was not her country, and that “we did not belong here. In a country “where possessions count for everything, we had no belongings except our stories” (7). Yet the ghostwriter only tells other people’s stories and so maintains her nameless nighttime existence until the dripping presence of her brother knocks on her bedroom door, appearing exactly as he did when he died a head taller than her twenty five years ago at fifteen years old.

His presence is strikingly anachronistic for her and looking down on him, she imagines all that she could have been or thinks she should be: shorter, more exuberant, more caring, better with children or with any relationship lasting more than one night. He manifests everything she might have been if not for that terrible day. Instead of engaging with her brother, she bolts to find her mother but when they return, he is gone, the only things left his wet clothes that she had exchanged for a dry set, as if his outer appearance mattered. And yet her mother goes shopping for new, warm clothes to give him when he comes back, annoyed with her daughter for giving him just a t-shirt and shorts, and admonishing that “he can’t be out wandering in the cold with what you gave him, like a homeless person or some illegal immigrant” (11). Her son’s presence a reminder of all the external things necessary to appear to fit in, to denote arrival.

When the ghost returns, the ghostwriter asks why he has come back:

“I haven’t come back,” he said. “I’ve come here.”

You haven't left this world yet?"

He nodded.

"Why not?"

Again he was silent. Finally he said, "Why do you think?"

I looked away. "I tried to forget."

"But you haven't."

"I can't." (13-14)

For the ghostwriter, her brother's ghost is the accumulation of past events that she has not reckoned with, her trauma having become a living thing she must feed by disappearing into her parent's fears and her own self-imposed invisibility. Yu and Nguyen both write about the ghosts of another time that haunt the refugee journey long after arrival. For Firuzeh, Nasima's ghost is a crutch, a presence to help her when she is unmoored. For the ghostwriter, her brother's ghost is the presence that keeps life out. The ghost tells her as much: "'You died too,' he said. 'You just don't know it'" (17).

This moment is a turn in the story, it is the moment the ghostwriter decides to come alive. She cries for her brother and the years they never had together; she cries for her parents and all the silent years they "lived together politely" (3). But when she turns for a tissue, her brother's ghost disappears. "He came and said all he wanted to say" instructs her mother (19). But the ghostwriter has not said all she needs to say and forces her talkative mother into the one conversation she does not want to have, the one about "the ghosts of the refugees and the ghosts of the pirates, the ghost of the boat watching us with those eyes that never closed, even the ghost of the girl I once was, the only ghosts [her] mother feared" (20). All of these unspoken memories obliterate other possibilities for mother and daughter by extending the temporal prison

of the refugee category. Although they have arrived and have what seems like a successful American life, they are still refugees, still frightened and unsettled and unable to move out of their journey's shadow. Her brother's ghost arrives to release them so he, too, can be released. Arendt writes that "in order to rebuild one's life one has to be strong and optimistic. So we are very optimistic" (264). But at what cost? That fake optimism that requires refugees "to forget more efficiently" cannot eliminate or even dilute the trauma of the past (Arendt 265). Within the capaciousness of fiction, Nguyen reveals the second self as a ghostly presence that haunts not with vengeance or mayhem but with quiet insistence that keeps the traumatic journey from giving way to a settled arrival.

When the story concludes, the ghostwriter embarks on a project under her own name: a collection of ghost stories. Ghosts, she writes, "are pallid creatures more frightened of us than we are of them, [which] is why we must seek them out," an invocation I read as an invitation to think more deeply about the duration of the refugee category and its interplay with assimilation and resettlement (21). The ghosts she seeks out and confronts—of her brother, her journey, the pirates, the others on the boat—are different from the ones she writes. She intends to fill her new book with stories adapted from the ones her mother has told her over the course of their life together. The effort represents change and settling as she warms to previously inaccessible pieces of her Vietnamese past to form her American future. Arendt stipulates that "refugees driven from country to country represent the vanguard of their peoples—if they keep their identity" (274). By writing a new book under her own name and filling it with Vietnamese ghost stories that do not frighten the living but speak to them or reassure them in some way, the ghostwriter joins the vanguard. Her publishing agent likes the pivot— "Ghost stories?" [The agent's] tone was approving. 'I can sell that. People love being frightened'"—but the ghostwriter

has no interest in writing about ghosts that terrify the living (19). Those are ghosts of bad deaths, like the ghost of her brother, or the ghosts of centuries of invaders who tried to conquer Vietnam. The “black-eyed women” of the story’s title are from the narrator’s childhood in Vietnam, the old crones of the village who tell stories about the country’s ghostly residents who will never return home. Those residents stuck in the country include “the upper half of a Korean lieutenant, launched by a mine into the branches of a rubber tree; a scalped black American floating in the creek not far from his downed helicopter...and a decapitated Japanese private groping through cassava shrubbery for his head” (4). These ghosts, like her brother’s, are doomed to remain in place until released by the living, but they are not the ghosts she intends for her new book. Instead, her mother’s stories are filled with ghosts of people who die surrounded by family, then reappear to their loved ones in another city or country and take their leave with a smile or a kiss; a “ghost simply making the rounds to say farewell” (4). By rejecting her agent’s expectation, she writes her Vietnamese identity into existence and meets Arendt’s caution. She also gives the ghosts an airing and in doing so, removes their scariness in death and in life as they come to stand in for fear of foreign others, especially current arriving refugees.

Yu and Nguyen focus on the trauma of the refugee journey’s aftermath, when people are no longer refugees, but neither are they citizens at ease in their new locale, as if that settling was simply a matter of location. Their efforts round out the scope of this dissertation to show that being a refugee lasts deep into one’s arrival. To describe the rough transition from arriving to settling, Vinh Nguyen coins a phrase, “Refugeetude,” and defines it as a feeling that is “crucially tied to relational politics—ways of knowing and being with others—that might emerge within and against a global refugee regime that continually produces, manages, and purports to solve the problem of forced migration” (110). Refugee, then, as both Arendt and Agamben argue in their

essays, is much more than a label that denotes legal status; it is a sense that supersedes perceived temporality and lingers in relationality between closest relations, strangers, individuals, and the states absorbing them. Nguyen's idea of "refugeetude" critically reconstitutes the label by giving it some attitude and, hence, its bearer some agency and leeway in understanding the "chasm between the definition of being a refugee and how it is experienced" (114). I am particularly drawn to Nguyen's redefinition because it can be accessed in different registers of performativity, as when Firuzeh thrice banishes Nasima's ghost or when the ghostwriter gives her scared and gentle ghost a proper airing. Their varied levels of self-confidence and comfort in place facilitate the ability to be adept with memory. Trauma creates a fracture that the characters here attend to with second selves that present as ghosts. As they heal by slowly gaining confidence and assimilating in degrees, the ghosts recede and the selves that remain are changed, markedly infused with refugeetude that honors past trauma without repeatedly succumbing to it or existing in its dark shadow.

Yu and Nguyen's narratives partially subvert the ghost trope in literature by conjuring benevolent ghosts who return to help lay the past to rest. Beyond being second selves for the characters, they also serve as reflections and reminders of unfinished or unpalatable business for readers. Writing in *The New York Times* about a spate of ghost stories in literature in 2018, Nguyen's *The Refugees* included, Parul Sehgal argues that "ghost stories are never just reflections. They are social critiques camouflaged with cobwebs; the past clamoring for redress." Yu and Nguyen's ghosts, covered with seaweed instead of cobwebs, are barely past. Within recent literature, they reveal the present clamoring for attention to illuminate the ways the refugee journey and its labels adhere to its bearers long after they have transitioned out of its legal status. The ghosts here are marked by death at sea, a reminder of the thousands lost in the

Mediterranean and other bodies of water that serve as moats for receiving countries. If ghosts are the images that stick with readers, they are, per Sontag, an invitation to attend to refugee journeys, to ask what conditions are in place that force their traumas to haunt people on the move decades after arrival.

#### **4.4 Temporality and Possibility in *Exit West***

Yu and Nguyen capture the sense of a forever journey that differs from the Protracted Refugee Situations I discussed in Chapter One. Protracted refugee situations are those in which people find themselves in long-lasting states of limbo like, for example, Palestinians who have been in camps for more than sixty years or residents of sprawling camps in Kenya who have known no other home for generations. They are “officially” designated refugees but there are three to four times as many others who are unclassified and unprotected, migrants who face hurdles to arrival even if they do, indeed, arrive. And so I extend the questions this chapter looks to fiction to wrestle with: what does it mean to arrive and how do new arrivals settle, settling being the more important of the two since arriving offers no guarantee of it?

In interviews I have done with recent arrivals to the United States—not fiction at all—arriving is often as challenging or even more so than the journey, especially when newcomers find out that their lives here are not like the American lives they watch on television.<sup>4</sup> Knowing English is critical. Saba, who came to Boston from Eritrea, told me that speaking English is like knowing two languages: English and confidence. While she slowly learned English, she worked nights in a meat processing plant in Portland, Maine, not the Western life she envisioned from war-torn Asmara. Nafisa came from Afghanistan and initially went to Iowa because rent was

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<sup>4</sup> These names and details come from a series of interviews I did as a Barclay Simpson Scholar in Public Fellow during Summer 2023. The interviews were done in person, over the phone, and via zoom to understand need from the perspective of new immigrants rather than donor agencies.

cheap. But without a car, she couldn't get to English classes, and with no other Afghans around, she and her kids were lonely. After a difficult year of scraping by alone, she came to Seattle, for movement and companionship. Svitlana from Ukraine was relieved by the services offered in King County, but without childcare for her 3-year old or adequate English to make phone calls, she could not take advantage of them. She did, however, get an apartment through a Ukrainian Facebook group. She is one of the lucky ones. At the moment, I am teaching English to two young men from Angola sleeping rough outside of a church in south Seattle that has become a refuge for migrants, but sleeping outdoors in the cold and rain of the Seattle winter is an arrival and little else. Coupled with bureaucratic hurdles, these material challenges allow no space for settling.

The refugee distinction has porous temporality: one is not an "official" refugee until entering into a camp or being legally granted the status from outside of the United States, but the effort required to get to that position is extensive and often results in periods of uncertainty and lack that can last decades. Once in the country, new arrivals can apply for asylum but that is a fraught process with multiplying hurdles. A recent *Seattle Times* news article about the overwhelmed church succinctly reports the process required to apply:

To secure asylum, [immigrants] need to be granted the status by an immigration judge or by an asylum officer. To have the best shot at winning their case, they need legal representation. To afford a lawyer, and housing in the meantime, they need money. To earn money, they need a job. To get a job, they need a work permit. To receive a work permit, they must file an application for work authorization. To get work authorization, they must wait about six months after submitting an asylum application. To complete the lengthy and detailed

asylum application, they must wait for volunteer attorneys, paralegals and interpreters to visit the church—or file in English on their own and risk making minor errors or introducing inconsistencies that jeopardize their case.

Even after all that, the process requires immense patience, as the courts and legal system has become overwhelmed with cases. As of September 2023, there are at least more than 2 million pending asylum applications in the United States. Last year, the average backlog wait time from case filing to hearing before an immigration court judge was about 4 years, according to Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse at Syracuse University. (Yoon-Hendricks)

I use this lengthy quote to illustrate the challenges newcomers face. Without a drop of blood, bureaucracy can be injurious, perhaps exactly as intended. Bureaucratic hurdles and backlogs institutionalize the precarity that NGOs are publicly and privately funded to eradicate, or at least lessen. The result is a perpetual loop of need that forestalls freedom by restricting access to capital *and* social standing.

With faceless ease, bureaucracy becomes a tool of discrimination for refugees seeking arrival since, Arendt writes, “passports or birth certificates, and sometimes even tax receipts, are no longer formal papers but matters of social distinction” (273). By limiting access to these documents, government also limits social freedoms. Cognizant of these material and bureaucratic limitations, and the challenges required to settle, Mohsin Hamid and Kim Stanley Robinson offer narrative fixes at the level of the collective in their speculative fiction. Even though the futures they imagine differ, both address belonging and unbelonging and what constitutes freedom, particularly freedom of movement. Each book takes on two terms that have anchored this chapter—refugee and death worlds—and reconsiders the conditions of resettlement

that give the terms such pejorative contexts. The freedom of movement both authors design does not repair migration—it is still happening all over their future worlds. Instead, they rework the discrimination and bureaucracy surrounding it, ushering the denizens of their imagined tomorrows into arrivals that are no longer death worlds as Mbembe conceived them.

Accordingly, those who move are no longer the walking dead because they can move again, and they can decide for themselves where they want to go—movement is unrestricted in Hamid’s *Exit West*, rendering moot the documents Arendt identifies as discriminatory and limiting above. In Robinson’s novel *The Ministry for the Future*, every person on the planet is entitled to a home and a guaranteed income, possibly rendering moot much of the need or desire to migrate.

Both books wrestle with the inevitability of migration due to climate change or war, inevitabilities taken right out of newspaper headlines over the last thirty years as migration from Global South to Global North has increased, even though 75% of migrating people move within the Global South. Moves away from unstable governments and extreme poverty have increased as have climate disasters and climate changes that force people to migrate away from resource scarcity. As people arrive, pressed by rising seas that destroy arable land or drought that turns it to dust, what will the nations of plenty do? In 2016, the former president of the Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed, posed a similar scenario to wealthy nations about the stark reality of rising sea levels on island nations: “You can drastically reduce your greenhouse gas emissions so that the seas do not rise so much. Or when we show up on your shores in our boats, you can let us in. Or when we show up on your shores in our boats, you can shoot us. You pick” (Frankel). Hamid takes up this hypothetical choice in *Exit West* after his main characters, Saeed and Nadia, a young couple from an unnamed war-torn city in the Middle East, journey through a magical door from Mykonos to London, specifically, to a mansion in which they commandeer the ultimate

luxury: a room of their own with a bathroom and hot running water. Hamid writes that “all over London houses and parks and disused lots were being peopled in this way...it seemed the more empty a space in the city the more it attracted squatters, with unoccupied mansions...particularly hard-hit, their absentee owners often discovering the bad news too late to intervene” (129). Over the course of a weekend, Saeed and Nadia’s mansion fills up, mostly with Nigerians who also take up residence in the mansion next door. Within a week, millions more migrants from the Global South in every shade of brown pour through the magical doors into the city’s empty spaces.

Their arrival stokes native fear and in short order the formerly posh neighborhoods of Kensington and Chelsea are cordoned off and turned dark. The area is cut off from electricity, water, and internet by city agencies— “communication and connectivity also being a purview of the west”—and encircled by the British military and heavily armed militias (108). Hamid addresses excess and connectivity in this tense showdown by incorporating Western claims of housing shortages. Are there shortages or are there millions of second, third, and fourth homes sitting empty as investment properties? He also reveals the tenuousness of connection, something well known to Nadia and Saeed who had their cell service cut multiple times in their home city as war between the army and insurgents flared around them. Nadia knew that “a mobile phone could be a fickle connection, its signal thought in normal circumstances to be like the sunlight or the moonlight, but in actuality capable of an instant and endless eclipse,” connectivity another freedom that can be plucked away any moment (140). As London tightens its grip on their area, Nadia and Saeed have déjà vu all over again—the deprivations and workarounds required to navigate “dark London” almost the same as those required when their home city fell into warring chaos, but without some of the smaller luxuries (146).

When they first arrive, Nadia takes advantage of the bathroom, locking the door for privacy to wash away weeks of accumulated grime from their journey. She indulges in the hot water, the pine and lavender soaps stocked up by the absentee owners, and the towels, “towels so plush and fine that when she at last emerged she felt like a princess using them, or at least like the daughter of a dictator who was willing to kill without mercy in order for his children to pamper themselves with cotton such as this” (125). Through a towel, a small and insignificant part of life, Hamid questions the price of luxury, pairing the desire for such towels against the price they exact in labor and resources and layering the way access to them is rationed by (merciless) power. What else?, Hamid seems to ask. What else is it that we readers consume without thought to provenance or apportionment? He writes that Nadia’s shower was “for her not about frivolity, it was about the essential, about being human, living as a human being, reminding oneself of what one was, and so it mattered” (126). Lack of water, lack of power, lack of connection, each removal an attempt by London’s city government to restrict pieces of the migrants’ humanity, strategies that would make killing them later less criminal.

The narrative, though, sticks tight to Saeed and Nadia and their increasing fear as resources dwindle and the British military closes in tighter. The migrants, armed with pots and pans and a few guns that have come through the magical doors, brace for a massacre. When Saeed wonders if the natives will really kill them, Nadia reasons that

...the natives [are] so frightened that they could do anything.

“I can understand it,” she said. Imagine if you lived here. And millions of people from all over the world suddenly arrived.”

“Millions arrived in our country,” Saeed replied. “When there were wars nearby.”

“That was different. Our country was poor. We didn’t feel we had as much to lose.” (164)

Hamid uses their brief exchange to consider the stakes of immigration, but as he has set up the book’s progression, he also forces an examination of consumption disparities and what could be lost: Access to plush towels? Multiple homes? Empty spaces just in case? Any sort of exceptionalism in being “native,” a term that resides in different loci throughout the novel?

When the London confrontation reaches its apex, days pass, nothing happens, the military backs down. Hamid offers no definitive reason for the step back from the brink, only suggestions. Perhaps the British did not have it in them “to do what needed to be done, to corral and bloody and where necessary slaughter the migrants” (166). Maybe the British capitulated to inevitability: the doors can be closed, but for each one that shuts more open, and with swifter frequency. And maybe still, he offers that the British understood “that the denial of coexistence would have required one party to cease to exist, and the extinguishing party too would have been transformed in the process, and too many native parents would not have been able to look their children in the eye, to speak with head held high of what their generation had done” (166). For readers imagining new futures and, by extension, elaborating new ideas of collective identity, each one of these suggestions is rooted into today’s refugee crises. Is there a way to stop flows of migrants without violence? When considering the suggestions Hamid offers, the answer is no. The magical doors offer passage across international borders at the speed of technology rendering useless border policing, quotas, or restrictions. Hamid’s conceit is that there is no way to make an impenetrable border; claiming one or the power to offer it is folly. The futurity in his fiction is imagining the moment in time when the number of migrants overwhelms the protections put in place. What then? Shoot? Corral? Bloody? Slaughter? Every one of these

inevitably has been enacted: Saudi Arabian forces have shot and slaughtered Ethiopians fleeing war (Polgreen). Egyptian forces have slaughtered protesting Sudanese (Whitaker). Millions are corralled in refugee camps worldwide and in dangerous border towns, particularly at America's southern border with Mexico. Israel is waging war against the existence of Palestinians as I write, and an entire population is being corralled, bloodied, and slaughtered, violence that will mark the "extinguishing party" for generations. Without saying so directly, Hamid proceeds with a foregone conclusion: these are not solutions.

The first durable solution he imagines is a massive project in a former greenbelt around London called the "London Halo" (169). He describes the whole planet on the move over one summer, with much of the Global South headed to the Global North or to other southern locales, some northerners moving further north, and some heading south. Halos, satellites, and constellations start springing up around cities all over the world, most offering some version of "forty meters and a pipe: a home on forty squarer meters of land and a connection to all the utilities of modernity" (170). All also offer constant scrutiny "under the drone-crossed sky and in the invisible network of surveillance that radiate[s] out from [each person's] phone, recording and capturing and logging everything," the *quid pro quo* of modernity being an illusion of privacy (188). Through tapered time taxes, in which a portion of the income of those newly arrived is collected as a tax and goes out as a subsidy to those who have been there for decades, each year lessening and building toward future subsidies for old age, housing is available to everyone who needs it. Although disruptions and conflict persist, "existence went on in tolerable safety" (170). Hamid's spare prose focuses on housing, connectivity, and freedom of movement, even if that movement is constantly surveilled, and his doors offer glimpses for possibilities for

both his characters and his readers. Readers can see a future that is not perfect but may be possible. Nadia and Saeed also see possibility.

At work in one of the London Halo's labor camps, their positions elevated because of their English fluency, Nadia decides that outer suburbia does not suit her. Together, she and Saeed pass through another door to Marin County, an overwhelmingly poor shanty city assembled on the hills outside of San Francisco. They fashion a shack out of corrugated metal and packing crates—an earthquake-proof design, according to the neighbors—get good wireless signals, purchase a solar powered battery, erect a rainwater catchment system, and use a discarded bench seat from an old car as a couch. The result, Hamid writes, “is not quite as rough, nor as cut off, as otherwise it might have been” (194). The hills teem with a mix of “intermittent[ly] optimistic” people because Marin is less violent than the places many of them have fled plus the views of the Pacific Ocean offer a constant reminder of movement and possibility (194). There is a collective spirit in Marin, which leads the residents to institute a plebiscite movement advocating for one person/one vote regardless of the person's country of origin. Hamid offers experimental governance and new forms of being and identity that, while nascent and tentative, find temporary purchase at different stages of communal development.

Each person Saeed and Nadia brush up against seems to be reborn, testing new forms of settling detached from ideas of nativity that equate birth rites with the right to belong. Hamid writes that migrating is “like dying and being born,” a hopeful position that allows each new arrival in Marin to claim status with nothing more than their presence (104). He pairs that natal belonging with the pain of leaving—movement may be easy but it is not devoid of consequence. When describing Saeed and Nadia's desolation over leaving Saeed's father in their dangerous home city, his narrator contends that “that is the way of things, for when we migrate, we murder

from our lives those we leave behind” (98). This evocation of violence—some of the only violence in the book—pairs pain and possibility, it also demands a new orientation from the reader: without the violence and trauma of the refugee journey, the part that is usually spectacularized in media accounts and in so many of the writings under examination here, connection through “normal” modes of sympathy is no longer available. Saeed and Nadia do not need saving with things or money, the kind of sympathy that perpetuates asymmetrical relationships. Instead, they are in search of the place to belong, to find acceptance and connection and to collapse the distance between “us” and “them.” Hamid suggests a universal sentiment in sympathy’s place, a positive and interested inclination toward the other as an active participant in shared governance and opportunity creation based on their collective situation, something that might be possible in a future imaginary, less so in present reality.

As Saeed and Nadia settle into new jobs and living arrangements and eventually drift away from each other, Hamid carries the reader down the California coast to Palo Alto, to an elderly woman from an old California family who has lived in the same house for her entire life, a house that now makes her a very wealthy woman on paper. Her granddaughter visits weekly, a welcome presence in every way but also baffling to the old woman as the granddaughter shares many of her features but looks like she was born in China—the intermingling of cultures visible in her old California lineage, which disrupt notions of being native to a place. Where once the old woman knew everyone on her street, now she knows no one and no longer tries,

for people bought and sold houses the way they bought and sold stocks, and every year someone was moving out and someone was moving in, and now all these doors from who knows where were opening, and all sorts of strange people were around, people who looked more at home than she was...and when she went out it

seemed to her that she too had migrated, that everyone migrates, even if we stay in the same houses our whole lives, because we can't help it.

We are all migrants through time. (209)

Through the old woman, Hamid radiates the condition of migration—we all do it in one way or another—and while universalizing the process might democratize its application, there is, in the present, a slippage of experience necessary to ingest such a conceit. My comfortable migration through time is not the same as another's flight out of chaos in Haiti, through the treacherous Darien Gap, and up to America's dangerous southern border. General freedom of movement and conditions for non-traumatic journeys that do not produce people desperate for refuge, which Hamid conjures with his magic doors, must exist in some more realistic form before the shared experience of migration is just ordinary. The hope for such a time is embedded into this fiction, for the doors make migration easy and commonplace so the story is less about the journey and more about the possibilities present on arrival.

This leaves the current figure of the refugee caught in limbo—either their story is traumatic and induces significant sympathy or it is unexceptional, maybe only a little bloody, like, well, birth, as is the case in *Exit West*. Because there is no traumatic journey, Saeed and Nadia's voices and subjectivity, rather than suffering and violence, are at the center of a narrative. They are two thoughtful young people, gentle with each other, but eager to gulp life. They are sexual and matter of fact, and, ultimately, Saeed is more comfortable with tradition and family and Nadia is more adventurous and open to experimental experiences. Can this be a worthwhile refugee narrative without the spectacularizing readers have come to know? Yogita Goyal argues that by rendering ordinary the experience of migration, too much is lost. "Caught between the banal and the spectacular, the figure of the refugee," she writes, "either enables

national fantasies to reconstitute themselves in sentimental fashion or is rendered extraordinary and exceptional, marking an unresolvable crisis” (253). Although I believe Hamid is trying to narratively resolve the crisis Goyal laments, she takes him to task for imagining doors that detach refugees from colonial pasts and current wars who arrive as “apparition[s] with no history, demanding hospitality from unwilling host countries” (254). And yet the magical doors resolve problems, too; they remove treacherous journeys and reconstitute choice. Goyal criticizes Hamid because he does not acknowledge the failure of nation-states nor does he make clear whether or not they have a place in futures that imagine freedom of movement, but I am conflicted by her demands and their utility within speculative fiction. Hamid is imagining a new future and inspiring readers to get there. Through Nadia and Saeed, he models ways of being citizens of a place—different engagements are required of them in their unnamed city, in London, and in Marin where the populace experiments with alternative government and varied modes of representation. Martha Nussbaum writes that “the literary imagination is an essential part of both the theory and the practice of citizenship” (52). In this novel about possible futures, especially with its magical doors, readers’ imaginations are also stoked. What if people could move freely? Will that turn nations in on themselves or inspire new ways of belonging and settling?

#### **4.5 Climate Catastrophe and Resolution in a Utopian Future**

In *The Ministry for the Future*, Kim Stanley Robinson does all the work Goyal sees as missing in *Exit West* but his conclusions regarding nation states are not what she might prefer. Nevertheless, he offers a vision for the future built on the foundations of the present. His odd novel takes place in the not so distant future. It contains news reports, meeting minutes, position papers, scientific studies, and prose poetry loosely bound by a narrative that centers the world’s

current Minister for the Future, Mary Murphy. There is nothing magical involved, in fact, the sheer ordinariness of the extraordinary weather events that drive the novel—it begins with a heat wave in India that kills twenty million people in one week—make everything that happens within feel eerily prescient, especially after the global heat waves of Summer 2023. Robinson’s main focus is climate but because climate change and climate disasters are the main causes of migration, refugees and what to do about them pepper the novel.

One refugee in particular, the Syrian matriarch I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, narrates a series of chapters that start with her arrival by train from Austria to Switzerland, the image reminiscent of trains used to transport Jews to concentration camps during WWII. She is with hundreds of refugees who have been told nothing about their destination or duration of travel but have been penned and herded from place to place then strip searched and scanned like animals for seven months since their arrival in Europe, the indignation more cutting in orderly lawful Switzerland. “The whole thing was dehumanizing,” she laments, “and of course this was not the first time it had happened, refugees are by definition less than human, having lost their homes, but perhaps it was some kind of last straw” (143). Furious at their treatment and lack of information, the refugees charge the Swiss police after they are instructed to get back on the trains, then set fire to the border buildings. The police fire back with rubber bullets, killing six refugees, a number far less than what the woman expected given the desperate ferocity of the attack. She describes how she felt in the moment, “of lashing out irregardless, of not caring whether I lived or died, of just wanting to maximize damage wherever I could...I wanted the world to suffer like we had...when you lose all hope and all fear, then you become something not quite human. Whether better or worse than human I can’t say. But for an hour, I was not a human being” (144-145). This showdown recalls the refugee confrontation with military forces

in *Exit West*. The moments stand out for their intensity but also because Robinson and Hamid both imagine coming to the brink of slaughter necessary before actions to ameliorate refugee situations can begin.

Robinson uses the scene to make three distinct points. The first two being the degradation of participants on both sides of the fight—the refugees are made subhuman by the institutionalized process of seeking refuge and the oppressors, here the Swiss, are also degraded by enforcing the bureaucratic stripping, scanning, and transferring over and over. To make someone subhuman is a betrayal of the humanity you also claim. Robinson blames the outburst on a host of dehumanizing factors but calls out just one in the woman's narration: loss of a home. While climate dominates this book, having a home, a place of one's own that offers dignity, is key to establishing identity and settling. Housing is one of Robinson's anchoring concerns. Accordingly, many different types of homes populate the book, from Mary's luxurious but heavily guarded "official" Zurich home to the small attic apartment she moves into after retiring, from the Swiss prison cell another character inhabits to the community residence he is released into, from refugee camp tents to new housing for newly resettled refugees. The book is heavily domiciled to suggest different living possibilities but also to confirm housing as a human necessity. Robinson presents a simplified new tax code adopted by every nation's central bank based on square footage, its imposition an effort to hit absentee landlords and owners in their wallets and discourage ownership of more than one primary residence, a smaller one at that.

Without a home, the Syrian woman is consumed by unhappiness in her refugee camp. She observes the young, idealistic camp volunteers, but their determined indignity at the plight of the refugees is also an affront. "They have to keep a distance from us, they have to or else they would become as unhappy as we are," she observes, "but I still hate them for not seeing me. For

looking me in the eye while they put food on my outstretched plate, yet never seeing. I try not to but I hate them. Just as I hate everything in this life” (206). This pairing of aid and emotion, hospitality and desolation, is, for me, one of the most important moments in this dissertation, a quiet but heaving moment of catastrophe that the writers of every book I have discussed cannot avoid. It is the moment that sympathy materialized as charity is not enough. Not only not enough, but harming. In *The Ungrateful Refugee*, Dina Nayeri writes that “accepting charity is an ugly business for the spirit,” a sentiment perfectly captured by Robinson’s matriarch (117). In the protracted role of receiver, which often carries with it an imposed role of criminal or parasite, without a home, without a job, and without freedom to leave the refugee camp, there is no room for arriving, much less settling, there is only what the woman describes for the reader: unhappiness.

Robinson’s fix, which he calls Plan B, is comprised of political, economic, military, and social components that he delivers through dialogue, essays, and presentations. When Jonathan Latham wrote in *Vanity Fair* that *The Ministry for the Future* was “the best science fiction nonfiction novel [he’d] ever read,” he was not joking; the book is teeming with ideas that lose none of their credence because it is a novel (Diop). Money is necessary for Plan B and because there is money, a strong banking system backed by sovereign states is required. “Sorry but it’s true, and maybe obvious,” Robinson writes. “Even if you are a degrowth devolutionist, an anarchist or a communist or a fan of world government, we only do the global in the current world order by way of the nation-state system” (410). He calls the nation-state system “a social order and nothing more” and contends that if all falls into chaos, there must be something of the old world order to hang the new world order on (410). Within this nation-state system, refugees are given world citizenship, meaning they have the right to live anywhere. Countries still have

quotas, but the quotas for all countries combined is twice the number of people in refugee camps, meaning that everyone can find a place to live. Preference goes to people who have been in camps the longest and “combined with a worldwide universal job guarantee commitment, and transport and settlement subsidies, everyone should end up ok” (468). In Robinson’s future, necessities are publicly owned and provided as human rights. They are food, water, shelter, clothing, electricity, health care, and education and they are “never to be subjected to appropriation, exploitation, and profit. It’s as simple as that” (409). Plan B guarantees necessities for every human on the planet and makes way for wilderness corridors that also guarantee space and territory for animals. By removing the need to seek refuge, Robinson consigns the term “refugee” to history. When the Syrian matriarch notes that her Swiss papers still identify her as “*ausländer*” or foreigner, she hints that this does not impact her dignity, and “when everyone in the world has their dignity, we will be all right” (554).

By guaranteeing necessities, Robinson restores dignity, which allows people to buy into a shared social system and a shared world order. Ambitious for sure, but no more so than the magical doors in Hamid’s future. Robinson’s extensive plans fill in the slippages that adhere to Hamid’s doors to imagine a future untarnished by the term refugee because it no longer applies—their futures allow people to find refuge without having to rely on sympathy or hand-outs and without dehumanizing waits in stateless limbo. Both books are narrative acts with a moral purpose, each an attempt to condition the reading market to consider where we are now inadequate for what is to come. Where Hamid focuses on movement, Robinson focuses on a new world order without the temporal distancing of centuries, one necessitated by cataclysmic climate changes and the effort to minimize more environmental damage, both moments he pegs to now because what we are doing “*isn’t working fast enough*” (99, emphasis in original). Their

joint efforts imagine dignity residing in the freedom of physical and mental movement, in other words, the ability to choose how to settle in body and mind. In Robinson's future, that settling can come after guaranteed necessities; Hamid makes no guarantees but allows for physical freedom facilitating its mental counterpart. Arendt writes that "the recovering of a new personality is as difficult—and as hopeless—as a new creation of the world," but Hamid and Robinson have created new worlds and within them the capacity for new personalities and new ways of being (271).

#### **4.6 Repair in Refugee Narratives**

Nguyen, Yu, Hamid, and Robinson offer literary imaginaries to influence the theory and practice of citizenship, as Nussbaum suggests. Their works are "narrative repair" for current refugee crises and concurrent crises of imagination plaguing durable solutions. I borrow the term "narrative repair" from the philosopher Hilde Lindemann Nelson to envision how identities damaged by master narratives can be repaired with counter stories. Nelson argues that "because identities are narratively constituted and narratively damaged, they can be narratively repaired with counterstories that show group members as fully developed moral agents" (xii). Her intent is to write marginalized identities into existence, and while the books in this chapter might not ring exactly true to her mission, each author offers a counterstory that demands moral agency from readers. One person reading one book might get caught in the enormity of the problems these narratives address, but the narratives also show that substantial and viable changes can happen in the short term: Nadia and Saeed watch as populations shift over the course of a summer and Robinson offers a new world order over the course of a decade. These are shifts that incorporate human movement into globalization that is currently restricted to capital and culture. They answer the plea of the main character in Chris Cleave's 2008 novel *Little Bee*, a Nigerian

refugee in England, who pines to be a pound coin because “a pound coin can go wherever it thinks it will be safest. It can cross deserts and oceans and leave the sound of gunfire and the bitter smell of burning thatch behind” (1-2). Counterstories expand structural totalities for readers, allowing moments of clarity to see the Western citizen’s place in the world and their impact on it. What is the cost of a plush towel, no matter how luxurious? Is the cost worth the damage it does? While these questions are not explicitly answered, the narratives offer images that demand answers to Sontag’s questions: Who caused what these narratives describe? Who is responsible? Is it excusable? Was it inevitable? Is there some state of affairs which we have accepted up to now that ought to be challenged?

The four books in this chapter offer dual frames for reimagined futures: Yu and Nguyen focus on individual psyches and intimate relations. Their use of ghosts to describe the lingering trauma of refugee journeys that extend death worlds shows the challenge of shedding the refugee label even after arriving. Moving forward requires acknowledging past trauma and releasing it; easier said than done but a model for understanding how new arrivals are often pulled into the past with greater strength than they are tugged into the future. Hamid and Robinson focus on the collective at a societal level. They imagine new world orders that eliminate the refugee category through freedom of movement, and their fictional improbabilities, like a heat wave that kills twenty million people in one week or collapsed borders, feel possible just five or seven years after publication. In each book, change does not occur until societies around the globe come to the cusp of destruction *after* improbable events, and so each is a warning of what could happen with continued inattention to patterns of movement and migration and continued inaction on the environment. In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh argues that not attending to either in serious fiction, climate change in particular, is a mechanism “designed to keep the ‘narrativity’

of life under control—to give a regularity, a ‘style’ to existence” (17). Banishing destructive climate events and massive migrations from fiction contributes to delusions of their non-existence and illusions of human control when the truth is quite the opposite. I contend that Hamid and Robinson offer just the disruption Ghosh demands from serious fiction, as their stories and their narrative styles throughout belie illusions of control or regularity. They are speculative fictions anchored squarely in the highly improbable real world. Even Hamid’s doors, though magical in the novel, are only a projection of humans moving at the speed of technology. Could we be so far off from turning that imagination into reality?

The characters in all four books gain awareness and mature into reimagined futures. As such, their narratives share elements of a bildungsroman, but one that envisions changed individuals living within an equally changed world order, shared governance itself developing through moral growth from childish protectionism to matured sociality. The desire for certain freedoms—to find one’s own identity and to move freely—provide an end point that is not free of conflict but offers room for individual and collective repair.

## Coda

I have resisted writing a coda for this dissertation because nothing I'm writing about is over and wrapping the project into a neat narrative bow feels more than disingenuous, it actually feels like a betrayal of the work. But here I am at a moment of ending and the moment feels unfinished. Why? Because I'm watching and writing as certain types of refugee narratives are no longer being published. In particular, novels about those seeking refuge during the waves of global movement since the 1990s, and especially during the 2010s, have all but disappeared. As I have often noted above, 75% of those seeking refuge are hosted in low- and middle-income countries, so the trickle that comes to North America, Europe, and Australia has been mischaracterized an invading horde. Yet the word "invasion" has become "a staple of Republican immigration rhetoric" as I write in the spring of 2024 (Ulloa). That mischaracterization finds more fertile ground without imagined stories that offer counternarratives, even though novelized refugee narratives may be flawed in different ways, not least being the way they often describe depoliticized stories of flight.

Although narratives in this genre, which take up a lot of ink in this dissertation, often present just a sliver of larger political, historical, and colonial involvements, they do the work of familiarizing Western readers with the refugee's plight, which necessitates having a story. One condition of seeking refuge today is producing a narrative: a refugee *must* produce one at a border, which makes the narrative less the story of a person and more a narrative of state technique and geopolitical relations. It also means that those seeking asylum really have two stories—the manipulated one crafted to help them gain entry to a country and the one they might share during an intimate conversation. As I have shown throughout this dissertation, the story

they might share is still governed by the limits of language, memory, and comfort, but at the end of my project here, I find myself overwhelmingly concerned with the second story, the one they chose to share.

In my work outside of academia, I sit on the board of a non-profit organization dedicated to humanitarian storytelling, specifically, gathering, writing, and archiving refugee stories. I have assembled migration stories in other capacities, as well. Some of the stories burst with detail and others have the starkness of a police report. All of them defy what Liisa Malkki calls the “anonymous corporeality” of refugee status, a characterization of what happens when political or journalistic practices create a composite refugee figure (1996, 388). These practices, Malkki writes, “tend actively to displace, muffle, and pulverize history...and hide the political, or political-economic, connections that connect television viewers’ [or readers’] own history with that of ‘those poor people over there’” (1996, 389). While readers and viewers may be moved by the stories of suffering right in front of them, they are actively separated from the causes of that suffering by the immediacy of conveying an alternate narrative. An “other” is produced who cannot be heard or who is only allowed entry into the dominant discourse by speaking in a certain way, i.e., with the right kind of narrative, that first kind I mentioned above.

The stories I’m gathering are not the right kind of narrative, and I’m observing that as one type of refugee narrative is disappearing, others are forming. The sympathy-generating depoliticized story that emerged as the genre coalesced in the mid-2000s seems to be going extinct, and nothing is filling the void. Instead, new forms are stepping in that are overtly politically charged. When Behrouz Boochani’s *No Friend but the Mountains* was published in 2018, it foregrounded Australia’s brutal state techniques for offshoring migrants attempting to enter the country by sea. Not content with turning migrants away, the state imprisoned and

tortured them physically and mentally. Dina Nayeri's 2019 book, *The Ungrateful Refugee*, also takes up state technique and the demands it puts on refugees to tell the story the state wants to hear, a fiction devised only to appease border officers or asylum attorneys.

Boochani and Nayeri write forcefully against "anonymous corporeality," at times coopting the techniques that produce it to indict the state actors involved. Their turn toward state policy, perhaps, precipitated the outrage toward Jeanine Cummins' *American Dirt*—a book that steers clear of politics even though politics are written all over the characters' situations—and foreshadowed new openings that hybridize literary genres (non-fiction and fiction in one, poetry and prose together). They also helped usher in novelized refugee narratives that are overtly political, including Omar El Akkad's *What Strange Paradise* and E. Lily Yu's *On Fragile Waves*. The shifting paradigm for refugee narratives makes for a puzzling moment: the stories refugees are forced to concoct for entry at a border are no longer valid currency in publishing, yet the stories they share, the ones being compiled and archived by organizations like the one I work with, lack a means of circulation. The effect is a narrative gap exacerbated by politics of representation: publishers are only looking for "authentic" stories from migrant voices but migrants in flight or narrowly arrived are struggling to eat and stay alive; their stories must be co-produced. Again, this story is not the refugee's but a narrative of publishing technique and, perhaps, reader interest. It also conflates different types of narratives when the one demanded, especially at a border, reveals the violence of the asylum process.

In his speculative fiction novel *Exit West*, Mohsin Hamid offers a flawed solution. He imagines a nascent plebiscite where refugees, immigrants, and arrivals of any sort no longer need a story, they need only exist: one person one vote for anyone residing in the area. Yes, this option depoliticizes and dehistoricizes, but it also revives people routinely cut off from a say in

their own existence. The stories being compiled and archived are related to Hamid's idea for a plebiscite. Yes, the stories need an interlocutor for transcription and formatting, but co-production is irreducible, and the work writes stateless, marginalized people back into existence. It animates, differentiates, and enlivens; it is the counternarrative to "invasion."

My dissertation ends with a question: What do I/we do with the stories being assembled? I wish I had an answer. It will be my work going forward. Perhaps I resisted writing a coda because I knew it would end here, with a question I can't answer...yet. But so much has evolved in the years that I've been writing and learning that I know I will either stumble or push my way into an answer. This dissertation started with an idea I described in the introduction: I wanted to assemble a refugee body through literature, each body part integral to a refugee's journey and revealed through storytelling would lead to a greater understanding of the whole refugee body. That idea dissolved and reformed into a different kind of corpus, one that charted post-2000 refugee narratives through a critical birth in 2006 and then to a crisis in 2020 with the publication of *American Dirt*. The depoliticized genre, despite being staggeringly political, is currently going through a personality change away from entertainment and away from sympathy and empathy as an ending. My hope is that the stories being compiled now usher in new forms of knowing that underscore the need to move toward policies that support more open borders and greater freedom of movement. The refugee stories being assembled and archived fit into this narrative change. Hopefully you will see them in a reanimated genre soon; I'll be working on it.

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