Reclaiming human movement, restor(y)ing hope

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the poetics and politics of "Refugee Tales, A Walk in Solidarity with Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Detainees" against a framework which foregrounds freedom of movement and access to the language as fundamental human rights. Drawing inspiration from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the project, which aims to raise awareness on indefinite immigration detention in the UK and reclaim its abolition, summons and combines the world-making power of storytelling and the extraordinary bonding potential of walking in solidarity to reconfigure the English polity as a welcoming space of listening and 'appearance'.

Keywords

David Herd, Refugee Tales, asylum seekers, migration, storytelling, immigration detention, listening, walking in solidarity

Introduction

In his influential monograph *The figure of the migrant* (2015) – based on the analytical perspectives of 'movement' and the 'migrant' as opposed to the more conventional lenses of 'stasis' and 'the state' – political philosopher Thomas Nail singles out the twenty-first century as "the century of the migrant" (Nail 2016, 1). Identifying migration as something that "has occurred […] since the beginning of human societies" (Nail 2015), the author maintains that the special emergence of the migrant as a signal figure of our times is not so much indexed to the unprecedented numbers of people on the move across the globe, as to the way "this is the century in which all the previous forms of social expulsion and migratory resistance have emerged and become more active than ever before," concurrently making explicit the centuries-long role of the migrant "as the true motive force of social history" (Nail 2015, 7). "The figure of the migrant," he concludes, "is a *political* concept that defines the conditions and agencies by which various figures are socially expelled as a result of, or as the cause of, their mobility" (Nail 2015, 235), which is itself re-valorized as a "constitutive" (Nail 2015, 236) element of the way societies evolve.

Focusing on the "primacy of movement" (Nail 2015, 236) – and the proliferation of strategic hindrances to the same enacted on a global scale by nation states – helps to shift the perspective and put into sharp relief both the agency inherent to the figure of the migrant and the willful constructedness of the current rhetoric of 'crisis'. It also serves to highlight the multi-

textured nature of institutional strategies and discourses of expulsion, drawing simultaneously on the "territorial, political, juridical, and economic" domains (Nail 2015, 236). It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that all these fields of action should be relevant to the current policies of criminalization of immigration and immigrants.

Since the beginning of the third millennium, with the "dark imagining" (McEwan 2005, 39) triggered by September 11 and the war(s) on terror, a spate of critical studies across the disciplines have been addressing the logics and technologies underpinning attempts by the states to regulate, hinder and suppress human movement even at the cost of contradicting and dismantling the hard-won international principles and agreements defining human rights. At the same time, research in the field of social sciences, psychology, identity and trauma studies, alongside imaginative and creative works, have painstakingly exposed the affective and existential costs, as well as the ongoing 'genocide', haunting the experience of forced migration.

Such analytical focalization may well be a response to the dramatic increase in mass displacement across several areas of the world over the decade inaugurated by the global financial crisis of 2007-2008. It was a biblical exodus, compounded by the geopolitical upheavals and neo-colonial wars affecting the Southern shore of the Mediterranean and the Near and Middle East, which, between 2013 and 2015, entered an unprecedented regime of visibility through the appalling death toll and "spectacles" (see De Genova 2002, 436; Tazzioli 2015, 2) of endless shipwrecks in the Mediterranean. In 2015, this deadly scenario was rendered even more conspicuous as a result of the so-called 'Syrian refugee crisis', which forced thousands of people to walk up the railroad tracks along the Balkan route, reminding older European audiences of images unseen since the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s.

At the same time, this surge of studies addressing and researching human mobility and displacement should be seen as a reaction, calling for actual practices of resistance, against the policies of increasing foreclosure and entrenchment implemented by the affluent countries of destination of the migrants. Competing perversely with the media for the control of public opinion and the management of consensus – an agenda based on the discursive evocation of 'crisis' and the so called 'politics of fear' – governments, as Zygmunt Bauman (2018) denounced shortly before his death, still adopt metaphors and practices of barrage, ob-struction, and confinement which are indexed to nationalist mindsets made fiercely obsolete by the globalized dynamics of the present. "What we call 'refugee crisis'," Bauman adds, comparing the notions of 'immigration' and 'crisis' with the idea of 'migration' as a global phenomenon and drawing on Gramsci (1975, 331), "is but one of multiple manifestations of the state of 'interregnum'" (Bauman 2018, 2), of the new 'world neoliberal disorder' which is proving to be hopelessly inadequate to imagining innovative political conduits for viable histories of the future. Quite to the contrary, states compete for primacy in challenging migrants and asylum-seekers with what Theresa May as early as 2012, when she was still Home

Secretary to David Cameron's coalition government, described as "a really hostile environment" (Kirkup and Winnett 2012). Tracing her progress from "deportation-enthusiast Home Secretary to 'protectionist' Brexit Prime Minister" on message with Cameron's promise of "an immigration system that puts Britain first" (Cameron 2014), Imogen Tyler forcefully demonstrates how – against an increasingly nationalist backdrop and the damages of austerity policies – deportability, understood as being in a continuum with "other neoliberal practices of disposability" (Tyler 2018, 12), has become "an increasingly central characteristic of British society," and has been naturalized as "a just, reasonable and proportionate response to unwanted migrants" (Tyler 2018, 11).

The 'hostile environment' and the *Refugee Tales* project

This 'hostile environment', which callously hinges on the interconnected weapons of c*rimmigration* (the increasing interpenetration of the criminal and immigration systems), indefinite detention, the forced destitution and precariousness of suspended lives, willfully misleading bureaucratic practices, recursive abuse of human rights and, eventually, repatriation and expulsion – has been effectively exposed and brought into sharp relief through the ongoing project of "Refugee Tales, A Walk in Solidarity with Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Detainees" (see Herd 2019, in this issue) and in the first two volumes of *Refugee Tales*, *I* and *II* (2016; 2017) on which my analysis resides. A third volume, *Refugee Tales III*, was published in June 2019, when this study was already in press. I refer to David Herd's article in this issue for a thorough assessment of this awareness-raising, militant project. Developed by Herd himself and Anna Pincus in collaboration with the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group and Kent Refugee Help to oppose the infamous practice of indefinite immigration detention in the UK, it combines "a politics of walking" (Wiemann 2018, 69) in solidarity with a poetics of storytelling modelled on Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales.* Refugees, former detainees, asylum-seekers, representatives of the many categories of 'lives on hold' created by the British immigration system, artists, intellectuals, activists, and sympathizers cross a countryside which taps into the deepest reaches of English identity, organizing storytelling events where the narratives of individual migrants – "as told to," as the credits for the stories run, and remediated by, famous writers in a committed exercise of respectful listening and collaborative authorship – are shared with local audiences in public venues. More than in the production of "politically committed texts," as Dirk Wiemann (2018, 69) has noted, Refugee Tales's particular achievement consists in its "making the mode and process of the text's production itself a political statement" which helps to reestablish literature as an active and compelling voice in the debate on the (im)mobility/humanity nexus.

Despite its collaborative dynamics, the communicative process underpinning the final oral versions – and later the published texts – of the protagonists' stories 'as retold', as it were, by leading authors, might still raise concerns about an apparent imbalance of legitimation and

power in accessing the public discursive arena and alert about a danger of 'speaking for'. While this is being countermanded by establishing unobtrusive, repeated and deeply 'respectful' modalities of listening, essential factors legitimating the choice of anonymity for the original 'witnesses' are their being at risk of further administrative and detentive sanctions on the part of the state, alongside an urgent desire that their tales should be told and circulated. "These are tales," David Herd explains, "that call for and generate a collective; tales that need to be told and re-told so that the situation they emerge from might be collectively addressed" (Herd 2016a, 142).[1] In this sense, the compositional dynamics characterizing the Refugee Tales' project shows analogies – with cause, given the central role of detention in the asylum process – with other autobiographical testimonies entailing stark power differentials, most notably ethnographic work conducted within prisons. I am thinking, among others, of *A Tragedy of Lives* (Muzengesi and Staunton eds. 2003), a collection of life-testimonies by women detained in the Zimbabwean prison system, interviewed by several women writers, academics, voluntary workers and other 'listeners' working in the media and education who 're-told' the inmates' stories and released them into the public arena anonymously, to avoid retaliations on the prisoners. While prioritizing a feminist perspective and being set starkly apart from Refugee Tales by its horizon of continued spatial confinement and context of criminal sentencing, this work may be said to share, to some extent, the broader goal of the Refugee Tales' project. For, as Fiona McCann notes, these kinds of stories are "very much forms of 'resistance writing'" (McCann 2016, 92) and a compelling demonstration of how, within a relationship of ethical listening and storytelling, "individual testimonies coalesce into a sustained, collective narrative of the marginalized" (McCann 2016, 93). The centrality of walking, with its remapping of an expulsive national space as a place of welcoming and its stress on a freedom of movement which cannot be separated from a freedom to inhabit the language, is, however, a defining characteristic of David Herd's project, and a mark of its originality and civil potential.

In her work on mobility and immigration enforcement in the UK, social scientist Melanie Griffiths has highlighted how the xenophobic narratives of the state rely on a rich web of narratological elements, which aim to reconstruct and project the image of the migrant in the shape of "the Foreign Criminal," that "common-sense spectre of danger" lying at the "intersection of both wickedness and alterity" (Griffiths 2015, 72). Politicians and the media – and the deadly language of immigration bureaucracy – effectively coalesce to describe the migrant as a figure which can only be apprehended in terms of his or her lack. Connoting the migrant as undocumented, irregular, clandestine, unauthorized, precarious, forever stuck in the liminal grey area outside the protection of the law and citizenship, is a pivotal strategy in bringing about the spectralization of this figure as a perpetual non-subject (cfr. Deandrea 2015). A disturbingly deviant and ultimately unknowable alien whose very mobility is seen as transgressive and "potentially criminal" (Griffiths 2015, 77), the migrant appears to be a perfect embodiment of those whom Nicholas De Genova has called "the others of *citizenship*, its

multifarious denizens, proliferat[ing] around its murky and treacherous margins" (De Genova 2015, 196). Their induced ghostliness and ensuing ban from the boundaries of common humanity serve as a backcloth against which social "hierarchies and exclusions" (De Genova 2015, 196) are established and discursively consolidated.

One more aspect which is instrumental to a more comprehensive understanding of the dehumanizing policies increasingly adopted by governments in the global North in order to curb immigration is the nexus between nationalism and racism which, in the United Kingdom, has recently acquired unprecedent legitimation and popularity in the debate on Brexit and has been convincingly articulated by Nandita Sharma in "Racism" (2015). Building on Benedict Anderson (1983), she highlights how nations have been conceived from the start, as it were, as "imagined *threatened* communities" (Sharma 2015, 102, italics in the text), always exposed to destructive penetration and disintegration by the relentless attacks of foreignness. To defend this imagined 'purity', the nation-state has always tended to "organize human 'society' as a racialized community" (Sharma 2015, 99), so that "[T]hose who cross national borders" are easily blacklisted by politicians and the media as potential "spoilers of 'national' space" and carriers of "a particular kind of existential danger to the postcolonial new world order" (Sharma 2015, 110).[2] As a result of this immoralizing process, they come to be publicly addressed as members of a diminished, 'undeserving' humanity, whom it is legitimate to abuse.

Against this willful narrative and affective disconnection of the 'migrant other' from the safe environment of 'the citizen', the Refugee Tales project provides a forceful antidote. In its triple capacity as oral storytelling, written word and movement in space, the project is meant to heal and restore the very connective tissue which may help making up a new, and 'humane', shared imaginary of openness, respect and relationality, and aims to leave a mark on the discursive and cultural geography of the nation.

By unfolding along routes which are symbolically and culturally relevant to foundational places and moments in the making of English identity – but are also related to public buildings (such as asylum and immigration tribunals) currently acting as stage props for the *mise-en-scène* of the exclusionary power of the state and its "mechanics of popular punitivism" (Bosworth and Guild 2008, 711) –, the Refugee Tales walks and stories put on an impressive counter-spectacle, based on a simultaneous restoration of movement, voice, and visibility, all of which are reclaimed as fundamental human rights and constitutive elements of the social.

By re-inscribing their words and bodies into affective places of origins of Englishness – such as the pilgrims' route to Canterbury in 2015, Runnymede in 2017, or the mythical coastal track from Brighton to Hastings in 2019 –, the refugees, former-detainees, asylum-seekers, activists, artists and writers joining the project can be seen as re-instituting, as well, their own claim to Hannah Arendt's notion of "the right to have rights" (Arendt 1958, 296). Their revision of Chaucer, moreover — "Walking / In solidarity / Along an ancient track / That we come back to the geography of it / North of Dover / That where / The language starts / Now longen folk to

goon / On this pilgrimage" (Herd 2016b, v-vi) — allows them to graft the plenitude of both their physical and emotional presence and their collaborative storytelling into the mythical heart of the language and of the literary canon which have been so instrumental in shaping and consolidating the identity 'fable' of the nation.

Listening and storytelling as spaces of engagement

Over the last few decades, several works drawing on ethnography, trauma and life-writing studies, as well as on postcolonial approaches, have highlighted the enormous potential of storytelling in opening up a space of unmediated self-expression for the excluded and the voiceless — or rather, as Arundhati Roy suggests, "the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard" (Roy 2004). Anna De Fina and Amelia Tseng, among others, have discussed the way the study of migrants' narratives have come to occupy a relevant place in academic work aimed at counterbalancing the negative representations and defamation of unwanted aliens by official discourse and the mainstream media. At the same time, they have highlighted how, by becoming "an authentic terrain of engagement for participants and interlocutors," storytelling allows "researchers and research subjects to create rapport" (De Fina and Tseng 2017, 391), re-fertilizing, in this way, the affective ground necessary to the reemergence of forms of social bonding. Susan Bibler Coutin and Erica Vogel have, likewise, stressed the invaluable mediation of ethnographers in allowing migrants' personal stories of "clandestine crossings, painful separations, and unspeakable loss" to transcend the muted and diminutive dimension of a world of victims to "become knowable, imaginable, and part of a larger story of global interconnectedness and inequality" (Coutin and Vogel 2016, 1).

This tension to rescue migrants' lived experiences of trauma and vulnerability from an undifferentiated pool of need and sorrow with the purpose of reassessing them, instead, against a wider debate on transnational justice, rights and responsibilities, has already elicited thoughtful analysis and cogent discussion. As Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith note in their studies on the role of life narratives and storytelling "in human rights campaigns throughout the world in the late twentieth century" (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 21), "storytelling has become a potent and yet highly problematic form of cultural production," enabling "circuits of connection across differences, and circuits of difference across connection" (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 14).

On the one hand, "although always compromised" (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 14) — in so far as they are necessarily overdetermined by the contingencies, contexts, sensitivities, politics and agendas they arise from —, "stories" which represent vulnerable, abused, or variously silenced and discriminated 'minority' groups offer readers new insight into the uneven human rights differentials across the globe. As these two scholars note, these narratives "[call] into existence […] new cultural forms, new modes of circulation, and new forms of civic

engagement," thus "alerting a broader public to situations of human rights violations" (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 14). This sentence directly builds on the quotation in the previous paragraph, highlighting the almost intrinsic positivity of terms of movement such as *circuit*, *connection* and *circulation*, and the way they respectively reflect such connotation on *differences* and *engagement.*

On the other hand, precisely because of the prize they pose on empathy, unless they are reconnected to a wider horizon of mass displacement and expulsion from the promises of neoliberal economic development, these kinds of *récits* are open to the risk of appropriation and hijacking by a global 'feelgood' market catering for an existing demand for "sensation-alized, sentimentalized" (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 14) stories that promise to gratify the readers with temporary identification and reassurance about their own ability to empathize.

While this danger, of course, exists — and it is a primary responsibility of readers/listeners and storytellers not to succumb to superficial, 'lazy', or merely 'affective' modes of relating and responding to these stories —, the tremendous ability of minority and vulnerable life narratives to "dismantle the foundational fictions through which nations and imagined communities construct and reconstruct their histories," and possibly to "promote new platforms for and forms of political action" (Schaffer and Smith 2004, 19) cannot be underestimated.

A similar *caveat*, as well as a parallel appeal to embrace the unique power of stories to redress injustice and restore human bonds through an ethical re-enchantment of the world, has been expressed by novelist and academic Marina Warner, herself one of the writers of the *Refugee Tales* volumes. As she beautifully explains in "Bearer-Beings and Stories in Transit/Storie in Transito" (2017), compassioned, sentimental and often voyeuristic narratives of trauma — alongside judiciary witnessing, press reports and "thousands of well-wishers" — tend to prioritize the "originary tale" of individual migrants' journeys and arrivals, "epic odysseys" (Warner 2017, 154) foregrounding victimization and suffering, and thus establishing a disempowering analogy with the genre of the slave narrative. At the same time, by con-forming to more familiar 'plot' structures, these kinds of stories "narrow the potential for flourish-ing through imaginative engagement with the world" (Warner 2017, 153-154).

Such imaginative *engagement* — which is always political as well as artistic and entails emplacement, embodiment, and embracing the full materiality of both a refugee's 'hostile environment' and his/her horizon of hope — is instead an outstanding characteristic of the best militant, 'poetic' attempts to counteract the dual ban on voice and visibility imposed on 'unwanted aliens' through the silencing, exclusionary practices of the UK immigration detention system in order to re-affirm the purity of the state. It must be noted how a short-circuiting of time and space — precipitated through the twofold imposition of (indefinite) waiting and physical confinement — likewise represents a cornerstone of the spectralizing agenda of detention. If, as Emma Cox suggests building on Feldman and Snyder (2005, 402), "hopeful thinking is 'a goal-directed cognitive construct', […] fundamentally associated with acting in the world" (Cox

2012, 121) and is necessarily linked to "some capacity to expect a desired future" (Cox 2012, 122), the life-draining nature of these measures stands out in full relief.

I am using *poetic* in its etymological meaning of doing/creating' the world 'through the word', and am, of course echoing David Herd's *incipit* in his poetry collection *Through* (2016), which shares many themes and concerns with the *Refugee Tales* volumes: "Sometimes when I say *poetics* I mean *politics*" (Herd 2016c, 29). In the same way, I am using *militant* in the sense adopted by the New Keywords Collective in a 2014 thought-provoking essay based on "militant research" which analyzes and deconstructs the keywords "Migration" and "Borders": "Militant investigation […] attempts to destabilize the binaries of researcher and researched, focusing instead on the identification or creation of spaces of engagement and proximity, sites of shared struggle and precarity" (Casas-Cortez 2015, 62).

Restor(y)ing community, undoing 'limbo'

An agenda to "de-sediment" the language of migration and make English "sweet again" (Herd 2016b, viii) is proudly enacted and sustained also in David Herd's poetic contributions to the Refugee Tales project, as voiced in the *Prologues* to the first two volumes of stories and *Through.*

Increasingly, over the last few years, writers, playwrights, artists and activists have forsaken the once preferred modes of the testimony and the tragic "tale of arrival," modelled on the epic journey to the land of safety and plenty, in order to shed light on the infamous politics of 'unwelcoming' that migrants and asylum seekers are confronted with on their arrival, be it the agonies and hardships of inventing a new life under conditions of pauperization and precarity, or, as is put centerstage in the *Refugee Tales* stories, the "scandalous reality of detention and post-detention existence" (Herd 2016a, 143).

In reading *Refuge Tales I* and *II*, one is shockingly reminded of a remark by Joseph Pugliese referring to the Australian system of immigration detention, which has served, avowedly, as a paradigm for the burgeoning European champions of xenophobic, hostile environments (a paradigm which has been recently appropriated also by the Italian govern-ment): "What must be relentlessly evaded is hospitality: don't expect refuge, only shelter; don't expect nourishment, only food; don't expect comfort, only harassment" (Pugliese 2002, online).

Harassment by the state, in the infamous forms of indeterminate detention and perse-cution through bureaucracy, is a recursive theme in the first two volumes of *Refugee Tales*, which address relentlessly, but with firm and responsive civility all of the main domains in which the state's project of civil obliteration of the 'alien' is routinely carried out, naturalized and unobtrusively expanded. Its structural deployment of hampered, constricted, or denied access to 'normal' experiences of temporality, spatiality and mobility as all-encompassing strategies of expulsion and abjection comes disturbingly to light through the compelling exploration of the ban on language and hi/storytelling which is at the heart of the narratives and the poems.

Several studies have focused on the devastating, unmooring impact on detainees and asylum seekers of a deliberate pathologization, on the part of the state, of perceptions of time and space, and of its disruptive fallout on the inextricable relationship between these two elements, which are pivotal to the formation and development of identity processes. Often based on interviews with detainees and ethnographic approaches, these studies have drawn attention to the recursive presence in the language of the interviewees of expressions revealing a collapse of their most intimate relationship to time and space.

The "chronic uncertainty" and "systemic primacy of waiting" (Griffiths 2014, 1991) informing the asylum system has been forcefully denounced in David Herd's *Prologues* to the *Refugee Tales* collections, and is foregrounded in *Through*, where, in describing Taylor House, the Tribunal of Appeal for asylum cases in London, he tells us how that is the place "where the action is, though for the most part *the action is waiting*. […] Not waiting as in waiting to go in. More like waiting as an *administrative weapon*" (Herd 2016c, 31; my italics). It is precisely in this sense that, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's description of absolute power as "the power to make oneself unpredictable and deny other people any reasonable anticipation, to place them in total uncertainty" (1997/2000, 228), also De Genova (2016, 7) alerts us to the way "detention power capitalizes on the amorphous temporalities of indefinite (possibly perpetual) waiting".

The same emphasis on waiting is to be found, to name only one recent example, in Homi K. Bhabha's 2018 interview with Franz Schulze-Engler, Pavan Kumar Malreddy and John Njenga Karugia "Even the Dead Have Human Rights" , where he foregrounds the "bureaucratic barbarism" of the "politics of waiting" endorsed by states: "Waiting to leave, waiting to be caught by the police, waiting to have their testimony questioned, waiting for the legal documentation to come through, waiting for acceptance, waiting to make a new life" (Schulze-Engler, Kumar Malreddy and Njenga Karugia 2018, 7).

Among other testimonies made known to the public thanks to the *Refugee Tales* volumes, a special mention should be made of Rachel Holmes' meditation, in *The Barrister's Tale*, about the devastating, Kafkian absurdity inherent in the very notion of "temporary" indeterminate detention: "Temporary indefinite detention. How do you measure time that's both temporary and indefinite? […]. Indefinitely temporary: temporarily indefinite. […] Waiting inde-finitely to be removed imminently. It's like Beckett and Orwell met for a bender on Bloomsday in The Kafka's Head" (Holmes 2017, 59). Just as impressive is Caroline Bergvall's retelling of the agonies of waiting in *The Voluntary Returner's Tale*: "Waiting waits for ground / waiting erodes all ground / waiting loses ground / waiting steals all ground […]" (Bergvall 2017, 64); "waiting eats the soul / waiting eats the bones / waiting eats the heart/ waiting eats all hope" (Bergvall 2017, 68). Neither is it possible to forget the protagonist of Abdulrakak Gurnah's *The Arriver's Tale*. Frozen, as is signaled by the suffix -*er* of his appellative, into a more than purgatorial, in fact infernal impossibility to complete the action of arriving, he ends by invoking and 'imaging', as it were, that notion of limbo which is a recursive trope in refugees' and

asylum-seekers' narratives: "Do you know what limbo means? It means the edge of hell" (Gurnah 2016, 39). Such limbo, as Daniella Salusso (2018, 8) suggests, should be read as denial of what Hannah Arendt described as "space of appearance" (Arendt 1958, 296), and is again consonant with the protagonist's lament in *The Voluntary Returner's Tale*: "Still they're not letting me go. Still they're not letting me stay. 15 years I've been in limbo" (Bergvall 2017, 70).

'In solidarity': walking and storytelling as human rights

But what stands out as particularly inspiring and empowering in the volumes of *Refugee Tales* is the way the project forcefully addresses and foregrounds the relationship between movement and language. By exposing the deadly violence underpinning the deceptively neutral discourse of bureaucracy, the project sets out to establish a new culture and poetics of welcome and experiments with an alternative use of language, apposite to foster and nurture 'disobedient' and non-exclusive imaginaries, plots and modes of storytelling in the service of a more convivial, and more "tender" future (Herd 2017b, 2).

This aspiration is paramount also in *Through*. In a poem which, just as the *Prologue* to volume I ("This prologue is not a poem / but an act of welcome" [Herd 2016a, 1]), is meant to serve both as "*a poem*" and "*an act*" and is indicative of the author's terms of engagement, David Herd announces his "decision to occupy the terms. There is after all a grammar to a hostile environment" (Herd 2016c, 3).

If "bordering," as Roger Bromley writes, "is indeed storying: narrating the national imaginary in the face of globalization" (Bromley 2012, 326) — and the border itself, "a fable in space and a story of, and in, time" (Bromley 2012, 326)**,** takes the form of a disciplinary fiction of exclusion —, the choice made by the Refugee Tales' peripathetic assembly to graft themselves onto the territory, and therein map, by walking, an alternative geography capable of transcending borders and transforming the countryside into a welcoming space of relation-ality and belonging, inaugurates a compelling, innovative strategy of resistance.

Against this background, revisiting Chaucer's work becomes particularly relevant. The Refugee Tales project's immersive and deep-reaching take on *The Canterbury Tales* has been assessed perceptively and with abundance of textual references by Helen Barr (2019), who has noted how, while "read[ing back into Chaucer's work a community of fellowship and common purpose" (Barr 2019, 103), the project's "appropriation" succeeds in "preserv[ing] the social spirit and the openness of *The Canterbury Tales* and its willingness to embrace diversity and give voice to the unheard" (Barr 2019, 104). At the same time, as a critic who also made the walk, Barr convincingly communicates how Refugee Tales "enables participation that is terrestrially, not just virtually, egalitarian," and represents also "a physical, bodily realization of *The Canterbury Tales*. The space of appearance that Chaucer's framed stories inspire is textually discursive, and geographically and interpersonally felt" (Barr 2019, 105). And while

acknowledging that asylum-seekers and sympathizers have unequal access to language and voice, she nonetheless concludes: "But side by side we walk, and we share our stories in solidarity. That is what I mean by realization" (Barr 2019, 106).

It is exactly in the imprint of a creative spoken word which is circulated and exchanged, and in the search for a mode of 'hospitable' storytelling which privileges orature and falls under the affective economy of a gift brought from afar by strangers who are represented in the act of coming together as a community, that David Herd identifies the restorative and affirmative potential of Chaucerian poetics. The "telling of stories," as Alice Smith, one of the writers of Refugee Tales reminds us on the website of the project, is "an ancient form of generosity, a hospitable meeting of the needs of others, and a porous artform" where the participants "meet and transform in the telling into something open and communal" (Smith 2018).

I have written elsewhere (De Michelis 2018) about the way the project draws inspiration from *The Canterbury Tales* to forge "a whole new language / of travel and assembly and curiosity / and welcome" (Herd 2016b, viii) and recapture Chaucer's ability to establish "a deep connection between poetry and human movement" (Herd 2016a, viii), both of which are indexed to fundamental human rights.

Against a public discourse which has been rendered exclusive and hostile "by act of law" (Herd 2016a, ix) — and is meant to "expel from the language" (Herd 2016b, 32), as we read in *Through*, those whom the state wants to immobilize outside the boundaries of citizenship through practices of "inclusive exclusion" (Agamben 1998, 7) — the political and poetic agenda that Refugee Tales borrows from Chaucer is that of making "his English sweete. / That's why Chaucer told his tales. How badly we need English / To be made sweet again" (Herd 2016b, viii). A language "that opens politics / establishes belonging / where a person dwells" (Herd 2016b, v) is what must be found in order to countermand the criminalization of mobility and reestablish freedom of movement as a primary element in the exercise of human agency and the (re)construction of the world as a permeable, welcoming space where relations of exchange and proximity may again be nurtured and imagined.

In David Herd's Prologues I and II, such performative function of the poetic utterance, translated into public space and made visible through the walkers' bodily reappropriation of space, becomes at the same time an 'action' and an 'act', both meant to countermand the silencing and expulsive powers of successive and ever more inhuman immigration "Acts". These, as David Herd reminds us, are, in fact, linguistic deliberations through which the foundations of a 'hostile environment' are laid and enforced. The terms *welcome* and *solidarity*, marking respectively the beginning and the end of the *incipit* of *Prologue I*, make a strong claim on the need to retrieve two essential modalities of being human(e): the collaborative experience of listening and storytelling, and the reclamation of the commons through walking, another fundamental human right.

Concluding remarks

Since the start of the millennium, the right to global movement of refugees and migrants, "[p]ositioned at the dangerous and productive liminal intersection of human rights and national sovereignty" (Castañeda et al 2016), has come to be increasingly reclaimed as both an ethical imperative and a platform for a "struggle to close the gap between the abstract man of the Declarations and the empirical human being" (Douzinas 2016). Being, partially, an inspiration for the recent UN New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (2016), mobilization of this kind has helped to bring to the fore a changing horizon of fundamental needs and hopeful desires which have been forcefully and beautifully expressed by the Martinican poet and intellectual Patrick Chamoiseau in *Migrant Brothers: A Poet's Declaration of Human Dignity*: "They sow Original Rights, Imagined Rights, Ever-Changing Rights, Rights to Succeed, which they themselves divulge, which their feet implement, their every cry is a judgment, their every death a precedent" (Chamoiseau 2018, 43).

By walking together and exchanging stories, the Refugee Tales' assembly realizes a kind of "political carnival" (Herd 2016b, vii), capable of rehabilitating the inhospitable landscape blighted by a cruel immigration system through their "Stories of the new geography" (Herd 2016b, vii), made known and welcome precisely through the remapping of space by words in movement. Contrasting governmental spectacles of expulsion, these "Stories of arrival" (Herd 2016a, vii) are instrumental in returning a voice and establishing a 'space of appearance' for those who, *because of* their stories, share the 'human' right to be given sanctuary.

This perspective is supported also by Marina Warner, patron of "Stories in Transit/Storie in Transito," another project based on listening and storytelling whose aim is to create "a form of shelter where fantasy and invention, memories and improvisation could happen" (Warner 2017, 149). "Can a tale become a home?," Warner continues. "Can narratives build a place of belonging for those without a nation?" (Warner 2017, 150). This hope, and "imaginative engagement with the world," is embraced also by the former-detainees, writers and walkers of Refugee Tales in their 'utopian' practice of peripathetic storytelling, wishing that their narratives might help to open up a new imaginary where the strangers knocking on our door might be given room ("Who has a story / Requires space" [Herd 2017b, 1]) and "listened to / As they tell their tales / That hearing we might shape / A polity – / Tender / Real / Comprehending welcome" (Herd 2017b, 2).

And I think that nothing could be better suited to conclude my reading than the following lines from Chamoiseau's visionary 'poets' declaration':

The poets declare that coming-going and drifting about the shores of the world are a poetic right—that is, a decency that arises from all known rights whose goal is to protect the most precious part of our humanity; that coming-going and drifting about are an homage offered to those toward whom we go, to those whom we visit, and that it is a celebration of human history to honor the entire earth with its movements and its dreams (Chamoiseau 2018, 116).

Notes

[1] *Refugee Tales III* adopts a slightly different narrative strategy, including, for the first time, a few tales *by* former detainees whose identity is conveyed, however, only through initials.

[2] A similar emphasis on the way the "notion of 'illegality' today does the same work which 'race' did in the nineteenth century" and a like appeal to fight "such forms of neo-precarity" and "to foreground a trans-border global ethics that will support the transcendence" of the current dialectics of exclusion has been expressed by Cecile Sandten (2017).

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