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Narratives In|With and Beyond Borders: Constraints and Potentialities of Biographical Research with Refugees

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Biographical research among refugees brings to the fore the need to analyze the texts and contexts of narratives as scenes of testimonial. The legal, sociological, and existential consequences of escaping a country or seeking asylum in another country inevitably determine the contents, form, and format of the asylum-seekers' narrative encounters with their hosts. Two fundamental dimensions of testimonial are at stake here: the witnessing of radical situations (the refugee is a *testis*, a "witness") and the experience of something menacing to human integrity (the refugee is a *superstes*, a "survivor"). In this essay, I briefly examine how biographical research may contribute to a formative and transformative critical dialogue between the different social positions of refugees and hosts in the framework of a mutual contribution to a shared humanity. The argument is that, through life narrative or biographical narration, we might get closer to each other and build a common history of peace and respect, regardless of eventual and sometimes radical personal differences.

The Encounters: “Now we have to think about settling in Portugal, finding a job, learning the language”

The research context in which I encountered refugee narratives in Portugal is in itself something to consider. Portugal has no significant history of receiving large numbers of refugees (it had received only a couple of hundred up until 2015), but it is now following the European Commission guidelines and quotas for hosting. As of today (March 2017), the country has received about twelve hundred refugees. In this new context, public institutions and civil society are offering effective help across the territory in ninety different locations. In addition, a few independent pilot projects are being funded by the European Union to resettle families in Portugal who were previously living in Egypt, Greece, or Italy.

This essay draws on the narratives of Syrian and Sudanese hosted in Penela, a small town near Coimbra in central Portugal, and on a self-published autobiography of an Iraqi refugee living in a nearby region. The interviewees were thankful to Portugal for receiving them and honored by the fact that Adjunct Minister Eduardo Cabrita was at the airport to welcome them with an official reception in front of television and newspaper cameras. Their landing in Portugal was a media event; each time a new group of refugees arrives in Portugal, there is media coverage. However, none of the welcomed refugees had known anything about either the country or its language prior to their arrival. Smiling and surprised, a Syrian speaker in Penela commented: “We are refugees, and the minister was at the airport for us!”

The media coverage of these new arrivals conveys Portugal's willingness to receive refugees and the political engagement of the national government in this welcoming. Compared to countries like Greece or Italy—which receive thousands of refugees in dramatic situations on the front line—the Portuguese media's attention to each group of newcomers is quite celebratory, given that the Portuguese government promotes tolerance and solidarity. Still, while such coverage shows the moment of reception as a symbol of political intention, it does not necessarily reflect whether the country is prepared to integrate them. A recent newspaper piece actually notes that the number of welcomed refugees leaving Portugal is proportionally higher than that of other receiving countries ([Marcelino](#)). These are called “secondary movements” and result from the fact that most refugees are initially unfamiliar with Portugal and have family or friends in Germany or Sweden, where they may expect to find jobs and develop networks more easily.

Once they arrive at the local resettlement sites in Portugal, these refugees face a totally unpredictable situation. For that reason, their initial narratives consist of a list of expectations, preoccupations, and questions regarding their lives after resettlement. Even sixteen months after their arrival, members of the Penela group express worries about learning the language, employment, reuniting with their families, and, as a Syrian mother of four who was trying to bring her brother to Portugal put it, “settling our lives in Portugal.”¹ In the context of my encounters with the refugee families, few accounts evoked their lives back in their home countries or even the time spent in camps in other countries. In these encounters, it became very clear that the subject position of everyone involved in the conversation (the refugees, the researchers, the journalist accompanying me, and the Portuguese-language teacher) shaped the kind of narration or account provided by our refugee speakers. Apart from the language issue (not all can speak English and neither I nor my collaborators speak Arabic), the questions of legal status, social necessities, and cultural differences put the refugees in an extreme asymmetry regarding any host interlocutor. This is a significant constraint for biographical research among refugees. A first step in our research among these newcomers reveals the need to answer immediate, practical questions concerning their condition. Biographical research has to respect the limits of the interlocutors’ expression.

From the very start, research with refugees is necessarily entangled in the structural and macro dimensions of the refugees’ existential and legal situations. It is not possible or even desirable to dissociate these narratives from the larger picture that frames the trajectories of escape and reception. Refugees are already—and by definition—encapsulated in a designation that removes them from regular participation in society. An observation of a conversation that a Syrian couple had with the Foreign and Borders Service (*Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras*) in Coimbra shows how defining of their situation the designation as “refugee” or “resident” is in their residence permits. Their social position in their host country makes them an exception and different legally while they remain “refugees.” After negotiating this first step of entry into the host country, we might analyze further issues—but only after that first step has been taken.

A second step is the analysis of the different borders present in refugee narratives: the borders of the country left behind, those of the countries crossed, and those of the host country. There are yet other borders of legal access to citizenship and belonging in everyday activities in the host country: linguistic and cultural borders with great impact on social relations and acceptance, and gendered, psychological, and cognitive

boundaries that might be harder to overcome in particular cases (refugees are men and women, children and adults, of various social classes and levels of education, and so on). Not all refugees are the same, but being a refugee at some time in one's life can harm one's integration into the everyday life of the host or passage countries. Having been traumatized, of course, compromises even more the shapes and sounds of the accounts that refugees might produce about their experience. Here I am especially interested in stressing the biopolitics involved in the possibility and impossibility of speech, in both the form and the content of an account by a person who had to flee war and is looking for a safe place to live.

The context in which these narratives are produced is equally relevant. An institutional translation (Giordano 589) is somehow always present in a discussion between a refugee and a local, and so is an intercultural dialogue or confrontation challenging our own identity as persons. Bearing these constraints in mind, we might attain a more complex understanding of the testimonials provided by refugees in formal and informal situations. A regulatory frame such as a police station, a court, or even a medical consultation might change a refugee's narration or account according to the norms and expectations of the host setting: for instance, the documentary film *La forteresse* by Fernand Melgar shows concrete examples of this “power-setting effect” in a refugee shelter in Switzerland. But a not-so-regulatory setting also requires awareness of structural differences. Moreover, if we advocate for the formative and transformative effect of biographical research among refugees, such differences are precisely part of the work to be done in the conceptualization of the terms, processes, actions, and outputs of the critical intercultural dialogue happening between radically different subject positions.

Testimonials: “My father told me I had to leave. Choices were very limited, either to escape or die”

Daud Al Anazy, an Iraqi who arrived in Portugal in December 2015, works in a bakery owned by a Portuguese-language teacher, Helena Lopes Franco, who has cowritten and published his testimonial, *De Mosul a Alfeizerão em 6000 palavras*.² The booklet was published to chronicle Al Anazy's difficult experiences and to provide the public, “carefully, in detail, and [with] much precision ... [with] a faithful portrait of what is being done and not being done in our welcoming of refugees” (79). The small volume has nine chapters describing his circumstances and reasons for leaving Mosul, his torture and imprisonment by Daesh, his route to Syria, his passage into Turkey, his shipwreck

and survival in the Aegean Sea, his place in the refugee camp in Idomeni, his arrival at Lisbon airport, and his arrival and first days in Alfeizerão (located one hour north of Lisbon). In a simple and clear style, this self-published booklet describes the terrible experiences Al Anazy has endured. Readers can learn about his motivation to write about such experiences and his editorial choices (for instance, why he did not write a fully developed story also covering his more recent days). Furthermore, the book includes reflections that bring a collective dimension to his account. He calls his own narrative a testimonial, and punctuates his descriptions with questions and comments that highlight the radicalism of the reported experiences: feelings of hope and despair, episodes of violence and dehumanization, states of alienation—all bringing significance to his new life.

This autobiographical narrative shows how Al Anazy is a survivor who becomes a witness to, and a representative of, the events through his storytelling. According to Giorgio Agamben, the witness personifies a surviving history that the witness can tell from the particular position of one who has almost died. In the young Iraqi's text, we can read a poignant account of his shipwreck in the Aegean Sea, "the longest, most difficult and simultaneously most fortunate hours of my life" (47). Around him, in the water, people are drowning. A float has kept him on the surface, where he is waiting for rescue or death together with two little children who have been separated from their parents and are holding onto a different float. Eventually, the coastguard arrives in time to save them from hypothermia, hunger, and exhaustion. Those were "hours, minutes without end, along which all my life was questioned and totally emptied" (49). Al Anazy was the last person to be saved. When he finds himself on land, he sees everyone who has escaped that nightmare "crying, laughing, as if not believing that they were there, alive, and saved" (51). He describes his feelings: "There was nothing left. There was nothing left.... only life had stayed. Life to conquer again, from scratch, from nothing" (52). His rendering of a radical experience into a narrative functions like a rebirth, a symbolic departure from a previous threatening situation, which in many cases causes trauma and the psychological impossibility of speaking. It is important to stress here that such a narrative brings to the surface the apparent impossibility of a shared truth with the host (the incommensurability of experiences). But much as the weaving of a narrative renews the life of the *superstes* after trauma, it also enables the listener to learn how to acknowledge that other truth. This is a crucial point which makes biographical research more pertinent and useful, since the request for a self-narrative from a refugee creates the possibility of

building bridges between two opposite worlds: that of the newcomer, the asylum-seeker, and that of the host, the one who might feel “invaded” or somehow threatened.

In his Guestbook Project, Richard Kearney describes the transition “from hostility to hospitality” as being made possible through the exchange of stories of different people. “Exchanging Stories—Changing History” is the slogan of his theory. Paul Ricoeur has also previously shown how individual memory might accomplish the function of raising awareness: each voice is singular but manages to awaken consciousness regarding human mortality and survival. An ethical relationship toward reality is developed through such awareness; the knowledge that can be transmitted to others is a testimonial with the capacity to awaken others. In this sense, self-narration manages to bring to the fore a shared humanity, and biographical research creates a present of new possibilities both for the one who narrates and for those who are willing to listen.

The narratives of refugees (where possible free from regulatory contexts) bring this level of co-responsibility to the narrator and the listeners. Generally speaking, the narration of one's own experiences engages a process of transformation, what Gaston Pineau calls “a formative art of existence” (65). This process, in turn, affects self-perception and perceptions of the world and others. In the present moment of historical shift and social transformation brought about by the so-called “migration crisis,” the production of narratives by refugees about their lives in their host countries corresponds to an identity-in-the-making, a work in progress. What is said, how it is said, and to whom, might actually change the concrete life situation of a refugee and the host. The biographical researcher, then, co-creates a historical possibility of dialogue and understanding where symbolic and material barriers dominate the scene. The narrators and subjects of such dialogue are authors (in the sense of the “ones who create”) of a new social landscape, choosing to build a culture of peace and mutual recognition instead of intolerance, impermeability, and fear. In order to facilitate the reciprocities and competencies of all the participants in such research situations, the idea is to “get closer,” working across religious and cultural differences that might create distances from the start. Intercultural and intergenerational dialogue among locals and refugees creates an opportunity for mutual learning and recognition. Furthermore, biographical work, especially when shared in groups, has exponential and transformational effects. The contributions of each participant in a group are built into collective issues. In this sense, the autobiographical texts and biographical narratives of refugees enable the empowerment or liberation of their narrators and public by simultaneously fostering

awareness (and performativity) in relation to the collective dimension of individual experiences. The refugees might not (yet) be citizens like their hosts, but they are witnesses and representatives of a common humanity that needs to be acknowledged and incorporated into our new social landscapes.

Notes

1. Informal conversation with the author, March 2017.
2. All translations are by the author.

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