Responding To Crisis: Reflections From the Edge of Disciplines
The refugee ‘crisis’ has to be seen in its wider context of decolonial thinking and what is meant by the coloniality of power. In so doing, we need to situate the mind-set which has led to European ways of seeing refugees in particular and migrants in general.

Roger Bromley
The arts and humanities permit us to exit crisis mode and look around us for the historical, social and cultural histories that have brought us to where we are today. This is something that needs to be at the core of our cultural self-understanding in Europe and the West.

Mariangela Palladino and Agnes Woolley
How are we to respond to the ever-increasing number of people on the move as a result of geopolitical and environmental upheaval? What might scholars, artists, activists and policy makers work together on this complex and multi-valent issue? What methodological challenges arise from multidisciplinary and multi-sector working?

These questions were central to the AHRC-funded network ‘Responding to Crisis: Forced Migration and the Humanities in the Twenty-First Century’, which ran from 2016 to 2018. The network sought to provide a forum for interdisciplinary dialogue between academics, policy makers, activists, artists and practitioners to address the impacts on people, places and cultures of the current rise in refugee numbers. The overarching aim of the project was to develop urgent and adequate cultural and material responses to the ‘necropolitical’ context of migration today, in Europe and around the world, by thinking about what it is that arts and humanities can do in a domain dominated by the social and political sciences. This pamphlet aims to bring together the various strands, conversations and dialogues that emerged from the network and stand as a resource that can be accessed by those wishing to take similar approaches.

The project was based around three workshops: the first event was held at Keele University in October 2016 and focused on “Contemporary crisis of values and ‘necropolitics’”. Speakers and artists included, Roger Bromley, Neelam Srivastava from arts humanities backgrounds, anthropologist Anthony Good, and voluntary sector representatives Caralina Albueme (Refuge Action) and Jerome Phelps (Detention Action). We also heard from Kristin Shirlin, who worked with Good Chance theatre in the Calais ‘Jungle’, and voiced support for the role of the arts in situations of crisis. Poets Saradha Soobrayen, Robert Hampon and James Sheard shared their poetry on the theme of migration.

The international component of the network – and our second event – took place in Naples, where we focused on: ‘Sea-crossing the Mediterranean and its “others”’. The Mediterranean is both a visible site of the current neoliberal ethical-human failure(s), and a crucial space for opportunity, social and political change, cultural challenges. We heard from scholars Iain Chambers, Martin Lemberg-Pedersen, Nando Sigona and Karolina Follis. They second session was dedicated to creative practices of archiving and re-elaborating the experience of migration by some curatorial initiatives such as Porto M in Lampedusa, presented by one of its founders, artist Giacomo Sferlazzo. The cultural collective Archive of Migrant Memories was presented by one of its members Livia Apa; the migrant-led organisation Migrant Voice, based in the UK, was introduced by Jason Bergen; activist Tommaso Gandini talked about #Overthefortress, a collective action of monitoring and enquiring in and beyond Fortress Europe. Artist Zineb Sedira focused on her works concerning transit, migration, maritime memories, and her postcolonial Euro-African autobiography; and poet Raphael d’Abalon, offered a reading of his poetry Mediterranean Blues. The workshop concluded with the screening of documentary Echoes by Gabriele Cipolla, about refugees’ experiences at the Idomeni camp and Radio No Border; and with Giacomo Sferlazzo’s concert, Lampedusa, based on the migrant stories that have crossed Lampedusa’s history.

Our third and final workshop, ‘States of Being at the Borders of Humanity’, took place in Hackney, at Space Gallery, enriched, for the occasion, by “migrant” exhibitions: the first one was titled Where We Are Now, by Kate Stanworth, based on her direct work with migrants and refugees in Europe. The other one, Narrating Objects of Displacement, included work developed in Morocco (and previously exhibited at Glasgow’s CCA), as a result of a participatory Video-Photography Workshop organised by the “Arts for Advocacy” research team, and guided by visual artists Julien Fleurance, who presented the project at our London event, and Amine Oulmakki. Mariangela Palladino opened the day with a presentation revolving around the relationship between social precariousness, human vulnerability, economic poorness and the concept of harvesting, in response to racism and state violence. The first panel consisted of Nina Murray talking about the European Network of Statelessness, and scholar Maggie O’Neill, who talked about her work with women asylum seekers, based on participatory art and walking methods, seeking to better understand, engage with and transform women’s lives. We then heard about a collaborative project between poet Yousiif M Gasmeyeh and scholar Lyndsey Stonebridge. Academics Nimal Puwar, Emma Cox, Parvati Nair and Jennifer Alisop and journalist Ismail Einashe all shared their work on displacement and creative practices. Performance pieces included: Asylum Monologues led by Christine Bacon of the ice&fire theatre company – which explores human rights stories through performance – theatre practitioner Kai Fisher and Neapolitan artist Ulderico who closed the event by taking the audience into the courtyard of the Space Gallery, where his performative installation was set.

The sheer breadth of contributions to these workshops is indicative of the amount of creative, academic and activist work going on in the context of border crossing in the twenty-first century. At various points we have wanted to stop and think through some of the historical, social and practical implications of these projects and this pamphlet brings together writing by some of the projects’ contributors.

Roger Bromley’s contribution sets the tone for the project as a whole by meditating on what it means to approach the issue of forced migration from a humanities perspective. For Bromley, the key challenge is to “consider the adequacy of existing criteria which refer to the situation of the refugee”. But his article also does important work in thinking through the historical and ideological underpinnings of current attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers. This includes colonial histories and ongoing racism. An important contribution the humanities can make, Bromley concludes, is to develop counter-narratives to negative, populist representations of refugees.

Taking up the need to interrogate the ‘humanities’ and its links to humanitarianism as an activist practice, Karolina Follis’s piece offers a critique of humanitarianism by drawing on examples from the UK and Italy. British opposition to sea rescue is compounded by most...
recent Italian policies of criminalising rescues at sea made by non-government agents and fishermen and denying access to a safe port. For Follis, humanitarian movements are ‘scarred by past failure and overreach’, meaning that any reconfigured humanitarian approach to the management of forced migration must be fully cognisant and reflective on its collusions with those very systems of state control which aim to curtail and prevent the movement of people across borders.

Both Jerome Phelps and Iain Chambers return us to the significant role played by creative and artistic responses to forced migration but take very different perspectives. Phelps is sceptical of the contemporary recourse to empathy as a means of engendering action on the issue, arguing that much ‘refugee art’ elicits ‘performance of empathy’, a ‘display’ of politics that colludes with the ubiquity of visual representations of refugees in the current context. After critiquing the spectacle of Ai Wei Wei’s 2017 documentary Human Flow, Phelps draws on examples of artistic engagement with the topic that provide alternative ways of mapping our predicament not based on a politics of visuality. Chambers draws out those artists who engage in a ‘radical re-alignment of the usual coordinates for registering and discussing migration in today’s Mediterranean’. Drawing on his longstanding work on Colonial Modernity, Chambers examines the ways in which the arts produce ‘a slash in our habitual tempo-spatial coordinates’. This gap, or dent in the fabric of time, allows us to perceive those colonial legacies underpinning the current movement of people.

The final contribution from Nelli Stavropoulou takes arts practices into the context of participatory arts-based research with asylum seekers in the UK. Drawing on her project Visual Stories, Stavropoulou seeks to explore the ways in which arts-based methods not only enable asylum seekers to access a non-linguistic mode of communicating their thoughts, ideas and experiences, but also presents audiences and viewers of the art with an alternative means of accessing the social realities of their ‘everyday, embodied and emotional experiences.’ By drawing on methods taken from the arts and humanities, Stavropoulou’s work is valuable in demonstrating the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to the complex and multivalent issue of forced migration.

In their discrete approaches, these pieces also raise important and often challenging questions about the relationship between the arts and humanities and the lived experience of border crossing; and about the capacity of creative, artistic and academic intervention to disrupt and even transform policy. Yet much of the work of the project indicates that the critical view on narrated realities, which offers a thicker, more historical stance on fast-moving developments, can help move us away from age-old divisions between high and low culture, or between sciences and the arts. What the project demonstrates is that a mixed ecology of approaches is crucial in a context that encompasses politics, emotion, security and wellbeing. The arts and humanities permit us to exit crisis mode and look around us for the historical, social and cultural histories that have brought us to where we are today. This is something that needs to be at the core of our cultural self-understanding in Europe and the West. Looking ahead, can we imagine a Europe in which our young people are taught colonial history as a matter of course, as well as the ways that legacy impacts us now, that people have always migrated and continue to do so for multiple different reasons; and that asylum and hospitality are part of our history too, in the West? This is a legacy we might once more be proud of.

Refugees symbolise precariousness, a liminality, which serves as an unsettling, unwelcome reminder of how many lives in the privileged West are now also potentially remaindered. Refugees occupy the borderland between abandonment and value now shared by many.

Roger Bromley
Disposability, the Coloniality of Power, and Representation: Understanding the Refugee ‘Crisis’

Roger Bromley

In thinking about the aims and scope of this Network from the perspective of someone whose research is in the Humanities, the first challenge which came to mind was to consider the adequacy of existing criteria which refer to the situation of the refugee. This was followed by attempts to locate the ideological underpinnings of current European attitudes towards refugees, encapsulated in the concept of racisation. Finally, I considered how to construct counter-narratives to negative, populist representations of refugees.

In the popular imagination, distinctions between asylum seekers, EU migrants, and ‘irregular’ economic migrants are conflated. In academic, legal and policy circles, there is now a debate about whether the conditions of the 1951 Refugee Convention are too restrictive – limited to a specific fear of persecution – and questions are being asked about whether those fleeing from poverty, material and environmental degradation, and profound social disadvantage should also be considered alongside those with a claim to political refugee status. Is a distinction between voluntary and forced movements still tenable? Richmond’s concept of ‘reactive migration’ (1988), linked to those (economic and political migrants) whose life choices and well-being were ‘severely constrained’ is still of real value.

The refugee ‘crisis’ has to be seen in its wider context of decolonial thinking and what is meant by the coloniality of power. In so doing, we need to situate the mind-set which has led to European ways of seeing refugees in particular and migrants in general. Useful starting points are Sylvia Wynter’s (2003) ‘Unsettling the coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, its Overrepresentation’ and Catherine Hall’s (2016) ‘The Racist Ideas of Slave Owners are still with us today’. In order to understand European attitudes to refugees at the level of the State and in popular terms, it is necessary to produce an historical account by going back and thinking about, what Wynter calls, the Western bourgeois conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself. The idea of the Western European as over-representing itself as human is of value because it helps to see why refugees are seen as disposable and regarded as less than human. Once the idea of dehumanisation takes hold it is accompanied by impunity and indifference at the level of the State and in terms of the popular imaginary. How, otherwise, do we make sense of negative responses to the deaths of thousands of refugees at sea, and elsewhere, in recent years (more than 35,000 since 1990), and policies of exclusion which consist of building walls and fences, in 70 or more countries, to keep out would-be asylum-seekers?

Any attempt to unsettle this overrepresentation necessitates an understanding of what a number of Latin American theorists (for example, Mignolo 2007) have called ‘the coloniality of power’. In writing about displacement, generally, we need to ask ourselves (as Europeans) why, and how, we distance ourselves from refugees, what set of values enables us to do so? One part of the answer is racisation, one of the primary legacies of colonialism, with the idea of race ‘the most efficient instrument of social domination invented in the last 500 years’ (Mignolo 2007). Catherine Hall, from another perspective, speaks of how ‘in order to make money the [slave] traders had to create a new discourse on “race”‘; and the impact of those ideas needs to be remembered too. Race as a master code, or narrative mentalité, has entered so deeply into common sense and daily discourse as part of the construct of the white Euro-American that the “epistemological disregard” of the other informs all other forms of “disregard”. Global inequality is one of the root effects and premises of this racisation and a reason why degradation, immiseration, and the violent deaths of refugees are met with indifference. They are, in Judith Butler’s (2014, 35) words, ‘the ungrievable’, ‘lives regarded as disposable or are so stripped of value that when they are imperilled, injured or lost, they assume a social ontology that is partially constituted by that regard…. their potential loss is no occasion to mourn’. Systematically representing refugees as figures of lack, without worth or value, lives not worthy of living, derives from ideas ‘about racial difference that began with slavery [and were] recalibrated across the centuries to encompass other colonised subjects’ (Hall 2016).

As an imperialising force, Western Europe not only practised slavery and extensive forms of exclusion, but also developed an accompanying ideological narrative related to this which persists today. Nationalism, the offshoot of imperialism, is one way in Europe in which history is still present in all we think and do. As Mbembe says, when it comes to imagining the inhumanity of foreign peoples, ‘race has been the ever-present shadow in Western thought and practice’ (Mbembe 2003, 4).

Until recent years, the ‘wretched of the earth’ would comfortably have been applied to those outside the West but neo-liberalism, austerity, and growing inequality mean that this term also now resonates within the West, hence the growth of populism, the fear of ‘invasion’ and the political response in the form of intensified bordering – fences, walls etc. Refugees symbolise precariousness, a liminality, which serves as an unsettling, unwelcome reminder of how many lives in the privileged West are now also potentially remained. Refugees occupy the borderline between abandonment and value now shared by many.

Any attempt to unsettle common sense thinking about refugees confronts ideological forms of nationalism, coloniality, and the state. Overcoming prejudice towards refugees is an agonistic process, a struggle on several fronts – generational and demographic. One of the major
problems to contend with is the notion of the commonality between always-existing national subjects, a fundamental aspect of subjectivity at the level of the symbolic: a taken for granted European and white ethnicity. Refugee representations have to somehow interrupt/disrupt this ‘continuity’ and introduce new levels of diversity and antagonism, expose the contingency and emptiness of nationalist signifiers, to go beyond the nation to formulate other, perhaps global, but not necessarily territorial, allegiances.

In order to resist seeing the refugee as a knowing subject, with autonomy and agency, many Europeans essentialize the ‘other’, reduce them to a set of invariable and negative characteristics and this enables us to regard their deaths with indifference. How this indifference and emotional disidentification can be challenged is partly by coming to terms with narratives that originate beyond the coloniality of power, or which interrogate this, such as The Gurugu Pledge (2017) or Shatila Tales (2018). To dehumanize others is a form of displacement, to remove them from their identity (and ‘ours’) so that you can be reassured that those who drown or are killed are not your own kind, they are sub-human.

Apart from these theoretical concepts, and connected to them, it is necessary to consider a range of issues related to the representation of refugees in, often reductive, Western discourses, such as the sentimentalised, passive victim, the object of compassion – ‘often, they are given no story at all, reduced to a shadow that occasionally flits across European vision’ (Trilling 2018) – and replace these with the agential subject, the resistant activist (‘actors in their own lives’ and the newly emergent citizen. How we render the refugee ‘knowable’ is another challenge, the challenge to the politics of representation. Where there is humanitarian concern and sympathy, the focus tends to be on vulnerability. Of course, the vulnerable have to be protected, but to see all refugees as victims, or vulnerable people, needs to be critically examined for its reductiveness and refusal of agency.

This involves a number of methodological challenges. The experience of refugees is unrepresentable in a sense, an ‘unimaginable existence’, and representational forms are always inadequate. This necessitates the development of other lenses for perception, a greater aesthetic-political reflexivity and sensitivity, a search for new, and radical, rhetorical which unsettle and disrupt expectations and preconceptions. From the standpoint of power, the historical narrative is always set in stone. Unsettling this power is the task of provocative narratives, from the perspective of the refugee. So, the forms of representation are crucial and the central point of radical narratives.

References

Our contemporary version of Arendt’s ‘efficient talk’ is the discourse of border control that relies on the rationalities of security, economic interest and military technology to hide from view violence perpetrated against hundreds of thousands of people.

Karolina Follis
Reflections on Post-Humanitarianism in Dark Times

Karolina Follis

British opposition to search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean and Polish pseudo-theological justifications not to help refugees exploit the insecurities of the humanitarian movement.

As the Mediterranean death toll shows no signs of abating, humanitarians involved in addressing the crisis are having a difficult time (UNHCR 2017). Recent academic critiques have pointed out the flaws of contemporary international humanitarianism, noting humanitarians’ white saviour complex, their complicity with the forces of militarism and capitalism, the ways in which they deprive the people they are ostensibly helping of agency, and the ways they trap them in a condition of perpetual depoliticised victimhood (see Ticktin 2014).

Equally recently humanitarian activities of various kinds have been the target of political undermining and outright assault coming from the political right. One striking example is the official British position to oppose search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean because, as the subsequent Tory governments have claimed, such activities act as a ‘pull factor’ that simply tempts more migrants into risking their lives. This claim has circulated also elsewhere in Europe. Meanwhile in the United States the concern of the new administration has been not so much with repelling refugees as with outright banning their arrival.

Humanitarianism may be defined by the OED at its most basic as ‘concern for human welfare as a primary or pre-eminent moral good; action, or the disposition to act, on the basis of this concern rather than for pragmatic or strategic reasons’. This broadest definition applies to anyone acting on the grounds of a moral commitment to the alleviation of suffering. This includes members of the humanitarian establishment in well-funded international organizations as well as activists in start-up NGOs who would likely bristle at being called ‘humanitarians’ precisely because they are so keenly aware of the dubious track record of some of the biggest humanitarian players.

If the field is so full of tensions, why lump very different actors together? After all they enter the scene with differential power, resources and political commitments. But to consider them together in this context makes strategic sense. The other side, the anti-humanitarian right, is not making distinctions in attacking humanitarians. It bashes UN envoys for being naive just as it ridicules the ‘leftists’ and ‘anarchists’ who protest border fences and migrant detention. Such attacks (which are not linked here so as not to raise traffic to the sites that host them) afford us a moment of clarity, to ask what humanitarianism means at its most basic. Still, in recognition of tensions that animate the field, I am inclined to join others who argue that today it might be better to speak of post-humanitarianism (see Squire 2014). This would not be to distance ourselves from the original moral claim but to capture its specific temporality. Wendy Brown (2010) has written that the ‘prefix ‘post’ signifies a formation that is temporally after but not over that to which it is affixed. ‘Post’ signifies a very particular condition of afterness in which what is past is not left behind, but, on the contrary, relentlessly conditions, even dominates a present that nevertheless also breaks in some way with this past.’

This brings me to the other concept in the title. Hannah Arendt borrowed the phrase “dark times”, from Brecht’s 1939 poem ‘To Posterity.’ Arendt (1968) wrote of the 1930s that ‘the disorder and the hunger, the massacres and the sufferers and the outrage over injustice … All this was real enough as it took place in public … and still, it was by no means visible to all … for until the very moment when catastrophe overtook everything and everybody, it was covered up not by realities but by the highly efficient talk and double-talk of nearly all official representatives who, without interruption and in many ingenuous variations explained away unpleasant facts and justified concerns’ (emphasis added).

Our contemporary version of Arendt’s ‘efficient talk’ is the discourse of border control that relies on the rationalities of security, economic interest and military technology to hide from view violence perpetrated against hundreds of thousands of people. And so we hear persistently of the need for a ‘crackdown on human smuggling’ as politicians scapegoat the smugglers to conceal their own responsibility for the unending deaths at sea (see Haas 2015). The pinnacle of Arendtian double-talk here has to be decision to name the EU naval mission to tackle human smuggling out of Libya ‘Operation Sophia’ after a baby born to a Somali mother on a German ship that rescued her mother off the coast of Libya in August 2015 (BBC 2016).

The UK is of course parting ways with the EU and its government no longer even pretends to care for migrant children (BBC 2017). The former Home Secretary and now Prime Minister Theresa May has disavowed search and rescue, whether it be state-sponsored as in the case of Mare Nostrum, or carried out by NGOs or other independent actors. Statements by border control “experts” asserting that trafficking gangs conspire with the Coast Guard to smuggle migrants into the EU under the pretext of humanitarian rescue operations enjoy broad credibility in the UK, printed in broadsheets and tabloids and circulated on the Internet. One such expert took aim at UNHCR in his comments for the Telegraph, when he opined that ‘The UN’s idea that one is obliged morally to take in people coming across in boats is a dangerous one … Some of these people are desperate, but a good proportion are economic migrants, and either way, you shouldn’t be encouraging people to risk their lives in a boat’ (Freeman 2015). The insidious effects of the phrase ‘economic migrants’ are well known (see Althaus 2016), so there is no need to rehash them here. Instead it merits noting how the ‘moral obligation to take in people coming across on boats’ becomes a fanciful ‘idea of the UN’ (ibid) rather than a description of a fairly uncontroversial moral principle that constitutes a response to...
the inherent dangers of maritime escapes. People may of course legitimately disagree on the extent of hospitality owed to those who arrive (see Carens 2013), but those questions cannot be meaningfully resolved through democratic deliberation if the passengers of the boats are consistently and deliberately dehumanized.

A different example of how humanitarian responses to the Mediterranean crossings can be effectively discredited comes from Poland. In 2015, at the time when the number of people arriving in Europe reached its highest level, Poland’s centre-right government reluctantly agreed to take part in the European Union’s solidarity mechanism for resettling refugees arriving in Italy and Greece. Based on that mechanism Poland would have accepted up to 12,000 refugees by 2017, but the new right wing government, which came into power following the October 2015 election, rescinded the deal. Jarosław Kaczyński, Poland’s de facto leader who holds no elected office but rules from behind scenes as the head of the Law and Justice party made headlines in late 2015 when he claimed that migrants must be stopped at the border because they carry parasites and disease into Europe (Cienski 2015). Less well known is the fact that he grounds his refusal to accept to refugees in the principle of ordo caritatis, which he translates as the ‘order of mercy,’ and which he claims derives from Aquinas. According to this principle, as rendered by Kaczyński, the faithful are obliged to first show mercy to those closest to them, that is the family, then to their compatriots and only in the last instance to foreign strangers. I will set aside here the quarrels that theologians might raise with Kaczyński’s interpretations of Aquinas (see Pope 2002). The important point is that the phrase ordo caritatis entered popular discourse in this predominantly Catholic country. It now serves as a rebuttal as much to the so-called ‘leftist radicals’ who support welcoming refugees as to those Catholics who interpret the Christian duty to help the needy more in the spirit of Pope Francis than Kaczyński.

I propose that the hard-headed British embrace of anti-humanitarian rationales and the Polish pseudo-theological justifications of the refusal to help not only represent extreme cynicism but also exploit the insecurities of the humanitarian movement which has been scarred by its past failures and overreach. Disappointed humanitarians may retreat or further compromise their principles by letting themselves be co-opted for the agendas of border securitarians. Nonetheless an opportunity lurks within the post-humanitarian landscape to re-embrace the most basic commitment to human welfare and the alleviation of suffering and to insist on its status as the moral horizon in our dark times.

Jerome Phelps

“...“This may be the most photographed humanitarian crisis in history: the tragedies playing out on Lesvos beaches can be recorded by anyone with a smartphone and a cheap flight ticket.”

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References


Why Is So Much Art About the ‘Refugee Crisis’ So Bad?

Jerome Phelps

The famous artist lies face-down on a Lesvos beach. The beach, the pose, seem familiar from the initially shocking, now iconic image of the drowned boy Alan Kurdi. But the dead Syrian toddler is nowhere to be seen. Instead – look! – it’s Ai Weiwei. His artistic project is “to relate to humanity’s struggles”, his Lesvos image has become something of a cultural trope, a straightforward attempt to embody this suffering humanity (quoted in Associated Press 2016).

Ai has faith in the gesture of empathy as antedote to the inhumanity of politics. Unfortunately, the gesture of the empathiser has a tendency to obscure the object of empathy. The performance of empathy has become something of a cultural trope, from students sleeping out in support of the homeless to campaigners undertaking the challenge of living on the financial resources of destitute asylum-seekers. In each case, the position in all this of the hypothetical recipient of empathy is rather unclear. By displacing the victim from the visual field, Ai’s image has the virtue of literalising this problematic.

Even at a celebrity art gala you can don an emergency blanket and feel good about yourself. Hard political questions, not required.

The performance of empathy

“There is no refugee crisis,” Ai has said, “but only a human crisis” (quoted in Alm 2017). His artistic project is “to relate to humanity’s struggles”, his Lesvos image a straightforward attempt to embody this suffering humanity (quoted in Associated Press 2016).

Ai purveys an empathy that is accessible and democratic, neutralising political crisis into a (passing) crisis of feeling: even at a celebrity art gala you can don an emergency blanket and feel good about yourself. Hard political questions, of your country’s leaders or yourself, not required.

Looking at refugees

Part of the difficulty of representing the ‘refugee crisis’ may lie in the very ubiquity of its representations. This may be the most photographed humanitarian crisis in history: the tragedies playing out on Lesvos beaches can be recorded by anyone with a smartphone and a cheap flight ticket. The very endlessness of images of disaster can numb. The only limitations on the flood of images are the media taboos on what can be photographed. The only taboos on what can be seen are those of death, the great sea that awaits us all.

But this is not at all the nature of the ‘refugee crisis’. As has been observed, it is in fact a crisis of values and politics (Woolley and Palladino 2016). Crudely, refugees only get to be a ‘crisis’ when they start coming ‘here’, to our world of privilege. The moment of crisis is a political decision, in this case to refuse to organise Europe’s ample resources to respond in a coherent and responsible way to the perfectly manageable flows of refugees and migrants.

Empathy with humanity can be a way to avoid this attribution of political responsibility – even European leaders have wept crocodile tears over the dead, whilst seeking ways to save them by preventing them from setting out for Europe in the first place.

In its very failures, Ai’s work points obliquely to the key political content of the ‘crisis’: the collapsing of distinctions between the ‘here’ of comfortable Western lives and the ‘there’ of humanitarian catastrophe and war. This disruption of our beaches and Eurostar journeys is immensely unsettling, and goes to the heart of the political construction of Europe itself. Apparently hardened war correspondents found working on the Greek islands unexpectedly traumatic (see Storm 2016), as being ‘here’ in Europe prevented them from putting in place the usual psychological defence mechanisms.

The other thing that is displaced in the performance of empathy is politics. Ai’s focus on that great abstraction ‘humanity’ lifts his gaze far above the humdrum political decision-making that actually cost Alan Kurdi his life. The crisis becomes the existential one of death, the great sea that awaits us all.

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Ai seems to be grappling with these difficulties of representation. He sees the inadequacy of the passive contemplation of yet more images of refugees. Instead, he goes there, he sets up camp in Lesvos, he enacts Alan Kurdi’s death. His willingness to engage is praiseworthy. But the result is bad art, in that we just end up with another glossy image to contemplate, the helplessness of the refugee victim doubled in the helplessness of the artist.

In its very failures, Ai’s work points obliquely to the key political content of the ‘crisis’: the collapsing of distinctions between the ‘here’ of comfortable Western lives and the ‘there’ of humanitarian catastrophe and war. This disruption of our beaches and Eurostar journeys is immensely unsettling, and goes to the heart of the political construction of Europe itself. Apparently hardened war correspondents found working on the Greek islands unexpectedly traumatic (see Storm 2016), as being ‘here’ in Europe prevented them from putting in place the usual psychological defence mechanisms.
This struggle over the shifting space of globalisation is key to the politics of the ‘refugee crisis’, just as it is to Trump’s projected wall. The European ‘here’ must be protected from the alien ‘there’, if necessary by militarising the Aegean and turning Greece into a vast borderland of camps. Images cannot capture this respatialisation of our political geography, as they are always already locationless and floating. They can register disjunctures (tourists sunning themselves as boats arrive), but they cannot move past this shock reaction to articulate where we are when ‘here’ and ‘there’ collide.

One of the places we end up is nowhere – the non-places of the refugee camps documented by Richard Mosse in the sublime black-and-white of his heat-seeking military cameras. Mosse’s extraordinarily beautiful panoramic hells have undeniable power, and reish the uncomfortable irony of redeploying cutting edge military gadgetry to aesthetic ends. But they arguably do not go beyond registering this nowhere as military-industrial sublime to the more difficult questions of our relationship to these non-places.

Representing here, there and nowhere

If our predicament is to be lost in these disjunctures and nowheres, contemporary art is in general poorly equipped for any project of spatial reorientation. The art world is itself disjunctures and nowheres, contemporary art disrupts spatial interventions. They have rather than artists) specialise in these disruptive spatial interventions. They have produced for a feature in an Indian art magazine. Mosse’s extraordinarily beautiful panoramic hells have undeniable power, and reish the uncomfortable irony of redeploying cutting edge military gadgetry to aesthetic ends. But they arguably do not go beyond registering this nowhere as military-industrial sublime to the more difficult questions of our relationship to these non-places.

Abdul-Ahad (Figure 1). In a few sweeping arrows, prices in various currencies and cartoonish boats and buses, it describes how you get from the Turkish coast to destination Germany (signified by flag-waving stick man). Its exuberance conveys that extraordinary period in 2015 when migrants themselves were actively refuging Europe’s political geography, on foot, communally in great numbers. Critically, it sees ‘here’ from ‘there’, it is a tool for action rather than an object of contemplation – and the migrant is doing the seeing.

I don’t mean to claim that only refugees themselves can represent this crisis, and that artists can have no role (which would be particularly unfair on Ai, given his own experience of political persecution). But this map may be a clue to the kinds of approaches that could be productive in grappling with our current disorientations. If the old hierarchical spatial configurations are no longer sustainable, or are only sustainable with the violence of walls and razor wire, then there is a role for art to set out alternative ways of mapping our predicament.

Last week, I was sitting in a conference room at a workshop for experienced NGO leaders by the Freed Voices group of experts-by-experience of immigration detention. The format should have been familiar: stories of personal experiences of detention that will inform our work as we return to ‘our’ space of advocacy. Instead, within seconds I have my eyes shut and am instructed to think of an experience of trusting someone. Then we are writing our questions on the walls – and the migrants have barely spoken yet, beyond a sparse few instructions. Later, we are staging media interviews between themselves, no (white European) interviewer in sight.

The Freed Voices (who are campaigners rather than artists) specialise in these disruptive spatial interventions. They have produced maps of the UK’s detention centres, non-places devoid of maps for security reasons, according to the experiences and emotional associations of the different rooms and wings (The Freed Voices 2016). The Freed Voices are resolutely here, not images in someone’s art project but living amongst us with (mostly) irregular immigration status, liable to be detained at any time. Telling us to shut our eyes and think of our childhoods.

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References


Drawing by Iraqi migrant. Disseminated by Ghaith Abdul-Ahad.
This violent exercise of European and First World power reopens a profound colonial wound. Migrants rendered objects of our legislation and laws signal once again the asymmetrical relations of power that produced the colonial world and its ongoing fashioning of the present.

Iain Chambers
the several occupied buildings in the city recognised by the town council as cultural centres. An intensive day of debate and discussion was punctuated by three artistic instances involving Zineb Sedira (2018), Kate Stanworth (2017) and Giacomo Sferlazzo (2013). In different ways, the photographic work exhibited by Kate Stanworth, the discussion of her own work by Zineb Sedira and the performance by Giacomo Sferlazzo, proposed a radical realignment of the usual coordinates for registering and discussing migration in today’s Mediterranean.

Kate Stanworth’s photographic exhibition of diverse migrants dislocated in European cities – ‘Where we are now’ – rightly played on the ambivalence of ‘we’. If, most obviously, the collective noun refers to relocated migrants in unfamiliar lands and cities, forced to re-negotiate their way in the world robbed of domestic referents, the insidious undertow is that the ‘we’ is also us and our responsibility for such situations. In the translation of transit we discover not simply that migrants, often under dramatic duress, are forced to transform themselves continually in order to engage with unplanned situations, but also that the very contexts of European culture and home are being translated. It is this mutual process, no matter how sharply asymmetrical the powers involved, that unleashes the slow but profound remaking of home, citizenship, culture and belonging… for all; not, and most obviously, only for the unexpected stranger. The narratives sustained in Stanworth’s photographs and the brief captions provided by the migrants cut up ready explanations and the flat maps of our understanding with rougher, often difficult to assimilate, interrogations. The latter leave no one really feeling at home.

In her visual and mixed media work, the Franco-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira draws us into the slippage and the translation that accompanies the transit of contemporary ‘traveling cultures’: women in white veils who oscillate in the interval of Islam and Christianity: perhaps Muslim or the Madonna (Self Portrait or the Virgin Mary 2000). Elsewhere, between rusting hulks of ships bobbing in the sea waters of Mauritania (Shipwreck series 2008), derelict colonial buildings on the Algerian coast (Haunted House 2006) and the glances northwards from the African shore, maritime horizons promote desire and dreams of a better life.

Here the sea, as a troubled archive, constructed as a site of multiple crossings, is transformed from a presumably dumb accessory to the political life and histories occurring on land to become a historical interrogation. If occidental modernity depended on its marine mastery to realise a colonial appropriation of the globe, a maritime reasoning (Floating Coffins 2009) today insists on the transit of other narrations on and over its waters. The ambivalence of the sea as both bridge and barrier reveals the deeper political economy of migration and its long term centrality to the making of the modern world. The ruins of a European colonial past here haunt the configurations of the present.

Giacomo Sferlazzo recounts in song and storytelling a history of Lampedusa. Once again, this is an oblique narrative. It refuses to tow the line. It transforms this tiny island of desert scrub (once covered in woods and full of wild life until charcoal burning brought about an ecological disaster) that lies 200 km south of Tunis and Algiers into another tale. As an outreach of Europe in Africa, at least geographically speaking, the island has in recent decades notoriously become a ‘hot spot’ for ‘illegal’ migration. A lost out of place. The figuration of the migrant in

stamped by the authority of Italy and Europe, falls apart. Crossed by multiple bodies and histories, the island escapes reduction to a frontier settlement and becomes the laboratory for questions and processes that neither Italy nor Europe seem capable of answering. Contrary to unilateral definitions of the Mediterranean and of Lampedusa’s role in policing and protecting its borders, Sferlazzo’s songs and stories rescue from the archives sustained by this island and the surrounding sea a humanism that exceeds the limits of European and Occidental sovereignty.

Tracing itineraries that commence from the south – from south of the Sahara, from the south of the Mediterranean, of Italy, of Europe – the work of all three artists disorientate and reorientate our mapping of the modern world. Here we confront the journeys induced by music and the visual arts: their invitation to look, and to look and listen again, that is always accompanied by the grit in the eye, the dissonance in the ear, listen again, that is always accompanied by the grit in the eye, the dissonance in the ear, the dissonance in the ear, the dissonance in the ear.

In an important sense, art in its concentrated attention and affects is always about matter out of place. The figuration of the migrant in

Saidou: Mali to Italy. “I came to Europe because of the war. I went to Algeria and from there I took a boat without knowing where I was going. It happened this way, that’s destiny.”

Salma: Syria to Germany. “I still have this dream to come back to Syria. If I complete my studies I can make radical change there, I can give benefit for the people and the country.”

Photo Credit: Kate Stanworth.
the contemporary field of vision deepens and disseminates this unhomely quality. For the modern migrant is not only the reminder of a colonial past that powerfully and unilaterally made the world over in a certain fashion. She also shadows present artistic practices with what the prevailing sense of modernity structurally seeks to avoid or negate, precisely in order to secure its particular sense of home and belonging.

On the other side of the canvas, in the margins of the frame, throwing a constant shadow across the visual field and disturbing our ears, those other histories fester as an incurable wound that continues to bleed into the present. Reopening the archive of a modernity whose art seemingly revolves around itself, the critical pace here quickens, threatening to spin out of the regulated order of its institutional reception in order to dirty the whiteness of its walls and the rationality of its knowledge with the dirt, death, despair, destitution and desires of an other worldly order.

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Art can therefore serve many functions; it can facilitate social connections and promote interaction and inclusion, as well as support self-expression and serve as a therapeutic avenue.

Nelli Stavropoulou
“It’s not about whether you can draw. It is about being able to tell your story in a way that is unique to you.”

The above response was offered by one of my research participants as we discussed her engagement in our participatory arts-based research project, Visual Stories. We had just completed our second workshop session during which she produced a collage piece about her experience of being a disabled female asylum seeker (Figure 1). In her words: “this kind of research can be less scary. You can talk truth without perfect English and still be heard.”

Her comments have resonated with me as they highlight two important features of participatory arts-based research, which is the potential of creative methods to engage with non-linguistic responses and to support the expression of traumatic and emotionally-charged experiences (Bagnoli 2009). Furthermore, such approaches can set in motion meaning-making processes that further illuminate our understanding of participants’ complex social realities and their everyday, embodied and emotional experiences (Fraser and al Sayah 2011).

Arts-based research (ABR) encompasses qualitative research projects that adapt creative means as part of their methodology in one or more stages including: data collection, analysis, interpretation, and/or dissemination (Leavy 2008; Savin-Baden and Wimpenny 2014). At the core of participatory arts-based research lies a commitment to inclusion, participation, collaboration, and dialogue (Frogegett, Little, Roy and Whitaker 2011). ABR encompasses projects that adapt creative means as part of their methodology in one or more stages including: data collection, analysis, interpretation, and/or dissemination (Leavy 2008; Savin-Baden and Wimpenny 2014).

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Visual Stories: A participatory arts-based project

During my eighteen-month fieldwork I had the opportunity to collaborate with a total of 75 participants using a combination of participant observation, biographical interviews, and visual methods. Visual Stories emerged as a side-project, inviting a core team of twenty female asylum seekers to share stories about their experiences of seeking asylum in the North East of England through the use of biographical and visual methodologies including: photography, drawing, and collage-making. Participants were identified through a women’s-only, weekly, volunteer-run drop in service in Stockton-Upon-Tees, and the project was advertised through the community partner’s noticeboard and through word-of-mouth.

It was suggested from the outset of our creative collaboration that participants had the option to present their pieces as part of a local Refugee Week event. All participants would remain anonymous for safety reasons and submitting their piece as part of the research project was optional. Participants were also informed of additional dissemination plans including academic publications, website and conference presentations.

There are various reasons why researchers interested in forced displacement may follow such a methodological avenue. Creative methods can offer more nuanced and complex understanding of exile experiences though inviting self-representation (see Lenette and Boddy 2013; O’Neill 2004; 2018), and equally can support our understanding of the emotional and symbolic aspects of people’s experiences (Dunn and Mellor 2017). Additionally, such approaches offer opportunities for dialogue and conversation as participants reflect on their artwork and reveal their own interpretations.

A total of 30 pieces were produced, which shed light on individual and collective experiences of seeking asylum in the UK. Participants communicated their experiences of having to navigate the asylum determination legal landscape and the lived experience of waiting for status acquisition (Figure 2). A shared experience was their inability to make plans and move on with their lives. Instead, they explained how they focused their time on volunteering at the church, supporting new arrivals and learning English. Participants also talked about “incomplete lives” as they were forced to live away from their children and families (Figure 3). For some, being in the UK was conceptualised as a new beginning and the opportunity to start a new life - as long as they were granted humanitarian protection. Additionally, participants also reflected on how the workshop sessions...
Art can therefore serve many functions; it can facilitate social connections and promote interaction and inclusion, as well as support self-expression and serve as a therapeutic avenue. Equally, it can become political, as participants may employ artwork as a means to talk about and critically reflect on issues that matter to them.

The exhibition event was a pivotal element of this research project, ensuring that the research supported knowledge-transmission and that participants felt that their contribution was valued, celebrated and recognised (Figure 4).

Concluding thoughts

Participatory arts-based research and in particular visual methods can therefore serve as powerful research and analytical methodologies involving participants’ creativity and encouraging reflection. It is important to note that it is the combination of such methods with other qualitative research methods (i.e. interviews, focus groups etc.) that enables a more nuanced understanding of individual lives and that despite evidence of positive engagement, arts-based research still involves power hierarchies between researcher and participants and therefore requires an ethical and reflexive approach.

As ABR offers space for self-representation, it is important to safeguard participants’ meaning making autonomy and realise that the interpretation of participant-produced material can only be accomplished together with participants and not on behalf of them. Respecting one’s creative vision also extends to data dissemination, as visual material can be easily appropriated and separated from participants’ stories (see Castledon et al. 2008; Catalani and Minkler 2010).

My biggest lesson so far has been that truly participatory arts-based research involves ‘letting go’ and embracing the ‘messiness’ of conducting research. This can be accomplished through ensuring that the research process is driven by participants’ interests, and that their voices have been heard.

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