https://doi.org/10.18778/2299-7458.13.02

Czytanie Literatury
Łódzkie Studia Literaturoznawcze
13/2024
ISSN 2299-7458
e-ISSN 2449-8386

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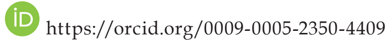
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Caring for Form:
Ali Smith and Contemporary Refugee Life-Writing

SUMMARY

Refugee life writing draws attention to the actual stories behind the statistics (100 million refugees worldwide, more than 3,000 people drowned while attempting to cross the Mediterranean in 2023 alone) and calls for solidarity across national and ethnic divides. A particularly poignant, but also provocative example of such an act of solidarity is the *Refugee Tales* project, in which established literary authors collaborate with refugees to relate stories of war, flight, loss, and the brutality of asylum systems in the West. This paper explores the ethical dimensions of telling somebody else's life zooming in on the example of "The Detainee's Tale as told to Ali Smith." Unlike many of the other tales, Smith explains the process of visiting and interviewing two refugees trapped in the British asylum system. While the research on the ethics of *Refugee Tales* has focused on the questions of "trust" (Rupp) and "precarity" (Sandten) of the refugee condition, this article chooses a different path. It suggests that the ethical questions arising in "As-Told-To Life Writing" (Lindemann) remain in the shadow if seen only in terms of authenticity of voice. Instead of scrutinising the authority of the real-world author, it is worth redirecting the attention to the narrative discourse and the specific forms it takes. Drawing on Caroline Levine's social formalism, the article investigates the interplay between political and aesthetic forms. In this collision of forms, "The Detainee's Tale" unmasks

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Received: 21.03.2024; verified: 1.07.2024. Accepted: 13.08.2024

and contests the inhumane side of the British asylum system, but it also carefully gestures towards possible ethical alternatives. The ethical aspects of Smith's contribution are best described in terms of a feminist ethics of care, which values the moral salience of recognising and attending to the vulnerability of others (see Held).

Keywords
Refugee life writing, Ali Smith, collaborative life writing, care, Caroline Levine, social formalism

In the current political climate of hostility towards refugees and "populist sloganeering,"[1] refugee life writing represents a critical intervention. In drawing attention to "the inhuman side of asylum seeking"[2] it orchestrates resistance and calls for solidarity across national and ethnic divides. A particularly poignant example that has sparked the interest of literary critics[3] is the *Refugee Tales* project, a multi-volume work relating stories of "violence, loss, modern-day slavery, … and most prominently, the state's willfulness and arbitrariness,"[4] as Cecile Sandten puts it. The *Refugee Tales* project was founded by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group in 2015 as a response to the British practice of holding refugees in indefinite detention.[5] In theory, British criminal law sets a limit to the time a person can be held in detention.[6] Still, in practice, refugees can be held in indefinite detention when "they are imminently to be removed from the UK,"[7] a process that can take years.[8]

The *Refugee Tales* project aims to put an end to the detention system, combining political activism with life writing and storytelling. Part of the activism involves regular 'refugee walks', or protest marches in which the life stories of individual refugees are read out loud. Some of the walks in the past followed the same route of the pilgrims in Geoffrey Chaucer's late medieval *Canterbury Tales*, on which the title of the project puns. The medieval intertext holds a central place in the British national imagination, and Chaucer is widely regarded as the father of English literature. Re-writing a canonical text is more than a "game of allusion."[9] It is an attempt to re-imagine migration, flight, and exile as pilgrimage, and thus, to contest refugee stigmatisation.

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[1] John Masterson, "'Don't tell me this isn't relevant all over again in its brand new same old way': imagination, agitation, and raging against the machine in Ali Smith's *Spring*," *Safundi*, vol. 21, issue 3 (2020): 7.

[2] Cecile Sandten, "Representations of Poverty and Precariousness in Contemporary Refugee Narratives," *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 12, no. 3 & 4 (2017): 122.

[3] See, for instance, Barr, Mayer, Rupp 2023, 2021, Sandten 2017, 2021, Wiemann.

[4] Cecile Sandten, "Representations of Poverty and Precariousness in Contemporary Refugee Narratives," *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 12, no. 3 & 4 (2017): 127.

[5] As Dirk Wiemann points out, the British policy of detention is "impossible even in Hungary." Dirk Wiemann, "Make English Sweet Again! Refugee Tales, or how Politics Comes Back to Literature," *Hard Times*, *Special Issue: The Return of Politics*, vol. 101, no. 1 (2018): 68.

[6] David Herd, *Afterword*, in *Refugee Tales*, eds. David Herd and Anna Pincus (London: Comma Press, 2016), 137.

[7] Ibid., 135.

[8] Ibid., 135.

[9] Helen Barr, "Stories of the New Geography: The Refugee Tales," *Journal of Medieval Worlds*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2019): 79–106.

To date (2024), *Refugee Tales* consists of five volumes. In the first two volumes of the project, well-known literary authors act as "go-between writer(s)"[10] to relate the life stories that individual refugees told them beforehand, whereas the third volume includes stories that were crafted by refugees. Among the authors are renowned *littérateurs,* such as the Nobel Prize winner Abdulrazak Gurnah, the poet and Oxford Brookes fellow Patience Agbabi, as well as popular bestselling writers, including Marina Lewycka. Most of the tales are written in a short story format with varying narrative situations, though some are written in verse or in a hybrid form blending poetry, prose, historical allusions and theory.[11]

The majority of the stories collected in *Refugee Tales* "are effectively co-produced"[12] by a writer and a refugee, as Jan Rupp observes. Thus, as a form of storytelling, the *Refugee Tales* project innovates traditional ways of writing a life and creates a new "collaborative constellatio[n]"[13] that lends itself to what is referred to as "As-Told-To Life Writing"[14] or "heteroautobiography."[15] While agreeing that the *Refugee Tales* project overlaps with the genre that Lejeune aptly terms "heteroautobiography" (he uses oral history as his main example), it includes a greater amount of crafting, patterning and fictionalisation than oral history, which usually remains true to the interview format of the original conversation.[16] As a result, they may raise more doubt and scepticism with respect to their veracity than "heteroautobiography."

Telling the stories of "[t]hose who do not write"[17] always involves questions of "trust" as Jan Rupp points out.[18] Can the refugee trust the writer with their story? What will it mean to have your own life story rendered by somebody else, however well-meaning that person may be? Furthermore, the fact that the refugees remain anonymous to be protected from state reprisal might make readers suspicious.[19] Can the writer be trusted to have told the story adequately? As Gayatri Spivak famously argues in her

[10] Jan Rupp, "Telling Y(our) Story. Precarity of Trust in Contemporary Refugee Life Narratives," *Diegesis*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2023): 2.

[11] For a very helpful overview on the different genres in the project see Cecile Sandten, "Refugee Tales*:* Asylum Stories and Walks as New Forms of Literary and Politcal Intervention," *Anglistik*, no. 2 (2020): 120 fn 1.

[12] Jan Rupp, "Telling Y(our) Story. Precarity of Trust in Contemporary Refugee Life Narratives," *Diegesis*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2023): 42.

[13] Ibid., 69.

[14] Sandra Lindemann, "As-Told-To Life Writing. A Topic for Scholarship," *Life Writing*, vol. 15, no. 14 (2018): *passim*.

[15] Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiography of Those Who Do Not Write," *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2002), *passim*.

[16] For a particularly poignant example of oral history in the context of forced migration, see Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000).

[17] Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiography of Those Who Do Not Write," *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2002): *passim*.

[18] Jan Rupp, "Telling Y(our) Story. Precarity of Trust in Contemporary Refugee Life Narratives," *Diegesis*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2023): *passim*.

[19] Ibid., *passim*. On anonymity see also Johannes Franzen, "Verräterische Diskretion: Pseudonymität, Autorschaft und Fiktionalität," *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik*, vol. 53 (2023): 67–80.

canonical work *Can the Subaltern Speak?*[20], the subaltern is all too easily silenced in the very act of speaking on her behalf.

Yet, as this special issue argues, auto/biography, no matter how honest and genuine, is the result of a process of selection and crafting; hence, a fictionalised version of a life. The collaborative process preceding the publication of *Refugee Tales* only makes visible the artifice that is at the heart of writing a life.[21] From the perspective of literary theory, it needs to be stressed that Spivak does not bring back the Romantic discourse of authentic self-expression 'through the backdoor.' The first part of her essay makes that important point particularly clear.[22] Instead, she suggests that the desire "to hear the subaltern speak" is not necessarily productive. As Gillian Whitlock argues in her excellent work on asylum stories, such self-representations may well become "valuable exotic products"[23] marketed to a benevolent white audience in the global North. To overstate my point, the ethical question raised by refugee life writing is not so much 'who speaks for whom' but which *forms* do these literatures take, and how do these forms interact with the forms of state power?

The task of this paper is twofold. First, on a more general, methodological level, I draw on Caroline Levine's work on aesthetic and social form to suggest that the study of activist life writing, such as the *Refugee Tales*, can be enriched by seeking connections between literary and political forms. As Levine demonstrates, traditional formalisms (such as New Criticism or canonical models in narratology) have been hampered by separating literary forms from their political context. Conversely, she argues convincingly that Marxist formalisms underestimate the power of aesthetic forms by seeing form as secondary or "epiphenomenal"[24] to economic power structures. Drawing on Levine's broad definition of form, this paper sets out to explore the interactions between collaborative refugee writing and the hostility of the nation state. While Levine focuses on the possibilities of critical intervention through "the collision" of forms,[25] I am also interested in the ethics of relational and collaborative form. It is my contention that recent feminist debates on ethics of care provide a productive backdrop here.

Second, and more specifically, this paper will investigate into the intersections between political and literary form in Ali Smith's "The Detainee's Tale" from the first volume of *Refugee Tales*. Smith's contribution is particularly interesting because it actually spells out the process of collaboration. Smith inserts herself into the story and thus makes her role as intermediary

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[20] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea* (NY/Chichester: Columbia UP, 2010).

[21] Oral historians actually also concede that their methodology involves artifice and selection. See, for instance, Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000): 13. Lejeune also touches upon the question of artifice in Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiography of Those Who Do Not Write," *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2002): 188–189.

[22] Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea,* 23.

[23] Gillian Whitlock, "Asylum Papers," in *The Cambridge History of World Literature*, ed. Debjani Ganguly (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2021), 877.

[24] Caroline Levine, *Forms. Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP 2015), 12.

[25] Ibid., 16.

transparent. Furthermore, she relates the process of the interviews, portrays the settings in which she met her interlocutors and includes her own reactions to the stories she witnesses without, however, making herself the protagonist. She remains a witness to the tales of the refugees. On the plot level, the tale relates two encounters and two conversations. The first half of the story revolves around the harrowing experiences of a nameless refugee from Ghana (only referred to by the second person pronoun "you"), which he confides to a nameless first-person narrator, most likely Ali Smith herself. The second half of the story deals with the preparations which the first-person narrator makes to visit a young Vietnamese detainee in one of the high-security prisons, euphemistically called Removal Centres. After a set of security checks that are as Kafkaesque as they are Orwellian[26] form of narration, in which the second detainee is referred to in the third person ("he"). By using the minimalist short tale form, Smith connects the microcosms of the individual conversations with the macrocosms of state power, global human trafficking and enslaved labour.

Therefore, the question of authenticity of voice, if read too mechanically, actually hampers the understanding of refugee life writing. Smith's formal crafting of the tale does create what Roland Barthes called "a reality effect" ("l'effet de réel")[27] rather than an actual correspondence between 'text' and 'reality,' as would, say, the original transcript of the conversation. Yet, "The Detainee's Tale" sheds light on a different type of reality, i.e. the weight of the "ethical responsibility"[28] (to use Spivak's phrase) that comes with telling somebody else's life. She assumes responsibility "for the accuracy of the *telling* of the story,"[29] which may entail a *care* for *form*, from the microcosmic formal patterning, such as the use of deictic markers and narrative pronouns, to the representation of macrocosmic forms of state power and global human trafficking. Care for form plays out on the level of the *récit*, the thematic focus on the encounters and the harrowing details of the detainees' stories, which echo and mirror larger societal forms (such as the hierarchies in the global system, the punishing rhythms of enslaved labour), and on the level of the *discours* or the 'how' of the storytelling and, the selection of events and settings. The relationality and affectivity of care (ranging from moral indignation to empathetic pain) thus shape and colour the tale and highlight the political urgency of the project as a whole.

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[26] See John Masterson, "'Don't tell me this isn't relevant all over again in its brand new same old way': imagination, agitation, and raging against the machine in Ali Smith's *Spring*," *Safundi*, vol. 21, issue 3 (2020): 7.

Ali Smith, "The Detainee's Tale," in: eds. D. Herd and A. Pincus, *Refugee Tales* (Manchester: Comma Press, 2016).

Franz Karl Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), 187.

[27] Roland Barthes, "L'effet de réel," *Communications*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1968).

[28] Spivak has repeatedly stressed the importance of dialogue when approaching ethics, a figure of thought that is distinctly Lévinasian. To quote just one important example: "We all know that when we engage profoundly with one person, the responses – the answers – come from both sides. Let us call this responsibility, as well as 'answer'ability or accountability." Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999), 382, see also 355 fn 59.

[29] Ibid., 73.

"The detainee's tale as told to Ali Smith": Voices, rhythms, hierarchies

The work of the Scottish writer Ali Smith is frequently read as "trac[ing] the darkness of our populist present."[30] Some critics regard her treatment of ethics as "*Kierkegaardian*,"[31] i.e. as recording the futility of caring for others "in the full knowledge"[32] that it will make no difference. Her collaboration with *Refugee Tales* also conveys a sense of moral agony and outrage; yet the tale's patterning and verbal structures are inked with the most delicate and careful brushstrokes.

"The Detainee's Tale" is particularly interesting with respect to its use of narrative voice. It opens in the form of a second-person narrative,[33] then shifts into the first-person *plural* voice ("we"). Only at the end of the second paragraph does the first-person narrator insert herself as the teller of the tale:

> The first thing that happens, you tell me, is that school stops.
> We are meeting in a room in a London university so that you can tell me, in anodyne safe surroundings, a bit about your life so far; I say so far because you aren't old, you are maybe 30.[34]

Already in the opening paragraph, the "you", i.e. the nameless West African refugee takes precedence over the first-person narrator. The usage of the first-person plural "we" highlights community, or perhaps even communion between the narrator and her interlocutor.

After the opening paragraphs, the reader follows the refugee and the narrator through the university building, a space unfamiliar to both of them. The space of the university is constructed like a labyrinth. As a consequence, the construction of space mirrors both the confusing and harrowing journey of the refugee and the obscure and incomprehensible workings of the British asylum system:

> *We meet* at the front door and follow the man who's showing us to the room. *We go* through several doors and then up some stairs. *We go* through a lot of corridors, then some more corridors, then down more stairs and along more identical corridors, then further down again and along a corridor with lagged pipes in the ceiling above our heads. *We go* through some swing doors, round more corners to some more dead ends. *We double back* on ourselves…. Eventually we find the room we're being lent for two hours.[35]

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[30] John Masterson, "'Don't tell me this isn't relevant all over again in its brand new same old way': imagination, agitation, and raging against the machine in Ali Smith's *Spring*," *Safundi*, vol. 21, issue 3 (2020): 2.

[31] Joanna Teske, "'Nonsensical Caring' in Ali Smith's Fiction and its Kierkegaardian Defense," *Annales de Philosophie*, vol. 71, no. 2 (2023): *passim*.

[32] Ibid., 62.

[33] Monika Fludernik, "Second-Person Narrative as a Test Case for Narratology: The Limits of Realism," *Style*, vol. 24, no. 3 (1994): 455–479.

[34] Ali Smith, "The Detainee's Tale," in: eds. David Herd and Anna Pincus, *Refugee Tales* (Manchester: Comma Press, 2016): 49.

[35] Ibid., 49 [emphasis MN].

Smith's use of parallelism (i.e. the repetition of the same sentence structure) and anaphora ("we go" is repeated three times at the beginning of each sentence) is striking. On the one hand, it creates a dull rhythm and, by extension, a claustrophobic atmosphere. One the other, it is suggestive of a shared experience, if only for the fleeting moment of looking for the room, between the passport-carrying writer and her interlocutor. Just as the refugee is looking for shelter from what will soon unfold as an unimaginably horrible experience of exploitation and victimization, the two are looking for a space in which he will be listened to, albeit for mere "two hours."

The paragraph can be read as a "collision"[36] of two forms in Levine's sense: the rhythm and the hierarchy. The rhythmic quality of the repetition (anaphora and syntactical parallelism) here collides with the unsurmountable hierarchy between the state and the refugee, which restricts and curtails his movement and his time. The state here exercises its anonymous power by creating a border regime, which is mirrored *en miniature* in the maze of the corridors and dead ends. In the act of walking together through the university building, whose architecture is as incomprehensible as the border regime, the writer-citizen and her interlocutor share a brief moment in which their experience of being trapped and confused converge. For a few minutes, they become a "we."

When the detainee begins to tell his story the narrative voice switches back to the form of the second person narrative. The detainee relates being orphaned at the age of three, and being "given"[37] into child labour on a farm at the age of six, where he works cutting, breaking and spreading cocoa pods and dragging "sacks … in the heat"[38]: "The only clothes you've got are made from the sacks you drag, shorts sews from sack. It's hot there. Not like here. You look out of the window at the bricks. Not like when it's hot here either; there on the farm it's the hottest that hot can mean."[39] The gravity of the detainee's experience of enslaved child labour – he is starved, beaten, and witnesses a boy dying from a beating – contrasts with the banality of the view of the "bricks" which the two can see gazing out of the window. The contrast between the two spaces, Britain and West Africa, also plays out in the weather, ironically, the most British of all conversation topics. The weather is constructed as a marker of radical difference, which is highlighted through the repetition of the negation "*not like* here" and "*not like* when."[40] The two spaces are thus linked and connected, but they are also structured in a hierarchical way. To use Levine's terminology, the UK and Ghana are part of a "network,"[41] a network of international trade, but the network is not flat or symmetrical: one side gets to exploit the other, it is

[36] Caroline Levine, *Forms. Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP 2015), 16.

[37] Ali Smith, "The Detainee's Tale," in: eds. D. Herd and A. Pincus, *Refugee Tales* (Manchester: Comma Press, 2016): 50.

[38] Ibid., 50–51.

[39] Ibid., 51.

[40] Ibid., 51 [emphasis MN].

[41] Caroline Levine, *Forms. Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP 2015), 21.

a network that entails a hierarchy. As a result, the passage draws attention to the injustice and violence inherent in the international division of labour, and by extension, to the agonising relationship between the consumers in the global North and the enslaved, victimised labourers in the global South.

In the following passage, the detainee relates how, after escaping from the cocoa farm he finds himself at the mercy of a human trafficker, who has flown him into England pretending to be his uncle. He is trapped in yet another situation of enslaved labour, this time in the global North:

> The shut room is all mattresses on the floor and there are six others and you in the room…
>
> A van comes at 4am. Someone opens the front door. The back of the van, with its door open, is right up against the front door. You and the others get in one by one. The van door closes. It's dark in the van. You get to the warehouse. You hear the warehouse door go up. The van goes in. The warehouse door comes down again.
>
> Room, van, warehouse. Warehouse, van, room. Four in the morning. Nine at night. Packing shoes. Ladies bags. Sorting dresses. Cleaning microwaves. They give you a cloth for this. Cleaning TVs. Cleaning fridges. They give you a roll of white rubber to wrap the electric things. They give you a winter jacket, one pair of jeans and a towel. They give you two shoes. They tell you it's cost them a great deal of money to bring you here. They say you'll be working till you've paid it back. There aren't beatings but there's shouting. There is a lot of shouting.
>
> Room, van, warehouse. Warehouse, van, room. Five years. Most weeks all week, 18 hours a day.[42]

Smith's minimalist description with short, at times elliptic sentences does not contain any representation of interiority; it does not have to. The horror is there even without any mention of emotion or thoughts. The events, tasks, and utensils come like blows from without, assigned to him by an anonymous group of people only called "they." The grammatical structure of the sentences mirrors the power structure of the arrangement with the "they" being in the subject position ("they give", "they tell") and the "you" in the object position ("They give you," "They tell you"). The punishing rhythm of the 18-hour workday is echoed in the elliptic sentences: "Room, van, warehouse. Warehouse, van, room." Her precise usage of temporal markers "Five years. Most weeks all week, 18 hours per day" is followed by a leap into the narrative present, to the situation of the interview in the university room: "You sit in silence, now, with me. You hold your head in your hands."[43] The "you" is now the subject of the sentences, and the first-person voice in the object position "with me." They are in the "now" but the trauma is not over.

Smith uses the present tense for both temporal levels of the narration: the level of the narrative present recording the event of the conversation

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[42] Ali Smith, "The Detainee's Tale," in: eds. D. Herd and A. Pincus, *Refugee Tales* (Manchester: Comma Press, 2016): 53.

[43] Ibid., 53.

and the level of the detainee's memories of the past: "Here's what you tell me. It's all in the present tense, I realise afterwards, because it is all still happening."[44] "The Detainee's Tale" thus resonates with a longer tradition of trauma testimonials. As it has been pointed out by a plethora of scholars of literary trauma studies, trauma shatters the victims' sense of self and their sense of time.[45] To quote from Dominick LaCapra's canonical *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, "trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence."[46] The detainee's trauma, the "hole in [his] existence" is conveyed both in the elliptical language of his own second person narration, and in the first-person narrator's description of his voice and storytelling: "You speak as if picking your way over broken glass"[47] and of the ways he holds his body: "it is as if your whole body fills with pain."[48] The shattered sense of time, the 'never really over' of the trauma narrative is, as stressed earlier, conveyed in her consistent usage of the present tense.

Indeed, the reader will never know for sure whether the actual detainee really did use the present tense in the original interview. Yet, the question of accuracy or empirical verisimilitude is, I argue, part of the problem rather than part of the solution. This form of scepticism echoes the nation state's suspicion towards the refugee and, by extension, towards the writer-activist, whom the populists would likely see as a traitor. To draw on Dirk Wiemann's helpful distinction, Smith takes responsibility for the "telling of the story"[49], not for "the empirical veracity"[50] thereof. Her task is to create a *form* that unmasks the workings of the British detention system. As the following passage highlights, it is actually the British nation state that cannot be trusted, since it revolves around the detainee's harrowing experiences of becoming trapped in enslaved labour:

> You meet a guy, you tell me. He's the driver. He takes a liking to you. He says he can get you out of there and find you a cleaning job in London. You trust him.
>
> You say the word trust and it is as if your whole body fills with pain. You sit silent again for a moment.[51]

Smith builds this paragraph around the fear that the refugee's trust will be breached, and indeed it will be. As advised by some friends he has made through the driver, the detainee writes to the Home Office explaining his victimisation at the hands of human traffickers, upon which

[44] Ibid., 50.

[45] See Kurtz for a useful overview on literature and trauma.

[46] Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 41.

[47] Smith, "The Detainee's Tale," 50.

[48] Ibid., 53.

[49] Dirk Wiemann, "Make English Sweet Again! Refugee Tales, or how Politics Comes Back to Literature," *Hard Times, Special Issue: The Return of Politics*, vol. 101, no. 1, (2018): 73.

[50] Ibid., 73.

[51] Smith, "The Detainee's Tale," 53.

> They come. They arrest you.
> They put you in prison for six months because the passport you've got is the wrong kind.
> First it's prison, then detention. That takes two years. Then they release you for six months. Then they arrest you again. Back to detention, another six months.[52]

As in the earlier paragraphs, the anonymous "they" (here the Home Office) is in the subject position both syntactically and symbolically. The Home Office's acts are unforeseeable and inconceivably outrageous. The arbitrary cycle of imprisonment, release, and re-imprisonment is captured in a minimalist, elliptic style. A span of years in terms of discourse time is condensed into a few seconds of story time. The gap between what must have felt like a horrifying eternity and the minimal story time effectively highlights the gruesome power of the nation state: it can inflict long-term harm and sheer unsurmountable pain in a split second, without reflection or hesitation.

Furthermore, Smith's reliance on the shortest possible sentences combined with anaphora and parallelism ("[t]hey come," "they arrest you," "they put you in prison" …) again creates a sense of a hammering rhythm. Arbitrary punishments rain down on the detainee in a staccato of words and actions. The detainee is trapped in an incomprehensible machine of power, isolated from any help, with his isolation mirrored by the use of indentures and short paragraphs. Smith thus unveils the punishing rhythm of political power and its merciless hierarchies by using *aesthetic* rhythms, *grammatical* hierarchies of subject and object, and the spatial form of the page and paints a picture of abject victimisation and helplessness. Detention, in particular, is portrayed as a hellish, traumatising experience: "Prison is better. At least in prison there is something to do. But not at the removal centre. They call it the removal centre, you know? … Removal, you say. When you arrive they remove you from a life."[53] In a terrifying paradox, the experience of detention gives the you-narrator an abject identity, he becomes "the detainee."

Witnessing and the collisions of forms

The situation of witnessing and the ethical task of preserving memories of atrocity shaping "The Detainee's Tale" resonate with an earlier a tradition of the trauma testimonial as theorised by Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman.[54] From the perspective of the trauma testimonial, the first-person narrator functions as 'the witness to the witness' and thus a "co-owner of the event"[55] to a certain extent. While it may seem risky to draw parallels between Shoah memoirs and contemporary refugee life writing (particularly from a Central European perspective), postcolonial theorists have turned and

[52] Ibid., 54.
[53] Ibid., 55.
[54] Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
[55] Felman, Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, 13.

continue to turn to post-Holocaust theory as a point of reference in a gesture of dialogue and solidarity.[56] As Gillian Whitlock points out, "[l]iterary testimonies are performative, rhetorical acts that 'summon and beseech us' as readers"[57] across contextual and historical divides. Writing from a position of solidarity (rather than competition), with earlier traditions of witnessing trauma and atrocity, Whitlock connects the legal discourse of "'rights' that are attached to those who testify in human rights discourse" with the "emotional attachments"[58] that may or may not be established between a most privileged readership and the witness. Such empathetic identification is historically and culturally contingent and can easily be withheld "through aversion, disgust, shame, and 'compassion fatigue.'"[59]

Whitlock's study of the historical trajectories and ethical pitfalls of testimonial life writing can be enriched by a closer attention to the microcosmic forms of specific narratives. What is striking about "The Detainee's Tale" is its careful patterning of the narrative voice and its multivocality and dialogicity. As I pointed out earlier, the "you" (the detainee) takes temporal and spatial precedence over the first-person narrator. The voice of the second person witness ("you tell me") is constructed within in a grammatical structure that puts the first-person narrator ("me") in the object position of the sentence. Viewed through the lens of Levine's concept of form, the relationship between the two is shaped by the social form of the hierarchy (between card-carrying, middle-class citizen and disenfranchised, criminalised detainee) but it is also the smallest possible unit of what she calls "the network." In this collision of social forms, Smith adds another layer of collision of form through reversing the hierarchy between the two interlocutors on an aesthetic and grammatical level. The aesthetic subversion of social hierarchy is followed, a few pages later, by a drastic change on the level of the first-person narrator's self-perception. Learning about the detainee's experiences in detention, trying to convince herself that it cannot be "so rough, not really,"[60] she concludes: "I am an idiot."[61]

The prosaic phrase could be read as a nod to the "epiphany," the sudden realisation prevalent in the Modernist short story; yet, while the Modernist short story typically ends with the protagonist's epiphany, Smith's disillusionment occurs in the middle of the narrative and forms the beginning of a process of learning and development. The passage continues: "But I am learning. A mere to hour or two with you in a university room and I'm about to find out that what I've been being taught is something world-sized."[62] She thus draws attention to her own ignorance, which stands in stark contrast with the detainee's "world-sized" experience and knowledge. The reversal

[56] See Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

[57] Gillian Whitlock, *Postcolonial Life Narratives. Testimonial Transactions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 8.

[58] Ibid., 9.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Smith, "The Detainee's Tale," 55.

[61] Ibid., 55.

[62] Ibid.

of hierarchy is highlighted in her use of contrast and juxtaposition: "a mere hour or two" in the small, enclosed space of the "university room" suffices to educate her about something "world-sized." In the collision of narrative and aesthetic form, hierarchies can be called into question, re-arranged and reversed. The privileged, middle-class, card-carrying citizen is "an idiot" and needs to "lear[n]," while the refugee possesses knowledge of planetary proportions and becomes an educator to his listener and, by extension, to the reader. Read along postcolonial lines, the tale entails a moment of what Spivak refers to as the ethical pedagogy of "learning to learn from below,"[63] while also drawing attention to the fundamental asymmetry of such encounters.[64]

Through her complex narrative aesthetic patterning of the "tale," Smith carefully navigates the Scylla of white saviourism and the Charybdis of sentimental identification, as it articulates the tensions between the benevolent Western desire to understand, know, and 'feel with' the disenfranchised and the 'idiotic' trappings of white, middle-class privilege. In the second part of the tale, the first-person narrator sets out to "go and visit, for another couple of hours, what it is to be a detainee, in this day and age, in our country. No, not even that: what I'll go and visit is only what it's like to *visit* a detainee."[65] Smith here draws attention to the vast gap between how it feels "to be a detainee" and "to visit a detainee" by initially conflating the two and then qualifying, or even correcting her own statement. She thus makes it abundantly clear that there is no such thing as knowing "what it is to be a detainee", that solidarity is different from identity (as in 'you are just like me'), or even empathy ('I know how you feel'). The text suggests the event of "visit[ing]" the other, which is highlighted in the repetition of the verb "visit," it appears three times in the text. Intriguingly, the verb 'visit' is used in different semantic constellations. For one time, it is used in a more everyday sense of the verb ("visit a detainee"), however, it appears twice in an unusual semantic context in the sense of visiting an *experience* ("visit … what it's like …"). Here, the author extends the semantics of 'visit' to connote something more akin to a 'visitation,' an experience of being haunted, of encountering something disastrous and horrifying.

The ending of the tale is particularly powerful in this respect. Here, the first-person narrator reflects on her conversations with the two detainees and in particular, on a brief "moment," in which the detainee showed "only a flash of anger:"[66]

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[63] Spivak qtd. in Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (New York/London: Routledge, 2002), 90. See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 382.

[64] In Lévinas' thought, asymmetry is crucial: Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002). Spivak is more ambivalent here. She often stresses the "*radical* alterity" of the subaltern: Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 290. emphasis in orginal; yet, when writing about an ethics to come, she gestures towards symmetry and mutuality. See fn. 59.

[65] Smith, "The Detainee's Tale," 55. Emphasis in original.

[66] Ibid., 61.

> It was a moment of anger only. It surfaced and disappeared in less than a breath. Except for this one moment you're calm, accepting, even forgiving – but for these six syllables, six words, that carry the weight of a planet, weight of the earth – yes, earth, like those other roads there under all our feet, whatever surfaces we cover them with, under all our journeys, the roads you walked between one place and another in the mix of fear and hope and the dark falling.
> But when I came to this place, when I came to your country, you say.
> I sit forward, I'm listening.
> You shake your head.
> I thought you would help me, you say.[67]

In these final paragraphs, Smith juxtaposes images of smallness, "less than a breath," "syllables" with images of vastness "the weight of a planet, weight of the earth," which resonates with Lévinas' ethical idea of the "infinity" ("*l'infini*") that opens up in the miniature face-to-face encounter with the Other. The phrase "weight of the planet, weight of the earth – yes, earth" is constructed in the form a parallelism, which is then followed and interrupted by a dash, in which word "earth" is emphasised through the affirmative "yes, earth." Through this complex and careful patterning Smith stresses the magnitude of the detainee's experience and, by extension, the magnitude of the responsibility the listener carries. Yet, instead of resolving the tension created by the verbal structure of the phrase, the reader learns that the first person narrator leans "forward" and is indeed "listening" and the story ends on a sense of terrible disappointment, which might well be read as an accusation: "I thought you would help me, you say." The "you" in the phrase "I thought you would help me" contains various slippages. Firstly, it no longer refers to the second person narrator who, here, speaks in the first person ("when *I* came to your country", emphasis MN), but to his interlocutor, Ali Smith. Second, the use of the second person pronoun extends well beyond the world of the text as the "you" could also be seen as a form of reader address. Here, Smith draws on the slippage between the second person singular and the second person plural in the English language.

Therefore, the reader is encouraged to become part of the story of the detainee, in the same way as the first-person narrator has become entangled in her interlocutor's story. The narrative thus creates a web-like structure (a "network," as Levine would put it), in which the two interlocutors form the smallest unit, then branching out to the nation state ("your country") and maybe even the whole "planet." Smith's use of the first-person plural in combination with images of movement through space ("our feet," "surfaces we cover," "all our journeys") highlights the sense of connectedness, and creates, again, only for a fleeting moment, the impression that there are webs of responsibility and care extending beyond the diegetic world. However, she does not end on a comforting note, but with the one reproachful sentence that is said, as she tells us earlier, with a tone of "anger." As a consequence,

[67] Ibid., 62.

the ending does indeed tie in with the tremendous question of trust, but it is not a question of 'authenticity of voice,' but the question of why 'we' (i.e. card-carrying citizens of the affluent nation states in the global North) allow 'our' institutions to breach the trust of refugees and asylum seekers in such harrowing ways. It is a question that bridges the gap between the aesthetic form of the text and the social forms we live in.

Caring for form

It is worth noting the wider implications of Smith's contribution to the *Refugee Tales* with respect to recent debates on the ethics of care. There are at least three aspects in the tale that considerably overlap with discourses on care. First, the ethics of care contests "[m]oralities built on the image of the independent, autonomous, rational individual" and values the "compelling moral salience"[68] of relationality and dependence. Second, "ethics of care values emotion"[69] instead of meeting them with "contempt" as signs of an "imperfect personhood."[70] Third, the ethics of care arises from the precarity and vulnerability of the human body.[71] At a certain point in our lives – as infants, in sickness, in old age etc. – we depend on a caregiver and can only hope that our needs will be met with attentiveness and kindness. According to care theorists, precarity entails ethical obligations and opens up questions of responsibility and justice.

By reading "The Detainee's Tale" along the lines of care, I do not wish to infantilize the refugee, nor do I sentimentalise the relationship between the narrator and the detainee. The sentimentalist, pejorative view of care is part and parcel of a highly entrenched cultural imaginary[72] that has been attacked by feminist care ethics.[73] This problematic imaginary needs to be replaced by a model of care that is more germane to the moral urgency of our contemporary political predicament. *The Refugee Tales* expands and modifies the cultural imaginary not only with respect to hostile preconceptions about refugees, or sugar-coated versions of the nation state and its power to "remove" undocumented migrants, but also with regard to questions of how to care for the precarious lives of others and taking on responsibility.

As I argued earlier in the essay, the very narrative form of the short story signals relationality and interdependence rather than autonomy or individuality, since the "you" and the "we" take precedence over the first-person voice. Furthermore, on the level of the content, the tale highlights that legal and economic autonomy remains unattainable for the detainee. As an orphaned

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[68] Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Diana Tietjens Meyers, *Gender in the Mirror: Cultural Imagery and Women's Agency* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 65.

[71] See Isabell Lorey, *Democracy in the Political Present: a Queer-Feminist Theory* (London: Verso, 2022), 121.

[72] Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global,* 37.

[73] See Meyers, *Gender in the Mirror.*

child labourer, as a victim of human trafficking and a target of the British detention system, he is robbed off any civil and human rights, reduced to what Giorgio Agamben called "bare life," and even his "bare life" is constantly at risk.[74] The social form of the detention system with its punishing structures of arbitrary imprisonment removes the detainee from the "whole"[75] of the nation state, while still exerting power over him. He is paradoxically included in the system of state power but shut off from any civil rights the state grants its citizens.

As the tale progresses, the first-person narrator, who does have access to liberal bourgeois subjectivity and rights, becomes entangled in the story of the detainee and gets a sense of her naïve view of the British asylum system. *Refugee Tales* as a project therefore warns readers of the narcissistic illusion that the liberal bourgeois subject is the norm and everything else is an aberration. Instead, the project suggests that enslaved child labourers, victims of human trafficking, people escaping from war zones and climate catastrophes form a precarious, vulnerable global majority, and their claims to asylum in the European islands of affluence have a moral urgency.[76] "The Detainee's Tale" makes visible such "precarious lives" (to use Judith Butler's phrase) through relating their harrowing life stories.

The tale specifically sheds light on the precarity of the body by including short, minimalist descriptions of the outward appearance, gestures, bodies of the two individual refugees: "You are a small man, dainty even, and gentle. You're so small that the two quite small rucksacks you've got with you seem large beside you," Smith writes. Setting a new paragraph, she continues:

> Later, when we leave this room and go back up through the maze of university corridors, you and your rucksacks keep getting caught in the swing doors because you aren't strong enough to hold them open; the door hinges are stronger than you. (50)

The frailty and smallness of the detainee's body run counter to the racist stereotype of the migrant's alleged predatory masculinity that is circulated and amplified across the mediascape. On the level of form, Smith here consistently uses the second person pronoun signalling relationality and dialogicity. She constructs the detainee as vulnerable and frail, but she does not silence him in the process, nor does she call his masculinity in question. He is a "man" albeit not "strong enough" for the door hinges, which stand for the 'closing doors' of the British asylum system.

The portrayal of her second interlocutor, a Vietnamese refugee who still finds himself detained "in an airless room" for the sole crime of entering the UK irregularly, echoes the motive of fragility and precarity but uses a different narrative voice and tense:

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[74] See Giorgo Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[75] See Levine, *Forms,* 24–48.

[76] On precarity in refugee literature see Sandten, *Representations.*

… something closer to a boy – a sweet tired boy, not much past adolescence. He is Vietnamese. He will find his painstaking way in English for just over an hour, telling me he is embarrassed not to be better at speaking it. I will tell him not to worry, that my Vietnamese isn't up to much. He will laugh at this. The laugh, like a clear little torchbeam, will light up the true and profound state of this young man's dejection.[77]

One might take issue with Smith's use of "boy," maybe here, the relationship of care does become problematic and 'matronising.' What I consider more significant here, however, is the shift from the second person to the third person pronoun ("he") and her usage of the future tense. The use of a different pronoun highlights the individuality of each refugee. Smith thus avoids constructing a 'generic refugee', and instead stresses that she portrays very individual stories and voices. Care seems to shine through the form of the narration, specifically through the usage of tense and narrative voice. The shift to the future tense marks an important aesthetic intervention in a highly contested political terrain, as the tale does not grant the reader the mollifying sense of the 'already over:' while the specific narrated events did take place in the past, the system of detention is still ongoing and will continue in the future.

To use Levine's terminology, Smith constructs "the whole" of state power by juxtaposing temporal and spatial registers; the nation state circumscribes spaces and borders to a devastating effect for those who are not regarded as part of the nation, while also structuring time in a way that defies any logic or common sense: detention is supposed to be temporary, yet it is also infinite. Smith draws attention to the harrowing temporality of detention by using the future tense to describe the narrated events which actually took place in the past. Writing in the future tense, she highlights that her interlocutor will still find himself in detention as she returns home to draft the story, will still find himself in detention when the story is published. The tale is thus indeed a call for justice and a call for action, but it is a carefully patterned call. Its subject requires care for form and relationality, a pattern that suggests attentiveness, receptivity, responsibility, rather than exclamation marks or sentimental humanitarianism.

Moreover, care here plays out in the ways she constructs the relationships between herself and her interlocutors. The encounters are coloured by a painful affectivity ("the laugh, like a clear little torchbeam, will light up the true and profound state of this man's dejection") and mutual attentiveness as both of the interlocutors' care for each other's well-being. The relationality of care, which collides with the social form of state power, is mirrored in a particularly intriguing passage, in which Smith relates the sheer unsurmountable obstacles she encounters when she tries to visit the Vietnamese detainee. The mere event of visiting a detention centre, even as a card-carrying British citizen, is grotesque and dystopian. The security checks consist of filling out two forms, emptying her pockets of the most

[77] Smith, "The Detainee's Tale," 58.

trivial of things ("crumbled bits of tissue, crushed receipts"), going through a "downmarket"[78] variety of "an airport scanner," having her boots and coat examined. Smith notes that she "will feel guilty"[79] for not having told the guard about a pencil sharpener in her coat pockets she had forgotten about. In this passage, which runs over two pages, the discourse time slows down creating the sense of time becoming thick and heavy, something which "must be endured rather than traversed," as Harold Schweizer puts it in his work on the temporality of waiting.[80] Smith's experience of waiting thus echoes the experience of "immobility" and "stasis"[81] typically associated with the refugee experience.

Her use of the future tense suggests a sense of a temporal infinity, of a machine-like bureaucracy working in its punishing, hammering rhythm in the immediate present and stretching into an infinite future. Here as in the passages describing her conversations with her interlocutors, she relies on syntactic parallelisms and anaphora to describe the incomprehensible yet methodical actions of the guard: "She will make me take my boots off. She will thump them, shake them upside down. She will go through all the pockets of the coat she's made me take off with more thoroughness than I've ever had at any airport. She will find a pencil sharpener …"[82] The comparison to procedures in airport security highlights the parallels between a familiar system of state power (from the point of view of the card-carrying European citizen), and the system of detention that she had been unfamiliar with. The difference between the two systems is that the Home Office employs even more "thoroughness" for the detainees' visitors.

Another image of comparison and parallel is the "lanyard"[83] that Smith is given before entering the security checks. She writes:

> I quite often get given lanyards in my job. At literature festivals they're used as passes into all the events or the hospitality and the green rooms. I throw away several lanyards a year without thinking. This one, the one I'll be given this afternoon, will render every other lanyard I've ever been given and ever will be given from now on nothing but frippery.[84]

Her careless handling of the other lanyards, insignificant material objects ("frippery"), shows the enormous privilege of the writer-activist in the global North, a privilege she had never been aware of nor cared for. This particular "beaten-up lanyard, a lanyard with a history"[85] connects her with "a hundred nervous people or their children"[86] in a web of agonising care.

[78] Smith, "The Detainee's Tale," 57.
[79] Ibid., 57.
[80] Harold Schweizer, *On Waiting* (London: Routledge, 2008), 2.
[81] Amanda Ruth Waugh Lagji, "Waiting in Motion: Mapping Postcolonial Fiction, New Mobilities and Migration though Mohsin Hamid's Exit West," *Mobilities*, vol. 14, no. 2, (2019): 221.
[82] Smith, "The Detainee's Tale," 57.
[83] Ibid., 56.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid., 57.
[86] Ibid., 56–57.

Thus, while creating connections between her own story of visiting a detainee, the detainee's "tale" and the possible other stories that could be told by other visitors and other detainees, she also draws attention to the fact that their subject positions are drastically different. Unlike the detainee, she can leave the detention centre, sit down at her desk and craft the story.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the study of refugee life writing can be enriched and amended by bringing it into dialogue with Caroline Levine's work on social formalism, on the one hand and care ethics, on the other. Specifically, it is worth paying particular attention to the connections and collisions between the macrocosmic social forms that shape the current political predicament and the microcosmic narrative forms of Smith's narrative. "The Detainee's Tale" uncovers the punishing form of the British detention system not just on the level of the narrated events, but also on the level of aesthetic form, as the punishing rhythm of state power is echoed and mirrored in Smith's reliance on anaphora and parallelism. By extension, the isolation and the overall devastating, soul-crushing experience of detention is rendered in a minimalist language that relies on indentures and ellipses. The usage of tense (present tense vs. will-future) and narrative pronouns ("you" vs. "he") highlights the singularity of each detainee's individual experience, whereas the syntactical structures stress the overarching hierarchy between refugees from the global South and the British nation state. In this juxtaposition of aesthetic and social forms Smith articulates a powerful political critique.

The web or network structure of the global economy plays out on the level of the short story's content and themes, as the tale relates a harrowing story of enslaved labour and human trafficking. This punishing social form, however, collides with the web-like dialogicity of the story's formal patterning, as the tale vacillates between the second-person singular ("you"), the first-person singular ("I") and the first-person plural ("we"). Through the multiplicity and slippage of pronouns, Smith establishes an ethical counterpoint to the exploitative web of the global economy. The primacy of the face-to-face encounters creates a sense of a Lévinasian dialogicity, and ties in with the testimonial tradition of life writing that places emphasis on witnessing and responsibility.

There is a degree of hope then, in refugee life writing, a hope that literature combined with political activism can be an antidote to the increasing hostility towards migrants and refugees in Europe. Concomitantly, there is a certain degree of hope and optimism in Levine's approach to read social and aesthetic forms as interacting and colliding with each other, which then places a certain amount of transformative power on aesthetic forms such as refugee literature.[87] For educators teaching literature, this optimism is

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[87] In her nevertheless very positive review of Levine's Forms, Sheila Liming writes "*Forms* … is an extended riff on fantasies of critical influence." Sheila Liming, "*Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* by Caroline Levine (review)" *Criticism*, vol. 59, no. 4 (2017): 661–666.

enticing, particularly, in the age of the neoliberal university, in which the humanities are deemed irrelevant to careers and are defunded as a result.

Yet, Smith's tale also warns us against being overly optimistic. "I am an idiot," she confesses, and maybe we are also "idiots" to place aesthetic forms on a par with social forms. The continuity between aesthetic and social forms may be less smooth than Levine's study suggests. However, that does not mean that her theory collapses as a result. As this paper has illustrated, her model is compelling in the context of studying refugee life writing. The point I am making is that shedding light on the collision of social and aesthetic forms is not heroic. This is the painful knowledge the Ghanaian detainee imparts on the writer-activist in the last sentence of his tale. Despite all her care and concern, she is unable to actually 'help' him. He may feature in the position of the speaking subject in the tale, he may be listened to by one of the most important writers of our time, and his story may reach a wide readership. But none of this actually empowers him in the ways that he would have hoped for. Voice and storytelling may entail agency in many instances, but without an insertion into an enabling political form (the right kind of passport …) nothing will stick.

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