

MIGRATION & MARGINALITIES: C21 ROUTES

UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON, 10 SEPTEMBER 2015

Panel E: Creative Testimony

‘Framing refugees: creative writing choices in a context of disbelief, paranoia and malicious rumour’ Jeni Williams (University of Wales)

The work which I will be discussing grows out of the creative writing workshops I have held (and continue to hold) with refugee women with women from countries as diverse as Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Lebanon, Syria, China, Sudan, Kenya and Nigeria. These grew out of a long and heartbreaking engagement with the brutalising process of asylum and the inhuman chill of its administrative language. I was a volunteer administrator for a legal charity for 10 years, ran a women’s support group, hosted and continue to host destitute individuals and was involved in broader support groups which not only gave practical and social support but also, under the Hafan Books project, published collections of refugee writing as part of its consciousness raising and fundraising objectives. I am an activist therefore - but I am also a poet and academic with theoretical interests in language and aesthetics: this paper unsurprisingly bears the marks of both theory (I would have loved to explore Levinas more) and practice (I wish I could have discussed the women’s work in finer detail).

The starting point is language and the act of communication that is creative writing. And any writer seeks to engage in some way with an auditor, even if imaginary. As Adrienne Rich points out ‘Someone writing a poem believes in a reader, in readers, of that poem’. Yet the language that *frames* the refugee voice determines to a large extent its implicit addressee, skewing not only what is said and how it is expressed but also the definition of self that takes place in the act of communication.

This communication is framed by the dehumanising language of asylum which processes individuals like ingredients in a meat factory. The introduction of categories - *asylum seeker*, *refugee* (now frequently just *migrant*) - demonstrates a linguistic sleight of hand peculiar to the west, one that emphasises from the outset the process of abstracting and assessing the victim of oppression in terms of credibility and fraudulence... switching from one category to another or administratively placed outside: *refused asylum seeker* / *illegal asylum seeker*. It is a matter of degree therefore, not material, to shift to *swarms*, *floods*, *cockroaches* etc

When editing the writing from the first of the workshops I began to understand the extent to which a discourse of credibility generates particular expectations of the function and meaning of refugee writing: the first, that unshaped, ‘raw’ testimony was a mark of ‘genuine’ writing, the second, that the purpose was to jolt the reader into action by alerting him or her to the lack of credibility of the media reports, and the third, that such writing *necessarily* focused on trauma.

In other words that the significance of such writing lay in the marketing of collective suffering. Many refugees are driven to tell stories that demonstrate their ‘credibility’ and their ‘genuine’ need for sanctuary, to ‘sell’ themselves as victims in terms laid out by the media rather than on the complex interchanges of a creative exploration and revelation of the self which reaches out on human terms. Of course not all writing need be of this kind but I think this is a problem which I think can be demonstrated first by two contrasting book covers and considering their implied recipients

And then by two contrasting poems: the first with clear demands on its reader and directly engaging in debate with slick newspaper clichés:

I feel like nobody here, ashamed, like everybody
Hates me,
But they don't know me, they really
Don't know who I am either,
Only they know what they read in the
Newspapers about me
And that is not me.

Maxson Sahr Kpakio (Liberia)

However *as a poem*, something that gives a jolt of sudden awareness of recognition of something new, there is nothing particular in its *expression*. Kpakio's second stanza deals with abstractions and takes the form of a [re-]statement of factual narrative:

Despite the torture and persecution I managed
To escape from home in search
Of a land of peace and respect for
Human rights.

This writer is highly articulate in his own language but his quirky, witty self has been swallowed up in his new identity *as* refugee. Our responses to this poem are equally restricted: if this is what we already think a refugee is, then this is what we expect; however if we don't, we could equally dismiss it as empty words.

Activist writing frequently excludes the uncommitted. However the issue is particularly problematic for a refugee often writing in a second (or 3rd / 4th etc) language and uncertain over the expression of emotions.

My translation (with the poet) from the Arabic of a Sudanese love poem indicates some of what is lost. It has shape and movement, is full of fluid passionate images. I wish I could read all of it but here's an extract:

You magnetise me, pull me to you at the height of your power.
My body, my being drawn to follow,
all the seasons of my heart extended alive in glowing pulsation,
in firepoints and explosions of light, in festival.

Between my grasp and the endlessly out of reach
when quiet evening descends
its calm quenched with the radiance that is you,
rising, brimming, bubbling up,
when the morning brightens with your fineness... (Amani Omer Bakhiet, Sudan)

The emotional range and sense of physical being of this poem generates, even in translation, an intensely personal response and acknowledgement of the gifted individual who wrote it.

As Bakhiet's poem demonstrates so eloquently, poetry is far more powerful than a series of unambiguous statements in short lines: and, anyway, information does not result in understanding or connection. Rich insists that poetry must be poetry to work: 'I can't write a poem simply from good intentions, wanting to set things right, make it all better; the energy will leak out of it, it will end by meaning less than it says'.

In the context of asylum, information is selected (and omitted) according to particular interests that turn it into a kind of magical thinking aimed at the credulous spectator, a system of signs which produces and manages the dehumanised spectacle of refugees as a mass. Baudrillard doubts the credibility of information *per se*: 'Do people believe in information? Everyone pretends to. But in the end, do people believe in it? I'm not so sure.'

Rational explanation of these horrors cannot unpick a magical system with its hypnotic repetition of such key words; a kind of non-language that prevents meaningful communication of tragedies which, after all are - in part - of our making. Baudrillard sees the prevalence of hate as a violence generated by a determined indifference: 'people don't know what they want anymore. People are only sure what they don't want. The current processes are processes of rejection, of disaffection, of allergy.'

The magical language of asylum work through an isolating non-language, one that loses connection to the physical and temporal being of the individual through generalisation and abstraction, categories and rules. Guy Debord characterises our modern societies as having 'reached the stage of integrated spectacle' and details the 5 essential principles under which he sees them operating 'incessant technological renewal, integration of state and economy, generalized secrecy, unanswerable lies, and eternal present'.

This degraded language enables a social retreat from broader ethical responsibilities (such as the care of the vulnerable other) and, starting with the asylum process has now spread to groups such as the unemployed and the sick. This is where Rich's analysis of poetry as a revitalising force offers some hope, taking the form of 'a rift, a peculiar lapse, in the prevailing mode. ... an exchange of electrical currents through language—that daily, mundane, abused, and ill-prized medium'

The image of a policeman cradling a dead child in his arms enables the release of empathy and the lack of full facility with a language need not prevent a writer from cutting through 'that daily, mundane, abused, and ill-prized medium' to produce a similar electric shock of recognition of the individual tragedy. A Syrian woman in Swansea records her niece's attempt via Skype to make sense of what is happening around her –

NO CELEBRATION THIS YEAR

(Damascus, August 2012)

She says. No celebration this year.
She is five.
She is thinking about the children who go away
and don't come back.

...

She asks her nani.
She wants to stay at her house.
Her own house is too much high.
She hears the tank sound and the plane sound.
She says, what will happen with us?

Sliva Kikki (Syria)

Kikki's poem appeals through its simplicity, illustrating Rich's point that

a partly common language exists to which strangers can bring their own heartbeat, memories, images. A language that itself has learned from the heartbeat, memories, images of strangers...

The refugee is the prime case of the stranger in the west but, reified to a mass without individual heartbeat, memories, images, the media denies the 'partly common language' that enables social being. And a self that does not recognise its own social being will be disconnected and lonely. The widespread evidence of rising mental health problems in our society demonstrates what Emanuel Levinas calls 'the sadness of self-interestedness' that accompanies Baudrillard's violence of indifference. There is no more relevant thinker than Levinas in considering the immense damage done by a language that impedes empathy. Anthony F. Beavers explains that Levinas's cornerstone 'ethical moment' emerges through recognition of the existence of others:

when the egoist self comes across something that it wants to enjoy, something that it wants to make a part of itself, but cannot. That which the self wants to enjoy but cannot is the other person ... who pushes back, as it were, who does not allow him/herself to be consumed in the egoism of my enjoyment.

The other resists consumption by the self just as the self refuses consumption by the other. So says Levinas. And Rich, a lesbian, Jewish, communist, disabled American poet, argues for poetry as the refusal of such consumption:

someone writing a poem believes in, depends on, a delicate, vibrating range of difference, that an 'I' can become a 'we' without extinguishing others.

THE WORKSHOPS

Because of my involvement with women's groups (and my own identity as a poet and creative writing lecturer) I set up writing workshops to develop the women's voices. This was because almost all of the work in the Hafan series was produced by men: men are more likely to be literate, and able to speak and write in English but we needed to hear women's voices as well.

From the outset these workshops explored writing as a creative process that extended and redefined the writer even as it told (part of) their story. We discussed how writing

oneself as victim might affect a long term sense of self. We discussed the value of poetic structure and form in giving dignity and deliberation to the words. This structuring can be seen in the Kikki's poem above.

I encouraged them to move away from abstraction and to express themselves obliquely, Maria Shafayat for example uses intense image and shaped sensory expression in—

The day rose upon her,
she felt nothing but the heat,
Burnt her down to the soul.

She is scared to dream again.
Her hands are all blood
from gathering the pieces of dreams

Maria Qurat ul Ain Shafayat (Pakistan)

An aspect of the refugee experience comes through in the writers' treatment of time:

She is thinking about the other children,
the children hungry or in a safer place.
She says. No celebration this year.

She says, what will happen with us?
With other people.
With our neighbours.
With friends.
She is carefully thinking.

Sliva Kikki

The future is problematized, particularly – as here - by the loss of the communal celebratory markers that give the passage of time meaning to a child. Here the speaker recalls the untroubled security of childhood by detailing the order of her safe world:

When I was a child
I woke up and thought

*When is Eid gone, Eid ul Adha is coming
When Eid ul Adha is gone, Rabi ul awal is coming.*

*I woke up and thought
on Sunday
I will go with dad to the market
and we will buy mangoes.*

*I used to think that
on 1st of the month
I will go with mommy to the grocers
and she will buy me jellies*

Maria Qurat ul Ain Shafayat

The poem builds on this litany of lost markers to conclude in the loss of order and safety together. This loss of childhood security is something to which we can all respond - as Rebecca Solnit notes in her *Book of Migrations*, 'we are all in some senses refugees from a lost world':

The very idea of self as an entity bounded by the borders of the skin is a fiction disguising the vast geographies [of home] contained under that skin that will never let you go .

The refugee's enforced loss of home is particularly intense but the loss itself is comprehensible to the reader, enabling an understanding of the other through a simultaneous sharing of experience and a recognition of the difference that has effected such a traumatic gash in continuity.

In this next poem time and home are still further complicated. The focus is a photograph, that carrier of memory and assurance of personal continuity. This particular photograph, like all the others, is now lost, itself turned to memory. The family of the writer, Aliya Khalil, fled first from Basra to Baghdad (Iran /Iraq war), then from Baghdad to Jordan (Saddam Hussein), returned to Baghdad after the invasion, fled chaos there and is now scattered all over the world. Here Khalil does not look back to a past moment but to the excitement and hope of the night *before* it takes place. She imagines herself simultaneously as a child (looking forward) and an adult (looking back) with the two timelines meeting in a photograph taken well before the first flight from Basra. The six year old girl looks forward to the celebration of Eid, a celebration that draws together friends, neighbours and family and the gift giving and interchange that marks their communal relationship:

... I will wear my new white dress
and my new pink shoes -
I put them safe under my pillow -
I will put them on first thing in the morning.
...
And my shoes, my new pink shoes
With their golden rings....
It seems always I dreamed of pink shoes
and this Eid the dream comes true.
I think of how my friends and neighbours will stare and say
O Aliya is wearing pink shoes!
...
I can't wait till tomorrow:
We will cross the sky blue wooden bridge
to the park on Sinbad island.
I will be frightened as we walk over the running water
but my dad will be with me.
He will protect me, hold me safe.
...

Aliya Khalil (Iraq)

But I finish with an extraordinary poem written by Grace Omoloso. Omoloso was sold to labour at 5 and trafficked to Britain at 14. She chose *not* to write of FGM, beating and abuse in Nigeria, nor of the miscarriage of three babies in Britain (the last due to criminal neglect in Yarlswood detention camp). She decided she didn't want to think about herself in this way and chose instead to write about picking mangoes as a child worker of 6 or 7:

We don't care that the chickens run to peck our maize
the goats come to eat our vegetables.

...

We wait till we are alone because we have been warned.
 The people come out shouting
 'You people from the second village...'
 Our stones hit their houses, break their cooking pots.
 ...
 We are deaf to everything, we cannot stop.
 We look up, watch where the stones go,
 see who hits which fruit, dodge the stones coming down
 Everything is invisible, everything is unreal except the mango tree.

 I know some will be beaten by the villagers - but that can wait.
 I know I will be shouted at -
 but that can wait.
 I don't think about pain
 even though I was beaten yesterday.

Grace Omoloso (Nigeria)

This memory differs from those of the previous writers because it does not hark back to safety but to a moment of self determination and resilience. And she makes that clear:

Whatever I do when I am at home I am always in trouble.
 There is no place for me. But when I am eating mangoes,
 when I am walking that hot way through the stream,
 it's like I'm flying.
 This is the place I can show myself, not be shy nor quiet,
 this is my space, where I can let myself loose.

 And I'm not alone there.
 even though the neighbours chase us with canes we are free.
 Brave, ourselves in our own space,
 not obedient, not how those who work us,
 who beat us and train us, not how they think
 we are.

This poem tells her story in a way that enables us to think beyond the clichés of either media pariah *or* pitied victim and to connect with a fierce determined little girl. As refugee writing it challenges so many stereotypes in its declaration, against the odds, that 'we are free / not how they think / we are'.

This is the universal value of such writing. Not just the testimony of trauma but the meeting of and recognition of another self through which dialogue can, in Levinas's words, begin to flourish. And as Rich so ably notes, poetry summons up questions of relationship best of all:

We go to poetry because we believe it has something to do with us. We also go to poetry to
 receive the experience of the not-me, enter a field of vision we could not otherwise apprehend.