

Preface

As the name for one who flees (*fugere*) from danger to a space of protection, the term *refugee* names a specific position in space and time: a past emergency leads to a dislocated present under the threat of harm, propelling one's flight to find refuge toward a future elsewhere. Its shadow is not only the term *migrant* but also *fugitive*, one who flees from the law, a reminder that persons move and are moved between regimes of legality and illegality.¹ Under the names of asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, refugees registered or under United Nations mandate, and "persons in refugee-like situations," more than sixty-five million live forcibly displaced around a globe criss-crossed by trip wire, check point, border wall, plastic tent, paper, vessel, plane, footpath, cell phone signal, truck, and treaty.²

These names for displacement have their own complex histories and trajectories as they develop and change among state, international, and nongovernmental actors. They are categories for managing migration that prompt, enable, hamper, and criminalize it. These categories are made meaningful through spatial practices of border and immigration control that shape the temporality of refugee displacement. Refugee movement may be timely and untimely; urgent and belated; compressed and extended into long moments of movement and stasis, of continuity and discontinuity. Refugee seekers might haunt the places they seek; waiting, processed, interdicted, resettled, "voluntarily returned," or eventually deported, they might be haunted by the futures of the places they do not come to inhabit. If refuge is granted through resettlement as "the gift of freedom," the time of gratitude must be endured indefinitely, always falling short of repayment to the state.³ If the refuge shows itself to be a site of violence, that violence is endured or resisted with yet another search. Even if refuge is granted and the experience of seeking refuge is relocated to the remembered past, refugee time often persists under the cover of, or erasure under, other names ("immigrant," "economic migrant," "illegal alien," "success story," "naturalized citizen"). A seeker of refuge might find a future in a host country or in his or her originating country; might change legal status while staying in place; might easily abandon the affective status of abjection or gratitude or exceptionality; might hold onto the temporal disruption of trauma indefinitely; and so on. Refugees, whether authorized or unauthorized, are made to improvise forms of life within systems that respond to them as disordered, unruly, devalued subjects.⁴

At sea, multiple temporalities get embodied, compressed, and organized into the space of a ship or a raft. Each vessel may hold a multitude of wartimes, memories, histories that overlap and elongate into an indefinite serial catastrophe. The vessels may be navigated but at any moment find themselves adrift, a vulnerable form of

movement for refugees and migrants but a powerful option for the political borders of states and international entities. On land, the temporalities of border control, interdiction, and deportation organize the penal architecture of prisons and detention centers—even if the United States would seek to legally call some of those detention centers “daycares” for Central American minors, or sites for holding economic migrants rather than refugees, or enemy combatants rather than tortured captives.

In the humanitarian architecture of formal refugee camps, UN guidelines on how to build an emergency temporary camp can organize the space that multiple generations of a family may inhabit. Built into the architecture of the Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya was the expectation that they would be used by a small number of Somali refugees for a few months: time has since expanded into a quarter century, by three generations born, and the space has compressed those generations ever more densely until a new section of camp is established. The Kenyan state has pointed to this mismatch of time and space to say the camp has outlived its intended temporariness; the camp’s inhabitants point to the most recent threats of imminent closure to ask where will Dadaab refugees find refuge from Dadaab. Meanwhile, people have improvised an informal borderlands, animating a zone of formal and informal economic practices.

And so, what promises in name to be a single, practical, urgent, and temporary need for refuge is almost never experienced or conceptualized this way: instead, contemporary refugee timespaces involve a complex of spatial and temporal scales as they collide, converge, interrupt, or overlap with each other. Writings and interviews of refugees and migrants fleeing violence often explicitly contend with these timespaces or are charged with the responsibility to make them recognizable to others. One need only look at the intense demands for spatial and temporal precision and continuity in an asylum application or interview for determining refugee status.

Where institutional humanitarian narrative conventions impose certain forms of simplified order onto refugee stories to make them recognizable, classifiable, and authorizable, other narrative forms enable more varied and challenging renderings of refugee timespaces. The translator Lina Mounzer puts this point well in her reflection on her work translating Syrian women’s first-person accounts into English for a blog by the Institute for War and Peace reporting. Carrying the women’s stories of “life under siege and war” across borders the women cannot (or cannot yet) cross, Mounzer propels herself into the imaginative space of occupying the women’s positions—impossibly, simultaneously, with fearful intimacy and a vicariness felt in the flesh:

In the last few months, I’ve moved houses no less than 35 times. . . .

In the last few months, I have watched my city, Maarrat al-Numan, burn, I have watched my city, Raqqa, burn, I have fled Aleppo from the increased fanaticism of the rebels, I have fled Aleppo from the chokehold of the regime, I have fled Aleppo to Turkey, I have fled Aleppo to Lebanon, I have fled Aleppo not knowing if I will ever return, or what I might find if I do.⁵

Multiple narratives converge onto, and are spun through, the translator’s body. She holds the power to carry words across space and time; she has no power to carry people across space and time; she makes space in her body for more voices in past,

present, and future tenses; she loses herself in the voices and their tensions. She transforms Arabic into English with immediacy and urgency; she does so remotely and belatedly. To each story, she imagines adding “*A Note on the Translation: War changes the laws of physics, bending time and space to its will.*” Mounzer’s note tries to account for the women’s testimonies as much as her translation. Time and space are not merely responsive to the force of war: subject to changing rules, time and space no longer seem to function properly, except to serve war. How do time and space, then, function for those who flee war?

This dossier considers how times and spaces are managed, conceptualized, and experienced through the unstable and contested category of the contemporary refugee, which produces political and legal fictions of legality and illegality. The essays move across disciplinary formations to examine contemporary refugee timespaces as they appear in public discourse, legal decisions, diplomatic treaties, digital archives, architectures, forms of diasporic literary fiction, and in the words of those seeking refuge and those claiming space in defiance of regimes that produce illegality through de facto status crimes. These times and spaces operate at interrelated levels and in complex ways—they are conceptualized, they are experienced; they press upon geopolitical forms and mark aesthetic ones.

Moving Borders

The dossier begins with essays by Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi, Maurizio Albahari, and Adam Goodman that address how borders move through international agreements and humanitarian programs. Siddiqi analyzes the “architectures of forced migration” that compose and reproduce the borderlands of Ifo camp, the oldest of the Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya. The border of the refugee camp is both literal and conceptual: formally bounded and equipped with supplies, the camp is an enclosed site of precarity where “multiple nations and multilateral agencies may convene and assert” their power. Dislocating our visual perception of camp borders, directing our attention to the mobile architectures of refugee dwellings, and troubling the line between formal and makeshift kinds of camps, she finds an “unruly esthesis” of the refugee camp that challenges theories of the camp as extraterritorial.⁶

Albahari argues for an understanding of the Mediterranean Sea, what he elsewhere calls the “world’s deadliest border,” as itself migratory or “globally adrift.”⁷ To discern this border and its drift is to look for the bodies it leaves behind, leaves out, or holds captive: they mark the border when they sink to the bottom of the sea along routes made hazardous, or hover near fences made to keep them out, or wait in detention centers that wall them in, or find themselves negotiating the nationalist spaces they are in but not of. Albahari’s essay incisively tracks the long-running diplomatic efforts of Italy and EU politicians to effectively outsource immigration control, described only as “illegal” and “clandestine,” by funding Libyan coast guard and border patrolling activities, detention centers, and involuntary repatriation of African migrants and refugees. Such diplomacy “deepens the structural wound to the right to seek asylum” by shifting sovereign boundaries to the south, pushing away the responsibility of Italy and the EU to uphold international conventions and human rights.

Goodman details the United States’ response to asylum seekers from Guatemala,

Honduras, and El Salvador, a large number of whom are unaccompanied minors, through increased detentions, expedited deportations, and the outsourcing of border controls to Mexico. Under Barack Obama and now Donald J. Trump, the United States has moved the border south for these Northern Triangle asylum seekers. Moving the border south alters the perceived timeline of crisis: as Goodman notes, an approximately 50 percent decrease in the number of Northern Triangle asylum seekers apprehended by the U.S. Border Patrol from fiscal years 2014 to 2015 led some to declare an end to a “surge” in migration that had merely been pushed downward, as Mexico dramatically increased its own number of deportations of Northern Triangle asylum seekers.

Entering Illegality

Legal agreements that outsource border policing, interdiction, and deportation deliberately produce forms of illegality and seek to curb asylum and resettlement claims. The essays on moving borders provide conceptual and geopolitical context for tracing the effects of border politics in producing illegality. Tanya Golash-Boza tells the story of Vern, an asylum seeker whose application became not only a time of waiting—first as it was pending, then as it was under appeal, then when it was denied—but also a time for building his life in Ohio. Golash-Boza’s interview with Vern, who was targeted in an ICE raid that led to his deportation to Guatemala, conveys the affective and economic effects of a capricious system, in which the asylum seeker’s residential location, level of access to legal representation, or luck of the draw in which particular judge hears his case could have given him and his family an entirely different future.

The counterpart to Golash-Bolaza’s story of a failed asylum bid and deportation is Gilberto Rosas’s narration of the willful refusal of undocumented Mexican nationals in the United States to seek the asylum or refuge that would most likely lead to their deportation, regardless of their ability to fit the definition of an asylum seeker. They refuse to seek refuge, legally and affectively, from an unjust legal regime. Escaping the recent extreme violence in Ciudad Juárez to participate in the economic boom of El Paso, its so-called sister city to the north, these denizens’ daily lives are a renunciation of the racial state as it classifies people into the legal fictions of the refugee, the migrant, the immigrant, the visa or green card holder, or the citizen. Rosas intervenes in the discussion of contemporary refugee timespaces by pointing to the quotidian ways people refuse humanitarian frameworks for their lives and by calling on scholars to upend those frameworks in scholarship on migration and the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, that “new frontier.”

Reconceptualizing Refugee Figures

The rhetorical and discursive forms for conceptualizing refugee timespaces can hold enormous legal, political, cultural, and aesthetic power over migrant forms of life.

Sharif M. Youssef analyzes the appeals case of an asylum seeker in Canada who successfully argued that lying to airport immigration officials about his identity and reason for travel was a morally involuntary response to a “temporally extended sense” of imminent threat. Having been imprisoned and tortured by Nigerian police for his political activism, the sight of uniformed immigration officials threw Ugochukwu

Chinosa Nwanebu into “an agonizingly long instant of fear,” a fear of harm analogous to the temporal experience of a domestic abuse survivor. Youssef’s essay challenges jurisprudence on refugees by refuting a core assumption in granting refugee status: that a subjective experience of imminent threat can be evaluated by an objective measure of time.

Where Youssef’s argument relies on the capacity of analogy to abridge or collapse distances across time and space—and thus expand the legal justification of morally involuntary responses for trauma survivors—Yogita Goyal cautions that widespread analogies of Mediterranean migrations to the transatlantic slave trade can obfuscate historical and political realities of slavery as well as contemporary migration, violence, and rights. Analyzing the frequent analogy made between the 1781 atrocity of enslaved Africans thrown overboard the *Zong* slave ship and the 2015 deaths of African refugees and migrants off the coast of Lampedusa, Goyal argues that “the analogy to slavery can be enlisted to yield broader visions of justice and reparation, but only if we refuse to settle the meaning of either term being compared.”⁸ Goyal calls for a critical examination of such analogies and their limitations in grappling with contemporary threats to black humanity in new forms of captivity, exploitation, and expanding global reaches of state terror. A “new comparative literacy” across time and space is needed in order for contemporary political activism and critique to move beyond the tendency of “seeing the past of the United States as the present of the Global South.”

Archiving Diasporic Figures

Where Youssef and Goyal evaluate juridical and rhetorical forms that conceptualize the refugee figure, essays by Crystal Parikh, Alexandra S. Moore, and April Shemak turn to the aesthetic and cultural forms for generating diasporic memory and futurity that respond to the promises of national liberal humanitarianism.

Both Parikh and Moore invite us to consider how diaspora becomes, as Samantha Pinto argues, a kind of aesthetic strategy of disorder—a formal disordering that challenges current humanitarian figurations of the refugee and stateless or exiled person.⁹ Parikh attends to “the strangeness of the refugee child” in Lê Thi Diem Thúy’s novel *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* to show how U.S. diasporic writers pull against the geopolitical constructions of “innocence, responsibility, and redemption” that ensnare the refugee. Informed by the legal strangeness of both the child and the refugee as innocents who are “said to need protections more than freedoms,” Parikh argues that the humanitarian nation attributes this idealized innocence to refugees in order to reflect that idealized innocence back upon the nation. What happens when the Vietnamese refugee child refuses the perfect innocence and perpetual gratefulness the hospitable nation demands from her? How do diasporic writers challenge national fantasies of innocence by portraying the refugee child as “vulnerable,” yes, but also “willful, demanding, difficult and strange in her relation to family, nation, and the law”? Against the presumed historical blankness of innocents that drives U.S. national fantasies of itself, Parikh reveals a strange and estranging figure who “carries with her the ghosts of other lives rooted in other worlds.” Both haunted and haunting, spatially pulled from and into elsewhere, the refugee child figure queers time and space by holding onto conditional pasts and conditional futures—“other lifeworlds that might

have, and might still, grant her and her family entirely other forms of recognition and good life.”

Moore looks to novels of the Tibetan diaspora to examine the “complex political and cultural imaginaries” that nourish the exilic dream of a future state and the restoration of a past Tibetan unity. In a play on detective and diasporic novel conventions, Jamyang Norbu’s *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* takes advantage of a temporal gap in Sherlock Holmes’s timeline to write the famous detective into the imperial “Great Game” as it unfolded between 1891 and 1894 in India and Tibet. Granting the novel a privileged capacity for the Tibetan diaspora to confront its political and historical complexity and envision a future, Moore reads Norbu’s novel as rendering competing imperial, diasporic, and national histories into the materials for “imaging a future” beyond refuge or exile.

Shemak examines the consequences of a public memory project in the form of a digital archive containing firsthand stories from Haitian asylum seekers, Cuban workers, U.S. military personnel, and so-called Enemy Combatants or No Longer Enemy Combatants, all of whom stayed, briefly or indefinitely, at the Guantánamo Naval Base in Cuba.¹⁰ She assesses the many tensions housed within the Guantánamo Public Memory Project as it seeks to foster a specifically U.S. national dialogue of a global space of detention, and as it presents the authoritative testimonies of guards alongside impressionistic “memories of remembering” by then-child detainees. What would a truly global, participatory archive of Guantánamo look like? How would it be organized to get at the enormous complexity of a site that has been made and remade to serve changing uses and powers of detention?

Fugitive, protected, integrated, interdicted, detained, or deported, the authorized or unauthorized refugee may be an object of hospitality and the subject of terror; the seeming confirmation of bare life and its challenge. It is the seeker whose line of flight may collapse the spatial, temporal, and psychic distances between war zones and home fronts. Refugee timespaces are generated in the emplacing, displacing, replacing, and misplacing of life and borders and rights. They shuttle between the material present and the remembered past; they collide or collapse into each other across space to generate new possibilities for recognition and critique.

NOTES

1. Note here the UN definition between refugee and migrant as a mainstreamed way of understanding displacement and its attachment to protection and rights. UNHCR, accessed May 28, 2017, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2016/7/55df0e556/unhcr-viewpoint-refugee-migrant-right.html>.

2. UNHCR Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2015, accessed May 28, 2017, <http://www.unhcr.org/statistics>. The report counts forcibly displaced persons at 65.3 million by the end of 2015, which had increased sharply throughout that year and is the highest number recorded by the agency. Included in the 65.3 million are refugees under UNHCR’s mandate, Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA, and “persons in refugee-like situations.” It does not include other “persons of concern” for the UN, which includes stateless persons and returnees who are presumably voluntarily returning to their home countries.

3. See Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012).
4. See Lisa M. Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (New York: New York University Press 2012), for her discussion of how humanitarian politics around personhood depend on racial, economic, and heteropatriarchal measures of worth.
5. Lina Mounzer, “War in Translation: Giving Voice to the Women of Syria,” accessed December 1, 2016, <http://lithub.com/war-in-translation-giving-voice-to-the-women-of-syria/>.
6. For an overview of refugee camps as objects of analysis, see Michel Agier, “Afterword: What Contemporary Camps Tell Us about the World to Come,” *Humanity* 7, no. 3 (Winter 2016): 459–68.
7. See, for example, Maurizio Albahari, “After the Shipwreck: Mourning and Citizenship in the Mediterranean, Our Sea,” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 286.
8. For the “Left-To-Die Boat” project, Forensic Architecture uses NATO surveillance technologies and memory aids for survivors to help reconstruct the events of 2011, in which a boat was left to drift in the Central Mediterranean for two weeks and led to sixty-three deaths, <http://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/left-die-boat/>, accessed May 15, 2017.
9. Samantha Pinto, *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic* (New York: New York University Press, 2013). See also Kate McCullough, “Displacement as Narrative Structure: Refugee Time/Space in Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Arabian Jazz*,” *American Literature* 83, no. 4 (December 2011): 803–29.
10. See “A Lens on Mohamedou Slahi at Guantánamo: A Conversation,” *Humanity* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 116.