Foreword

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This issue of Living Refugee Archives titled *In Their Own Voices i*s a special collection of papers written by and with refugee women based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. It is fortified by the contributions from Iranian photographer Amin Kamrani who worked alongside the refugee communities in Kuala Lumpur, and the verse of Mwaffaq Al-Hajjar, a Syrian poet. All contributors were participants in a doctoral participatory action research (PAR) project undertaken in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, conducted between 2017–2018 by Kirandeep Kaur, a doctoral researcher in Law and Development at Tilburg University. The project is a testimony to the fact that using collaborative and inclusive methods of fieldwork in the form of a genuine human dialogue and materializing the transformative potential of wilful action is indeed possible.

In each chapter, Kaur and her companions invite us on a journey of storytelling through which "grief, pain and loss" commonly leading to furthering the "collective fears of the unknown stranger or an invasion of the other" instead end up challenging canonized forms of archiving, collecting testimonies and keeping a tally on human suffering. Our inability to connect with forced migrants' hopes and suffering goes hand in hand with the lack of visibility of their faces, not just in the media, but in the registers of humanity at large: disposable lives, disposable bodies, disposable life stories. Kaur chose to go against the grain and trained and worked alongside the Afghan, Syrian, Somali and Rohingya communities with the aim of inclusive publishing and co-writing at the expense of turning her back to formal academic writing and editing processes. In the final instance, this work brings narrative politics, storytelling, witnessing and collective action together in a seamless flow.

Although narrative politics has long been recognised as both practice and theory, there has been little investigation about how survival narratives and testimonials delivered as first-hand accounts are constituted, could be mobilised and what kind of alternative political spaces they could create[1]. The interdisciplinary nature of narrative politics as method is readily embraced by critical humanities, drawing on philosophical properties of the narrative self. In this collection, however, the focus is not on the specific stories of individuals alone. These are instances of circumscribed storytelling that aim to challenge the assumptions, lacunae and areas of tension in our record of the present time, and they compel us to develop a more critical approach to the image of the refugee, the asylum seeker, the illegal migrant. Together with photography and poetry that do not victimize the dispossessed but identify their agency, these essays lead us to think about further possibilities offered by such communicative for-

[1] See Peter J. Rabinowitz, Before reading: Narrative conventions and the politics of interpretation. The Ohio State University Press, 1998, and, Frederick W. Mayer, Narrative politics: Stories and collective action. Oxford University Press, USA, 2014.

mats of delivery of research findings and the novel spaces and practices of understanding they bring about.

Deliberately, Kaur introduces the whole body of work in the language of stories about stories. She is very insistent that the people whose stories we hear are not to become anonymised participants in an empirical study. These stories are real, refer to actual experiences, and yet the mode of their delivery also challenges the assumed transparency, neutrality and compulsory positivity of survival narratives. Furthermore, echoing contemporary debates on the image and the possibilities of dialogue and understanding through photography, the collection at hand combines a deep and vested interest in the pain and suffering of others with politics of representation[2]. Presenting an engaging exploration of the ethical challenges posed by the ubiquity of narratives and images of dispossession, suffering and loss, Kaur and her companions' take on both the power and the danger of humanizing forced migration is worth a really close look. Inching towards a new theoretical model for understanding human agency and political subjecthood, this compilation of essays/stories/images/poems proposes a series of paradigmatic shifts in terms of both the ontology and historiography of the representation of the dispossessed and of displacement. Moving away from the dualistic understanding of the spectator and the image, contributors to the volume embrace a triadic model that is constituted of the writer/photographer, the analyzed/photographed subject and the reader as an active participant. They therefore invite us to re-think the role of witnessing, documenting and disseminating testimonials in the wider context of violence, citizenship, statehood, borders, exclusion, lives rendered disposable, survival vis-à-vis perceived limits of academic spectatorship.

Both testimony and photography are linked to memory in the context of loss, abyss, failure and absence. While the questions of what is missing or what cannot be recalled have a negative relation to memory, they are essential pillars of the endeavour of building archives that bear the traces of the past in pursuit of 'tangible evidence' or 'records.' If so, how could one establish a 'living archive'? Bringing these two seemingly disparate concepts into a conversation with each other initiates complex negotiations around subjectivity, belonging and witnessing. The living archive is an anchor through which one attempts to resist the imposition of what is deemed as 'appropriate' to be remembered. It creates a platform for making a judgment that enables the utilization of witnessing as a self-reflexive engagement with the aim of achieving historical accountability for those who are made invisible at the present moment and thus likely will not be accounted for otherwise when the very present becomes tomorrow's past.

If so, action research is a perfect entry regarding the growing roster of the Living Refugee Archives. This type of scholarly work challenges the cognitive models of reflection that are implicit in much of the methods literature and instead underlines the importance of human capacity for relational understanding of struggle and survival. All the while, relying on our capability of reflection which could ultimately facili-

[2] See Susan Sontag, "Regarding the pain of others." Diogène 1 (2003): 127-139 and Judith Butler, "Photography, war, outrage." pmla 120, no. 3 (2005): 822-827.

tate personal, societal and ultimately systemic change. Indeed, theoretical conceptions of reflective scholarly practice and action research are inherently related. In both cases, our witnessing of, engagement with and reflections on human experience are deemed to be transformative of the lives of individuals and situations involved. And yet, this does not mean reflective practice is tantamount to action research or active forms of witnessing[3]. One has to have a genuine consideration of the concept of strategic action and wilful consideration for the aforementioned transformative potential to be materialized. Strategic action involves the development and utilization of a deliberate framework to solve a particular problem using a coherent, systematic and targeted methodology. Though action research, by definition, must incorporate these components, in and of itself it does not provide a destination for the choices that emanate from our capacity for judgment and resort to human will. The framing of it determines its potential outcomes.

In this context, Kaur and her collaborators' work articulate a global, cross-cultural historiography in which absolutist notions of statehood, political subjectivity and identity are refashioned according to the demands of a new frame of reference. The contrapuntal perspective their work proposes in and of itself exposes the violence that underpins the formation of modern sovereign subjectivity finding its ultimate expression in national citizenship. Citizenship and the dominant rights discourse that comes with it is in turn an integral part of a system in which relations of domination are structurally occulted. The stories shared in the collection also highlight the social and political production of a particular type of individual body, which is regulated, enclosed, sovereign and yet only so if it is recognized by the system and thus rendered visible. As such, they posit the need for a radical re-imagining of realities of forced migration in order to enable the emergence of a new type of agency and its embodiment as a heterogeneous assertion of specificity while contesting the global commodification of human suffering. Attacking the two-dimensional view of the political discourse pertaining to refugee status determination, in which the ethical boundaries of statehood and peoplehood dangerously overlap, the techniques utilized in Kaur's collection exhibit a complex awareness of what is anticipated from a representative work of refugee stories, testimonials and survival narratives and what is silenced as a result.

If we recall pivotal work such as Lisa Marie Cacho's Social death: Racialized rightlessness and the criminalization of the unprotected, Kaur's collection of stories is an excellent contribution to the kind of scholarship on social death4 as the term applies to forced migration studies. Not only does it have new things to say on issues related to vulnerability and agency, but her contribution crosses a number of disciplines while anchoring them back in critical legal studies. The fluidity witnessed in this work is a result of an engaging analysis of alternative methodologies of academic work hand in hand

[3]See Nergis Canefe, "Gender, Dispossession and Ethics of Witnessing," and "Gender, Identity and Displacement: Nexus Requirements for a Critical Epistemology" in Nasreen Chowdhory and Paula Banerji, eds., Gender, Identity and Migration in India, Palgrave (forthcoming)

[4] Cacho, Lisa Marie. *Social death: Racialized rightlessness and the criminalization of the unprotected*. Vol. 7. NYU Press, 2012.

with an open condemnation of the effects of state-sanctioned personhood.

In her introductory essay, Kaur frames the debate by re-introducing story-telling and testimonials not only as form but also as potent content inherently related to the politics of survival. Kaur's work establishes an important dichotomy that guides the organization of the volume: the value of one's humanity is made intelligible through racialized, sexualized, spatialized, and state-sanctioned representations of political subjects or the lack of these thereof. Each section in the collection thus offers a captivating narrative of these absences and offers a counter-narrative of presence and visibility. This is especially compelling due to perceived illegality of asylum seekers and migrant workers and the victims of exclusion, marginalization and societal violence becoming guilty of what could best be identified as a "*de facto* status crime,"[5] rendering them ineligible for personhood and what Judith Butler calls 'grievable lives.'[6] The question that lingers is what comes after claiming that very space which was habitually denied and for that, the Living Refugee Archives should be considered a site of protest as much as a platform for exchange and dialogue.

[5]See Dov Lynch, *Engaging Eurasia's separatist states: Unresolved conflicts and de facto states*. US Institute of Peace Press, 2004.

[6]See Judith Butler, *Frames of war: When is life grievable?*. Verso Books, 2016.

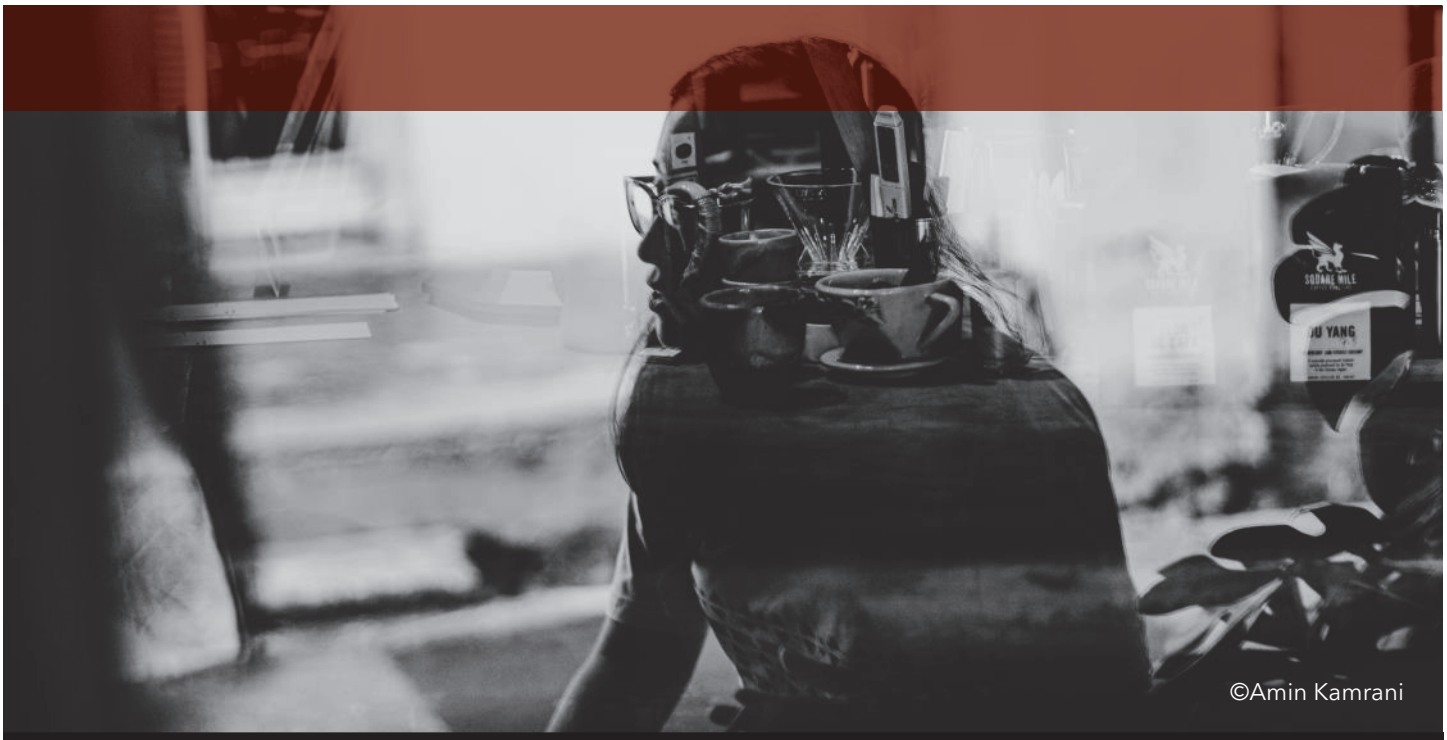


Photo Credit: Amin Kamrani, 20/20 Exhibition

Photo Titled:

Photo No. 3 Your Pattern on the Window

Taken in: Georgetown, Penang, Malaysia

20/20 Photos are available for purchase with 60% percent going to refugee communities in need

In your absence

the sun is just the sun

the day, day

night, night.

Your presence is a

moonlight mixture.