Maurizio Veglio[1]

Tales From Another World

Abstract

At the Human Rights and Migration Law Clinic (HRMLC), established at the International University College of Turin, narratives from asylum seekers are conveyed by clinical students into written legal memos aimed at supporting claims for international protection. Throughout the process the former become (often unconscious) authors, while the latter are the medium – pens, keyboards and lenses – shaping words into a script.

Resulting legal papers encapsulate life diaries and chronicles of violence, obsession and death, a more-than-contemporary form of literature mingling history, drama and legal storytelling.

Introduction

If the irruption of asylum seekers on European media's headlines prompted the launch of a strict containment policy, known as the European Agenda on Migration, no barrier, wall or barbed wire could limit the vehicular power of storytelling.

Detained in hotspots, held in deportation centres, stranded in Libya, migrants' words violate body-proof fences, leaking out to reach those who can forge them into legal biographies.

The same way anthropologists are devoted to ethnography, clinical students – together with adjudicators and legal professionals – record an anthology of voices, a collectively owned novel challenging boundaries of themes and genres: magic realism, horror, mythology, cruelty, resistance.

Unexpectedly such a peculiar process happens within a legal framework, in the effort to revert law from a supremacy tool into a justice-generating factor.

While assisting asylum seekers, clinical students become modern-day legal story writers, as well as witnesses, photographers, painters, depicting the very nature of an individual condition, human suffering.

What follows is a first recognition of unchartered narrative territories[2].

1 Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull'Immigrazione (ASGI), International University College of Turin (IUC).

2 A special thanks to Irene Pagnotta for her valuable contribution and her passion for

Unintended Literature

Stemming from a typical client-lawyer relationship, narratives from asylum seekers are the raw material on which legal professionals exercise their skills, pursuant to a formal mandate and complying with specific normative requirements.

Yet the peculiar interaction between international protection applicants and legal advisors stimulates a dual deception: asylum seekers become unaware authors, borrower of the traditional storytelling legacy, while clinical students turn into unaware legal story-writers, modern biographers of noteworthy but otherwise soon-to-be-forgotten humankind.

Besides the drafting of legal claims, the interplay of voices and words marks the foundation of an anthology of history and drama, a singular kind of *unintended literature*.

"I was 13 years old when I got arrested
for the first time in Dyarbakir.
I was young, skinny, short hair, dressed as a boy,
I had no breasts.
After taking me to the police station,
the chief of the local anti-terrorism squad
came to me and pushed me with his hands on my chest.
He wanted to humiliate me.
He was a middle aged man, pot belly, little hair,
acting as the dominant male.
I was a little girl.
He had power, but I had love"
(E.A. from Turkey)

A Post-Colonial Chorus of Voices

The very root of such creative process lies on a subversive deed: returning the voice to the new subaltern, those whose words have been abducted, misspelled and silenced by the general discourse.

Far from a mere symbolic repayment, applicants are given the chance to speak for themselves, distancing from the corner in which they have been boxed (Fanon, 1961), and fighting face-to-face ignorance, prejudices and trivialization (Said, 1978).

Reclaiming the power to "*describe back*" (Rushdie, 2000) – the right to one's own biography – requires a great effort from asylum seekers, moving bottom-up rather than in-between to eradicate the idea that, as 19th century small-holding peasants, "*They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented*" (Marx, 1852).

human beings.

Many applicants – illiterate, abused, overwhelmed – can barely offer raw and naked narratives, challenging western dogmas of time and space and questioning the very idea of the *measurable*.

Indeed emptiness and silence shaping these accounts – the power of the un-said – validate the definition of asylum seekers as "*speechless emissaries*" of suffering (Malkki, 1996).

"One day we are forced into a car and taken to the coast.
It's 7 pm, deep dark, hard to see anything.
I am frightened.
When we get before the sea they shout "Qullah"
and order us to raise one arm and then two fingers.
They explain: if you choose one, you jump on the boat;
if you choose two, you get shot and die.
There is a huge boat facing us.
I have never seen so much water in my life.
You do not get to see the end of the sea.
In Mali I saw puddles and rivers, and you can see
people standing on the other side of the river.
That's not the sea.
The water touches the sky. I can not swim.
Maybe it's the biggest puddle I have ever seen"
(D.G. from Mali)

National, Vehicular and Vernacular Repertoires

Applicants' narratives update the oral tradition of storytelling, a world where "*language provides the terms by which a reality may be constituted*" (Uwasomba, 2010).

Countless realities fill up this anthology, since – aside vehicular languages – accounts are depicted in rotten vocabularies (pidgin, creole, local dialects), providing an invaluable array of nuances and requiring an herculean effort to domesticate the *untranslatables* (Cassin, 2014), words that migrate from language to language without receiving translation.

Resorting to unconventional idioms defies the monoglot ideology, the theory of a natural, neutral, acontextual, and non-dynamic linguistic regime – a fact of nature – within a national space, "*a very modernist response to postmodern realities*" (Blommaert, 2009).

As most asylum seekers violate borders' regulations, their transnational and transcultural lexicon contradicts the static (i.e. of the State) expectation of a *national order of things*, according to which an erratic life trajectory entails an erroneous linguistic repertoire.

"In Libya if they don't pay I call Libyan soldiers, military men,
from the Government, I always work with them, they love me.
They come to my garage and threaten the client to pay.

The client is surprised: "How can a Nigerian call Libyan military men?".
They come, I show them the car I fix, "It is a good job", they say,
they make him pay.
Someone stole my car and my driving licence. I call them and tell them
the model, the colour. They bring me my car before two days.
At Gaddafi time Libya was just like Europe.
Now Gaddafi is dead, everybody is capo"
(P.A. from Nigeria)

Functional or Fictional?

Narratives from asylum seekers are not meant as piece of arts, though: the foreigners' future depends on the outcome of the application, while clinical students need to abide to specific legal and ethical duties.

Yet, the common goal – persuading the decision-maker that the interlocutor is an actual refugee – adds a thrilling feature to the writing process, known as the economy of realism and fiction (Beneduce, 2015), truth (whatever its meaning) and speculation.

Adjudicator and asylum seeker take a waltz on a stage where borders between real and fictional evaporate, leaving the floor to "*alternative truths*" (Noo Saro-Wiwa, 2017).

"They kidnap you and then ask for money for your release.
Me, I was taken to an abandoned house,
they asked me if I had parents and I said yes.
They ordered me to call them but I did not know the number,
it was 4 years I had no news.
They did not believe me.
My wrists were tied to the ceiling and they started to beat me.
They beat me so much, to test me and see how much I could take.
They whipped me harshly on my feet's soles,
you feel the blood rushing through the body up to your head.
They do it to weaken you, so that you can not move anymore.
But I am strong, not like them.
Death was calling me, but I did not want to reply".
(D.O.Y. from Ivory Coast)

In the quest for success, asylum seekers attempt to satisfy expectations of the decision makers, paving the way for adjustments, exaggerations, *coup de théâtre*, while adjudicators usually pursue the ideal refugee figure, regardless of its actual existence.

Truth here does not echo what the applicant actually lived, rather whatever looks closer to the image of a poorly (if any) educated young African boy seen through the eyes of a Western man (Poudiougou, 2017).

Under a cloud of mutual suspicion, both parts second-guess each other and legal memos are the mirror through which the applicant's image gets deflected, and possibly denied, or disclosed, and eventually acknowledged[3].

If adjudicators must focus on the credibility assessment ("*Is this true?*"), and clinical students need to elaborate strategies ("*Is that plausible?*"), the reader is allowed – encouraged, in fact – to drift away from dilemmas ("*Who cares!*") and indulge in the fascination: as Rushdie put it, "*the demonstrable fictionality of fiction does nothing to lessen its power, especially if you call it the truth*" (2006).

"My father has been a traitor, to me.
We, the Lari, have a very bad reputation for betrayals.
He supported the opposition when young members
were arrested, tortured and killed
by the regime of Sassou Nguesso.
Then, after the election, they struck a deal
and some opposition members were appointed by the regime.
My father benefitted from the agreement
and worked directly for Sassou.
Nowadays he's not betraying anymore, because he's old.
But he is ready, as soon as he can, to betray again.
"Tosa o lia" in lingala.
Submit yourself and then you eat"
(R.K.K. from Republic of Congo)

Singing the Novel Oratorio

Through the lens of a subjective camera, each voice from asylum seekers offers a private and intimate tile of the big puzzle of history. The chorus of epic narratives results in a boiling collective novel, echoing Alexievich's description of a "*genre of actual human voices and confessions, witness evidences and documents*" (2006).

Unveiling their fragile human side, individual accounts restore substance to collective events.

"On Friday, October the 22nd, 2010, a massive rally of RPG supporters
took place nearby the Palais du Peuple.
Professor Alpha Condé was finally back in town
after days of campaigning around the country.
At that time there were few freezers in Guinea
and those who own it made an income out of them.
At the rally, alongside yoghurt and bissap, iced water

3 In challenging biased and stereotypical representations of *the foreigner*, clinical actors are supported by Anthropology students from University of Turin, assisting them during interviews and Country of Origin Information (COI) search, allowing them to expand their vocabularies of knowledge.

was offered and sold into transparent bags, tied up and frozen.
It was later found that water had been contaminated
with caustic soda and that sellers were all Peul.
Donka and Ignace Deen hospitals were overflowing,
beds were not enough, dozens of injured were lying everywhere.
My sister Fanta underwent surgery, a part of his intestine had to be removed"
(M.K. from Guinea)

An Anthology Dressed in Noir

With no exception, asylum seekers' stories are written in black ink, suggesting the ultimate colour of their essence, *noir*.

Violence, obsession, horror and death float around like haunting demons offering sketches of dark literature, a place where unspeakable atrocities become ordinary.

"Libya is not a place.
I met my friend Oumar in prison, we were kidnapped together,
him, his mother and me.
In Libya when cars stop on the roadside everybody get closer,
hoping to be chosen to work.
On that day, though, we were all taken to prison.
I kept quiet, if you want to avoid problems you need to behave.
Once I gave my food to a friend, who was still hungry.
They got mad and this is what they did to me:
they marked me with a hot iron.
It will be here forever, and it is very different from the tattoos on the other arm,
those made in my village.
Oumar's mother was cooking in prison.
If you speak with him, he says he does not know where she is.
I know it, however. She was killed there.
When a mother sees his son beaten and tortured it is hard to keep quiet.
He is not aware, though.
These days he cries a lot, he says he feels her close.
Libya is not a place"
(D.O.Y. from Ivory Coast)

Cruelty – merciless by definition – does not spare children, disabled and sick people, victims of gross abuses, those whom the anaesthetic glossary of bureaucracy calls vulnerables (almost all vulnerated, in fact).

They all quickly learn the language of subjugation and survival, where abstract principles (*non refoulement*) surrender to concrete life strategies (*se debrouiller*).

"Gaddafi militia told us that since Western governments
were shelling Libya, Gaddafi wanted to fight back
and push away all Africans living in the country.

Military men forced us on the boat,
I was 14 years old, my brother was 13.
We beg them to let us enter two different boats,
if one would drown
at least the other could survive"
(S.M. from Guinea)

Whispering voices of life chronicle show the immense (soft) power of memory and compassion.

"1992, late night at my family's house.
Someone sat on my bed and hugged me warmly.
It was my uncle, whom I never met.
Later I came to know that he had left to the mountains
to join the PKK 4 years before.
"What is your name, boy?". I was 5 years old then. "Firat".
"That's very beautiful. It is the name of a great river. Are you attending school?".
"I will start next year".
He was peeling an orange, a fruit I loved and rarely had the chance to eat.
"What would you like to become?" I can't remember what I replied.
"You should be a lawyer or a teacher".
He passed me on slices of that orange, delicious to my memory,
and gave me another one.
"This is for your younger brother, give it to him tomorrow,
I won't be here".
Twenty days later something like a funeral took place in the courtyard.
Adults were speaking of an unknown man, I could not understand,
I sensed they were referring to my uncle.
As I grew up I discovered that he had been killed
along other 6 comrades by a series of gunshots
from an helicopter and from the ground.
After the shooting the wheat field where the bodies were lying
was set on fire and that was why they were all unrecognisable. I have not eaten oranges since then"
(F.A. from Turkey)

Conclusion

Unintended, post-colonial, vernacular, functional, subjective, noir.

The anthology of papers drafted by legal professionals supporting asylum applications visually transpose the reader into worlds of different shape, beliefs, sounds, behaviours, embarking in the most ambitious journey of distancing from one's perspective.

Embracing a different point of view – something intrinsic in art – may prove at times scary, at times exhausting. Yet, it reminds us all that humanity is not a luxury we can not afford, rather the centre of gravity of mankind. Forget it and we will end up picking up our pieces.

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