Life Writing Meets Creative Non-fiction in Refugee Encounter Narrations

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The texts collected in this book tell people’s stories of the past, show depictions of the present and portray dreams of the future. They are about stagnation and transformation, agency and victimization and ability and disability (Eastmond, 2007). They are representations of encounters of people with different life histories and are, therefore, testimonies of curiosity, courage, conflict and empathy.

The texts are based on conversations between at least two, sometimes three or more, interlocutors. One of the interlocutors involved in the construction of each text is a refugee who fled to Austria. The term ‘refugee’ in this context synonymously refers to people who were granted the legal status of ‘Convention Refugees’ by the Austrian authorities as well as asylum seekers who experienced forced migration and seek protection in Austria. The other interlocutor was not forced out of her or his home, is a university student and partook in the university class as part of which the encounters between the interlocutors were organised. Reading the colourful and detailed descriptions of the interlocutors in the texts, the reader will notice that ‘refugee’ and ‘university student’ are only simplified labels and that manifold stories hide behind these terms. Over the course of one semester, the interlocutors, or ‘project partners’, met regularly, spent significant time together and so got to know each other. Considerable attention was given to the refugees’ stories and the process of learning about each other and becoming familiar with each other was then written down by the students. While in the majority of the cases, the refugee project partners did not (wish to) contribute their own writing and the texts were authored by the students, they can, nevertheless, be considered to be co-constructions: The students wrote and the refugee project partners shared their stories specifically for them to be written down. The act of writing about the encounter was, thus, preceded by the actual performance of the encounter – a fact which, at a time when digital media prompt as well as control many people’s social interactions and political persuasions, is not self-evident.

There are several reasons why having written refugees’ stories down within and outside academia is rewarding. As Eastmond argues, narratives of forced migration are very often the only means of “knowing something about life in times and places to which we have little other access” (Eastmond 2007, 248); life, which at the same time shapes our own social context while it is often not tangible. In other words, it is
important to write down refugees’ experiences of persecution, conflict and seeking refuge for the simple sake of gathering their knowledge. For research in particular, it can, moreover, be worthwhile studying refugees’ life narratives because they might reveal how refugees experience and make sense of “violence and turbulent change” (ibid.). Most importantly, however, narratives in forced migration studies can instigate a questioning of “over-generalized notions of the refugee experience” (ibid.). Refugees’ stories like the ones published here reject to consider refugees as a homogeneous group with the same historical and political background ignoring the individuals behind the term ‘refugee’ (ibid.). While the stories in this book are artificially grouped together, this book can also serve as a reminder that not only are refugees not a homogenous mass but just as little are they a group that belongs together. Very often it is the political and juridical – more so than bureaucratic – label ‘refugee’ that creates the imagination of one large group of refugees (Zetter 2007). A rejection of such a simplification and over-generalization of refugees is not only of great significance to society but can also be vital to refugees themselves “in order to contest over-generalized and de-individualizing images promoted in a […] camp situation” (Eastmond 2007, 254).

The significance of researching refugee narratives has also been emphasised by Woolley, who reminds us of the problems occurring with asylum seekers’ having to relate their stories as part of their asylum bids (Woolley 2017). The power relations between an immigration officer and an asylum seeker at such an interrogation are clear: whether or not an asylum claim is successful depends, amongst others, on “the self-representation of the individual claimant” and “their ability to convince an immigration officer” (ibid., 380). Authorities often fail to “take into account linguistic and historical nuance, the memorial revisions of trauma, or its own structural performative aspects” (ibid., 381) and asylum seekers often find themselves in a disadvantaged situation.

It must be acknowledged here that the students in this project also represent an institution – the university – and conversation is made in English or German rather than in the refugee project partner’s mother tongue. Therefore, there are differences in ‘power’ in this project too. However, while asylum authorities stick to strict interview situations and do not allow for, what Blommaert terms “home narratives” – that is “often long and sometimes anecdotal stories” (Blommaert 2001, 415) – this is exactly what this project was after (Wooley 2017, 179). Moreover, the conversations were casual and happened in an entirely different context to an asylum interrogation that can decide over life and death of a person (ibid.).

In order to gain legal recognition as refugees, asylum seekers must thus “provide for decision-makers a ‘well-founded’ narrative of persecution based on verifiable evidence” (ibid., 377). Because of this, asylum seekers often “cede narrative agency
over their stories to institutional procedures” (ibid., 382). Coming back to the problem of over-generalization, this and the demand of bureaucracy – and politics as Zetter would argue (Zetter 2007) – for a standardisation of cases can often add to stereotypical simplifications of refugees’ stories (Eastmond 2007). As the reader of this book will notice, however, the narrators of the stories are just as diverse and heterogeneous in their social backgrounds, their worldviews, their access to civil rights and their political opinions as are the stories in content, style and form.

The texts in this book are carefully crafted creative representations of encounters between the project partners. They do not portray the refugees’ and students’ lives but are subjective representations of them. Readers of the stories have to be aware of the basic difference here between “experience and expression” (Eastmond 2007, 249). Accordingly, a distinction must be made between “life as lived”, “life as experienced”, “life as told” and “life as text” (ibid.). “An experience”, Eastmond argues, “is never directly represented but edited at different stages of the process from life to text (ibid.).” Many simplifications, falsifications and interpretations will be made before the reader then reads and understands the text yet again in her or his personal way. In this sense, the texts are “representation rather than documentation” (ibid., 250). What also adds to this is the fact that the stories were often subject to several stages of translation: while the actual event told might have been experienced in an Arabic speaking context, it was then, in the encounter between the project partners, related in German and then written down in English or vice versa. Naturally, emotion or content can get lost or transformed in this process. However, the issue of potentially ‘losing’ information only corresponds to the actual subject matter of the texts which is, amongst others, loss, the difficulty for refugees of understanding and being understood and of having to change or ‘translate’ their identities (Bal 2007). In contrast with interrogations at asylum authorities, where translations can never be accurate enough, the depth or information missing in the stories in this book, the things we would have liked to know in more detail, perhaps tell a story for themselves (ibid.).

Thus, the students committed to writing representations of lives: their refugee project partners’ lives as these were told to them but also their own lives. In literary studies, the writing about lives, often divided into autobiography, biography, memoir and other forms, is subsumed under the term life writing. With the rise of postcolonial literary studies and its interest in reading lives beyond the “Western male autobiography” (Moore-Gilbert 2009, xv), life writing studies have increasingly turned towards representing and studying non-dominant ethnicities, which is also the case in the project displayed in this book. Certainly the refugee project partners were diverse in their ethnic background and – as mentioned above – were not as such a homogeneous group. However, their often precarious
situations and their manifold experiences render them intriguing narrators in life writing. As for life writers themselves, one characteristic of contemporary life writing is an opening up of the genre to lay writers rather than limiting it to professional authors. This has allowed lay writers to write and be heard, such as the students who contributed their pieces to this book.

Life writing scholar Gillian Whitlock slightly martially terms life narratives “soft weapons”, arguing that telling stories of people who face or fight social injustice can be an effective means to address human rights issues (Whitlock 2007). Considering life narratives to be “soft weapons” can be a peaceful and yet compelling method of bringing injustice to the foreground because carefully chosen words can be powerful (Whitlock 2007). While I would argue that all refugees experience social injustice, certainly in their home countries and perhaps also in their receiving societies, not every refugee is a political activist who tells her or his story with the intention to fight injustice, which might perhaps also be an indicator of injustice in itself.

The texts in this book can, thus, be considered powerful and thought-provoking wake-up calls rather than soft weapons. Their aim is not necessarily to actively fight social injustice but confront the writers and readers of the texts with their very personal expectations, stereotypes, potential fears and to question political certitudes. When looking at the texts as wake-up calls, we might, therefore, accept that they challenge our habitual thought patterns and force us to re-think ourselves and our environment; they give place to fresh thoughts and ideas about the self and the other. In this sense, the texts in this book are prime examples of contemporary life writing while each text is, in itself, a *bricolage*.

The reader of this book will recognise a great variety of genres and styles appearing in the texts. They show traces of biographies and autobiographies, diaries and ethnographic field notes as well as features of journalistic and artistic literary writing. Besides the texts’ anchoring in life writing, their inherent variety of genres and their many other characteristics explored below also render them fine examples of creative non-fiction in general, a genre closely related to literary journalism. Creative non-fiction is defined by creative writing scholar Philip Gerard (Gerard 2004) by a distinction from journalism. Creative non-fiction, he argues, is cut loose from the necessity of timeliness usually expected in journalism (Gerard 2004, 8). He suggests that creative non-fiction does not only portray a “current crisis but larger trends, deeper truths” (ibid.). Gerard highlights the “ironic tension between the urgency of the event and the timelessness of its meaning” in creative non-fiction (ibid.).

This certainly holds true for the texts in this book. They are embedded within a European discourse on refugees and asylum, which, in its current scope developed after 2015, when the number of asylum bids in the European Union
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was significantly higher than in the years before and the years that followed. In this sense, the texts do react to and explore “the urgency of the event” (ibid.). This event can be the war in Syria, the increase of refugee arrivals in Europe or very personal, challenging and noteworthy situations of the narrators in the stories. What also renders the stories typical of contemporary narratives of this kind, is not only their very specific historical setting or their being produced for a university course but also the impact of digital media. Digital media shapes the stories on several levels: First, it influences the refugee project partners’ stories in their content. They can easily stay in touch with friends and family in their home countries, keep up to date with events there and connect with other refugees, all of which, of course, has an impact on their life in the receiving country. Second, digital media influences the interaction between the project partners. Not only are mobile phones used as online dictionaries which then influences conversations but they are also used, amongst others, by the project partners to show photos or videos to each other. Third, digital media, of course, has a great impact on preconceived ideas that the project partners may have of each other and ideas the reader may have prior to and after having read the stories.

The tension between timeliness and timelessness referred to by Gerard, however, arises when reading the texts irrespective of their current historical setting. The texts can be placed within a larger historical context of war and terrorism in the Middle East and some parts of Africa at the beginning of the 21st century, a post-colonial narrative of recurrent Western exploitation in its former colonies, the disparity between the global South and global North more generally or issues of white supremacy, racism and discrimination. Moreover, many of the themes appearing in the texts such as war, migration movements, intercultural encounters, interpersonal conflict or friendship are by no means specific to the 21st century. The texts published in this book therefore show the timelessness of the very topical issues that appear in the texts, which again is typical of creative non-fiction.

Another typical feature of creative non-fiction is its inclusion of an “apparent subject” and a “deeper subject” (ibid., 7, 8). The apparent subject of the texts can be considered to be the refugee’s story. This includes anecdotes and accounts of her or his family, home country, dreams and wishes as well as her or his life as a refugee and her or his life in the receiving country in general. The apparent subject, always subjectively represented by the student, can be thought of as one narration, a read thread in the text. It also represents the process of the project partners getting to know each other because confidence, trust and familiarity always engender a disclosure of more intimate and detailed stories. The deeper subject might constitute a frame story of the narrations. It might be about the students’ interest in and concern with potential otherness, their endeavour to
reject othering and their dealing with difference. This goes beyond what often is subsumed under the term ‘culture’ but might also involve the students’ dealing with differences in gender, age, educational background, socio-economic status, humour, political persuasion or religiousness. All these issues are reflected on in the writing and show that there is more to the narrations than ‘only’ a refugee’s story. This reflection, which may correspond to the deeper subject of the texts, is sometimes even indicated by the use of italics or different fonts.

The students, therefore, often gave very careful consideration to the construction of their texts, which again is typical of creative non-fiction. In contrast with the journalist, Gerard argues, the creative non-fiction writer exceeds the inverted pyramid style typical of journalism (ibid., 11) – a strict model on how to structure a journalistic text – and adds more to it. Indeed, most students did not simply write facts about what happened when and where. Many wrote emotional descriptions of the situations they were in, portrayed the encounters with passion for detail when describing food and tattoos as well as bombs and loss. Besides distinguishing creative non-fiction from journalism, it is, however, also important, to contrast non-fiction from fiction, which the term already suggests. This is especially important in the context of the texts published in this book because of the “culture of disbelief” (Finch 2005) many refugees face.

Creative non-fiction is narrative that employs devices borrowed from fiction, such as “character, plot and dialogue” (Gerard 2004, 9). The texts do so not because the students were taught the tools of fiction or creative non-fiction – in fact they were not given any guidelines on how and what to write. The texts employ character, plot and dialogue because the students have been exposed to reading literature – be it fictional or factual, be they language or anthropology students. They introduce characters gradually, present their stories chronologically or in an order that is well thought out and enrich their writing with flashbacks and, less frequently so, with foreshadowing. They use direct speech and indirect speech, dialogues and inner monologue and sometimes even create suspense.

Gerard warns non-fiction writers to always “rein in that impulse to lie” (ibid., 4) and the students were, of course, aware that the project was not about composing fairy tales. However, the stories are always subject to the narrator’s and the writer’s honesty and to the difference between experience and expression referred to earlier (Eastmond 2007). While asylum authorities are preoccupied with a search for truth and authenticity in the statements of asylum seekers and the fear of “bogus asylum seeker[s]” (Woolley 2017, 380) is prevailing, learning or defining the truth was not a primary aim in the construction of the texts of this book. The term creative non-fiction does, by definition, promise to the reader an account of the truth (or the ‘not-fiction’), however, the final product will, for reasons elaborated on above, always be a subjective interpretation of a situation or
a story. In contrast with writers of fiction, non-fiction writers face the difficulty of having to write the story the way it was told to them or experienced by them – even if they did not like it and even if they had preferred a different ending to it (Gerard 2004). The actual ‘ending’ in refugees’ stories, even if it is only a ‘preliminary ending’ or does not actually correspond to the end of a chapter in real life, can, however, be telling, even if the student would have preferred to write a different ending to the refugee’s story or to their encounter.

Taking all these characteristics and categorisations of the texts in this book into consideration, I suggest naming them ‘refugee encounter narrations’. There is a great variety of storytelling projects that include refugees and yet, this one is different to most other projects because it is not only about stories of asylum-seeking or stories of flight but also about encounters of refugees and non-refugees. The texts are as much “encounter narrations” as they are “refugee narrations” and therefore a combination of the two only seems appropriate. They are narrations rather than narratives because (1) they show the diversity in refugees’ biographies and oppose a standardised “refugee narrative” and (2) because the term narration highlights the act of storytelling and thereby also creating new experiences while telling and writing the stories. The refugee encounter narratives are inherently unfinished in that they represent only a fraction of the refugees’ stories (namely that of the encounter with the student). As Eastmond argues, refugees are in the midst of the story they are telling, and uncertainty and liminality, rather than progression and conclusion, are the order of the day” (Eastmond 2007, 251). Refugee encounter narrations as instances of life writing and creative non-fiction are, therefore, about representing and writing lives and are instances of texts where the writing lives.

References