



Article

The Slow Refugee: Transit as Stasis, Narrative Ethics, and Level Telling Fields

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Abstract: The slow humanities, this article argues, can make valuable contributions to the study of migration narratives. A slow take on literary representations of refugees and migrants has two distinct but related dimensions. On the one hand, the figure of the slow refugee introduced here challenges theories of migration which emphasize movement. On the other hand, the slow approach to literary representations of forced migration focuses on various forms of narrative empowerment. My readings of the novel *What is the What* (2008) by Dave Eggers and Parwana Amiri's work *My Pen Won't Break But Borders Will: Letter to the World from Moria* (2020) demonstrate how collaborative and allied forms of storytelling help restore narrative agency and authority, moving beyond the exemplary, documentary, and ambassadorial functions of vicarious storytelling. Instead of speaking on behalf of others, or even worse, for others—the default case in many conversations on migration—the literary representations of refugees discussed in this article emphasize the need to tell and share stories with others, for the benefit of everyone. In this sense, they help establish a level telling field, initiating a debate on the terms and conditions of fair conversation on forced migration.

Keywords: refugees; (forced) migration; narrative; ethics; slow humanities; attentive reading; level telling field



Citation: Sommer, Roy. 2023. The Slow Refugee: Transit as Stasis, Narrative Ethics, and Level Telling Fields. *Humanities* 12: 59. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h12040059>

Received: 7 March 2023

Revised: 20 June 2023

Accepted: 24 June 2023

Published: 5 July 2023



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1. Introduction

The slow movement in the humanities is a cross-disciplinary response to the negative impact of the “cult of speed” (Honoré 2004) on reading, scholarship, and education. Acceleration produces, and thrives on, the political, economic, and cultural climate of what has been dubbed the attention economy, fast modernity, or the metric society. Its effects are felt by slow professors increasingly alienated by the “corporatization of universities,” “standardized learning,” and “a sense of urgency,” as Berg and Seeber (2016, p. 8) have argued. Resisting the regimes of speed and haste, the slow humanities in general, and “slow philosophy” (Boulous Walker 2017) in particular, rely on attentive reading and deep thinking to create and disseminate knowledge.

A fuzzy concept par excellence, slow in this context also means patient, thorough, and sustainable. In contrast to fast success, which is often short-sighted and superficial, slow practices and interventions seek persistence and purpose, and they foster resistance and resilience. Slowness puts more emphasis on ethics than efficiency and advocates “attentive listening rather than a closed mind” (Boulous Walker 2017, p. 33). Reading and attentive listening—both so closely related in practice that Boulous Walker’s concept of “reading as a kind of attentive listening” (ibid., p. 103) hardly seems metaphorical—are among the first victims of late modern “hyperacceleration” (Rosa 2013, p. 298) and of the commodification of time in the “attention economy” (Davenport and Beck 2001). This is most obvious in contexts where stories matter most, such as the defense of human rights in discourses of displacement and forced migration. In what follows, the notion of reading as listening serves as a conceptual link between the slow humanities and the study of fictions of migration—a link that explores the forms, functions, and effects of storysharing in cross-cultural encounters.

With respect to migration narratives, which are the focus of this essay, a slow take on literary representations has two distinct, but related dimensions. On the one hand, the figure of the slow refugee introduced in the next section challenges theories of migration which emphasize movement. By reading transit as a form of involuntary stasis or stagnation, I emphasize that being a refugee means, for most people, losing agency and becoming dependent on others. In narrative terms, this includes relying on others to speak for you—the realm of vicarious storytelling (see Gebauer and Sommer 2023) that often characterizes advocacy work.¹ Slow critique engages both with the ethical problems arising from vicarious representations and with the state-sanctioned stasis which characterizes life in detention camps, denying human beings the right to move and, as a consequence, the right to arrival, development, planning, and to any future at all.²

On the other hand, the slow approach to literary representations of forced migration outlined here focuses on various forms of narrative empowerment. In section three, I discuss the novel *What is the What* (Eggers 2008) by Dave Eggers—a rare example of truly collaborative storytelling. Section four will demonstrate how the School of Resistance (2021), a hybrid event curated by Swiss theater director Milo Rau, provides an opportunity for Afghan activist and writer Parwana Amiri to present her recent work *My Pen Won't Break But Borders Will: Letter to the World from Moria* (2020) to a wide audience. Both examples place emphasis on the lived experience of refugees and create conditions which allow the refugee perspective to take center stage, serving as a correlative to policy narratives on forced migration.³

My analyses will show how collaborative and allied forms of storytelling help restore narrative agency and authority, moving beyond the exemplary, documentary, and ambassadorial functions of vicarious storytelling. Instead of speaking on behalf of others, or even worse, *for* others—the default case in many conversations on migration—the literary representations of refugees discussed here emphasize the need to tell and share stories *with* others, for the benefit of everyone. In the final section of the essay, I will link these findings and ideas to the notion of the level telling field, a mechanism to secure fair play in the narrative market. Developed in an ongoing research project funded by the European Union, the metaphor of the market and the analogy with level playing fields in international trade make a political point: Toxic debates are the discursive equivalent of trade wars; sustainable solutions must involve all parties on an equal footing. In this sense, the figure of the slow refugee is a provocation that aims to start a new dialogue on migration and successful integration.

2. The Figure of the Slow Refugee

The figure of the slow refugee resonates with Thomas Nail's book *The Figure of the Migrant* (Nail 2015), which seeks to develop a political theory or "philosophical history" (p. 3) of the migrant. Nail points out that "the migrant has been predominantly understood from the perspective of *stasis* and perceived as a secondary or derivate figure with respect to place-bound social membership" (ibid.). Existing theories of the migrant are thus biased, as "more than any other political figure (citizen, foreigner, sovereign, etc.), the migrant is the one least defined by its being and place and more by its becoming and displacement: by its *movement*" (ibid., original emphasis). Nail's own project seeks to move beyond notions of the migrant "as a failed citizen" (ibid.) by proposing a theory of social motion, or "kinopolitics" (p. 24), which emphasizes "regimes of motion" (ibid.). While this analysis recognizes, rightly, that "societies are always in motion" (ibid.), it is somewhat at odds with the precarious status of the refugee, stuck at borders or waiting in detention, who is *denied* mobility.

The figure of the refugee is not part of Nail's typology, which distinguishes four figures of the migrant: the nomad, the barbarian, the vagabond, and the proletariat. Under the figure of the vagabond, Nail subsumes "illegal people" (p. 201), i.e., "the migrant whose status is specifically criminalized in relation to an expanding system of local, state, national, and international law" (ibid.), explicitly acknowledging both the history and

the ongoing practice of criminalizing vagrancy. Equating the refugee with the vagabond, however, stretches the concept unnecessarily. Adding the figure of the (slow) refugee or migrant to Nail's typology and aligning it with the existing types would require an equally comprehensive 'kinopolitical profile,' i.e., a social *and* historical account of how it "invents a form of kinetic power of its own that poses an alternative to social expulsion" (p. 125). Such a profile would fall in the domain of the "new mobilities paradigm" (Sheller 2014), however, and would deviate too far from my present focus on narrative ethics and empowerment; it might be interesting to see, though, to what extent the two perspectives can be reconciled in future work.

The figure of the slow refugee, then, insists on the relevance of stasis, a series of obstacles which eventually stall free movement. It proceeds from the observation that more often than not migrants in transit do not move but *are moved* from one place to another. The agent controlling the movement—the date of departure, means of travel, and final destination, as well as the duration of the passage and the risks the migrant has to take—can be a smuggler or trafficker, a hierarchical community of fellow-migrants,⁴ or a state deciding where immigrants, once they have crossed the border, must dwell. The state and its institutions also decide the terms and conditions under which migrants can remain in a country or place, the freedoms they enjoy or are denied until an application for asylum is submitted and granted or rejected, and whether they will eventually be denied entry and sent "back" (in the case of unaccompanied minors or second-generation migrants with no ties to their parents' country of origin, back simply means away). The slow refugee is thus systematically denied agency, often for years,⁵ and forced to accept decisions made by others; sometimes a stroke of luck may help along the way, but coincidence hardly suffices to turn patients into agents deciding their own fate.

The same holds true for irregular migrants waiting to cross borders. Around the world, refugees and migrants in transit are subjected to unspeakable horrors including family separation, debt bondage, human trafficking, rape and other forms of violence, illegal pushbacks, racism, hunger, disease, and trauma. They are often stuck in transit for ages, waiting for a lorry to hide in, a boat with an uncertain destination, a hole in a fence, some kind of asylum status. This can mean years spent in limbo (cf. Trilling 2018, p. 107), waiting for an opportunity, years in which people die and children are born and life somehow goes on—some kind of life, a life dependent on the goodwill of others, a life that can change fundamentally from one day to the next, a life deprived of agency, where planning is reduced to day-dreaming.

Any theory of forced migration, whatever its focus, should therefore be sensitive to the realities of involuntary, enforced stasis and the impact of uncertainty and unpredictability on refugees in detention, well-documented by ethnographers (see, for instance, Turnbull 2016). Literary scholars can make an important contribution by acting as mediators, putting migrant writing on the syllabus, encouraging more sensitive ways of reading, and engaging with the ethical questions raised by vicarious storytelling. Speaking or narrating on behalf of another person is the rule rather than the exception when migration is framed as a threat, a crisis, or a management problem. Walls and illegal pushbacks, numbers and statistics, or rules and regulations are designed to repel, exclude, and silence people in transit, with the result that others—activists, NGOs, artists, lawyers, aid workers—have to step in to tell the stories that would otherwise go unheard. Despite their humanitarian intentions, however, vicarious narratives raise ethical, political, and economic concerns. Who may speak for whom, and under what circumstances? How can storytelling help to address the lack of agency and narrative authority which characterizes lived experience in transit? What strategies are used by storytellers in order to draw a line between representation and appropriation?

From a generic angle, one can distinguish at least four different types of vicarious storytelling (see Gebauer and Sommer 2023) that deal with such questions. The first type is exemplary case stories featuring anonymous characters, as routinely used in fundraising campaigns by NGOs to create empathy in audiences. The second type is documentary

narratives created by investigative journalists, whose work is often the only reliable source of information on the actual situation along refugee routes or in camps. Third comes ambassadorial storytelling describing narrative projects curated by NGOs working not only for, but *with* refugees and migrants, using stories as a form of empowerment. Finally, there are various forms of collaborative storytelling with ‘allies’ such as activists, artists, and writers—allied storytelling that helps the migrant experience and perspective take center stage in the public debate. My two case studies, short readings of *What Is the What* and *My Pen Won’t Break, But Borders Will*, belong to this latter type.

3. How to Tell Your Story When You Can’t: Valentino Achak Deng, Dave Eggers, and *What Is the What* (2006)

What do you do if you want to share your life story but find yourself incapable of narrating it? You ask somebody to write it for you. That is what Valentino Achak Deng did, teaming up with Dave Eggers; together, writer and activist managed to co-narrate Deng’s story, bending generic rules to reinvent the vicarious novel and demonstrate that fair co-telling is definitely possible. The result is a strange hybrid, a prime example of collaborative autofiction: a book that claims to be an autobiography (title), is labeled a novel (paratext), and yet openly acknowledges that the author of the book and its first-person narrator are not identical (preface), meaning that this alleged autobiography is really, in Deng’s words, a “biography” (p. xiii). This confusing acknowledgement of generic diversity or hybridity can be complicated even further: “*What Is the What* exhibits self-awareness about the various genres it draws from and transcends, openly rehearsing their generic complexities: the humanitarian narrative, autobiography, the human rights bildungsroman, fiction, testimony, oral history” (Peek 2012, p. 118).

What is the point of playing with the conventions of self-writing? Michelle Peek suggests that the novel “is about the limitations of autobiographical humanitarian storytelling and witnessing” (p. 119). Two such limitations, pragmatic and technical in nature, are mentioned in the preface. After being saved by a charity called the Lost Boys Foundation, Deng migrated to the US, where he later became a public speaker. However, as well as sharing his experiences at live events, he wanted to reach a “wider audience” (p. xiii)—hence his wish to write a book. Yet, as he was “not a writer” (ibid.), he did not know how to accomplish this and needed someone to do it for him. What, then, does the “novelization” (Brooks 2010, p. 36) of Deng’s life story entail? Brooks points to the effective telling, well-paced narration and “crystallizing moments of reflection and repetition” (ibid.), plot structure (handling of three interwoven subplots), and powerful ending—clearly such a display of narrative technique requires a competent writer.

More limitations surface as we read on: memory, framing, tellability. As Deng was only a boy when he fled his home, he barely remembered some episodes, and could not properly comprehend and process many of the events and encounters that marked his journey. Writing the story—even before Deng asks Eggers to retell it professionally—thus becomes a matter of collaborative reconstruction of timelines and itineraries, a tale that has been told before, by himself, a young man growing up in a refugee camp:

The UNHCR and the United States wanted to know where we had come from, what we had endured. We were to write our stories in English, or if we could not write adequately in English, we could have someone write it for us. We were asked to write about the Civil War, about losing our families, about our lives in the camps. Why do you want to leave Kakuma? they asked. [...] Whichever strategy we applied, we knew that our stories had to be well told, that we needed to remember all that we had seen and done; no deprivation was insignificant. (p. 485)

But what is a “well-told” story? The answer depends, of course, on context. For the young storyteller eager to start a new life, success means meeting the criteria for the resettlement scheme. The expected framing is suggested by the task: “Are you afraid to return to Sudan, even if there is peace? We knew that those who felt persecuted in Kakuma

or Sudan would be given special consideration" (ibid.). Deng, however, still finds it "very difficult to know what was relevant and what was not" (ibid.), and compares his own story with the one written by his friend, Achor Achor. He reminds Deng of all the details he has forgotten and encourages him to try harder: "I worked on it for weeks more, thinking of every last thing I had seen, every path and tree and pair of yellowed eyes, every body I buried. When I finished, it was nine pages long" (pp. 485–86). Nine pages, as opposed to a novel that runs to more than five hundred pages. The difference is the intended audience: American and international readers for whom a life is not a short story. Here, nine pages will not do.

A third limitation, closely related to context, is what sociolinguist Neal Norrick (2005) has called the "dark side" of tellability, namely events that need to be talked about in order to come to terms with trauma but are considered taboo: "[O]ver half of the young men who call themselves Lost Boys were child soldiers to some degree or another. But this is a part of our history that we have been told not to talk about" (Eggers, p. 17). Even the horror is neatly categorized; the persecuted cannot be perpetrators. Later readers learn that Deng himself was spared: "I was almost a soldier, Julian. I was saved by a massacre" (p. 318). The well-crafted contrast between those two sentences betrays the dramaturgical expertise of the competent writer who knows how to capture the reader's attention. This is not how you open a conversation, not even an imagined one with a staff member in a hospital; this is how you start a new chapter.

A complementary question, then, is: How does Eggers accomplish the formidable task of writing on behalf of somebody else without generating either a sad protocol of the genocide in Darfur—something historians could do better—or a generic refugee tale that fails to do justice to the complexity of the refugee experience (including the fact that all the suffering, in Sudan as elsewhere, is acted out in front of a global audience)? Instead of hiding the inconsistencies and discrepancies which are part and parcel of biographical life-writing in general and refugee life-writing in particular, and unwilling to resort to conventional framings, Eggers has his character-narrator Deng confront the reader with unpleasant truths: "Survivors tell the stories the sympathetic want," he says in a matter-of-fact manner, "and that means making them as shocking as possible" (p. 21). The kind of mediated refugee experience that relies on narrative templates such as "the image of the lost child in need of rescue" (Peek 2012, p. 121) satisfies the demand for clichés, fueling the reproduction of cultural stereotypes such as the "timeless African subject" (ibid.), or the notion that Africans are incapable of helping themselves, even given the right kind of support. This is the vicious circle that well-meaning, but poorly executed vicarious storytelling finds itself in.

Eggers creates a counter-narrative to vicarious case stories, those streamlined exemplary narratives whose prominent status in humanitarian migration discourse rests on their ability to elicit empathetic responses. His take on allied storytelling follows a different strategy: the narrative design reflects ethical principles, empowerment, and sustainability, which also have clear economic implications. Eggers worked for free, with all his author's proceeds from *What Is the What* going to the Valentino Achak Deng (VAD) Foundation, a nonprofit organization he established with Deng in 2006 promoting access to education for young people and sustainable development in South Sudan.⁶ Almost twenty years later, the book continues to have a strong impact on the next generation of Sudanese children, young people, and women for whom it was written.

With this in mind, the novel's generic hybridity can be read as a conscious design choice allowing the inconsistency and incoherence of a young refugee's perspective to take center stage. What is at stake here, from an 'allied' perspective, is not so much the question to what extent Deng's (auto)biography fulfills the expectations raised by the 'autobiographical pact' (Lejeune), but rather how creative writing can amplify "silent stories" in such a way that "story ownership" (Shuman 2015, p. 41) is guaranteed not only in a literal sense, but also metaphorically—or rather, is complicated to such an extent that it ceases to matter. In vicarious narration, there is always a thin line between representation

and exploitation, whether intentional or not; Eggers and Deng are clearly aware of this. Their novel is the product of two like-minded people who collaborated in founding the VAD Foundation and share the humanitarian worldview expressed in the story's final sentences: "How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist" (p. 535). Their joint work, a prime example of collaborative storytelling grounded in an alliance between partners, transcends the limitations inherent in more conventional, and more problematic, forms of speaking on behalf of somebody else.⁷ Seen in this light, the novel's defamiliarizing hybridity is instrumental in avoiding the ethical pitfalls of vicarious storytelling.

4. "I Am a Girl in a Tent": Parwana Amiri's *Letters from Moria* (2019–2020)

My reading of *What is the What* not only demonstrates why the narrativization of lived experience or "life-into-story," Newton's (1997, p. 4) term for the "union" of life and story, is from an ethical perspective far from trivial. My second example, Milo Rau's School of Resistance and Parwana Amiri's text collection *Letters from Moria*, continues this line of thought, linking refugee writing to the notion of 'migration as stasis' introduced above. But first, some context.

On 24 September 2021, Schauspiel Köln (Germany), the International Institute for Political Murder, the National Theater in Gent (NTGent, Belgium), and the School of Political Hope hosted, in cooperation with #LeaveNoOneBehind and numerous organizations from all over the world, a School of Resistance for a new politics of humanity and justice.⁸ Comprising a workshop program, three hybrid panels, a solo rally, a concert, and the launch of a joint fundraising campaign, this event was headed by Swiss theater director Milo Rau, artistic director of NTGent since 2018, whom *The New York Times* has called a "provocateur" who "loves an ethical minefield".⁹ In 2018, Rau published a radical manifesto for the theater which, among other things, called for a ban on classics and demanded that all stage productions should involve amateurs. Such provocation is not an end in itself for Rau: his programmatic approach serves to cast new light on the most pressing challenges of our times, including neo-imperialism, jihadism, and inhumane migration policies,¹⁰ as well as on the political functions of theater as a post-dramatic art form.

The 2021 School of Resistance included a hybrid panel discussion on "Practices of Art and Justice"¹¹ in which Mourad El-Keddani, a refugee from Afghanistan who came to Germany in 2016, and Omer Shatz, an international lawyer and the legal director of NGO front-LEX, joined Rau on the Cologne stage for a discussion of the harsh realities of refugee lives. Online participants were Congolese lawyer and human rights activist Céline Tshizena, together with S.—an anonymous exiled refugee from Afghanistan not shown on screen for safety reasons—and Parwana Amiri, a nineteen-year-old Afghan human-rights activist and writer.

Speaking on Zoom from a refugee camp in Greece, Amiri reminded her European audience that refugees are invariably afraid of speaking out about life in transit (55:00).¹² Viewers gained an unintended glimpse of that reality, as Amiri was not speaking from an office space or some other neutral environment but from a small bedroom flanked by bunk beds, a wardrobe, and various articles of clothing. Four people, one room: The lack of privacy in the camp—in stark contrast with the spacious, half-empty theater from which the School of Resistance audience was listening or the comfort of a private space enjoyed by online viewers—was enhanced by two interruptions during her short presentation.

First, a young man entered from a door to the left to get a backpack (57:52). After looking curiously at the screen for a split second, the intruder stooped low to stay invisible, trying to hide from the camera. A second person entered a little later (1:00:10) to retrieve an item from the top right bunk bed (1:00:35); he also stooped to withdraw without too much of an interruption. It is impossible (and unnecessary) to decide whether these intrusions should be read as signs of curiosity (entering under a pretext) or as signaling sensitivity and politeness (keeping disruption to a minimum). Either way, two interruptions in a mere five minutes emphasize that life in transit means an almost complete lack of privacy.

This is also a recurrent theme in documentary storytelling; “you spend all day on the street” (Trilling 2018, p. 33), says Jamal, a Sudanese refugee hoping to cross from the infamous “jungle” in Calais (France) to the UK. His testimony allows investigative journalist Daniel Trilling to piece together a life spent searching for a meal, a shower, and a place to charge a smartphone while waiting for sunset and an opportunity to hide under a lorry heading for the Channel Tunnel. For the literary scholar, Amiri’s disrupted appearance conjures up Virginia Woolf’s timeless essay *A Room of One’s Own* (Woolf [1929] 1993), which famously defines independence and freedom for women writers not only in terms of money and space—“five hundred a year and a room with a lock on the door” (p. 103)—but also as leisure and time for contemplation (cf. p. 107).

Amiri’s memoir *My Pen Won’t Break, But Borders Will: Letters to the World from Moria*, a collection of short autobiographical, auto-fictional, and vicarious narratives illustrating life in the camp, is a reminder that such luxuries are out of reach for refugees, especially women, who are systematically deprived of resources for self-expression, self-empowerment, and self-fashioning, from education in general to writing in particular. “These letters were written mostly at night by torchlight in the tent that Parwana shared with her eight-person family, in the olive grove,” the editor’s introduction tells us (Amiri 2019–2020, p. 5). “She always waited until everyone was asleep, so that she would have the peace of mind to write in the darkness with her torch” (ibid.).

Unlike Deng, Amiri cannot yet enjoy the luxury of retrospection. Hence ‘writing to the moment,’ the key feature of the epistolary novel since Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), seems a natural choice. Best characterized as a participating observer, Amiri records impressions from inside Moria, Europe’s most infamous refugee camp, destroyed in a fire in 2020. Amiri speaks about herself but also employs (partly fictionalized) narratives of vicarious experience in Fludernik (1996), Norrick (2013), and Hatavara and Mildorf (2017) sense—i.e., accounts of other migrants’ life stories, collected in oral conversations—to create what Susan Lanser in *Fictions of Authority* (Lanser 1992) has called “communal voice”. Criticizing the “narrative individualism that European cultures take for granted,” (p. 21) Lanser defines communal voice as “a spectrum of practices that articulate either a collective voice or a collective of voices that share narrative authority” (ibid.).

Although Lanser’s concept originally refers to fictional narration, her concept of communal voice, together with her project of a feminist poetics, help us do justice to Amiri’s take on vicarious storytelling from the inside. The author puts herself in the shoes of a desperate mother, a volunteer translator, an unaccompanied boy, or an old woman. Her fictionalized retelling of experiences shared in conversation serves multiple purposes. On the one hand, her stories focus on the individual human being: “It is only one aspect of my current situation,” she cites her interlocutor, the translator, “that I am also a refugee, one among thousands of others” (p. 18). On the other hand, she acknowledges that shared experience creates an, albeit temporary, narrative community: “We are different people with a thousand different stories. What unites us is that we had to leave our homes” (p. 25). Every refugee story is an account of individual suffering, but they all feature similar events, emotions, and expectations, contributing to the universal “story of inequality and discrimination among human kind” (p. 25) which Amiri seeks to end, against all odds.

Human nature is the biggest hurdle, not only outside, but also inside the camp: “Instead of establishing friendly relations between each other as oppressed people that face the same discrimination, we become part of the reason people have fear. We escaped war, but it seems we are in war again” (p. 30f.). Anger, violence, drug abuse, sexual harassment, and rape add to the overall hardship, lack of food, and non-existent medical supplies. Amiri’s bleak description of life in the camp is emphasized by dark metaphors, resonating with the Roman proverb *homo homini lupus*: “Wolves hunt in the darkness of night and the shepherds look after the flock. But here the wolves are the shepherds, the shepherds are the sheep and sheep turn into wolves” (p. 32). The brutality of life inside an overcrowded, underfunded camp means that people do not dare move: “All our wealth is our blankets and a few warm clothes. Fear of losing even these keeps us near our tent 24 h a day” (ibid.).

It also underscores, sadly, Amiri's humanist agenda: "We are not another quality of people; another class of humans; another kind" (p. 25).

In *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), Julia Kristeva contemplates the "silence of the polyglot," claiming that "between two languages, your realm is silence" (p. 15). Writing in English, a major challenge for nineteen-year-old Amiri (cf. p. 4), means raising the stakes in the struggle against this silence. It allows the writer to address her intended audience, sympathetic European publics, directly, using bold print and exclamation marks to remind them of their own ethical dilemma: the gap between knowledge and action. As readers participating in the School of Resistance, the least we can do is listen to Amiri, appreciate her work, and find a safe place for it in the emergent discourse on slow ethics and narrative.

After all, the refugee perspective is a much-needed corrective to the official migration policies that are turning Europe and North America into fortresses. Kristeva's reading of Arendt's classic *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt [1951] 2007) reminds us of the consequences of putting the nation state above people: "The world of barbarity thus comes to a head in a single world composed of states, in which only those people organized into national residences are entitled to have rights" (Kristeva 1991, p. 151). As Arendt put it: "It seems that a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man" (Quoted in Kristeva 1991, p. 151). There is no better way of insisting on the obvious: If human rights are universal, the principle of sovereignty protected by borders must be subordinated to human development.

To sum up: While Eggers's retrospective narrative foregrounds Deng's journey and development, which ties in well with Nail's notion of migration as movement, Amiri's account is best understood as a struggle for agency and authority. The refugee experience of Moria implies terms such as stasis, paralysis, and enforced slowdown.¹³ "I am a girl in a tent," says Amiri, "and I am thinking about this world as the days won't pass by and I am waiting for permission to leave this place" (p. 25). By speaking out for others and reminding Europe of its responsibilities, Amiri regains agency for herself. Her appeal to dignity ("Our shields of protection are naked hands and our dignity", p. 32) resonates with the Preamble and Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights".¹⁴ Yet dignity without a right to development is as hard to imagine as freedom without development—the two concepts are, as Sen (1999) has argued, inextricably linked.

5. From Ethics to Politics: Toward a Level Telling Field

Vicarious storytelling is ambivalent. It seeks to raise awareness for refugees and migrants, yet often undermines their individual agency, precisely by highlighting the importance of an ethical approach to narrative representations of refugees across genres and media. Insisting on the value of slow practices such as reading and listening, and thinking of reading as attentive listening, are first steps in the right direction. However, the current conversation in, and on, the slow humanities also reveals two limitations which narrative ethics can discuss but cannot overcome. Ethical readings analyze specific constellations, e.g., ethical questions raised by the story's content or by the act of narration. They can also theorize more generally the limits of tellability and the problems inherent in speaking *for*, rather than *with*, somebody else. An ethical approach cannot offer solutions, however, to what is essentially a systemic problem: making sure that everyone is heard. This is also a political problem in the sense that a fair conversation is often not desired, in order to prevent refugees from becoming integrated in society before they are granted asylum; it is harder to get rid of people who have become valuable members of a community.

Systemic problems require systemic solutions: the subaltern *can* speak, to quote Spivak's famous article, but they will only be heard if they gain access, literally and metaphorically, to stages and PA systems. In the absence of political will to introduce humanitarian migration policies, to support welcome cultures in destination countries, and to promote social inclusion, the humanities should take a more active part in campaigning for new narratives and practices. It may be unusual for literary scholars to team up with

social and political scientists, let alone NGOs, to advocate a different approach to migration. Yet in times of uncertainty, when civil rights and human rights are under attack both in the US and in the EU, slow professors must take a stance.

What kind of contribution can narrative research make? Funded by the European Commission, the collaborative research project “Crises as Opportunities: Toward a Level Telling Field on Migration and a new Narrative of Successful Integration,” promotes level telling fields as an essential factor in the move to transcend ethically problematic forms of vicarious storytelling and to overcome toxic debates that frame migration as a threat to sovereignty and national security. Adopting the economic metaphor of the level playing field, which stands for fair competition, equal opportunities, and a condition of parity, the ‘Level Telling Field’ (LTF) approach develops playbooks and mechanisms to facilitate a fair dialogue on migration involving migrants, citizens, and stakeholders. This comprises both theoretical work—defining, discussing, applying, evaluating, and modifying the premises, principles, and processes that characterize fair debate—and advocating a more inclusive narrative on integration grounded in an ethics of listening and mutual recognition. Within this framework, which considers migration as an opportunity rather than a crisis, NGOs working with refugees and migrants have been organizing local events in several European and African countries, establishing and testing level telling fields in practice.

In principle a scalable concept, the LTF approach also seeks to initiate a new conversation on fair play in public debate. This will involve further conceptual work to reconcile the Habermasian notion of the public sphere (see [Habermas \[1962\] 1989, 2022](#))—along with its critique by [Fraser \(1990\)](#) and others—with the narrative dynamics of discourses on migration in the digital age (see [Sommer 2023](#)). The latter is characterized by new overlaps between private and public spheres, the crisis of political representation, the rise of ‘alternative’ media, and what one might call ‘nonpublic’ publics, e.g., private groups on instant messaging services, which are instrumental in channeling discontent and fostering societal division. More pragmatic than the normative conception of the public sphere proposed by Habermas, level telling fields do not seek to unite competing counter-publics with an appeal to rationality, but rather to initiate a debate on the terms and conditions of fair conversation on controversial issues, the sine qua non of a pluralist democracy.

6. Conclusions

Returning to the figure of the refugee, the starting point of my argument, one can now see how the ethical dilemmas posed by the (re-)telling of vicarious experience can be overcome through collaboration or other acts of narrative solidarity. With the benefit of hindsight, Deng and Eggers tell a story of survival and success, a story which accepts the burden of representation, speaks for those who did not live to tell their tale, and addresses a generation of young people in Sudan. From her bedroom in a refugee camp, affording her no privacy to speak of, Amiri addresses an invisible audience, demanding the most basic human right: a future. Haunted by the past, the refugees she represents are stuck in the present, unable to move forward; women cannot, literally, leave their tents in the camp without fear of harassment and theft. In transit, then, retrospection offers little solace—one intolerable situation has been replaced by another, at least for the time being. Both narratives highlight key aspects of the migrant experience. Being a refugee means, on the one hand, being dependent on others—smugglers, activists, authorities. On the other hand, Amiri’s example shows how, even in the most difficult circumstances, activists and writers are fighting to regain some kind of agency. Her stories tell of resilience in the face of hardship, small signs of solidarity, and the power of writing as a means of self-fashioning, community building, and empowerment.

Theories of forced migration, I have argued, should therefore consider both movement and stasis. What is more, they should be aware of how they position themselves in discourses on migration, what texts they discuss, what contexts they create, what canons they establish, implicitly or explicitly, or what reading methods they encourage. This is where the humanities come in, with slow concepts, of which reading as attentive listening is

a prime example. The narrative dynamics of migration is an emergent field of study which explores the hierarchical and often antagonistic relationships between public narratives on migration and the stories of refugees and migrants. Silencing the other is another form of slow violence in Rob Nixon's (2011) sense. I have briefly outlined the political implications of such silencing in Section 5. Marginalized, subaltern voices can only speak for themselves, if we, the silent majorities in destination countries, are prepared to listen attentively, leveling the telling field.

Funding: Research for this article was conducted in the Horizon 2020 project "Crises as Opportunities: Towards a Level Telling Field on Migration and a New Narrative of Successful Integration" (<https://www.opportunitiesproject.eu/>). This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research & Innovation program under Grant Agreement No. 101004945. The information in this article reflects only the author's views and the European Union is not liable for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The term vicarious storytelling, used here to describe the practice, results, and ethical implications of retelling (parts of) somebody else's story, often in humanitarian contexts and with specific audiences and goals in mind, is closely related not only to concepts such as the "narrative of vicarious experience" (Fludernik 1996, p. 14) and "stories of vicarious experience" (Norrick 2013, p. 386) that focus on distinctions between first-hand and second-hand experience, but also to participation frameworks and telling rights. This line of research is continued in Hatavara and Mildorf's work on related issues raised by narratives of vicarious experience, such as "storytelling rights and authority, which are intricately related to the questions of mind reading or mind attribution" (Hatavara and Mildorf 2017, p. 396). From the perspective of migration studies, it is crucial to question the aims and purposes of vicarious stories, as the practice of speaking on behalf of another has significant implications both for narrative agency and authority in general, and for the creation of a 'communal voice' in particular (see Section 4).
- ² The sociology of waiting, i.e., "the study of how individuals wait" (Price 2021, p. 2), has emphasized the link between waiting time and the characteristics of waiting (Gasparini 1995, p. 36). Long-term waiting not only "creates a relatively stable condition" (ibid.), but may also lead to a new social role for waiting actors. Whether this holds true largely depends on context. I am chary of following Rotter's (2016) interpretation of the daily routines of asylum seekers waiting for a resolution of their immigration status as an intentional and agential process; Turnbull (2016) takes a more critical stance.
- ³ Among the various forms of vicarious storytelling in migration discourses (exemplary, documentary, ambassadorial, allied), distinguished by Gebauer and Sommer (2023), allied storytelling, such as the *Refugee Tales* books series, edited by David Herd and Anna Pincus (Herd and Pincus 2016–2021), is the exception rather than the rule. The novel is an inherently vicarious genre which allows authors to imagine and stage, through characters and conflicts, the experiences of others. Whether that means that allied storytelling is more frequent in literary fiction than in factual narrative is open to debate.
- ⁴ Trilling (2018, p. 25ff.) describes in detail how irregular migrant communities, largely separated by nationality, run informal camps, establish sets of rules, and pass on tacit knowledge. For an in-depth discussion of the problematic implications of commonly used terms such as "irregular" or "undocumented", see (McNevin 2007, p. 655 (fn. 2)).
- ⁵ In the UK, for instance, more than 40,000 asylum seekers have to wait for one to three years for a decision on their claim, according to *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/14/more-than-40000-asylum-seekers-in-uk-waiting-one-to-three-years-for-decision>, accessed on 5 July 2023).
- ⁶ <https://www.vadfoundation.com/>, accessed on 5 July 2023.
- ⁷ Cf. Peek (122): "Even though *What Is the What* is prefaced with Deng's statement of faith in the power of humanitarian story [...] the narrator Valentino foregrounds limitations of humanitarian narrative and activism by implicating humanitarian aid and US hospitality in racial and colonizing histories".
- ⁸ <https://www.schauspiel.koeln/en/schedule/a-z/school-of-resistance/>, accessed on 5 July 2023.
- ⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/06/theater/milo-rau-familie-ntgent.html>, accessed on 5 July 2023.
- ¹⁰ Rau's film *The New Gospel* (2020), for instance, combines interviews with African immigrants in Italy with a fictional reenactment of the story of Jesus, reimagined for the 21st century.
- ¹¹ A video recording of the event is available on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m-1XECEloLk>, accessed on 5 July 2023. References in the text refer to the timeline of this recording.

- ¹² Paynter (2018, p. 45) points out that the experience of transit also affects support networks of activists and advocates which supplement aid at local levels: “Yet the limbo of transit is also, in many ways, the limbo of these collectives: their stability depends on the recognition and permission of local authorities”.
- ¹³ “Could you control yourself, stay calm and create peace while your fate was uncertain for months and years while trapped in Moria?” (p. 32)
- ¹⁴ <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>, accessed on 5 July 2023.

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