# From Peril to Hope:

## Narratives of Border Crossing in Refugee Tales

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The year 2021 witnessed the publication of the latest volume of Refugee Tales, which chronologically coincided with the seventieth anniversary of the adoption of the 1951 Refugee Convention by the UK and other countries. This collection is the fourth volume of the Refugee Tales Project, which began in 2015 with a yearly meeting to walk and share stories by victims of detention, with the main goal of abolishing indefinite detention in the UK. The Refugee Tales Project, which exposes the humanitarian crisis involved in displacement, refugeehood, and detention, is primarily a spatial project that is concerned with borders and boundary crossings. The centrality of space can be seen reflected in the stories collected in Refugee Tales IV, which also reveal a sustained interest in the dimension of time. In this context, the present study addresses borders and border-crossing in the literary voicing of migrants' experience as these migrants interact with spatial and temporal planes, with the aim of exploring such an interaction in a selection of narratives from Refugee Tales IV. This analysis examines the selected tales from the perspectives of the treatment of space, time, and the disoriented perception of both, considering how the articulation of these parameters contributes to the exposure of the injustices in detention and refugeehood.

Keywords: Borders; Space; Time; Refugee; Waiting; Detention; Refugee Tales; Short Story

### 1. Introduction

Refugee Tales IV was published in 2021, coinciding with the seventieth anniversary of the adoption of the 1951 Refugee Convention by the UK and other countries. This volume is, moreover, the first post-Brexit and post-

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COVID-19 publication of the Refugee Tales Project, which began in 2015 with a yearly meeting to walk and share stories by victims of detention. Founded and co-organised by David Herd and Anna Pincus (who are also the editors of all the volumes of Refugee Tales), the Project has the central goal of abolishing indefinite detention in the UK, while simultaneously exposing the humanitarian crisis involved in displacement, refugeehood, and detention. Refugee Tales is primarily a spatial project, concerned with borders and boundaries, seeking "to extend the space in which such stories can be properly heard", as Herd puts it in the Afterword to Volume IV (Herd 2021, p. 152). Furthermore, so my contention goes, the tales collected in the volume also reveal a sustained interest in the dimension of time, as already reflected in Shami Chakrabarti's Prologue to the fourth volume, "The Time Traveller's Tale". Signed by "A. Einstein" ten years after the end of the Second World War, the Prologue is told from a temporal vantage point with access to the past and future, envisaged "as places and possibilities in themselves" (Chakrabarti 2021, p. vii; my italics). Describing himself as a European refugee before his arrival in the United States, "Einstein" appealed to the image of debtors' prisons in the past to denounce the injustice and cruelty suffered by the "prisoners of the future" (Chakrabarti 2021, p. viii), who are those indefinitely incarcerated in detention centres and refugee camps in the twenty-first century. Temporality is, indeed, crucial in the experience of refugeehood to the point that, as argued by Vinh Nguyen in his discussion of "refugeetude", the refugees' condition goes beyond particular places or times, becoming instead "psychic, affective and embodied, enduring in time and space" (Nguyen 2019, p. 114), and transgressing national and generational borders.

In the configuration and articulation of both parameters (time and space), the pro- tagonists (and sometimes narrators) of the stories display a tendency to feel dislocated or displaced, not just from the spatial perspective but also from the temporal one. Boundaries and border-crossing experiences, therefore, acquire a broader meaning beyond their pri- marily geographical or geopolitical dimension. Following Johan Schimanski and Stephen F. Wolfe's definition of borders as part of "b/ordering processes of exclusion and inclusion", and "places of crossing and waiting" (Schimanski and Wolfe 2017, p. 149), border crossing is understood here in terms of migrants' interaction with spatial and temporal planes in the literary voicing of their experience of refugeehood. In light of this, the present study aims to examine such an interaction in a selection of narratives from Refugee Tales IV, focusing on spatial borders in "The Running Person's Tale", temporal borders in "The Hotelier's Tale", and the disorientation associated with spatial and temporal borders in "The Translator's Tale". This analysis, which includes references to other stories in the volume, is preceded by a section on the theoretical conceptualisation of borders and their connection with temporality, waiting, and the Refugee Tales Project.

## 2. The Conceptualisation of Borders and the Refugee Tales Project

In the context of the current spatial turn in cultural and literary studies, "[l]ocal, urban, intimate and subjective spaces are now as important as geopolitical national boundaries" (Rosello and Wolfe 2017, p. 2). Considering the increasing relevance of the crossing of boundaries, both real and symbolic, in the present state of globalisation, borders are concep- tualised beyond their primarily geographical or geopolitical dimension, to become signs or aesthetic facts (Viljoen 2013, pp. xii, xv). Indeed, the twenty-first century has witnessed "the return of borders worldwide: as material reality, as a concept and as a way of thinking [. . .]" (Korte and Lojo-Rodríguez 2020, p. 3). This broad conceptualisation of borders connects with Jacques Derrida's limitrophy and its attention to "what sprouts or grows at the limit or around the limit, but also what feeds the limit, generates it, raises it, and complicates it" (Derrida 2008, pp. 29–30). Limitrophy addresses the existence and interaction of different dimensions in the generation of limits; in this same line, contemporary border studies scrutinise the projection of the concept of borders in cultural texts onto several planes, including topographical, symbolic, epistemological, textual, and interestingly, temporal ones (Rosello and Wolfe 2017, p. 14; my italics). This explicit acknowledgement of the temporal dimension opens the way to examining the relevance of time and temporality in the configuration and experience of borders, which is an approach that connects with the contemporary temporal turn in the social sciences (Jacobsen and Karlsen 2020, p. 7).

As the editors of Migrating Borders and Moving Times (Hurd et al. 2017) put it, "crossing borders entails shifting time as well as geographical location" since "[t]hose who cross borders must [. . .] negotiate not only the borders themselves, but the practices, memories and narratives that differentiate and define the time-spaces they enclose" (Hurd et al. 2017, p. 1). From this perspective, borders are dynamic phenomena, since they are characterised in terms of "bordering processes" (Viljoen 2013, p. xviii); emphasising action and movement, borders are, therefore, redefined as "dynamic spaces of bordering" (Rosello and Wolfe 2017, p. 9). Bordering implies a processual and performative dimension, as it "is always a transitional activity involving processes of debordering and rebordering" (Schimanski and Wolfe 2017, p. 163). The dynamic and temporal transposition of a primarily spatial concept like that of the border can also be seen reflected in the temporal shift of the notion of liminality. Although the image of the limen or threshold is spatial in origin, the points of departure and arrival in the process of crossing the threshold are in themselves "places of transition and transformation" (Aguirre et al. 2000, p. 8). In his approach to the processualisation and temporalisation of space, Victor Turner imbued the threshold with temporal attributes (Thomassen 2014, p. 9) in such a way that liminality appeals to temporality in its marking not just a

beginning and an end but also "duration in the unfolding of a spatio-temporal process" (Andrews and Roberts 2012, p. 1), consequently emerging as a chronological formation (Achilles and Bergmann 2015, p. 7).

In this context, the exploration of the intersection of time and space in border-crossing experience emerges as an innovative and fruitful approach in the field of border studies (Hurd et al. 2017, p. 3), addressing the polity border and its territorial division of societies as a timeline as well (Leutoff-Grandits 2017, p. 123). Madeleine Hurd et al., for instance, highlighted how "crossing borders results in variously bordered combinations of time as well as space, superimposed on, challenging and reinforcing one another in shifting patters of spatio- temporal overlap and disjunction" (Hurd et al. 2017, p. 2; my italics). Along this same line, Christine M. Jacobsen and Marry-Anne Karlsen argued that it is crucial to acknowledge the mutual imbrication of time and space in migration experiences and practices, while at the same time, they claim that the temporal gaze is necessary "to destabilising the dominance of spatial understandings of migration in anthropology and beyond" (Jacobsen and Karlsen 2020, p. 1).

Interestingly, space and time, in their association with migration, converge in the process of waiting, which also connects with border-crossing experiences. Causing "a standstill, a distance and difference in time and space", a border can be seen as "a waiting act" (Van Houtum and Wolfe 2017, p. 131). Like a border, waiting implies both inclusion and exclusion (Van Houtum and Wolfe 2017, p. 131), as it is spatio-tamporally constituted "in and through multiple and relational temporalities" and in different "geopolitical and chronopolitical locations" (Jacobsen and Karlsen 2020, p. 7; my italics). As is discussed below, spaces of waiting, such as refugee camps or detention centres, which were characterised by Christoph Singer et al. as "passages rather than static places", "illustrate the temporalization of place" (Singer et al. 2019, p. 7; my italics). Being liminal in nature, these spaces of waiting emerge as "borderscapes" where processes of bordering and border-crossing take place, "contributing to the negotiation of borders in the public sphere and constructing new configurations of belonging and becoming" (Schimanski and Nyman 2021, p. 2).

Waiting figures prominently in the stories narrated within the Refugee Tales Project, which began in 2015, the year of the so-called European refugee crisis. It is fostered by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group, a charity that fights for the abolition of indefinite immigration detention in the UK, which is the only country in Europe deploying this measure of immigration control in defiance of international human rights. The Project, which also struggles for the welfare of refugees and immigrants affected by the detention system, organises a yearly meeting of people of different ages, places, and backgrounds to walk and share stories by victims of immigration detention, with the goal of exposing

the humanitarian crisis involved in the process. In addition to this, there are monthly walks, namely, the "Walk With Us" events, which keep the walking community connected, and are simultaneously coordinated with other solidarity walks arranged by international partners in other parts of the world. Walking alongside each other is "a collective experience" that enables "visibility [. . .] and the reframing of space" (Herd 2023, p. 198), which is particularly relevant in terms of how the Project resonates with Hannah Arendt's notion of the "space of appearance", which was invoked by David Herd in previous volumes of Refugee Tales in relation to the ethics behind the Project. According to Arendt ([1958] 1998, pp. 198–200), the creation of a public space where the subject appears to others, and the others appear to the subject, that is, the "space of appearance", depends on human interaction on the levels of speech and action. The Project brings this space into being thanks to its collective nature and its promotion of "different kinds of exchange", where "[u]nderstanding is deepened and changed by the process of listening and reflecting with others" ("Summary of Findings of the Walking Enquiry into Immigration Detention"). In this way, the Project reclaims spaces from which refugees and detainees are hidden, while at the same time, it makes their voices audible, ultimately appealing to social and political change.

The Project takes Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales as a template, and in doing so, it brings to the fore migration and human mobility as a transcultural, transhistorical, and transnational phenomenon. The response to Chaucer's text goes beyond the structural similarity of the storytelling journey, as it highlights the implications of "language in transmission—[. . .] stories told and retold", while it "reawakens an awareness of the refugee in Chaucer's work" (Taylor 2020, p. 251). As Helen Barr argues in her study of the Refugee Tales as "stories of the new geography", the walks and the tales reorient the concept of the pilgrimage "in ways that recall Chaucer's fusion of the spiritual with the secular" (Barr 2019, p. 83). In this way, Refugee Tales redefine borders to make space for narratives that need to be heard, opening up "a pan-national geography where text (if not people) are able to travel freely" (Barr 2019, pp. 84–85). At the same time, the correspondence between the Canterbury Tales and the Refugee Tales reinforces the connection between storytelling and hospitality, particularly in the light of Jacques Derrida's approach to hospitality as a question of what arrives at the borders. In his discussion of the Law of absolute hospitality (as opposed to the conditions and norms of the laws of hospitality), Derrida addresses an unconditional "yes to who or what turns up, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor" (Derrida 2000, p. 77). This can be connected with the "spectacle of welcome" conjured up by Herd in the Prologue to the first volume of Refugee Tales, and with the view of storytelling proposed by Ali Smith, who is one of

the patrons of the Project:

> The telling of stories is an act of profound hospitality. It always has been; story is an ancient form of generosity, [. . .] Story has always been a welcoming-in, is always one way or another a hospitable meeting of the needs of others, and a porous artform where sympathy and empathy are only the beginning of things. The individual selves we all are meet and transform in the telling into something open and communal. (Smith 2018, n.p.)

This porosity of the short story places it as a fertile ground for the depiction of the crossing of national, ethnic, and cultural boundaries, with it being "the liminal genre par excellence" (Achilles and Bergmann 2015, p. 4). The liminality of the short story has been examined by Adrian Hunter in terms of the suitability of the genre for the representation of liminal or problematic identities (Hunter 2007, p. 138), while Jochen Achilles and Ina Bergmann have argued that the genre's in-betweenness places it as "an ideal terrain for mapping out liminality" (2015, p. 23). Significantly, as Hurd et al. argued (2017, p. 12), "the migrant passage from one bordered time-space to another" tends to be characterised as liminal, "a journey that is never complete, but is repeatedly caught between the moments of departure and arrival". Refugees, moreover, suffer a form of double liminality, both spatial and temporal, as they live in a liminal space and legal limbo, while inhabiting "an anomalous, interstitial present radically separated from aspired, possible futures" (Eriksen 2020, p. 58). This experience of liminality is intensified in the case of refugees becoming detainees, since "detention is a place of liminality where they are 'stuck', for indeterminate lengths of time, while they wait to know what will happen to them and their futures" (Turnbull 2016, p. 76).

The stories told by those liminal subjects in the course of the yearly walks of the Refugee Tales Project have been published since 2016 in successive volumes of Refugee Tales (2016, 2017, 2019, and 2021). The latest one, Refugee Tales IV, widened its geographical scope beyond the original limits of immigration detention in the UK. As a result of the increase in international participation in the online events of the Project during the COVID- 19 pandemic, Refugee Tales IV includes international tales alongside those set in the UK. This makes this volume particularly apt for the study of border-crossing experiences as undertaken in the present article, in terms of the expansion of spatial boundaries beyond the UK, and the distorted perception of time and space during the pandemic. Moreover, Refugee Tales IV also invests in capturing the real voice of refugees since it features more tales narrated by refugees themselves, namely "The Poet's Tale", "The Translator's Tale", "The Daughter's Tale", "The Delivery Person's Tale", and "The Advocate's Tale". The following analysis addresses the experiences of displacement, refugeehood, and detention in both the UK ("The Running Person's Tale" and "The Hotelier's Tale") and the international context ("The Translator's Tale"), as narrated by

writers giving expression to the migrants' voices ("The Running Person's Tale" and "The Hotelier's Tale"), and by the migrants themselves ("The Translator's Tale").

## 3. Crossing Spatial Borders in "The Running Person's Tale"

"The Running Person's Tale" (as told to Philippe Sands) illustrates the intersection of time and space with the centrality of the spatial dimension. The relevance of space in the tale does not mean that the articulation of time should be underestimated, as the narrative invites reflection on issues such as retrospection, the pace of physical movement, the duration of individual sojourns in certain places, and the narrating time spent on the reconstruction of these in the act of telling. Considering the space–time duality, however, the dimension of space is the one that plays a pivotal role in the narrative. Indeed, the protagonist's identity is delimited at the beginning of the story in terms of geographical location, since the author gives him the name of "Al Beider" because he was born in the town of Al Bayda, in Yemen (Sands 2021, p. 75). Likewise, the physical mobility that marks the protagonist's experience is encapsulated in the noun phrase defining him in the title as "the running man", as well as in his self-characterisation as "a migrant" claiming his agency and usefulness: "'I deserve to be a migrant. I don't want money. I don't want things to be given to me. I'm not useless" (Sands 2021, p. 75). In the course of the story, Al Beider is described with several expressions that point to the relevance of geopolitical borders and their crossings in the narrative: they include keywords such as "migrant", "asylum seeker", "stranger", "foreigner", and "outsider" (Sands 2021, pp. 75–77). While "asylum seeker" is the neutral phrase used by Philippe Sands to describe the protagonist at the moment of writing the tale, "stranger", "foreigner", and "outsider" are applied and self-applied to Al-Beider to evoke his experience of (non)-belonging in the process of geographical mobility. Of these terms, "migrant" deserves special attention because it reflects how the character wants to be treated as somebody actively going from one place to another, and not as a refugee, who is confined to a state of exclusion and permanent liminality.

Border crossing becomes prominent already when Sands narrates the protagonist's childhood, as Al Beider's family leaves Yemen for Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, because of the poor conditions of life there. This confirms how, as Madeleine Hurd et al. argued, "[d]isparities of economic and political value between each side of a border may encourage [migrants] to move in pursuit of a better life" (Hurd et al. 2017, p. 11). As he grows up, this geographical movement has negative consequences for Al Beider, who is denied access to university, both in Saudi Arabia and Yemen:

As a foreigner he was unable to gain entrance to a university in Saudi Arabia, so he decided to return to Yemen.

Back in Sana'a, he is in for a shock. His school certificate is Saudi, which means he can't get a scholarship or access to a public university in Yemen. (Sands 2021, p. 76)

The protagonist finds himself in the liminal position of a displaced identity, feeling disoriented and excluded from both countries. Considering how national borders "bestow a comforting cultural identity on the people they enclose" (Viljoen 2013, p. xxi), physical and spiritual dislocation and alienation emerge as a consequence of crossing topographical borders (Viljoen 2013, p. xii). In the story, this is articulated in terms of (non-)belonging, which is a concept with changing connotations in the course of the narrative, and a crucial factor in the configuration of identity. As Jeffrey Weeks stated, "[i]dentity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. [. . .] it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality" (Weeks, quoted in Weedon 2004, p. 1; my italics). This figures prominently in the tale, as the protagonist's origins are described in terms of his parents' and his own geographical belonging: "I belong to the United Yemen, and I believe in that in a political sense, but I have two bloods"; "My mother belongs to the city where I was born, she belongs to the north. My dad belonged to the west" (Sands 2021, pp. 75, 76; my italics). In this line, Al Beider's identity conflict resulting from his passage across the borders between Yemen and Saudi Arabia is evoked in terms of belonging too: "Because I grew up in Saudi Arabia, they felt like I didn't belong to the place"; "I understand I will not belong to Saudi Arabia. I am a foreigner" (Sands 2021, p. 77; my italics). In other words, the liminal nature of the borderscape, as discussed by Schimanski and Nyman among others, extends to its inhabitant's identitary configuration, placing Al Beider's identity in an in-between position.

The protagonist's feeling of non-belonging, intensified by the war in Yemen, drives him to embark on a process of geographical mobility, from continent to continent and from country to country. In three years, he goes from Asia to Africa and from there to Europe, trying unsuccessfully to find a better life, spending time in Malaysia, Egypt, Jordan, Mauritania, Mali, Algeria, Morocco, Spain, France, and finally Britain. The story thus evokes a sense of intensified mobility (in the form of displacement) and accelerated time that contrasts with the stasis which characterises life in detention. As argued by Sandra Mayer et al. (2023, p. 7), detainees are "stuck within an enforced limbo" since their transitional passage is suspended and their temporality is frozen in an indefinite present. This is reflected in stories like "The Teenager's Tale" or "The Advocate's Tale", which depict detention centres as disorienting spaces, "both like and unlike prisons" that "hold" migrants in a state of boredom and monotony (Turnbull 2016, p. 64).

As opposed to the stillness of life in detention, Al Beider's experience of relentless border-crossing results in his personal dislocation and instability. In

the process, the protagonist loses his passport, with the consequences that it entails not just in terms of bureaucracy but also as a symbolic loss of identity. Deprived of identity and homeless, Al Beider's knowledge of the English language leads him to try to enter the UK. First, he desperately attempts to pass the security fences by swimming from a beach near Calais; second, after almost drowning to death, he pays a smuggler and manages to cross the British border. As an asylum applicant, he becomes part of the detention system; here, his geographical mobility continues from centre to centre, although now narrated in the passive voice, and with references to shorter periods of time that enhance the sense of dislocation and displacement. At the same time, this enumeration of detention centres in association with short periods can be assessed as a narrative strategy to evoke the indeterminacy and indefiniteness of Al Beider's seemingly infinite experience of migration:

He is sent to Cardiff. Three weeks there. He is sent to Swansea. Two months there. He is sent to Luton. Another two months. Al Beider is a long way from Al Bayda.

[. . .]

Then he is sent to a new home, the place from where he speaks, a hotel that doubles up as a detention centre [. . .]

And the future?

'I cannot go back to Yemen. [. . .]

'I am running from death, I am running for my dreams' (Sands 2021, pp. 79–80)

The story concludes with the physical movement of running in the metaphorical sense of the pursuit of dreams. As evoked in the final section of the story, the protagonist's lifelong dream is to find a stable identity that is defined in terms of independence and (non)belonging, with a different connotation: "I want an identity. [. . .] I don't want to belong to anyone" (Sands 2021, p. 80; my italics). Here, the negative connotation of belonging gives voice to the idea that, in their border-crossing experience, "[m]igrants, refugees [. . .] are not waiting for a chance to belong but rather to participate. [. . .] it is a refusal to 'belong', that is, 'to be the property of' someone else" (Khosravi 2020, p. 206). The story, therefore, opens and ends with Al Beider's self-assertion of identity in terms of agency and usefulness on the one hand and individuality and independence on the other. At the same time, the indefiniteness of the refugee status is reinforced by the open ending, with the ambiguous evocation of the protagonist's present location as a space that is said to be "a place with humanity" (Sands 2021, p. 80).

## 4. Crossing Temporal Borders in "The Hotelier's Tale"

The strategy of the open ending recurs in "The Hotelier's Tale" (as told to

Robert Macfarlane), which, like the previous story, opens in Britain in the present. The narrative tells in retrospect the protagonist's stories of detention and asylum seeking across time and space, here with the predominance of time over space. As Macfarlane gives literary expression to the protagonist's experience, he narrates "The Hotelier's Tale" with temporal shifts between the different stages in the protagonist's story, going from the present to the past, mixing a distant with a recent past, and returning to the present. The protagonist's experience includes political prosecution in his unnamed home country and asylum denial, detention, threat of deportation, and release to the streets of London in the UK.

Already in the opening passage of the narrative, the unnamed narrator-protagonist describes his birth through spatial and temporal markers: "I was born with mountains around me. [. . .] I was born on the first day of a month, in the first year of a decade, more than two kilometres above sea level" (Macfarlane 2021, p. 1). Above all, time can be felt as a presence in the story in terms of two main elements: on the one hand, the recurrence of spatial images to characterise the passing of time; on the other, the emphasis on the action of waiting, which exposes the indefinite nature of detention, particularly in the UK.

Waiting is ubiquitous in refugees' and detainees' narratives, reflecting how "the plight of millions of refugees worldwide is not only grounded in mobility and movement, but in equal measure related to waiting, delay and deferral" (Singer et al. 2019, p. 3). As noted earlier, this is intensified in the UK, with the absence of a time limit in waiting resulting from the practice of indefinite detention. Suffering a state of extended liminality, refugees and detainees are victims of border waiting, which is a form of "forced waiting, imposed by bordering practices with consequences of destabilising of lives and bodies" (Khosravi 2020, p. 203). Informing particular subjectivities and precarities for these migrants (Rozakou 2020, p. 25), waiting (as subjection to power) enhances their vulnerability, as reflected in the present tale, as well as in others like "The Waiting Man's Tale". Waiting, however, can also become liberating, meaningful, and active (Van Houtum and Wolfe 2017, p. 134; Rozakou 2020, p. 25), as discussed below in the analysis of "The Translator's Tale".

"The Hotelier's Tale" projects the passing of time onto several images that incorporate the dimension of movement and space: the movement of the clock hands and running water, and the spatial image of the mountains and stones. The clock is present from the very beginning of the tale, and the persistent appeal to the sound of the clock ticking intensifies the feeling of time running: "The clock is clicking. I can hear every movement of the thin red second hand. Click. Click. Click"; "The clock is still clicking. Click. Click. Click"; "The hour is going on. The hour is counting. Click, click, click" (Macfarlane 2021, pp. 1,

3, 6). This gives voice to the rigid temporality of bureaucracy in the asylum apparatus, "which assigns appointments at fixed hours, where delays cannot be mitigated [. . .], and where the temporal regime remains stuck in a mid-twentieth century rhythm based on the assumption that clock time reigns supreme" (Eriksen 2020, p. 68).

At the same time, the protagonist's mind repeatedly resorts to the image of running water, with different degrees of speed, signalling the changing perception of time in the course of life: "Life seemed endless then. Time flowed steady; a slow river with broad banks, no eddies"; "Time is a torrent and I am caught in its current"; "Sometimes the river rushes me on towards the edge. At other times I stand looking down at its flow" (Macfarlane 2021, pp. 3, 4, 13). Like water, another natural symbol that is continually summoned in the story is the spatial image of the mountains and stones, as temporal markers, contrasting the immensity and permanence of time in geological formations and the transience and fleetingness of time in human life: "Mountains keep a different time, a deeper time. Their time is more like God's, and it does not run in straight lines"; "Each second is heavy as a single stone. Each second falls, and slowly the stones build up around me" (Macfarlane 2021, pp. 1, 6). The contrast between different layers of time, both human and geological, in the story signals the multidimensional nature of refugees' experience of time, from both the legal and the phenomenological perspectives. Legally speaking, Jessica Schultz (2020, pp. 173–74) distinguishes two dimensions of "refugee time": "time as attachment" (related "to the passage of time [. . .] and opportunities to re-establish one's life and livelihood") and "time as a deadline", which marks "the eventual end of refugee status".

From the phenomenological point of view, as Jana Kuhlemann contended, refugees are especially vulnerable to discontinuities in the perception of time: for them, present and past are in many cases intertwined as a result of their traumatic experiences, while the re- strictions imposed in the receiving country, together with waiting and the uncertainty in the process of asylum application, affect their views of the present and future (Kuhlemann 2023, pp. 2, 3). In light of this, Kuhlemann argued, it is possible to offer a complex categorisation of more than fifteen types of time perceptions by refugees, including strange time (resulting from different rhythms of social life in the host country), liminal time (associated with the temporal nature and transitional nature of their stay), sticky time (when, as a consequence of waiting and uncertainty, time seems to slow down and not pass fast enough), and frenzied time (experienced by refugees in situations of temporal rupture like deportation procedures) (Kuhlemann 2023, pp. 4–5).

The contrast between sticky and frenzied times acquires special relevance in the description of the period of detention in "The Hotelier's Tale", when waiting becomes the dominant action in the narrative. In this passage, the use of

the image of the stones intensifies, while at the same time, the ticking of the clock stops "[f]or the first time in a long time [. . .]. The second hand sweeps round smoothly now" (Macfarlane 2021, p. 8). Time "slows, thickens, becomes sticky" (Macfarlane 2021, p. 2) to the point that the distressing episode of waiting for a telephone call to avoid the deportation flight seems eternal: "I wait in the detention centre for a call [. . .]. There is no time to achieve something, so what can I do but wait? Nothing. Nothing to do but wait" (Macfarlane 2021, p. 6; my italics). The anguish suffered by the protagonist in his experience of waiting is transferred to the disruption of narrative linearity in the course of the tale. In this sense, the mixing of the present and past tenses, and the disjointed temporal shifts between the events back in the narrator's home country and forth to his present suffering in the UK, awake a sense of temporal disorientation in the reader aimed at the critique of the temporal regimes imposed on refugees.

Waiting becomes discouraging in the light of the protagonist's desperation when facing the fact that his children are growing up in his absence back in their home country: "I am always thinking about my children. They are growing up. Every day they are one day older. This is the clock that I cannot stop. [. . .] Time, as do my children, hurts me so much" (Macfarlane 2021, p. 9). This confirms how "[migrants] are not only trapped in space but also stuck in time, unable to visit elderly and infirm relatives, or children who grow up in their absence, leaving the migrant fixed in an 'eternal present' of things-as-they-had-been when they left" (Hurd et al. 2017, p. 12). This painful feeling, which figures prominently in "The Prisoner's Tale", permeates the open ending of the story that is devoted to the image of the mountains (in connection with the protagonist's children) and the action of waiting: "They cannot see the mountains from where they are. [. . .] I am waiting [. . .] I am always waiting" (Macfarlane 2021, p. 13).

## 5. Disorientation in the Crossing of Spatial and Temporal Borders in "The Translator's Tale"

Waiting recurs in "The Translator's Tale", which is one of the international narratives in Refugee Tales IV and is set in Greece. The story depicts the harsh conditions of life in the Moria camp and Moria detention centre on Lesvos from the point of view of the refugee, who is the narrator and the author of the story. The narrative follows a chronological se- quence with the traditional division into beginning–middle–end, structured in five sections entitled Beginnings, Forwards or backwards, Life in A1, Strange world, and The Future. Two of these titles already suggest the idea of disorientation and loss: "Forwards or backwards" from the temporal viewpoint and "Strange world" from the spatial or geographical one.

The setting of the story is particularly telling considering how Greece "has become one of the main entry points for irregular arrivals to Europe in the

recent years, the vast majority of them being migrants and refugees" (Souliotis et al. 2019, p. 5). The Afghan narrator-protagonist of the story spends three years in Greece, from September 2017 to October 2020, and the narration of his experience there begins in the Moria camp, which is acknowledged as one of the hotspots in European migration and is aimed at containing and channelling international mobility and displacement (Pollozek and Passoth 2019, p. 608). The Moria camp is repeatedly described as overcrowded, unhygienic, and unsafe (van de Wiel et al. 2021, p. 2), a dismal picture that is confirmed by the protagonist's evocation of the place in terms of "the poor conditions, the long queues everywhere, the nervous people" (Mohammadi 2021, p. 65). This image, which points to the prevalence of mental problems among the inhabitants of the camp (van de Wiel et al. 2021, p. 2), is counterbalanced by the protagonist's optimistic and active attitude, which persists throughout the narration. In the camp, he collaborates with different NGOs, undertaking the task of translating for both volunteers and refugees, which is an activity that reflects how refugees in Greece face problems derived from cultural and linguistic barriers (Souliotis et al. 2019, pp. 1–2). The protagonist's predisposition towards solidarity and help intensifies during his stay at the Moria detention centre, where he is moved after his failed attempt at leaving Greece with smugglers.

This experience with smugglers is dominated by mixed feelings of anxiety and ex- citement, worry and expectation, with an emphasis on two factors that later recur in the evocation of life in the detention centre. Such factors are, first, the dichotomy between inside and outside, from the perspective of space, and second, the action of indefinite waiting, from the point of view of time. On the one hand, the inside becomes suffocating in the description of the reduced dimensions of the truck where the protagonist and other migrants are supposed to be taken to Italy: "We made a small space to sit—one metre wide and two metres long with a height of 70 centimetres for ten people" (Mohammadi 2021, p. 67). This prison-like nature of the inside recurs in the Moria detention centre, where Mohammadi shares room A1 with fourteen people for more than six months.

From the legal perspective, detention centres can be characterised as "special zones which are neither fully within nor without any existing state [. . ..] the detention centre may amount to a permanent 'border within borders,' a hollowed out space for these unreturnables" (Wilsher 2012, p. xix). Those borders are outrageously visible in the Moria detention centre, "a heavily secured area surrounded by barbed wire" (Mohammadi 2021, p. 68), and the border-within-border condition only becomes blurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the whole world is turned into a prison: "We were aware of what was going on outside; we heard about coronavirus, which was changing the whole world. During lockdown, we were sorry for the big change outside, but we said: 'So now everyone in the whole world is in prison, it's just that our

prison is a bit smaller!'" (Mohammadi 2021, p. 71).

In the detention centre, the prevailing activity is that of waiting. As argued above, the indeterminacy of waiting for asylum seekers was highlighted in different studies of migration and refugeehood, including those by Sarah Turnbull (2016) and Willemine van de Wiel et al. (2021). For the protagonist of "The Translator's Tale", waiting is present in his life since his early days on Lesvos in the Moria detention camp: "I had already stayed on the island for two years, waiting so long in a place that has a dark history; I was afraid of staying any longer and losing any more time [. . .]" (Mohammadi 2021, p. 66). In the detention centre, waiting intensifies, which results, from Mohammadi's optimistic perspective, in the cultivation of patience: "Not only can you learn a new language, painting or even tattooing, but you also learn a new way of behaving and being patient" (Mohammadi 2021, p. 69). Mohammadi's attitude to waiting is, therefore, an active one, as he transforms waiting into "waiting out", which "involves asserting some agency over the very fact that one has no agency by not succumbing and becoming a mere victim" (Jacobsen and Karlsen 2020, p. 13). Mohammadi makes his waiting meaningful by engaging actively in the daily life of the detention community: "We were the Afghan team. [. . .] We did our best to help each other. [. . .] We washed each other's clothes, we played games, we made jokes, danced and talked" (Mohammadi 2021, p. 70).

The dark side of this attitude is, however, the number of devastating effects that wait- ing has on most victims of detention. As argued by Turnbull (2016, p. 63), detainees suffer a unique type of incarceration due to the high levels of uncertainty and unpredictability of their waiting. Considering how "the relation between the length of time spent in the asylum procedure [. . .] and mental health find a cumulative adverse effect" (van de Wiel et al. 2021, p. 2), it is unsurprising how psychiatric conditions have a relatively high preva- lence in detention centres, with fear, anxiety, and depression rating high (Souliotis et al. 2019, p. 5). This is witnessed by Mohammadi, who remembers how in the Moria detention centre "most of the people there had some kind of mental health issues. It was always very loud and noisy. [. . .] people yelled at each other often" (Mohammadi 2021, p. 69). The protagonist, himself feeling "very strange, frustrated and lost" at the beginning, manages to cope with the stay in the detention centre by resorting to the same strategy as in Moria detention camp: creating his "own world" inside, making himself useful to others. He is able then to transpose the positive implications of "refugeetude" in Moria to his experience in the detention centre; as Nguyen argued, "[r]efugeetude [. . .] turns away from readily available discourses of victimhood [. . .] to highlight how refugee subjects gain awareness, create meaning, and imagine futures" (Nguyen 2019, p. 111). In Mohammadi's case, this involves once again crossing linguistic barriers, as he becomes "Tarjoman", the translator:

But it changed. We changed; we made our own world inside A1. My

name in there was ‘Tarjoman’, this means translator. [. . .]

I translated, I had a good job in there, [. . .] Everyone offered their skills to each other; it was a good way of being creative and changing our situation into something better. (Mohammadi 2021, pp. 70–71)

Despite his positive attitude, Mohammadi does not escape the psychological con- sequences of detention. These negative impacts, “which can be long lasting, even after release” (Weiler et al. 2022, p. 1849), are intensified by the worldwide effects of COVID-19, as the protagonist finds himself released into the strange space and time of the pandemic: “Still, I feel very strange in this time that has changed the world. [. . .] Especially for refugees, now it’s very difficult. Since being released, I have tried to have some fun and enjoy my freedom, but I still have problems to solve!’” (Mohammadi 2021, p. 73). This signals how COVID-19 has influenced refugees’ spaces and temporalities of waiting, as attested for instance in “The Outsider’s Tale” and “The Delivery Person’s Tale”.

In his new state of freedom, Mohammadi displays “strange new habits” acquired in detention, like cutting his nails with razors or wearing earplugs on silent nights, while reminding himself that he is free to use his mobile phone, which was forbidden in the detention centre. Depriving detainees of their smartphones is particularly pernicious in the light of how smartphones work “as an antidote to waiting by accelerating communication and social connectivity” (Eriksen 2020, p. 63) since they enable regular and immediate contact with others, expanding space and personalising time (Eriksen 2020, p. 69). The usefulness of smartphones and other electronic devices for migrants was reinforced during the pandemic, as reflected in the online interaction of refugees and writers in several of the stories collected in Refugee Tales IV, such as “The Stowaway’s Tale” and “The Chef’s Tale”. Even when once again enjoying social interaction (both physical and electronic), Mohammadi suffers the persistence of the inside–outside dichotomy (“Now I am outside, but my mind is still in detention”; Mohammadi 2021, p. 73), as well as the endurance of waiting in the seemingly endless process of asylum seeking: “Now I am staying with a friend, resting my soul and waiting for the next step, [. . .] I have been waiting for three years in Greece; [. . .] I need asylum and access to my future” (Mohammadi 2021, p. 74). This future, which is described in the last section of the story (entitled precisely with the phrase “The Future”), is characterised by a hopeful mood of trust in the exciting prospect of Mohammadi’s new life in Germany. At the point in the story when the protagonist’s present chronologically coincides with the telling of the story on 19 January 2021, his mind travels fleetingly to the past (and to the beginning of the narrative) as he looks at the pictures taken three years before in Greece: “For a short time, I lived once again in those moments. I could feel what happened. [. . .] I was back there in that long food line again. Now these are only memories, and I am glad to have met great

people in those times" (Mohammadi 2021, p. 74). Here, memory emerges as "a border-crossing between a present and a past", as Schimansky and Wolfe put it (2017, p. 163). Superimposed over this past, Mohammadi's future fills him with the expectation of social opportunities, which are significantly perceived as the final destination of his life journey across borders:

> Since November 2020 I have been in Germany. It marks the end of part of my life and the beginning of another, one with a big difference and higher quality! [. . .] No more lines, no more Moria, no more watching grumpy faces!
>
> It seems I crossed many borders and circumstances; hardship and good times, too, to get here. (Mohammadi 2021, p. 74)

## 6. Conclusions

Mohammadi's final reflection attests to how "[d]aydreaming, orienting oneself to- wards not-yet fulfilled promises, is pre-eminently a political act by which migrants claim their right to potentialities that make prospects for a better future possible" (Khosravi 2020, p. 206). In so doing, the ending of the story is infused with an optimistic and hopeful mood that permeates the narrative and its articulation of the spatial and temporal dimensions. This becomes clear in the protagonist's experience of detention, where waiting is made meaningful and active, thus serving as an antidote to the disorientation springing from the dichotomy between inside and outside and from temporal indefiniteness. "The Translator's Tale" then provides a contrast to the pernicious effects of hectic geographical mobility in "The Running Person's Tale" and indefinite waiting in "The Hotelier's Tale". If this second story reveals the enhanced vulnerability resulting from the lack of a time limit in detention, the first one emphasises the shattering consequences of having to move permanently in search of an identity and (non-)belonging. All in all, these three narratives illustrate the centrality of crossing spatial and temporal borders in Refugee Tales IV, and how the experience of both space and time invites the reader to reflect on the injustices of displacement, refugeehood, and detention in contemporary global migration.

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