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When the Voice of the Refugee is Heard: Sharing Experiences of Detention in *Refugee Tales IV*

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Refugee Tales IV, edited by Anna Pincus and David Herd and published in 2021, is the fourth volume to date of the *Refugee Tales* short-story collections. While these stories are told by individuals who have been in detention centers, it is renowned writers such as Dina Nayeri and Robert Macfarlane who generally help these refugees and asylum seekers capture their experiences on paper. The project was set up and is organized by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group "as a response to the silence that surrounded indefinite immigration detention in the U.K. [and other countries around the world]" (Herd 2017, 113), which criminalizes the asylum process, "mak[ing] the commitment of a crime (for instance, trying to leave the country under false papers) so much more likely" (117). In this article, I will explore how the short stories in *Refugee Tales IV* contribute to helping refugees and asylum seekers achieve a space of self-determination where their stories, which are often disesteemed or ignored, can be heard. By emulating some of the main themes and features of *The Canterbury Tales*, these stories shed light on the traumatic experiences many refugees face in the U.K. and other countries with regard to their indefinite detention and a legal system that marginalizes them. I will pay particular attention to the various forms in which the individuals express the impotence of not being able to decide things for themselves, as well as the ways in which the act of storytelling allows them to occupy a literary space from where to speak up and become active agents.

Keywords: refugees; resistance literature; storytelling; refugee narrative; narrative space

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Cuando el refugiado se hace escuchar: La visibilización de experiencias de detención en *Refugee Tales IV*

Refugee Tales IV, editado por Anna Pincus y David Herd y publicado en 2021, es la cuarta colección de cuentos bajo el título *Refugee Tales*. Si bien estas historias son contadas por refugiados y solicitantes de asilo que han estado en centros de detención, son escritores de renombre como Dina Nayeri y Robert Macfarlane quienes generalmente ayudan a estas personas a plasmar sus experiencias en el papel. El proyecto fue creado y organizado por el Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group "como respuesta al silencio en torno a la detención indefinida de inmigrantes en el Reino Unido [y otros países del mundo]" (Herd 2017, 113; mi traducción), la cual criminaliza al proceso de asilo "hasta que cometer un delito (como por ejemplo abandonar un país con documentación falsa) llega a ser algo mucho más probable" (117; mi traducción). Este artículo explora la forma en que las historias cortas recogidas en *Refugee Tales IV* otorgan a las personas refugiadas y a solicitantes de asilo un espacio literario de autodeterminación donde se puedan escuchar sus historias, a menudo desestimadas o ignoradas. La colección emula algunos aspectos formales y temáticos de *The Canterbury Tale*s con el fin de arrojar luz sobre las experiencias traumáticas a las que se enfrentan muchas personas refugiadas en el Reino Unido y otros países a causa de la detención indefinida y un sistema legal que las marginaliza. El análisis de los relatos presta una especial atención a las diversas formas en que los individuos expresan la impotencia de no poder decidir sobre sus destinos, así como a las formas en que la narrativización de sus vivencias les permite ocupar un espacio literario donde mostrar su voz y convertirse en agentes activos.

Palabras clave: personas refugiadas; literatura de resistencia; narrativa; narrativa de personas refugiadas; espacio literario

1. Introduction

Refugee Tales IV (2021) is the fourth volume of the *Refugee Tales* short-story collections edited by Anna Pincus and David Herd and published in the U.K. by Comma Press, starting in 2016. While all these stories are told by individuals who have been in detention centers and some of the tales are written by themselves, it is renowned writers such as Dina Nayeri and Robert Macfarlane who generally help these refugees and asylum seekers capture their experiences on paper. *Refugee Tales IV* is the first publication of Refugee Tales Project after Brexit and COVID-19. The project started in 2015 with yearly walks in solidarity with victims of detention carried out in different places in the south of England. These walks function as a metaphor for the migratory journey, allowing participating migrants to relate their experiences of exile and refuge as they walk. In these events, organized by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group, writers, care professionals and politicians walk with refugees and asylum seekers "as a

response to the silence that surround[s] indefinite immigration detention in the UK [and other countries around the world]" (Herd 2017,113).

Refugee Tales draws structurally on *The Canterbury Tales* in that the collection consists of personal stories that some of the asylum seekers tell during the walk. In addition, the project purposely shares certain other similarities with Geoffrey Chaucer's masterpiece, such as the journey as a fundamental theme, the importance of storytelling in the circulation of ideas, giving priority to personal experience, the collage of voices and the defense of individualization by dedicating a chapter to each person ("The Hotelier's Tale," "The Teenager's Tale," "The Poet's Tale," etc.). Indeed, Chaucer's classic is considered one of the first English narratives to satirically question the medieval corporate view of society (where the individual only existed as part of a hierarchic and totalitarian community), rather leaning towards the defense of a modern individualized view where individual experience acquires a significant role (Fisher 1997). Just as *The Canterbury Tales* suggests that "the behavior of individuals is a function of personal idiosyncrasies" (Fisher 1997, 31) and challenges the medieval belief that every human being must behave according to what their estate and the Divine Plan stipulates, *Refugee Tales* aims to be a literary platform where individual experiences of detention are told and made visible countering the treatment of refugees as a whole and the often reductive depiction of them in the production of general media outlets (Wright 2002; Cooper *et al.* 2021).

Those involved in the Refugee Tales project are demonstrating their unease about the U.K. government's Immigration Bill, passed on the 12th of May 2016. While the third section of this act permits immigration officers to retain asylum seekers' documents indefinitely and without the need for a warrant, the fourth section allows for deportation to be enacted first and an appeal to be lodged later, which, primarily, criminalizes the asylum application system and reduces the individual's prospects for success. The approval of this immigration law has caused great concern among a large sector of the British population. Many claim that it contravenes the premise of international law that detention must be, in the words of Mainwaring and Cook, "reasonable, proportional, non-arbitrary, non-punitive, adhere to due process, and be used only after non-custodial alternatives prove to be inadequate," that is, immigration detention must be "a measure of last resort and for the shortest time possible" (2019, 2). In the Afterword at the end of each of the *Refugee Tales* collections, David Herd states that the detention estate with respect to immigration is a breach of a person's human rights and that the effect of this legislation is "to criminalize the asylum process" (Herd 2017, 117). Herd also argues that there should not be "anything utopian about the demand that everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law" (122) and believes that "to detain a person indefinitely is to breach the principles that underpin due process, a principle that has its origin in Magna Carta and that achieves forceful expression in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (123). The Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group notes that the U.K. is the only country in Europe

where the detention of immigrants has no time limit. Being indefinitely detained and without legal guarantees has a devastating impact on families and communities and seriously damages the mental health of detainees. More than one person a day requires treatment for self-harming in U.K. detention centers, while since 2000, "55 people have died whilst detained under immigration powers" ("What is immigration detention?", n.d.).

Stephanie J. Silverman defines immigration detention "as a deprivation of non-citizens' liberty for the purposes of an immigration-related goal," adding that although international law rejects it as a routinary practice, "the U.K. government is increasingly focused on its detention estate as a tool to promote efficiency in its immigration control system and as a symbol of its 'firm but fair' approach to irregular migrants" (Silverman 2012, 1134-35). There has been a significant response from Parliament, as well as a large section of the British population, against the tendency of successive governments in the U.K. to promote detention as a "regrettable but necessary" solution that implies the indefinite incarceration of people who are not necessarily charged with any crime. For instance, on September 1, 2009, politician Nick Clegg, leader of the opposition Liberal Party at the time, published an open letter in which he asserted that child immigration detention is a "state-sponsored cruelty" and a "moral outrage" (quoted in Silverman 1145) and in 2015 a cross-party parliamentary report called for an end to indefinite detention. Similarly, several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also played an active role in criticizing U.K. immigration detention policy and practices. These organizations are not only essential in disseminating information, but also function as the spokesperson that many asylum seekers need to work on their behalf to improve their conditions and denounce the fact that "detention interferes with physical liberty, [which is] considered […] a basic human right" (Silverman 1135). Such organizations believe that immigration detention is a violent mode of altering refugees' and asylum seekers' spatial-temporal reality in that detainees are held indefinitely, with their mobility restricted. Once stripped of any legal status through which they can claim rights, "detainees are made both invisible and silent politically" (Martin and Mitchelson 2009, 465).

Within this framework, the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group (GDWG) set up the *Refugee Tales* project. GDWG is a registered charity that started in 1995 when British immigration authorities began detaining people at the Immigration Removal Center, near Gatwick Airport. It has around seventy volunteers who offer psychological support to detainees through weekly visits. Additionally, it puts pressure on political authorities to improve conditions in detention centers and to implement policies that abolish indefinite detention. As aforementioned, Refugee Tales wanderers first gathered in 2015, walking from the Immigration Removal Center on the White Cliffs of Dover to the Immigration Removal Centers at Gatwick Airport as a demonstration against indefinite detention. They also walked the North Downs Way route, which largely emulates the Pilgrims' Way, "the ancient track along which people once travelled

from Hampshire […] to Canterbury" (Herd 2017, 133). In 2020, the social distancing imposed by the pandemic forced the organization to carry out the walk(s) in smaller groups or even as individuals, while online events multiplied for those who wanted to participate but could not do it in person due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Afterword to *Refugee Tales IV*, Herd explains that to show where people were walking, "the project plotted their locations on an online map," which, at the end of the walk, demonstrated that people from over twenty countries had joined the initiative and it had thus acquired a worldwide dimension (Herd 2021, 146). As a result, this fourth part of the collection, being more plural in terms of the origin of the stories (Canada, Greece and Italy), has a more international character than its predecessors, converting their complaint against the British indefinite detention system into a global denunciation.

The fourteen short stories in *Refugee Tales IV* result from the encounter between professional writers and refugees on the organized walks and shed light on the injustices and legal irregularities committed in British detention centers. These stories contribute to helping refugees and asylum seekers achieve a space of self-determination where personal testimonies that are often disesteemed or ignored can in fact be heard. *Refugee Tales IV* is the proof that culture is made in motion and, by providing asylum seekers with a literary space where they can share their experiences, they come to be acknowledged in their creative potential, rather than feeding the mainstream media's depiction of the refugee as either simply a dehumanized victim or as a threat. Rafael Rojas focuses on the political role of literature when claiming that it "produces subjectivities, cultural and political citizenships" (Rojas 2006, 420; my translation) and that narratives can be "a powerful tool in establishing ideological interests" (Mayer 2014, 92). In the TED talk "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie also acknowledges the potential of storytelling and asserts that "like our economic and political worlds, stories are defined by […] how they are told, who tells them, when they are told, and how many stories are told" (Adichie 2009). Thus, drawing on the idea that storytelling constitutes an empowering device and acquires a key role in the construction of the self, this article argues that the telling of refugees' narratives strengthens their human dignity and, as Vanessa Agnew puts it, fosters "an awareness of historical continuities […] around refugees and their routes of escape and survival" that promote "more humane and sustainable responses to the plight of the forcibly displaced" (2020, 20). The European mass media have, in recent years, generally linked refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants to crime and violence, and "attempts to counter these narratives have been restricted in part because of the low number of stories in which refugees, asylum seekers immigrants and migrants actually speak" (Cooper *et al.* 2021). In this sense, *Refugee Tales* constitutes a counternarrative that offers a more accurate and fairer representation of, at least, some refugees' experiences to the one that media outlets project.

Several studies in the last two decades demonstrate how geographers, anthropologists and political scientists have begun to promote new lines of research that delve into

the relationship between detention and identity or spatial practices (Hall 2008; Nisa 2008). Even though imprisonment brings vexation and suffering, participants in *Refugee Tales IV* can transform their traumatic experiences into powerful contestatory narratives where individual voices are given the chance to express themselves freely. The stories in the book take advantage of the fact that British detention centers can become sites of identity production (Hall 2008), and that identity and power are strongly related to space (Sack 1986; Rose 1995). In this sense, refugees and asylum seekers who have experienced detention can, with the help of professional writers, shape a space of their own in *Refugee Tales IV* that allows them to gain self-autonomy and move towards an identity that is "fluid, relational, and always in flux" (Kalua 2009, 23), and that differs from the immobility to which detention centers and bureaucracy condemn them (Martin and Mitchelson 2009). In short, they employ storytelling to avoid the identity politics imposed by nations, media outlets and political institutions in order to pursue the construction of a narrative space from which to express themselves. In this sense, this study clearly illustrates Fredrick Mayer's understanding of literary texts as "an empowering tool of mind" (2014, 79), as well as Julia Borst's belief that literature has the potential to provide a voice to "immobile voices" (2019, 113). These tales are indeed important socio-political documents. Not only do they provide a clearer understanding of current political and social issues, but also convey powerful ideological messages that could further support some of the ongoing studies within social and political science that aim to shed light upon what Homi Bhabha calls "the histories of the excluded" (1994, 6).

2. *Refugee Tales* as a Communal Account of Individual Experiences of Detention and Institutional Mistreatment

As in *The Canterbury Tales*, *Refugee Tales IV* exercises a democratic purpose based on its plurality of accounts and participants. One of the most valuable features of the book is that, as in the rest of the *Refugee Tales* collections, it gives prominence to the individual voices of asylum seekers, who are given the opportunity to share their traumatic experiences with indefinite detention and to tell the specific reasons for their exile. For instance, the narrative voice in "The Hotelier's Tale" points to the government of his home country as the main reason for his flight. The narrator relates that he is arrested in his home country due to his demonstration of support for the opposition party. He tells how he was held in prison without trial, tortured and then released after a year under the prohibition of taking part in any political action or conversation against the authorities. However, the hotelier's desire to express himself and to make his country a freer place leads him to collaborate once again with the opposition party and help its exiled members communicate. When the government eventually finds out about his re-involvement in politics, he has to go into hiding and, ultimately, flee from the country. Similarly, the narrative voices in "The Chef's Tale" and "The Activist's Tale"

tell how they were likewise forced to leave their countries because of the tyranny and authoritarian behavior of their governments. In the former story we are informed that S., the name the narrator uses so as not to reveal the asylum seeker's identity, was a student leader back in his home country and that his family is involved in local politics. The narrative voice mentions "amnesties, coups, presidents imprisoned, civil unrest, corrupt governments, revolts, phones being tapped—the ebb and flow of hope and then despair" (2021, 93) as part of S.'s experience, also adding that he is later taken into custody for no reason on "trumped-up charges of attempted murder, robbery, extortion" (93-94) and eventually released in a state of confusion. When the police come for S. for the second time, fleeing seems the most prudent solution. In "The Activist Tale" we are told about Solomon, a Northern Guinean man whose family is Fula, a "long oppressed ethnic minority who practices Islam and are scattered across West Africa" (56). His father, an anti-regime activist, and Solomon himself, set up a Fula opposition party against the military Junta and its president Lansana Conté, an autocratic leader. After being arrested a number of times, his father eventually "vanishes," and Solomon has to leave the country for his own safety.

Violence, poor living conditions and war are other reasons why the refugee protagonists in other stories feel the urgency to apply for asylum. In "The Stowaway's Tale," the narrator mentions that the asylum seeker whose story she is reproducing does not want to give details about all the obstacles they faced in their country, only saying that "it was brutal and quick and confusing" (47) and that the refugee's family is believed to be dead. The Afghan asylum seeker Khodadad Mohammadi is open about his identity and "The Translator's Tale" explains how the poor living conditions he was experiencing in Moria camp, a refugee camp founded in Greece in 2013, pushed him for a better life in Europe. Likewise, the narrator in "The Running Person's Tale" reveals that the reason why Al Beider leaves Yemen is that his country is currently "the site of proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia" (75), while Natalia's family in "The Daughter's Tale" have to leave Colombia after they are persecuted and receive threats because of the human rights legal work in which Gabriel's mother (Natalia's mother-in-law) was involved.

Importantly, unlike with most mainstream media, these tales are transparent and outspoken about the humiliating conditions refugees live in inside detention centers and the continuous breaches of human rights that occur during the asylum-request process. With reference to British detention centers, Silverman claims that they involve "the deprivation of someone's liberty and autonomy for the noncriminal reasons of unresolved immigrant status" (2012, 1148), and adds that "this deprivation leads to deterioration in immigration detainees' mental, physical, and emotional health, which worsens with everyday incarceration. Coupled with patchy access to legal counsel and bail, indefinite time limits, incarceration of families, and mandatory holding of certain national groups, this deterioration is an offense against the dignity of noncitizens" (1148).

Detention centers in the U.K. are privately run and, as David Herd mentions in the "Afterword" of *Refugee Tales IV*, the ways how the tenders are won an entry to observe what happens within them is very restricted (2021, 142). Nevertheless, in 2017 the BBC program *Panorama* managed to circumvent the security of the Brook House Immigration Removal Centre at Gatwick Airport "by providing one of the detention center staff with a hidden camera" (142). The footage revealed the constant abuses and mockery suffered by the detainees, the most shocking moment being when a detention center officer, knowing that a person had tried to strangle himself in their cell, "responded by placing his hands around the person's neck to finish the process off" (142). *Refugee Tales IV* too provides a very stark picture of the deplorable conditions that some asylum seekers experience in detention centers and shows the injustices and abuses individuals are exposed to by a system which, in its arbitrariness and its indefiniteness, disregards human rights. For example, the narrator in "The Teenager's Tale" describes the detention center as having "four-meter-high fences, a plain courtyard in each area, five identical low prefabs," some burnt, the internal walls of which are "scratched" [by human nails] and whose toilets have "no doors" (15). In "The Daughter's Tale," the detention center is openly compared to "a prison you would see in a TV series" with an indoor patio that "looked like a tiny metal playground from a Nazi movie" (84). Not only does this narrator refer to the place as "terrible," but also portrays the security guards as "bulky" and "aggressive" people who speak to the asylum seekers "as if they were prisoners" and forcing them to fill out long questionnaires about, for example, the reasons of their departure and the motivations to arrive in the host country (84). Being under indefinite detention in these hostile circumstances tests the protagonists' mental strength. The asylum seeker Khodadad Mohammadi claims in "The Translator's Tale" that, while in detention, he and the rest of the prisoners were aware of the coronavirus and everything that was going on outside. Although they were sorry about the health crisis, Mohammadi felt some relief when he realized that due to lockdown the whole world could somehow understand what he had been going through in that he thought that "everyone in the whole world is [now] in prison, it's just that our prison is a bit smaller" (71). The narrator in "The Stowaway's Tale" speaks more directly of the difficulties of remaining mentally sane in detention centers when they reproduce the words of the person whose story is being narrated. The unnamed refugee told the narrator that detention has "fucked her head up," and "that there is something wrong in [her] head, because sometimes [she self-harms]" (53).

This negative image of detention centers and the officers working in them also applies to the system behind such incarceration itself, which is described as cruel and unfair. "The Poet's Tale" includes six poems written by the refugee Kyon Ferril, who explicitly asserts that it is the system *per se* that dehumanizes and saddens the asylum seeker. In the poem entitled "The system will break your heart," he expresses his belief that those institutions in which asylum seekers trust will eventually disappoint them because they are just interested in wealth, power and

control, and that he has been abandoned, "ignored and detained throughout [the] process" (43). Also, in the poem "Heart castaway," he addresses the tedious and discriminatory bureaucratic process asylum seekers have to face, and regrets that even if successful in their asylum application, people will have to travel "the long road back for acceptance through the highway of pain" (40). The poetic voice feels alienated from society and treated as a criminal. After wondering how someone can grow up and evolve while perpetually confined, he closes the poem with the desperate cry of challenge "oppress no more!" (41).

3. The System in Control of the Asylum Seeker's Space and Time

Many of the voices that make up *Refugee Tales IV* address the control of their time and space that indefinite detention exerts over them. As far as space is concerned, there are numerous references in the tales suggesting that asylum seekers lack control over their mobility and their bodies when they are held in detention centers or transferred from one place to another at the whim of institutions and officials. In this sense, the processes of detention and confinement become social practices of immobilization in which space is used for the benefit of the State to control people and their mobility (Martin and Mitchelson 2009). For instance, the first-person narrator in "The Teenager's Tale" associates his experience of exile and detention with a lack of self-autonomy. The tale begins with the words "I like driving. I always did, since I was a kid" (15), highlighting the refugee's taste for being in command of the course of his life. These words contrast with the questions he asks himself at the beginning of the different sections that make up the narrative and which denote his lack of total control over the space he occupies: "what am I doing in this center?" (15), "what am I doing in this house?" (16), "what am I doing in this car?" (17), "what am I doing in this cell?" (18), "what am I doing in a police car?" (19), "what am I doing in this elegant room?" (20), "what am I doing in this country?" (20). All these questions demonstrate his inability to decide about the spaces he occupies, and in turn they trace his journey from Somalia to Italy. It is in this European country where his request for asylum is finally accepted and he regains the right to move around the country (and through space) more freely.

In the bureaucratic process leading to asylum, the immigrants whose stories are told in *Refugee Tales IV* are turned into passive subjects who are controlled and moved from one place to another like puppets at the hands of the system. The first-person narrator in "The Prisoner's Tale," for example, is unable to provide an answer when one immigration officer asks him why he is on T Wing of the detention center, the area reserved for criminals, because he has simply been placed there with no explanation. Similarly, in "The Waiting Man's Tale," the unnamed refugee acknowledges his lack of free circulation when asserting that he is "locked down in London [...], where the Home Office has placed [him]" (29) and, once he is out of the detention center, reports how some native people always make him feel out of place by ignoring his presence.

This is also how the refugee who tells his story to the writer of "The Chef's Tale" feels: as if he was nowhere, "locked into a non-place [...] with suspended animation" (93), that is, unable to fully inhabit a space. The feeling of being stripped of their animation and free circulation is in fact stressed in all the stories that make up *Refugee Tales IV* through the continuous use of the passive voice and other linguistic structures to address the imposed passivity of refugees. Sentences such as "I was sent to a hostel in Croydon" (9), "I was denied asylum" (10), "I was held in solitary confinement" (18), "I was taken" (32), "we were moved to" (68) and "he is sent to Cardiff" (80) are just a few examples from the book that depict the asylum seekers' lack of control over their space and point to others as being the ones making decisions about their life courses.

While in detention and dealing with all the bureaucratic machinery, these asylum seekers also lose track of time because they are forced to remain waiting indefinitely for the resolution of their destiny. Concerning indefinite detention, Silverman states that "the UK's position outside the Schengen zone allowed it to opt out of the EU Returns Directive (2008), which set an 18-month time limit on detention. Therefore, although many are held for less than two months [...], it is not uncommon for individuals to be detained for many years" (2017, 8).

For instance, in "The Activist's Tale" Solomon mentions that they (referring to institutional workers and authorities) tried to kill him "with waiting" (63) and that years later, when he won his unlawful detention case, "he spoke in front of the House of Commons about the mental torture of being made to wait, of becoming an object in a bureaucratic machine designed for the convenience of the Home Office" (63). The theme of the system controlling the asylum seekers' time is present in almost every tale in the collection. In the first lines of the book, the narrator of "The Hotelier's Tale" announces what time is going to mean in the subsequent stories: "time is two kinds of enemy when you are in this system. As the first enemy, time slows, thickens, becomes sticky. It is something you wade in. As the second enemy, time rushes onwards, forwards. It is a flash flood in the mountains, forcing you helplessly towards a precipice" (2).

Time is imagined almost as another character, with physical properties and the power to alter someone's free will. It is an almighty enemy that haunts the asylum seekers because it forces them "helplessly towards a precipice" with no way of avoiding it. As in this excerpt, time in other parts of "The Hotelier's Tale" is compared to "a slow river with broad banks" (3), "a torrent" (4) in which the narrator is caught and formed of seconds that are as "heavy as a single stone" (6) that keep falling and piling up around him. The tyranny of the hours, which stretch or contract depending on the situation, is also epitomized by the clocks on the walls of the detention center. The narrative voice cannot help being excessively aware of clocks ticking, and the onomatopoeic words "tick, tick, tick" appear several times throughout the tale, portrayed as a terrifying sound that torments the asylum seeker. In short, time is a source of affliction, as the narrator himself points out: "This is the clock that I cannot stop [...]. Time, as do my children, hurts me so much" (9). Similarly, in "The Teenager's Tale," time is described

as "tough and heavy," and the narrative voice specifies that he was in a high security prison for reasons that were never explained to him for more than two years, caught in a daily routine that "is like a circle" (19) in its repetitiveness and tediousness. Indeed, the refugees whose stories are told in "The Outsider's Tale," "The Poet's Tale" and "The Waiting Man's Tale" also focus on the tortuous relationship they have with time due to the seemingly endless wait they are forced into in detention centers before discovering whether they will finally be deported to their home countries or granted asylum. While the narrator in the first of these stories describes his experience as a continuous "waiting in limbo" (27) and, in the second, the poetic voice in Kyon Ferril's poem "Heart Castaway," included in "The Poet's Tale," says that "everything is distorted like time" and that "the heart longs for more […] time" (40), in the latter, Rachel Seiffert writes a whole tale out of an unnamed refugee's wait for institutional and administrative decisions. "The Waiting Man's Tale" reproduces the conversation of a video call between the author and the refugee who is telling the story. The latter starts the chat by saying that he feels stuck, waiting for his ID card, his "leave to remain" (31). Later on, he directly blames the Home Office for this horrible waiting and confesses that he sometimes feels like he is "waiting in the shadow of the valley of death" (31). This is a powerful image that further depicts these refugees' waiting as one of the main causes of their suffering. The tale ends with a short but potent message in prose, where once again time acquires prominence through the words "wait," "day," "night," "each time" and "morning." Interestingly, it seems that the long waiting of these asylum seekers, although full of vexation, is evoked as an act of resilience against the system, the proof that the refugee still has hope and that he has not given up his fight to be accepted in Europe:

> How hard the wait is.
> The so much you have been through.
> And what it takes to live each day as you do.
> Night is a struggle, I have to tell you.
> But each time morning comes, I am glad again.
> And I am waiting. I am waiting (36).

4. Storytelling as an Empowering Deed

Detention centers and institutional bureaucracy, then, both physically and mentally constrain asylum seekers by dominating their time and space. Their mobility and agency are consequently limited, as well as their right to make decisions and, most importantly, to express themselves and be heard. In this respect, the stories in *Refugee Tales IV* do the extraordinary job of making visible this lack of freedom on the part of detainees, along with their testimonies about the identity crisis resulting from exile and detention. When the first-person narrator in the third tale of the collection, "The

Outsider's Tale," claims that after leaving his country he feels "faceless in nameless places and nameless in faceless places" (24), he is to some extent anticipating the loss of selfhood that the refugee characters in the rest of the stories also undergo. Bearing in mind that identity and power are strongly related to space (Sack 1986; Rose 1995) and that the negotiation of a subcultural and alternative identity within a hegemonic order requires winning "a space […] to mark out and appropriate territory" (Clarke et al. 1976, 45), I argue that much of the suffering that the protagonists in *Refugee Tales IV* experience comes from their lack of a space to belong to and where they can develop their identity. They remain "out of place" (31), in the deplorable conditions of detention centers while "waiting for their ID cards" (30-31), that is, an identity that only the host country can give them because, as it happens with Solomon in "The Activist's Tale," many do not have "proof of their real identity" (58) after fleeing the countries of their birth. Natalia Sierra tells in "The Daughter's Tale" that, when she started living in a detention center, she had "to redefine [her] ideas of identity" because her "passport, driver's license, and identity cards were confiscated" (82), and later in the narrative she describes being stripped of her identity as one of the worst things she experienced in detention. HH, the name that the protagonist of "The Delivery Person's Tale" adopts so as not to be recognized, is even blunter, claiming that "if you are without documents [that prove your identity], sadly, you are often treated as less than a human" (116). Many studies have investigated the damage to human dignity that staying in detention centers entails (Arriola and Raymond 2017; Esposito *et al.* 2022), addressing the unsanitary and dehumanized conditions to which detainees are often subjected, and understanding these centers as places of temporal-spatial exclusion (Montange 2021). The hostility the refugee characters in *Refugee Tales IV* face in this exclusionary space leads them to a very dark place where their selfhood and capacity for action are annulled. This annulment is conducive to an interdependence with political institutions and their sometimes-unmoral practices as shown in the following excerpt of "The Running Person's Tale": "I want an identity. I don't want anything from this government. I don't want a holiday in a hotel. I want to stay to have a life. I want opportunity. I want freedom" (80).

Therefore, territoriality is a primary geographical expression of social power (Sack 1986, 5), and the literary territories (in the form of tales) that make up *Refugee Tales IV* constitute a powerful contestation to the silence and spatial-temporal exclusion to which these detainees are relegated. Sharing their personal stories helps the asylum seekers participating in this project discredit the identity politics that nations, media outlets and political institutions impose on them. Indeed, this short-story collection allows them to express their own subjectivities and regain control of their own individual space and time when telling of their experiences of exile and detention. They counter the political institutions' attempts to physically and mentally immobilize them through incarceration, undermining the dominance media outlets have over their own personal accounts of their experiences. In the process of acquiring autonomy and

becoming active agents, storytelling is essential, as it is itself a deed that releases them from inaction and provides them with authorship and empowerment.

Thus, although providing a realistic picture of the hardship and subjugation experienced by these refugees, the tales also project their protagonists as outspoken and active agents. Their power is forged at two levels. First, in a metanarrative sphere through the act of storytelling itself (which is forceful). *Refugee Tales IV* and the other books from the project are themselves a resistance mechanism because they allow these refugees a means of self-expression and are an important platform for disseminating their testimonies. In this sense, "The Poet's Tale" epitomizes the whole book's purpose because of the poems written by Kyon Ferril while being held as a migrant detainee in Central East Correctional Center (Canada). The narrative voice that introduces Ferril's literary work says that "the fact that we can read the poems gathered here, and—perhaps even more importantly—hear his resistant voice, is testament to both the human spirit, and to Kyon's own indomitable will to be free, to be heard, and to live a meaningful life" (37). This is precisely the aim of *Refugee Tales IV*. It aims to shed light on stories that are often ignored or discredited, demonstrating the power of storytelling when it comes to someone regaining control over their own account. Secondly, the individuals whose stories comprise the project are likewise empowered when they directly confront the State and its institutions at a narrative level, revealing the injustices both some governments and detention centers commit against asylum seekers. For instance, tired of the passiveness and the seemingly indefinite wait into which he is forced, there is a point in the story in which Solomon, the refugee behind "The Activist's Tale," decides to stop complying with the system:

> He lost track of the number of times his asylum was rejected. [...] Maybe he didn't have to be complicit in this torture. He had refused to help with his own deportation, hadn't he? He had power. He had agency over his own body and mind. And so, one day, Solomon decided to do something other than counting (61).

Similarly, in "The Daughter's Tale," Natalia Sierra talks openly about the mental and physical paralysis she faced while in detention and uses her writing to regain agency over her body and mind. Natalia claims that "every experience of [her] journey is like a flame inside of [her], desperate to escape before it burns [her] a little bit more inside" (82). Statements like this make the tales spaces of self-expression and political action, which brings out the importance of literature and storytelling in the creation of spaces and, consequently, identities. Likewise, the first-person narrator in "The Hotelier's Tale" takes advantage of his status as storyteller to express his point of view. He says that the immigration worker who interviewed him refused his first asylum request because "he had no specialist knowledge of [his] country," and ridicules him when adding that "perhaps he might have googled the name of [his] country after the interview, or even before" (9). After this direct criticism of the immigration officials for not believing his testimony, the

narrator points at his version of the story as the only truth: "what I wanted to tell him, what I wanted to make him see, was the simplest fact of all, the proof of the truth. Why would I leave my children behind if my life was not in danger? That is the only truth that is needed for the story" (9). The words "the story" resonate strongly and indicate the use of storytelling to reappropriate his own life, his story, altered and manipulated by those who treat him as if he were a criminal. In the same vein, the unnamed refugee whose story is told in "The Stowaway's Tale" criticizes immigration workers and an unfair asylum system when he mentioned that "an immigration officer came to interview [him], and they brought [him] a paper to sign to say that [he] wanted to go back to [his] country" (51). He complains that no one really wanted to listen to his story, so he makes use of the opportunity that the *Refugee Tales* project gives him to express his opinions about the lack of solidarity and interest toward refugees: "[I]f people run away from their country, they don't run away for no reason. And if they run away for a reason, I don't see the point why immigration can't help them" (51).

In "The Translator's Tale," despite the abundance of passive forms that point to the course of Mohammadi's life as being controlled by institutional authorities while he is detained, he achieves some agency by becoming an unofficial translator in Moria detention center. Due to his knowledge of English, Arabic and a little Greek, he acted as a translator and a teacher for the rest of the detainees and was able to speak with the Greek policemen who had no command of the English language. "I translated [...] and sometimes I did English lessons for the others. [...] It was a good way of being creative and changing our situation into something better" (71), he says, and with this statement he postulates himself as an active subject, denoting agency through the words "translated," "did," "creative" and "changing." In the same way, "The Chef's Tale" tells how S. gains some agency when becoming a chef in his host country. The use of verbs in the active form and the use of the second person to refer to himself when describing his new life after his multiple detentions, such as "you talk" (100), "you now work" and "you are in the process of opening a free community food hub" (102) highlight that he eventually manages to regain his autonomy and has acquired some perspective on his life. These statements contrast with sentences like "you are detained again," which evoke his lack of free will during the asylum-request process. "The Chef's Tale" also exposes the potential of storytelling to modulate reality and to define the self. The narrative voice, to explain the reasons behind this refugee's flight, mentions amnesties, coups, presidents imprisoned, civil unrest or revolts, eventually referring to his home country as "a nation reinvented [...], its story retold to suit each incoming faction in charge, discrediting the last. Histories and stories retold; a nation reinvented. Tides in, tides out. The ever-present army, with the recurrent pretext and excuse of 'corruption', an excuse for action, repression, terror" (93). These words, which narrativize all these traumatic experiences and gather them all in just some sentences, seems a narrative demonstration of to what extent our lives are reduced to storytelling, also including nations and governments as fictional constructions through the use of

the word "histories retold" or "nations reinvented." The power of storytelling to create realities out of fictions is at the core of this collection of personal experiences, since it is by telling their stories that the refugees participating in the project take back control. As with national narratives, whoever tells the story makes the reality and has the power to influence the listeners' or readers' minds.

5. Conclusion

On May 12, 2016, the British government approved a new Immigration Bill with the aim of toughening the asylum application process and reducing an individual's prospects of success. Since then, many NGOs, associations and political organizations have harshly criticized this legislation, as it violates human rights and infringes International Law by allowing immigration agents to withhold the documentation of asylum seekers indefinitely and without warrant. Since 2015, the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group has been organizing large-scale annual walks in which established writers, politicians and activists travel in solidarity with refugees, asylum seekers and, as a result, against their rejection or mistreatment by European immigration institutions. The group's literary project *Refugee Tales* advocates for the abolishment of indefinite detention and, finding inspiration in *The Canterbury Tales,* transforms into short stories the personal accounts of exile and seeking refuge that immigrants tell during the walks.

This paper has delved into how the asylum seekers and refugees participating in *Refugee Tales IV,* the fourth volume in the collection, highlights the right of immigrants to tell for themselves the deplorable conditions and mistreatment they experience in British and other countries' detention centers. These stories aim at the humanization of their protagonists and are an appeal for the dignified treatment of exiles and asylum seekers by the authorities. Since their imprisonment during the initial stages of the immigration process implies the loss of control over their time and space, and consequently of their individual free-will, *Refugee Tales IV* constitutes a counter-narrative space where they regain their agency. They become active subjects by assuming the role of storytellers and therefore not allowing governments or media outlets to expound a story of their experiences subject to political and social filters, prejudices and interests. As such, all the personal stories in *Refugee Tales IV* are resistance narratives that promote the creative potential of the refugees concerned and point to storytelling's role in building the symbolic spaces that are necessary for the renegotiation of an alternative identity to that offered by the hegemonic discourse. In this same vein, this analysis has demonstrated that storytelling is an essential medium through which to heal, encourage community cohesion and provide understanding about other people's experiences. Storytelling humanizes and empowers asylum seekers, making this collection of stories a socio-political document of vital importance due to the accounts of exile and refuge told from the protagonists' perspective that are contained within it, thereby offering a more accurate and genuine picture of today's worldwide refugee crisis.

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