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Aesthetic *Témoignage*: Refugee Poets as Humanitarian Aid Poets

Abstract

The following article addresses the question of how the poetry of authors who have experienced flight and displacement can be understood as a form of humanitarian work. The focus lies on possible connections between the genre of poetry and the concept of *témoignage* (›to witness‹), an ethical principle primarily anchored in humanitarian contexts that describes the aim of actively bearing witness to the plight of people in need. My reflections are based on a close reading of the anthology *Making Mirrors* (2019) written by Arab and African refugee poets. I understand the examined poems as expressions that position readers as witnesses to partly unspeakable but no longer unspoken experiences of displacement and, from that perspective, argue that such poetry can be conceived as a form of aesthetic *témoignage* that supports humanitarian causes.

Keywords

Displacement, poetry, literature and migration, humanitarianism, *témoignage*, bearing witness

Ästhetische *Témoignage*: Die Lyrik Geflüchteter als Lyrik des Humanitären

Zusammenfassung

Der folgende Artikel untersucht, inwiefern die Lyrik von Autor*innen mit Fluchterfahrung als Form humanitärer Arbeit verstanden werden kann. Im Zentrum stehen dabei etwaige Verbindungslinien zwischen der Gattung der Lyrik und dem Konzept ›*témoignage*‹ (= ›Zeugnis ablegen‹), ein vor allem in

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humanitären Kontexten verankertes ethisches Prinzip, das das Ziel beschreibt, das Bewusstsein für Menschen in Not zu schärfen. Meine Überlegungen sind gestützt auf ein *close reading* des von arabischen und afrikanischen Autor*innen mit Fluchterfahrung verfassten Gedichtbands *Making Mirrors* (2019). Die untersuchten Gedichte verstehe ich hierbei als Zeugnisse von teils unsäglichem, aber nicht länger ungesagtem Erfahrungen von Vertreibung, und argumentiere, dass sich entsprechende Lyrik als eine – den humanitären Gedanken unterstützende – Form ›ästhetischer témoignage‹ definieren lässt.

Schlagwörter*

Vertreibung, Lyrik, Literatur und Migration, Humanitarismus, Témoignage, Bezeugen

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1 Introduction

Human atrocities as experienced in the context of flight or displacement may end life as we know it. All too often, people who are forced to flee are bereft of words – in multiple ways. The voices and perspectives of refugees are generally at high risk of remaining unheard, while experiences of flight or displacement may be so traumatic that they exceed words, thereby condemning to failure refugees’ attempts to overcome the ineffable.¹ In the case of fatal events, forced silence may be reinforced by the grave of the (all-too-often anonymous) dead.

Poetry, due to its complex play with literal and figurative meanings and its license to use the white void of the page to express both what is written and what remains unsaid, has the potential to mirror and possibly even break the silence that all too often accompanies flight and displacement. In that way, it makes the public aware of sometimes unspeakable but no longer unspoken events and experiences.

¹ The term *trauma* refers to a specific emotional response to a stressor (i.e., traumatic event) such as disaster, act of violence, or other life-threatening situation (for definitions of *trauma* and various stressor-related disorders, see American Psychiatric Association 2013). One in three refugees can be assumed to have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and/or depression (Refugee Trauma and Recovery Program 2022; see also Blackmore et al. 2020; de Silva et al. 2021). In this article, I use *trauma* in a broader sense and explicitly not as a clinical diagnosis of the poets whose work I analyze.

With that said, this article is interested in the work of refugee authors who address their own experiences of flight and displacement through poetry. In particular, I ask whether poetic approaches to flight and displacement can be considered to have an intrinsic humanitarian dimension. Drawing on the humanitarian concept of *témoignage* (›to witness‹), I argue that, in some circumstances, the work of refugee poets can be understood as a form of aesthetic *témoignage* that may help to maintain or regain humanity in inhumane times. My analysis is based on a close reading of *Making Mirrors* (2019), a collection of poetry written by Arab and African refugees that gathers a broad range of poetic perspectives on (forced) displacement and diaspora.

To make my argument more comprehensible, I begin with some theoretical elaborations on the concept of *témoignage*. In that regard, I focus on the humanitarian NGO Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which actively affirms the duty to bear witness as one of its core principles. In Section 2, the contextualization of the concept of *témoignage* is accompanied by an outline of the research relevant to my postulation of refugee poetry as a potential form of aesthetic *témoignage*. After a general introduction to the anthology *Making Mirrors* in Section 3, I examine my hypotheses that refugee poetry is an aesthetic *témoignage* that can actively support humanitarian causes through analyses of exemplary poems in Section 4. The concluding reflection in Section 5 ends the article by considering the refugee writer as a humanitarian aid poet.

2 The Ethics and Aesthetic of *Témoignage*

One of the cornerstones of humanity is the freedom of speech, a right firmly rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: ›Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers‹ (United Nations 1948, Article 19). However, human atrocities experienced in the context of forced displacement all too often endanger the freedom of speech and can present language as something that cannot be grasped or express what has been experienced.

A group of people who often witness firsthand the unspeakable horrors experienced by others are humanitarian aid workers. In his autobiography, English physician and former president of the International Council of MSF James Orbinski (b. 1960) remembers the silence surrounding the people he has treated – a silence that may scream trauma:

»The silence of the people in the clinics, the whispered single syllables acknowledging that the doctor has found the source of their pain – these sounds and the empty spaces between mark where suffering is borne not by those who choose but by those who must endure what is imposed on them. [...]

It is into this silent place that the humanitarian acts, and in speaking from this place, the voice of outrage is raised. It is a voice that bears witness to the plight of the victim, and one that demands for the victim both assistance and protection, so that the silence does not go unheard.« (Orbinski 2008, p. 9)

When accepting the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of MSF in 1999, Orbinski further stated, »Silence has long been confused with neutrality, and has been presented as a necessary condition for humanitarian action. From its beginning, MSF was created in opposition to this assumption. We are not sure that words can always save lives, but we know that silence can certainly kill« (Orbinski 1999). Following the ethical principle of *témoignage*,² the need to speak out through human rights reports, photographic documentations, or blogs, for example, is firmly anchored in MSF's philosophy:³

»Médecins Sans Frontières was founded to bring medical professionals together to not only provide aid in war zones, but to talk about what they saw. In spite of the risks, this group refused to watch in silence. They believed that silence could kill, making those that watched complicit in the atrocities. They hoped that by bringing abuses to light, they could help bring them to an end. Acting and speaking, treating and witnessing were acts fundamental to the creation of MSF. Today, they are still at the core of what we do.« (Doctors Without Borders [no date])⁴

2 An overview of the (historical) development of *témoignage* in MSF is provided by Redfield 2013, p. 98–123. For critical discussions of MSF's concept of *témoignage*, see also Calain 2012, especially p. 283; Hron 2015; Gorin 2021. For the historical background of witnessing in humanitarian contexts, see Givoni 2011.

3 MSF has published a collection of (written and oral) *Speaking Out Case Studies* online at <https://www.msf.org/speakingout>. For analyses of different forms of (witnessing) storytelling see, e.g., Moore 2013 (visual forms of *témoignage*) or Fox 2014, chapter 1 (MSF field blogs). For differences between bearing witness in form of (objective) reports and in form of (subjective) narratives, see Fürholzer 2020.

4 For in-depth insight into MSF's philosophy and practice of *témoignage*, see Redfield 2006, 2013, chapter 3. The reasons why human aid workers speak out vary considerably, from the wish to »denounce [...] crime or grave breach, or to try to motivate an intervention, military intervention or political intervention. And then lastly and somewhat more ambiguously they do it to publicize their own organization's work« (David Rieff, cited in Dawes 2007, p. 165). The impossibility of (publicly) doing justice to every story may cause feelings of guilt and betrayal: »One of the things that journalists and human rights workers [...] might be feeling is that feeling that they've emotionally drained somebody or retraumatized them, and then left. [...] All the people that I've met over the years, when I've finished an inter-

When bearing witness, Orbinski stresses the importance of not only talking about human atrocities in an abstract manner but also listening to the stories of people who have been personally afflicted. By telling those stories, the public can also both *become a witness* and *bear witness*. Along those lines, témoignage and witnessing are similar but not identical. In an interview, former director of MSF UK Marc DuBois explained that »witnessing is a very passive act. [...] you have people who witness stuff and then just keep walking. Bearing witness seems to be something different for us [MSF]. The way in which we use that word is that you act upon what you witness« (Gorin 2021, p. 30).⁵ While acts of »bearing witness have been central to the promotion of humanitarianism and human rights, to the pursuit of justice that they have inevitably and implicitly endorsed, and thus to the politics that have or might yet address those issues« (Orbinski et al., p. 698), témoignage does not necessarily equal change. Instead, it

»encapsulates a medley of ideas: proximity with people living through crisis; the intent to listen to them; the swelling anger at their plight; the desire to change their situation; and calling out the manipulation of humanitarian action (Redfield, 2006). [...] it doesn't always attempt to achieve change. It is also an expression of empathy, solidarity, anger, outrage.« (Claire 2021, p. 47)

When it comes to bearing witness to the plights of people forced to flee, not only professionals such as journalists but also health care providers speak

view, that's all they want: Well, what's going to happen now? What are you going to do? Who are you going to tell? Are you going to send help? You know, that's what they want. And I think without leaving them with anything tangible, we as interviewers can get a sense that we've stolen something. [...] Like: I came in, I stole something from you, I *took* your story, and you'll never see me again« (Dave Eggers, cited in Dawes 2007, pp. 176 f., original emphasis).

⁵ In that context, a linguistic differentiation by Rachel Bowlby seems worth quoting: »The English noun ›witness‹ roughly corresponds to the French *témoin*, but the verb ›to witness‹ is not equivalent to *témoigner*: to witness is primarily to see or hear for oneself, whereas *témoigner* means to bear witness in the way that a witness does in a court of law, for instance to testify, to give evidence. Similarly, the noun *témoignage* means testimony, giving evidence, bearing witness; in some contexts, it can be simply evidence: that which of itself bears witness, is an indication. However, the English verb ›witness‹ also has a transitional sense, or rather one that encompasses both meanings. When someone formally ›witnesses‹ a signature, or some other official event, the witnessing is not only seeing the deed done (witnessing in the first sense), but also, by giving a witness's signature, *attesting* (the second sense) to *having witnessed* in the first sense« (cited in Derrida 2020, p. 206, original emphasis). The idea of witnessing of course goes beyond MSF discourse; for a wider understanding, see Jensen and Jolly 2014; Gautier and Scalmati 2018; Hasian 2019; Jones and Woods 2023. My hope is that my reading of the poetic corpus through the lens of MSF's concept of témoignage will at least broaden theory-based approaches to *witnessing* by accommodating a more practice-based definition of *bearing witness*.

out – meaning that, as in the mentioned case, medical experts also assume the role of humanitarian experts (e.g., Givoni 2011). What enables humanitarians to do so is their »first-hand knowledge of humanitarian and human-rights principles and their limitations« (Orbinski et al. 2007, p. 698). Although refugees cared for by MSF may not be experts on theories of human rights, they may be experts on what a violation means in practice. Nevertheless, their self-representations remain at high risk of being ignored. That risk was particularly true in the past when *témoignage*

»overshadowed the voices of people it was speaking out for. Volunteer gatekeepers vetted and re-packaged people’s concerns into simplified narratives aimed to appeal to international journalists. Often people’s lives resembled exaggerated stories of suffering, which fitted well with the humanitarian narrative of suffering, in turn reducing people to ›patients‹ and ›victims‹ to further justify the relevance of humanitarian action.« (Claire 2021, p. 48)

Regarding (forced) displacement, Kamal Sbiri (2011) states that the refugee still remains »far from representing her/himself; rather, they *are represented*« (original emphasis). Although it is crucial to speak out on the behalf of people threatened to be silenced, it seems equally important that people directly affected by flight and displacement can express what they have experienced in their own words and from their own perspectives. An advantage of such self-constructions is that they can prevent a stereotypical victimization of refugees (Grieder 2021), a common trope in representations of refugees that, to quote Emma Cox,

»too often does little more than reinforce powerlessness and limit the range of stories that might represent refugees and other disempowered people. [...] Refugee narratives often serve one or the other (or both [...]) of two broad functions: representing marginalized communities within or for themselves (typically pursuing recuperative and/or therapeutic ends) and to or for broadly constituted host communities (typically pursuing cross-cultural pedagogic, empathic ends).« (Cox 2012, p. 122 f.)⁶

Although victims of human atrocities, including people who have been forcibly displaced, remain at risk of being, as Arundhati Roy once poignantly said, »deliberately silenced« or »preferably unheard«,⁷ attempts to publicize their stories are becoming increasingly common.⁸ In that context, the work of

6 For a critical stance on how humanitarian organizations may construct and mobilize victimhood, see Leebaw 2020; Limbu 2023.

7 »[T]here’s really no such thing as the ›voiceless‹. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard« (Roy 2004; see also Lenette 2019).

8 For scholarship on refugee writing, see Nyman 2017; Stonebridge 2018; Sbiri 2019; Sbiri et al. 2020; Cox et al. 2021; Beck et al. 2021; Lê Espiritu Gandhi and Nguyen 2023. Studies on

refugee writers represents a genre in which witnessing is inherent: »Refugee writers have always been special witnesses to the shifting grounds of political life. These acts of witnessing have been present from the very beginning of modern refugee writing« (Bakara 2020, p. 289; see also Bakara 2022). That characterization rings true not only for autobiographical approaches but also for artistic ones. As Zusanna Olszewska (2023) emphasizes, »Writing poetry« is not only »an act of release or personal catharsis for the refugee poet« and »an act of self-making as an engaged and empathetic intellectual« but also »an act of witnessing a collective pain and claiming the right to voice it« (p. 151).⁹

3 *Making Mirrors: »Poetry by and for Refugees«*

A publication that presents experiences of flight and displacement directly through the voice of people personally afflicted is *Making Mirrors: Writing/Righting by and for Refugees*, an anthology published in 2019 (Bseiso and Thompson 2019). As »part of a long tradition of poetic responses to repression« (Thompson [no date]), *Making Mirrors* provides 46 novice as well as established poets from an array of national, cultural, professional, and other experiential backgrounds with an aesthetic platform to speak (out) for themselves and for others.¹⁰ Designed as a »collection of poetry by and for refugees«, the book, which was initially envisioned and definitively edited by

refugee writing can also touch on the interconnection between human rights and literature, an interdisciplinary field that »gained formal momentum after September 11, 2001« and that »undertakes two mutually invested intellectual projects: reading literary texts for the ways in which they represent and render intelligible the philosophies, laws, and practices of human rights from multiple, shifting cultural perspectives and considering how stories, testimonies, cultural texts, and literary theories contribute to the evolution of such philosophies, laws, and practices« (Goldberg and Moore 2011, p. 2).

⁹ The idea of poetry as a form of witnessing goes back to a rather different origin, as Forché notes: »Poetry of witness,« as a term descending from the literature of the Shoah and complicated by philosophical, religious, linguistic, and psychoanalytic understandings of *witness*, remains to be set forth. In my sense of this term, it is a mode of reading rather than of writing, of a reader's encounter with the literature of that-which-happened, and its mode is evidentiary rather than representational. The poem inscribes the *risky crossing*, marked by that which happened, bearing the legible trace of extremity, at the same time enacting the rupture of the first-person, and hence voicing its *ghost-like status*, marking as it was marked, incising the wound in its inception and henceforth holding it open to the reader's encounter. Such utterance is as much evidence of what happened as the spatter of spilled blood« (2011, p. 141, original emphases). For poetry as a means to witness, see Derrida 2020. For a discussion of aesthetic versus activist stakes in the context of témoignage, see Fişek 2016.

¹⁰ Other collections of poetry written by refugees include Vecchione and Raymond 2019; Badr 2020; Radulescu and Cazan 2020; Nsabimana 2021; International Refugee Poetry Network [no date].

U.S.-based poet Becky Thompson and Palestinian poet and humanitarian aid worker Jehan Bseiso, aims to »create a space for writers to share their work and to include refugee poets on the move« (Thompson and Bseiso 2019, p. 16). To that end, the editors taught poetry workshops in several refugee camps in Greece – among them Moria, one of the world’s most overcrowded refugee camps – as well as in Palestine and Lebanon and gathered poems from those contexts, while the other poems were collected via an online call for submissions (for the anthology’s background, see Fahmy 2020). The result of that multifaceted approach »to include poets currently risking their lives to save their lives« (Thompson and Bseiso 2019, p. 13) is »an archive of the experiences of refugees across time and borders« (Fahmy 2020).¹¹

One purpose of the archive is revealed even in the title, *Making Mirrors*. As Bseiso stated in an interview:

»The book is very much attuned with the metaphor of the mirror that constitutes its title and main motif; the pages act as mirrors, the poems reflections of one another. It also provides a mirror for people who have never lived through that experience to, nonetheless, attempt to see themselves in it, and to be able to empathise with those who have.« (Fahmy 2020)

As Bseiso further explains, the genre of poetry seems particularly capable of fulfilling that goal:

»There are countless poets from all over the world who give voice to their experiences in poems; in short, abrupt stanzas and in long, uninterrupted sequences, in rhythmic verses and, deliberately, in no rhythm at all, because for them, there is no rhythm to trauma. Ultimately, they mould their experiences into a form that is as precarious as the shape that their lives has taken: the poem.« (Fahmy 2020)

The collection’s recourse to the specific latitude of the poetic form suggests that *Making Mirrors* can also be read as a form of testimony. In her review of the anthology, Ramona Wadi (2019) explicitly links the book’s poems with the idea of bearing witness:

»Politics determined the labelling of refugees, yet their experiences of loss speak of a universal pain that each and every one of us can feel due to a shared humanity. These individual insights not only offer a glimpse of life lived in peril; they are also a testimony of emotion that is vividly portrayed through the refugees’ coming to terms with their non-belonging.« (Wadi 2019, n.p.)

¹¹ For a critical discussion of the sometimes conflicting stakes between facilitators, writers, and readers of refugee writing, see Bernard 2021.

With that said, *Making Mirrors*, which is also explicitly framed by the realm of humanitarianism and the editor's own pledge to bear witness in the course of her work with MSF (e.g., Bseiso 2015, 2019a),¹² eventually presents itself as an aesthetic form of témoignage. As the texts within the anthology exemplify, poetry of that type is not only a passive description or depiction of potentially traumatic fates but may also actively support humanitarian causes, particularly through implicit and explicit reflections of the humane, human, and inhumane. In the following, I explain that proposition in greater detail by drawing on various poems from the anthology. I concentrate on four key aspects: poetry as a means to make the refugee's story (publicly) known, bearing witness to the fate of (dead) others by proxy, individualizing collective fate, and bringing humanity (back) to mind.

4 Exemplary Readings

4.1 Making the Story (Publicly) Known

As Ibtisam Barakat's poem *A Song for Alef* shows, putting the refugee's story into words can have a healing effect in times of trauma:

»Alef knows
That a thread
Of a story
Stitches together
A wound.

Alef the letter
He's the shape
Of hope.

Like me,
A refugee.

For me,
My refuge.« (Barakat 2019, p. 107 f.)

In Barakat's poem, person and language blur into one. Alef, the first letter of the Semitic writing system abjad, is a »refugee«; he is volatile, constantly on the move, and searching for a humane place to live. Due to the prominence of the letter at the very beginning of the abjad, Alef is linked with the promise of a new advent; he is a symbol of »hope« indicating that letters and words permit us to tell the stories of our lives in the way we want them to be told. They endow us with the power to speak up and about experiences from the

¹² Bseiso's background as an MSF worker is also highlighted on the book's dust cover.

past but also to envision aloud a different future, a new life. Able to verbally root what has been deracinated and to sow the seeds of recommencements, letters as the very beginning of every (life's) story may constitute a »refuge« even for people displaced from their homes. In light of the powerful efficacy that words may assume, it comes as no surprise that Alef, the letter, is personified; he »knows«, as goes the »thread of a story«, which is not passive but actively »stitches together a wound.« Agency, ascribed through anthropomorphism, letters, words, and stories, go beyond that of the individual speaker. They have a persistence and purview that exceed the restrictions of the moment in which they are uttered or written; as such, they have the power to reverberate in different places, at different times, and in different people. They may continue to exert an effect long after the physical wound has formed a scab and grown back together, only leaving behind a thin, pale scar on the visible surface.

In that context, the poetic form may further promote the effect, for its specific aesthetics allow it to also approach experiences that seem to exceed words and may even let language become a witness of its own. According to Carolyn Forché, many writers who have experienced extreme violence such as torture, war, or forced exile »wrote their poetry not *after* such experiences, but in their *aftermath* – in languages that had also *passed through* – languages that also continued to bear wounds, legible in the line-breaks, in constellations of imagery, in ruptures of utterance, in silences and fissures of written speech« (Forché 2011, p. 137, original emphases).¹³ As Barakat's poem insinuates, the poetic language of the aftermath may both show and heal those wounds; »Alef knows« uses a verb that, in the context of the poem, alludes to the potential of letters, words, and stories to become means of individual and collective commemorative culture. Paradoxically, the »thread of a story« may also exert its healing effect not by closing the wound but by tearing it open. Moreover, by keeping it gaping, oozing, and bleeding, the wound may also help to call the trauma experienced as savagely to mind as the narrated wound, thereby eventually fighting against the threat that the trauma and what has caused it will vanish into oblivion.

For the poet, however, dealing with the visible and invisible wounds inflicted in the context of forced displacement may be an arduous undertaking, as Sholeh Wolpé's poem *The World Grows Blackthorn Walls* suggests:

¹³ Meg Jensen (2014) draws on the concept of the aftermath as well: »Autobiographical fiction and poetry [...] constitute a unique and useful form of trauma testimony, not by telling the *story* of a trauma but as evidence of its ongoing personal and public aftermath« (p. 141, original emphasis).

»Exile is a suitcase full of meanings. I fill up
 a hundred notebooks with scribbles.
 And when I am done I throw them into fire
 and begin to write again; this time
 tattooing the words on my forehead.
 This time, writing only not to forget.« (Wolpé 2019, p. 97)

Being in exile fills, overfills the lyrical speaker, to such a degree that »a suitcase of meanings« pours out of them. However, not even »hundreds of notebooks« suffice to give voice to what the lyrical speaker attempts to say – that as soon as the words are written, they are already null and void and handed over to the fire, only for the lyrical speaker to immediately start over again. Despite their power to overcome the volatility of spoken language, pen and paper ultimately become an inadequate means to cope with the intense experience of exile. Only a tattoo incised into the body promises a remedy; the words are carved into the skin, such that the skin becomes the paper, the book that can prevent the experiences from being forgotten in the ephemerality of time (»This time, writing only not to forget«). As the location of the tattoo suggests, the lyrical speaker has the urge to publicly share the experience of exile. After all, the tattoo is not placed in a secret, well-veiled part of the body such as the heart but on the speaker's forehead, as if the inner thoughts of the subjacent mind were pushing, pressing, and swelling to the outside. Being incised and exhibited on one of the most exposed parts of the body, the tattoo, by implication, presents itself as an open testimony to an experience that may never be forgotten or overlooked. As an enduring expression of the inner imprinting forever notched into the speaker's physical and psychological being, the tattoo eventually presents itself as a symbolic witness that cannot be ignored or removed and that may, through such radical immobility, become a counterpoint to the (forced) mobility of the displaced.

Barakat's and Wolpé's poems thus mirror the urge and the struggle of refugee writers to confront experiences of flight and exile through language. In that regard, both poems also allude to the beneficial effects that words may have for the self and the other, for it is the expression of potentially traumatic experiences that allows the speaker to ground themselves when being deracinated, to regain control in times of chaos, and to actively and publicly bear testimony to realities of flight and displacement.

4.2 Poetry as a Surrogate Witness for the Dead

In refugee writing, the need to vociferously bear witness to flight and displacement and thereby prevent the lives of the affected from becoming forgotten can be traced to people deprived of the chance to speak out for them-

selves. Being dedicated »to the families and lovers at the bottom of the sea«, *Making Mirrors* also expresses an attempt to erect a memorial through which the legacy of the dead can be kept alive. Reinforcing the book's dedication, the poems additionally serve as textual memorials to people who did not survive the flight across the sea. Zeina Hashem Beck's *Naming Things*, for instance, brutally pinpoints the literally ›macabre‹ dimension of the mass grave that was supposed to afford rescue, with the Arabic word *maqbara* meaning ›cemetery‹ or ›graveyard‹:

»the sea is a cemetery.
That fish you grilled last night,
did it laugh? Did it say, *I have been feeding*
on your children?« (Hashem Beck 2019, p. 43, original emphasis)

Without even having to state a specific name or place, the poem bears witness to the horror of losing a child and, in that way, recalls the effect that Peter Redfield has ascribed to first-person narratives written by patients treated by MSF:

»Presented without embellishment and accompanied by images of distressed individuals in everyday settings, these narratives lend particularity to the mass experience of a suffering population. They also underscore that these are distinctly ordinary lives; their tragedies should resonate with anyone who has a child, or indeed with any ›decent human being.‹« (Redfield 2013, p. 114)

As the poems in *Making Mirrors* time and again highlight, the people who have died in the water are innumerable:

»Who lies here at the bottom of the sea,
lost but not forgotten?«

asks the lyrical speaker in Bronwen Griffiths's *Sailing to Eternity* (2019, p. 88). Angela Farmer's *Stories from the Sea* is another of the many poems speaking of the unfathomable number of people for whom the sea represents not (only) the hope of a new life but (also) the fear of a life lost:

»and did they survive,
shout with joy as they neared safe shores?

where are they now
or did they too sink into the deep cold sea?

[...]

Too many stories,
so many lives.« (Farmer 2019, p. 61)

In the context of flight, the ebb and flow of the waves washing up at the shore become a gruesome metaphor for the ups and downs of hope and despair. The uncertainty about the fate of the missing further strengthens the fate of some refugees as being haunted by displacement, even in death.

As the texts in *Making Mirrors* demonstrate, poetry may be used as a testimony of the writer's personal experience and as a surrogate witness to the fate of others lost in the course of flight. Through poetry, the sunken bodies, figuratively speaking, rise up from the sea's shallows, resurface, and pass over to the text into a memory outlasting physical decay. Similar to memorial stones engraved with epitaphs, the poetic form allows anchoring, in black and white, people scattered in the untraceable, inaccessible expanse of the sea and ultimately provides an enduring place for the displaced that also grants the dependents a site for remembrance. By fixating the dead in the physical pages of a book, the poets give the grieving an (location-independent) opportunity to seek the poetic, symbolic graves of the deceased whenever they need to, to fill the blank spaces surrounding the texts with their own private stories and lives, and to use the poems to reconvene at the very least in a symbolic manner with the loved ones whom they have lost.

4.3 Individualizing Collective Fate

As Bronwyn Leebaw notes, it is commonly perceived as »inhumane or immoral to witness suffering without feeling compassion and an instinctive desire to help« (2020, p. 145).¹⁴ When we are emotionally moved, passive witnessing can become an active form of bearing witness. By constantly confronting readers with the traumatic fate of the (lyrical) speakers, refugee poets may also use their words to prevent what has happened from going unnoticed and may move readers to react to what they have witnessed through the text. However, when trying to face up to sometimes traumatic experiences of flight and displacement, the immense number of people affected may exceed what is conceivable and cause a sense of incapacity and impuissance. As philosopher Peter Singer points out, it is usually not the confrontation with the collective but the individual fate that enables us to grasp and react to inhumane circumstances. As he notes, the emotional response that we may have in that context makes »the plight of a single identifiable individual much more salient to us than that of a large number of people we cannot identify« (Singer 2017, p. 176). Singer illustrates such a paradoxical psychology in the following example:

¹⁴ Of course, witnessing suffering can also evoke negative emotions such as guilt, shame, and outrage (Gorin 2021, p. 31).

»In one study, people who had earned money for participating in an experiment were given the opportunity to donate some of it to Save the Children, an organization that helps poor children. One group was told things like: »Food shortages in Malawi are affecting more than three million children.« A second group was shown a photo of a seven-year-old African girl, told that her name was Rokia, and urged that »her life will be changed for the better as a result of your financial gift.« The second group gave significantly more. It seems that seeing a photo of Rokia triggered an emotional desire to help, whereas learning facts about millions of people in need did not.« (2017, p. 176; see also Singer 2009, 2015, pp. 3–11)

Bseiso and Thompson, who understand *Making Mirrors* as »a plea against historical amnesia and its twin, psychic inertia«, also express their concern that the sheer number of refugees could result in »compassion fatigue« (2019, p. 13, 16).

»It's a problem of seeing, more than it is a problem of feeling, because you cannot connect with what you do not see,« Bseiso explains [...]. Media has largely taken center stage in highlighting refugees' plights on a daily basis, and statistics on displaced populations continue to rise in number, but those statistics do not do much to actually paint an image of their inner lives, their lives as they unfold, not on paper, but in the world, every day.« (Fahmy 2020)

Quoting Ahmad Almallah's poem *States of Being in Holy Land*, the anthology thus poignantly reminds readers that »The Facts are Faces« (Thompson and Bseiso 2019, p. 67, 72). Along those lines, Bseiso's own poem *No Search, No Rescue* hauntingly merges individual and collective fate:

»This is my family.
Baba, mama, baby all washed up on the shore. This is 28 shoeless survivors and thousands of bodies.
Bodies Syrian, Bodies Somali, Bodies Afghan, Bodies Ethiopian, Bodies Eritrean.
Bodies Palestinian.« (Bseiso 2019b, p. 31)

Forché notes that in the »poetry of witness«, »Language incises the page, wounding it with testimonial presence, and the reader is marked by encounter with that presence. Witness begets witness. The text we read becomes a living archive« (Forché 2011, p. 146). That characterization seems true for *No Search, No Rescue* as well: Bseiso's text is a poetic burial site, a graveyard of the unnamed, of the unspoken. What has been lost is reflected by the break between the first and second lines of verse. The lyrical speaker mourns the loss of the family whose individual members are listed or, in a metaphorical sense, almost laid out in a bier. However, instead of calling their names, the dead are remembered in their roles as father, mother, child. By not linking the lost ones to specific individuals, the poem allows readers who share the

lyrical speaker's experience to identify more deeply, to see their own losses in the nameless family members, and to grieve those losses with the help of poetic proxies. In the openness that provides a place for both the individual and the collective, the poem also recalls experiences that humanitarians can make in the field. As Orbinski states while recalling an encounter with a dead patient, »I didn't even know his name, but I knew he had been someone's son, someone's friend and possibly someone's husband, someone's father« (2008, p. 6). In Bseiso's poem, the thin line between individuality and collectivity is further captured by the combination of the word »Bodies« with different nationalities, and the fate of the dead and bereaved is shared regardless of geographical or political – and thus artificially drawn – borders. By continuously capitalizing the word »Bodies«, the otherwise abstract term takes on the function of a proper name. Thereby, the poem eventually serves as a reminder that the »thousands of bodies« are not an anonymous mass but individuals with their own unique identity that deserves to be dignified, even when words and names can no longer be reconstructed.

Reminding us that a collective fate is always a conglomerate of individual fates, *Making Mirrors* eventually liberates the »thousands of bodies« from the abstractness of sheer incomprehensible numbers. That liberation is essentially due to the recourse to poetry, for the genre's openness to first-person speakers and, closely related to that, to monologicity and subjectivity inherently underscores notions of singularity and individuality.¹⁵ At the same time, as collaborative projects of different poets, anthologies such as *Making Mirrors* are themselves collages of singular fragments of lives that accentuate heterogeneity within collectivity. Along the same lines, in their preface to *Making Mirrors*, Thompson and Bseiso explicitly stress that »the term ›refugee‹ is, itself, precarious. It also contains multitudes« (2019, p. 14). In light of the mentioned effect of becoming overwhelmed by the sheer number of people in need, the juxtaposition of individual stories with their emphasized framing as parts of a larger collective thus seems, at the very least, to allow poetic collections such as *Making Mirrors* to react and maybe even overcome the risk of public impuissance and compassion fatigue without doing injustice to the heterogeneity of those subsumed under the term *refugee*.

4.4 Bringing Humanity (Back) to Mind

Poetry is an easily underestimated but powerful means of expression. When extreme experiences such as flight and displacement are approached in poetic forms, the aesthetic latitude of the genre can influence perceptions of the

¹⁵ For characteristics of poetry as a genre, see Müller-Zettelmann 2000, pp. 73–139; Wolf 2005; Culler 2015.

topic represented. In an interview, Bseiso has described poetry as an antidote to compassion fatigue:

»Poetry, in the way it lives on inventing and re-inventing expression, in metaphors, similes, or hyperbole, provides that almost infinite space of expression, which particularly helps in the case of displaced and exiled people whose lives – often always on the move – don't allow room for much else to be done; other forms of expression are not as accessible to them to create. Novels need the luxury of time, and media needs the luxury of resources; but poetry is not as restricted.« (Fahmy 2020)

When it comes to turning witnessing into an act of bearing witness, one of the genre's key assets is its license to break off in mid-sentence and confront the reader with the white void of the page. As Heather McHugh has stated: »All poetry is fragment: it is shaped by its breakages, at every turn. It is the very art of turnings, toward the white frame of the page, toward the unsung, toward the vacancy made visible, that wordlessness in which our words are couched« (1993, p. 75).

Nora M. Barghati's poem *Exodus* distinctly illustrates the way in which poetry's creative leeway can react to the inhumanity that people who need to flee may face. *Exodus* confronts the reader with a »raw stampede« of »hundreds and thousands« of refugees (Barghati 2019, p. 79). However, the terrors that the refugees have hoped to leave behind are merely substituted by the new horrors of their flight:

»Men dragging their women
women dragging their flesh and bone
—their own—
and their own
dragging empty bellies
and empty words.« (Barghati 2019, p. 79)

As an assemblage of highly shortened lines of verse, often tolerating no more than a word or two, the poem does not represent a harmonious flow of thoughts but seems as rushed and flustered as the refugee's »stampede.« Speaker and reader alike thus arduously fight their way through the tatters. The poem's few sentences are torn into brief components as if mind and eye can only endure the reality of the exodus when approaching it in the smallest fragments and splinters possible. The flight is depicted as a cruel feeding of animals, the fodder being people who lack the strength for such a strenuous journey:

»they watch the vultures soar
 around the fallen
 and the ill
 and wonder
 when
 will I be next?« (Barghati 2019, p. 79)

The chopped-off form of the lines visibly mirrors the degree to which the stampede deprives the lyrical speaker of the ability to breathe and speak, thus time and again forcing them to break off their attempt to give voice to the unspeakable. The interruptions allow only a moment to catch one's breath, and, following the eye of the lyrical speaker, readers are forced with each new line to continue to witness the horrors that mercilessly and relentlessly mark the fugitives' path. Eventually, the stampede itself also proves to be an assault on humans and humanity:

»Trampling on
 the rotting corpse
 of humanity« (Barghati 2019, p. 79)

The grammatical use of the singular (»the rotting corpse«) suggests that it is a specific human body being confronted. The corpse, as the poem shows, has not been buried or carefully laid aside in an undisturbed final resting place but instead seems to lie in the middle of the road, where it is trampled over and over by the »hundreds and thousands« fleeing. As a result, even rest in death is denied, and inhumanity bleeds over into the post-mortem world. When reading further, the »corpse« turns out to be not a specific human body but »humanity« itself. Through the enjambed separation of the lines, the poem expands the »corpse« to a metaphor for the general downfall of the humane and thus again juxtaposes the image of the violated individual with the immeasurable collectivity of inhumane cruelty. By presenting the verbs »to trample« and »to rot« in the present progressive tense instead of in the simple past tense, humanity is suggested to be in the process of rotting: It is trampled on at this very moment, thus indicating that the terror is not yet over and that atrocities are still taking place right now. Through its play with verse length and breaks (e.g., enjambments), suggestiveness with alternative grammar, and rhetorical devices, the poem is at once expressive of the events occurring during the stampede and of their inner perceptions by the lyrical speaker. In that regard, the flexibility of the poetic forms makes it possible to vividly depict the complex interplay of the denotations and connotations of horrors endured in only a few words and lines, thereby conveying an inkling of terrors that exceed language.

While the contrast between the aesthetic form and the potentially traumatizing contents of a poem can illuminate the comprehensiveness of human experiences of inhumanity, it may also remind of the human(e) within the inhumane. The lyrical speaker in Sara Abou Rashed's *Welcome to America*, for instance, explicitly contrasts the use of bombs as symbols of terror with poems as symbols of peace, thereby providing a powerful answer to the gruesomeness of inhumane behavior:

»Lord, make us whole again, all of us, make us human again,
forgive us for we have sinned, and Lord,
guide them to see me for who I am, because
I, too yearn for peace, because I drop poems, not bombs.« (Abou Rashed 2019, p. 101)

By directly addressing the reader, the lyrical speaker opposes atrocities with an emphasis of (mutual) humanity:

»See,
I am as much of a human as you are;
I brush my teeth, I sleep, I cry when hurt and bleed when injured,
I walk the land you walk, I breathe
the same air you breathe, your American dream
is my dream, I am afraid of what you're afraid of.« (Abou Rashed 2019, p. 100)

From the banalities of everyday life – brushing teeth, sleeping, walking – to the ethical dimensions determining human existence – dreams and fears, among others – the lyrical speaker stresses basic aspects of being human. At the same time, readers are asked to not reject what is foreign to them out of fear, ignorance, or insecurity, which would not least bear the risk that victims and perpetrators are equated with each other:

»Please, don't stop me on streets to ask what Jihad is,
don't mistake me for one of them, don't stare at me like an alien,
like a one-eyed, four-legged, green monster of your nightmares.

[...]

And no, I don't celebrate the death of children,
I don't wish to destroy homes and churches.

[...]

Still, some fear me, they call me names, they try to break
me, to wreck me, to ricochet me [...].« (Abou Rashed 2019, p. 101)

As underlined in those stanzas, the refugee seeking a new home in a foreign place is no less human than those already living there. On a related note, *Welcome to America* thus reminds readers of the origins of the word *refugee*:

»The overgeneralised term has indeed been made almost meaningless with the way it has been used for years in news and media, and often as a mere prefix to the unseemly ›camp.« The way ›refugee‹ as used throughout the book is a venture back to that original meaning, to the word it draws from: *refuge*, with all the irony, paradoxes, and complexities that it now carries.« (Fahmy 2020)

If the readers of *Welcome to America* ignore the refugee's longing for refuge, then they not only deny the lyrical speaker their humanity but would, at least to some degree, also side with the perpetrators whom the lyrical speaker has hoped to leave behind as well as endanger their own human sympathy and humanity. In that way, Abou Rashed's poem brings the human(e) back to mind, which all too quickly may become overlooked when focusing only on the inhumanity of human atrocities.

As that example suggests, poetry, perhaps more than other forms of expression, may express and bear witness even to (life) stories that go beyond words because it permits giving voice simultaneously to what can and cannot be said. After all, due to the complex possibilities of figurative speech or the ability to speak both *in* and *between* the lines, poems may allude to the implicit meanings, connotations, and associations hidden behind what is expressed on the surface. In those ways, the genre can make the ineffable palpable, visible, and hearable and may thus become a resounding witness even to inhumane experiences that exceed words.

5 Refugee Writers as Humanitarian Aid Poets

According to Andrea Grieder, »Poetic writings beyond victimhood and stereotypes contribute to the reshaping of collective narrations« (2021, p. 179). That statement, which also seems fitting for the anthology *Making Mirrors*, is only one of many emphasizing that the works of refugee writers are not passive mirrors of experiences of flight and displacement but may also turn into means for active change. When giving voice to both the speakable and unspeakable sides of flight and displacement, when presenting the individual without ignoring the collective fate, when recalling the human(e) afflicted by the inhumane, or when stressing the commonalities that unite humans

despite their differences, poetry can be read as a plea for solidarity,¹⁶ a notion grounded in the concept of *témoignage*. After all, when moved by the stories of the people whom they care about, humanitarian aid workers may feel the need to bring atrocities to the public eye and, in that way, permit others to be moved and to react as well.¹⁷ As Orbinski points out, standing in solidarity with people who are suffering can be regarded as a humanitarian act:

»In our choice to be with those who suffer, compassion leads not simply to pity but to solidarity. Through pity, we respond to the other as a kind of object, and can assume a kind of apolitical stance on the causes of and the conditions that create such suffering, as though these lie somehow outside the responsibility of politics, and as though charity and philanthropy are adequate responses. [...] Solidarity implies a willingness to confront the causes and conditions of suffering that persist in destroying dignity, and to demand a minimum respect for human life. Solidarity also means recognizing the dignity and autonomy of others, and asserting the right of others to make choices about their own destiny. Humanitarianism is about the struggle to create the space to be fully human.« (Orbinski 2008, p. 7 f.)

In Bseiso's and Thompson's anthology, the humanitarian thought of solidarity – the »simple expression of the most basic sense of humanity« (Redfield 2013, p. 99) – is lived out by using poems to create »connections« between all those who, in times of trauma, are at risk to lose themselves in the grueling loneliness of a world out of joint (Thompson and Bseiso 2019, p. 13).

A poem, not least due to its aesthetic latitude – for instance, its ability to detach the singular from the collective without concealing the sheer inconceivable quantity of the collective, or to express both what can and what cannot be said – may liberate speech from the chains that may throttle it in times of crises. As *Making Mirrors* exemplifies, the genre of poetry may thereby facilitate responses to the urgent challenge to bear witness even when – or precisely when – events leave us speechless. In that regard, when an organization such as MSF »refuses to watch in silence« in order to bring »abuses to light« and »help bring them to an end« (Doctors Without Borders [no date]), that goal may not differ from the goal of refugee writers who, through their aesthetic *témoignage*, bear witness to their own experiences or, by proxy, to those of others – and who can therefore be understood as humanitarian aid workers – or, better yet, as humanitarian aid poets who speak out to fight for humanity.

¹⁶ In the context of the work, that understanding of poetry may increase awareness of the importance of humanitarian aid as well as a general willingness to support the work of humanitarian NGOs.

¹⁷ See also Fürholzer 2020, p. 151.

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