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STORYTELLING AND ARTIVISM IN CURRENT MIGRATION NARRATIVES
Reshaping and Expanding the Anglophone Postcolonial Literary Canon

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Abstract – This paper assesses the efficacy of artivism in Warsan Shire's poetry and in the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group's digital narrations *28 Tales for 28 Days* (2018). The last decades have witnessed the proliferation of new literary trends and genres which highlight the enduring issues of racism, identity, belonging, and alienation. Enabled by global culture, telecommunication technologies, and the new media, heterogeneous multifaceted literary production engenders narratives that are simultaneously accessible and available to a wider audience. These new paradigms to narrate and negotiate the complexity of current times set forth a performative counter-discourse that relies on language and moving images along with a broader involvement that includes writers, current migrants or descendants of earlier migrants, intellectuals, and common people whose actions and thinking are characterised by both questioning the past and challenging the present. In so doing, this diversified, authorial community envisages and anticipates a better and more just future, while simultaneously reshaping and expanding the Anglophone postcolonial literary canon. Warsan Shire's works, especially the poem "Home", focus on migrants' journey and the reasons compelling them to leave their country of origin; *28 Tales for 28 Days* brings awareness to the United Kingdom government's policy of indefinite detention of migrants by producing web-video first-hand accounts of refugees' experiences read by well-known artists. The Internet thus becomes a collective space where feelings of uprootedness, homelessness, and personal fragmentation find artistic expression.

Keywords: migration narratives; Warsan Shire; *28 Tales for 28 Days*; artivism; transmedia storytelling.

1. Migration, postcolonial literature, and artivism

Nowadays, despite the current interdependence of the world's economies and cultures brought about by cross-border interchange of goods, services, technology, money, information, and people, several groups of human beings are still excluded from moving freely across national borders. Nonetheless, migratory flows do define our age, as put forth by Swedish human rights lawyer and member of the Nobel family, Peter Nobel:

> Some say we live in the era of the Bomb and the migrant. I would say it is the era of the refugee as very few states today encourage anything but marginal immigration and then exclusively in the interest, as it is understood, of that state. The overwhelming majority of the refugees originate in the Third World. The direct causes of their flight are conflicts kept alive mostly by super-power politics and by weapons forged and manufactured at bargain prices in the rich countries, who export death and destruction, and import the natural and partly processed products of the poor countries. At the same time they refuse to a great extent to receive the refugees who try to escape the suffering and the sorrow generated by super power-politics. (Nobel 1988, p. 29)

Based upon Nobel's statement, anthropologist Liisa Helena Malkki argues that "the emergence of the Third World" represented one of the effects of colonialism on cultures and societies especially after "the end of official colonialism" (Malkki 1995, p. 504). Arguably, in the twenty-first century, discussing the effects of colonialism might sound anachronistic. However, Ghanaian literary critic and professor of English at Stanford University Ato Quayson asserts that postcolonialism should be considered as a long process:

> [A] possible working definition for postcolonialism is that it involves a studied engagement with the experience of colonialism and its past and present effects, both at the local level of ex-colonial societies and at the level of more general global developments thought to be the after-effects of empire. Postcolonialism often also involves the discussion of experiences such as slavery, migration, suppression and resistance, difference, race, gender and place as well as responses to the discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy, anthropology and linguistics. The term is as much about conditions under imperialism and colonialism proper, as about conditions coming after the historical end of colonialism. (Quayson 2005, pp. 2-3)

The topic of migration continues to occupy a central place in postcolonial intellectuals' and scholars' thinking and reflections. For instance, Indian-New York-based author Suketu Mehta clearly defines the issue of migratory flows as one of the effects of colonialism on cultures and societies:

> These days, a great many people in the rich countries complain loudly about migration from the poor ones. But as migrants see it, the game was rigged: First, the rich countries colonized us and stole our treasure and prevented us from building our industries. After plundering us for centuries, they left, having drawn up maps in ways that ensured permanent strife between our communities. Then they brought us to their countries as 'guest workers' – as if they knew what the word 'guest' meant in our cultures – but discouraged us from bringing our families. Having built up their economies with our raw materials and our labor, they asked us to go back and were surprised when we did not. They stole our minerals and corrupted our governments so that their corporations could continue stealing our resources; they fouled the air above us and the waters around us, making our farmers barren, our oceans lifeless; and they were aghast

> when the poorest among us arrived at their borders, not to steal but to work, to clean their shit, and to fuck their men. (Metha 2019, pp. 3-4)

Furthermore, similarly to Quayson's consideration on postcolonialism being concerned with a discussion on migration and slavery, Kittitian-British writer Caryl Phillips compares present-time migrants' condition to the past subjugation to the former coloniser:

> The asylum seekers, in particular, have migration forced upon them. It doesn't involve chains, it doesn't involve manacles, it doesn't involve physically brutal labor, but the psychological trauma can fester for years. These are not economic migrants who have bought a ticket. Europe is full of people who are psychologically scarred, having cut the umbilical cord with their countries and their languages, as viciously and as traumatically as people did in the past with slavery. (Phillips 2009, p. 12)

Nonetheless, what emerges from Nobel's, Mehta's, and Phillips's observations of the long-lasting issue of migration is the alternative usage of terms referred to migrants. Phillips employs the term *asylum seekers* in relation to migratory flows that characterise present-day Europe, whereas Nobel relies on the term *refugee* and Mehta makes use of the general locution *migrants* besides discussing their condition in a subjective, personalised manner that resembles a first-hand experience. The latter is detectable in the use of the pronouns *they* – i.e. 'the rich countries' – and *us* – i.e. current migrants – every time Mehta addresses his complaints to the former colonisers. As migration has characterised most of human existence, over time individuals leaving or fleeing their home country have been subjected to different definitions.

Since 1982, when the Refugee Studies Centre (RSC) was established as part of the University of Oxford's Department of International Development (Queen Elizabeth House) in order to promote the understanding of the causes and consequences of forced migration, scholars have been particularly meticulous in choosing terminology when arguing, considering, and analysing current migrations (Sorgoni 2022, p. 28). At present, or in the era of the refugee as defined by Nobel, "[t]he world […] is on the move" (Andersson 2014, p. 4). However, this sense of motion and mobility is rather a privilege granted to the rich countries and their citizens rather than the whole world:

> Globalization, theorists argue, involves such 'time-space compression' on an unprecedented scale. Yet while some travellers – whether executives, 'expats', or tourists – are celebrated for their powers to shrink distances and connect territories, others are fretted about for the same reasons. The label 'migrants' is usually, and paradoxically, reserved for them. These migrants haunt the rich world […]. What they have in common is their relative poverty and the suspicion attached to their movements – a suspicion that, for some, comes to subsume their whole identity in the eyes of their reluctant hosts. These are the

> ‘illegal immigrants’, the absolute Others to the dream of a mobile world: those who cannot – or should not – move. (Andersson 2014, p. 4)

In her contextualisation of current-day handling of migratory flows, anthropologist Ruben Andersson criticises the “time-space compression” emphasised by theorists and celebrated by those individuals who can take advantage of globalisation. In point of fact, since 1988 Europe has been surrounded by fences, walls, borders that aim at preventing ‘illegal immigrants’ from entering. At the same time, the gates of ‘Fortress Europe’ have given rise to what Andersson defines as the “illegal migration industry” or “illegality industry” (Andersson 2014, pp. 2, 5). As a consequence, “in our high-speed world of resurgent international borders, mobility is paradoxically becoming both a privilege and a stigma” (Andersson 2014, p. 7). This economic, political scenario raises the necessity of properly labelling the so-called ‘people on the move’ especially when they are fleeing conflict, poverty, and terror, some of whom leaving their home and family behind and undertaking a perilous journey only to reach less than welcoming shores.

The main distinction is among economic migrants, or human beings who can benefit of ‘time-space compression’, refugees, and asylum seekers. The terms *asylum seeker* and *refugee* are often conflated. An asylum seeker is a ‘person’ who says that he or she is a refugee, but whose claim has not yet been assessed. A refugee has been assessed by a government or by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as set out in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, commonly known as the Refugee Convention (AHRC). Countries that have ratified the Convention are obliged to assess asylum seekers’ claims for protection. According to the Refugee Convention, a refugee is a ‘person’ who is outside his or her own country and is unable to return due to a well-founded fear of persecution on the following grounds: race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. More than 140 countries have acceded to the 1951 Convention or its 1967 Protocol, and many of these countries have incorporated the refugee definition of the Convention within national legislation (Sorgoni 2022, pp. 20-21).

Literature, and especially postcolonial literature, mirrors our societies and provides in return a realistic, at times alternative but comprehensive scenario and knowledge of the aggregation of past and present events and human affairs. In addition, literature reflects, absorbs, and explores influences from a variety of fields, and these features are particularly evident in Warsan Shire’s poetry and in the digital storytelling of *28 Tales for 28 Days*. In their own way, both set out to highlight and expose the plight of present-day migrants, and display the supplementary feature of social activism, a peculiar quality conferred by Phillips to literary production:

> As long as we have literature as a bulwark against intolerance, and as a force for a change, then we have a chance. […] for literature *is* plurality in action; it embraces and celebrates a place of no truths, it relishes ambiguity, and it deeply respects the place where everybody has the right to be understood. (Phillips 2011, p. 16)

The diversified authorial community of the above-mentioned literary productions on current migrations envisages and anticipates a better and more just future along with simultaneously reshaping and expanding the Anglophone postcolonial literary canon. A broader authorial involvement is also synonym for activism in terms of exposing and defending through storytelling, sometimes in the form of testimony or first-hand narrations, the claim for civil and human rights for those human beings in search for fair, equitable, unprejudiced life conditions. Ultimately, in their storytelling these activist authors rely on art and employ very diverse narrative forms and media. This blending of forms, modes of expression, and production along with cutting-edge technologies, facilitates multimodal creative works, multidimensional forms of protest, and the building of "egalitarian alliances and connections across difference" (Sandoval, Latorre 2008, p. 83). The tendency to take an active part in events, especially in social and political contexts, has characterised human behaviour, in one form or another, since time immemorial, manifesting itself in every part of the world and in every culture, as pointed out by Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei:

> Throughout history, political and social change only existed in the forms we knew because protest actions, be they violent or peaceful, were carried out with a lack of resources, especially in terms of communications. Individuals could mobilize and share information with others only to a limited extent. Such circumstances posed obstacles to protest actions that people can take and hindered the impact of their efforts. Today, we are in a very different world. The Internet and computer technologies liberate individuals and let them act as one. Ideas, plans and actions can be shared with others at lightning speed, and anyone may participate autonomously. New technologies finally enable humans to truly act as individuals. We no longer need to ask where an idea comes from. It gets shared quickly, and other individuals can carry it out within a short period of time. The real revolution is in each individual's mind. Everybody has to learn to become different from how they perceive themselves. The ways of bringing change and facing political and social struggles have become very different from the previous era. The work of individuals and the path to social change will continue to surprise us. (Weiwei 2011)

Indeed "the path to social change" has surprised us especially over the last two decades thanks to constantly up-do-date, user friendly, and accessible digital devices. Politically and socially active artists rely on them and deliver in return works of aesthetic value that fall under the umbrella term of *artivism*, a combination of *art* and *activism*, a hybrid neologism "that signifies work

created by individuals who see an organic relationship between art and activism" (Sandoval, Latorre 2008, p. 82) and might be understood here as a critical process that disrupts one-dimensional explanations of current migrations and the dominant paradigm of refugee crisis deployed by the member states of the European Union and the media.

Artivism took roots in the late 1990s in gatherings between Chicano artists from East Los Angeles and the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, with the intent of shedding light on the issues of race and ethnicity within white American society (Sandoval, Latorre 2008, pp. 92-93). Since then, artivism has developed following the proliferation of protests against wars and globalisation. In many cases, artivists attempt to promote political agendas through the means of art. Besides using traditional media like film and music to raise awareness or push for change, artivists can also be involved in culture jamming, subvertising, street art, spoken word, protesting, and activism (Milohnić 2005). For instance, in a talk given at a Chattanooga TEDx event in 2014, spoken word artist and activist Marcus Ellsworth introduced his speech on how to help build community around art and issues of social justice with the following words: "Art as activism, another way of saying it would be art as a bringer of change, art as a way to connect people, to engage people, to motivate and move people to action" (TEDx Talks 2014, 00:09-00:24).

Eve Ensler – playwright, performer, feminist, and activist – expands on Ellsworth's definition of artivism. Acknowledging a twofold but divergent meaning of change, Ensler frames artivism in terms of passion as a creative, militant response to power:

> It is easily argued that violent revolutions, war and repression bring about the most immediate, obvious change. But I think we need to look at what we mean by change. Terror and violence can change a given political situation and keep the population in line. But these tactics simply change one dominant force for another. Methods of passion involve a deeper, more transformational process: inviting commitment, vision and long-term struggle. All these can bring about lasting change both in the individual and the community. Methods of passion model the world we want to create. I have had my moments of rage where I think the powers that be will never end oppression or inequity voluntarily. But I do not trust these moments of violence within me. Passion is persuasive. Power is dominating. Passion is contagious and inspirational. Power is threatening and coercive. Passion moves people. Power controls them. I think in these perilous times, a third way is emerging, a kind of escalated passion – a creative energy that comes from giving one's heart and soul and imagination to the struggle. Not aggression but fierceness. Not hurting but confronting. Not violating but disrupting. This passion has all the ingredients of activism, but is charged with the wild creations of art. Artivism – where edges are pushed, imagination is freed, and a new language emerges altogether. (Ensler 2011)

Pushing edges, freeing imagination, and employing a language that can be understood by an enlarged audience may be read as keywords to *28 Tales for*

28 Days and Shire's digitally creative and emphatic literary works. They both stem from collective productions thought, developed, and created by writers, artists, passionate human beings who aim to "bring […] change and fac[e] political and social struggles" (Weiwei 2011) related to current migrations and Western political agendas that strongly hinder them by surrounding 'Fortress Europe' with fences, walls, borders, simultaneously attempting to arouse nationalistic passions against foreigners.

2. Warsan Shire: from printed prose to performance poetry

Born to Somali parents in Kenya but raised in London, Warsan Shire is among a generation of young poets who have attracted a larger audience by initially publishing their poetry online. Besides providing immediate visibility, Internet platforms such as social networks and YouTube also encourage poets to track their follower counts and engagement rates. Shire first became prominent through Tumblr, which functions as a sort of virtual mood board where selfies, music, and poetry can be posted randomly, and later on her Twitter and Instagram accounts, which count thousands of followers.[1] To reach Somali refugees and support their cause, instead, she usually relies on Facebook. She also supports the cause of the African women feminist movement along with engaging herself in conversations in the form of interviews or podcasts about migration and racism every time an opportunity is given to her. In 2014, the visibility gained on the World Wide Web conferred her the title of London's Youth Poet Laureate. To a larger audience, she is best known for having collaborated in 2016 with American singer Beyoncé on *Lemonade*, a visual album in which the singer's music is interspersed with Shire's poetry.

Nonetheless, her social and political engagement does not exempt her from exploring alternative ways of storytelling. Her narrative has been composed for a variety of media, ranging from print distribution to audio recordings to online circulation. In 2011, she released her first printed narrative: the pamphlet *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* published by London-based flipped eye publishing, a company that promotes original poetry and prose on a not-for-profit model. This brief publication, barely over thirty pages, contains poems and short stories that chiefly elicit the dichotomy of longing for home while searching for a new place to call home. In her narration, Shire deals with the issues of migration, war, trauma, patriarchal violence, racism, and language also from a feminist point of view as emerges, for instance, in the two-lines poem "In Love and in War":

[1] Lately, Shire has been using Twitter and Instagram as a showcase for her published works rather than a virtual space containing everyday thoughts, reflections on migration and racism, images, and videos to be shared with the online community.

> To my daughter I will say,
> ‘when the men come, set yourself on fire’.
> (Shire 2011, p. 34)

Allegedly, this motherly piece of advice might be an aftermath of foremothers’ memories caught in the worst turmoil of conflicts that have been taking place across Africa.

It may be argued that Shire’s lyrical feminist writing is related to sociologist Michael Scott Kimmel’s theorisation on patriarchy. Kimmel asserts that patriarchy is a system deeply rooted in imperialism, racism, and capitalism and that one of its facets, manhood – or the composite of qualities, such as courage, determination, and vigour that supposedly characterise adult male humans – is culture-bound:

> Manhood means different things at different times to different people. We come to know what it means to be a man in our culture by setting our definitions in opposition to a set of ‘others’ – racial minorities, sexual minorities, and, above all, women. (Kimmel 2010, p. 59)

On the basis of this, it follows that the term *patriarchy* chiefly implies male domination and prejudice against women, even though it is important to bear in mind that the *concept* of patriarchy, which has been developed within feminist theory, has a whole variety of different meanings. On the whole, patriarchy is a form of social organisation in which a male is head of a social unit, be it a family or a tribe. In this social unit, the patriarch has legitimate power over every member of the community, and descent and kinship along with title are traced through the male line. However, on a larger extent, patriarchy includes any social, political, or economic mechanism that evokes male dominance over women (Beechey 1979, p. 66).

In January 1969, left-wing political essayist, journalist, activist, feminist, and pop music critic Ellen Willis and radical feminist, writer, and activist Shulamith Firestone started a group called Redstockings of the Women’s Liberation Movement (Willis 1984, pp. 96-97), whose “Manifesto” reads:

> Women are an oppressed class. Our oppression is total, affecting every facet of our lives. We are exploited as sex objects, breeders, domestic servants, and cheap labor. We are considered inferior beings, whose only purpose is to enhance men’s lives. Our humanity is denied. Our prescribed behavior is enforced by the threat of physical violence. […] We identify the agents of our oppression as men. Male supremacy is the oldest, most basic form of domination. All other forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism, etc.) are extensions of male supremacy: men dominate women, a few men dominate the rest. All power structures throughout history have been male-dominated and male-oriented. Men have controlled all political, economic

> and cultural institutions and backed up this control with physical force. They have used their power to keep women in an inferior position. All men receive economic, sexual, and psychological benefits from male supremacy. All men have oppressed women. (Redstockings 2023)

Kimmel, Willis, and Firestone recognise women as an oppressed class. Both definitions mirror similarities, even though the main concept – men dominate women – represents a double oppression for women who live within a patriarchal community and – as for Shire – are also a visible minority in a country with a colonial history where white Western culture is omnipresent.

Shire's poetic voice remarks on the unbalanced female-male relationship through the usage of metaphors of the woman's body, which, in this context, is both the metaphoric and the literary location of pain:

> Her body is a flooding home.
> […]
> She is a boat docking in from war,
> her body, a burning village, a prison
> with open gates.
> (Shire 2011, p. 30)
>
> You are her mother.
> Why did you not warn her,
> hold her like a rotting boat
> and tell her that men will not love her
> if she is covered in continents,
> if her teeth are small colonies,
> if her stomach is an island
> if her thighs are borders?
> her hands are a civil war,
> a refugee camp behind each ear,
> a body littered with ugly things.
> (Shire 2011, pp. 31-32)

These extracts are undisguised examples of Shire's employment of metaphors with references to conflicts and, as earlier offered for consideration by Malkki, to the effects of colonialism: "her hands are a civil war, / a refugee camp behind each ear, / a body littered with ugly things". In relation to physicality, Shire also seems to reproduce in her writing one of Bill Ashcroft's statements: "The body itself has also been the literal 'text' on which colonization has written some of its most graphic and scrutable messages" (Ashcroft *et al.* 1995, p. 322).

Shire's act of addressing her homeland as female is arguably a relic of the colonial past. Within the realm of postcolonial criticism, the colonial space or the occupied territory is personified as female, whereas the act of conquering and colonising is associated with maleness. This binary opposition – female/male as well as object/subject (the latter in terms of the one who

performs or controls the action) – goes back to the eighteenth century, when the increase of sea voyages for scientific purposes or for the spread of Christianity allowed a more extensive encounter with the Other. The consequent collision of cultures along with the subjugation of peoples considered 'inferior' was grounded on a Eurocentric supremacist perspective, as put forth by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin:

> Such knowledge [of the overseas countries] also directly facilitated exploitation and intervention, processes whose real effects are reflected in phrases like 'the opening up of Africa'. Such a phrase also suggests the gendering of landscape and the associations between sexuality and exploration and conquest. 'Virgin territories' (never virgin, but the inhabitants were considered to be uncivilized and thus having no legal rights of ownership) were opened up by exploration to trade and settlement, their original inhabitants killed, displaced or marginalized within European settler communities. (Ashcroft *et al.* 2003, pp. 89-90)

Besides the employment of metaphors, Shire also relies on the literary device of repetition. Words such as *men*, *boat*, *home* might be referred to as keywords as they are spread over the other poems and short stories collected in *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (2011). Clear evidence can be found for instance in "Conversation about Home (at the Deportation Centre)", a story made of four paragraphs which are distributed over four pages. Written in 2009, the short story was inspired by the author's visit to the abandoned Somali Embassy in Rome, where some young refugees found shelter and turned the building into their home (Bausells, Shearlaw 2015). However, the refugees' deliberate act of occupation of a safe African location in a hostile host country may be interpreted as a paradox. Shire's strategy to distribute the short story over four pages might be read as an attempt to both emphasise the refugees' sense of displacement and somehow mirror their discontinuous journeys, which are often characterised by perilous travel conditions, stopovers where they are dehumanised by their abysmal condition, and unwelcoming arrival destinations. In point of fact, the first paragraph begins with the narrating voice's discouraging reflection: "Well, I think home spat me out" (Shire 2011, p. 24); on the following page, the second paragraph is introduced by questioning her/his point of origin in a way that corroborates Ashcroft's concept of the body as a "literal 'text'":

> They ask me *how did you get here*? Can't you see it on my body? The Libyan desert red with immigrant bodies, the Gulf of Aden bloated, the city of Rome with no jacket […] Sometimes it feels like someone else is wearing my body. (Shire 2011, p. 25, emphasis in the original)

Carrying on with the analogies between the senses and the body as a literal text, the third paragraph focuses on the issues of identity along with the dichotomy belonging/longing that manifest themselves in the host country:

> I do not know where I am going, where I have come from is disappearing, I am unwelcome. […] My body is burning with the shame of not belonging, my body is longing. I am the sin of memory and the absence of memory […] the distance I am from home. (Shire 2011, p. 26)

Lastly, in the fourth paragraph the narrating voice elucidates the awareness of being *persona non grata* immigrants and refugees carry with them as soon as they have to deal with the hostile host community: "I hear them say *go home*, I hear them say *fucking immigrants, fucking refugees*" (Shire 2011, p. 27). Besides giving rise to unreconcilable and fragmented identities, this hateful, inhospitable reception develops into a further act of psychological violence that does increase and exacerbate their sense of displacement and precariousness, as put forth by Phillips:

> The first time one is called a 'nigger' or told 'go back to where you come from', one's identity is traduced and a great violence is done to one's sense of self. Thereafter, one fights a rearguard action to keep other elements of oneself in focus, and it's hard to get through the day without the shoulder coming into play. I don't mean the 'chip on the shoulder', I mean the 'the glance over the shoulder'. Once somebody has mounted a stealth attack on a part of who you are, you had better be wary for you know it's coming again. (Phillips 2011, pp. 123-124)

In response to the global refugee crises of the twenty-first century, in 2017 Shire converted the short story into the performance poem "Home", which was subsequently published as a prose poem in the author's recent collection *Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head* (2022). "Home" captures the pain and trauma of the refugee experience, and, as Shire averred during an interview, was written, "for them, for [her] family and for anyone who has experienced or lived around grief and trauma in that way" (Bausells, Shearlaw 2015).

The words, figures of speech, and stylistic strategies employed in the poem vividly depict the journey made by human beings fleeing conflict, poverty, and terror along with their brutal living conditions of undocumented individuals in Europe. By recounting the refugees' constant struggle for survival, the text poignantly raises the Western audience's awareness of present-day migrations and unsettles the concept of 'home'. As a matter of fact, even though the term usually evokes a feeling of belonging and implies sympathetic, compassionate, and unhesitating acceptance, in the poem the place that usually represents both a domicile and one's national identity becomes so hostile that 'unwanted residents' are forced to leave: "You only leave home when home won't let you stay" (Shire 2022, p. 24).

It may be argued that Shire's performance poetry may be envisioned as a return to orality or, borrowing Northern Irish linguistic anthropologist Ruth

Finnegan's definition, a return to "oral art as literature" whose vehicle of transmission becomes the given performance (Finnegan 2012, pp. 3-6). The past couple of decades have witnessed an accelerating shift in perspectives on the dynamics of storytelling and of making a stand for a better and more just future in general. However, this shift is particularly evident in the field of postcolonial studies and human rights advocacy. The recent performance-centred perspective carried along with the daily, common use of always up-to-date technologies and free and available platforms on the Internet allow for a growing awareness of the role of individual creativity. Shire's poetry is a clear example of a shift from written strategies employed in the short story published in her first pamphlet to visual and audible strategies employed in gaining a wider audience with a shorter but more incisive version of *Conversation About Home (at the Deportation Centre)*.

3. *28 Tales for 28 Days*: a digital activist action

The Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group is a registered charity that offers support to people held in indefinite immigration detention in the United Kingdom.-Clearly stated in their motto "Supporting people during and after detention" (*GDWG* n.d.), their mission is to assist newly arrived migrants, refugee asylum seekers, and those arrested for illegal staying. This charity is a project of humanitarian activism that reveals the entangled, and often impenetrable, links between language and culture that have created an inhumane immigration system in the United Kingdom, a former colonising country that identified itself as the 'mother country'. It was set up in 1995 in response to the UK Immigration Service as it began to detain people at a small holding centre near Gatwick Airport and instantly exhibited its militant activist agency. It is a non-party political organisation that made itself known chiefly on the Internet. Its well-designed website is a recipient that contains practical and legal information for migrants and refugees, updated news, links to social media such as Facebook and Twitter along with other helpful contact channels. In addition, its website becomes a virtual space where stories are transformed into podcasts and videos that function as evidence of the migrants' journey from their home country to the United Kingdom and their life conditions as unwanted human beings in the hostile host country. Moreover, the website is accessed by a wide audience that add comments, intervene, and launch crowdfunding actions.

In 2014, David Herd – poet, professor of modern literature, activist – and Anna Pincus – director of the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group – launched a wider campaign in defence of migrants' rights. They increased the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group's commitment to support people affected by immigration detention and expanded the original website by adding a new

link to a further project of humanitarian activism named "Refugee Tales", which draws on Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1388) for inspiration. Since 2015, every summer through the English countryside, "walks of solidarity" have taken place over several days of trekking and storytelling. The storytelling that occurs during the event is then turned into a collection of stories published by Comma Press, a not-for-profit Manchester-based publisher and development agency. So far, Herd and Pincus have edited four volumes titled *Refugee Tales* (2016, 2017, 2019, 2021) – the fifth is going to be published in the summer of 2024.

This additional form of activism that was brought to life on the Internet with an explicit literary viewpoint has originated a remarkable role reversal. It has given a platform and humanity to the often-voiceless Others, outsiders – the 'typical' characters of postcolonial literature – who now have the chance to become the authors of their own narratives. Their life experiences are told to volunteers who share the core values of the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group and the Refugee Tales Project. Among these volunteers are well-known postcolonial writers such as Abdulrazak Gurnah (winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature 2021), Jackie Kay, Monica Ali, Bernardine Evaristo, Kamila Shamsie, Gillian Slovo, and many more. These first-hand life experiences told by impromptu storytellers are later transcribed, and on this occasion a collaborative, synergic relationship between the improvised teller and the celebrity writer takes place. The latter, that is to say the well-established and by now canonical postcolonial author, momentarily sets aside his/her own writing style and narrative techniques to let the teller's voice predominate on paper. In contrast to the way the migrants are muted or written out of legal and bureaucratic discourse, the tales open up a space for their voices and their language to be heard. These are stories told and shared so that people listen to a new discourse but above all they give voice to refugees who can ultimately talk about their no-win situations to listeners who have ears to hear and willingness to transmit that experience without distortion or prejudice.

The Refugee Tales Project holds a relevant place among 20th- and 21st-century responses to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. The project comprises collections of tales published in textual editions alongside a politically embodied campaign launched in 2018 to call an end to the practice of indefinite detention of those regarded as illegal immigrants in the United Kingdom. Moreover, it is also one important example of transmedia and visual communication. "The Refugee Tales Statement", created to draw attention to indefinite detention carried out by the British government, was recorded in front of a camera, uploaded on both the 28 Tales for 28 Days website and YouTube. The video runs two minutes and forty-seven seconds, and in this frame of time, activist, famous writers, and actors, who have about five to six seconds each, join together to spread the voice of the often-voiceless Others. In the span of approximately three minutes, they claim justice and human

rights, and call for a change in the law in addition to suggesting immigration detention be limited to only twenty-eight days. Concurrently with the launch of the campaign, in order to attract a wider audience and raise awareness of indefinite detention, each day for twenty-eight days a tale was released, posted on the website with the opening lines “Come back each day to hear why the law must change. End indefinite detention”, and made available on YouTube.

The 28 Tales for 28 Days website home page looks like a calendar, a table showing thirty-three squares which are hyperlinks. If Internet users click on squares labelled by numbers from one to twenty-eight, they are then redirected to a video of the reading of a tale performed by participants in “The Refugee Tales Statement” (the first square in the third row). Some of them are also contributors whose names and short biographies are listed on the last pages of the four volumes. The first square – “Refugee Tales” – redirects visitors to the project’s aims and purposes and is followed by the numbered hyperlinks. Emulating the structure of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, in the first video award-winning English actor and activist Jeremy Irons reads the *Prologue* written by Herd and published in the first volume. It is an introduction to the project that already in the first stanza clearly states in black and white the activist nature of “Refugee Tales” as detected in keywords such as ‘welcome’, ‘criminalises’, ‘human movement’, and ‘solidarity’:

> This prologue is not a poem
> It is an act of welcome
> It announces
> That people present
> Reject the terms
> Of a debate that criminalises
> Human movement
> It is a declaration
> This night in Shepherdswell
> Of solidarity.
> (Herd 2016, p. v)

This process shows how the pervasiveness of new media affects storytelling and literature. The synergy among disciplines that gives rise to a new, accessible, and inclusive literature, not to mention opening the canon to new forms of writing, is increasingly emphasised in the contemporary phenomenon known as transmedia storytelling, a concept coined by media scholar Henry Jenkins. Transmedia storytelling (also known as transmedia narrative or multiplatform storytelling) is the technique of telling a single story or story experience across multiple platforms and formats using current digital technologies and attracting larger audiences (Jenkins 2008).

Moreover, the video “The Refugee Tale Statement” is itself a digital example of social and political engagement, an example of inclusion (the switch between genders as well as the switch between white and black

individuals, between migrants and black British citizens, between famous and ordinary people), and eventually an example of the convergence of new media and traditional storytelling. In point of fact, the video comes with default subtitles, a preset value that undoubtedly provides a full understanding of the statement, not to mention the yellow-highlighted keywords that contribute to the comprehension of the recorded message. According to sociologist Marshall McLuhan “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 2013, p. 14), and this video becomes an agency by which the claim for a time limit to immigration detention is conveyed. Furthermore, relying on Jenkins’s theories, transmedia storytelling is a process whereby the elements of a fiction or a non-fiction are dispersed systematically across multiple media for the purpose of creating a unified experience. Transmedia storytelling integrates two dimensions: (1) the construction of an official narrative that gets dispersed across multiple media and platforms; (2) the active participation of users in this expansive process. User participation may adopt different forms: simple viral reproduction of content, manipulation of a text (remix, parodies, and so on) and, specifically in this context, redistribution, active participation in online communities, creation of narrative extensions (Atarama-Rojas 2019, pp. 3-5).

The Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group initial process of collaboration becomes a collective endeavour especially because it is an integral stage in the creation of a public space of social action. Twenty years after its foundation, the charity group continues to advocate for the end of indefinite detention and to release new editions of “Refugee Tales”. The “Tales” have attracted media attention, active participation, and involvement, while exploring new forms of storytelling that draw on, overlap, and intersect with different disciplines, mirroring an openness to experimentation with form and content that often characterises literature, and in the process, the Refugee Tales Project itself has become literature.

4. Migration narratives as activist storytelling

Warsan Shire’s poetry and *28 Tales for 28 Days* digital activist storytelling are both a distinctive example of the way literature, specifically contemporary migration literature, blends with artivism. This blending mirrors Milohnić’s definition of artivism. Not only do *28 Tales for 28 Days* and Shire’s community engage in pushing political agendas by the means of art but also focus on raising social and technological consciousness, that is to say making people aware of the usefulness and availability of technology for communication. Besides using traditional media like video and music to raise awareness or push for change, they are also involved in spoken word poetry, protesting, and activism, and above all they rely on not-for-profit volunteer work and publishing houses (Milohnić 2005).

The organisation of people, ideas, and other resources is at the core of activism. In addition, as put forth by photographer, computer programmer, and sociologist Brian Alleyne, the technological dimension has taken on greater importance in contemporary social movements. The ability to use these new technologies is important for activists wanting to constitute, expand, and sustain their projects as they are 'force multipliers' for the collective generation of knowledge in which all activists must engage in order to pursue goals for social change (Alleyne 2002, pp. 79-80).

Shire's interviews, conversations, delivered speeches along with her literary production become a multimedia mixture of visual-oral-written communication. In the current digital age, moreover, multimodal narrations become "movement of information" (McLuhan 2013, p. 97). In so doing, contemporary authors like Shire address the issues of migration and racism producing transnational political dialogue that travels across digital space and creates, in return, a new way to stand out in the cultural industry as well as in the World Wide Web by engaging Western audience, scholars, and intellectuals in new ways of reading literature. It is not accidental, then, that Shire's line "No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark" (Shire 2022, p. 24) has become the worldwide rallying call for refugees and their advocates.

28 Tales for 28 Days and by extension the Refugee Tales Project represent, among other things, a form of digital activism. Brought to life on the Internet by authors and activists taking advantage of up-to-date technologies to make themselves known, first in the United Kingdom, and from there, borrowing Phillips's definition of literature, "travelling furiously across borders and boundaries" (Phillips 2001, p. 5). Their activist actions and political stand do travel across digital space and geographical limits which are established only by agreement between governments. During the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the annual 'walks of solidarity' took place online on the YouTube channel where the Refugee Tales community virtually gathered to "call for a future without detention" (Refugee Tales n.d.). Following Herd's suggestion, photographs of bridges encountered along the way were sent and posted online. It may be argued that those bridges may be symbols of crossing and making connections:

> If there is one good consequence of lockdown Refugee Tales, it is that this year at least, anybody can join in. […] But this year people are joining from across the world, joining in solidarity in the call for a future without immigration detention. In order that we can make that shared call vivid, please let us know via our website, where you are and where you are walking. And please, when you see one, take and send us a photo of a bridge. We are making bridges this year, and we are crossing borders. (Refugee Tales 2020, 05:57-06:49)

Camelia Crisan and Dumitru Bortun define digital stories as strong pieces of evidence to support a particular cause: the narrator is the interpretative advocate for the case which is uploaded online and made available for anyone browsing the Internet and watching. Digital stories can be tools in calling to action because they elicit emotions, reveal the journey of their narrator, and provide first-hand account of events (Crisan, Bortun 2017, p. 156). For Warsan Shire, the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group and the Refugee Tales Project, online platforms thus become the collective space defined by Arendt: the process through which individuals reconstruct their personal experiences and enter a collective space where feelings of alienation and personal fragmentation find artistic expression in text, image, and sound (Arendt 1998, pp. 176-181).

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