Représentations dans le monde anglophone
ISSN : 2552-1160
Publisher : UGA éditions

28 | 2024
The Unbearable Precariousness of Place and Truth *suivi de* Autour du fonds Léonie Villard

No Place for Truth? Credibility and Dis/belief in Asylum Storytelling

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https://publications-prairial.fr/representations/index.php?id=1112

DOI : 10.35562/rma.1112

Electronic reference
Jessica Small, « No Place for Truth? Credibility and Dis/belief in Asylum Storytelling », *Représentations dans le monde anglophone* [Online], 28 | 2024, Online since 16 décembre 2024, connection on 16 décembre 2024. URL : https://publications-prairial.fr/representations/index.php?id=1112

Prairial
Pôle éditorial
Lyon Saint-Étienne

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OUTLINE

TEXT

1 Across the nation-states of the global north, asylum interviews constitute an essential and determining stage in the processing of an asylum claim (see Miller III). During these interviews, asylum seekers are required to recount the story of their escape from their country of origin to the representative(s) of the nation present. The nation-state will then either accept these stories, resulting in the granting of refugee status, or reject them, resulting in appeal or expulsion. Asylum interviews are therefore moments of coerced storytelling in which "refugees must narrate themselves into existence" (Wooley 18). By stereotyping asylum seekers within a "bogus asylum seeker" / "genuine refugee" binary (Kushner 257), contemporary media and political discourses often imply that truth within asylum storytelling is the determining factor in shaping the outcome of asylum interviews. Such an implication stands in stark opposition to the findings of studies on the asylum adjudication processes in the US, UK, France and Ireland (Conlan et al., Anderson et al., Bögner et al., Reid, Shuman and Bohmer, Holland) which indicate that asylum seekers' stories are instead subject to a series of hostile and elusive

credibility criteria within a systemic "culture of disbelief" (Anderson et al.).

2 This article examines how the complex relationship between credibility and truth in asylum adjudication contexts is represented and problematised within contemporary works of refugee literature. An altogether different form of asylum storytelling than that of asylum interviews, refugee literature has been defined as "a body of texts *by* and *about* refugees which represent migration as part of a shared world" (Stan 795, emphasis added), where the term "refugees" encompasses all those subject to forced displacement. In this sense, the term transcends the narrow confines of its internationally-recognised legal definition [1] and is instead in accordance with the framework of the emerging interdisciplinary field of Critical Refugee Studies (Critical Refugee Studies Collective, "Who we are"), within which:

> Refugees are human beings forcibly displaced within or outside of their land of origin as a result of persecution, conflict, war, conquest, settler/colonialism, militarism, occupation, empire, and environmental and climate-related disasters, regardless of their legal status. Refugees can be self-identified and are often unrecognized within the limited definitions proffered by international and state laws, hence may be subsumed, in those instances, under other labels such as "undocumented". (Critical Refugee Studies Collective)

In contrast to the coercive context and the "limited definitions" within which the stories of asylum adjudication procedures are produced, works of refugee literature constitute creative expressions of refugee agency, and renew the epistemologies through which asylum is addressed.

3 In particular, I will seek to examine here what select works of refugee literature have to say about the *place* given to truth within asylum adjudication, where truth is understood as denoting the multifaceted complexity of lived experience. In this sense, truth cannot be singular. To borrow Adrienne Rich's phrasing in a 1975 essay, "there is no 'the truth', 'a truth'—truth is not one thing, or even a system. It is an increasing complexity" (187). Indeed, forced displacement is often caused by intersecting geo-political factors that have erupted into

chaotic violence. The latter is experienced traumatically on an individual level, so that such factors can be difficult to understand and articulate. Making sense of the truth involves an informed and attentive focus on its multitude of interconnected threads, as Rich observes: "the pattern of the carpet is a surface. When we look closely, or when we become weavers, we learn of the tiny multiple threads unseen in the overall pattern, the knots on the underside of the carpet" (187).

4 Meanwhile, by interrogating what place is *given* to truth in these contexts, I evoke implications of place as a "position in some scale, order or series"; place as a "standing", "merit" or "rank", encapsulated in the phrase "*to know one's place*" ("Place" 938–939). Exploring the kind of place afforded to truth entails examining the extent to which the complexity of truth is acknowledged as important and *prioritised* in representations of asylum adjudication. Indeed, the use of the word "place" is also intended to invite a conception of the asylum interview as a place, not tethered to any particular geopolitical boundary but nonetheless attached to a particular experience (of asylum storytelling) within a particular encounter (between nation-state representatives and asylum seeker). Is any truth to be found in the literary representations of such a place?

5 I apply these questions to a selection of texts by two refugee writers: Dina Nayeri's *The Ungrateful Refugee* (2019) and *Who Gets Believed?* (2023), hybrid works combining autobiography and creative non-fiction with fictional passages, and Melatu Uche Okorie's short story "Under The Awning" (2018). Nayeri's works offer narrative representations of asylum interviews and storytelling that draw from her lived experiences as well as her extensive research and volunteer work in the field of forced migration. [2] Okorie's story constitutes a forceful parallel to the asylum storytelling process. By means of an embedded narrative structure, "Under The Awning" recounts the experiences of a migrant woman in Ireland who attends a creative writing group and reads aloud her autobiographical story of racialised persecution, only to be met with disbelief and criticism by the other participants. All three texts offer representations of refugee storytelling in which truth is sidelined or rejected due to oppressive preconceptions and prejudices, operating within the systemic "culture of disbelief" identified by Anderson et al.

Credibility criteria

6 Two implications lie behind the rhetorical question that constitutes the title of *Who Gets Believed?* The first is that truth is subordinate to *credibility*, one's "capacity to be believed or believed in" ("Credibility"). The second, as demonstrated by the unusual passive structure, is that one's credibility is reliant on external factors beyond one's control. In her study on the reception of asylum stories in the context of US asylum adjudication procedures, Madeline Holland confirms the reality of these implications within asylum interviews. In particular, she demonstrates that there is a predetermined narrative criteria of credibility applied to asylum stories, that hinders the expression and recognition of truth: "Western literary standards shape our understanding of what a 'true story' should sound like; this conflation of literary story-telling and truthful story-telling in the context of asylum proceedings can result in the failure to recognise 'true' stories" (86). Holland's study compellingly outlined three narrative criteria required of asylum application testimony: detail, plausibility and consistency. Studying the social-scientific literature on the asylum adjudication processes in the US, UK, France and Ireland in line with Holland's approach reveals the importance of the following criteria in asylum narratives: linearity, the theme of persecution, an equilibrium of tone, a victimising form of characterisation, and an attention to detail and originality. These criteria are depicted and problematised in Nayeri and Okorie's writings as leaving little place for truth to be expressed, let alone recognised.

Linearity

7 The aforementioned literature suggests that linearity is one of the most prominent requirements of asylum narratives, in contrast to the supposed discrepancies they might present. Holland quotes Aristotle's *Poetics* as a reminder of the preference for cause-and-event structures in plots at the origin of Western thought: "of all plots […] the episodic are the worst […] in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence" (87). In order to abide by this cultural preference, asylum stories should follow a logical, causal and chronological pattern. This pattern should

be firmly situated within a Western temporal framework (Schuman and Bohmer 396). In her work calling for postcolonial analyses of the dominance of the Western linear temporal framework in the field of international relations, Katharina Hunfield denounces the way in which "the colonisation of time", which she defines as "a process within which the time of the European colonisers was institutionalised as the Greenwich Mean Time of normativity", created "a discourse of otherness through time that helped to construct the racial and cultural inferiority of non-Europeans as well as the marginalisation and suppression of non-European ways of narrating and relating to time" (101). Such discourse is apparent in the suspicion afforded to asylum seekers who are unable to narrate their stories according to the norms of Western temporality. Presenting the findings of their research on US asylum adjudication, Amy Shuman and Carol Bohmer discuss the difficulties faced by applicants "unfamiliar with the use of calendar dates", citing "one Afghan applicant [who] knew nothing about the Western calendar" and "Malay clients [who] had no concept of time in Western terms" (396). In the Irish context, a report from the Irish Refugee Council found that asylum decision makers are often tempted "to conclude that the account presented to them is simply not plausible according to their knowledge or understanding of events which occur in countries which have […] very different cultures" (Conlan et al. 3).

8 In Who Gets Believed?, author Dina Nayeri draws from her lived experience to illustrate how "refugees draw suspicion by fumbling over dates" (119):

> When my family landed in Dubai from Iran, the first leg of our asylum journey, we calculated my Western birthday. I was nine years old and my birthday was in *Ordibehesht*, the second month, which roughly equaled May, the fifth month. I scrutinized my mother's calendar and converted the date. But here was a confusion that frustrated us. In the Persian solar calendar, the leap day is added on March 20, just before the equinox. In the Gregorian calendar, it is added on February 29. So, the leap day adjustment happens twenty days later in Iran than it does in the West. Every leap year, they have a different birthday in the Gregorian calendar. They must translate their birthday from a calendar year *of the year they were born*. If they check this year's calendar, they could be off by a day. (119)

There is a strong undercurrent of irony in Nayeri's description of a nine-year-old girl who is capable of comprehending concepts of cultural difference in a way that her surrounding environment is not. This is underlined by the didactic tone with which Nayeri exposes and explains the problem using simple, logical structures—"but", "In the Persian solar calendar", "In the Gregorian calendar", "So", italicising her key point for further clarity. Indeed, in *The Ungrateful Refugee*, she offers her readers a lesson in interculturality on the topic of Iranian storytelling:

> Iranians have no problem with spoilers—the ending isn't the pleasure of a story for them. They don't start in the middle of the action (as Western writers are taught to do) or even at the beginning (where Western logic may take them), they start long before the beginning: 'Let me tell you about modern Iran', they say, because that is how they are trained to begin. And those are the savvy ones; the rest begin with the creation of the universe. But you start philosophising and you've lost your Western listener. (242–243)

In this passage Nayeri assumes the pedagogical role of cultural mediator, translating Iranian storytelling norms for her Western readership. Through the use of clauses inserted in brackets, she repeatedly situates Iranian norms in comparison to Western counterparts, creating a consistent, visual parallel between the two. In so doing, she uses her writing to demonstrate the cultural relativity, inherent to perceptions of truth, that is often overlooked in contexts of asylum adjudication.

9 Melatu Uche Okorie's story "Under The Awning" uses a different conceit through which to demonstrate the unjust dominance of Western notions of chronology when applied to asylum storytelling. The story that the protagonist presents to the writing group, narrated in the second person, focuses less on the speaker's flight from Nigeria than on the racially-motivated hostility she has experienced since her arrival in Ireland, although, as we see in the group's reactions to her story, the same credibility criteria are rigidly applied. The woman's story could be described in Aristotelian terms as "episodic"; she eschews coherent chronology in favour of a series of emotive impressions and memories that conjure her isolation and loneliness in the face of racism. New occurrences in the narrative are

presented abruptly, without any temporal indicators for context: "*You stood under the awning outside the spar shop*" (40); "*You got on your bus*" (41); "*On television a man was talking*". The other members of the group do not fail to criticise her lack of linearity, calling for the story to be "rewritten in chronological order" (55), to "observe chronology" (55). Echoing the rejection of asylum claims that do not conform to Western temporal frameworks, her story is not acceptable to them because it does not meet their expectations of narrative temporality, and this narrative gap prevents her from finding a place in the group.

Theme

10 Theme is also crucial to the acceptance of asylum stories. More precisely, asylum stories must have at their core the theme of persecution, since the Geneva Convention defines as refugees only those who justify "a well-founded fear of being persecuted" in their country of origin. "To meet the criteria for political asylum", as Schuman and Bohmer write, "applicants need to reframe what they often understand as a personal trauma into an act of political aggression; […] rape victims, for example, see their rape as a personal attack rather than an example of gender violence" (396). In their experience, "many victims never reach the stage of being able to use a political narrative to describe their personal situation" (397).

11 This phenomenon is demonstrated in a passage from *The Ungrateful Refugee* in which Nayeri quotes the oral testimony of Parvis Noshirrani, an Iranian refugee and volunteer cultural mediator in the Netherlands who helps his compatriots in Amsterdam prepare their asylum stories. Noshirrani recounts the failure of a Kurdish refugee and rape victim to recount her rape as an act of persecution:

> I once helped a badly raped Kurdish girl. Soldiers came through her village and raped her in the stable beside the horses. She kept weeping, "I wish I could find a pill to forget the past. I wish I didn't remember." She was losing her mind. They rejected her claim. Do you know why? They said "You are not an interesting person for the government. It was a random act and you were in the wrong place. You don't have a credible fear that the soldiers will return for you." (177)

12 Even though its storyteller belonged to an acknowledged persecuted group, the story was rejected because its main theme was that of personal trauma, as evidenced by the repetition of the first-person pronoun and the focus on her own interiority. Contrastingly, Suketu Mehta's case study on asylum storytelling, published in *The New Yorker*, includes the example of a refugee from the Central African Republic who successively claimed asylum in the United States. Whilst the latter was also claiming asylum on the basis of rape, she was able to recount her story according to the theme of political persecution: "The President of my country was about to be overthrown. My father worked with the previous government. They arrested my father, and tortured everybody at home. [...] People are not allowed to express their opinion if they're against power" ("The Asylum Seeker"). She then describes the rape in graphic detail, before concluding "[If I return] I might be killed on the road, because I am a member of the opposition." Her story is clearly framed in political terms, beginning by establishing the context of political turmoil, clearly demonstrating the connection of the events in relation to this context, and concluding by articulating her fears in explicitly political terms. As Mehta muses: "The system demanded a certain kind of narrative if she was to be allowed to stay here, and she furnished it."

13 In *The Ungrateful Refugee*, Nayeri reflects upon the importance of selecting the appropriate theme for asylum stories through the plot trajectory of Kaweh, a Kurdish-Iranian asylum seeker in the UK. Nayeri's imagined rendering of his ultimately successful asylum interview is narrated in explicitly political terms:

> I was a member of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran for over three years. I was approached by the Iranian authorities to be a spy and I refused. They gave me money that I accepted and used for my personal needs. I never repaid them. They found me in Turkey. My life is in danger in Iran and also in Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey. (208)

Like the young woman of Mehta's case study, Kaweh frames his story within the political context and its consequences, explicitly referencing the nature of his political affiliation and the fact that the state is the source of his persecution. It works, as Kaweh is granted asylum. Nayeri's inclusion of this story is demonstrative of the

thematic imperative underlying successful asylum storytelling within asylum adjudication.

Tone

14 A further characteristic of storytelling that can prove problematic for asylum seekers is that of tone, and in particular emotivity. Research suggests that for an asylum story to be deemed credible, it must strike an extremely delicate balance in its expression of emotion. One the one hand, a certain amount of emotion is expected: Schumer and Bohman report that recounting the story "too calmly" can "negatively affect the claimant in the B.C.I.S interview", because "the interviewer is less likely to believe the account if it is not accompanied by suitable emotional expression, even though such emotionally flat presentation is characteristic of the posttraumatic disorder suffered by many applicants" (400). On the other hand, they warn of the dangers of telling a story with "too much emotion" (394). This, too, "will have a negative impact in that the interviewer may dismiss the claimant as simply hysterical [...] our legal system values rationality and objectivity in the narratives presented in court" (394). An advanced understanding of the legal and cultural context of the listener is thus essential to striking the elusive equilibrium in tone necessary for meeting this narrative criterion.

15 In *Who Gets Believed?*, Dina Nayeri compares the composed emotion expected by asylum adjudicators to the literary preferences of a Western readership:

> Western readers are taught that it is always more dignified, deeper, to swallow your drama [...] drama is bad. Big emotions are lowbrow, and to understand events complexly, one must be emotionally unsure. Subtle pain is deeper pain; better to show a trembling hand, though even that is too much. (158)

16 In the same work, Nayeri draws from her own life story to illustrate this phenomenon. One of the book's central subplots recounts the story of her mentally ill brother-in-law Josh, whose threats of suicide are regarded with cynicism by narrator-Nayeri. Josh eventually takes his own life, leading the former to grapple with the preconceptions and prejudices that led to her misplaced disbelief. This process is

didactic, intended to demonstrate how such biases impact credibility. Prior to Josh's funeral, narrator-Nayeri is "nervous" at witnessing his mother's grief:

> How would his mother's agony manifest? I kept imagining myself in her shoes. I would be like my father's cousin in Iran, who, on the day of her husband's funeral, threw herself on the floor. She thrashed her bed, other mourners' chests. She screamed and rejected all sympathy. She wailed and ripped out her hair by fistfulls, demanding that God return him to her. (191)

When her mother-in-law instead demonstrates emotional composure, remaining "gracious and serene", even "consoling friends and neighbours", narrator-Nayeri is impressed: "I sensed a new kind of respect for her taking root"; "*Well done*, *Flo*" (191–192). There is an undertone of negativity in her description of the Iranian cousin's mourning, that she imagines as her own, through vivid evocations of physical violence—verbs such as "threw", "thrash", "ripped". In contrast, the adjectives she uses to describe her mother-in-law are decidedly complimentary. Narrator-Nayeri has internalised Western distaste for the overtly emotional mourning practices of Iran, while writer-Nayeri exposes her own biases in the service of demonstrating and problematising culturally-based predispositions to her readers.

17 Melatu Uche Okorie's "Under The Awning" also demonstrates such biases, through the responses of the creative writing workshop participants to the narrator's account of her protagonist's sadness. The latter is engulfed by her emotion: "you cried for a long time on your bed […] confused at how alone you felt" (50). Her emotional display fails to move the participants, who brand the scene as "melodramatic" (53), "bleak and negative" (51) and instruct the narrator to "work on the bleak picture" (55). Like the asylum seekers cited in Schumer and Bohnan's study, she has failed to regulate the tone of her writing and her story is criticised accordingly.

18 Perhaps the element of the narrator's story that most displeases the workshop participants, however, is her failure to write a character that appeals to their sense of how a victim *should* behave. This too is an important criterion in the evaluation of asylum storytelling: Emily Reid's research into asylum adjudication in France found that asylum

seekers were required to "perform their victimhood" if their stories were to succeed. She cites the example of a woman referred to as "Bimpe":

> As [Bimpe] was preparing her appeal testimony, she expressed hope in the fact that she was busy reconstructing her life, having found employment and a new community in Nice; however, the *de facto* obligation to embody an "ideal-type" victim meant she was counseled to focus upon the tragedy of her experiences, rather than her continuing strength in survival.

19 Schumer and Bohman come to the same conclusion, quoting the advice that US asylum attorney Lea Greenberg repeats to her clients to never talk about their lives in terms other than suffering, "never volunteer anything except maltreatment suffered by you and your family" (394). These findings echo what Vanessa Pupavac describes as "the prevailing cultural image of the refugee" as being "a feminised, traumatised victim" (1). The latter's study into common sympathetic representations of refugees before and after the Cold War charts a movement away from representations of refugees as courageous political dissidents towards figures who are "traumatised, scared and in shock" (1). To elicit sympathy, then, the narrative "I" of asylum stories must be characterised along these lines.

20 Okorie's narrator fails to conform to this archetypal characterisation. Her story gets off to the wrong start when the sensory trigger of rainfall prompts fond memories of life in Nigeria: "*you knew that back home, life would not stop over 'this small rain'*"; rather, street sellers would continue selling fragrant foods; there would be a joyous cacophony of "*singing in pidgin English, Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba*"; "*there would be corn sellers lined up along your street selling your favourite fresh roast corn*" (40–41, italics in original). Nostalgia for home is incompatible with the figure of a long-suffering-victim that the narrator is required to embody.

21 The ending, too, is problematic: she concludes the story on a note of resilience, as the narrator "went […] and bought a diary" (50), implying agency and self-expression in writing. Yet, one participant revealingly comments: "something […] prevents me from caring about the character. I always know I'm reading a work of fiction" (51). By

refusing to characterise her protagonist as a passive victim figure, Okorie's narrator alienates her audience, whose stereotyped visions of refugees as helpless are such that demonstrations of agency are perceived as lacking in verisimilitude.

Detail

22 The challenge of verisimilitude is reflected in a further criterion that carries narrative weight in the context of asylum storytelling: that of detail. Holland cites Roland Barthes' essay "The Reality Effect" in her discussion of the importance of this factor in lending credibility to asylum seeker testimony (88). Just as Barthes applauds the realism of Flaubert's intricate depiction of "an old piano [that] supported, under a barometer, a pyramidal heap of boxes and cartons" in his depiction of a room in "A Simple Heart" (qtd in Barthes 141), so one immigration officer in the US explained his criteria for credibility: "[asylum seekers] have to give me detail. He could answer my questions. He could give me details […] if you lived it you can give me the answers" (qtd in Holland 88). In her research in the French context, Reid found that lack of detail was the most frequently-cited reason given to accompany the 75% refusal rate in 2019, the year of her study, with rejection letters repeating the phrases "not detailed enough" or "vague".

23 This criterion can be particularly difficult to fulfil when asylum seekers suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder are forced to recount traumatic events. Not only does trauma elude linear narratives, but recounting such experiences can harm the recuperation process and trigger post-traumatic instructions (Schock et al.). Nayeri uses narrative to demonstrate the hardship of being forced to recount—and in so doing, relive—deeply traumatic experiences. *Who Gets Believed*? opens with a graphic torture scene, in which a character known only as "K" or "KV" is brutally interrogated in a prison in his native Sri Lanka for being falsely suspected of collusion with the Tamil Tiger insurgency. K's storyline is one of the central narrative threads of the book, and is based on the true story of a man who, having suffered brutal torture in Sri Lanka, was not only disbelieved by the British Home Office after claiming asylum in the UK but was accused of hiring another person

to inflict grievous wounds on him in order to gain refugee status (United Kingdom Supreme Court). The description is harrowing in its detailing of K's suffering:

> K was taken into the interrogation room with ten men who demanded to know where the Tamil Tigers hid their gold. As he knelt, panting, trying to convince them that he knew nothing, he felt a heat near their shoulder. He turned to see a soldier with a metal rod approaching. The end of the rod glowed red; even through a terrified grey haze, it was easy to make out the glow in the room. Before K could think, the rod sank right into his arm, an instant heat shot through his body, and he passed out to the sound of his own distant screams. He woke to more questions about the Tamil Tiger gold, and to the sensation of new wounds: now his back, too, was badly burned, though he didn't remember it happening.

Then the gaggle of men held him down and poured gasoline over his face, his back, covering his fresh wounds. They threatened to set him alight unless he revealed the location of the gold. "I swear I don't know", he said, for the hundredth time. "I'm not LTTE. I'm a jeweler's assistant." As K choked on gasoline, an itch crept up his back and arms and distracted him from the foul taste, the smell. Then the itch became searing, and the screams poured out of him again. He glanced at his arm—strange the details one remembers—and saw the dry skin of his long confinement now wet and slimy and peeling away (6).

24 The vivid mental images that Nayeri conjures for her readers such as the rod penetrating K's arm, the pouring of gasoline on his wounds, and the sight of his skin peeling away, are intensified by the ample sensory detail. All five senses are evoked through the "red" "glow", the "smell" of gasoline, the "sound" of screaming, the "itch" and "searing" sensation and "slimy" skin, "the foul taste." K's terror is represented in the lack of control he has over his screams, from which he appears to dissociate himself, so that they seem "distant", "pouring" out of him. Structurally, the progression of pain from the initial "heat", to "itch", to "searing" agony, intensifies the reader's sense of K's torment.

25 The striking nature of this passage is such that the reader is reminded of it when, later on in the book and after the reader's attention has been diverted elsewhere by the introduction of

different plotlines, K is forced to recount his torture to UK asylum officers "during the interview with the Home Office" (23). K's retelling echoes words and phrases from the original passage:

> In that small office, he repeated the whole story: that in August 2009, his captors burned his *arm* with a hot soldering iron. That *he felt a heat* on his arm, turned and saw the *glowing rod*. That the *burning* intensified, he fell forward, and passed out. That his captors branded his back cleanly while he was unconscious and, when he woke, *poured gasoline* on his *wounds* to increase the pain.
> (23, emphasis added)

The repetition of the distressing story is not necessary for the reader's comprehension of the plot, for which the clause "he repeated the whole story" would have sufficed: its inclusion can thus be interpreted as a textual demonstration of the suffering that asylum seekers experience when obliged to recount traumatic experiences. By using the same words and images that she used in her initial passage, Nayeri makes her readers recall their reading of the latter; this is an illustration of the flashbacks that the asylum interview can trigger in PTSD sufferers and that can render the criterion of detail so difficult to fulfil.

Originality

26 The requirement for detail functions jointly with the requirement for originality. In her research, Emily Reid notes that asylum claims are likely to fail if the stories told are "'too similar' to other seekers' experiences"; Shuman and Bohmer explain that "[Officials] think that similar stories are evidence of fraud" (396). Holland quotes one US asylum officer's suspicion when confronted with stories that are "so boilerplate, there's nothing anything unique about the claims, it makes you wonder" (88). Dina Nayeri expresses the entwined nature of these criteria when, in *The Ungrateful Refugee*, she remarks that "the [asylum] story must be compelling, full of strange, but not too strange, details. It must not mimic other stories" (251).

27 Nayeri employs heavy irony to underline the combination of challenging narrative demands required of asylum stories:

> To satisfy an asylum officer takes the same narrative sophistication it takes to please book critics. At once logical and judgmental of demeanour, both are on guard for manipulation and emotional trickery. Stick to the concrete, the five senses, they say. Sound natural, human, but also dazzle with your prose. Make me cry, but a whiff of sentimentality and you're done [...] Go ahead. Try it. It's not so hard, you penniless, traumatised fugitive from a ravaged village, just write a story worthy of *The New Yorker*.
> (*The Ungrateful Refugee* 243)

28 The irony of the final sentence underlines the contrast between the requirements imposed on asylum narratives and the testimony that can be reasonably expected of trauma survivors, whilst the persistent use of the imperative mode reflects the coercion through which such stories are extracted. Meanwhile, the reference to the iconic American magazine functions as a reminder of the Western standards that are indiscriminately applied to asylum stories of all cultural origins in adjudication contexts of the Global North. In Nayeri's representations of asylum adjudication, as well as in Okorie's short story, truth is relegated behind a series of interconnected preconceptions and requirements.

Narrative capital

29 Of course, writing "a story worthy of *The New Yorker*" also requires a significant amount of "narrative capital", to borrow the term coined by Ivor Goodson in his book *Developing Narrative Theory* (14). Goodson intended the term as a reference to Bourdieu's own triad of economic, social and cultural capital, to reflect how these intersecting forms of capital are involved in the construction of narrative. In Goodson's view, contemporary discourse of both the personal and political fields has taken a "narrative turn": in this context, it is a matter of pressing importance that "stories and storylines need to be understood, not just as personal constructions but as *expressions of particular historical and cultural opportunities*" (6, emphasis added). The "opportunities" that determine how a narrative is constructed can also determine the prejudice, or lack thereof, with which it is received. Dina Nayeri and Melatu Uche Okorie's literary representations demonstrate that

perceptions of truth are associated with the storytellers' reserves of narrative capital, thus disclosing how intersecting forms of privilege are involved in the credibility granted to an individual's story. [3]

30 For instance, the following transcript of an exchange between two asylum officers in the US provides rare evidence of the profound impact that class and education level can have on the likelihood of an asylum claim to be accepted:

> Asylum Officer 1: When I get somebody from China who I know is a PhD, I'm much more generous with them than I am with some guy who I may think is cooking in the back of some kitchen. And it's not because—it's not—that's not how I'm thinking either. But I'm thinking that oh, this person is very articulate. Their claim is very—
> Asylum Officer 2: Well of course, it makes it easier to understand it. (Qtd. in Holland 89)

31 Such disparities are further compounded by an unequal access to mediators such as lawyers. Understanding the intricacies of foreign legal systems without a lawyer requires a level of specialised knowledge available to very few. In *Who Gets Believed?*, Dina Nayeri underscores this point with a quote from US asylum attorney Ana Reyes, who claims that "the real issue [in asylum stories] isn't credibility versus non credibility. The real issue is whether you have an attorney. I'd say that the biggest predictor of whether you will get asylum is whether you have an attorney" (81). Nayeri adds that proving credibility in a court "isn't hard if you have a degree from Harvard Law, as Reyes does" (83), hinting at the further variation in degrees of narrative capital that exists amongst legal professionals themselves.

32 She also explores this issue through her depiction of Kaweh's experience of legal representation prior to his asylum interview, in *The Ungrateful Refugee*. Well-educated, informed, and confident in his knowledge and rights, Kaweh is able to turn down the "young solicitor, a trainee in immigration law" whom he first consults, when the latter states "he would be removed to Turkey, since he first claimed asylum there" (209). His assertive response illustrates his conviction: "'No,' he said, 'you have it wrong. I didn't claim asylum in Turkey. I did it through UNHCR. That makes a material difference.'

When had he learned this? He hardly knew; one of the many long nights of reading and obsessing" (209–210). After a second solicitor makes "the same error", Kaweh's roommate's brother arranges a meeting with a "London solicitor", which he "borrow[s] money" to attend (210); the reference to the UK capital is intended to evoke metropolitan prestige. This solicitor proves superior to the previous two and Kaweh's asylum claim is ultimately successful. Kaweh's effective legal representation is thus the product of a combination of privilege and chance, dependent upon knowledge, training, self-confidence, social networks and the ability to procure funds, in addition to sheer serendipity of circumstance. By including this story, Nayeri invites her readers to ponder upon the fate of those asylum seekers who do not benefit from such advantages and therefore upon the injustice that operates when it comes to the legal mediation of asylum stories.

33 Nayeri's fiction tends to focus on Persian characters and does not dwell on the disparity in experiences created as a result of racialisation; in Okorie's story "Under The Awning", however, this constitutes the central theme. Indeed, the short story can be read as an illustration of the way in which racial prejudice negatively impacts narrative capital. In the story that she shares with the group, Okorie's protagonist-narrator outlines a series of racist microaggressions that she has suffered: from finding that fellow passengers avoid sitting next to her on the bus (41), to being subject to racial slurs (42, 50), derogatory stereotypes about "Africans" (46) and racial fetishisation (48). Her story is branded unrealistic: the group's comments repeatedly criticise the protagonist's "paranoia" (52) and accuse her of "completely misread[ing]" events. One particularly violent comment goes so far as to suggest that her perceptions of racism are the fabricated result of her own "self-loathing and self-hatred" (53). In so doing, the members of the group demonstrate their own failure to understand a key message of the story: the nature of racism is such that its targets are made to feel constantly aware of their racialisation. It is precisely because of the narrator's race that her story is criticised by the group, since she is recounting experiences that they cannot relate to and subsequently deny.

34 In the end, the narrator internalises the participants' criticism and re-writes her story accordingly. The end of her re-drafted version

sees her attempt to appease her audience by explicitly articulating the possibility that the microaggressions were not intended maliciously:

> Your class-mates who asked their friends to mind their bags were not actually doing anything wrong; the bus driver who dropped you two stops away from your bus stop could have done so due to road works; the man in the supermarket who asked your mother for a BJ is just sick; and the children who called out "Blackie" at you whenever they saw you passing by could just be what they were, children. (54)

This rewrite is still insufficient to convince some of the participants. One comment asks her to "temper the racism", judging—ironically—that "there is so much bias, so much prejudice, that it almost swallows itself" (54). Okorie explained in a podcast that the story is intended to reflect the violence that accompanies discussions of racism, in which the dismissal of one's accounts of experiences of racism is a second "form of abuse"; to the point that "it's easier if a person with white skin talks about it" (Scholes). In "Under The Awning" she portrays a situation in which racialised people's stories are systematically disbelieved, no matter how much their author attempts to adapt them to please the demands of their (white) audience. When it comes to narrative capital, the short story suggests, the skill and training of the storyteller cannot counteract the limiting factor of racialisation. Both writers thus illustrate how injustice and prejudice can prevent truth from being heard in places of asylum storytelling.

Culture of disbelief

35 Finally, Dina Nayeri's representations of asylum interview procedures situate rejections of truth within what humanitarian workers and researchers working in the field of British asylum adjudication have termed "the culture of disbelief": an environment characterised by "inconsistent decision-making, insensitivity and bias" that works against asylum seekers (Anderson et al.). In her ethnographic study of the day-to-day workings of Immigration Officers in the UK Home Office, Olga Jubany outlines the impact of this culture on the work of asylum officers as follows:

> [Asylum officers'] roles are increasingly aimed at identifying threats and enforcing social control. Asylum seekers represent a menace to the state and society that officers must identify, be that a welfare cheat, asylum shopper, bogus refugee, criminal or terrorist. (5)

36 As part of her research, she was given the rare opportunity to attend the full six-week training program provided to those whose role it is to determine the validity of asylum claims made in the UK: she was struck by the way in which "officers are tacitly encouraged to reproduce a world that connects asylum and migration to threats and fears" (30). In other instances, the Home Office's incentivisation of its workers to delegitimise asylum stories is rather less tacit: this is notably the case for their controversial policy of awarding gift vouchers to officers who achieve a 70% or above refusal rate in asylum appeals (Taylor and Mason). Structural disbelief "is not an individual or exceptional process", Jubany insists, "but one that takes place within a socio-cultural, political and organisational context, in which a very specific subculture develops" (7).

37 Nayeri's literary representations demonstrate how this subculture pervasively impedes the recognition of true experiences. The Home Office itself regularly appears as an anthropomorphised figure in her writing. A ministerial department with a diverse and complex management structure supported by twenty-nine agencies and public bodies (UK government), the Home Office is personified in Nayeri's writing as a single, unified and villainous character. In *The Ungrateful Refugee*, the Home Office is afforded the capacity of speech when it ejects refugees for their humanitarianism: "people had been rejected for doing charity work out of boredom. 'You worked', the Home Office would say. 'You broke the rules'" (214). In *Who Gets Believed?*, the "Home Office" is represented as being capable of vision, when the latter functions to facilitate the expulsion of refugees: "the Home Office *zeroed in* on the doctor's clearly hyperbolic point about anaesthesia" (180, my emphasis). Nayeri employs the third person to suggest that the Home Office is a homogenised actor. Commenting on the decision made to deny asylum to KV on the basis that his torture wounds could have been self-inflicted, Nayeri writes:

> The cruelty and audacity of KV's rejection shook the humanitarian community. Activists and lawyers saw it as a chilling new low in disbelief culture, a warning that standards had shifted away from refuge toward barred gates. […] The Home Office was now openly teaching its gatekeepers bad-faith techniques, incentivising and training them to trap survivors in surreal logic games. If they offered a place to anyone, it was because they had lost. (263–264)

Here, the "Home Office" is explicitly represented as the origin of "disbelief culture": it is portrayed as a malevolent ruler, whose workers are pawns in the extension of its power, as demonstrated by the use of the possessive pronoun "its". Asylum adjudication is viewed as a "game", the rules of which the Home Office determines and the aim of which is to issue rejections; the odds are inevitably stacked in the game-creator's favour. The Home Office thus functions as a metonym for the culture of disbelief at large, in all of its harmful cynicism. Nonetheless, there is a subtle shift from singular to plural pronouns at the end of the quotation, as "it" becomes "they"; despite the homogenising force of violence symbolised by the Home Office, Nayeri reminds us that it is built up of a multitude of individual actors who each have a part to play.

38 The metaphor of asylum officers as "gatekeepers" in the previous quotation is repeated throughout Nayeri's work (e.g. *The Ungrateful Refugee* 66; *Who Gets Believed?* 124). At the end of *Who Gets Believed?* Nayeri confirms the intertextual association with Kafka's *The Trial* that the image was intended to evoke. [4] In particular, the term evokes a character in an embedded fable entitled "Before the Law" (Kafka 153–155), in which a man seeks entry to the law but is stopped by a gatekeeper: after spending his entire life waiting to be granted permission to enter, the man asks the gatekeeper before his death why it is that no one else has sought entry. The gatekeeper explains that the door was meant only for him and is now closing. Beyond its evident underlining of the destructive power of bureaucracy, the significance of the reference lies in Nayeri's interpretation of the role of the gatekeepers in Kafka's parable: "Kafka seems to say that we have some power: to reject authority, to look away, to refuse to play a part or even to twist the knife" (260). Nayeri's vision of asylum officers as Kafkaesque

gatekeepers, far from absolving them of responsibility, serves to highlight their role as active agents within the bureaucratic system.

39 Elsewhere in Nayeri's work, the term "asylum officer" is employed as a byword for cynicism. Writing from a refugee camp in Katsikas, Greece, Nayeri states in *The Ungrateful Refugee* that "it is widely understood here that, in becoming an asylum officer, you relinquish all imagination and wonder" (158). Becoming an asylum officer according to Nayeri means becoming a "cynical reader" (*The Ungrateful Refugee* 245) and a "dishonest listener", who "grabs the part [of a story] that helps their case, and ignores all else" (*Who Gets Believed?* 227). In so doing, she refuses to fall into the trap outlined by Olga Jubany, in which "most accounts [of the encounter between states and asylum seekers] underplay the roles played by those individuals and groups who embody state power, particularly at borders" (4) and instead emphasises the fact that "it is the immigration officers themselves who are the Charon of refuge, determining who passes to the next stage of the process and filtering out the majority" (Jubany 5).

40 Nonetheless, Nayeri does not do so without exploring the socio-cultural context in which such cynicism is engendered. If Olga Jubany laments "the paucity of research into immigration officers' worlds" (12), Nayeri's fictionalised account of an immigration officer's life and work in *Who Gets Believed?* contributes to rectifying this absence at least in the realm of the imaginary, and adds nuance to her own representations of the cynical gatekeepers to asylum. In the passage in question, Nayeri's narration invites us to imagine the asylum officer responsible for the handling of KV's asylum claim:

> I imagine it like this:
> Somewhere in London, a young woman graduates with a two-year degree. She casts about for jobs. It's rough out there, competing with university and masters graduates. She sees an ad for a Home Office caseworker. She can be part of something good. If she's precocious, she reads up on the Refugee Convention, studies the harrowing photos of overpacked dinghies on a black Aegean night. Maybe she thinks, *I'll save some of these wretched people*. (174)

Nayeri's imagined caseworker must navigate a challenging economic environment in which she struggles with a relative amount of disadvantage. She nonetheless demonstrates altruistic intent in the face of the representations of refugees that inform her imaginings of what her work will entail. She experiences trepidation when, on the first day of the job, she is met by a superior—"a senior caseworker"—who greets her with an intimidating "Welcome to the toughest job of your life" and instructs her to be distrustful: "Get ready to be lied to. A lot" (74). She undergoes training in which she is ingrained with the message that "her job is to root out inconsistency" (74).

41 Over time, the Home Office environment begins to impact both her well-being and the generosity with which she listens to asylum testimony:

> A ritual begins, a drumbeat of danger and despair that over weeks and months wears her down. The ritual changes her. How can so many people come out of the same country with the exact same injuries? How can so many people have crossed the same bridge, met the same smuggler, worn out their shoes on the same treacherous mountain? It seems impossible that she should meet twenty men a day, all dark, all with the same face, the same stature, branded with the same scar patterns, running from the same village. […]

> The young caseworker goes back to her office. She stares at the bottomless pile of nightmares on her desk. Later today, she will hear three new Sri Lankan cases, all identical to KV's—his captors back home have wounded so many brothers. None of this is special to this English woman; by now, the rituals have worn down her senses. The droning stories, one after the other. She is tired. A single rote response has crystallized. *What dramatics. Maybe he did it to himself*. (174–175)

Her newfound cynicism is represented as being intertwined with a mental fatigue that "changes her". The repetition of the verbal phrase "wears (her) down / worn down" rhythmically mirrors the exhausting cycle of routine she seems caught in. Besides, the alliteration of the plosive "D" in the description of the "drumbeat of danger and despair" of her working life functions as an aural manifestation of such repeated hardship. She appears to be impacted by the trauma—or

"bottomless pile of nightmares"—that she encounters daily, and as a result, "she is tired", the short sentence further emphasising the limited capacities that result from exhaustion. The reminder of her "English" nationality underlines the cultural distance between her and the "Sri Lankan cases" she is working on, that involves grappling with subject matter outside the realm of her lived experience. In her tiredness, she accepts the simplest solution to the string of rhetorical questions that plague her, the one that has been engrained in her like a "rote response"; the stories that she is hearing are lies, "dramatics". By the end of the passage, to KV's detriment, the optimistic graduate has become a weary cynic:

> Then KV enters her interview room carrying photos of his mutilated back that looks like every other mutilated back, and medical reports that read like all the others, from the same NGO doctors. The caseworker sighs: another Tamil Tiger, limping and scared. (175)

42 Nayeri's imagined caseworker is not innocent of becoming a Kafkaesque gatekeeper. The latter's dismissive sigh in the face of a suffering individual is a gesture of hostility that only she is seems responsible for—nor is she inherently mistrustful of asylum seekers. Rather, Dina Nayeri depicts asylum officers as the result of their political and socio-cultural environment. They end up engaging in the "culture of disbelief", in which hostile cynicism is bred, fostered and reproduced until it prevents recognition of truth.

Conclusion: a place for truth in fiction

43 Dina Nayeri's multifaceted portrayal of an asylum caseworker is testament to the power of fiction to afford multiple perspectives; or, to once again borrow Adrienne Rich's phrasing, to tease out "the tiny multiple threads unseen in the overall pattern" (187). As demonstrated by Dina Nayeri and Melatu Uche Okorie's representations of the fraught experiences of asylum storytelling, fiction is a place in which complex phenomena can be gently yet powerfully untangled, thus giving truth an important place. Their representations illustrate the hostility of asylum interviews, in which asylum seekers' stories are

subject to harmful, preconceived criteria and culturally-ingrained disbelief. It is all the more significant that fiction is the discursive space used to denounce such hostility. If, as Coleridge famously described, fiction requires a "willing suspension of disbelief" from its audience (208), thus it might appear as an antidote to the "culture of disbelief" surrounding asylum interviews, a time and place where, in Nayeri's words: "there are no limits on the truth. There is no risk to believing" ("Throwback").

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NOTES

1 This definition is enshrined in the 1951 Geneva Convention of the then newly-founded United Nations. It qualifies exclusively as a refugee: "someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion" (UNHCR). Its scope is thus limited to those able to convincingly demonstrate targeted persecution in their country of origin, and does not include those who flee for other reasons such as, for example,

poverty or environmental destruction. It also necessarily excludes asylum seekers.

2 For a broad introduction to Nayeri's background and work, including the novels not studied in this paper, see the interview published in this journal in 2019 (Small).

3 Goodson's term carries a second, therapeutic, meaning, pertaining to the capacity of an individual to imagine promising narrative trajectories within their own lives. For the purpose of these analyses, my use of the term here excludes this element.

4 *Who Gets Believed?* is indeed scattered with references to *The Trial*, such as the inclusion of the section title "The Rule of the World"—a reference to a quote from *The Trial*'s protagonist K—and indeed the repeated choice to refer to KV as "K".

ABSTRACTS

English

Across the global north, asylum interviews are incidents of coerced storytelling in which asylum seekers must narrate their flight from their country of origin to representatives of their host country, in the hope of being granted refugee status. Whilst media and political discourses often imply that truth within asylum storytelling is the determining factor in shaping the outcome of an asylum claim, socio-scientific research into asylum adjudication processes in the US, UK, France and Ireland reveal that asylum seekers' stories are instead subject to a series of hostile and prejudiced credibility criteria within a systemic "culture of disbelief". This article examines the place of truth in asylum storytelling in a comparative approach that draws socio-scientific research together with the literary portrayals of asylum interviews by authors Dina Nayeri and Melatu Uche Okorie. These works of refugee literature emerge as alternative forms of asylum storytelling that denounce the injustices of asylum adjudication all the while creating a place for truth within fiction.

Français

Dans l'ensemble des pays du Nord global, les récits sont au cœur des entretiens d'asile, pendant lesquels les demandeurs d'asile doivent raconter leur fuite de leur pays d'origine aux représentants de leur pays d'accueil, dans l'espoir d'obtenir le statut de réfugié. Alors que les discours politiques et médiatiques laissent souvent entendre que la vérité au sein du récit raconté constitue le facteur déterminant de l'issue des demandes d'asile, les recherches socio-scientifiques sur les processus d'arbitrage des demandes d'asile aux États-Unis, au Royaume-Uni, en France et en Irlande révèlent

que les récits des demandeurs d'asile sont au contraire soumis à une série de critères de crédibilité hostiles et biaisés dans le cadre d'une « culture de l'incrédulité » systémique. Cet article examine la place de la vérité dans les récits de demande d'asile, à travers une approche comparative qui met en relation les recherches socio-scientifiques et les représentations littéraires des entretiens d'asile par les auteures Dina Nayeri et Melatu Uche Okorie. Ces œuvres de littérature des réfugiés — « refugee literature » — émergent comme des formes alternatives des récits d'asile qui dénoncent les injustices systématiques tout en créant un lieu où la vérité peut trouver sa place, au sein même de la fiction.

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Mots-clés
demande d'asile, entretien d'asile, tribunaux d'asile, culture de l'incrédulité, littérature des réfugié·e·s, Nayeri (Dina), Okorie (Melatu Uche)

Keywords
asylum seeking, asylum adjudication, asylum interviews, culture of disbelief, Home Office, refugee literature, Nayeri (Dina), Okorie (Melatu Uche)

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