Activist Rewritings: Reframing the Refugee Experience through Collaboration[1]

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Abstract: This article shows how collaboration reshapes literary processes of retelling and reads activist rewritings of refugee stories against the backdrop of the frame tale, which constitutes one of the main genres for narrating someone else's story in literary history. Focusing on Dina Nayeri's *The Ungrateful Refugee*, Marie Cosnay's *Des îles*, and Matthieu Aikins's *The Naked Don't Fear the Water*, I argue that collaboration redefines the vertical relationship and spatiotemporal division that characterize the dynamics between storyteller and protagonist, between frame narrative and inner story in literary traditions of retelling. However, by engaging with the paradoxes of (in)visibility in processes of translation, the article also points to the asymmetries that emerge when Aikins, Cosnay, and Nayeri, take on more agency in their role as activist retellers and translators, unveiling the reverberations that the latent structures of the frame tale have in texts that, at first sight, do not classify as such. The source of this tension, I contend, is a reconfigured relationship between literature and politics that challenges the idea that writing, in and of itself, is already a humanizing act that can be detached from political action.

Keywords: collaboration, refugee writing, frame tale, retelling

CLC: I1 **Document Code:** A **Article ID:** 2096-4374(2025)01-0120-13

DOI: 10.53397/hunnu.jflc.202501012

Introduction: Framing Refuge

Refugee Tales, the literary and activist project founded in 2014 by Anna Pincus and David Herd, has become a paradigmatic example of how collaborative writing is able to amplify the voices and experiences of migrants seeking refuge in Europe. The five volumes published by Comma Press gather short stories written by established authors based on their exchanges with asylum seekers, refugees, and professionals who have first-hand experience with the detention system

in the UK. Against Britain's hostile environment policy, punitive immigration enforcement, and bureaucratic asylum procedures, the initiative aims to create a hospitality culture based on listening and storytelling. The tales emerging from these encounters are modeled on Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and shared during the solidarity walks and public readings that take place each year along the Pilgrim's Way, counterpoising the immobility of refugees with the mobility of the former pilgrims and contemporary walkers. Apart from transferring the trope of pilgrimage to a contemporary setting, the stories also reproduce the structure that is at the core of *The Canterbury Tales* and other canonical frame narratives in the European literary tradition, such as Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*: one in which the framing narrative is "composed primarily for the purpose of presenting other narratives" and "depicts a series of oral storytelling events in which one or more characters in the frame tale are also narrators of the interpolated tales" (Irwin 28). On a paratextual level, all stories in *Refugee Tales* make this narrative situation explicit through "the subtitle 'as told to,' which follows the standardized title of Chaucerian pattern ('The Migrant's Tale,' 'The Interpreter's Tale,' 'The Barrister's Tale,' 'The Embroiderer's Tale,' 'The Activist's Tale' etc.) and precedes the respective author's name" (Mayer et al. 9). While the names of the authors are visible and recognizable to the reader due to their established status in the literary field, the tellers often remain anonymous as a result of their vulnerable legal status and for protection reasons.

This imbalance inevitably leads to a tension between the frame and the story, the writer and the refugee, the written text and the oral tale, in which the power of citizenship, linguistic fluency, and the script determine the conditions in which refugee stories are told, mediated, and heard. On a textual level, the stories in *Refugee Tales* compensate for this asymmetry through two overlapping strategies. While some stories veil the presence of the reteller and put instead the voice of the refugee center stage by using a first-person narration or focalizing on the experience of the refugee, other texts challenge the gap between frame and story by highlighting the links between both subjects in the outer and inner story and the reciprocity of the exchange. Ali Smith's "The Detainee's Tale," for instance, describes the actual encounter preceding the narration and uses aesthetic devices such as the second-person narrative to remind the reader of the process of mediation and translation to which the refugee tales are subject. In contrast with the historical, canonical frame tales, where the relationship between the storyteller and the protagonist of the story tends to be fictional and arbitrary and the narrator often tells a tale set in another time and place, in *Refugee Tales* the act of retelling is preceded by interpersonal interaction between both subjects. Collaboration not only revises the linear and vertical relationship between frame and story, it also transforms the fictional nature of frame tales to bring them closer to the genre of life writing, illustrating how collaboration inflects literary history and how new writing practices reshape literary conventions.

This article identifies a new form of collaborative retelling that, in line with the *Refugee Tales*, breaks away from the division between the frame tale and inner story that characterizes the discourse of storytelling in literary history, typically associated with the genre of the frame narrative. I argue that the frame tale's traditional structure, built on the spatiotemporal separation between the narrative subjects of the inner and outer stories, implicitly highlights fixed distinctions between us and them on a societal level that *Refugee Tales* and other related texts seek to overcome. Redirecting the history and meanings of the genre to reconceive storytelling as a communal endeavor, this new set of texts, which I call activist rewriting, redefines the role of the author as a political agent that actively shapes the life and stories of the (refugee) figures appearing in the inner tale, emphasizing the commonalities and shared space between citizens and refugees,

or between the framing and inner story, so that the two structures become increasingly blurred.

If in *Refugee Tales* the relationship between the narrator of the frame narrative (the author) and the teller of the story (the refugee) remains limited in time and space due to the constraints of the detention regime, the three texts I have selected for my analysis further undermine this distance. In *The Ungrateful Refugee*, published in 2019 by Canongate, the Iranian-American novelist Dina Nayeri interweaves her own memories and experiences as a refugee child fleeing from Iran to the US with the stories of other refugees she meets as an adult. By emphasizing the similarities across time and space, the retelling of other stories becomes a form of self-narration that blurs intersubjective and spatiotemporal boundaries. While Nayeri's own refugee background makes it easier to cut across the categories of inner and outer story, insider and outsider, Marie Cosnay's *Des îles: Lesbos 2020–Canaries 2021* and Matthieu Aikin's *The Naked Don't Fear the Water* rely on cross-cultural solidarity and reciprocity to renegotiate the relationship between author and refugee, the frame narrative and story within the story, yet without fully erasing the distance and power hierarchies that characterize this encounter. Cosnay's first volume of the trilogy *Des îles*, published by the independent publishing house Éditions de l'Ogre, focuses on two key entry points for migrants seeking refuge in Europe—Lesbos (Greece) and the Canary Islands (Spain). Blending personal narrative, reportage, and political reflection on the 2015 refugee reception crisis, this hybrid text documents the struggles of the migrants that Cosnay assists as an activist and volunteer both in refugee camps and in Bayonne, where she lives. Cosnay, who is a translator of ancient texts, most notably of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, explores how questions of exile and migration, which have shaped literary history since its beginnings, transform the cultural and social geographies of the Mediterranean into phantasmagoric spaces haunted by death and disappearance. Similarly to Cosnay, Aikins's nonfiction account *The Naked Don't Fear the Water*, published in 2022 by Fitzcarraldo Editions, blends immersive reporting with personal reflection. In order to give testimony to the journey of his friend Omar, who migrates from Afghanistan to Europe, Aikins goes underground on the refugee trail, showing the legal impediments and precarious condition of those who do not have the right to travel across borders. The act of retelling is no longer centered around a distant other, confined in the inner tale, but is a collaborative process that challenges strict distinctions between self and other, inside and outside.

Although the genre of activist rewriting has gained significant prominence since the 2015 refugee reception crisis and can be located across various linguistic and cultural traditions, it remains largely unexplored. This is astonishing given its profound implications for literary theory and translation studies. Activist rewritings challenge traditional conceptions of the author as a solitary genius, which are, in turn, intrinsically linked to notions of aesthetic autonomy. Similarly to the authoritative role of the author as the owner and inventor of an original, the figure of the storyteller typically "commands attention and exudes a form of authority. Although the stories are not his own, he nonetheless temporarily acquires and exudes authority through the performance or telling of his story" (Dragas 25). In Aikins's, Nayeri's, and Cosnay's texts, the authority of the overlapping figures of the author and the storyteller is contested through collaboration and shared with the voices of the refugees. By presenting the author as an activist and a re-/co-writer of the refugee condition, activist rewriting expands the range and social function of authorship to include collective causes and multiple voices, questioning the idea that literature and politics constitute two separate domains. Despite giving up part of their authority, the authors-retellers are not passive scribes but active participants in shaping and mediating the refugee story and

political advocates who campaign for the rights of refugees. In *The Ungrateful Refugee*, *The Naked Don't Fear the Water*, and *Des îles*, the authors-storytellers bridge the political and cultural domains and immerse themselves in sustained ways in the social conditions that characterize the refugee experience: Nayeri volunteers for various refugee organizations in refugee camps and at asylum centers in Greece, the UK, and the Netherlands; Aikins (not unproblematically) assumes the identity of a refugee, enduring the hardships of the journey and the sordid living conditions at the Moria refugee camp; Cosnay helps migrants to set foot in Europe. In taking part in the lives of refugees, the process of collaboration, which goes beyond a single interaction and is maintained over a considerable period of time, becomes part and content of the literary work. Storytelling is thus not a distant act of narrating, but a lived experience that brings the retellers much closer to those whose stories they mediate. This proximity between product and process transforms the relationship between text and context, as it redefines literature as a social practice and puts the literary medium at the center of political debates around borders and national identity.

Collaboration also recasts the ways we think about translation, highlighting the importance of this practice in contemporary literary production. Activist rewriting can be understood as a form of translation that situates the genre at the crossroads of textual production and reproduction. Although original writing and translation are traditionally perceived as distinct activities, overlapping only in the figure of the self-translator, in activist rewriting, production and circulation are mutually implicated processes of co-creation through which the refugee experience is entextualized and relocalized. To use Rebecca Walkowitz's words, this is a "born translated" genre (3). The authors are also translators, not only because they (re)write refugee stories with a specific (often Western) readership in mind, but also because they typically negotiate linguistic differences. By straddling both creation and translation and writing for the rights of refugees, Cosnay, Nayeri, and Aikins question traditional understandings of translation as a secondary and derivative activity. Activist rewriting, as a form of retelling and translation, "is not just simply an act of faithful reproduction but, rather, a deliberate and conscious act of selection, assemblage, structuration, and fabrication" through which the translator advocates in favor of human rights and against national border regimes (Gentzler and Tymoczko xxi). The creative and political agency of the translator has often been associated with notions of visibility, especially in the influential work of Lawrence Venuti, who argues that foreignizing translation constitutes a "highly desirable" strategy for translators to claim their visibility and resist against "ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism" (20). Domestication, by contrast, puts the translator in a submissive position as it "effaces the work of translation, it contributes to the cultural marginality and economic exploitation that English-language translators have long suffered, their status as seldom recognized," while adding to the "complacency in Anglo-American relations to others, a complacency that can be described […] as imperialistic abroad and xenophobic at home" (17). Venuti's ethical approach to visibility resonates with the moral imperative in activist rewritings to amplify the voices and rights of refugees through the active and engaged role of the retellers/authors/translators/activists, who are no longer discreet, distant observers of a foreign story but political allies in favor of human rights or (underground) refugees themselves.

However, Venuti's normative stance towards visibility and dichotomic view of power relations obscures situations in which invisibility can function as a tool of resistance and protection against state surveillance or visibility might entail a certain degree of domination and appropriation. In his piece "Visibilities of Translation – Visibilities of Translators," Klaus Kaindl questions a

"static or definitive relationship between power, visibility, and invisibility on the one hand, and specific methods of translation on the other" (38). Along the same lines, Jieun Kiaer, Jennifer Guest, and Xiaofan Amy Li ask: "How and when is something made visible through translation, perhaps at the cost of something else? (In)Visible to whom and made (in)visible by whom, for what purposes and in what contexts?" (2). Similarly, Peter J. Freeth points out the limitations of the predominantly Anglophone focus in Venuti's work, which does not encompass the effects of translation in other sociopolitical realities—activism being one of them. Building on recent debates in Translation Studies that challenge unidimensional approaches to (in)visibility and translation, this article examines the contradictions of activist rewritings in their attempt to reframe the refugee experience by focusing on the invisibilities, asymmetries, and disparities that might emerge when Aikins, Cosnay, and Nayeri take on more visibility and agency in their role as activist retellers and translators. The first part of the article analyzes the intersubjective relationships that are established between author and refugee as a result of the collaborative process and the blurred distinctions between framing and inner story, while the following section examines how this narrative restructuring transforms the representation of spatiotemporal dynamics. By drawing on translation theory and notions of collaboration to study discourses of storytelling, this article not only bridges the gap between the fields of literary and translation studies; it also updates the rather dominant focus on canonical and historical texts in literary criticism of the frame narrative.

Relational Writing

As explained before, an important innovative element of activist rewritings vis-à-vis the traditional frame tale, which is the genre that is typically associated with the discourse of storytelling and the act of remediation, is the more collaborative and horizontal relationship that the narrators of the framing story establish with the tellers of the inner tale, to the extent that these two narrative structures become undistinguishable from one another. In *The Ungrateful Refugee*, the author and the protagonists of the retellings share the same identity as refugees. Nayeri juxtaposes her own self-narration, written in the first-person and in the past tense, with chapters in which she recounts the stories of other refugees and the reasons for their flight. As the account unfolds, the two storylines become increasingly blurred. Ashwiny O. Kistnareddy writes that "Nayeri does not simplify the reading journey, instead opting to pull the reader into multiple parallel stories" that are interrupted and interspersed by other tales, often becoming intertwined with her own story (308). While the first part of the book ("The Escape") presents stories of refugees who seem to have no personal ties with the author, the rest of the narrative shows how Nayeri met the protagonists (through her volunteering in refugee camps, through other advocates and activists for human rights). Even in the case of Kambiz, an Iranian asylum seeker residing in the Netherlands who set himself on fire and whose story circulated in the news, but whom Nayeri never met in person, the author interviews people who knew him and reconstructs what she was doing on the day of his death, when she was living in Amsterdam, evoking the proximity between their paths, although they never crossed.

The reciprocity of these interactions, alongside the fact that the retold stories entail lived experiences, require an ethical commitment that all three authors make explicit in the paratexts. In the author's note preceding the narration, Nayeri asserts that she has "only written about events that were carefully recounted" to her in interviews and that the retelling is based on consent (ix).

Even though she collected "dozens of stories," (13), the book focuses only on a few—those cases of people who, at first sight, appear less deserving of compassion, who seem less "real" refugees (8): "I'm interested in doubt, in the feared 'swarms.' These are stories of uprooting and transformation without guarantees" (14). As the title indicates, Nayeri aims to debunk depictions of refugees as passive victims, grateful for Western help and compassion and fleeing from extreme poverty—inaccurate retellings that devoid refugees of their agency and distort their lived experience, as is the case for the abridged, simplified version that many Americans seem to have of her own story: "Once in an Oklahoma church, a woman said, 'Well, I sure do get it. You came for a better life.' I thought I'd pass out—a better life? In Isfahan, we had yellow spray roses, a pool" (7). Against such reductive narratives, the author offers an alternative rewriting of the refugee experience, one that, in contrast with the asylum procedures, does not aim at verifying the identity of the asylum seekers, corroborating the truth, or distinguishing refugees from economic migrants. As a writer and professional storyteller, Nayeri is well aware that any reconstruction of one's own past and someone else's life will inevitably entail a degree of fictionality:

> I started writing "auto-fiction," staying close to stories I had lived, but used the tools of fiction, combining characters, collapsing time, inserting invented images. It was, I believe, the purest, most powerful way to tell honest stories. Auto-fiction removes any impediment to vulnerability, so that the writer can focus on creating a fresh, compelling voice and a moving narrative. (241)

By blending truth and fiction, personal memories and other stories, the author breaks the autobiographical pact between the reader and the author that characterizes the memoir (Lejeune), while creating a liminal space where trust can cautiously form. The reader is asked to let go of expectations of authenticity, to stop behaving like a caseworker or migration officer in search of a well-founded, true story: "Writers and refugees often find themselves imagining their way to the truth. What choice is there? A reader, like an interviewer, wants specific itches scratched" (Nayeri 14). This does not mean to fall into complete distrust, but rather to accept a new kind of truth transformed by the frailty of trauma and displacement, in other words: to recognize the humanity, dignity, and rights of those on the move, even if their claims for asylum will not succeed.

Similarly to Nayeri, many of the stories that Cosnay retells in *Des îles* belong to economic migrants who often fall outside the legal definition of a refugee. But Cosnay does not adhere to legal and political classifications, which she deems arbitrary and fictitious, as she makes clear in the prologue that frames the retellings:

> La politique d'immigration européenne créait des lieux de fiction: Dublin III, le règlement, enfermait les gens dans ces pays qu'après 2008 on s'etait pris à appeler les PIGS. Il s'agissait des premiers pays d'entrée en Europe, ceux du Sud.
> Plus encore que les premiers pays d'entrée, les îles, Lampedusa, les îles grecques, les Canaries, devenaient des prisons. Les déserts et les mers, des cimetières. (13)
> (European immigration policy created fictional spaces: Dublin III, the regulation, locks up people in the countries that, after 2008, came to be called the PIGS. These were the primary countries of entry into Europe, the ones in the South.
> More than the first countries of entry, the islands, Lampedusa, the Greek islands, the Canaries, became prisons. The deserts and the seas, cemeteries.)[2]

Even though contemporary border regimes turn the Mediterranean islands into phantasmagoric landscapes, these geographies have very real effects on migrants and become part of Cosnay's own lived experience too. As an activist, the writer is "totally immersed in the geographic or social space" that the migrants inhabit (Viart 575): refugee camps, borders, cafés, and other undefined and temporary locations. Apart from sharing the same physical and symbolic space, the horizontal relationship between the author and the refugees is established through anonymity and non-identity. By keeping her own voice and story at the background but without fully erasing them, Cosnay refrains from disclosing her personal history, professional background, or private life. Rather than focusing on herself, she places the spotlight on the migrants she encounters in transit, telling their stories in the third-person or reproducing their dialogues. Although the narrative is built around their stories, the refugees remain as anonymous and undefined as the narrator herself: following the same ethical principle of anonymization as Nayeri, the author mentions the protagonists by their first name exclusively, modifies details of their identity so that they are not immediately recognizable, and only discloses the stories of those people who gave her permission to be included in the book. In order to avoid an extractivist approach to literary (re)writing, Cosnay writes about migrants whom she actively helped, turning storytelling into a token of solidarity and challenging the idea that writing, in and of itself, is already a humanizing act that can be detached from political action:

> Hormis quelques entretiens en bonne et due forme (où je pose des questions et prends des notes), je n'ai écrit, à propos de quelqu'un, que dans les cas où je tentais de l'accompagner dans les méandres du dédale administratif qui était le sien à ce moment-là. […] Je ne fais pas de cette méthode une règle éthique générale, mais c'est ce qui m'a permis de ne pas me sentir en dette, ou prédatrice d'histoires. (15)
> (Except for a few formal interviews [where I asked questions and took notes], I only wrote about someone if I was trying to accompany them through the twists and turns of the administrative maze they were navigating at that moment. […] I do not make this method a general ethical rule, but it is what allowed me not to feel indebted or like a predator of stories.)

The undefined, elusive identity of the refugees in *Des îles* stems not only from ethical considerations, but is also a deliberate stylistic choice. Cosnay deploys strategies similar to Nayeri's to dislocate the reader and reproduce the tortuous journeys of refugees, jumping constantly between narratives and settings, highlighting the simultaneity of events, the criss-crossing of paths, and promoting a global view of the world. The first chapter, for instance, entitled "La Métamorphose," features the stories of Moïse, Honoré, Thierno, Anastasia, Atikoula, Adama, and Fatou and is located "in Bayonne, in a café, on the Behobia bridge, in Artea, Bizkaia, in Bayonne, along the Adour river, and from there: in Guinea, in Mauritania, in the Western Sahara, in Tanger, in Nador, but also in Afghanistan, in Germany, in Turkey. And finally, in Toulouse" ("À Bayonne, dans un café, sur le pont de Behobia, à Artea, en Biscaye, à Bayonne, sur les bords de l'Adour, et de là: en Guinée, en Mauritanie, au Sahrara occidental, à Tanger, à Nador, mais aussi en Afghanistan, en Allemagne, en Turquie. Et enfin, à Toulouse"; 19). Like in *The Ungrateful Refugee*, many stories remain open-ended, engulfed in "the immense mass grave into which stories and families fell. The dead, and those who will forever wait for them" ("l'immense fosse commune où tombaient les histories, les familles. Les morts, et celles et ceux qui les attendront toujours"; 14). This lack of closure, which

points to the threshold between life and death and oscillates between hope and despair, is visible in the story of Makoko, Ahmed's younger sister who disappears on her journey from Morocco to Spain. Cosnay assists Ahmed in the search for Makoko and contacts some colleagues from the Red Cross in Las Palmas without success: Makoko might be dead, but it is also equally possible that, once in Spain, she wishes to remain invisible and protect her newly gained independence as a woman no longer subject to the gender roles and expectations from her family and home country. Acting as a translator that mediates between the migrants and Western institutions (and the reader), Cosnay is constantly confronted with the unspoken and the imponderable. Populated by the ghostly figures of the disappeared migrants, *Des îles* showcases the limits of storytelling as a means to access the truth.

This contradiction between narration and silence is also at the core of Matthieu Aikins's *The Naked Don't Fear the Water*: in order to pass as a refugee and be able to retell Omar's journey to Europe, Aikins must keep his true identity as a Canadian journalist secret, creating an illusive equivalence with the other refugees that he encounters on the road. This cultural mimicry brings him close to the experience of a refugee, but at the same time produces a form of slippage that points to the inscrutability of the other that is also at the heart of Cosnay's writing. Like Nayeri and Cosnay, Aikins writes from an activist point of view and refuses any hierarchical distinctions between human beings, hoping to bridge cultural and legal differences through a mutual "encounter as humans" (32). Along these lines, his relationship with Omar is presented as a horizontal one, rooted in old friendship, as outlined in the first chapters that frame the retelling of the journey. The two friends met during Aikins's "first magazine story in Afghanistan, more than six and a half years earlier" (26), when Omar was working as an interpreter for journalists and international organizations. This friendship becomes evident in the intimate details that Aikins, who is also the first-person narrator, reveals about Omar, describing him, for instance, as "enslaved by desire" (46) and building "relationships by the minute" (47) and hence using an over-familiar tone that stands perhaps in contrast with the little information that the reader has about Aikins's private life.

Friendship, solidarity, and mutual support are also at the core of the informal agreement that the author reaches with Omar in order to get first-hand insights into the refugee experience: "If Omar was going to travel that way, then I wanted to go with him and write about it. […] This way, I could see the refugee underground from the inside. And I wouldn't have to leave my friend behind. We'd be helping each other. And I would pay for everything" (19). The agreement, however, retains a transactional element, which, added to the different motivations behind Aikins's and Omar's journey, becomes more charged as the story unfolds, and has an impact on the ethical considerations guiding the piece. Although Aikins uses pseudonyms to refer to other refugees he encounters, as he explains in the final "Note on Source and Methods," it is unclear to what extent these other stories are shared with consent, especially taking into account that, because he was travelling underground, he could not reveal his identity as a journalist for the sake of the story and his own safety.

Authors and Refugees

As Aikins's account illustrates, the horizontality of the relationship that guides the collaboration in framing does not always hold in practice, resulting in an implicit separation between the author and the refugee that hints back at the canonical format and origins of the genre, built upon

the hierarchical distinction between frame tale and inner story, detached narrator and distant protagonist. The different positionalities occupied by the author and the refugee also mark Nayeri's and Cosnay's rewritings. Nayeri's memoir is characterized by the gap between the past and the present, or the voice of the experiencing and the narrating I (a temporal difference that is at the core of the memoir as a genre): Nayeri is no longer a refugee but has become an American citizen. The author does not hide the painful process of assimilation and acculturation behind this privileged and legally secure status, which led her to starve herself to success and erase all traces of cultural and linguistic difference until she made it to Princeton. While writing enables her to reconcile herself with the past, the story makes also clear that a return to the previous self is not possible. This distance from the past inevitably shows when, as a volunteer in the Greek refugee camps, she is perceived as an outsider rather than a (former) refugee: "There is absolutely no fixing this. My every reaction is American, urban, obsessive-compulsive. This is who I am" (147). Her own privilege becomes especially painful when she receives pleas for help to which she cannot respond, for instance when a family asks her to take their son with her to England and to "drop him off in a camp in England" in case she does not want him (180). Even when faced with more reasonable requests, the affective relations remain embedded in transactional processes: "'Is there something you can do to speed things?' Majid asks. He means the asylum claim. I don't know what to say—his mobile videos are scenes from a nightmare and I feel cruel and silly for having revealed my own asylum story, my impossible passport" (169). Nayeri's difference is also noticeable when she interacts with other Iranians in the US, with whom she no longer shares the same cultural and linguistic ease that, as a child, connected her to her homeland: "My accent in Farsi had deteriorated so much that I was a curiosity: a foreigner who spoke their mother tongue" (331). The distance between the past and the present is not only visible on a personal level, it also has a political and collective dimension, as border regimes and asylum systems have become more restrictive and societies less welcoming towards refugees: "Now, thirty years have passed; I have so much to say. The world no longer speaks of refugees as it did in my time. The talk has grown hostile, even unhinged, and I have a hard time spotting, amid the angry hordes, the kind souls we knew" (13).

In *The Naked Don't Fear the Water*, the tension between Aikins and Omar arises less from generational or temporal disparities but has to do with the different material conditions behind voluntary and forced forms of migration. For Omar, fleeing means leaving everything behind, including Laila, with whom he is very much in love, and putting his life at greatest risk, since he does not have the same institutional and material resources that Aikins has as a Canadian citizen. For the author, it is mainly his story that is at stake. He therefore grows irritably impatient when Omar keeps postponing their departure, describing the time he waits for him as a "waste," afraid of going back to New York "empty-handed" (87). Once on the road, he keeps putting pressure on Omar to carry on with the journey despite his friend's hesitation: "I tried to think of what I could say to rally Omar. He'd once been up for almost anything, but as the years went on, I found him less eager to take risks on our assignments together" (117). Although he later acknowledges that he "was treating this trip like another assignment where [he] was in charge" (125), this dynamic remains present throughout the narrative. Faced with the experience of detention and immobility at the Greek refugee camp of Moria, Aikins is confident that they will find a "way off," a promise that sounds empty in Omar's ears: "He smiled without saying anything. We both knew I could make a phone call to get my passport back and leave, any time I wanted" (245). When they finally escape Moria and find refuge in City Plaza, a former hotel in Athens turned into a self-organized squat for refugees, Aikins

feels instantly at home, while his friend becomes increasingly despaired and depressed due to his multiple failed attempts to leave Greece: "Each time I came in and saw Omar lying there, his face in Facebook, I felt a prick of annoyance. What kind of protagonist was he?" (343). Aikins's and Omar's respective roles as author and protagonist reflect the different degrees of agency behind their mobility. If Omar's trajectory is tied to bureaucratic and legal regimes that obstruct his freedom and mobility, Aikins, as a Western citizen, is free to become the author of his own story.

Cosnay's *Des îles* also risks reproducing an image of refugees as passive figures. The fragmented voices and recurrent tropes of death, absence, and disappearance end up dissolving the singularity of each individual story into an undistinguishable mass of collective accounts, in which each tale resembles the other:

> Il y avait un fil (fragile), il liait entre elles les histories, d'un pays à un autre. Des voyages obstinés, la mort déjà venue à laquelle s'arracher, le monde sous les pieds, des dialogues, des récits, des familles étranges, éclatées, des convivialités réciproquement intéressées, des tragédies (quelqu'un cherche, des années après, une soeur ou un frère, un fils). Des îles. Des forteresses. (21)
> (There was a thread [fragile], it linked the stories together, from one country to another. Stubborn journeys, death already come to be torn away from it, the world beneath one's feet, dialogues, stories, estranged families, broken, mutual, self-interested convivialities, tragedies [someone searching, years later, for a sister or a brother, a son]. Islands. Fortresses.)

Against this backdrop, the only voice that persists and stands out is that of the author. Her own invisibility as a character in the story, which compensates for her active role as a translator, writer, and mediator, does not prevent her from invisibilizing others. Even though in activist rewritings the retellers/authors/translators/activists are no longer discreet, distant observers of a foreign story but political allies in favor of human rights themselves, their visibility and active involvement in the story frame translation and storytelling as an intersubjective process but do not fully reverse the hierarchical divisions between outsider or insider and dismantle notions of voice and the power to narrate.

Spatiotemporal Divisions between Frames and Stories

The ambivalent relationship between authors and refugees also applies to the representation of space and time in the texts. While activist rewriting completely dismantles the vertical relationship between inner and outer story, so that the structure of the frame tale is no longer recognizable in the act of storytelling, the genre still retains a subtle division in terms of the spaces that the author and the refugee, the reteller and the teller, occupy, pointing back to the spatiotemporal distance that, broadly speaking, characterizes the canonical discourse of storytelling. This division becomes most apparent in Aikins's *The Naked Don't Fear the Water*. Even though the author's goal is to help Omar enter Europe and to undo the political and symbolic barriers between the West and the rest, the different routes that Aikins and Omar end up taking to reach Greece illustrate the distance between the two figures. The first chapters that precede—or frame—the author's joint journey with Omar reconstruct Aikins's relationship with Afghanistan, a country that he discovered during

his travels after graduating from college. With his Canadian passport, he is allowed to cross borders and move freely, a privilege that is one-sided and impinges on the sense of reciprocity that guides his journey with Omar, as the actual story will make clear. Although in Turkey his identity as a Canadian journalist becomes an impediment for legal entry and he has to reach the country illegally through Bulgaria to meet with Omar, the conditions under which they both travel are not comparable. Telling himself that he is "going on a holiday" (135), the author sleeps comfortably in a hotel and takes a taxi to the border zone before beginning his adventure, wondering how he would come across: "A lost tourist? A Bulgarian vigilante? A smuggler going to pick up his clients by the river?" (142). While none of these identities correspond with the precarious status of a refugee, Aikins goes the extra mile to start the journey on equal terms with Omar, depositing his second passport and valuables at a friend's in Italy and embarking on a boat. However, when they finally reach Greece and the only way to escape the refugee camp of Moria is to use forged papers, Aikins recedes: "I'd already decided that using forged papers was a legal line I shouldn't cross. Our plan was that I would call a friend of mine who would bring me my own passport, the unburned one I'd left back in Trieste, so that I could use it to leave the island. Once Omar made it to Athens, I'd follow as Matthieu, and then we could go back underground together" (260). Along similar lines, once the two friends reunite in Athens and Omar tries to fly to another European destination by using his fake papers, Aikins's and Omar's paths take different directions: "If Omar was going to fly, then it wasn't a good idea to follow him through the airport. […] Christmas was approaching, so we came to an agreement; I would return home for the holiday, and if Omar was still stuck in Athens after the new year, I'd come back. Otherwise, I'd see him in his new country, wherever that was" (348). In these scenes, Aikins's power to momentarily step out of his identity as underground refugee and metamorphose back to his previous self points to his privilege both to cross borders as well as to leave the story and return to the safe, protected space of the frame.

The process of metamorphosis resulting from migration is also a key trope in Cosnay's *Des îles*. Restrictive migration policies and border regimes turn migrants into wandering figures, stuck in space and time, unable to leave the phantasmagoric, deadly geographies of migratory checkpoints and arrival points, as the interspersed, black-and-white maps of the Aegean Sea, the Strait of Sicily, the Basque Coast, and the Canary Islands remind us. Evoking timelessness and absence, the lack of color in the cartographic material suggests loss and invisibility, erasing the contested histories of border-crossing and the suffering behind migratory travels from official representations. However, even upon arrival in Europe, refugees remain haunted by their journeys. The cruelty of such endless errantry becomes most apparent in children, who are suddenly thrown into a world of violence that will have long-lasting traumatic consequences, as the metaphor of the "time bombs" evokes: "Des enfants errants sur ces routes, refoulés à In Salah, à Ghardaia, des enfants de toute l'Afrique subsaharienne errants en Algérie et au Maroc, fragiles, refoulés, forts, perdus, qui connaissent tout, les violences, toutes les ruses, bombes à retardement, dit Denis, psychologiquement réduits" ("Children wandering along these roads, pushed back at In Salah, at Ghardaia—children from all over sub-Saharan Africa wandering in Algeria and Morocco, fragile, rejected, strong, lost, who know everything: violence, every trick, time bombs, says Denis, psychologically broken"; 194). Eternally haunted by the past, the protagonists of Cosnay's retellings become unavoidably associated with the distant times and realities that, traditionally, characterize the inner story in the frame narrative, unable to cross the symbolic border that separates them from the structuring and logical reality of the frame. The very title of the book, *Des îles*, points to the insularity of the

refugee experience, while presenting it as a result of European immigration policies and not so much as an inherent, essential condition that can never be overcome.

The transformation of landscapes through migration histories and policies is similarly visible in Dina Nayeri's memoir *The Ungrateful Refugee*, which depicts how spaces that are supposed to provide shelter and safety, such as refugee camps, have become increasingly hostile and threatening environments. A good example can be found in the contrast between Barba, the former hotel in Italy turned into a refugee hostel where Nayeri stayed as a kid and which she remembers with nostalgia, and Moria in Greece: "I know now that Barba was a 'low-hardship camp'. Both parts of that term seem dishonest. Yes, it was something other than hell—it wasn't Moria in Lesbos, with its raw sewage and midnight wars, its five-hour food lines and shared tents on open soil. And yes, it was officially a refugee camp. But it wasn't low-hardship" (126). The impact of time on the changing geographies of refuge also materializes in the transformation of the hostel (Barba) from a refugee camp into a fancy "place for businesspeople to rest and eat forgettable meals between breakout sessions" (116). The now Hotel Belvedere embodies Nayeri's own metamorphosis, who returns to Barba as a tourist and married woman many years later. Despite Nayeri's efforts to revisit the past, the author does not share the same symbolic and material spaces that contemporary refugees occupy—a gap that, similar to *The Naked Don't Fear the Water* and *Des îles*, makes it difficult to fully overcome the difference between living and reliving, telling and retelling.

As the analysis of *The Ungrateful Refugee*, *Des îles*, and *The Naked Don't Fear the Water* shows, the generic structures that characterize the discourse of storytelling in literary history still shape contemporary activist rewriting. The vertical relationship between storyteller and protagonist and the spatiotemporal division between frame and inner story that are at the core of the frame tale exist in productive tension with the collaborative (re)making and activist dimension of the texts. If at first sight the three case studies—and the genre of activist rewriting in general—do not seem to bear any direct resemblances with the traditional frame tale due to the non-fictional, biographical nature of the texts, and the active role that the authors/translators/storytellers take on in shaping the story, notions of (in)visibility help unveil the latent traces of legacies of retelling that are in place in more relational and horizontal forms of dialogue across cultures. While still embedded in the power dynamics of giving voice, activist rewriting reconfigures the relationship between writing and politics in unprecedented ways. By showing how words are preceded by action, Nayeri's, Cosnay's, and Aikins's accounts suggest that reading, too, needs to be followed by acts in order to collectively rewrite the politics of asylum.

Notes

1. This work is part of the *COLLAB* research project and has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme (grant agreement n° 101076847). Views and opinions expressed in this chapter are those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

2. All English translations from *Des îles* are mine.

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