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This paper will explore what testimony is and how it functions in a number of asylum narratives. Becoming a refugee is something experienced by millions of people across many disparate places around the world and for a myriad of different reasons. Despite this, the texts discussed in this paper demonstrate connections in the ways that experiences are depicted. The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as:

> A person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution. (*Most frequently asked questions about the Refugee Convention* 2001, pp.16-17)

In the UK, an individual who claims asylum puts forward the case that they are a refugee through interviews and written statements and the Home Office makes a decision about whether they fit the definition of a refugee. This means that at the end of the claim process, someone will make a decision about the veracity of the account presented. A statement on the UK Border Agency website reads:

> The UK has a proud tradition of providing a place of safety for genuine refugees. However, we are determined to refuse protection to those who do not need it, and

> will take steps to remove those who are found to have made false claims. (under *Asylum*)

This discourse immediately indicates a preoccupation with a claim being either 'genuine' or 'false' and establishes a problematic binary.

I will examine autobiographical texts by Jade Amoli-Jackson (2007) and Mende Nazer with Damien Lewis (2004). These texts will be considered in terms of deconstruction theorist Jacques Derrida's theories on testimony (2000), alongside the work of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's who wrote about trauma and testimony in relation to the holocaust (2002) but whose work is also useful when considering the way testimony works in other contexts. Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *By The Sea* (2002) provides a useful counterpoint as a fictional testimony. This text has some similarities to the testimony offered by a Rwandan individual, referred to as A, in a letter written to the Queen[1] and will also be considered alongside two video testimonies from asylum-seekers. Providing a testimonial narrative is often the only way of demonstrating a fear of persecution in an asylum claim but there will always remain the possibility of fiction within testimony. Testimony does not reveal itself to be 'genuine' or 'false.' In fact, Jacques Derrida argues that fiction forms a critical role within testimony, enabling the representation of what he describes as 'unexperienced experience' (2000, p.47). Conditional hospitality is on offer to the asylum-seeker but the condition is that 'genuine' testimony is provided, which cannot be accomplished by the speaker alone. Testimony relies on a listener. In asylum cases, the genuineness is determined by the listener (the Home Office); it is not inherent in the testimony. Many

[1] A arrived in the UK in 2003 from Malawi, where he had been living since fleeing civil unrest in Rwanda. The result of his asylum claim is unknown.

Home Office responses to testimonial narratives reveal that the listener resists the testimony as a way of resisting the unseen fictional element within it and the threat that this poses to the condition-making process. In some of the texts, this resistance fragments the narrative, becoming an additional point of trauma and the text themselves become testimonial, working through this trauma.

1. The asylum claim as testimony

Jade Amoli-Jackson fled violence in Uganda, arriving in the UK in 2001. Her autobiographical short story 'My Painful Journey' (2007) follows a basic chronological progression. She begins with factual information, contextualising her life before the traumatic events that follow: 'We were born in northern Uganda - my twin sister, Jane and me. We studied up to Makerere University, where I met my husband, the father of my three children.' (Amoli-Jackson 2007, p.201). Then follows the narrative of the trauma that she experiences:

> Then I too was abducted, with several other people, some of whom were shot dead. After two months of captivity, hardship, rape, hunger and burying my friends, a soldier helped me escape from my kidnappers. I was a walking skeleton with wounds all over my body, most of which are permanent (Amoli-Jackson 2007, p.203).

Jade's description here utilises the image of wounds, which, as Elaine Scarry, a leading theorist on representations of pain, discusses, 'begins to externalize, objectify, and make sharable' the pain experienced (1985, p.16). Scarry argues that because pain is internal, it resists expression in language (1985, p.3). One strategy for expressing pain is through an object, such as a wound. Jade indicates her pain

through the reference to her wounds but is also able to quantify her experiences: 'captivity, hardship, rape, hunger and burying my friends' (Amoli-Jackson 2007, p.203). This demonstrates that she has externalised her experiences, in terms quantifiable in language. This externalisation is enabled through testimony; the expression of the trauma in language serves to place it within a frame of reference. This structuring differs from the 'sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned' (Scarry 1985, p.4) that Scarry discusses as the expression of pain. However these sounds also act as testimony in the sense of bearing witness to pain and as an expression of the inexpressible. Trauma cannot be externalised and quantified without expression.

Following her experiences in Uganda, Jade flees to the UK where she is met with kindness: 'I woke up to see this white man looking at me with kind eyes' (Amoli-Jackson 2007, p.204) and describes Juliet whom she stays with: 'Juliet was very patient with me, very kind and really beautiful' (Amoli-Jackson 2007, p.205). When she is separated from this kindness, it risks what Dori Laub describes as 'a return of the trauma- a re-experiencing of the event itself' (Felman and Laub 1992, p.68). When she goes to the Home Office, 'I went in alone. I had to leave them outside... it brought back all the nightmares I went through in Africa' (Amoli-Jackson 2007, p.206). Later, 'the Red Cross gave me an interview. Retelling was still as painful as the day they took my children away from me and took me and my friends forcefully to the bush' (Amoli-Jackson 2007, p.215).

However, she is also met with sympathetic listeners:

> I told her, in Edel's presence, my whole story, and she felt really very bad and asked if I wanted coffee. **[....]** Edel told me that the lady was very important in the Home Office. She shed tears while I was telling my story and she asked Edel to take me to the doctor so that they could examine me and treat me (Amoli-Jackson 2007, p.209).

The representative from the Home Office acts as the listener and is affected by the narrative. This enables the narrative to become testimonial. Every testimony requires a listener; as Dori Laub states, 'testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude' (1992, p.70). As Felman and Laub outline, speaker and listener undertake 'a common struggle to release the testimony which, in spite of inhibitions on both sides, will allow the telling of trauma to proceed and to reach its testimonial conclusion' (1992, p.xvii). The very process of listening is affective:

> The listeners and interviewers whose own listening in fact enables the unfolding of the testimonial life accounts of Holocaust survivors - cannot fulfil their task without, in turn, passing through the crisis of experiencing their boundaries, their separateness, their functionality, and indeed their sanity, at risk (Felman and Laub 1992, p.xvii).

The listener participates in the testimony and becomes 'the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time' (Felman and Laub 1992, p.57) which also means that he 'comes to partially experience trauma in himself' (Felman and Laub 1992, p.57). It is this process of speaking and listening which enables a narrative to become testimonial and for Amoli-Jackson, it is within the structure of the asylum claim that this process is realised.

Having kind and sympathetic listeners enables her narrative to become testimonial and what her short story 'My Painful Journey' provides is effectively the narrative of the testimonial process that has taken place. Relating her testimony has enabled the externalisation of her trauma so that she is able to represent it in quantifiable terms. As Laub describes:

> The very circumstances of being inside the event that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist, that is someone who could step outside of the coercively totalitarian and dehumanizing frame of reference in which the event was taking place, and provide and independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed... a world in which the very imagination of the Other was no longer possible (1992, p.81).

Fresco describes this as a 'gaping, vertiginous black hole' (cited in Felman and Laub 1992, p.64); the traumatic event is internalised so that it becomes part of the self and its own frame of reference. Testimony serves the function of 'reconstructing a history and essentially of re-externalizating the event' (Felman and Laub 1992, p.69). The testimonial process provides 'the very imagination of the Other' through the active listener and the process of constructing testimony starts to make sense of the traumatic event, re-framing it within the life narrative of the narrator rather than as a 'black hole' of meaning. In 'My Painful Journey,' this re-framing takes the form of a chronological narrative. The narrative of the trauma is placed within a logical and structured framework as it is externalised.

Although Amoli-Jackson's text demonstrates a certain level of progression and resolution, as demonstrated by its chronological structure, other testimonial narratives are characterised by structural

fracture. *Slave* by Mende Nazer and Damien Lewis (2004) follows a basically chronological structure but does show some signs of fragmentation. The Prologue describes 'the day that changed my life forever' (Nazer and Lewis 2004, p.1), before moving back chronologically to the pre-trauma context. As in the other texts, there is some difficulty in articulating the trauma: 'I cannot describe to you all the scenes I saw as we ran through the village' (Nazer and Lewis 2004, p.3). This is what Felman and Laub describe as:

> Occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference (1992, p.5).

The text describes a happy childhood, interrupted by the raid. When the raid is described for a second time in the text, some of the phrasing exactly matches that used in the Prologue: "Mujahidin!' my father yelled. 'Arab raiders! The Mujahidin are in the village!' (Nazer and Lewis 2004, p.2 and p.91). Derrida states that, 'testimony testifies to nothing less than the instant of an interruption of time and history' (2000, p.73). The raid functions as a point of trauma, an 'interruption' or 'black hole' which fragments the narrative, causing it to cycle back to this point.

Mende goes through many years of trauma as a slave before escaping in London and claiming asylum. When she first meets another Nuba person, she says, 'I blurted out my story as fast as I could. Once I'd opened the floodgates, I couldn't stop' (Nazer and Lewis 2004, p.284). She is met with 'stunned silence' and then her listener asks her 'Are you telling me the truth?' to which her response is 'Yes. It's true. You've got to believe me,' I sobbed, breaking down' (Nazer and Lewis 2004, p.285). The fact that she 'couldn't stop'

demonstrates her compulsion to testify. In this case, the listener is momentarily resistant which causes the 'breaking down' of Mende's narrative and she finds herself unable to communicate. Later, when her asylum claim is refused, Mende's response is 'Oh my God! They're going to send me back to Sudan! No! They can't. Oh my God! When? When will they try to do this? Oh my God...' (Nazer and Lewis 2004, p.302). When the Home Office do not believe her story, the result is an overflowing of emotion and of language. She is unable to articulate her response. The phrase 'they can't' mirrors earlier on 'you've got to believe me' (Nazer and Lewis 2004, p.285) and demonstrates an attempt to re-impose meaning and control on events. The threat of not being listened to, of the testimony remaining unresolved causes the fragmentation of communication. The text concludes, 'On 23 December 2002, I was at last recognised as a refugee by the British government, and granted asylum and permanent residency in the United Kingdom' (Nazer and Lewis 2004, p.309). The final recognition of her narrative enables its conclusion but the threat of not being believed remains fresh and almost realised. The fragmentation of language when the Home Office does not believe her story echoes the fragmentation of the narrative structure earlier on and indicates this point as a point of trauma. The resolution of her asylum claim provides a resolution to her testimony so that the text becomes both a narrative of testimony realised (within the asylum system) and a testimony itself, an opportunity to relate the trauma of the asylum claim to the reader.

2. Resistance to testimony

The threat of not being believed that Mende faces is also present in other texts. Without an active listener, testimony will fail. As Laub outlines:

> The absence of an addressable other... it is, precisely, this ultimate annihilation of a narrative that, fundamentally, cannot be heard and of a story that cannot be witnessed, which constitutes the mortal eighty-first blow (1992, p.68).

Laub uses 'the mortal eighty-first blow' to describe the limit of what a person can endure. Often, rather than the asylum claim becoming an opportunity for testimony and the re-externalisation of trauma, the 'addressable other,' the Home Office, demonstrates resistance to the narrative becoming testimony. A report from Asylum Aid offers examples which demonstrate this resistance:

> You then stated that you remained at a friend's house until 30 October 1995 when your parents telephoned to let you know that sentence had been passed on Ken Saro-Wiwa **[...]** [The Secretary of State] is also aware that sentence was passed on Ken Saro-Wiwa and the others on 31 October 1995. [He] is of the opinion that these discrepancies must cast doubt on the credibility of your claim to be a MOSOP leader. (*Still No Reason At All* 1999, p.30)

As Laub points out, testimony often reveals 'the reality of an unimaginable occurrence' (1992, p.60). Laub uses the example of the testimony of a Jewish woman describing an explosion in one of the chimneys at Auschwitz: 'the number [of chimneys] mattered less than the fact of the occurrence' (1992, p.60). Some of the details of the event are lost in the memory of an event which was previously 'unimaginable.' What this example from the Home Office decision

letter demonstrates is what Laub describes as 'an obsession with factfinding; an absorbing interest in the factual details of the account which serve to circumvent the human experience' (1992, p.73) as a mechanism of resisting the testimonial process. The reader focuses on the factual information in the account as a means of avoiding the 'human experience' or 'the fact of the occurrence.' As a result of this 'factfinding,' the date specified in the claim is used to deny the whole narrative.

The resistance to testimony on the part of the listener is also demonstrated in the language used in responses to asylum claims: 'You claim that although you survived this attack you were arrested and imprisoned, without trial, for 3 years and 2 months during which time you allege you were mistreated' (*Still No Reason At All* 1999, p.19). The words 'claim' and 'allege' indicate an attempt to position the narrative within a legal framework but this attempt conflicts with the human experience of the testimony. A Kenyan woman is told in her asylum decision letter that the death of her sister is 'regrettable' and a Nigerian man is told that the 'alleged' death of his father is 'an unfortunate occurrence' (*Still No Reason At All* 1999, p.59). The listener is not 'addressable', but rather competitive, intervening directly in the narrative. This resistance to testimony is, at the same time, a resistance to the possibility of fiction within the narrative. If trauma creates a 'black hole' of memory, fiction provides creative possibilities for representing trauma. In fact it becomes an essential way of representing trauma in testimony. Because of this, for Derrida, testimony 'exceeds the opposition between real and unreal, actual and virtual, factual and fictional' (2000, p.91) as a way of reconciling the 'unexperienced experience,' that is the encounter with death, with reality. As Derrida states, 'I am the only one who

can testify to my death' but 'I certainly cannot testify to my death – by definition' (2000, p.46). The encounter with death in a traumatic experience is both death experienced and death not experienced and so opens up a gap between reality and unreality. This means the way that the 'fact of the occurrence,' outlined by Felman and Laub, is represented will not necessarily fit into what is expected of a 'genuine' testimony in a legal framework and the struggle for the narrative is symptomatic of this resistance to the fictional element.

The asylum claim offers conditional hospitality, the condition being 'genuine' testimony. Derrida offers a distinction between unconditional hospitality and conditional hospitality but considers unconditional hospitality impossible because it lays bare the host. The host must be prepared for 'the unexpected arrival of any other,' (1998, p.70) an other that is 'always unknowable' (Gunning cited in Farrier 2008, p.122). However, when conditions are put on the hospitality offered, there always remains the philosophical possibility of unconditional hospitality, held in check by those conditions. This possibility draws attention to the artificial nature of conditional hospitality. If the conditions are revealed to be arbitrary, they risk being overwhelmed by unconditional hospitality. In the context of asylum, if the conditions of hospitality, i.e. refugee status, are revealed to be based on an arbitrary decision by the Home Office rather than the asylum claim itself, the defence of the entire system is destabilised. Therefore, the Home Office focuses on the condition of 'genuine' testimony as a way of concealing the mechanisms of their condition-making process. However, the blurring of fiction and fact is indeterminate within testimony so that the condition itself is unrealisable; no testimony is inherently and without doubt 'genuine' because testimony can only ever be a representation of trauma. The

necessity of fiction within testimony means that the condition of providing 'genuine' testimony contains within it its own contradiction and thus opens up the possibility of unconditional hospitality through the destabilisation of that condition. The acceptance of testimony is also the acceptance of the fictional element within it; the listener resists the testimony as a way of resisting this possibility.

The intervention in the narrative of the listener impacts on the narrative structure. In *Slave*, the narrative is destabilised and returns compulsively to the moment of trauma but is able to move past this once active and sympathetic listeners are established. A similar narrative fragmentation can be seen in *By The Sea* by Abdulrazak Gurnah, which relates the story of Saleh Omar who arrives in the UK sometime in the 1990s, seeking asylum from Zanzibar, where he was imprisoned from the late 1960s until 1980. As a fictional testimony, the novel offers a different configuration of fiction and testimony. The testimony that it can provide is of real trauma within society; asylum-seekers face similar situations every day. Although the details may be fictional, the 'fact of the occurrence' of the trauma remains. When Saleh arrives, he is questioned by an immigration officer, who says:

> "Mr Shaaban, I don't know you or know anything about the reasons that brought you here, or the expenses you incurred and all that. So I am sorry for what I now have to do, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to refuse you entry into the United Kingdom. You don't have a valid entry visa, you have no funds and you have no one who can offer a guarantee for you **[…]** we will be putting you on the next available flight back to the destination you came from and on the airline that brought you here." (Gurnah 2002, pp.8-9)

When Saleh's response is 'Refugee... Asylum' (Gurnah 2002, p.9), Kevin Edelman's eyes become 'angry' (Gunah 2002, p.9). Saleh intervenes in the narrative that Kevin Edelman is constructing for him, the words 'refugee' and 'asylum' imposing the meta-narrative of the Refugee Convention.

However, Kevin Edelman regains control of the narrative through questioning:

> "How much danger is your life really in? Do you realise what you're doing? Whoever persuaded you to do this is not doing you any favours... It may take years to sort out your application, and then you may be sent back, anyway **[...]** This is a young man's game, this asylum business, because it is really just looking for jobs and prosperity in Europe and all that, isn't it?" (Gurnah 2002, p.11)

Saleh remains silent apart from his initial intervention. In this way his actions echo Felman and Laub's description of Holocaust survivors as 'the bearers of silence' (2002, p.xix) and testimony as a process which seeks to 'decanonise the silence' (2002, p.xix). Without the outlet of testimony, Saleh has no framework in which to formulate his experiences. It is from this point of silence that the narrative is structured, in a similar way to how Mende's narrative pivoted on the point of trauma until her narrative could be transformed into testimony through the asylum process and thus form a cohesive framework. The narrative framework in *By The Sea* is disjointed, beginning with the moment of arrival, travelling forwards, then abruptly back again to progress to the moment of arrival. It is the moment of arrival and the disbelief of the immigration officer which provides the moment of trauma which the narrative cannot move

past. When a space for Saleh's testimony does emerge, it is not within the legal framework of the asylum process but in conversation with Latif. Latif provides an active listener, an 'addressable other' and the testimony enables 'both of us to find relief' (Gurnah 2002, p.207). However, the narrative of Saleh's asylum claim remains unresolved and it is the trauma of this initial disbelief that is worked through within the text.

A similar kind of structuring can be found in a letter written by 'A' to the Queen, following two refusal letters from the Home Office: 'I took sky to direction to the UK on 29 December 2003 and I arrived in the morning at Heathrow airport London and I claim asylum when I arrived at airport my claim is refusal on 11 March 2004' (2008). As in *By The Sea*, his narrative opens with his arrival in the UK and claiming asylum. It is only towards the end of the letter that he states, 'I came here because I was have problems of Africa because RPF of Rwanda killed my father and my brothers and our family just why I came here and I got again too much problems' (A 2008). The narrative pivots around the point of refusal, ending 'I believe you nice answer for me' (A 2008). The speaker is unable to move forwards without a 'nice answer,' that is without confirmation that the listener has accepted his story. In both texts (letter and novel), the point of arrival is a point of trauma, over-laying the trauma experienced in the country from which the writers are fleeing and a point that causes the fragmentation of the narrative. This reflects the effect of trauma to the life narrative, that an individual is unable to move past the point of trauma without its resolution in testimony.

Without the resolution provided by testimony, relating trauma becomes a second trauma, represented in terms which expose its

fragmentation. In 'Mercy's Video Testimony,' part of 'The Testimony Project,' Mercy, a woman from Kenya seeking asylum says:

> "It feels horrible. It feels really, really horrible. I feel disabled, you know. I feel like I don't have arms and I don't have legs. That's how it feels to be an asylum-seeker... That's how it feels, I feel disabled...I feel so, you know, I feel like I have no legs, I have no mouth, I have no hands, that's how I feel because I was not like this you know... We are human beings you know, we are human beings just like them, trying to make a better future for ourselves." (Mercy [n.d.])

Just as Jade Amoli-Jackson uses her 'wounds' to describe her experience, Mercy uses terms related to wounding to express her pain but is unable to quantify what is happening to her. It is also clear that she is in the midst of trauma. There is no cohesive narrative, just repetition and fragmentary metaphor. Jacques Lacan, speaking of psychoanalysis, asserts, 'Analysis can have as its only aim the advent of authentic speech and the realization by the subject of its history in relation to a future' (cited in Durrant 2004, p.8); the function of testimony is the reconciliation of the past into a narrative which also includes a future. Here, Mercy talks of 'trying to make a better future.' Her narrative is still under construction. She 'feels' in the present tenses because she is still very much within the moment of trauma. The resistance to her asylum claim has become a point of trauma that has fragmented her narrative to the extent that she cannot form a narrative at all. Similarly, in 'Asli's Video Testimony,' Asli, seeking asylum from Ethiopia, says, 'It seems like I lost five years of my life' (Asli [n.d.]). The period spent waiting for a decision

is not part of her life narrative, it forms a 'black hole' which the narrative is unable to move past.

3. Conclusion

For Mercy and Asli, the trauma narrative is not yet concluded. Their fragments of expression indicate that they are in the midst of trauma, which causes the fragmentation of their narratives. As in *By The Sea* and A's letter to the Queen, the fact that the trauma remains unresolved is because their listener (the Home Office) resists their testimony. The language used in responses to asylum claims indicates that this resistance is caused by a fear of fiction within testimony and the possibilities that this opens up for unconditional hospitality. The asylum system demands testimonial narratives as a condition of hospitality but at the same time resists the transformation of narrative into testimony. The system provides a listener who can be the witness or 'addressable other' necessary for testimony, as for Jade Amoli-Jackson and eventually for Mende Nazer. However the listener may also be resistant or competitive. Without an addressable listener, the narrative fragments and cycles around the point of resistance. The compulsion to testify remains unresolved and this lack of resolution becomes embedded in the structure of the text as an additional point of trauma. This shows that, for many individuals, progressing through the asylum system is itself traumatic and is represented in similar ways to the trauma experienced prior to arrival in the UK.

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