

RESEARCH ARTICLE

(Re)Telling as remembering during COVID-19 and its aftermath in *Refugee Tales IV* and *Refugee Tales V*

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Abstract

This article offers an interdisciplinary approach to the intersection of memory, narration, and migration as a fruitful theoretical framework to analyse *Refugee Tales*. These are the publications of the Refugee Tales Project, fostered by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group with the goal of abolishing indefinite detention in the UK. The tales give voice to the refugees' experience of forced displacement, asylum claim, and detention, and most of them are collaboratively narrated by the refugee and an established writer. My contention is that the exercise of (re)telling inherent in *Refugee Tales* can be examined in the light of the concept of communicative remembering, considering how the refugee and the writer engage in a dialogic co-construction of the refugee's autobiographical memories. In this context, the article aims at exploring how (re)telling and remembering go hand in hand in a selection of narratives from the latest volumes of the series: *Refugee Tales IV* (2021) and *Refugee Tales V* (2024). Both include the experience of COVID-19 as a context or as content of remembering, and so the pandemic becomes one more factor in the process of giving voice and listening to the refugees' testimonies of indefinite and arbitrary detention in the UK.

Keywords: memory; narration; migration; refugees; COVID-19; *Refugee Tales*; literature

Introduction

In the Afterword to *Refugee Tales V* (2024, 152), David Herd states that 'more or less since the beginning of the pandemic, the construction of the environment in immigration and asylum policymaking [...] has altered'. The choice of the pandemic as a turning point in the migration policy of the UK, from a hostile environment to an expulsive one, is particularly significant because it can be connected with the impact of COVID-19 on the Refugee Tales Project, and with the presence of the pandemic in *Refugee Tales IV* (2021) and *Refugee Tales V* (2024). The Project, which pursues the abolition of indefinite detention in the UK, organises walks where refugees tell their experiences, among other transmedia actions. These narratives are later published in *Refugee Tales*, which give voice to the migrants' real-life testimonies of forced displacement, asylum seeking, and detention.

This article addresses the interrelation between narration and remembering, considering how, in terms of the discursive, pragmatic, and performative quality of remembering (Bietti 2014; Lagerkvist 2016), memory processes are based on narrative schemata and structures (Schmidt 2008; Straub 2008). In line with Andrea Smorti (2020, 12), who argues that '[n]arrating becomes a way to reflect on oneself', the present study aims to explore the practices of (re)telling inherent in *Refugee Tales* as exercises of communicative remembering (Pentzold et al. 2023), of dialogic co-construction (Schiff 2023), of the refugees' autobiographical memories.

Departing from an interdisciplinary framework that brings together memory, narration, and migration, the article offers a literary analysis of a selection of narratives from *Refugee Tales IV* and *Refugee Tales V*, the two volumes where the presence of COVID-19 can be detected, both as a context and as content of the tales. It will address questions such as: How do narrating and remembering intersect in the accounts of migrants' life experiences in *Refugee Tales IV* and *V*? In which ways does COVID-19 emerge in the narrativisation of the refugees' memories? What are the ethical–political implications of voicing and listening to personal memories of asylum claim and detention in *Refugee Tales IV* and *V*?

Memory, narration, migration: An interdisciplinary approach

'The Waiting Man's Tale', from *Refugee Tales IV*, opens with 'I've been through so much', a sentence that recurs throughout the narrative as a litany repeated by both the protagonist and the writer. It summarises and condenses the Waiting Man's past experience since his childhood days in Ghana to his present situation of uncertainty and waiting for a response from the UK Home Office. The indefinite 'so much' encapsulates, therefore, his distant and close recollections, immersed in networks of autobiographical memories (Williams and Conway 2009) that constitute the protagonist's self-images in the course of time.

Being 'the content of the self' (Williams and Conway 2009, 33), autobiographical memory fulfils three functions (Williams and Conway 2009), two of which pertain to the individual level (the directive and the self functions), and another to the social one. This social function, which enables sympathy and understanding, signals the significance of the interaction with somebody outside the remembering subject for the re-construction (or co-construction) of memory. Indeed, autobiographical memory is formed 'in togetherness with others' and 'develops in processes of social exchange' (Welzer 2008, 290), such as dialogues and conversations (Straub 2008; Schiff 2023).

This brings to the fore the concept of communicative memory, originally advanced by Jan and Aleida Assmann as one of the registers of collective memory, in opposition to cultural memory. Communicative memory pertains to social time and to the identity of the person as a carrier of social roles, engaged in everyday communication (Assmann 2008). In its revision as 'communicative remembering' (Erll 2011a; Pentzold et al. 2023), it is no longer seen as a register but as a mode of remembering, and therefore as a practice. The dynamic or processual conceptualisation of memory as remembering (the one favoured in the present article) is particularly relevant in the light of the approach to remembering as doing (Ricoeur 1999), and to the notion of memory as fluid and in movement (Erll 2011b; Bond et al. 2016), as discussed below.

Communicative remembering, as explored by Pentzold et al., highlights the crucial role played by the present in conveying the significance of the past, a view shared by Williams and Conway (2009) and Smorti (2020), among others, and which can be applied to the dialogic (re)construction of memories in *Refugee Tales*. In the context of the analysis of the tales from the perspective of communicative remembering, two aspects of Pentzold et al.'s

study should be emphasised: the engagement of communicative remembering with the recent past, and its departure from the dimension of collective memory, since '[t]he practical side of communicative remembering is individual, but also socially shared' (Pentzold *et al.* 2023, 8).

Communicative remembering, like Lucas M. Bietti's 'discursive remembering' (Bietti 2014), opens the way to reconsidering different instances of communicative interaction that generate remembering, including not only conversational situations but also narrative ones. The intersection between remembering and narrating (particularly in the context of the self-other relationship) has been the object of Paul Ricoeur's monumental *Time and Narrative* [*Temps et Récit*] (1983–1985), recurring in later works such as 'Memory and Forgetting' (1999). Here, Ricoeur proposes a practical approach to remembering as doing things, which comprises three levels: the pathological-therapeutic, the pragmatic, and the ethical-political ones. Telling and remembering are jointly invoked on the pragmatic level, considering how memory is 'an exercise in *telling otherwise*, and also in letting others tell their own history' (Ricoeur 1999, 9). Likewise, on the ethical-political level, narration is discussed alongside remembering in relation to their roles as ethical duties.

The correlation between remembering and narrating becomes the focus of Andrea Smorti's *Telling to Understand. The Impact of Narrative on Autobiographical Memory*, which addresses it in the processes of understanding the self and the other. Considering remembering and narrating as activities that simultaneously spring from and build memories, Smorti explores how narrator and narratee are, in turns, the addresser and the addressee of the other's stories (Smorti 2020, 237); moreover, he argues that the interpretative process rests on a network of four points of view: the *interpretatio operis*, the *interpretatio auctoris*, the *interpretatio lectoris*, and the *interpretatio paratextualis* (Smorti 2020, 244–45). Their coordination is facilitated by the cooperative relationship between the narrator and the narratee, which modifies the narration, and in turn, memory (Smorti 2020, 76). This process, the 'narrative dialogue', underlines the relevance of listening, and in particular empathic listening (Smorti 2020, 73–74), one of the cardinal principles of the Refugee Tales Project, and of the *Refugee Tales* in their different media of articulation.

Listening has a transformative effect on both the listener and the listened to (Gardner 2023), being constituted as a political act of affectivity with consequences in the dimensions of belonging (Gardner 2023), and of emotional recognition (Jolly 2014). In fact, 'listening encounters' provide a context for conveying memories to the self and to the other, and offer a site to enact dynamics of inclusion/exclusion, proximity/difference (Gardner 2023). The action of listening confers pragmatic, performative, and ethical transcendence to the process of giving voice to, or bestowing auditive visibility on, otherwise silent or invisible tellers or narrators. Voicing and listening constitute the backbone of the Refugee Tales Project, as it offers refugees a space for talking and being listened to, particularly in a conceptualisation of listening as 'an exercise in empathy, trust, and political solidarity', as opposed to the hostile listening required of immigration officers (De Capitani 2023, 233).

The question of expressing and receiving, coding and decoding, what is communicable and memorable (Duffy 2009, 31) is made more complex in relation to traumatic memories. They issue the challenge of narrativising experience that resists the principles of coherence, structure, meaning, or comprehensibility (Andrews 2014, 37), posing the paradox 'of how to make intelligible truth out of nonlinear, nondiscursive trauma' (Jensen 2014, 148). For these memories, narration offers the possibility of transcending the personal and acquiring a more-than-personal meaning, raising issues of entitlement and empathy (Shuman 2005), which are pertinent to the analysis of *Refugee Tales*. In this sense, Amy Shuman's exploration of the promise of narrative to provide a means of travelling beyond the personal (2005; 1, 18) can be taken as a starting point to approach the intersection of migration with memory and narration.

In the context of the transcultural turn in memory studies (Erll 2011b; Bond and Rapson 2014), memory is seen as fluid and on the move (Bond *et al.* 2016). Beyond being transnational in the crossing of physical and geopolitical borders (Assmann 2014), memory is conceived as 'travelling memory', circulating among social, medial, and semantic dimensions (Erll 2011b, 15). Memories are constituted through multi-dimensional movements (Erll 2011b), to the point that migration has been welcomed as a quality and the condition of memory: '[b]etween times, places, generations and media, [...] movement is what produces memory' (Creet 2011, 9). The intersection between memory-remembering and migration is bidirectional, since while movement is inherent to memory, memory is also one of the structural bases of the (e)migratory experience, together with identity and melancholy (Rosińska 2011).

As argued by Zofia Rosińska (2011, 39), memory plays a triple role in its influence on (e) migration: it is identity-forming, therapeutic, and community-forming. These three roles recall Williams and Conway's three-function paradigm of autobiographical memory, with the self and social functions corresponding to the identity- and community-forming roles. The therapeutic role, which echoes Ricoeur's pathological-therapeutic level of the practice of remembering, enables the migrant self to recover their sense of continuity in terms of the process of 'autobiographical meaning-making' (Camia and Zafar 2021).

According to Christin Camia and Rida Zafar, migration, and particularly the forced displacement suffered by refugees, entails biographical disruption in the form of 'a disturbed sense of self-continuity' (2021, 2). This psychological problem, which prevents the individual from relating to his or her former self, can be repaired by employing their autobiographical memories. The exercise of autobiographical meaning-making implies a deliberate and active effort 'to create a coherent life story [...] in order to explain and negotiate personal changes' (Camia and Zafar 2021, 2). Such a process underlies many refugee narratives, *Refugee Tales* being a case in point.

Refugee narratives participate in the discursive and material construction of refugees as embodied individuals, as human subjects embedded in a historical and social context (Espiritu Gandhi and Nguyen 2023; Limbu 2023). This construction rests on a humanitarian framework which, in the case of *Refugee Tales*, is articulated as a 'story of flight', depicting the refugee's constant movement, and the tension between mobility and stasis (Coundouriotis 2016; Limbu 2023). As Bishupal Limbu contends (2023, 42), this is one of the alternative paradigms to the sentimental script that sometimes pervades refugee narratives, and perpetuates tropes of suffering, innocence and victimhood (2023, 45).

Beyond this, the protagonists of *Refugee Tales* display agency and forward direction not only as actors in their 'stories of flight' but also as makers of autobiographical meaning in a process that could be described in terms of Brian Schiff's 'dialogic co-construction' (2023, 277). Through the (re)telling of their experience, with the aid of writers, refugees articulate remembering in two dimensions of interaction between memory and migration (Creet 2011, 9): they generate memories of migration as a socio-political phenomenon, and also perform the migration of memory as a phenomenological concept, with memories travelling among subjects (refugees, listeners, writers, and eventually readers), and among media (oral conversations, written narratives, and digital content). In doing so, they add a new, creative connotation to the confrontation (or rather, encounter) with one's self *through* the other, which is inherent in (e)migration (Rosińska 2011, 40).

The Refugee Tales Project, *Refugee Tales*, and the impact of COVID-19

This encounter of the refugee's self through the writer-other lies at the heart of the Refugee Tales Project. Founded and co-organised by David Herd and Anna Pincus, the Project is fostered by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group (GDWG), a charity that fights for the

abolition of indefinite detention in the UK. The Project aims to expose how ‘the UK is the only country in Western Europe that detains people indefinitely under immigration rules’ (Herd 2021, 139; 2024, 147). Between 1988 and 2015, the number of people indefinitely detained in the UK increased from 2166 to 32000 (Herd 2021, 140). Currently, the 2023 Illegal Migration Act has meant a threatening step forward in a political environment of expulsion and generalised detention, and the 2025 Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Act does not seem to have improved the situation. In this context of flagrant breach of human rights, and of the principles of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the Refugee Tales Project is enacting different transmedia practices of activist intervention (De Capitani 2023, 232; Mayer 2023, 133).

Since 2015, the year of the so-called European refugee crisis, the Project organises an annual summer walk through the English countryside (mostly in southern England) that brings together former detainees, asylum seekers, writers, volunteers, and others. During several days, they walk together and share stories of the lived experience of detention, both informally during the walks and formally during the evening performances of reading and music. The combination of walking and storytelling is modelled on Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, although instead of the tale-telling contest, the emphasis is placed on the *compaignye* that transmits stories in a side-by-side (non-adversarial) interaction (Herd 2023, 198). This interaction favours the teller’s communicative remembering, which, as argued before, is individual but also socially shared.

Highlighting the implications of ‘language in transmission – stories told and retold’ (Taylor 2020, 251), the concept of the pilgrimage is reoriented in the Refugee Tales Project with the creation of a new geography where former detainees can walk freely and be heard (Barr 2019). As one of the participants in the 2025 walk has put it, the fusing of multi-day walks with storytelling produces ‘a new vocabulary of protest’, in which the conversational mode of engagement between walkers and civil society is ‘profoundly dignified and effective’ (Shore Banks 2025). In fact, the Project has created a walking community that challenges the restrictions of movement and voice, communicating ‘the realities of detention and the ongoing impact of those realities on individual lives’ (Herd 2021, 152).

This communication is articulated through several practices, apart from the yearly walks and other monthly walks that keep the community connected, as well as coordinated with other solidarity walks in the international context. The practices notably include the publication of the refugees’ life narratives in the volumes of *Refugee Tales*, edited by David Herd and Anna Pincus. So far, five volumes have been published (2016, 2017, 2019, 2021, and 2024) by Comma Press, which gives the proceeds from the books to the GDWG and Kent Refugee Help charities. Although volumes III, IV, and V include some tales authored by the refugees themselves, most of the narratives are collaboratively created by the refugee and an established writer, in the aforesaid process of ‘dialogic co-construction’.

Following the Chaucerian template, the tales are entitled with a trait that identifies the protagonist as an individual, followed by ‘as told to’ and the writer’s name. This formula foregrounds two key issues in the configuration of the tales: first, it highlights a process of individualisation that demarcates each refugee’s personal experience (Fuentes Antrás 2024, 189), as opposed to the depiction of refugees as dehumanised hordes or waves (Espíritu Gandhi and Nguyen 2023, 3). Second, the ‘as told to’ expression raises the question of entitlement pointed out earlier in connection with the narrativisation of traumatic memories (Shuman 2005). This calls attention to the power dynamics inherent in collaborative life writing, which entails ethical dilemmas in terms of representation and appropriation (Couser 2004; Rupp 2023). In this context, the testimony about refugees has been critically examined by Liisa H. Malkki (1996, 390) as resulting in dehumanising speechlessness and silencing. Similarly, Gillian Whitlock has interrogated how refugee narratives are controlled and contained (2006, 18), arguing that ‘testimony from refugees and asylum seekers fails to

achieve sustained recognition' (Whitlock 2006, 81). All this brings to the fore the notion of the voice (whose voice?) and the issue of narrative authority in relation to refugees (Malkki 1996; Qasmiyeh 2025).

In the 'as told to' format of *Refugee Tales*, voice consists of two 'I's: that of the biographical subject (the refugee) and that of the go-between writer as the biographer (Rupp 2023). Their common narrative envisions 'new relations of trust through hospitable form' (Rupp 2023, 73), and so the co-narration in *Refugee Tales* has been welcomed as simultaneously offering protection to refugees while making their stories heard (Rupp 2023, 69–70). As contended by Sandra Mayer (2023), the collaborative effort behind *Refugee Tales* decentres authorship while recentring the process of storytelling as 'an act of remembrance, recording, testimony, and [...] recognition' (137). By emphasising plurality and polyphony, with a chorus of voices, the tales reveal the potential of storytelling as an instrument of socio-political activism (Mayer 2023, 128). In the light of this, the present article favours a positive view of the writer–refugee relationship in *Refugee Tales*, envisaging the writer's empathic listening to the refugee as performative and transformative.

The potential of storytelling for socio-political activism has been enhanced by other strategies implemented within the Project, such as *28 Tales for 28 Days* (2018), a series of writers' and actors' readings of *Refugee Tales* that were recorded and made available online (<https://www.28for28.org>). The choice of 28 was motivated by the fact that one of the urgent claims by the Project is an immediate 28-day time limit on immigration detention, as detailed in the document summarising the findings of the Walking Inquiry into Immigration Detention ('Summary of findings of the Walking Inquiry into Immigration Detention'). The Inquiry was staged between 2019 and 2022, with the goal of extending the scope of the official Public Inquiry into the mistreatment of detainees at Brook House Immigration Removal Centre, which was limited to the period May–October 2017 (Herd 2023, 196).

The findings of the Walking Inquiry were effectively presented at the UK Parliament on 26 October 2022, after overcoming difficulties such as those posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, the Inquiry, supported by evidence and documents like Ridy Wasolua's films (<https://www.gdwg.org.uk/voices-from-detention>), was underpinned by two principles: its direction should be determined by people with lived experience of detention and its deliberations had to be shaped by the act of walking (Herd 2021, 143). This second principle was hindered by the outbreak of the pandemic, and for some months the Inquiry had to meet online, on Zoom, described by Herd in 2021 as the place 'where the whole world gathers these days' (144).

As in the Walking Inquiry, the impact of coronavirus was strongly felt in other aspects of the Refugee Tales Project, too, including the annual walks and the tales themselves. Lockdown and social distancing made walking en masse impossible in 2020 and 2021; instead, the walk dispersed, and participants were brought together by means of online meetings (Herd 2021, 146), which involved people from over twenty countries worldwide. As a result, *Refugee Tales IV* contains tales set in different countries apart from the UK, the setting of the previous volumes and of *Refugee Tales V*. Moreover, the immediate and long-lasting effects of the disease on refugees' experience can be detected in a number of narratives: COVID-19 emerges as a context or as content of remembering in eight (out of fourteen) tales in *Refugee Tales IV*, as well as in the Prologue and in the Afterword; in *Refugee Tales V*, the presence of the pandemic is not so pervasive, and it can be traced in four (out of sixteen) tales, and in the Afterword.

The shadow of the pandemic already looms over *Refugee Tales IV* in its veiled presence in the Prologue, where Shami Chakrabarti gives voice to an ambiguous 'Time Traveller' that signs the text as 'A. Einstein'. This first-person speaker characterises war as a disease, referring to the Second World War as 'a deadly global pandemic' (Chakrabarti 2021, vii), in a description that carries poignant overtones for the post-COVID-19 readers of the tale. The

image of the ‘deadly global pandemic’ captures the sense of how, as the back cover blurb of *Refugee Tales IV* puts it, ‘the coronavirus pandemic defies borders — leaving those who are detained even more vulnerable’. As a matter of fact, the effects and consequences of COVID-19 were more severely suffered by migrants, refugees, and displaced populations (Sachs *et al.* 2022, 1225; Jayan and Dutta 2023, 69), not only from the point of view of health but also from the economic and legal perspectives (Bohnet and Rüegger 2021).

This state of heightened vulnerability, or in other words, the fact that inequalities and forms of surveillance and control were amplified for migrant populations during the pandemic (Kaur-Gill and Dutta 2023, 4), goes hand in hand, so my contention goes, with the intensification of two parameters associated with refugees’ status and daily life. First, the process of waiting, characterised by uncertainty and unpredictability (Turnbull 2016, 63); second, the stasis and lack of movement of life in detention (Mayer *et al.*, 2023, 7) and in asylum seeking.

These two parameters will be recalled in the following sections of the article, which analyse a selection of four tales from the two post-pandemic volumes of *Refugee Tales*, in the light of the interdisciplinary intersections of remembering, narration, and migration explored above. The selected tales are set in the UK, so they explicitly address the indefinite and arbitrary nature of detention in this country, as suffered by the protagonists, whose true names are safely hidden or anonymised under a capital letter. These tales are representative of the *Refugee Tales* collections from two points of view: first, they are ‘stories of flight’ not only in the literal sense of physical movement in and between different countries but also in terms of the bureaucratic journey through the process of asylum claim in the UK. Second, they focus on the psychological effects of detention, with the recurrent presence of haunting images in the protagonists’ memories. Moreover, the selected tales narrativise COVID-19 in the (re)telling of the refugees’ autobiographical meaning-making through communicative remembering.

In order to underline the collaborative nature of the compositional process of the tales, the selected narratives are ‘as told to’ writers, bringing to the fore the centrality of empathic listening and co-construction. In terms of the refugee–writer interaction, the tales are paired in two groups according to the criterion of the visibility of the dialogue between the refugee and the writer as a frame for the tale: in the first two tales (‘The Waiting Man’s Tale’ and ‘The Host’s Tale’), the conversation is the explicit frame where remembering is enacted; in the second group (‘The Chef’s Tale’ and ‘The Footballer’s Tale’), although there can be some references to the context of the meeting between the refugee and the writer, the stories are not explicitly framed, and the refugees’ life experiences are directly recalled in an exercise of narration.

Remembering through conversation in ‘The Waiting Man’s Tale’ (*Refugee Tales IV*) and ‘The Host’s Tale’ (*Refugee Tales V*)

These two tales are framed by a conversation between the refugee and the writer in the context of the pandemic and its aftermath. The dialogue is a ‘listening encounter’ (Gardner 2023) which prompts the refugees’ co-construction of their life narratives through the communicative interaction with the writers. Such frames, which could be compared with the prologues preceding some of the *Canterbury Tales*, confer a dual structure to these tales, in terms of Katherine G. Young’s conceptualisation of the ‘storyrealm’ – the conversational immediacy, the situation of telling – and the ‘taleworld’ – the events in the story, or in this case, the life story (Young 1987).

In ‘The Waiting Man’s Tale’ (as told to Rachel Seiffert), the storyrealm is set in the present of the COVID-19 lockdown, which prevents physical contact between the writer and the refugee, anonymised as ‘G’. In ‘these plague days’, the tale opens with the acknowledgement

of the usefulness of online communication in the situation of social distance, highlighting its strangeness: 'We both [smile]: me before my laptop; you, with your phone screen in hand. We nod our grateful hellos, glad that we can speak across the miles like this, make contact in this strange pandemic time marked by distance, by separation' (Seiffert and 'G' 2021, 29). Seiffert's access to G's voice and image becomes crucial because her empathic listening is not restricted to the refugee's verbal account, but she also pays attention to his gestures, signalling the relevance of both body and discourse in the telling of traumatic memories (Jensen 2014, 152). G's changing mood in the narrative dialogue is reflected in the waving of his palm, his shrugging and frowning, and above all, in recurring gestures like his smile or the passing of his hand across his face.

These gestures accompany the process of communicative remembering, which is prompted by two questions on Seiffert's part. The first of them ('how have you been keeping?') triggers G's summary of his past and of his present in a short answer: 'I've been through so much. So much. And now I am stuck, you know? I am really stuck here. Waiting' (Seiffert and 'G' 2021, 29). This passage contains the sentence that, as explained above, is repeated like a litany, condensing in 'so much' the autobiographical memories that are described later in the tale. Moreover, the refugee's answer refers to static waiting as the defining action in his present condition (with 'waiting' and the passive 'being stuck' repeated several times), to the point that it is the expression that identifies him in the title.

The answer is followed by the writer's retelling of G's recent memories, which are characterised by two features that persist throughout the tale: the use of the second-person singular, transferring the conversational closeness of the storyrealm to the tale-world, and the focus on the understanding between narrator and narratee, in the context of Smorti's *interpretatio auctoris* (favouring empathy) and *interpretatio lectoris* (favouring autobiographical reflection). One instance of *interpretatio lectoris*, already at the beginning of the tale, concerns the key concept of home, when Seiffert recalls the connection between G and London in terms of how 'the city has been home to you. [...] the same south-of-the-river places I call home as well' (Seiffert and 'G' 2021, 29). Home recurs in the dialogic co-construction of the refugee's distant memories, which are narrated after G's online tour around the house where he has been placed by the Home Office: a cosy and orderly house, but in a northern town where the sense of displacement prevails: 'it is not your place. [...] you are reminded [...] that you are out of place there' (Seiffert and 'G' 2021, 31).

The communicative remembering of G's distant past, prompted by Seiffert's second question ('What was before this?'), goes back to the protagonist's childhood days in Ghana, and to the critical point when home became dangerous: 'From my home, I was kidnapped' (Seiffert and 'G' 2021, 32). The painfulness of these memories activates the writer's *interpretatio auctoris* ('But you have been through so much – so much – I remind myself, Seiffert and 'G' 2021, 32; 'Your story is hard to tell – there is so much you have been through', Seiffert and 'G' 2021, 33), and raises the issue of what is communicable and memorable (Duffy 2009, 31), in the light of the unsayable nature of traumatic memories (Andrews 2014, 40): 'uneasy with recalling and retelling what was so hard', 'how to say all this?' (Seiffert and 'G' 2021, 32, 33). These are memories that fulfil the self and social functions, in their role in the formation of both the refugee's identity and his community with the writer; at the same time, they are networked with other autobiographical memories that revolve around episodes of painful deprivation of freedom: G's experiences of imprisonment and detention.

Both episodes take place in the UK as a 'Mother Country' that turns hostile (which connects with Herd's commentary on the hostile migratory environment in the Afterword to *Refugee Tales V*, and with the philological wondering about 'hospitality' and 'hostility' in 'The Host's Tale'), leaving the protagonist 'unwelcome, and on the wrong side of the law' (Seiffert and 'G' 2021, 33). Although both imprisonment and detention last one year and ten months, they are perceived by G as completely different experiences, in terms of their

reasons and effects. On the one hand, G was sent to prison as a result of his involvement in drug selling, and this episode gave him the opportunity to work and to confer an ethical level to his memories: 'You could think and talk through your experiences; you could help others' (Seiffert and 'G' 2021, 34). On the other hand, detention was arbitrary, and it has left G in a state of confusion, anxiety, and fear, with the images of detention ('the room without windows [...]; the terrible uncertainty; [...] the long meetings and telephone calls [...]', Seiffert and 'G' 2021, 34) 'haunting' him.

This emotional state, and the recent memory of a letter from the Home Office demanding money and documents, is counterbalanced by the protagonist's active decision to stop 'dwelling on sadness' (Seiffert and 'G' 2021; 30, 31, 36), and his positive resolution to live in the day to day, 'finding [small] ways to look forwards' (Seiffert and 'G' 2021, 36). This hopeful note presides over the ending of the protagonist–writer's dialogue, with G's unfading smile on the screen, and the writer's reflection on the narrativisation of the refugee's memories: 'But I want to pass this on now – all that you have said to me. / How hard the wait is / The so much you have been through. / And what it takes to live each day as you do' (Seiffert and 'G' 2021, 36).

The reflection on the travelling of memories from the conversational medium to the narrative one also emerges in the conclusion of 'The Host's Tale' (as told to Tessa McWatt). Here, the frame is set in the aftermath of the pandemic, when the writer and the refugee ('Y') can talk face to face, as they meet in a Sudanese restaurant in London. The context of the storyrealm is specified in the news that McWatt checks on her phone as she waits for Y's arrival: 'news of war, the ongoing pandemic and our climate crisis' (McWatt and 'Y' 2024, 1). Such news (demarcated in italics) focuses on the forced displacement triggered by the Russo-Ukrainian war, and it surfaces three times in the frame of the tale, providing a counterpoint for the life story of Y's memories of flight and refugeehood. The first of these instances ('*more than three million people have fled the country*', McWatt and 'Y' 2024, 1) precedes the beginning of the conversation between Y and McWatt, when the protagonist's distant memories travel into the chronological sequence of the writer's third-person narrative in the past tense.

These are painful memories of racial persecution and unfair imprisonment with torture in Sudan, followed by the experience of being smuggled to Libya, where Y was sold by the smugglers into forced, slavery-like, labour. The narrative of distant memories, in which Y's verbatim words from previous conversations are marked by quotation marks, is interrupted by his arrival at the restaurant, with a smile that is recurrently mentioned by the writer. The protagonist's first expression in the storyrealm is 'Welcome', a keyword in the tale alongside 'hospitality'. Both relate to two salient elements in the narrative: the allusions to food and the references to the pandemic.

Food works as a temporal marker in the frame since the dialogue is chronologically structured according to the sequence of the Sudanese meal shared by McWatt and Y. This notion of food sharing (like that of eating together) recurs in the tale in connection with community and belonging, and so as an expression of hospitality and welcome: 'He describes the hospitality of Sudanese people: everyone eating together, meals shared with all, and the fact that strangers and foreigners are welcome'; 'If you come you will be welcome. [...] We welcome foreigners' (McWatt and 'Y' 2024; 4, 8). Moreover, food also plays a mnemonic role in Y's association between the image of 'oily potatoes' and 'his recounting of his time in England so far' (McWatt and 'Y' 2024, 3).

Food and COVID-19 converge in the retelling of Y's memory of his arrival in the UK, dangerously crossing the Channel in an inflatable dinghy, on the verge of drowning and death. The temporal setting of this experience is described by appealing to a COVID-19 memory shared with the reader: 'On a pre-dawn morning, while the first Covid-19 lockdown was still in place' (McWatt and 'Y' 2024, 5). As Y is rescued and taken by the British Border

Force to Dover, he is offered hot chocolate, and fish and chips. This episode marks a turning point in the protagonist's story of flight, from movement in Italy and France to immobility in the UK. After escaping from the Lampedusa refugee camp and the Calais jungle, Y has to remain static, 'waiting', in hotels in York and Hounslow which are transformed into refuges for asylum seekers during the COVID-19 lockdown. The remembrance of the hotels as 'welcoming, not hostile' (McWatt and 'Y' 2024, 6) foregrounds the question of hospitality, and readers are invited ('as we now know') to reflect on how lockdown kindness and compassion were exceptional and fleeting (McWatt and 'Y' 2024, 6).

The protagonist's immobility is prominent, above all, in his experience of detention in Brook House Immigration Removal Centre. The narration of this memory differs from the rest of Y's life narrative in the absence of specific temporal markers, and in the reference to silence, which is prompted by the traumatic memory of witnessing mental illness and suicide in the detention centre. McWatt's empathic listening ('I try to break the mood', McWatt and 'Y' 2024, 6) favours the resumption of remembering, which evokes an image of life in detention that echoes G's haunting memory in 'The Waiting Man's Tale': 'Detention was like jail. [...] Small windows [...] the men walking past his room' (McWatt and 'Y' 2024, 7). Narrating this experience allows Y to appeal to an ethical-political dimension ('I want people to know that [...] we come here because we have no choice', McWatt and 'Y' 2024, 7), which recurs in his answers to the writer's questions about his plans for the future, and about the reason for their collaborative effort of communicative remembering: "'Why do you want me to tell your story?' [...] 'My idea likes yours,' [...] 'People think that refugees come here just to steal jobs, but they would not come if they did not have a really strong reason to risk life'" (McWatt and 'Y' 2024, 7).

The conversation, and the fact that the lunch is unexpectedly paid by a man who has greeted Y in the restaurant ('The man with whom Y shared food and sleep and anger and hope in the Calais jungle paid for our lunch', McWatt and 'Y' 2024, 9), leaves McWatt confused and full of conflicting thoughts. They lead the writer to reflect on her duty to make the protagonist's memories available and effective for the reader: 'I must conjure words that will describe the experience of hearing this story – the etymologies of hostile and hospitality, of stranger and estranged' (McWatt and 'Y' 2024, 9–10). This reflection on the affective and political power of language provides a circular structure to the tale, which opens with names of Sudanese food – an expression of community and hospitality – and concludes with a revision of the concept of 'home' as 'an action. Something to make, something to give. [...] An act of decency' (McWatt and 'Y' 2024, 10).

Narrating memories in 'The Chef's Tale' (*Refugee Tales IV*) and 'The Footballer's Tale' (*Refugee Tales V*)

As in 'The Host's Tale', food plays a key role in 'The Chef's Tale' (as told to Simon Smith), where it denotes agency and self-fulfilment on the part of the protagonist, anonymised as 'S'. Like 'The Footballer's Tale', 'The Chef's Tale' is not framed by an explicit conversational interaction; instead, the online meeting described at the beginning of the tale dissolves into a second-person narrative that recounts the refugee's memories of his life experience. Such a meeting is conditioned by the COVID-19 lockdown and social distance, as in 'The Waiting Man's Tale', and it takes place in the online space of Zoom, which enables communication 'in this new locked down reality, a new kind of imprisonment we all now share, in slow-mo, distanced, time-stopped' (Smith and 'S' 2021, 93). Cyberspace gives Smith access to the protagonist's image ('glasses [...] thick beard, a smile', Smith and 'S' 2021, 93) and to his voice, which in its narrative transformation is associated with identity and belonging.

The absence of an explicit dialogue framing the tale does not imply an erasure of the sense of a collaborative co-construction of remembering between the writer and the

refugee. On the contrary, the use of ‘you’ throughout the narrative (as in ‘The Waiting Man’s Tale’ and ‘The Footballer’s Tale’) favours a conversational closeness between Smith and S, reinforced by the frequent apostrophes to the protagonist. This closeness is also enhanced by the prevailing use of the present tense, which at the same time produces an effect of temporal immediacy between the narration and the reader, while emphasising the truthfulness of the account, as in ethnographies (Shuman 2005, 154).

The question of truthfulness is raised already at the beginning of the narrative, with the dichotomy of history versus story, in the evocation of S’s distant memories of political conflict in his home country: ‘History and stories retold, a nation reinvented’ (Smith and ‘S’ 2021, 93). These distant memories are condensed in a few paragraphs, in the same way as the protagonist’s forced displacement is summarised in three lines: ‘You have to leave [...] Your mother and father urge you to go. You flee’ (Smith and ‘S’ 2021, 94). In this sense, ‘The Chef’s Tale’ can be understood as a story of flight beyond the usual conceptualisation of flight in terms of movement, mobility, and stasis; alternatively, the flight it narrates is the ‘second journey’ that refugees must negotiate ‘through unwelcoming UK asylum policies and practices’ (Kirkwood *et al.* 2016, 183). This is, indeed, the centre of attention of ‘The Chef’s Tale’, which focuses on S’s experience of the unfair and dysfunctional system of asylum claim, and of the appalling and harmful conditions of life in detention. Before this, and setting a contrast to what follows, the narrative retells S’s ‘new life’ in his first years in the UK (Smith and ‘S’ 2021, 94–95); these are positive memories of ‘a new environment, new surroundings, new challenges’ (Smith and ‘S’ 2021, 95), and they play an identity-forming role in the protagonist’s personal and professional development.

S’s development, successfully combining his accounting studies with work in a restaurant, is interrupted in 2014, when he finds himself in the need to apply for asylum, and especially in 2017, when he is detained for the first time. The legal procedure of asylum claim is depicted as a stressful and onerous process, full of exasperating contradictions and discouraging obstacles: the asylum application, submissions of evidence, the screening and the substantial interviews, removal directions, applications to remain, refusals, deportation threats, bails, counter arguments, judicial reviews, the court of appeal, and reporting events (Smith and ‘S’ 2021, 96–100). The protagonist has to cope with opaque practices, changing rules, and with conditions affected by the legal implications of COVID-19 (Bohnet and Rüegger 2021, 357).

Alongside this bureaucratic nightmare, Smith’s narrative portrays S’s successive experiences of detention since 2017, when the first episode triggered trauma in its being networked with a previous autobiographical memory of an arbitrary arrest (Smith and ‘S’ 2021, 96). The evocation of detention details the physical and criminal features of the detention centre (‘This place is big, like a prison. You are locked up four times a day, [...] Drugs are being sold’, Smith and ‘S’ 2021, 100), together with the psychological environment of staff violence and cruelty, and the witnessing of suicide attempts. Above all, the emphasis is placed on the emotional effects of detention on the protagonist, whose distress leads him to depression, binge drinking, and difficulty to go back to normal life. The retelling of the memory of this difficulty bears the trace of Smith’s empathic listening, with his attention to S’s expressive reaction: ‘You talk, emotionally now, about the first day you came out of detention’ (Smith and ‘S’ 2021, 100).

This instance of *interpretatio auctoris* recurs in the final part of the tale, which is devoted to the anticipation of the protagonist’s promising future as a chef: ‘cooking [...] has gradually become your profession, and you speak with real enthusiasm about it’ (Smith and ‘S’ 2021, 101). S’s engagement in ‘the business side of food’ (Smith and ‘S’ 2021, 101) fulfils a similar role to that of autobiographical meaning-making, since it enables him to recover his confidence, minimising the psychological distress caused by detention, and favouring the protagonist’s self-continuity. The narrative concludes thus with a hopeful open ending in

which COVID-19 is no longer a source of heightened vulnerability, but just a temporal marker in a project that endows S with agency and self-fulfilment: 'S, you are in the process of opening a free community food hub in East London during the COVID-19 crisis. [...] you want to open a pay-as-you-can-afford restaurant – where the needy and homeless get to eat for free' (Smith and 'S' 2021, 102).

In contrast with 'The Chef's Tale', hope does not permeate the ending of 'The Footballer's Tale' (as told to Guy Gunaratne), which concludes on a bitter note, with an allusion to the protagonist's sad smile as he asserts: '*I will keep trying. But, honestly, I really don't know for how long*' (Gunaratne and 'Footballer' 2024, 144). This is one of the moments when the Footballer's verbatim words (in italics) are inserted in the tale, which is not framed by any specific dialogue between the writer and the refugee (who is given no name or initial), but refers to different communicative interactions, free from COVID-19 restrictions. Such interactions include face-to-face and online conversations, as well as WhatsApp messages, which are interspersed in the course of the second-person narrative that retells the Footballer's memories of his story of flight. As in 'The Chef's Tale', this story of flight focuses on the 'second journey' of asylum seeking that the protagonist has undertaken since his arrival in Britain.

This moment of arrival at Heathrow Airport is a recurrent memory that evokes the reason for the protagonist's escape from Nigeria: '*I am bisexual. I felt my life was in danger*' (Gunaratne and 'Footballer' 2024, 139), reflecting how the asylum claims of LGBTI individuals are beginning to be recognised (Espiritu Gandhi and Nguyen 2023, 3). The details of such danger are left unexplained, and this fact points to the relevance of empathic listening in 'The Footballer's Tale'. This is so because the writer pays special attention to the protagonist's weariness and distress at having to repeat the account of his persecution again and again, 'to solicitors, lawyers, judges' (Gunaratne and 'Footballer' 2024, 140); instead of reliving those episodes, the narrative gives access to two memories of the protagonist's past that are visually invoked through the description of photographs.

The photographs convey the image of his thwarted vocation of becoming a famous footballer in the distant past, and that of his role as a father in the recent past. Both memories fulfil a self or identity-forming role, facilitating the Footballer's autobiographical meaning-making, and providing a sense of self-continuity with the present. First, his experience as a footballer, associated with agency ('*I had big dreams and was always active*', Gunaratne and 'Footballer' 2024, 140), has enabled him to help young people as a football coach lately; second, the memory of his adopted daughter gives a focus to his current dream to work and support her. Moreover, this memory plays a social or community-forming function, since the writer points out that, whenever he and the Footballer speak, they talk about their daughters (Gunaratne and 'Footballer' 2024, 144).

The empathy existing in their relationship surfaces in the listening encounters that are recalled throughout the tale. In these dialogues, Gunaratne's *interpretatio auctoris* is enacted both verbally and visually, as he listens to and interprets not only the refugee's voice and gestures (as in 'The Waiting Man's Tale') but also the emotions that lie behind them. In this sense, the writer describes the Footballer's changing smile (Gunaratne and 'Footballer' 2024; 140, 143, 144), his widening eyes, or his rubbing of his eyes and head, while at the same time Gunaratne is attentive to the message and meaning of the protagonist's voice, detecting frustration and sadness, relief, desperation and regret, and fear. This empathic listening contrasts with the lack of hearing received from the immigration system, which enhances the refugee's sense of invisibility: '*it's like no-one wants to hear me talk. Even when I do talk they do not want to hear what I am saying*' (Gunaratne and 'Footballer' 2024, 144). Counterbalancing this invisibility, the narrative confers overt presence on the Footballer's voice, which is audible in the communicative remembering of his experience of asylum claim.

This experience includes life in detention and the post-detention period. Unlike memories of detention in the previously analysed tales, the image associated with detention in 'The Footballer's Tale' is not the space of the cell but the clothes that the protagonist is made to wear, a sort of uniform that erases his individuality. Beyond this image, the focus is placed, once more, on the psychological effects of detention: 'you felt confused, felt desperate' (Gunaratne and 'Footballer' 2024, 141). Having witnessed suicide, the Footballer only finds solace in his meetings with the writer and with a volunteer from GDWG. The memory of the protagonist's relationship with this charity is correlated with a therapeutic effect ('a listening ear [that] was transformative', Gunaratne and 'Footballer' 2024, 142), and it prompts a reflection on the work of GDWG, together with an ethical–political message about detention: 'detention is completely arbitrary, and results only in deeply felt trauma and devastates mental health' (Gunaratne and 'Footballer' 2024, 142).

The memory of detention foregrounds the uncertainty resulting from temporal indeterminacy, which recurs in the post-detention period. The dialogic co-construction of the memory of this period pays attention to its depressing effects, aggravated by the curtailment of the footballer's agency, because asylum seekers in the UK are not allowed to work until their claim is processed (Kirkwood *et al.* 2016, 100): 'You want to offer more than what you are permitted to give' (Gunaratne and 'Footballer' 2024, 143). This situation, which the narrative exposes with the use of the passive voice throughout the tale, exerts a pernicious influence on the refugee's physical and mental condition ('I cannot be active anymore', Gunaratne and 'Footballer' 2024, 144), as he is relegated to indefinite waiting. Waiting intensifies with COVID-19, when 'the world shuttered closed' (Gunaratne and 'Footballer' 2024, 142), and since then, the Footballer has remained in a seemingly endless cycle of repeating his story again and again: 'It is now four years I have been waiting. I have told my story for many people. So many times' (Gunaratne and 'Footballer' 2024, 142).

Conclusion

The fruitless repetition of the Footballer's story, unheard by the immigration system, contrasts with its effective retelling in the context of *Refugee Tales*. As it narrativises the refugee's story of flight in the process of asylum claim, 'The Footballer's Tale' exposes the unfairness and opacity of a system that leaves the protagonist in a state of psychological distress and endless waiting. This exposure is enacted as well in the other narratives analysed above, which manage to convey to a wide audience of listeners and readers the ethical–political message about the need to put an end to indefinite and arbitrary detention in the UK. In the explored tales, detention is associated with haunting images of life in detention centres and, above all, with the psychological effects of its long-lasting and traumatic consequences.

Such effects permeate the processes of communicative remembering through which the writer and the refugee co-construct the latter's autobiographical memories in a dialogic interaction. In this co-construction, each refugee's individuality is preserved, and their narrative voices display distinctive qualities. Thus, G in 'The Waiting Man's Tale' reinforces the centrality of space as denoting home and belonging, with a resilient attitude that underlies his positive resolution to live in the day to day. Like G, S in 'The Chef's Tale' also emerges as an active individual, whose agency and pursuit of self-fulfilment are projected on his professional engagement with food. In 'The Host's Tale', food presides over Y's attention to hospitality, welcome, and community. Contrasting hospitality in his native country and abroad, he appeals to an ethical–political dimension in his voicing of refugees' need to flee to countries like the UK. The ethical–political message is also explicit in 'The Footballer's Tale', where the protagonist reflects on the therapeutic effect of being listened to. In the course of the tale, his sense of invisibility is registered by the writer, whose choice of the second

person for the narration (as in ‘The Chef’s Tale’) favours the dialogic closeness between the writer and the refugee, even in the absence of a conversational frame like that of ‘The Waiting Man’s Tale’ or of ‘The Host’s Tale’.

The writer–refugee interaction is conditioned by the restrictions of COVID-19 in the narratives of *Refugee Tales IV*, where the memories of the pandemic surface in connection with the intensification of the refugees’ waiting. This recurs as well in *Refugee Tales V*, where COVID-19 also works as a temporal marker in the narrativisation of the experiences evoked in the dialogic interaction. In this way, digital intimacy resulting from social distance permeates the encounter between the refugee and the writer in ‘The Waiting Man’s Tale’; similarly, cyberspace provides the setting for their meeting during lockdown in ‘The Chef’s Tale’, where COVID-19 heightens the protagonist’s vulnerability in the legal procedure of asylum claim, with changing conditions, rules, and deadlines. Although the pandemic restrictions no longer control the communicative exchanges between refugees and writers in ‘The Host’s Tale’ or in ‘The Footballer’s Tale’, both narratives recall the enforced suspension of refugees’ lives in the stasis of lockdown during the long and onerous process of seeking asylum.

All in all, the sense of collaborative understanding between the writer and the refugee persists in all the tales. This understanding rests to a great extent on the writer’s empathic listening, which pays attention to the refugee’s words and gestures in the articulation of *interpretatio auctoris*. Empathy plays a crucial role in the elicitation of the refugee’s memories, which fulfil self (or identity-forming) and social (or community-forming) functions, favouring the refugee’s autobiographical meaning-making. Ultimately, remembering through (re)telling enables the travelling of the refugees’ personal accounts from the individual to the communal, and so the visibility of their life stories urges the need for an active change.

Data availability statement. The article will be freely available online on the MMM website as well as institutional repositories complying with OA guidelines.

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