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The narrative practices of hostile environments: the story of the nation-as-family and the story of security

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This article contributes to research into the importance of storytelling in asylum practice by examining the narratives used to promote and justify Hostile Environment policies. The two narrative practices identified are the “story of the nation-as-family”, which defines national belonging predominantly by markers of race and ethnicity, and the “story of security”, whereby racialized refugees are framed as potential threats to the nation’s socio-economic stability. The former propagates a notion of consanguinity that works to exclude and silence people seeking asylum from non-European nations. The latter sees the rhetoric of a “clash of civilisations” so central to the “War on Terror” taken up in policy debates about climate-induced migration. An analysis of the way in which these stories are staged and critiqued in the writing of Abdulrazak Gurnah and Stephen Collis reveals how they elide the relationship between forced migration and the history of European colonialism. In exploring this elision, this article insists on the significance of literary texts as spaces where monocultural conceptions of belonging can be confronted, and where understanding Europe’s colonial past is established as an integral part of hearing the stories of refugees in the present.

KEYWORDS

hostile environment, nationalism, colonialism, climate migration, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Stephen Collis

Introduction

The aim of this article is to explore the stories that are constructed by those who administer Hostile Environment policies, and thus the stories that are mobilized as a means of justifying the legitimacy of the national border, the detention and exclusion of refugees, and the proliferation of anti-immigration sentiment in “host” countries. This examination is rooted in the awareness that, when proposing immigration policy for public and parliamentary approval, States adopt their own set of narrative practices based on conceptions of national belonging and national security that work to delegitimize the stories of people seeking asylum. Existing research into the relationship between refugee policies and the importance of storytelling has productively explored the ways in which States require asylum applications to provide a comprehensive narrative of persecution. That the Hostile Environment gains legitimacy through the formation of stories is an often-overlooked aspect of debates about the treatment of people seeking asylum.

In examining the narrative practices of the Hostile Environment here, I identify two stories that are central to the manufacture of anti-refugee policy and public sentiment across the wealthy nations of the Global North. The first is what I am calling *the story of the nation-as-family*, which draws upon notions of national, cultural, and racial consanguinity to designate individuals as either legitimate or illegitimate members of the citizenry. The second is *the story of security*, which frames refugees as potential agents of terrorism and socio-economic instability. The former has its roots in a long tradition of nationalist discourse that sees the nation-state as being held together by an immutable sense of cultural cohesion based on markers of race and ethnicity. The latter became a prominent response to immigration since the US/UK-led “War on Terror” at the beginning of the 21st century and is increasingly being deployed as a means of policing the migration of people fleeing climate emergencies across the Global South.

In the sections that follow I will outline the significance of storytelling in existing scholarship on refugees and asylum in order to unpack the specific means by which the narrative practices of the Hostile Environment operate. I will then examine how the story of the nation-as-family is staged and critiqued in the novel *By the Sea* (Gurnah, 2002) by the Nobel Prize-winning author and former refugee Abdulrazak Gurnah. In this novel, Gurnah dramatizes the weaponization of the story of the nation-as-family by a British immigration official when faced with a refugee fleeing post-colonial Zanzibar. In doing so, the novel shows how the nation-as-family story supports a monocultural conception of national belonging that simultaneously elides the historical, political, and cultural connections between the former colonial metropole and its colonized “margins”. The story of the nation-as-family is returned to by Gurnah in “The Arriver’s Tale”, his contribution to the inaugural volume of *Refugee Tales* (Gurnah, 2016), but in a manner that also exposes the contradictions inherent to the story of security, where the significance of religious affiliation is emphasized. Analyzing this feature of Gurnah’s tale will lead in the final section to a reading of Stephen Collis’s “The Lawyer’s Tale”, also taken from *Refugee Tales*, as a means of exploring how the rhetoric of national security that flourished during the “War on Terror” has been retained in the securitization of refugees fleeing ecological breakdown. I will show how Collis interrogates the story of security through his refusal to see environmental breakdown as a crisis caused by an undifferentiated humanity and his insistence that it be understood as a legacy of European colonialism and the extraction and use of fossil fuels. This analysis of both Gurnah’s and Collis’s tales ultimately reveals that an understanding of Europe’s colonial past is necessary to both interrogate the narrative practices of the Hostile Environment and to hear the stories of people seeking asylum in the present.

Embedded and deflective stories

Storytelling has been identified as an integral part of the appeal for sanctuary by people seeking asylum: it is the primary means by which credibility is determined in relation to the specificities of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

“Refugee determinations”, writes Millbank (2009, p. 2), “involve the most intensely narrative mode of legal adjudication” since the credibility of an asylum claim is judged on whether the claimant’s testimony convincingly carries the “ring of truth”. Faced with the requirement to prove a credible fear of persecution in their country of origin, “the [asylum] claimant”, as Woolley (2017, p. 380) notes, “must narrate themselves into a position of legitimacy”. The asylum system thus produces what Woolley has called the “asylum story”, which names “an idealized version of refugeehood on which the civic incorporation of the asylum seeker depends and which circulates in a narrative economy that sets the terms for the enunciation of refugee experience” (378–9). This means that “refugee or asylum-seeker status is both a legal determination and a subjectivity shaped by and through language and storytelling”, and “narrative interpretation” provides the “basis on which the state [...] makes a decision on asylum protection” (379, 378).

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that storytelling is fundamental to the establishment of immigration policies that must seek parliamentary and public approval. In other words, while Millbank and Woolley are correct that the *interpretation* of refugee narratives by the State plays a prominent role in determining the material conditions of people seeking asylum, the State’s own processes of narrative *formation* are also key. There exists a set of stories that are wielded by the State in conjunction with the forms of border control, detention, and administrative processing that define the material manifestations of governmental power over people seeking asylum. The State’s stories weave an impersonal, bureaucratic series of legalistic decisions into broader cultural narratives of national belonging, based predominantly on race, ethnicity, religion, and class, that define how the “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) of the nation-state understands itself and its relations and obligations to those considered to be “outsiders”. Comprehending and critiquing this set of narrative practices assists in the forging of new and alternative narratives about belonging.

Broadly speaking, the State’s stories operate at the macro and micro levels of asylum and immigration discourse. At the macro level there exists what we can define as *embedded* stories; these are narratives that are embedded in pre-existing notions of national identity and are freighted with long-standing concerns about cultural stability and preservation. The story of the nation-as-family and the story of security represent two interlinked examples of embedded stories that will be the focus of this article. At the micro level, Hostile Environments mobilize what can be thought of as *deflective* stories: where *embedded* stories are “positive” in the sense that they align border control with aspects of national life that are framed as being jeopardized and in need of protection (i.e., cultural cohesion and socio-economic stability), *deflective* stories are “negative” in that they ostensibly identify problems that need to be protected against or stamped out.

Deflective stories tend to speak directly to more complex but also *ad hoc* geopolitical conditions, as opposed to the national and cultural metanarratives deployed by embedded stories. Following the so-called “Windrush scandal”, for instance, the UK government under Priti Patel as Home Secretary pivoted its Hostile Environment rhetoric away from the outright scapegoating of migrants themselves and toward “criminal gangs” and “people

trafficking”¹. Such rhetoric conflates immigration with modern slavery and incorrectly gives the impression that there are “legal” routes of entry into the UK for people seeking asylum. Facing criticism of its plans to relocate refugees to Rwanda, moreover, the same government adopted a stance that any criticisms of the plan are driven by racism and xenophobia toward African nations, as opposed to being rooted in an understanding of Rwanda’s history of human rights abuses. Deflective stories thus demonstrate how the scourges of criminality and racism are weaponized by the State as *ad hoc* responses aimed at deflecting criticism of anti-refugee policies. An interrogation of such deflective rhetoric is of course necessary, but my concern here is with an attempt to define and interrogate the more enduring, macro stories that are deployed by those who administer Hostile Environments.

The story of the nation-as-family

That the material reality of any nation-state is upheld by the abstract and imagined conception of the nation is a truth widely held since the publication of Benedict Anderson’s (Anderson, 1983) seminal *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Nations are “imagined”, writes Anderson (1983), “because even the members of the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear from them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” ([1983] 2006, 6, original emphasis). In this work Anderson is not, of course, suggesting that nations do not exist. Rather, in asserting that the “political community” of the nation is “imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6), Anderson is highlighting how the real-world borders and cultures of the nation rely heavily on stories of “a deep, horizontal comradeship” (7) across geographical space and temporalities. This sense of national comradeship is “deep” in the sense that it stretches back in time and is based on a notion of antiquity, and it is “horizontal” because, theoretically at least, there is no inherent hierarchy: “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each [nation]” (7), one person’s attachment to the nation is no more valuable than another. Central to Anderson’s conceptualization of the nation as an “imagined community” is the availability of material texts, what Anderson calls “print-capitalism” (44): it is no accident, he says, that the idea of the nation-state replaced religious affiliations in the 18th century, around the same time as the wide proliferation across Europe of novels and newspapers. These new written forms, predominantly consumed by the newly formed bourgeoisie, allowed for the wider limits of the national community to be imagined: they involve characters living different lives simultaneously and they use a standardized language that transcends regional differences.

More recently, Lauenstein et al. (2015) have argued that Anderson’s conception of the nation as an “imagined community” does not sufficiently expose the gendered and patriarchal inequalities of nationalism, whereby men are regarded as actively participating in the public sphere of the nation while women are reduced to the private, domestic roles of housewives and mothers or else act as passive symbols of the nation (such examples

include Britannia, Liberty, and Germania). In recognition of the fact that “family metaphors are ubiquitously present within modern national symbols” (Lauenstein et al., 2015, p. 326–7), Lauenstein et al. argue for the concept of the nation as an “imagined family”. The notion of the imagined family is “a better framework for considering nations” (312), they say, as it foregrounds the pervasiveness of “the abstract ideal of the nuclear family” (312) in nationalist symbolism and discourse: this ideal can be discerned, for instance, in the terminology of the “mother/fatherland”, one’s “mother tongue”, the idea of the national community as a “brotherhood”, as well as in the history of European colonial domination whereby colonized peoples are infantilized as “children” in need of education and strict ruling.

An investment in the “ideal” nuclear family unit as a microcosm of the nation in nationalist ideology is said to tie “together various relevant descriptive and normative aspects of social organization” (311). Such “normative” characteristics of the family that are projected out to encompass the nation include: “social roles and responsibilities, which are clearly ordered along gendered lines of production and reproduction”; “biological ties of blood relatedness” which makes the family a “metaphor [that] reifies social relations as biologically determined”; “clear hierarchies of age and gender”; and “a clear geographic situatedness” that provide “a sense of a place of origin, belonging and safety” (312, original emphasis). Of particular interest to analyses of the way in which the “imagined family” narrative informs anti-refugee policy and national sentiment is the emphasis that it places on biological determinism and situatedness. Nationalist symbolism that sees “the family as ‘naturally’ mono-racial”, write Lauenstein et al., means that “inequalities such as racial differences are legitimized and obfuscated” (314). Such inequalities in turn are bolstered by the material fact that “place of birth (*ius solis*) and [the] nationality of one’s parents (*ius sanguinis*) are central to contemporary legal definitions of nationality: the situation of one’s biological family determines one’s entitlement to a national citizenship” (314)².

For a critique of the way in which the story of the nation-as-family works to legitimize racism and the systemic exclusion of refugees from the national citizenry, we can turn to the work of the Zanzibarian writer, Abdulrazak Gurnah. Gurnah’s writing is in part informed by his own experience of fleeing the unrest of the post-independence Zanzibar Revolution and seeking asylum in the

¹ See Townsend (2021).

² In a UK context, it is worth noting that the 1981 British Nationality Act (signed in by Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative Party) has meant that British nationality is granted only to children born in Britain who have at least one parent who is already a permanent resident. Critics have seen this Act as imposing legal restrictions on non-white migration, as Salman Rushdie argued in his 1982 essay “The New Empire in Britain”: “This already notorious piece of legislation, expressly designed to deprive black and Asian Britons of their citizenship rights, went through in spite of some, mainly non-white, protests. And because it didn’t really affect the position of the whites you probably didn’t even realize that one of your most ancient rights, a right you had possessed for nine hundred years, was being stolen from you. This was the right to citizenship by virtue of birth, the *ius soli*, or right of the soil. For nine centuries any child born on British soil was British. Automatically. By right. Not by permission of the State. The Nationality Act abolished the *ius soli*. From now on citizenship is a gift of the government” (Rushdie, 1991, 136).

UK, and previous analyses of his novels have productively focused on the way in which they stage the power of storytelling to enable counter-hegemonic forms of agency for refugees. As Chambers (2011, p. 114) notes, “[T]he abandonment of the homeland, and its permanent loss in all but memory and storytelling” is a concern that “resonate[s] throughout [Gurnah’s] oeuvre.” For Steiner (2006, p. 304), “The migrant storytelling” in *By the Sea* in particular functions as a “site of enunciation, where ‘translation’ across time and space creates a present for the narrators.” This is especially the case in terms of the relationship between the two central characters of *By the Sea*, Saleh Omar, who we see experiencing the asylum process first-hand, and Latif, who arrived in England as a refugee but is settled with a teaching job at a University. When the two men first meet in the UK, it is revealed that they had already encountered each other in Zanzibar due to a long-standing disagreement over the ownership of a family home. Yet, it is through the patient process of storytelling and listening, as they sit together in Saleh’s temporary accommodation on the Kent coast, that the two men can understand each other’s pasts, overcome their initial hostility, and develop a friendship. “Saleh’s and Latif’s stories”, writes Steiner, “are translations of a past and a place of departure produced in order to make possible a ‘continued life’ in the present” (320).

This reading is supported by News (2020, p. 132), who maintains that “through the process of asylum, Saleh gives up his agency to construct meaning in all its complexity. Rather, meaning is placed onto him by the asylum apparatus of judiciary, immigration officials and social workers.” By comparison, it is through the encounter between Saleh and Latif, and the working through of their complex, partial memories of a shared history, that “the process of storytelling becomes a way to make new meaning out of painful events that occurred long ago, in a different place” (133). Ultimately, this enables Saleh to “divulge the private narratives that would previously have been dangerous to betray, or simply seen as irrelevant in an asylum system that demands ‘objectivity’” (133). In contributing to this scholarship, the focus of my reading of *By the Sea* will be on the way in which Gurnah confronts the story of the nation-as-family, exposing how it elides the complex history of colonialism whilst objectifying, racializing, and limiting the agency of people seeking asylum.

The key scene in *By the Sea* in which the story of the nation-as-family appears is the border control interview that takes place between Saleh Omar and the officious immigration officer Kevin Edelman. This scene, as News maintains, stages how “the conditions of modern asylum seeking require that Saleh [...] ‘perform’ a story of his life that conforms to the expectations of refugeehood” (125). At the same time, the characterization of Edelman stages the performance of the Hostile Environment’s own dominant stories. After Saleh (who is traveling with a false passport under the name of Mr. Shaaban) utters the only two words that he has been advised to say—“Refugee” and “Asylum”—he explains that Edelman greeted him with a “manner [that] made me feel that I was a tiresome and stupid prisoner he was interrogating, who had just momentarily frustrated him in some petty word-play” (2001, p. 9). Edelman goes on to proffer the view that the “asylum business” is not driven by a “fear of life and safety” but by “greed” (11). In voicing this opinion, Edelman renders people seeking asylum from Africa as parasitical in contrast to what he sees

as legitimate forms of immigration from Europe: “My parents were refugees, from Romania”, he says, but they “are European, they have a right, *they’re part of the family*. [...] People like you [...] don’t belong here, you don’t value any of things we value, you haven’t paid for them through generations, and we don’t want you here” (12, emphasis added). The “Europe-as-family” story that Edelman is telling here does two key things: firstly, it supposes a stable and immutable biological connection that underpins ideas of belonging in Europe; and secondly, it links a presumed biological stability to a cultural identity based on supposedly shared “values”. Gurnah’s choice of name for the character of Edelman emphasizes this: “edel” in German means “noble” and is thus a word that denotes virtue and honor. The suffix “man” gives us “nobleman”, which alludes to a hierarchical, European social structure of consanguineous lineage whereby one’s power over others is determined by birth-right. Edelman’s name, therefore, accentuates the two core features of the story he tells: he belongs in the UK because of both his inherent European virtue and his hereditary links to the continent, and it is these characteristics that underpin his authoritative dismissal of Saleh.

Edelman’s story of the imagined European family is a simple one that befits the “tiny room” (10) within which Saleh’s interview takes place. Saleh’s life story, on the other hand, is an expansive and complex one that includes Britain’s colonial past in Zanzibar. Saleh offers a rebuttal of Edelman when emphasizing the reality that European global dominance, and the power to refuse asylum for racialized refugees, is based on the history of colonial exploitation: Edelman, Saleh says, was “the owner of Europe, who knew its values and had paid for them through generations. But the whole world had paid for Europe’s values already, even if a lot of the time it just paid and paid and didn’t get to enjoy them” (12). Where Edelman sees himself as part of a European family defined by high-minded values, Saleh sees him as “the gatekeeper to the orchards in the family courtyard, the same gate which had released the hordes that went out to consume the world and to which we have come sliming up to beg admittance, Refugee. Asylum-seeker. Mercy” (31). This perspective offers a significant, postcolonial counter-narrative to the immigration officer’s insistence on biology and shared values, historicizing Saleh’s plea for sanctuary from Zanzibar within a history of European colonial expansion and exploitation. It is significant, however, that Saleh does not speak these words aloud as he has been advised not to show that he understands English. This reveals that there is no space within the interrogation led by Edelman, which is characterized by a “duplicitous courtesy” (10), to go into questions of Britain’s colonial history, or how its legacies are central to an understanding of why Saleh finds himself in an interrogation room in Gatwick Airport. Rather, it is the literary space of the novel that has the capacity to accommodate the complex personal and geopolitical reasons for Saleh’s forced migration.

The story of the nation-as-family is also staged by Gurnah in “The Arriver’s Tale”, taken from *Refugee Tales*, an initiative that recognizes how the act of storytelling in literature can claim visibility and a voice for people seeking asylum in the face of stringent and hostile bureaucracy. Each volume of *Refugee Tales* brings a range of creative writers together with people who have lived experience of the UK asylum system, from those seeking

asylum to lawyers, charity workers, and activists. In “The Arriver’s Tale”, Gurnah recounts the real-life story of a Christian man from an unspecified Muslim-majority country who was forced to flee his home after encouraging a group of girls to refuse genital mutilation. We discover that the man was advised by an Englishman working for an NGO to “run away to Britain to seek asylum” since “[i]t is a Christian country, and you are a Christian worker persecuted for doing Christian labor” (Gurnah, 2016, p. 36). In this way, admittance to the British “family” is assumed on the grounds of religious affiliation. Despite this, when the man arrives in the UK, he discovers that his religion is not of consideration and instead of hospitality he is met with “the stubborn and unruffled hostility of the [immigration] officers” (38). After being moved between houses in Newcastle and Glasgow and being “interviewed for 5 h by three different people”, the man discovers that the officers “did not want me here. They did not like me. The result of the interview was that I was refused permission to stay” (38). Gurnah’s retelling of this experience remains true to the account he was told, allowing him to bear witness to the way in which the story of the nation-as-family operates in UK asylum practice, privileging consanguinity and imposing limits on inclusion based on race and ethnicity.

The only group that the man is admitted entry into is that of a diasporic African church in Glasgow after being invited by a Nigerian man he meets in a shop: “I found a community there”, he explains, “and felt more welcome that I had ever felt since arriving” (38). The sense of belonging that is rooted in the man’s religion and connection to an African diaspora, however, is fleeting: after 2 years of applying for asylum, his application is successful, but he is still prevented from working. After taking a job illegally, he is arrested and imprisoned for 12 months, and upon release is “return[ed] to the limbo” of awaiting the outcome of a new asylum plea. “Do you know what limbo means?” he asks the reader, “It means the edge of hell” (39). Ultimately, in this instance, the “shared cultural values” that are presumed to be inherent to the man’s Christianity, and that underpin the story of the nation-as-family, are trumped by an “othering” of the man based on his race and place of birth. The emphasis on religious affiliation in “The Arriver’s Tale”, and the fact that it takes place between 2007–2011, points us to the unspoken context of the “War on Terror” and the associated rhetoric of there being a clash between supposedly progressive Christian societies and backward-looking Islamic beliefs. It is this geopolitical context that defined the beginning of the 21st century and that connects the story of the nation-as-family to the story of security.

The story of security

The framing of refugees who have migrated from the Global South to the Global North as potential threats to national security has its roots in the UK-US “War on Terror”, and it is out of this same context that the rhetoric of the “hostile environment” first began to flourish. It was in response to the 9/11 attacks that the UK’s Home Office, under Labour’s David Blunkett, stated its aim in 2004 to make the country “a hostile environment for terrorists” by restricting funding for terrorist organizations³ When the focus

on terrorism began to wane toward the end of the 2000s, the term was taken up to refer specifically to “illegal” immigration: firstly, in 2007 by Labour’s Liam Byrne as the Minister for Borders and Immigration, and then most famously by the Conservative Home Secretary Theresa May in 2012. Central to the linkage between national security and policies on immigration and asylum is the belief that migrants who are not part of the “imagined family” on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, and class are de facto potential terrorists, a belief that was legitimized in political rhetoric by drawing on Samuel P. Huntington’s (Huntington, [1996] 2011) *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, which began as a lecture in 1992.

In his book and lecture, Huntington attempted to mark a significant shift during the late 20th century from earlier conflicts based on nationalism and socio-economic ideology. Following the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, Huntington argued that in a new globalized world, in which regions are interconnected by a capitalist, free market system, the axis of conflict would be along cultural and religious lines. The rhetoric of a “clash of civilisations” was taken up by the UK and US to justify the “War on Terror”, positing that a singular, homogenous “Muslim culture” stands in opposition to the internal coherence of a supposedly monolithic “Western culture”. This vision of a “clash” between Islam and the West recirculates the colonial discourse that a modern and progressive West stands in opposition to a backwards and pre-modern East. As Ahmed et al. (2012, p. 5) write in their Introduction to *Culture, Diaspora and Modernity in Muslim Writing*, after 9/11 “[i]t was common to find political leaders pronouncing on Islam’s backwardness and its need to enter ‘the modern world’”, and yet “the simplification involved in such rhetoric quickly runs up against the reality of diverse populations within major cities of the modern multicultural western world, and the spotlight is turned on allegedly recalcitrant Muslim communities ‘at home’”. It is also a stance that is ahistorical, serving an understanding of geopolitics based on distinct notions of cultural binaries and disregarding centuries of migration, colonialism, and cultural interaction between regions that are categorized on either side of the civilizational divide.

The view of immigration as a national security concern has not waned along with the abandonment of “War on Terror” rhetoric; rather, the geopolitical vision of a “clash of civilizations” has been sustained by turning toward climate change as a potential “threat multiplier” and driver of global conflict and instability. The World Bank has predicted that the global climate emergency will lead to the forced migration of up to 216 million people by 2050 (Clement et al., 2021), a reality that will increasingly be framed across countries in the Global North as an issue of national security.⁴ And as Ahuja (2021, p. 9) avers, “Since such security discourses disavow race’s central role in the unequal formation of the international system, they reify precepts that environmental change may be driving civilizational differences, suggested by a division between Islamist and secular views of governance.” All the while, as the global ecological crisis worsens, “[c]limate

³ See <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20040722014242/http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/terrorism/govprotect/finance/index.html>.

⁴ See the 2008 report on “Climate Change and International Security” by European Commission (2008) and the U.K.’s 2010 Stern Review, “The Economics of Climate Change”.

security measures will [...] likely remain aimed at containing the aftereffects of emissions rather than addressing the problem through concerted efforts to rein in emissions” (10). This is affirmed by Miller (2017, p. 58), who notes in *Storming the Wall: Climate Change, Migration, and Homeland Security* that toward the end of George W. Bush’s administration in 2009, “the newly formed Dept for Homeland Security” was warning that “climate shifts would threaten US national security.” Yet rather than spurring action “to ensure that the necessary changes would be made to prevent large-scale ecological crisis [...] the security apparatus worked hard to keep things the same in terms of economic, political, and social centers of power” (42). This has meant “more spending on border reinforcement than ever before in the history of humankind” due to the fact that “all environmental security assessments factor in the massive displacement of people” (23–4, 68)⁵. In evaluations of the climate crisis across the Global North, then, the climate migrant has become a figure freighted with national security concerns, and yet as both Miller and Ahuja acknowledge, there is no established, internationally recognized categorization or legal framework by which someone can claim asylum based on forced movement due to ecological factors (Miller, 2017, p. 23–24; Ahuja, 2021, p. 47). This reality exposes the paradox that the racialized climate refugee is at one and the same time a legal impossibility and the new specter of socio-economic instability⁶.

A significant means of interrogating the story of security is through an examination of the way in which anthropogenic climate breakdown is framed as a crisis caused by an undifferentiated humanity, rather than as a consequence of the extraction and use of fossil fuels and a geopolitical order that was inaugurated by European colonialism. Doing so is productive for a discussion of the treatment of refugees as it generates an understanding of how, much like the story of the nation-as-family, the story of security elides the legacies of European colonialism and, in doing so, legitimizes the inequalities that make racialized refugees more vulnerable to both climate-induced migration and the authority of the militarized border. An interrogation of the way in which the climate emergency must be understood as a legacy of European colonial expansion since the late 15th century is staged in Collis’s (2016, 107) “The Lawyer’s Tale”. The tale is inspired by Chaucer’s “The Man of Law’s Tale” which, Collis writes, is “a narrative of sea migrations, of exile and refuge and exile yet again.”

In the pronouncement, “I don’t particularly like the term ‘Anthropocene’—isn’t the *anthros* what we are trying to navigate away from?” (108), Collis’s “The Lawyer’s Tale” engages with live debates concerning the terminology used to define anthropogenic climate breakdown. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the neologism Anthropocene (meaning “the age of humans”) has become the most widespread term for labeling our era of human-induced ecological crisis. Coined by the Nobel Prize-winning chemist Crutzen and Stoermer (2000, p. 17–18), the word emphasizes “the central role of mankind in geology and ecology” and recognizes that “mankind will remain a major geological force for many millennia, maybe millions of years, to

come”⁷. In proposing that the Holocene—the official name of our current geological epoch—has ended and the Anthropocene begun, Crutzen and the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) of which he is a member have sparked a geological debate, providing one answer to the question: how do we name the unit of geological time in which the human impact on the environment can be identified in stratigraphic material, predominantly in evidence of a dramatic rise in the “greenhouse gases” carbon dioxide (CO₂) and methane (CH₄)?

This debate hinges on the fact that the term “Anthropocene” cannot be taken up simply because of widespread scientific proof that the climate crisis is real and is being caused by human activity. Rather, geological epochs must be dated in relation to clearly defined environmental changes, such as fluctuations in atmospheric carbon, that are marked in the Earth’s sediment. Such markers are called “golden spikes”, and any consensus on an Anthropocene golden spike affects how the climate crisis is framed and what solutions are agreed upon to avoid global environmental catastrophe. Crutzen and the AWG argue that the Anthropocene be dated to the invention of the steam engine in 1784 and the ensuing Industrial Revolution. This, they say, was followed by a second important historical moment, the post-1945 “Great Acceleration”, which names the increased reliance on fossil fuels and nuclear energy due to a boom in the world’s population over the latter half of the 20th century.

While the term “Anthropocene” has been taken up across the Environmental Sciences and Humanities as a productive means of officially recognizing human activity as the primary driver of the climate emergency, the label has also been criticized for universalizing humanity in a manner that deflects culpability away from the oil and gas industries, the carbon-intensive economies of the Global North, and the historic expansion of large-scale agricultural and industrial practices through European colonialism. In “The Lawyer’s Tale”, Collis’s (2016, 109) speaker acknowledges this with the assertion that, “If we blame everyone, we blame no one/we give the guilty—free passage—/and we bear burdens we did not bring on ourselves”. He goes on to note that, while the Industrial Revolution is thought by some to have inaugurated the Anthropocene,

The first time human activity impacted the entire planet [...] was during North American colonization, when the deaths of some 50 million indigenous inhabitants of Turtle Island [the Indigenous name for North America] was registered in a worldwide decline in CO₂—swallowed up by the forests that filled in the farmland the indigenous worked before they were suddenly—swallow up (109).

This pronouncement draws on research conducted by Lewis and Maslin (2018, p. 6), who have been at the forefront of acknowledging that “[t]here is no single entity called ‘humanity’ that drives the changes to our home planet: specific groups of people cause each impact.” In *The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene*, Lewis and Maslin (2018, p. 3) concur with a framing of geological change that sees human actions as

5 See also Parenti (2011) and Sheller (2018).

6 See also Goff et al. (2012), Baldwin et al. (2014), Missirian and Schlenker (2017), and Warner and Boas (2019).

7 See Crutzen (2002), Steffen et al. (2007), and Davies (2016).

environment-shaping forces. “In the past”, they write, “super-volcanoes and the slow tectonic movement of the continents radically altered the climate of Earth and the life-forms that populate it. Now there is a new force of nature changing Earth: *Homo sapiens*.” In contrast to Crutzen and the AWG, however, they maintain that the beginning of the Anthropocene epoch should be dated from 1610, “marked by a short-lived but pronounced dip in atmospheric carbon dioxide captured in an Antarctic ice-core” (13). This dip—labeled the “Orbis Spike”—occurred as a consequence of the colonization of the Americas from 1492 and the “Columbian Exchange”. The ensuing spread of European diseases to the Americas and the genocide of Indigenous peoples—which led to a 95% fall in Indigenous populations—precipitated the reforestation of land that was formally agricultural. By 1610, this process of reforestation had created enough of a carbon sink to significantly lower CO₂, making it “the last globally cool moment before the onset of the long-term warmth of the Anthropocene” (13). Thus, “[i]n narrative terms”, dating the Anthropocene to the Orbis Spike and not the Industrial Revolution acknowledges that it “began with widespread colonialism and slavery: it is the story of how people treat the environment and how people treat each other” (13).

In a similar vein, Kathryn Yusoff’s (Yusoff, 2018) *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* retains the term Anthropocene but in a manner that includes the exploitative histories of slavery and capitalist-imperialism as well as the inequitable access to climate crisis-inducing resources between the Global North and the Global South. “To be included in the ‘we’ of the Anthropocene”, writes Yusoff,

Is to be silenced by a claim to universalism that fails to notice its subjugations, taking part in a planetary condition in which no part was accorded in terms of subjectivity. The supposed “we” further legitimates and justifies the racialized inequalities that are bound up in social geologies (Yusoff, 2018; 12, original emphasis).

For Yusoff, then, the “we” of the Anthropocene “cannot be immune to who is writing and mobilizing this history and the implications of its telling for who is granted agency in shaping the present and future” (23).

Collis’s speaker, too, seeks to complicate the contentious “we” that is an “empty category” (110): “We (things that are living) are all carbon-based beings, but ‘we’ (active and passive participants in waves of economic violence) don’t all do unto others as ‘we’ would accumulate various and unequal wealths and debts to ourselves” (115). More recently, Collis has challenged the “we” of the Anthropocene in an article co-written with David Herd. “It is noteworthy”, write Herd and Collis (2020, p. 20),

That the same peoples which have a history of being cast out of the category of the human [...] are also not taken into account by the concept of the Anthropocene, which blends them into an amorphous humanity when it comes to assigning “blame” for the current ecological crisis, thereby obscuring the real agents and architects of the contemporary situation.

In other words, the dominant Anthropocene discourse being written and mobilized by Crutzen and the AWG does not

acknowledge the intertwined geno- and ecocidal impacts of European colonial expansion that have already ended the worlds of Indigenous and colonized societies, and have left ecosystems depleted in their wake. Instances of ecological exploitation that have destroyed Indigenous societies and formerly colonized regions—such as deforestation, oil extraction, and over-hunting—constitute examples of what Nixon (2011, p. 2) has termed “slow violence.” Yet, they are too often discounted because they disproportionately affect the global poor, they are “incremental and accretive,” and their “calamitous repercussions [play] out across a range of temporal scales” (2). The discourse of the Anthropocene also does not include forms of anti-capitalist and anti-colonial climate justice, or the long-derided cosmologies of ecological reciprocity, that are rooted in various Indigenous environmental ethics across formerly colonized regions and still-existing settler colonies.

Where Yusoff and Lewis and Maslin accept the term “Anthropocene” but with an alternative golden spike to the AWG, Collis’s speaker in “The Lawyer’s Tale” opts for a language that emphasizes socio-economic conditions over geological markers of change, attending to the fact that the climate crisis is caused by the spread of global capitalist relations: “Call it ‘geophysical capitalism’: the era in which our economic activities have come to effect the entire geosphere—all ecosystems, all species” (108). This assertion aligns “The Lawyer’s Tale” with advocates for the term “Capitalocene”, a neologism first coined by Andreas Malm and since taken up by Moore (2015) in *Capitalism in the Web of Life* and the edited collection *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?* (2016). In the former, Moore asks,

Are we living in the *Anthropocene*, with its return to a curiously Eurocentric vista of humanity, and its reliance on well-worn notions of resource- and technological-determinism? Or are we living in the *Capitalocene*, the historical era shaped by relations privileging the endless accumulation of capital?

How one answers these historical questions shapes one’s analysis of—and response to the crisis of the present (Moore, 2015, 173, original emphasis).

Turning to the same Orbis Spike origin as Lewis and Maslin (2018), Moore and his co-writer Raj Patel argue in *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* that, “it would be wrong to characterize this episode of genocide and reforestation as anthropogenic. The colonial exterminations of Indigenous Peoples were the work not of all humans, but of conquerors and capitalists. *Capitalogenic* would be more appropriate” (Patel and Moore, 2018, p. 162–3).

This framing of the global climate crisis and its related ecological catastrophes asks us to take seriously the long history of European capitalist-imperial expansion and its current impacts upon formerly colonized, non-European regions across the Global South. It invites us to understand the burden of responsibility that wealthy, imperial and post-imperial nations must accept for inaugurating and benefitting from the interconnected forms of exploitation and violence that have pressed colonized humans and environments into the service of capital accumulation. Doing so refuses the ideological premises on which the story of security rests and instead insists on hearing the individual

stories of those forced to flee environments that capitalist-imperial expansion since the 15th century has rendered hostile to human life.

Conclusion

It has been the assertion of this article that the Hostile Environment has its own set of narrative practices that weaponize ostensibly “positive” stories of national belonging and stability as a means of “othering”, dehumanizing, and excluding people seeking asylum. The two stories that have been examined here—the story of the nation-as-family and the story of security—rest upon embedded notions of a cohesive and consanguineous national citizenry that must militarize its borders to be protected from the specters of cultural conflict and violent unrest. I have shown how different forms of literary storytelling counter the State’s Hostile Environment stories: Gurnah’s *By the Sea* and “The Arriver’s Tale” and Collis’s “The Lawyer’s Tale” reveal the stories used to justify the Hostile Environment to be propagated by an act of will, thus confronting their presentation as immutable realities.

The thrust of Gurnah’s and Collis’s writing invites the nations of the Global North to confront what Paul Gilroy has called a pervasive “post-imperial melancholia”, which names the diminishment and active forgetting of the history of colonialism that feeds a monocultural conception of the nation and detaches immigration from the history of empire. This is described in terms of melancholia because it denotes an unconscious grieving process whereby the source of grief (namely, the loss of an empire and geopolitical dominance) is not properly identified, leading to a cyclical form of nostalgia. In the context of the UK, according to Gilroy (2005, p. 98), the “silence” surrounding British colonialism results in “the error of imagining that postcolonial people are only unwanted alien intruders without any substantive historical, political, or cultural connections to the collective life of their fellow subjects.” Literary texts, such as those analyzed here, are spaces where this forgetting and silencing can be confronted: in the writing of Gurnah and Collis there exists an exploration of the difficult and complex histories of European capitalist-imperial expansion that warns against forms of nationalist exceptionalism and the superficial narratives of the story of the nation-as-family

and the story of security. In place of the stories told by those who administer the Hostile Environment, literature that attends to the lived experiences of people seeking asylum recognizes the need for governmental and corporate accountability for the socio-political and ecological conditions underpinning displacement and forced migration across the Global South. It does so in a manner that contains the possibility for mutual understanding and tolerance beyond the limited horizons of the national border.

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Conflict of interest

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