Blog-series introduction by Dr. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Refugee Hosts PI, UCL
A year after the AHRC-ESRC funded *Refugee Hosts* research project was officially launched, we are introducing this new blog series which aims to offer critical and creative insights into the politics, ethics, poetics and aesthetics of representations of displacement.

READ THE SERIES HERE.

DISRUPTING HUMANITARIAN NARRATIVES?

One of our project's aims has been to disrupt mainstream humanitarian narratives which have traditionally represented, and therefore *constituted*, refugees as individual suffering victims, passive recipients of aid and/or as unique 'ideal' refugees who are *truly* worthy of international sympathy, assistance, and protection. By disrupting these and other established narratives and representational strategies, we ultimately aim to document, trace and examine alternative ways of seeing, knowing, feeling, listening to, writing, reading, drawing, conceptualizing, and otherwise responding to displacement.

Mainstream humanitarian narratives of victimhood, suffering and – more recently – of what we can call 'the super-refugee' (ie. the Olympian swimmer who has overcome herculean feats, the hyper-successful entrepreneur, the genius who changed the world), have often been heralded as offering an important corrective to media and political representations which frame refugees as 'waves' and 'masses' which threaten individual, communal, national and international security.

'Humanising' refugees by centralising 'the human face'; recounting 'refugee stories' and listening to refugees' 'lived experiences' of surviving harrowing journeys and different forms of violence, are all key components of such an approach: they are perceived as essential ways to enhance public

understanding, compassion and sympathy. In an era of hostility towards refugees, of closed borders and push-backs, it could appear counter-productive – unethical even? – to interrogate the foundations, nature and implications of such approaches. As Harrell-Bond asked when interrogating whether "humanitarian work with refugees can be humane," could critiquing 'well-meaning,' 'humanising,' 'humanitarian' representations of worthy refugee victims, ultimately be like "sending mother's apple pie to the Federal Drug Administration for chemical analysis or turning the dog over to medical research"?

As unsettling as such a critique may be for many, representations of 'worthy' refugees which fit the humanitarian narrative – vulnerable, suffering, grateful, *appropriately* resourceful and *positively* contributing to the local economy – are of course themselves not apolitical depictions of reality. While they may lead to compassion – even acts of solidarity – they nonetheless actively *constitute* problematic and at times deadly *realities,* including for the 'worthy' refugees who are forced to fit into this narrative, and also for the unworthy refugees and migrants against whom they are explicitly and implicitly compared and contrasted (as I argue here). These representations are permeated by hierarchical processes of inclusion and exclusion, including on the basis of gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion: only certain faces, bodies, identities, voices, stories, words, are seen, heard, read, and empathized with, while others remain – or are purposefully rendered – invisible and on the margins.

REPRESENTATIONS OF EVERYDAY LIVES IN DISPLACEMENT

In light of the dangers – and epistemic violence – inherent within mainstream humanitarian narratives, this blog series aims to examine different ways of representing *everyday* processes of displacement *and* of hosting, and to critically explore what the implications of these different approaches might be.

FIGURES HERE

On the one hand, this entails examining ways of representing the diverse roles played by both refugees *and* local hosting communities in responding to the everyday challenges of displacement. Indeed, while acknowledging the roles played by individuals and families, we especially wish to examine how local *communities* (such as the ones Refugee Hosts is working with in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey) can be brought into representation in ways that are humane and respectful, and which neither dehumanize nor idealize their members. To this end, we are particularly interested in considering how a focus on the 'spaces' where refugees and hosts are living, and the communities that they have (or have not) been welcomed into, can help us to better (or at least differently) understand displacement and hosting? In turn, what impacts do public, NGO and academic representations of host and displaced communities have on politics, policy and practice on local, national and international levels?

On the other hand, it involves going beyond the focus on the actions, agency and experiences of individuals affected by conflict, to examine diverse ways that different refugees and hosts themselves may *conceptualise* and *represent* the encounters that take place throughout displacement *and* hosting. As Refugee Hosts' Writer in Residence, Yousif M. Qasmiyeh, reflected in an earlier piece entitled 'The Camp is Time':

> *Who writes the camp and what is it that ought to be written in a time where the plurality of lives has traversed the place itself to become its own time. […]*
>
> *What am I saying right now, in this specific instant and under the false impression that the camp is mine? I say that it is the autobiography of the camp that is autobiographising the camp, suspended in time it is, while we deliberate the impossibility of narration in that context.*

In order to think of narration (not necessarily its narration), we follow it discreetly in the shape of ash.

And, in his latest piece published as part of this series, he posits:

Only refugees can forever write the archive.

Through our research we aim to centralise the ways that people affected by displacement are *analysts* of their own situations, and those of others. This will be achieved, for instance, through exploring the intersections between historical and contemporary journeys of displacement and hosting, including through a combination of interviews, focus groups, and creative writing workshops with members of host and refugee communities in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

Rather than asking people to recount their harrowing experiences of displacement, by bringing together people who are now refugees but once were members of host communities, and hosts who have themselves experienced displacement (including refugees hosting refugees), we intend to examine how people affected by the Syrian conflict *conceptualise* the encounter between refugees and hosts, and how they represent – and *perform* – this to one another, to us and to themselves.

Importantly, as we have argued here on Refugee Hosts,

Creative methods may enable diverse forms of 'self-exploration' and 'self-expression', but they can (and perhaps should) also simultaneously provide a space for participants to transcend and resist different forms of externally imposed expectations. This can include providing a space to resist the expectations inherent within the scripts referred to above – of the vulnerable/ violent/ bogus/ grateful refugee -, but also the very expectation that participants will (or should) be performing in an 'authentic' way and 'revealing' their 'true self' during

workshops.

Furthermore, as Refugee Hosts Co-I Lyndsey Stonebridge has argued here:
> *Poetry is not therapy, and writing is only creative to the extent that can be accommodated between people. It is a kind of host. We will be developing and exploring the kind of hosting that poetry and translation can make possible throughout Refugee Hosts.*

SPACES AND PLACES, NOT FACES
As one of the precursors to this new blog series, Aydan Greatrick and I concluded in our earlier reflection on The Roles of Performance and Creative Writing in Refugee-Related Research, that

> *Meaningfully engaging with diverse narratives around refugees' encounters in different spaces requires us to continue thinking critically about the different roles that diverse creative practices can play when conducting research with people affected by conflict and displacement.*

It is also this focus on *encounters* over time and *space*, and our focus on 'communities' (noting that this is itself a problematic concept and 'unit of analysis'), that guides our project's foundational approach to photography, what I call our '*Spaces and Places, not Faces*' approach.

Our decision not to take photographs of, or publish the faces of people affected by conflict and displacement is of course far from unique in the context of Refugee and Humanitarian Studies (for instance, see Oxfam's guidelines on Photography in humanitarian crises, and *Forced Migration Review*'s photo policy). In part, the Refugee Hosts' policy echoes the – by now almost standard – acknowledgement of the risks and ethical quandaries of displaying refugees' faces in publications and on

websites, or the dehumanizing implications of pixelating or otherwise blurring facial features.

However, beyond these quandaries, our provocation to approach representation through a 'Spaces and Places, not Faces' paradigm is an invitation to rethink the potentialities and limitations of different modes of photography in contexts of displacement and hosting (see my new photo-essay as an example of this approach). It raises, amongst other things, the question: Does the absence of 'the humanizing face' in our photographs necessarily embody a failure to *resist* the dehumanization of refugees? Or might it offer a productive alternative mode of 'seeing', 'feeling', 'understanding' and 'being with' communities affected by displacement: refugees and hosts alike? It is our hope that our approach (or at least the provocation) can be viewed as offering an entry point for the latter, with other modes of representation – and hosting – which we are exploring in this vein including soundscapes, poetry, graphic novels, painting and creative writing.

> *In this soundscape [LINK], the sounds of Syria in Baddawi refugee camp in Lebanon can be heard neither through the perceptible voices nor the dialects of refugees from Syria, but through the evocative sound of the Syrian coffee-seller, whose presence is announced across the camp's alleyways through the recognisable clinking of his coffee-cups. Everyday life carries on in the camp, with the high-pitched hum of the electricity generator, and the sound of children playing in the camp's busy 'streets'.*
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> *This second – longer – soundscape offers echoes of everyday life in Baddawi camp, in particular through the overlapping calls to prayer and afternoon conversations on the roof.*
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> *Baddawi refugee camp, recorded by E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, April 2017.*

Ultimately, what we wish to explore through this blog series is: To what extent can these and other methods and approaches offer critical and creative insights into displacement and hosting processes that mainstream humanitarian narratives and traditional 'humanising' photographs cannot?

The new *Representations of Displacement* blog series – which you can read, view and listen to here – will run from 1 September 2017 until 30 November 2017, although these questions will continue to be explored throughout the entire duration of the project (autumn 2020).

To contribute to our community of conversation as part of this blog series and more broadly, see here.