

Beattie, A. R. (2016). *Storytelling as 'unorthodox' agency: negotiating the 2012 family immigration rules (United Kingdom)*. *Politics, Accepted*. DOI: [10.1177/0263395716686599](https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395716686599)

## Introduction

In July 2012, the United Kingdom (UK) Government announced changes to the rules surrounding family migration for non-European Economic Area (EEA) nationals into the country. This article attends to the lived experience of binational families subject to the 2012 family immigration rules (FIR). It seeks to enrich the pre-existing discussions of family migration within the European Union (EU) and the UK, focusing on the 'micro-political' experiences of those whose lives have been adversely affected by their introduction. It draws specifically on the life writings of binational families in order to highlight the negative emotional and personal experience as a result of these rules. Binational families, in this iteration, are the product of individuals of different national citizenships coming together and forming a family unit, traditional or otherwise. I draw on Kofman (2004) who suggests the term binational family. Migration Studies literature refers to individuals living across state boundaries as transnational migrants (see for example Wildene 2006; Baldassar 2008; and Miller & Madianou 2013). Binational families represent a particular form of transnational migrant as their immediate family relations may not live across international borders while their extended family might. I adopt the term binational families to reflect upon the vulnerability experienced by binational families living in the UK, unable to meet the FIR requirements, and thus are living apart. I suggest that because of their geospatial positioning these families may not have recourse to traditional modes of agency to negotiate and make sense of this lived experience. This article attends to that need, suggesting an unorthodox rendering of agency premised on the act of storytelling.

In July 2012, the Home Office indicated its intention to strengthen the requirements for family migration, and marriage migration specifically, into the UK. The changes acknowledged the

UK's wider EU obligations and were made with specific reference to Article 8 namely, the right to a family life and a private life as documented in the European Code of Human Rights. The Home Office wrote:

The new rules will reflect fully the factors that can weigh for or against an Article 8 claim. They will set proportionate requirements that reflect, as a matter of public policy, the Government's and Parliament's view of how individual rights to respect for private or family life should be qualified in the public interest to safeguard the economic wellbeing for the UK by controlling immigration and to protect the public from foreign criminals. This will mean that failure to meet the requirements of the rules will normally mean failure to establish an Article 8 claim to enter in the UK, and not granting leave on that basis. (Statement of Intent, 2012)

These changes required, among other things, that UK nationals must earn an annual income of at least £18,600. This amount rises if children who are not UK nationals wish to come as well. Non-British citizens must also meet the language and cultural expectations, sitting both an English language test and the Life in the United Kingdom Test. The test results determine if non-EEA nationals are suitable candidates for entry.

Without question, these rules prompt harm. The Migration Observatory (2014) suggests that the income requirements unfairly burden women and ethnic minorities. Consequently, the ability to meet the FIR requirements depends on your race, gender and geographic location. Children of binational families also suffer because of these rules. The Children's Commissioner (2015) released a study in conjunction with Middlesex University that revealed the psychological stress and mental health challenges faced by children in separated binational families. Similarly, the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI) has detailed the challenges associated with family separation. They suggested that the inequality of the income requirements enhances insecurity in general and specifically caters to instances of domestic violence. Their campaign, *Divided Families*, seeks migration justice and demands that families' wellbeing features at the heart of UK migration policy. In a similar fashion, Migrants' Rights Network (MRN) (2014) has been raising awareness of the harm associated

with the FIR, suggesting the same gendered and geographical challenges the Migration Observatory highlighted. Little has changed with regards to these restrictions; however, these various interventions have resulted in the Courts of Justice reviewing the rules. From 22-24 February 2016, the Supreme Court engaged in a review of the Minimum Income Requirement (MIR).

The results of this review have yet to be published, but the review itself reflects political activists' concerted efforts to see the rules surrounding family immigration repealed. The intervention of these activist groups reflects a campaign informed by traditional assumptions of agency. I suggest that traditional agency –drawing on the ideas of O'Neill (2001 & 1986) and MacIntyre (1999) is rooted in practical reason. Agency, so understood, originates in the recognition of inequality and/or the need for social, political and/or institutional change. It is supported by an ability to reflect and reason, deliberate and then act with a view to achieving the desired ends. These assumptions take for granted that agents are situated within the political; however, they fail to take into account the distinction between dominant and marginalised communities and the intricacies of power that guide their interactions. As Card (2010) argues, marginalised groups, when acting as agents, must be aware of their vulnerabilities. The balance of power within the state may not rest in their favour. She further suggests that marginalised groups' within the political may not allow them the access required to exert influence and achieve their desired goals. Binational families must cultivate an awareness of these challenges. While they may wish to effect political change, they also want to be granted a family visa. Navigating this interweaving of political and personal relationships is thus a risky business.

This article is not addressing the activist agency as it relates to the FIR and the desired institutional and legislative changes outlined above. It acknowledges these efforts so as to

demonstrate a particular role for macro-political forms of agency in binational families. It also demonstrates the micro-political forms of harm the FIR enacts. This evidence, I suggest, illustrates the need for an alternative, unorthodox rendering of agency attuned to the needs of individuals and families negotiating the lived experience of the FIR. The ensuing account of agency suggests storytelling as a form of personal, moral agency. As the article unfolds, it will be made increasingly clear that this form of agency helps binational family members make sense of their experiences and reposition themselves thoughtfully in the world they inhabit. There is no call to transform the political within this imagining of agency. Instead, it is an account of agency that helps individuals re-imagine their position in the community, aware of the fact that the wider legislative aims therein would enact a form of personal and familial harm.

To achieve this end, the article is broken down into three distinct sections. Part One frames the debate. I interweave ongoing discussions within marriage migration policy studies with micro-political theory and iterations of the neurotic citizen to justify the focus on binational families lived experience. Part Two attends to the lived experience of binational families, interweaving a collection of love letters with a series of wider reflections that attends to the current political climate in the UK. I suggest that this interweaving provides a thoughtful documentation of the inequalities binational families experience and how those inequalities contribute to a neuropolitical experience. Part Three suggests storytelling as moral agency, interweaving a variety of interdisciplinary findings that suggest its suitability to the needs of binational families. In the Conclusion, I highlight the particular role these love letters play in the storytelling process, contributing to a (potential) renewed sense of empowerment on the part of binational family members.

### **Part One: Intimate Relations and Family Migration Policy**

Family migration, according to Kofman (2004), was an understudied phenomenon in Europe. Migration policy was influenced by economic policy. She suggests this neglects women and, by extension, the family because it denies a particular value to 'women's work'. Her call to attend to this challenge resulted in a plethora of publications. One strand focuses on the governance of family migration across Europe. (See for example: Newland, 2010; Hatton, 2007; and Geiger 2013) Another strand examines the integration of migration workers and their families. (See for example: Joppke, 2007; Penninx, Spencer, & Van Hear, 2008; and Carrera, 2009) Finally, there is an emerging focus on the regulation of intimate relations and sexualities within family migration, which challenges traditional orthodoxies of marriage migration. Sociological and geographical discourses are key champions of this approach. (See for example: Gorman-Murray, 2009; Mai & King, 2009; Kalra & Bhugra, 2010) This necessarily brief overview of the thematic interventions and developments in migration studies reveals an emerging trend towards the micro-political explorations of the migrant experience. A focus on intimate relationships, personal lifestyle and emotional experiences all feature in this unfolding discourse.

While academics are pushing the boundaries within the field of migration studies, UK public attitudes towards family migration are increasingly sceptical. As Bonjour and Kraler (2014) suggest, public opinion surrounding family integration is increasingly negative. Their research reveals that family migration is believed to contribute to increasingly patriarchal family orders, prompting difference rather than integration within the state thereby challenging traditional family values. Research Blinder (2015) conducted for the Migration Observatory supports this analysis. His interrogation of UK public attitudes towards family migration reveals that British citizens understand the need for certain forms of economic migrants, for example those in the caring industry. However, they are increasingly sceptical

of the need for family migration into the country. When asked if they support family reunification, only 14 per cent of those surveyed believed this form of migration had a positive impact on the country. This emerging public sentiment has had an impact on the generation of family migration policy. As Strik et. al. (2013) argue, this narrative has, in turn, led to a tightening of family migration routes and increasingly restrictive policies on the nature and process of family migration across Europe.

Wray's (2011) work discusses the tension that emerges when governments must negotiate the intimate choices of their populations while providing economic stability and security through particular policies. The criteria for family migrants evidenced in the 2012 FIR reflects this decision making process. The language it adopts suggests an element of criminality while questioning the economic suitability of family migrants. It is indicative of the wider public sentiment, which remains sceptical of the value of family migrants in the UK. Moreover, the subjective nature of the income requirement threshold is suggestive of the arbitrary and fluctuating hierarchy that family migrants must meet to be deemed suitable for entry. This, Wray (2011) suggests, reflects the assumption that family migrants are less valuable to the country than economic migrants, for example. As Beck-Gernsheim (2011) argues, the increased numbers of family migrant applicants and the need for strict entry requirements – can be attributed to an inability to gain access via other forms of migration. In essence, the income threshold suggests that the right to a family within the UK is a privileged right premised on the economic worth of the British citizen.

These macro-political tensions can have an impact on the micro-political experiences of individual citizens and their families. The interplay of these various levels of analysis is well demonstrated in D'Aoust's (2014) concept of 'technologies of love'. She writes:

We should take seriously the idea of love as a technology in itself that not only shapes conduct through expectations of its 'true' manifestation by the 'feeling subject' and others, but also creates, cuts across and connects with citizenship and intimacy, simultaneously creating subjects and their creative potential and restraining them by shaping their conduct. (264)

This suggests that individuals in relationships will demonstrate the validity of their relationship through the use of language, artefacts and space. Typically, these displays of affection correlate to the hierarchy discussed by Wray (2011), a point not lost on D'Aoust. She suggests that the underlying values informing such intimacies reify traditional Western, privileged assumptions surrounding family life namely, a courtship of some duration prompted by the primary individuals within the relationship and not arranged by elder family members or the community. Binational families that embody alternative lifestyles and do not align with standard nuclear family patterns will struggle to demonstrate the validity of their relationships.

D'Aoust goes on to suggest that technologies of love will have an impact on the shaping and experience of a loving relationship. Technologies of love, she suggests, 'shape conduct' in a desire to demonstrate a 'true' relationship. (264) This not only creates subjects, it informs their actions and interactions, which government officials then evaluate. These officials determine, based on the self-same set of values, the verity of the relationship and the quality of the migrant that substantiate it. This lived experience suggests some interesting parallels to the idea of the neurotic citizen articulated by Isin (2004). Taking the individual as the unit of analysis, he writes the following:

Governing through neurosis means that the neurotic subject is incited to make two adjustments in its conduct to render itself a citizen. While on the one hand the neurotic citizen is incited to make social and culture investments to eliminate various dangers by calibrating its conduct on the basis of its anxieties and insecurities rather than rationalities, it is also invited to consider itself as part of a neurological species and understand itself as an affect structure. (233)

This experience, Isin suggests, emerges when individuals do not see their particular life choices and lived experiences mirrored in the understanding the government purports to have of them. Isin's work suggest that citizens will deny parts of their personhood in an effort to align with the rational and liberal experience of political subjectivity, thereby engendering a neurotic political experience.

How far can we push the concept of the neurotic citizen? If we extend this theoretical line of enquiry and interrogate binational families' lived experience, a previously unexplored silence might emerge. I suggest a need to attend to this personal, nay, intimate migration experience and draw on the works of Solomon and Steele (2016) to initiate this line of enquiry. They suggest a micro-political approach that highlights silenced and marginalised political experiences. I draw on their work, aware of the claims of Mauthners (2000). She writes of her ethical responsibilities to her research subjects and the challenges they pose when trying to integrate intimate revelations alongside traditional research findings. She suggests that she fails in this endeavour, ultimately producing sterile and objective findings (much to her disappointment). While she struggles to incorporate the elusive intimacy of personal relationships, I believe that the works of Solomon and Steele (2016) offer a means of overcoming this roadblock. Like Maunthers (2000), Solomon and Steele (2016) suggest that this otherwise excluded information will augment pre-existing categories of knowledge that typify social science methodologies. Rather than abandon traditional forms of knowledge production, they draw on the micro-political to enhance pre-existing debates and discussions. They articulate three categories to enable this excavation: 'sensation, resonance, movement and flow'. I draw on these categories in the ensuing section to probe the boundaries and peripheries of Isin's (2004) neuropolitical experience.

## **Part Two: The Lived Experience of the Family Immigration Rules**



I turn to the work of the activist group Love Letters to the Home Office, whose publication of the same name, herein referred to as Love Letters (2014) – provides insight into intimate relationships that have experienced the everyday consequences of marriage migration management and governance. This activist campaign has five stated goals:

1. Unite the families separated by the law, creating a community of those affected and ending individual isolation
2. Draw attention to the law and the fact that the UK currently has different human rights for families depending on how much they earn
3. Call of change from the Government
4. Show support for the Home Office and demonstrate the urgent need for investment, infrastructure and increased manpower within the visa and immigration system, calling for change in this area
5. To do so through literature, activism, theatre and art

Their 2014 publication is an example of just how they intend to achieve these goals. Not only has the book now been transformed into an acclaimed stage play, it gives the group the opportunity to highlight the emotional duress separated binational families experience because of the UK's immigration rules. While the campaign's specific impact is difficult to assess at present, it does provide evidence of the emotional hardships binational families experience.

One author, a student in the UK, writes of her experience of her son's birth while her boyfriend (the child's father) was living in Albania because she could not meet the income requirement.

At 11am on Tuesday morning, my precious baby boy was born healthy and perfect. I called his dad.

'He's here,' I told him. 'He's 3.2. kilos and looks like you.'

I emailed him a photo of our beautiful boy.

Four months later, father and son met for the first time. We both travelled to Venice and stayed there with my boyfriend's family for two weeks. It was a happy and loving time. Father and son were very taken with each other. (14)

The family then said goodbye after two weeks together, travelling back to Greece and the UK, respectively. While the family does go on to enjoy periodic holidays together, they are marked by beginnings and endings, leaving the mother to wonder how all of this will affect her little boy.

I'm thankful for so many things: my child, my health, my abilities. But I'm sorry that my son can't have his father in his life. Who knows what pain my son is storing up for the future. Will he ever understand the thrust of it? I don't know. (15)

This is the story of life interrupted. The process of hello and goodbye, of happiness and sadness, that comes with living in different countries as a family. But it is also a story of loss that speaks to the challenges raised by the Children's Commissioner (2016). It queries the potential development of a child's subjectivity in a state that will not welcome his father.

This story unearths the tensions that governments face when grappling with intimate experiences embedded within policy development. But it is a deeply human enactment of this tension. It reflects the everyday experience of the policy and not the practice of migration management. It is suggestive of the inherent tension between the rights of citizenship and mobility and the contestation of families therein. This is a significant distinction, as Honohan (2009) discusses, when interrogating the various hierarchies of rights and the claims made by citizens and non-citizens within the state. Moreover, it is a negotiation that, as Andy Burnham recently suggested, the UK Government is failing to meet. Speaking in response to the insecure position of EU nationals within the UK in a post-Brexit environment, he said the following:

The three million or so EU nationals residing here are the fathers and mothers, aunties and uncles, grandmas and granddads of millions of British children. To leave any uncertainty hanging over their right to be here is tantamount to undermining family life in our country. (Whale, 2016)

He goes on to conclude that the issue of guaranteeing family rights within the UK to binational or wholly EU families is 'entirely a matter for the UK Government to decide'. This question was revelatory. It was posed in a deeply insecure political environment. For the first time, EEA nationals residing in the UK are being forced to reflect on their own neoliberal position. It is perhaps too soon to reflect upon the effects of a post-Brexit environment on the subjectivities of EU nationals living in Britain. However, this question highlights the hierarchies within the binational family community in the UK.

Another inequality predates the emerging concerns of EEA binational families: the geographic positioning of families within and beyond the UK. Reading other Love Letters, the challenge of distance and its effect on agency is poignantly rendered to the reader. One family writes of their experiences living simultaneously in the UK and Peru with two children, aged 4 and 2.

We wanted to bring our children up experiencing both of our cultures, but I had no choice but to leave Peru in July 2013 because of financial difficulties.

I talk to Vanessa daily, but Skype is a luxury only available in the city centre, which means I rarely see my children. Sometimes, when I do, Olenka is indifferent, not wanting to talk. Other times, she's excited, saying 'Hola, Papi, vamos al parquet?' Those are the times that fill my heart with joy.

We have cried often, in despair for our future. We have cried over not sharing those magical moments that will never return. Moments gone forever. Moments like my children's first days at school.

I often feel as if no one in this great nation cares. I often think I'm seen as a nuisance, a failure or just someone who should have made better decisions.

It's in those times that I take solace in Vanessa's words: 'I will always love you. So will your daughters. And, with God's help, we will be reunited as a family. You are the best man I have ever known. Don't lose hope.' (17 & 18)

While there is joy in this story, there is also a keen sense of lost time together. There is also an insightful awareness that modern technology such as email, FaceTime and Skype struggle to facilitate the co-presence needed to develop strong family relationships.

Wildene's (2006) and Baldassar's (2008) work suggests technology can provide a form of mediated co-presence in transnational families. Their work reveals how letters, phone calls, emails and text messages can help family members maintain relationships across time and space. Yet, within the UK's legal institutions, there is skepticism surrounding the viability and longevity of such technologies to enhance a mediated form of co-presence within the family. In a 2015 court decision, Mr Justice Wood denied a mother permission to leave the UK to live in Singapore with her son. The mother argued, in the spirit of Wildene (2006) and Baldassar (2008) that Skype and alternative technologies could supplement the relationship the son had with the father in the UK. In response to this argument, Justice Wood reiterated that time differences and technological failure would harm the father-son relationship, noting the following:

The disadvantages of Skype as any user will know are all too often the lack of clarity of image, the sound delay even if short and, as Consul colourfully notes in his closing submissions, 'You can't hug Skype'.

He continues:

This is a case where a father, despite obstacles, has built up a very good and profound attachment to his son. The mother's proposals to relocate him even if her proposals for visits, telephone calls and Skype calls are carried out in vein practice do not make up for these losses.

In the writings of Miller and Mandianou (2013) the idea of polymedia is presented as an antidote to such challenges. They write of the relational quality of polymedia suggesting that when one technology presents a limitation, another form of media is then used to transcend the problem. For example, they write of how email lacks an emotional quality which, when necessary, can be overcome by using video chats and instant messages. Thus, there is reason to believe that the skepticism of Judge Wood, might be overcome.

Wildene (2006) Baldassar (2008) and Miller and Mandianou (2013) all reflect on pre-existing familial relationships. Their work, so far, does not engage with emerging familial relations

and how media might artificially support the co-presence needed to generate organic family relations. This, I suggest, is significant because when the decision of Judge Wood is juxtaposed with the lived experience of separated binational families there are questions surrounding the representation of a child's right to be with both parents. All children, regardless of their parents' income, language and citizenship, ought to enjoy their presence in their daily lives. This right ought not be limited to those British children living within the state. Yet as *Skype Families* (2016) revealed children that are subject to immigration controls and go before immigration tribunals are not well represented. The report reveals that since 2013 approximately 60 cases before such tribunals have involved the welfare of a child. Of these 60 cases, they write of one decision taking an active interest in the child's welfare. While this raises questions about how best to enact a form of child advocacy (and queries a rights-driven approach to do so, as discussed by O'Neill (1988)), it serves as a reminder of the many silences and omissions that pepper the governance of family migration. Within this unarticulated space, a more personal and intimate framing of the lived experience of family migration emerges. It attends to the emotional dissonance prompted by the playing out of macro-political forces within the everyday. To understand this is to locate a particular form of neuropolitics, as suggested by Isin (2004), unfolding within the state.

### **Part Three: Storytelling as 'Unorthodox' Agency**

There is clear evidence emerging from within the love letters campaign that binational families both within and beyond the UK are suffering. The suffering is rooted in the Government's failure to meet its familial responsibilities. As indicated in the Introduction, there is an established activist community advocating for a change in the FIR. But this campaign for change will not happen overnight. As Goodin (1991) notes, the task of institutional change is a long and arduous process. It is a rare occurrence when change

happens at the hands of an institutional designer in a relatively short and efficient time scale. This time-lapse has implications on how an account of agency can be a tool that binational families draw upon to help negotiate the emotional and relational dissonance that emerges from within a neuropolitical experience.

An account of agency that can support this type of negotiation and grapple with the neuropolitical begins with the individual. It must attend to the everyday and the emotional experience prompted by the practice of marriage migration. It is not about political, social or institutional change. Instead, it reflects the need to make sense of the positing of the individual, and the changing nature of his or her subjectivities in light of the various tensions presented as part of a neuropolitical experience. It must be mindful that, in this particular framing, the binational family is a marginalised community. Their lived experience is subject to the governance mechanism embedded within family migration policies. Consequently, this account of agency must be mindful of the macro-political decisions that inform the lived experience of the binational family and its members. Moreover, it must be attuned to the wider framings of the common good within the community and help individuals to renegotiate their relationship with it. This, it is suggested, will provide a measure of guidance on how to negotiate the insecurities attached to a neuropolitical experience.

I turn to the idea of storytelling to shape this account of agency. Storytelling is, perhaps, a rather unorthodox imagining of agency, political and/or moral. However, I suggest that focusing on storytelling as a method of renegotiating one's position in the world attends to the geospatial challenges of orthodox forms of agency while remaining wary of the power relationships that flow throughout the macro and micro level governance of family migration. In the writings of Nussbaum (1983) and Tirrell (1990), we can begin to understand the relationships that stories have with various understandings of moral agency. Nussbaum's

interrogation of *The Golden Ball* demonstrate how within various literary works we can begin to understand a particular notion of moral agency. Her engagement at the intersection of philosophy and literature demonstrates how stories attend to our moral faculties and allow us to be surprised. This, she suggests, allows us to be more fully engaged in our lived experiences and develop more fully as human beings. Drawing on this insight, Tirrell (1990) suggests that stories provide individuals with the ability to develop alternative understandings of their unfolding autobiographies. Consequently, they are able to re-imagine a decision making paradigm about what is and what is not a morally acceptable course of action. In many respects, this moral casuistry is similar to the claims of O'Neill and MacIntyre. Indeed, MacIntyre carves out a particular role for stories in an alternative work, *After Virtue* (2013), which suggests the story's importance in understanding particular communities' moral assumptions. I draw on this wider discourse but suggest the centrality of the storyteller, him or herself, within the process.

Tirrell (1990) suggests the particular benefits storytellers accrue in telling their story. She notes that the process helps them understand and solidify personal identity while highlighting the relationship between the individual and the community. She writes the following:

In telling stories one develops a sense of self, a sense of self in relation to others, and a capacity to justify one's decisions. These features are necessary for being a moral agent in the categorical sense. Telling stories may also increase our sophistication as agents. We may begin with rudimentary stories that show a basic grasp of the moral, and sometimes we may eventually develop the thickened judgment that enables one to take control of oneself, one's place in one's community and to have a directed impact on that community. (125)

Her claims, while framed in a philosophical understanding of storytelling, mirror the findings of those that draw on storytelling as a form of narrative therapy. For example, Crossely (2000) has demonstrated how storytelling is one way that individuals can remake sense of their world after a traumatic experience. She goes so far as to suggest that storytelling reveals

the structures and meaningful experiences in people's lives in ways that are otherwise silenced and hidden from view. This process, she concludes, 'transforms life and elevates it to another level'. (537) Crossely (2000) draws on the insights of Carr (1986) to make her claims and reveals a subtle but important difference to the ideas of Nussbaum (1983) and Tirrell (1990). Storytelling, in this sense, is not focused on establishing a moral casuistry. Rather, it is a means of establishing and/or recovering personal empowerment. In this framework, storytelling is both restorative and reflexive. The reflexive element of this account of agency, she suggests, demands that individuals probe their lived experience and become attuned to the subtleties of emotion, flow and engagement –much like the interrogative categories Solomon and Steele (2016) suggest.

Carr (1986) suggests that narratives and storytelling mirror subjects' lived experience. Life experiences are not single, isolated events but are interwoven and highly related to each other, like the notes of a symphony. Standing alone they make little sense. But when understood within the wider context of one's life, relationships and experiences, the emerging stories reflect the reality of each and every person. What is more, narrative approaches provide individuals with a way of being in time, not existing beyond time. He is, in making this claim, suggesting that attention be paid to the autobiographical reflections of individuals. This, in turn, demands an alternative understanding of time. Unlike the causal framings that emerge from within the macro-political decisions of family migration governance, autobiographical time attends the lived experience of these decisions. Autobiographical time, as discussed by Brockmeier (2000), engages with both an individual's flash-forward and flashback reflections. Moreover, as Ricoeur (1984) suggests, it embraces the positionality of the individual when it acknowledges that in the process of restorying their lived experience, individuals are constantly re-imagining their histories with a view to shaping their emerging futures. Such repositioning attends to the cultivation of 'flow' and 'sentiment' discussed by



Solomon and Steele (2016) by supporting a process of restorying. In so doing, it attends to the overt prefacing of otherwise silenced, nay lived, experiences.

Restorying one's lived experience is a central component of regaining a sense of empowerment within a disenfranchised lived experience. Many of the stories evidenced in *Love Letters* (2014) reflect on the seeming lack of control and power they have within their experiences of family migration. For example, one woman reflects on her first year of marriage to a Pakistani man. She writes:

It has been a year since I left, and I have not seen my husband once since then. I miss him day and night. My life is torn apart; my heart is torn in two. I am not able to share my love with him like so many others do.

I shall never wish this upon anyone. How could it be a government's policy to keep me from living a happily married life? (24)

Similarly, another individual writes of frustration with the requirements of the family immigration rules.

Why has this happened? The consequences of this law are loving husbands and wives living in perpetual separation. It causes hardship on individuals, marriages, and families. Please, can this law change as soon as possible? (25)

Restorying reveals how, within this feeling of hopelessness and frustration, individuals can begin the process of recovery. As Epstein and White (1990) suggest, the ability to recover a sense of agency and exert a sense of control amid confusion and chaos is central to the restorying experience.

Storytelling fosters the process of externalisation. Individuals, in the spirit of Carr (1984) and Crossely (2000), are excavating their various relationships, prompting a reflexive distancing between the lived and problematic experience. Externalisation occurs during the restorying

process and enables individuals to revise their positionality within the story itself. As Epstein and White (1990) write:

As persons become separated from their stories, they are able to experience a sense of personal agency; as they break from their performance of their stories, they experience a capacity to intervene in their own lives and relationships. (15)

When individuals are encouraged to externalise their story, they are offered the opportunity to re-tell the narrative capturing the possibilities of a life framed within an autobiographical account of time. They are excavating their relationship to the problem and repositioning themselves in such a way that the problem is simply that a standalone problem. Individuals, as Madigan (2012) suggests, are redefining their relationship to the experience that challenges them, and transforming themselves in the process. Herein lies the chief difference between this articulation of agency and that discussed in the Introduction. Agency premised on storytelling does not transform the institutional inequality or seek out political and/or social change. Rather, it repositions individuals within their relationships to others and the challenges they must negotiate, thereby facilitating a process of empowerment amidst chaos.

## **Conclusion**

In suggesting storytelling's ability to promote empowerment and individual agency, I have drawn significantly on the ideas and discussion within philosophy, communications studies and psychotherapy. I am mindful that this is not the first time a narrative approach has been endorsed by academics interested in those who face obstacles to realising their mobility and citizenship rights. There is a specific community working with what Johnson (2015) has labelled non-citizens, helping them negotiate the world they are forced to navigate. For example, Gemingani (2001) has documented the value of storytelling for individuals negotiating the lived experience of the Balkan conflict. He suggests that this experience is

traumatic and finds evidence of worlds falling apart and in need of repair. The devastation of this experience is hidden within the silent narratives he documents. Likewise, Blackburn (2010) has demonstrated her use of narrative therapy techniques as a means of helping forced migrants reconcile their experiences, remaining mindful of the gendered lenses and differing cultural perspectives that inform the emerging narrative(s) of the forced migrant. Similarly, Marlowe (2010) draws on narrative techniques to investigate what he calls the ordinary and extraordinary facets of male Sudanese refugees, and to help move beyond the simple label of 'refugee' and recognise their independent agency and value to society in the aftermath of traumatic experiences.

Reading through this community of scholars gave pause for reflection. Is the neurotic citizen the appropriate label for the experience of binational families? Isin (2004) reflects on the neoliberal framing of the political and the dissonance that emerges when micro-political imaginings of identity are found to be at odds with macro-political considerations of the community. But within this category I can find two particular challenges that remain unaddressed. While an awareness of the neuropolitical experience that reveals the neurotic citizen may label the experience and provide solace for individuals who have experienced it, I remain unconvinced that it provides a means of negotiating its outcomes in an unfolding and uncertain future. For individuals, and in particular the binational families discussed in this paper, there is an acute need to engage with the disempowerment that this future presents. My suggestion of an unorthodox account of agency beginning with storytelling is one way, albeit not the only way, of navigating this uncertain future.

But I must also ask: what about the children living out this neuropolitical experience? The silent omission of their particular subjectivity within this category suggests the wider challenge of advocating for children and acknowledging their citizenship claims. As Jans

(2004) suggests, if we understand citizenship as a participatory act that engages with social involvement, then children do have citizenship claims. What is more, these claims will, by their vary nature, differ from their adult counterparts. In light of the Children's Commissioner's findings (2016), space must be made for their lived experience within the neuropolitical framing of the political.

Many of the stories documented in *Love Letters* (2014) grapple with a loss of voice and faith, and suggest the collapsing of their worlds in light of their lived experience. This begs another question: should scholars be informed by trauma frameworks in order to position their lived experience within a research framework? It is beyond the scope of this conclusion to interrogate this question. I pose it simply to point out areas for future theoretical and practical work in light of the political turmoil surrounding the UK in a post-Brexit environment. In suggesting the potential for a traumatic interrogation of the separated binational family experience within the UK, I am very much aware of the challenges a trauma label affords. As Fassin & Rechtman (2009) demonstrate, there is currently a growing fascination with the label of trauma within various social science disciplines. They reflect upon how quickly Western narratives scholarly and public – have embraced the traumatic vehicle as an explanatory device, and how this may deny agency to marginalised communities. I am likewise informed by the insightful work of White (2004), which assesses the value of narrative therapy to address the experiences of trauma, and Denborough (2006), which suggests how to craft narrative responses to trauma and the wide variety of approaches to narrative therapies more broadly. Their response to the queries raised by Fassin is intriguing and deserves wider reflection. What becomes increasingly clear when reading the entire canon of *Love Letters* (2014) is how the letters reveal the emotional breakdown that accompanies the lived experience of the FIR. Consequently, I continue to wonder. If trauma is understood as the loss of voice or speech and the inability to express one's lived experience

(as Edkins (2002) suggests) or if trauma unmakes our world (as Crossely (2000) suggests) – then there is a need to engage further with this particular area of research.

In the interim, there is solace to be found in the very work that Love Letters to the Home Office is doing, both at the institutional level and at the individual level. They suggest, as described in Part Two, that one of their aims is to bridge the gulf between divided families and create a community of support for those whose family experiences are restricted by the 2012 Family Immigration Rules. In their own way, they are attending to the needs of their community members. They are providing (as Card (1996) suggests) a safe space within which marginalised communities can, in the face of harm and suffering, regroup, re-imagine their role in the community and emerge stronger than before to face the world as it is and not as they would like it to be. In the same vein, Love Letters to the Home Office, through their dedication to arts and literary outputs, has already initiated a process of storytelling and is facilitating the process of individual empowerment in the face of political inequality. The opportunity for individuals to write their stories and reflect on their lived experience is a recognised process in the narrative therapy experience. (See for example the overview provided by Wright & Chung, 2001) In so doing, Love Letters to the Home Office are providing an insightful side-programme to the political campaign discussed in the Introduction. They are offering the support individuals need at a micro-political level to sustain them throughout the wider campaign to rescind the current governance regime of family migration in the United Kingdom.

## **Acknowledgments**

I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this special issue and would like to thank the co-editors for their support in producing this article. I would like to thank the three anonymous peer-reviewers for their insightful and constructive critique of previous iterations of this article. It is much improved from their feedback. The paper benefitted from feedback from a one-day conference on Migration and Activism at Aston University and I am grateful to Dr. Katie Tonkiss and Dr. Graeme Hayes for the opportunity to present and receive feedback on this article. The article also benefitted from feedback from colleagues in Politics and International Relations at Aston University and the particular editorial help of Anna Gunning. Thank you.

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