

Movement and Stillness: Journeying through storying, asylum seekers in the UK

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This paper is informed by my fieldwork in 2003 with asylum seekers and support organisations in the cities of Norwich, Great Yarmouth and Peterborough in East Anglia in the UK. I will begin by giving a brief background of asylum seekers in these field sites, then introduce the myth of Sisyphus as a metaphor for the notion of movement and stillness. I will discuss these concepts and finish by just touching on Heidegger in relation to movement and stillness.

Here I am specifically talking about asylum seekers rather than refugees. Although many asylum seekers consider themselves to be refugees, asylum seeker refers to someone who is in the process of seeking asylum and who is awaiting a decision on their application for refugee status. Asylum seekers in East Anglia tend to form a diverse mix of people from Iran, Iraq, Kosovo, Kenya, Guinea Bissau, Congo, Zimbabwe, Angola, Senegal and Armenia. At the time of my fieldwork, there were not enough numbers of asylum seekers from a specific ethnic origin for a substantial community to form.

Seeking asylum in the UK is a lengthy and complex process. In Great Yarmouth, many asylum seekers were still awaiting a decision by the Home Office to their application some 2 to 7 years later. During which time they lived in a converted run-down hotel with other asylum seekers. This is what one asylum seeker had to say about the hotel:

[...] asylum seekers are treated like herds of cattle in the hotels. When [the authorities] ring up the hotel to move people around, instead of saying move so-and-so to room whatever, they say move room 2 to room 4, so we're not people anymore, we're numbers.

(Mrs K, Kenyan asylum seeker, Great Yarmouth, 2003)

This was the situation for asylum seekers who from the mid 1990s were removed from London and accommodated in different parts of the country whilst their asylum application was being processed (Norwich and Norfolk Racial Equality Council 1998: 32-33). The dispersals were initiated by London borough and then joined by the British Government's National Asylum Support Service (NASS) from 1999, for the purpose of relieving the strain on London.

Asylum seekers are housed together and barred from accessing higher education, employment and social security benefits equivalent to that of British citizens. The process of seeking asylum permeates every aspect of asylum seekers' lives, from political and social status to health and well being to ethnicity, culture and identity.

One family in Great Yarmouth, Mr and Mrs Z, an Iranian couple with a baby born in the UK, were appealing a negative decision to their application for asylum and, no longer able to cope with a feeling of being isolated in Great Yarmouth, they managed to convince the authorities to allow them to return to London and rent a small flat while their appeal was considered. The following quote by Mrs Z is the kind of speech-act, a monologue that became familiar to me as it was repeated many times.

She said:

The hotel in Great Yarmouth was very hard because Mr Z and I, always in the same room. We never could get away from each other. Also, there were young men who take fruit and vegetable and food from the fridge that was not theirs and eat them. And I did say nothing because you know I don't want to make any trouble for me and Mr Z and we have baby. I prayed to God to help out of this situation and find somewhere else to live. Now my prayers are answer and I leave the hotel. Now only I pray for positive decision. Now only I worry about this. But you know, I am very worried that we don't get good decision. Because we are on appeal, and maybe we only get negative decision again. If we get negative decision then what can I do? If there is negative decision there is nothing to help.

(Mrs Z, Iranian asylum seeker, London, 2003)

These monologues, common amongst asylum seekers, are made in response to the

British asylum system to which asylum seekers are bound indefinitely. They refer to asylum seekers' current status and convey a sense of desperation, anxiety and anger. Speech-acts about seeking asylum 'constitutes a major component of their understanding of their lives' (Linde 1993: 4).

Myth of Sysiphus

After hearing many speech acts by asylum seekers that went over and over the difficulties of seeking asylum, Mr Z, who had been studying comparative literature in Iran, drew my attention to Camus's essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus writes:

The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor. You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing.

Albert Camus (1955)

This excerpt from the *Myth of Sisyphus* is a striking and powerful metaphor of the perceived futility of seeking asylum. It is somewhat confronting in that, according to Mr Z, it reflected his sense of despair at the time. I suggest that what Mr Z was experiencing, and relating via Camus's essay, might best be explained through the notion of movement and stillness. The *Myth of Sisyphus* provides a useful signpost from which we can use the notion of movement in terms of literal physical action, and speech-acts recalling and reflecting such movement, as well as the existential movement of a 'being' - endeavouring to make sense of his or her world. Like the stillness experienced by Sisyphus, asylum seekers are trapped in a liminal period, but movement, evident in their speech-acts, assists them in affixing ways to overcome such a predicament. For asylum seekers, their predicament is one in which they struggle to negotiate their existence of 'being' rather than 'nothingness' (see Sartre 1957). Movement in a seemingly motionless context is itself enough to generate the possibility of future happenings. Therefore, this extract from Camus's

interpretation of the Sisyphus myth might introduce us the sense of movement and stillness which is an intrinsic part of seeking asylum.

Stillness

Before I discuss the movement that is generated through asylum seekers' speech acts, I will first show how asylum seekers' are caught in a kind of stillness where it may feel as though nothing changes. They have to wait day-in day-out for a decision to their application for refugee status – feeling trapped rather like Sisyphus.

I was with Mrs Z, in Norwich, doing some window shopping: At one of the jewellery shops there was a china bird in a gold cage. Mrs Z pointed it out. 'Look', she said. 'It is me in Great Yarmouth – I am also trapped in a cage!'

Here Mrs Z expresses stillness as a geographical containment, and equally as the restraints of an asylum seeker identity and a restriction in *feeling* free. Mr D, an asylum seeker from the Congo, also refers to this absence of feeling free and relates it to the asylum system, which requires all asylum seekers to report to the authorities and to remain under surveillance. He said, and I quote:

We have to sign in every week. Why? We are not allowed to go anywhere unless we are given permission and you have to tell them where you are going. You cannot go away for more than one week. Then you may be free to leave where you live, but you are not free here [points to his head].

(Mr D, Congolese asylum seeker, Peterborough, UK 2003)

Contained by their asylum seeker status, and isolated from their ethnic communities, many asylum seekers are fearful of the reaction of locals, and aware of the 'limitations of shared understandings' amongst other asylum seekers (Barth 1969: 15; Coker 2004: 31). Stillness is also a result of the invisibility and loss of community.

Stillness can also be understood as the symbolic death of a former self, life and

possibilities. For Mr Z, stillness is encapsulated by a kind of social death. As we walked up the main street one day Mr Z told me that it was such a shock to come to the UK, where people are more reserved. He said, and I quote:

[...] if I were to have a heart attack and collapse here on the street, people would just walk straight past. If I collapsed on the street in Iran, people would rush to my side to assist me. [...] That is what a society is, people interact. I am not used to people who are reserved and cold, I am used to interacting with people.

(Mr Z, Iranian asylum seeker, London, 2003)

For Mr Z, then, stillness may be represented by a hypothetical collapse in the street symbolising the loss of community. His view that 'people would just walk straight past' symbolises the movement around him from which he remains alienated and dislocated. The revealedness of the heart as the source of communication with others, as a link to one's community and representation of a sense of self, is starkly contrasted with the stillness of loss and alienation. Stillness in this case is borne from social isolation. So, Mr Z's death of his heart may be symbolic of a return to the invisible and the loss of knowledge of oneself.

Does this mean that Mr Z, and all asylum seekers in his situation, will suffer a torment like Sisyphus that can be likened to stillness? I suggest not, because it is the very articulation of the torment, through his speech-act, that creates movement out of stillness. As Derrida says: If one says 'it's not going well' one has inadvertently announced the possibility of redemption (Derrida 2002: 243).

Let me give you an example of an asylum seekers' speech act that generates movement through what I call a heroic story.

Heroic Stories

Mr I, a Kurdish asylum seeker, recounted his attempt to flee his country:

'Many people died crossing the border, many people. You have to cross the border at night and go so quietly otherwise you will be shot. I crossed the border with a group of people, and we got shot at, so everyone ran in different directions. I was left with my friend and we hid for 3 hours. There was a terrible smell. It was of something dead and rotting. We looked behind us and there was a body, an Iraqi man. We think that maybe he was sinking in the water and someone must have pulled him out and just left him on the beach by the river. But animals had been eating his face and body, there were bits out of him. We think he was from Iraq but it was hard to tell. The only thing left intact was his shoes.'

'So, we waited until just before dawn and then we went across the border into Turkey and went straight to the police. The police [punched] us and sent us back to Iraq, where we were put in prison. But after that I kept trying'.

(Mr I, Iraqi asylum seeker, Peterborough, 2003)

Heroic stories convey a sense of triumph, when one finds one has survived a horrendous and dangerous journey. Re-telling such a story emphasises one's survival and the loss of life for others. It highlights one's ability to overcome the strange and alienating experiences of flight, and suggests the possibility of future triumphs. Metraux calls this an 'adventure myth' whereby one represents oneself as courageous and curious and 'experiencing unknown ways of living and hidden human resources' (1991: 9). Telling and re-telling one's story of flight gives a sense of mastery over one's experiences. In recounting a story, one sees oneself as both the victim and the hero; the victim struggles through torturous experience, the hero defies danger and death. But in such a heroic story, one is re-inserted into that journey and one re-experiences it again and again as if to make sense of one's survival, when others have perished.

The heroic story re-articulates fragmented events. The hero is able to identify the body of the Iraqi man – a faceless victim (as 'animals had been eating his face') who did not survive the journey. The hero, through the retelling, identifies the unidentifiable. The hero survives and thus his identity, within the context of the journey, can remain intact. To fail is to lose one's personal identity – as does the faceless man. The faceless man's heroic story cannot be told. In this way, the recounting of this journey is a discovery of courage. This is evident in Mr I's

persistence: 'After that I kept trying', he says, meaning after everything that he had suffered and experienced. This persistence is found in the articulation of danger, the self and what Schwartz calls 'acting well' or one's ability to cope with such an experience (2004: 1).

Unlike Camus's accusation of Sisyphus, Mr I is not the absurd hero. His fate is not sealed. His speech-act attempts to 'render coherent a complex of boundless continually evolving phenomena' (Stone-Mediatore 2003: 165). His heroic storying reveals a multiplicity of movement – of physical journeying, cognitive movement, remembering and retelling.

Mr I did not start his story at the very beginning nor end his story. The outcome is unspoken, it is self-evident – he finally escaped Iraq and arrived in the UK. Thus, the self has become its own story that has not ended – his very being is a tangible embodiment of his journey.

So what is it about this journey and struggle between movement and stillness? And what is it that movement achieves? Stories about journeys are journeys in themselves which, through the telling, change our perception of experiences (Jackson 2002: 30). Stories are therefore coping strategies – they assist one in coming to terms with one's experiences, and as Jackson says, 'making words stand for the world, and then, by manipulating them, changing one's experience of the world' (2002: 18).

People seeking asylum are seeking security and safety from dangerous and uncertain events. Heidegger describes this movement through the use of his concept of *authenticity* and *inauthenticity* (1967: 68). Authenticity is steeped in potentiality, of possibilities (Heidegger 1967: 184) arising from 'creative self-realization' (Martens

2005: 2). Inauthenticity is the distracted self, 'fully scripted' within a social construct – 'more absorbed in "they"' (Martens 2005: 2) than in 'mineness' (Heidegger 1967: 68). Authenticity is a person's self-realisation of the need to fulfill their real potentiality in the world (Warnock 1970).

Heidegger's notion of revealed concealedness is the essence or truth of being-in-the-world (1967: 263). Revealed concealedness is found by taking entities, as Heidegger says, 'out of their hiddenness and letting them be seen in their unhiddenness [their uncoverdness]' (Heidegger 1967: 262). Heidegger says that people are 'thrown' into the world. So that people are situated in the world but at the same time they have the freedom of choosing a range of possibilities. This is the coexistence of restriction and freedom – movement and stillness.

Truth of being-in-the-world is about accepting that movement and stillness co-exist. It is an acceptance of the co-existence of certainty and uncertainty, security and insecurity. Asylum seekers become enveloped by the stillness of uncertainty. Like Sisyphus, asylum seekers are bound in the stillness of a hopeless and futile time. But at the top of the mountain while the rock rolls back down the hill, for a moment Sisyphus is freed. There is a moment of potentiality. But this moment of movement also occurs at the same time as the stillness Sisyphus experiences while the rock rolls down the mountain.

Movement also occurs during stillness for asylum seekers. Speech-acts become a tool of discovery as Derrida says, 'first by opening up a world and then by pointing out things in it' (1991: 270). It is only in the acceptance of the coexistence of certainty and uncertainty, security and insecurity, that one can find authenticity - or truth and meaning for oneself. Speech-acts articulate this sense of searching for being rather than nothingness (see Sartre 1957).

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