THE VISUAL-DIGITAL STORYTELLING IN CURRENT MIGRATION NARRATIVES

Anglophone Postcolonial Literature

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ABSTRACT • Using W. J. Thomas Mitchell's concept of the "pictorial turn" as a starting point, this paper assesses the impact of the digital world and new media on the body of current migration narratives within the field of anglophone postcolonial literature. In a culture dominated by images, new media, particularly the Internet, have increasingly complemented written language as the primary means of conveying storytelling. In regard to migration narratives, as it happened at the dawn of cinematography when the human face attained a multidimensional, visual and emotional focus, this shift in the messenger has conferred a digital life to the human face itself. Given this new media reality, the human face is now able to communicate simultaneously across distances, across time and to a wider audience. This quality, referred to as "facialization" by Thomas Macho, enables individuals to take a predominant role as real-life protagonists in their own real-life stories engendering in return an online community. Furthermore, as put forth by Hilde C. Stephansen, this online community also takes a stand against the mainstream narrative of present-day migrations and directs attention to marginalized human beings prevented from entering Western societies. In this paper, these real-life stories are explored in the visual-digital storytelling by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie of her experience as a migrant; by Reni Eddo-Lodge as a descendant of earlier migrants; by Lucy Popescu as an activist working for the publishing industry as well as by activists engaged in the *Refugee Tales Statement*. This visual-digital production of migration narratives and their consequent availability also render the human rights issues facing stateless persons pressing and immediate.

KEYWORDS • Visual-digital Storytelling; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; Reni Eddo-Lodge; Lucy Popescu; the *Refugee Tales Statement*; Digital Engagement.

1. The Digital Context

It is evident that global culture, cutting-edge communication systems, not to mention digital technologies, have affected traditional forms of literature along with its production. An example can be detected in twenty first century migration narratives within the field of the literary canon of anglophone postcolonial literature. Aiming to attract the attention of a wider audience, present-day migration narratives are rediscovering and exploiting the audible and, above all the visible dimensions of storytelling taking advantage of means of communication provided by digital technologies. The Internet in particular, as an accessible medium through which migrants who had been shut out from the mainstream narrative can eventually speak out, offers a virtual space that is across-the-board, boundless and borderless. Furthermore, being characterised by user-friendliness, equality and openness, this cyberspace allows a collaborative process of producing and dis-

tributing real-life experiences along with engaging the audience in the enduring debates about migration and racism.

Global culture and digital technologies are also paving the way for the increased production and propagation of images. In our Western, cultural context, images and new media, especially the Internet, have gained ascendency over written language as the primary means of conveying narrative and storytelling to such an extent that we are witnessing the emergence of the image of the human face as a conveyor of stories in ways that we had not seen before. With this premise in mind, this paper explores the ways in which current migration narratives address humanitarian crises, experiment with literary genres, inform and spread real-life stories that are unacknowledged, repressed or altered by mainstream press and narration. Pertinent to this paper, the face as a conveyor of stories in current migration narratives is evident in the visual-digital production of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Reni Eddo-Lodge, Lucy Popescu and the *Refugee Tales Statement*.

2. The "Facialization" of Storytelling

In 1992, the American, art historian and media theorist William John Thomas Mitchell developed the concept of the "pictorial turn" that has also had a bearing on the production of literary works. To Mitchell the pictorial turn is

> a trope or figure of thought that reappears numerous times in the history of culture, usually at moments when some new technology of reproduction, or some set of images associated with new social, political, or aesthetic movements, has arrived on the scene (2018: 14).

Although, the pictorial turn describes an intricate but related series of transformations in the production and understanding of culture, it reflects at the same time a restored interest in pictures and images in an age of an extensive and diverse visual culture where images may be on the same level of language (2018: 16-18).

Expanding his reflection, Mitchell conceives the pictorial turn as

> forces of media, capital, and culture [that] swirl about us like massive storms of images. We know more about the world now than ever before, just as it seems to be more than ever escaping our comprehension, much less control (2018: 14).

These "forces of media" enable alternative image/information providers to compete with and to circumvent the mainstream narrative of present-day migrations depicted by the fourth estate[1]. In the ongoing digital age, the potentialities of the Internet allow beyond question a multimodal and multimedia narrative and the latter implies visual narration too. The American pioneer in criticism and theory of electronic literature, hypertext and hypermedia George P. Landow argues that the

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[1] "There is a general understanding that the Fourth Estate is another name for the news media" (Schultz 1998: 1). "The term fourth estate has been around for centuries. In Europe, going back to medieval times, the people who participated in the political life of a country were generally divided into three classes or estates. In England they were the three groups with representation in Parliament, namely, the nobility, the clergy, and the common people. Some other group, like the mob or the public press, that had an unofficial but often great influence on public affairs, was called the fourth estate. The first known use of fourth estate was in 1837 when it came to refer exclusively to the press. Nowadays it is applied to all branches of the news media" (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary).

Internet as a host for videos becomes a multimedia platform, "therefore […] it has an identifiable logic−a McLuhan-esque message in the medium−the Web certainly is significantly pictorial" (2006: 88-89).

Although the Canadian philosopher and leading theorist in media studies Marshall McLuhan could not experience the current digital age, his avowal "the medium is the message" (2001: 9) is still effective. In the early sixties of the last century, McLuhan brought forth his reflection as follows:

> The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name. This fact, characteristic of all media, means that the "content" of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph. If it is asked, "What is the content of speech?," it is necessary to say, "It is an actual process of thought, which is in itself nonverbal". […] When the light is being used for brain surgery or night baseball is a matter of indifference. It could be argued that these activities are in some way the "content" of the electric light, since they could not exist without the electric light. This fact merely underlines the point that "the medium is the message" because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action (2001: 10-11).

Making the above extract suitable to current times, the Internet can be a medium/message, but under specific conditions otherwise it "is pure information". When current migration narratives are delivered by means of videos posted on the Internet platforms, the audience receive a realistic as well as a first-hand account of events. In this context, these videos might be understood as "activities" that are the "content" of the Internet. In addition, proceeding with McLuhan's theory adaptation, the Internet, that has become dominant in our daily lives, accelerates and enlarges the scale of previous human functions along with accelerating the transit of information in space and time. In our global culture, McLuhan's avowal "movement of information" (2001: 70), that occurs between the sender/the author of the message and its receiver/the audience, is both important and crucial especially in regard to enduring issues of racism and migration that characterise our Western societies.

Furthermore, "new technology of reproduction" (Mitchell 2018: 14) greatly simplify the creation and dissemination of multimodal and multimedia forms of narration. Relying on this new media technology, the above-mentioned authors address issues of racism and migration and produce transnational political dialogue that travels across digital space, and in so doing, they create a new way to stand out in the cultural industry by engaging Western audiences, scholars and intellectuals in new ways of reading literary works. In other words, "new technology of reproduction" generates an open and egalitarian site for activism or, to put it in a more colloquial way, for showing up and taking a stand.

All taken into consideration, as migration narratives are rediscovering and exploiting the audible but above all visible dimensions of storytelling, it may be proposed for consideration that this visible quality allows faces of the silenced, marginalized *personae non gratae* in Western societies to be perceivable. Websites and Internet platforms such as YouTube, for instance, become a safe, welcoming site where migration narratives are delivered by means of visual communication. This visual-digital narration is a manifestation of the German, cultural historian and philosopher Thomas Macho's ideas on contemporary societies. Macho argues that constantly updated technologies have facilitated the shifting into "facial societies" which primarily act through the recognizability and representation of faces (1996: 90). The Internet and social media platforms have created a culture of extreme visibility, this means that the human face has an agency and has become a significant interface for human communication. Macho goes further suggesting a face-to-

face contact that is transferred to the Internet platforms and or social media where the mass media subtract the body presence from the face, and one of the fundamental habits of our perception involves the need to recognize faces and to maintain our own identity. These needs are satisfied by means of cultural techniques of self-reflection that

> differ from all other techniques through their potential self-referentiality, a pragmatics of recursion. From their very beginnings, speaking can be spoken about and communication be communicated. We can produce paintings that depict paintings or painters; films often feature other films. Even today, the majority of cultural techniques serve as vehicles of self-description, self-legitimation, and authentication, whether in the form of pictures, writings or numbers: be they portraits and passport photos, signs of the body (such as fingerprints), seals, stamps, coats of arms or logos, signatures and signs, or numerical codes (ranging from one's personal and social security number to the PIN-code at the ATM) (2013: 31).

As Macho points out, we live in a society of portraits and in a saturated image culture, in other words a "facial society" (Maurice 2017: 3), and as the Australian scholar in contemporary art practices Laini Burton sustains "standing out from the ever-growing crowd of faces may be read as a last radical act" (2023: 4).

The visual-digital storytelling in current migration narratives relies on posted videos that employ strategies such as close-up shots in which the face is predominant, and this form of visual art of videomaking fits Macho's "facialization" neologism. By this term, the German scholar refers to the feature of "faciality" enabled by new media and digital technologies. As Macho asserts, these approachable means of communication have also developed and increased individuals' need to see and be seen especially in original virtual spaces where end users of electronic devices can act, give vent to attention-seeking, and eventually to self-representation. In this manner they signal their membership and participation in facial societies (1996: 87-108).

That being said, it is important to underline that beyond question these technologies allow authors and publishers to be visible, gain a wider audience and deliver a realistic account of events, but more importantly, these narratives continue to "display" the distinguishing features of literature identified by the French philosopher and semiotician Roland Barthes, that is to say:

> Literature is essentially an activity of language that makes a work literary. But this formal language is powerfully underwritten by conventions, approved vocabularies, standards of 'taste', ranges of reference, and so forth, which shape its acceptable 'readability' in any period. Therefore, to be [considered] 'Literature' […] writing needs to conform to prevailing standards of expression. […] To thrive, authors need to advertise their literariness; their work must display the signs of 'Literature' which prevail in their period. (Barthes qtd. in Rylance 1994: 9-10)

"The prevailing standards of expression" emphasised by Barthes are the ones employed by authors taken into consideration in this paper. In order "to advertise their literariness", they consciously conform to contemporary models and norms of usage of the language, and this conforming in return merges into Mitchell's thought when he asserts that images may be on the same level of language.

The African-American, multi-award writer, lecturer and activist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie represents a perfect example of an author who has consciously conformed to models and norms of the language in use. Born in Nigeria, Adichie moved to the U.S.A. for her higher education. Adichie is a well-known novelist, but she is also a well-known face to Internet regular users. Already in 2009, at a TED conference in Oxford (United Kingdom), she introduced herself as a storyteller and as a "vehicle of self-description" (Macho 2013 :31) she stood in front of the audience

and the camera in a Western outfit but simultaneously wearing an African style head covering as to emphasise her African-American identity.

Adichie spent almost twenty minutes reading a script and warning the audience of "the danger of a single story" because it often originates from misunderstandings or lack of knowledge of the Other, and, as it happens in contexts of racism and migration, single stories can also have a malicious intent to suppress other groups of people due to preconception. Among the examples provided, Adichie mentioned her single story on Mexican migrants shaped by words and images delivered by the U.S.A. media coverage: "There were endless stories of Mexicans as people who were fleecing the healthcare system, sneaking across the border, being arrested at the border, that sort of thing" (08:35-08:44). However, when she visited Mexico from the U.S.A. she learnt another story:

> I remember walking around on my first day in Guadalajara, watching the people going to work, rolling up tortillas in the marketplace, smoking, laughing. I remember first feeling slight surprise. And then, I was overwhelmed with shame. I realized that I had been so immersed in the media coverage of Mexicans that they had become one thing in my mind, the abject immigrant. I had bought into the single story of Mexicans and I could not have been more ashamed of myself. So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become. (Adichie 2009: 08:46-09:24)

In her intent to warn the audience of the danger of a single story, Adichie relies on an Igbo word "nkali" that can be translated "to be greater than another" and "stories too are defined by the principle of nkali: How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power" (09:46-10:03).

The concept of stories dependent on power is emphasised also by the British journalist and author Reni Eddo-Lodge who was born in London to a Nigerian, single mother. Her visual-digital storytelling started to circulate in 2017 right after the publication of her debut work *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*. As a part of her book promotion, the Internet hosted videos that show her face looking plausibly at the interviewer who is not visible, not even audible. With a serious, at times on the verge of indignation facial expression, she denounces issues of race and racism within British society from a personal perspective, and because of this, she can candidly admit that "British society is shaped by race [and] it's something we're in deep denial about" (2017: 02:28-02:32). Her showing up and taking a stand is based on first-hand stories about living in a white society and being black. Speaking from personal experience, Eddo-Lodge clearly states that

> racism is not coincidental; it exists for social purpose to basically compound power in the hands of people who are white […] that's the problem of racism; it has a social point […] and actually it's very effective if you look at the bastions of power in this country there's barely anybody who isn't white in those arenas" (2017: 03:26-03:47).

She goes further denouncing an emerging fear of a black planet especially at present time that witnesses the rise of far-right politics:

> I think that, in terms of global politics, it really [is] pertinent. And a fear of a black planet is essentially people who on one side deny the power relations of race in this country but on the other side are very very scared of white people becoming a minority. Almost as if they recognise that being a minority in this country means treatment that is not preferential […] there is an understanding there from people who might dedicate their lives' careers to white supremacy, frankly, there is an understanding that

being a racial minority means – means structural disadvantage […] And so I think that far right politics and its sort of resurgence across the globe is almost that – almost the last dying cry of monocultural society. (2017: 08:49-10:14)

Over the years, Eddo-Lodge realised that "in the moment you start naming the problem, that is race and racism, then you become the problem" (2017: 08:09-08:14) as a consequence, as she explains in her print media form of activism:

Entering into a conversation with defiant white people is a frankly dangerous task for me […] if I express frustration, anger or exasperation at their refusal to understand, they will tap into their presubscribed racist tropes about angry black people who are a threat to them and their safety […] it's also likely that their white friends will rally around them, rewrite history and make the lies the truth (Eddo-Lodge 2018: xi).

"Rewriting history and make the lies the truth" is also at the core of the issue of present-day migrations. Lucy Popescu, writer, editor who believes in the power of words and activist in the field of human rights, in May 2019 delivered a speech at a TEDx conference at the London Business School. With the firm intention of speaking the truth of current migrations and "to directly challenge the negative press and to cast a more positive light on a situation that, for many, is a living hell" (2016: 2) in a span of time of almost twenty minutes, Popescu with her face sheds light on migrants' journeys, that is to say a painful process unwillingly experienced by human beings who arrive in Western societies in search for a place to call home. Those human beings fled conflict, poverty and terror, some of whom left their home and family behind and undertook a perilous journey, only to arrive on less than welcoming shores. The physical but above all psychological wounds of this passage leave long lasting scars on migrants' bodies and minds. As Popescu points out, finding "the words to describe their trauma and begin the healing process" (08:39-08:43) is not easy and or immediate. In believing in the power of words as a means of giving back to migrants their voices along with "bring[ing] some order back into their lives" (09:07-09:10), as a speaking face, Popescu shows one of her successful attempts made to cast a more human-centred light on migrants. As activist and publisher, she encouraged Jade Amoli-Jackson, a refugee from Uganda, to express her emotions by composing as "writing allows them to process past trauma and brings them hope for the future" (09:45-09:47). The production of that form of speaking was later published, and on that occasion, Popescu let Amoli-Jackson's voice overwhelm the audience with her poetry that explicates the reasons behind her journey:

> I ran out of the house
> Without packing anything
> Even my sanity
> How can a country I called home
> Become a butcher's den
> And my bed a foreigner's heaven! (Amoli-Jackson in Popescu 2019: 10:48-11:05)

In a dark conference room Amoli-Jackson's lines were showed on a screen and were audible in a strong Ugandan accent. After having read her last stanza,

> Fond memories of my youth
> And the good old days
> I search my head and heart
> But the huge dark memories
> Planted in my brain remain

> I will treasure the good ones
> And loathe the bad ones. (11:19-11:40)

while the light was smoothly coming back in the conference room, and in contrast to the seriousness visible on Popescu's face, Amoli-Jackson's smiling face was showed on the screen for a couple of seconds (11:44-11:46). Arguably, this can be envisioned as a sign of a successful attempt "to forge a new life from the sel[f]" (09:24-09:26). In those twenty minutes, besides giving spaces to migrants' voices and faces, Popescu laid stress upon the fact that "those fleeing poverty, conflict, torture or persecution deserve a wider audience" (11:45-11:53) in order to spread their real-life stories that are unacknowledged, repressed or altered by mainstream press and narration. As a matter of fact, "some have been forced to leave behind their children, some are coping with bereavement, some have lost their entire family" (09:30-09:39).

Popescu's last claims are the crucial essence of the "Refugee Tales" project. Established in 2014 by currently well-known faces David Herd and Anna Pincus, this project aims at raising awareness about the experiences of asylum seekers in the United Kingdom. Herd is professor of modern literature, poet and activist; while Pincus is director of the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group. In 2018, to call for a change in the law, the *Refugee Tales Statement* was recorded and uploaded online, both on their official website and the YouTube platform. In this video that echoes Burton's suggestion, i.e. a form or "radical act" (2023: 4), authors, actors, journalists and activists join their faces together to read a statement on indefinite detention as the United Kingdom is the only country in Europe that detains people without a limited time. Besides allowing human beings to oppose inhumane political policies by calling for a more human and just, legal system for what the British law defines illegal migrants, this visual-digital narrative mirrors Landow's definition of the Web as being "significantly pictorial" (2006: 89). In a span of time of two minutes and thirty-two seconds, thirty human beings (women and men) of British and non-Western origin whose skin complexions cover various nuances of white and black, besides having different social and cultural backgrounds, alternatively put their faces in front of a camera and read some lines of the statement. This tracking shot shows a sequence of faces that resembles Macho's face-to-face contact as mentioned above. The audience's faces in front of an electronic device's screen see only close-ups of the activists' faces. Some of them, as is the case of the 2021 Nobel Prize's winner Abdulrazak Gurnah or the 2019 Booker Prize's winner Bernardine Evaristo, have their eyes on the camera constantly; whereas actors like Sinéad Cusack or Nima Teleghani add emphasis moving their hands if to accent the meaning of the expressed words. Furthermore, in order to make the message understood by everybody, default subtitles are visible and, in a visual way to add more stress on some key concepts but also to direct the audience's eyes on important issues, some words are emphasised in yellow. This formal oral and written declaration provides figures of human beings detained as well as the death toll from detention, of the length of time spent in custody along with the amount of money spent to financially support this inhumane, illegal system as "people who are detained indefinitely *are not charged with anything*" (00:39-00:43 emphasis in the original). The faces and voices go further asserting

> *By every measure* and every charter, indefinite detention is *a breach of human rights*. 'No one,' as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* says, '*shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile*.' Indefinite detention *denies due process* and is *a breach of the rule of law*. (01:12-01:32; emphasis in the original)

The closing request in the statement is expressed by the pluri-award British actor and activist Jeremy Irons who relying on his acting skills, as if he were performing in a stage play, demands that: "The law must change, *now*" (02:28-02:32 emphasis in the original). Unfortunately, the law

has not changed yet. However, they did manage to direct the audience's attention to the matter of migration along with the atrocious detention system. As a matter of fact, over the years, thanks to its digital visibility, the project has reached an international audience and has given rise to similar activist movements worldwide.

3. Conclusions

The authors, editors, intellectuals and activists briefly introduced in this paper are just a few of the names who rely on visual-digital storytelling to shed light on current, but enduring, issues of racism and migration. Arguably, this online community of human beings telling stories and taking a stand may become, in the broad Saidian sense, "individual[s] endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying [and] articulating a message […] to and for a public, in public" (Said 1994: 11) along with speaking the truth to power. Furthermore, what the Portuguese academic in communication studies Rita Figueiras defines as "the democratization of opinion production" (2012: 152) is a sign of empowered new media which strives to mobilize individuals who then lend their faces and voices in order to direct attention to marginalized individuals or human beings prevented from entering Western societies (Stephansen 2016: 1-2). In so doing, this online community fosters citizenship, social cohesion, political engagement, and visibility through digital media. To a certain degree, this digital engagement also fits Macho's assumption of human beings' need to see and be seen especially in original virtual spaces. In this context of migration narratives, end users of electronic devices do act, give vent to attention-seeking, and eventually to self-representation (1996: 87-108). Being prevented from entering Western societies, then marginalised, or made visible in a distorted manner by press and mainstream narration, migrants by means of digital, cultural techniques can be instead "vehicles of self-description, self-legitimation, and authentication" (Macho 2013: 31).

In this context of migration narratives, it may be argued that the digital engagement is twofold; authors and activist who commit themselves on the questions of migration and racism and migrants who are able to show up and take a stand.

However, Macho also puts forth some limits detectable in the practice of cultural techniques:

> In the past 30 years […] a series of […] 'turns', such as 'the pictorial turn' or 'the sonic turn', [have] been elevated to the level of cultural-technical generality. The possible recursions of cultural techniques are what generate questions of identity and identification in the first place; […] they require media: screens and mirrors, paper and books, instruments of measurement and calculation, sound and visual storage equipment, computer. Cultural techniques cannot be practiced without media, but they cannot simply be reduced to media technologies either (2013:44).

Indeed, the authors concisely discussed in this paper have managed to direct attention to issues of migration and racism relying on media and digital technologies, but they also commit themselves outside the digital world like Popescu or the activists involved in the "Refugee Tales" project, for instance. They consciously rely on "the prevailing standards of expression" (as put forth by Barthes) because the Internet, that has become dominant in our daily lives, accelerates and enlarges the scale of previous human functions along with accelerating the transit of information in space and time. Nonetheless, this represents only the first but crucial stage of the process of welcoming, inclusion, right and fair treatment of human beings who are in search for a place to call home in our Western societies.

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