

Seeking out the Untold Stories of Mobility

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This is a guest post by Amanda Russell Beattie, Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at Aston University School of Languages and Social Sciences.

Last week, a little boy drowned on a Turkish beach. In an instant, the world took notice of the plight of refugees fleeing violent conflict. Closer to home, in the UK, this one photograph has prompted ordinary people to undertake numerous political acts, donating clothing, food, money, and other forms of aid to the refugees currently living in the Calais jungle. Much has been written on the ethics of publishing this photograph: whilst I am aware of and grateful for the acts and the sentiment that it has prompted, I cannot support its publication. This tension is difficult, and has proved impossible for me to work through. These are some of my thoughts.

On twitter, Annick Wibben reflected on the publication of the photo and the ensuing action it prompted, suggesting that 'something is better than nothing' when seeking to achieve political change. These reflections prompted a blog exchange between her and Megan MacKenzie, leading Wibben to wonder what should, or can, academics do in response to experiences of trauma? Wibben makes a compelling claim that the stories of those fleeing conflict can inspire us to understand how such situations, like the death Alan, come to be. These type of tragic incident can facilitate sites of intervention that offer 'points of resistance' to enact policy changes.

In turn, MacKenzie's blog post wonders if this is enough. MacKenzie is against the publication of the photo if all it prompts is discomfort and denial. To be actively political, MacKenzie claims, is "to engage and reflect" on what the image and people framed within it represent. It demands that we think through the politics of mobility, how states are maintained, borders formed, and security enacted.

For my part, while I am not comfortable with the image being shown, I am aware that it has prompted many to act who otherwise would not. I should be grateful. But I also think the publication of this single image is harmful. (I am setting aside the actual ethics of publishing the photo aware of the ethical permissions academics must seek before conducting research!) The publication of this single photo attends only to one plot in a complicated and diverse story of being a refugee, but more generally, to be a mobile person. To focus on one story, to the detriment of so many others, I suggest causes further harm.

I doubt I would know as many refugee stories myself had I not been ordered to be deported from the UK in April 2013. But I was, and my life fell apart.

In an attempt regain my academic voice I began to seek out the stories of individuals whose mobility has been thwarted. What I learnt is deeply troubling and inexcusable in the contemporary global world. For example, in the UK if you fall in love with someone from outside the EEA you must earn above £18,600 to bring them into the country. (Even more if you have kids!) The right to a family, as enshrined in the European Code of Human Rights has, for British Citizens, become tied to their economic worth. The activist group Love Letters to the Home Office has documented the trauma prompted by this legislation: their edited volume tells the stories of the hurt, betrayal and ongoing loss experienced by families separated by arbitrary rules and borders.

Like the stories in Love Letters I grappled with a life that had been torn apart when my work permit was revoked due to administrative errors. I had to reconcile the fact that my privileged and deeply comfortable life as an academic in the UK, with a loving husband and two young children, could be taken away from me. It is a life that I had never been forced to examine, reflect upon, and engage with in the way that MacKenzie asks us all to do. I actually have to admit, writing this post is hard, because of the guilt that I feel that I couldn't handle this experience when it was borne out in the comfort of my own home. It is also scary as it reminds me how I could have been detained in a UK detention center. I'm profoundly grateful I was not.

At a conference in Edinburgh in 2015, I learnt of the abuse suffered by detainees at the hands of their guards. Where previously my writings on trauma and mobility had largely been theoretical, now I was confronted with the realities of trauma. A video, produced by Standup productions, detailed the harm and trauma endured by detainees (see full video here); it prompted a panic attack. I had to leave the room. I have since watched the video in its entirety but

always with a quickening heartbeat and a tightening chest. The video captures the lack of humanity faced by detainees on a daily basis. It challenges the assumed presence of the rule of law in the UK.

The plight of the detainee within the UK does not feature in the media this week alongside the tragic loss of Alan leaving me to wonder if it ought to have been published at all. Perhaps a little good has come of it, but at what cost? If, as Wibben suggests, we ought to focus on stories, then I suggest we need to be curious and wonder what stories aren't being told. Their absence from the social narrative might enhance the realities of mobility trauma. But at the same time, the reflection demanded by Mackenzie might foster a space for alternative stories to emerge. If they do I'm mindful of the arguments put forward by Lissa Malkki.[1] She writes of a pathology that haunts those that are mobile, of their presumed amorality because they chose to leave their motherland. Yet those that leave, do they really have a choice? I don't think that they do. But I've lost faith in my abilities as an agent to help them. Instead I seek out their stories, one at a time, in the hopes that telling it to me might help them – and me.

[1] Malkki, L. H. (1995). Refugees and exile: From "refugee studies" to the national order of things. *Annual review of anthropology*, 495-523; (1996). Speechless emissaries: refugees, humanitarianism, and dehistoricization. *Cultural anthropology*, 11,3, 377-404.