Securing agency through self-representation of asylum seekers and refugees using Black Lives Matter and Indigenous Peoples' movements as a back-drop

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The call by emblematic figures of refugees, black people, and indigenous communities, for

agency and recognition spans the world over. The political urgency of the need for refugee

self-representation has been revealed to us more clearly than ever before against the backdrop

of a landscape in which political movements designed to give a voice to those marginalised

by racial or indigenous "otherness", have been vilified and pushed to political action. The

Black Lives Matter movement, and the Indigenous Rights movement give a model for how

refugees can self-advocate for improved rights, inspiring and laying the ground for improved

political voice. The new-found energy that has driven these political movements prompt us to

think about whether it is time for a refugee rights movement, and we start to see some hint in

the drive towards self-representation in films such as *400 Miles to Freedom*. However, the

difficulty of demonstrating or staging a refugee rights movement makes things like

filmmaking or literary representation become more important and empowering mediums in

which the activists are protected as people cannot physically reach them.

In the current context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the virus' ability to transcend borders or any

cultural divide has revealed the cracks within our societies. The effects have been skewed

against marginalised communities such as refugees, people of colour, and indigenous

communities through heightened border restrictions and job and income insecurity. Images in

the media of fires at Moria Refugee camp[1]; fires at Rohingya Refugee camp in Bangladesh[2];

millions marching in the Black Lives Matter protests demonstrating over the death of George

[1] Jean Mackenzie (2020). 'Moira migrants: Fire destroys Greek camp leaving 13,000 without shelter', *BBC NEWS*, 9 September. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-54082201 [accessed 15 February 2021]

[2] Md. Kamruzzaman (2021). 'Large fire devastates Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh', *AA,* 14 January. Available at: https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/large-fire-devastates-rohingya-refugee-camp-in-bangladesh/2109330 [accessed 15 February 2021]

Floyd[3], or the thousands who marched in support of the Wet'suwet'en indigenous people in

Canada[4] signify to opening of new areas of study regarding forms of containment, and

closures, for people who are vilified more on their heritage and identity than anything else.

In documentary films, images oscillate between polarities of sentimentalism and realism to

represent these communities of refugees, black or indigenous people. Madelaine Hron argues

that affective expectations that refugee stories are dystopic, or tragic, reduce refugees to

[3] Larry Buchanan, Quoctrung Bui and Jugal K. Patel (2020). 'Black Lives Matter May be the largest Movement in the U.S. History', *NY Times*, 3 July. Available at:
https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html [accessed 16 February 2021]

[4] David M. Shribman (2020). 'Indigenous Protests exposed tensions behind Canada's tranquil image', *Los Angeles Times,* 7 March. Available at: https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-03-07/canada-rail-blockade-protest-westsuweten [accessed 16 February 2021]

objects of pity whose only subjectivity is victimhood[5]. Sentimentalism thus reinforces the

binaries of self vs other, and also largely disallows the potential for ideological critique.

Therefore, allowing the refugee to self-represent has the effect of bringing out their real-

world experience to the forefront.

The pandemic has also exacerbated the xenophobic responses and blame directed on

minorities and refugees, not only by the mainstream media, but also by very senior politicians

holding high offices. In UK, the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary have been on the

offensive in castigating lawyers who were acting to support refugees, and more recently the

Home Secretary was quoted as saying she disagreed with last year's Black Lives Matter

protests as well as taking the knee and branding the protests as 'dreadful'[6]. Such

condemnations create a hostile environment, making it difficult for self-representations by

refugees.

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[5] Emma Cox, Sam Durrant, David Farrier, et all (2020) *Refugee Imaginaries,* Edinburgh University Press, p 334.
[6] Nazia Parveen (2021). 'Priti Patel describes Black Lives Matter protests as 'dreadful''. *The Guardian*, 12 February. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/feb/12/priti-patel-hits-out-at-dreadful-black-lives-matters-protests [accessed 16 February 2021]

For these three communities, the ground shifts and conditions change, but the same hierarchies remain, though articulated in new ways, vulnerabilities are exacerbated and solidified. In this pandemic, whilst the subjects might change in terms of directions, motivations and networks, the echoes of the past remain. There is still a highly volatile space of violence, political space of asymmetry and increasingly a space of precarity. These conditions emerge through multiple circuits and modalities, extending transnational or cultural divides.

In considering how recognition, agency and deservingness is afforded to these communities, we need to establish where to begin when wanting to secure agency for these maligned people; whose perspective; whose vantage point is taken; and whether it is a narrative of an individual or a group. How are economic, social and political logics and narratives mobilised, mediated, represented, lived, and how are all these threads entangled? In seeking agency for these communities, what is being considered is the privileging of minoritized voices.

In the UK, a multitude of grassroots projects and initiatives have sprung up dedicated to recording and preserving the memories and histories of different communities often under-voiced and under-represented within the mainstream heritage[7]. The impetus for such projects arose from a range of motivations but in general all were responding to the desire to document, record and preserve the identity and history of their own locality and community. It is thus possible to view refugee filmmaking as another form of community archiving which might be viewed as also articulating a voice of protest that makes them chime with the BLM

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[7] Flinn, Andrew, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd. "Whose memories, whose archives? Independent community archives, autonomy and the mainstream." *Archival science 9*, no. 1-2 (2009): 71.

movement. This lends support to the notion of encouraging self-representation amongst the marginalised communities, fostering development of their own narratives based on lived experiences, and having these disseminated and archived for posterity.

In securing agency by refugees, being able to hear personal narratives and observe refugee lives clearly offers subjects a greater say in the construction of their image. It represents a major shift in attitude about where one looks for authority and authenticity. Portraying refugees as straightforward victims removes political agency from the figure of the refugee by establishing a condition of political voicelessness. Liisa Malkki advances the idea that 'voice' is the ability to establish narrative authority over one's own circumstances and future and also the ability to claim an audience[13].

This paper evaluates securing of agency by refugees and asylum seekers through self-representative documentary filmmaking directorship. Exploring ways in which refugees can secure agency, Lilie Chouliaraki, for instance, suggests that migrant self-representation may facilitate recognition, remediation, performance and celebration of migrants themselves in a way that counteracts moral regulation[14]. This self-representation is further supported by Jay Ruby, who comments in the Visual Anthropology, arguing that for some observers, indigenous media is a positive step towards self-determination. [15] She contends that it offers a possible means, social as well as political, for reproducing and transforming cultural identity for people who have experienced massive political, geographic, and economic disruption. These disruptions are a common feature in the lives of refugees and indigenous

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[13] Liisa Malkki, 'Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization'. *Cultural anthropology, 11*(3) (1996), 377-404.

[14] Lilie Chouliaraki, 'Symbolic bordering: The self-representation of migrants and refugees in digital news', *Popular Communication*, 15:2 (2017), pp.78-94 (p.84).

[15] Jay Ruby. 'Speaking For, Speaking About, Speaking With, or Speaking Alongside An Anthropological and Documentary Dilemma'. *Visual Anthropology Review,* 7(2) (1991), 50-67.

communities, and having the capacity to dictate the narrative, and lead discourse on their lives serves to help them reclaim agency and deservingness.

The documentary film *400 miles to Freedom* (2012), self-directed by Avishai Mekonen who is a refugee, is an autobiographical film that tells the story of his family's journey as they fled religious persecution from Ethiopia on their way to Israel via Sudanese refugee camps.[16] This gives him total authorial control over the creation of both the recorded and broadcast content of the film, and means that as the sole filmmaker, he has the ability to address a particular idea through his film without having to consult with any other party. This position can be read as a form of 'indigenous media', defined by Pamela Wilson and Michelle Stewart as work made by those within the communities that are documented, and which often directly addresses the politics of identity and representation by engaging and challenging the dominant political forms.[17] They contend that control of media representation and of cultural self-definition asserts and signifies cultural and political sovereignty itself. This is particularly relevant to Avishai, who has autonomous control in how he represents the figure of the refugee. Malkki argues that there is a 'tendency to universalise "the refugee" as a

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[16] Avishayi Mekonen, dir., *400 Miles to Freedom,* (US: Pacific Street Films, 2012). Available online at Kanopy Movies, [https://ntuuk.kanopy.com/video/400-miles-freedom] (last accessed 30th August 2020).
[17] Wilson, Pamela, and Michelle Stewart. "Indigeneity and indigenous media on the global stage." *Global indigenous media* (2008): 1-35.

special "kind" of person, not only in the textual representation, but also in their photographic representation'.

the children are begging,
like, you know,

These photographic representations would be based on preconceived notions that dehumanise refugees, and frequently objectify them whilst dismissing their historical, cultural and political circumstances. Social actors, who have the capacity and capability to create media outputs, can play a significant role in redefining discourse on refugees. When refugees have access to video camera equipment, they are not bound by anyone or any institution as to the type of content they can create. They can use this opportunity to create content that speaks about them, celebrates their identity, values and culture. This self-representation accords Avishai the right to maintain his identity, regardless of the country that he finds himself living in. As a refugee, he falls in the category of marginalised groups and experiences, who have thus claimed their space among autobiographical narratives.

Kess Adisu Biyadgili

We want to tell the government
about our heritage,

In conclusion, through self-representation, members of these communities, refugees, black people, and indigenous people are able to showcase their own religion, history and identities by circumventing the dominant structures of mainstream media. Colin Harvey argues that 'perhaps it is time to consider the advantages of perpetual critical 'irritants'', when referring to dissident voices in our discourse.[19] For this reason, voices such as that of Avishai should be encouraged, if not promoted, so that the marginalised, be they black, indigenous communities or refugees, will be afforded agency to determine their own lives, and see themselves as deserving citizens who have the same rights as every ordinary citizen.

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[19] Colin Harvey. 'Dissident voices: Refugees, human rights and asylum in Europe'. *Social & Legal Studies*, 9(3) (2000), 367-396.