Essay

Time, Sovereignty, and Refugee Writing

HADJI BAKARA

HADJI BAKARA is assistant professor of English at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He is the editor of a special issue of *The Journal of Narrative Theory* on refugee literatures (2020), and his published writing on human rights and migration can be found in *American Literary History*, *German Quarterly*, and the forthcoming *Routledge Handbook of Refugee Narratives*. He is currently completing his first book, "Governments of the Tongue: A Literary History of Human Rights," and is working on a second, "Refugee Futures: A Political Theory of Time."

It is difficult to think about modern refugee writing without beginning with the "power of territory" (Gilroy 200). After all, until the emergence of the nation-state as a bounded and sovereign territorial entity there were no refugees in the way we understand them today: as people forced out of their national homelands and seeking refuge in another sovereign state.[1] Yet to say that refugee writing is tied to the power of territory does not mean that it hews to territorial borders—quite the opposite. Writing by and about refugees, Lyndsey Stonebridge rightly observes, often speaks to "the frailty of the category of the nation state itself, its sovereignty and its borders" ("Statelessness" 1332). Consequently, it "open[s] up a space—at once historical, political, and imaginative—for thinking and being between nation states" (*Placeless People* 19). Refugee writing, in this view, reveals the limits of political boundaries. It illuminates a "third zone between metropolis and ex-colony" (Gikandi 26), "alienates the frontiers of the modern nation" (Bhabha 236), and cultivates ideas and visions of "deterritorialization" (Appadurai 301).

Yet the warp of territory is bound up with the weft of temporality. Anthropologists in particular have shown how the lives of refugees are shaped as much by political chronometry—the way states, laws, and ideologies divide and sequence time—as they are by political topographies (Peteet 44; Ramsay 518). Both international law and humanitarian organizations treat refugees as past and future citizens of a nation, relegating them not only to a space but also to a time that is viewed as "intermediate or transitory or leading to some other specific, socially defined, 'steady state'" (Bauman 347). When they cannot avail themselves of the two "pathways to citizenship" held out by international law—repatriation or assimilation—refugees are consigned to periods of "emergency" or "crisis," which are imagined not as part of history's

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unfolding but rather as a way of signaling the "interruption of normal temporality" (Coundouriotis, "Improbable Figures" 239). And even when refugees successfully attain asylum or citizenship, they often continue to experience instabilities that mark their "lives, and futures . . . as threatening and in need of intervention" (Ramsay 518).[2] Ilana Feldman calls this the refugee's "contradictory nexus"—the fact that "the right way to be a refugee" is to "prepare for *not* being a refugee." Seen in this way, refugees are peoples not just "between nation states" but also between states of stable and acceptable temporality (Stonebridge, *Placeless People* 19). Consequently, the ways they inhabit and persist in time (like the ways they traverse and inhabit space) can threaten or affirm normative ideals of wholeness, continuity, stability, sovereignty, and futurity.

Both the lived experience of refugees and the structure of the modern "refugee regime" thus ask that we analyze national sovereignty at work in more varied axes and dimensions than physical space affords (Gatrell 32). Sovereign power operates not only through lines on maps, carceral spaces, or militarized borders but also through policing the borders of the past, present, and future. In this essay, then, I offer a broad reframing of modern refugee writing, focusing on the ways that it has emerged with and challenged national sovereignty's power over time rather than over territory.[3] Across the humanities and social sciences there are many formative accounts of how the real and imagined movements of refugees perforate territorial sovereignty, generating interstitial spaces and deterritorial imaginaries. But how do we describe and theorize the ancillary effect on temporal sovereignty, the political imaginary that conceives and enforces time's linearity and the future's singularity projected in the image of the modern nation-state? What does a refugee's temporal ongoingness reveal about sovereign power? What is unimagined, but also imagined into being, when refugees represent and theorize their own fugitivity in time rather than in space?

To answer these questions we can analyze a recurring figure found in the fiction, poetry, criticism, and theory of refugees over the last century: a refugee, real or imagined, who does not or even refuses to progress into citizenship, instead taking up a posture in time that is queer, backward, and antiteleological. In what follows, I trail this figure across different literary forms and in the work of three refugee writers: the German-born writers Hannah Arendt and Anna Seghers, who wrote at mid-century, and the Kenyan-born British Somali poet Warsan Shire, who writes today. My basic argument is this: by willfully diverging from a pathway that would lead from refugeehood to citizenship, this figure challenges a conception of time and futurity projected in the image of a single political subject (the citizen) and state form (the nation-state).[4] I refer to this vision of temporality molded to the citizen and the nation as "citizen time." To be clear, with the term *citizen time* I do not mean to argue that time is experienced universally by all citizens. To the contrary, I use the term to describe a historically constructed and highly political construal of time that excludes refugees as political and historical actors in the present, deferring rights and equality to some imminent future citizenship.[5] For our purposes, the central feature of citizen time is that the citizen is always the future of the refugee. There are no exceptions. As we will see, however, this way of situating refugees in—or out of—time has ramifications running all the way up to the political underpinnings of international order since the mid–twentieth century. Moreover, I do not oppose citizen time against an opposite "refugee time." In fact, I argue the opposite. The refugee writers I study here do not essentialize time in their own image but seek to de-essentialize time by separating it from any single subject or political form. Over the last century, I ultimately argue, refugee writers have represented time as plural and non-sovereign, revealing the multiplicity of temporalities and futures lost to a singular modernity of the nation.

This essay has five parts. The first is theoretical. It considers why and to what effect refugee writers have represented their own endurance in time and into the future. The second part is brief and historical. It explains why the politics of temporality came to matter to refugees in the first

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place. Subsequent parts analyze Seghers's classic novel *Transit* (1944), Arendt's wartime readings of Franz Kafka and her essay "We Refugees" (1943), and Shire's poem "Conversations about Home (at the Deportation Center)" (2011). My choice of these three writers is informed both by the resonance of their ideas and by the historical and formal diversity of their work. Reading texts from the 1940s to the present will help us see refugee writing as a century-long project engaged with sovereignty's control over time. And by tracing this engagement through literary criticism, political theory, a novel, and poetry, we can see how ideas about time and sovereignty are expressed differently across genres of writing and the forms of thinking they catalyze.

By reframing the history of refugee writing through its engagement with time and sovereignty, this essay aims to provide a new and more fulsome account of the theoretical and political traditions to which refugee writers belong. Moving beyond Giorgio Agamben's biopolitics and Homi Bhabha's cosmopolitanism, it opens up connections between refugee writing and queer theory, postcolonial studies, and what Jesse Matz has called "time ecologies" (3). Furthermore, by focusing on how refugee writers have engaged political temporality, it adds a voice to conversations about humanity's vexed relationship to the future in the age of climate crisis and mass migration.

Today, refugees feature prominently in deliberations over collective futurity (Bettini 68; Colebrook 116). They are imagined as a mirror for both a catastrophic future that must be prevented (Horn 18–20) and a coming universality that must be democratized (Latour 6; Butler and Athanasiou 109). Yet very little has been written about how contemporary refugees represent their own place in time and the future.[6] In the final part of this essay, I show how Shire's poem "Conversations about Home (at the Deportation Center)" intervenes in the political temporality of the present by asking us to unlearn the idea that the citizen is the future of the refugee. Contrary to an emergent school of thought that universalizes refugees as the humans of the future, Shire's poetry crystalizes a less radical but more concrete proposition: the citizen's deuniversalization in the present.

Time, Non-Sovereignty, and Refugee Writing

My aim in what follows is to show how refugee writers have represented their own persistence in time as a challenge to the immanence of sovereignty. I find expression of this challenge in the backward orientations of Seghers's *Transit*, in Arendt's readings of Kafka and her theory of a refugee "vanguard," and in Shire's modes of address to a citizen-reader. Across these writers' works, refugees digress from or even renounce the pathways made officially available to them by sovereign powers. When they do so, they show that time and futurity are more capacious than a linear "pathway to citizenship." For Seghers, Arendt, and Shire, futures cannot be anticipated as sovereign and nation-based. And therefore—and this is the most important part—*the citizen is not the future of the refugee*.

This idea is important because it overturns an assumption so deeply rooted in political modernity that it can go almost unremarked: the idea that futures are sovereign. As James Martel puts it, political modernity upholds a vision "in which time itself appears to structure and deliver the necessity and inevitability of a particular model of sovereignty" (7). This concept—let us call it "sovereign futurity"—has been theorized by a long and illustrious line of thinkers, from Thomas Hobbes to Carl Schmidt and Jacques Derrida. "In a certain sense," Derrida writes, "there is no contrary of sovereignty, even if there are things other than sovereignty . . . even in politics, the choice is not between sovereignty and non-sovereignty, but among several forms of partings, partitions, divisions, conditions that come along to broach a sovereignty that is always supposed to be indivisible and unconditional" (76). "Political sovereignty," Wendy Brown can thus surmise, "provides horizons and compass points," those necessary coordinates for moving forward in time, or even for imagining that time is moving at all (71).

Over the last century, however, refugee writers have often presented challenges to sovereign futurity

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by inventing, imagining, staging, and theorizing a refugee's persistence as a historical actor who is non-sovereign. Students of Arendt will be familiar with the concept of "non-sovereignty" ("What Is Freedom?" 155–57). In Arendt's political philosophy, the term refers to the contingency, relationality, and unknown outcomes of human "action" in the world (*Human Condition* 235–36, 244). To be non-sovereign is to be moving and acting within a continuum whose directions and conjunctions cannot be fixed (Jagoda 19–31), except (as with national sovereignty) through violence or coercion (Vardoulakis 9–12). Whereas sovereign futurity is a form of temporality that casts human beings as moving always toward an end that is secure and sovereign, Arendtian non-sovereignty assumes that human action forgoes any given and preordained end (Arendt, "What Is Freedom?" 164). As Rosine Kelz puts it, Arendt's theory of non-sovereignty does not lead to an "assumption of the total absence of all grounds, but rather to the assumption of the impossibility of a final ground" (11). Arendt's theory of non-sovereignty, scholars have noted, comes out of her experience as a refugee (Sjöholm 108).

The concept of non-sovereignty has also become an important part of postcolonial studies, especially as it works to reclaim alternative temporalities and collective futures previously subsumed by anticolonial nationalism.[7] Yarimar Bonilla's notion of "non-sovereign futures," for instance, describes visions of twentieth-century global order that fostered "plausible (or even utopian) alternatives to the modernist projects of decolonization and national sovereignty" (xiv). In this vein, non-sovereignty invokes political heterotemporalities that diverge from the singular modernity of the European nation-state and Eurochronologies (Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* 8; Goswami 1468). As we will see, non-sovereignty in both the Arendtian and postcolonial senses echoes through the ideas and forms of refugee writing. On the one hand, the temporal persistence of refugees—staged again and again by refugee writers—suspends the idea that citizenship, nation, and sovereignty are universal end points for the acting and moving human being. On the other hand, this persistence also pluralizes time, forcing us to acknowledge temporalities inhabited by peoples who are not and may never again be citizens of a sovereign nation-state.

One of my main arguments, then, is that when refugees persist in time and into the future, they violate a deeply ingrained conception about how time bends to politics in a world of nations. This is what I call citizen time. Citizen time is an often tacit but widely accepted idea that all humans will ultimately become citizens of a sovereign nation-state, through some combination of birth, self-determination, immigration, migration, repatriation, and assimilation. Citizen time is not a universal experience of time shared by all citizens. It is, rather, the construal of time as projected in the image of the nation imagined as universal. Put another way, it is how many have come to imagine time since the "modern system of nation-states [came] to be a natural order of things in many dimensions of human lives" (Malkki 5). Since neither the purview of the nation-state nor the experience of citizenship is universal, citizen time is an illusion. But it is an illusion with a powerful hold on the dynamics and preservation of global order, especially regarding refugees. This is because citizen time ratifies the existence of some immutable future point where the refugee disappears into the prospective horizon of the citizen. The fantasy of this horizon is inextricably bound up with a belief that the lives of citizens will unfold toward a future that is secure and stable. As long as the refugee disappears into the citizen, then citizens can go on with our own sense of sovereignty, security, and futurity intact.

Yet when we read the work of refugee writers like Arendt, Seghers, and Shire, we do not witness an acquiescence to the logic and arc of citizen time. To the contrary, we see various instances of a self-aware refusal to disappear into the citizen. What I ultimately want to argue is that these moments of self-conscious resistance to or digression from sovereign futurity reflect a larger struggle to loosen control of time from the power of the nation-state form. To give this struggle its proper historical context, however, we need to return briefly to the history of the modern refugee through the somewhat unfamiliar lens of time. We need to see

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how refugees came to be acknowledged only as past or future citizens. And for this, we need to go back to the beginning.

Refugees in Citizen Time

The birth of the modern refugee is nearly always told as a story of territory. The years around World War I in Europe saw the creation of a new kind of modern nation-state. Karl Polanyi called this a "crustacean type of nation" with a "hard shell" and noted that it was based on a form of "sovereignty more jealous and absolute than anything known before" (104). Arendt linked the new political entity of the nation to the "emergence of an entirely new category of human beings" ("'Rights'" 26)—the "migrant groups who, unlike their happier predecessors in the religious wars, were welcome nowhere and could be assimilated nowhere" (*Origins* 267). On an unprecedented scale, peoples forced from their homelands encountered a world so full of territorially bounded nation-states that their claims to rights and political belonging "foundered on the existing and abiding fact of state sovereignty" ("Minority Question" 127).

Yet the territorial genesis of the refugee is only one part of the story. The global spread of the nation-state in the twentieth century transformed not only how territory was inhabited but also how time was experienced. As new nation-states proliferated—first in the years after World War I and later across the globe during the era of decolonization—the future of the world as a whole was premised on a system of territorially bounded sovereign states. Consequently, human futurity itself became ever more imbricated with national citizenship and national sovereignty (Cooper 8, 14). Thus, the concept of citizenship, which for centuries had been lived plurally, in modes both territorial and extraterritorial (Stein 5–8; McKeown 5), was suddenly bounded by the hardened borders of the nation-state, which was "unified and inseparable" from its sovereignty (Sheehan 2). As a consequence of this global reordering of political geography into the mold of territorially bounded nation-states, the idea of citizen time burgeoned. To be sure, aspects of citizen time far predate the early twentieth century.[8] Yet it was only in the postwar period that the naturalized flow of time toward national citizenship and national sovereignty took on a globally hegemonic form: from the prepolitical "right to a nationality" included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the political imaginary of anticolonial nationalism (Chatterjee 201). Sovereign powers thus sought to enlist time itself as a technology for converting human beings into what Patrick Weil calls the "sovereign citizen"—a citizen defined by the "formal linkage" of an individual to a state "independently of an individual's sense of belonging or degree of participation in national and patriotic institutions (5, 6). The consolidation of citizen time as an imaginary did not mean that all human beings became national citizens, or that citizenship was experienced in a flattened and universal way. But it did determine the legal and political response to refugees.

The entwinement of temporality and nationality after World War II gave refugees two ways of being in—or rather out of—time. On the one hand, there was what Didier Fassin has called the "history without history" of humanitarianism (8). Refugees who fell into humanitarian care entered a continuous present that was out of history, "betwixt" the past and the future, in an eddy outside the river of time (Malkki 7). On the other hand, refugees who were recognized as legitimate asylum seekers were admitted into the "waiting room of history" and started down a "pathway to citizenship," an aspirational orientation toward future assimilation and sovereignty in a nation (Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* 8). As they emerged from World War II, refugees were a people divested of temporal and geographic sovereignty in the present yet thrown into a temporal order where time itself is imagined to deliver these political lodestars. In this way, the mid–twentieth century produced refugees as a new kind of temporal inhabitant—a people with no future except as citizens-to-be.

Arendt was perhaps the first observer to see the simultaneous fallacy and world historical necessity of recognizing refugees as people only between sovereign states. She considered it a singular political

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irony that a conception of time that situated all humans as universally oriented toward national citizenship and sovereignty had prevailed despite the ongoing existence of refugees—a people that so clearly proved that time itself would deliver neither.[9] Yet she also understood why refugees would be acknowledged by the war's victors only as past and future citizens of a nation-state. As she argues in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the "seeming stability" of a world of sovereign nations is possible only against the backdrop of the refugee's purportedly exceptional movement and instability. When refugees were framed as a continuous "exceptional phenomenon," it left the "system itself untouched" (276). The fact that refugees could always be repatriated or assimilated did double duty as an imputed solution to the mid-century "crisis" and as reassurance to postwar citizens that their futures were secure and sovereign.

Arendt's diagnosis of postwar global order helps us better understand the political temporality of the present vis-à-vis the refugee. When it is imagined that refugees are always past and future citizens, moving toward an end point in the sovereignty of a nation, this temporal imaginary reflects not only how we see refugees inhabiting time but also how we imagine citizens to inhabit time. And it is through this double movement—in which the refugee's imminent sovereignty secures the idea of the citizen's stability and security, and the citizen's imagined security undergirds a presumption of global order—that we begin to see why the stakes of a refugee's temporal fugitivity could be so high. This movement also prepares us to further understand how an archive of writing where refugees do not disappear into the citizen would be so consequential. I will now turn to this archive, beginning with a beguiling character: a refugee who literally turns their back on the promise of future sovereignty and chooses to persist in statelessness.

The Backward Refugee: Anna Seghers's Orientations

According to Eleni Coundouriotis, the quintessential contemporary narrative of refugee experience is one of "flight" from a traumatic event in the past to safety and security in a future nation ("In Flight" 78–80). Seen in this way, refugee writing follows an arc from non-sovereignty to sovereignty. As Anthea Vogl notes, contemporary refugee writing tends to follow a "linear narrative that moves towards self-possession and sovereignty, and which resolves in incorporation into the nation-state and citizenship" (83). It has not always been so.

Consider Seghers's classic novel *Transit*, which should, by all appearances, be a forerunner of the contemporary flight narrative. The novel depicts a humanitarian crisis: Europeans fleeing Nazism through the French port of Marseille. Seghers and her family made this journey in March 1941, sailing away from Europe on the *Capitaine Paul Lemerle* with André Breton, Simone Weil, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Victor Serge. Yet the novel does not reproduce the author's path precisely: whereas the Segherses sought and received asylum in the Americas, the narrator of *Transit* chooses to remain in Europe and continue his life as a stateless person. The novel, therefore, is no autobiography or documentary text (as it is often read). It is an outright counterfactual. Instead of documenting twentieth-century history as Seghers experienced it, the novel imagines a different shape of history and flow of time, where refugees neither wallow in "wretchedness" (Viet Thanh Nguyen 220) nor progress inevitably "towards self-possession and sovereignty" (Vogl 83).

The narrator of *Transit* is a nameless and stateless German who assumes a dead man's identity, acquiring the man's passport and a transit visa that would allow him to escape Europe. From the outset of the novel, then, any possible progress from refugee to citizen is cast as a kind of dishonesty, a ruse. When he arrives in Marseille the city is filled with a "multitude of poor devils all longing to leave" (Seghers 55). Converging with this "multitude" poised for flight, he discovers that their lives are entirely structured by the tempos and syncopations of the nation-state: the opening and closing of borders and consulates, the coming and going of ships. One of the novel's recurring scenes is of refugees rushing from one side of the city to another

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in hopes of catching up with the bureaucratic ticktock of the nation to which they supplicate for entry; another is of an endless queue of refugees assembled before an embassy's gates, where asylum seekers collapse and die before they gain an audience with the diplomatic officials who dictate their fate. In these scenes, where everything and everyone is both figuratively and literally oriented toward a nation's recognition, Seghers gives texture to the nation not as a territorially bounded entity but as a dominant temporal field and horizon.

Yet instead of entering into this temporal field, the narrator becomes a special witness to its distortions. Observing his fellow refugees from his seat in a café, the narrator diagnoses their plight as produced by the machinations and bureaucracies of the nation-state: he notes that "consulate time" is "a kind of planetary time in which you equate earthly days with millions of years because worlds can burn in the time it takes a transit visa to expire" (129). Here, he imagines time's multiplicity being condensed by the nation's sovereignty, for if "consulate time" can become a "planetary time"—which is to say, if nationalism can become a cosmology—it is because any distinction between the nation and the world has disappeared. For the refugees fleeing Marseille, there no longer appears to be a plurality of times that humans can inhabit and live out, only a single unitary time to which every other human tempo must be synchronized to avoid death and oblivion. Yet when the unity of time is so oppressive, so seemingly total, even a minor deviation of movement or orientation becomes especially significant—even an act of resistance.

Grown tired of a life that leads in only one direction, the narrator begins to trace wayward peregrinations and errant routes through Marseille. The reader, kept close through the intimate first-person narration, traces these patterns too. These digressive movements, which seem to travel in every direction but forward, disarticulate narrative time from citizen time. As such, these digressions recover the possibility of multiple temporalities that linger in the interstices of national chronometry. As the novel progresses, the narrator slowly abandons his plan to leave Europe, thus staging a fundamental reorientation for both the narrator and reader, who learn to inhabit a temporality that does not converge with that of the nation.

As I see it, the narrator's errant itineraries can be read as Seghers's effort to bequeath an archive of alternative orientations to her readers. The narrator's wanderings seem to invoke other horizons and futures glimpsed or desired in her time as a refugee—futures that were foreclosed, narrowed to a single option: flight to and asylum in the Americas, a new citizenship. The most enduring of these orientations is the image that begins and ends the novel: the narrator sitting with his back to the door of a Marseille café, and to the Atlantic Ocean. The anteleological thrust of *Transit* is coded in the physical posture of the narrator: facing backward. He has quite literally turned his back on the refugee ships sailing for North America. Behind him, the ships escape toward a horizon where the refugees disappear into prospective sovereignty. But the protagonist no longer seeks passage on the ships, although he now has the papers to do so. Instead, he has made the seemingly inexplicable decision to remain in Europe, to maintain the supposedly temporary position of the refugee. Why does the narrator choose to remain a refugee? The answer is kept elusive. What matters here is his interruption of time's official order. His choice is neither heroic nor rational, nor even an outwardly principled decision, but rather a kind of cosmic digression from a refugee's expected progress from statelessness to citizenship.

In Seghers's decision to imagine a refugee who turns his back on the nation and the citizen, we can begin to see how refugee writing and queer theory have found common cause in non-normative orientations in time. Queer and refugee writing share an investment in characters who adopt digressive postures as a way to "feel out" what Lauren Berlant describes as "alternative routes for living without requiring personhood to be expressive of an internal orientation" (18); and they are populated with figures who seek out "new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space" (Halberstam 2) in the "interstices of national-political life" (Freeman x). Likewise, the narrative form of *Transit* speaks

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to both the queer historicism of Heather Love's *Feeling Backwards* and the queer futurity of José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*. For Love, the queer archive of "backwards" emotions reveals a pessimism about the existing identities and forms that both political modernity and queer life could take in the twentieth century (6). Seghers's image of the backward-facing refugee conveyed her own pessimism about the forms and conditions of refuge Seghers experienced in the Americas. But at the same time, Seghers's novel as a whole can be read as expressing a kind of optimism: a belief that new forms of political community could arise out of the suspension of teleology made possible or thinkable through the narrator's digressions. From this perspective, it would be difficult to find a better example of what Muñoz sees as the aesthetic of "queer futurity": "a rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (1). Whether in a pessimistic or an optimistic mood, Seghers turned to fiction to open up and feel out ways of being in time that were unavailable to her as a refugee in flight at mid-century.

The Refugee as "Vanguard": Hannah Arendt's Theory of Futurity

Given the space, I could continue to explore multiple examples of mid-century refugee writing that diverges from and critiques sovereign futurity, beginning with the work of Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, and Ernst Bloch. Instead, however, I want to begin making good on my central claim: that this tradition of writing develops a challenge to national sovereignty's power over time. This will bring us back to Arendt. Like Seghers, Arendt attained asylum in the early 1940s yet immediately turned her attention to a refugee who refuses the very teleological progress that she had taken up in her own life. Unlike Seghers, however, Arendt did not simply depict a refugee who turns his back on future sovereignty. Rather, she theorized this figure as a challenge to the immanence of the sovereign nation-state and national citizen. In her work of the 1940s, Arendt came to conclude that refugees who endure in time, even if only imaginatively, disentangle futurity from sovereignty. They pluralize time, revealing temporalities other than those lived out by the citizen, and bring to light political futures that break with the eschatology of political sovereignty. Yet the refugee who demurs from future sovereignty was a figure that Arendt discovered first in imaginative literature, in Kafka's unfinished novel *Das Schloss* (1926; *The Castle*). She would only later assume this position rhetorically and imaginatively in her autobiographical essay "We Refugees."

Before Seghers's backward-facing narrator, there was Kafka's K at the gates of the Castle. During World War II, Arendt became the first critic (though far from the last) to read K as a refugee. He desires only "a home, a position, real work to do," to "become a member of the community" (Arendt, "Franz Kafka" 100, 101). At first, the Castle's officials reject K's appeals to become a member of their community. Eventually, however, they grant him the privilege of entry, but only out of pity. Their concession is an exception—a sovereign decree. As Arendt observes, the Castle works by "divine authority" and "grants rights only as either favors or as privileges." Yet K is unwilling to "regard his normal human rights as privileges" bestowed by the sovereign state of the Castle. He rejects their offer, choosing instead to die alone in the village (103). Therefore, it is not the case that sovereignty is withheld from K. Rather, he is offered safety and community within the boundaries of the Castle. But he refuses them on principle.

In his rejection of the Castle's sovereignty, K prefigures the posture of refusal found in the work of later refugee writers like Seghers. However, neither Seghers nor Kafka offers much in the way of explanations for their characters' acts of refusal. Arendt, however, who writes as both refugee and critic, attributes immense significance to K's actions. She interprets his rejection of the Castle's terms of belonging as evidence that Kafka foresaw a more egalitarian future to come. Through K's actions, Arendt argues, Kafka signaled to his readers that a "future world" was possible, one where the right to belong as an equal "member of the community" would not issue from "mysterious forces . . .

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emanating from above or from below" (103). By this account, K refuses to join the Castle community as a political exception because he anticipates a future where equal membership in community will require no exceptions. K rejects future sovereignty because he envisions a non-sovereign future.

As Arendt came to see it, K's principled refusal of the Castle's sovereign power made palpable an entire historical trajectory, a future "that human beings would construct in which the actions of man depend on nothing but himself and his spontaneity, and in which human society is governed by laws prescribed by man himself rather than by mysterious forces" (103). Kafka's "art is the expression of some future world," the philosopher wrote optimistically in 1944, "which is our future, too—if we are to have any future at all" ("No Longer" 122). Arendt found in Kafka and K what Alexis Lothian deems an "old future" (4) and Reinhart Koselleck calls a "future past" (270)—an archive of expectations waiting to be blasted out of the continuum of history. In order to further the possibility of this future, though, K's actions would have to be translated into a more active form: a way for political actors to actually understand and inhabit time that could contest the singularity of sovereign futurity. And Arendt developed this form in one of her most complex ideas—the idea that refugees were a historical vanguard. With the idea of the refugee vanguard, Arendt fused the posture of refusal found in Kafka (and later Seghers) to an active vision of political participation and the possibility of shaping the world to come.

Arendt's idea of the refugee as vanguard appeared at the same time as her writings on Kafka, in the essay "We Refugees." In that essay, Arendt describes the physical strain and psychic violence of what would now be called refugee resettlement. She explains how, as legal and affective claimants to asylum in the wartime United States, refugees are coerced into performances of national belonging, tacitly bidden to become excessively "optimistic" and to adopt an entirely passive identity that she calls the "prospective citizen" (266). For Arendt, prospective citizenship is sovereignty at its most metaphysical: citizenship imagined not as a legal status or as an assemblage of national traits but as emplotment within a unidirectional flow of time. Against all inherited expectations about the hopes and desires of wartime refugees, however, Arendt vigorously rejects the forward-looking orientation of the "prospective citizen." "There is something wrong with our optimism," she protests (267). Arendt compares this optimism—the belief in the inevitability of future citizenship—to astrological forecasting and blind trust in the laws of the heavens. Forfeiting one's political freedom to the promise of future sovereignty, she suggests, is an "insane optimism," "conjur[ing] up the spirits of the future" (266). In response, she offers a different kind of prognostication. Refugees who do not conform to the demands of assimilation, instead choosing to "keep their identity" as foreigners and refugees, can help shape the politics of the future world. "Refugees driven from country to country" would no longer be the vanquished of history but rather the "'vanguard' of their peoples" (274).

This move—Arendt's elevation of refugees to the position of a vanguard—is one of the most enigmatic, affectively complex, and unorthodox statements in all of her thought. On the most literal level, Arendt's "vanguard" refers to Europe's Jews, who were the first to be driven out of their countries. Yet their position as a "vanguard" distinguishes refugees from their "peoples," including the Jewish people. Arendt's ultimate point, it seems, is that refugees are a people of their own—historical actors autonomous from original political affiliations or affective group identifications. This is their historical and political novelty. For Arendt, the concept of the vanguard would also have carried Leninist overtones, evoking a privileged minority that engages in a momentous struggle to remake the political-temporal landscape. Susan Buck-Morss, for example, connects the vanguard with the "cosmological temporality of the party," which implies a group with a privileged knowledge of, and ability to shape, history, politics, and the future (493). Through the term "vanguard," with its rich connotations, Arendt thus speculates on how the postwar future could change if refugees were viewed not as aspirants to existing political groups but as actively

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creating new political identities and structures. What if, she asks, refugees were recognized as political actors making history instead of simply striving for a return to the political structures of the past?

The point I want to make here is that Arendt's ideas of the refugee as "vanguard" and the refugee as "prospective citizen" point up two opposing political theories of time. When refugees capitulate to the status of the "prospective citizen," they endorse a theory of time that is inevitably oriented toward national sovereignty and national citizenship. But refugees—people who have been divested of past sovereignty and citizenship and made to wait for future citizenship (sometimes indefinitely) in the present—know that this theory of time is a fallacy. And in disavowing the passive state of the "prospective citizen," which accedes to future sovereignty, and instead seizing the agency of a vanguard, refugees can help wrest time itself from the singular control of national chronometry. As a "vanguard," refugees can embody a theory of time that is consistent with the concrete historical situation of refugees and their ongoing displacement and non-sovereignty.

Crucially, though, Arendt does not propose a new universal time—she does not offer something like "refugee time" that would simply invert citizen time. Instead, by electing refugees as a "vanguard" she works to cleave the political future from any single, universal political actor or geopolitical formation. In Arendt's view, just as the citizen is not the future of the refugee, the refugee is not the future of the citizen. Her critique of citizen time and the "prospective citizen" is directed not against the ideal of belonging to a political community where rights are secured but rather at a theory of time and sovereignty that allows only the future citizen of a nation-state to have a future at all.

Writing at the Ends of Citizen Time

Arendt and Seghers, mid-century refugees who lived through World War II, were writing in a period just before and during the nation-state's capture of global temporality and collective futurity. Living through this wartime interregnum, when "the contours of the postwar order were not yet fixed," helped them anticipate political communities beyond the primacy of national sovereignty (Wilder 1). Refugees today also write from a world historical interregnum—but one critically different from the mid–twentieth century. They write from a period not of national sovereignty's consolidation across the globe but of its weakening control over global imaginaries of both space and time, as ecological, political, and economic forces radically call into question the integrity of national borders, divisions of labor, and the stability of the future. As Brown notes, the historical present is perhaps best understood as a "global interregnum, a time after the era of state sovereignty, but before the articulation or instantiation of an alternate global order" (39). And the conditions of this interregnum give new meaning to the refugee's persistence in time. Nearly a century ago, refugees like Arendt and Seghers used their writing to disentangle human futures from national futures. Today, however, the future of humanity as a whole is sometimes figured through the refugee.

Whereas mid-century refugees were excluded from a universal history predicated on the imminence of sovereign futures, today's refugees are shaping what Dipesh Chakrabarty sees as a "new universal history of humans" where "climate change poses for us a question of a human collectivity, an us" ("Climate of History" 221, 222). Michael Agier echoes many, for instance, when he observes that "[p]ersons in displacement may well be in the process of living an experience far more universal than it might appear," and thus "enable us to anticipate a way of being-in-the-world that might one day be generalized" (viii). This increasing proclivity "to imagine all of humanity as being in the condition of seeking refuge," Claire Colebrook suggests, "is perhaps an indication of some awareness of the fragility of all life and its migratory condition" (119–20). These scholars represent what might be called the new refugee universalists. "[T]he new universality," according to Bruno Latour, "consists in feeling that the ground is in the process of giving way" (5), as we learn "that we are all in migration towards territories yet to be discovered and reoccupied" (9).

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At this point we might ask how the theories and scales of new universalists like Latour and Colebrook, which provincialize the sovereign nation and citizen, match up with the tradition of refugee writing we have explored so far. Does Arendt's idea of the refugee "vanguard" now appear a prescient view of a world to come, a world where refugees, rather than citizens, command the image of the future? My answer is no. Reading refugee writing against contemporary theory, we find one vital difference: rather than universalize the refugee, refugee writers deuniversalize the citizen.

For example, Colebrook and Latour argue, correctly no doubt, that within the "deep time" of the planet human beings are rendered a migratory species, forever seeking refuge from climatic instabilities. Consequently, they ask us to think ourselves into deep temporal scales in an effort to "imagine migration not as the unfortunate exception in an otherwise stable world of nations" but as the universal condition of our species (Colebrook 116). "Climate change and migration are the way of the world, the very conditions of life," writes Colebrook (120). There is certainly common ground here with refugee writing. Arendt, Seghers, and, as we will see, Shire also contest the idea that refugees are an exceptional phenomenon in an otherwise stable world. Yet the question these writers ask is not conditional—not predicated on the "what if" of deep time. Instead, when they stage a refugee's persistence in time they do so in order to show that not all refugees become citizens. They say, "Look, here is a refugee who endures indefinitely in time and into the future, a refugee who follows or is pushed along paths that do not lead to citizenship and sovereignty. How do we proceed from here?" Their message about the shape of things to come is based on the false universality of the citizen in the present, not on the supposed universality of the refugee in the future.

By way of a conclusion, I want to turn to Shire's poetry to elaborate on the ways that refugee writers deuniversalize the citizen. Contemporary refugee writers like Shire are engaged in a vital conversation about what kinds of political community can be imagined when futurity itself is disentangled from any single political subject—but not when the future is subsumed within another singular horizon. Shire does not, like Agamben, urge citizens "to recognize the refugee that he or she is" (118); instead, she simply asks that citizens let go of the idea that they are the refugee's future. This is her intervention into our present politics of time.

"I Was Once Like You": Warsan Shire's Political Tense

Over the last half decade, Shire's poem "Conversations about Home (at the Deportation Center)" has become perhaps the first literary mantra of twenty-first-century refugee politics. It frequently appears in newspaper articles, academic and legal studies of migration, and *Instagram* feeds; it forms the basis of gallery shows and museum exhibitions on the topic of refugees; and lines from the poem are spray-painted across walls in cities and refugee camps (Kuo). The headline of a 2015 *Guardian* article about Shire simply reads, "Poets Speak Out for Refugees" (Bausells and Shearlaw). Her perceived ability to speak collectively for refugees comes out of both her personal history and her method. Born in Kenya to Somali refugee parents and raised in London, Shire weaves her poetry out of an archive of family memories and stories, field recordings, interviews, and notes from the contemporary European "refugee crisis" (Shire, "Q and A"). In "Conversations," the poet condenses this multiplicity of sources into a collective "I" that speaks for many, perhaps millions, of refugees today, giving voice to the trauma of displacement and the impossibility of return.

As its title suggests, Shire's poem is staged as a conversation. Specifically, however, it is a conversation between a refugee and a citizen. This political and phenomenological specificity is key because it allows "Conversations" to make meaning through its orientations—especially, I will argue, through the relative place in space and time of a refugee-speaker and a citizen-reader, rendered through Shire's use of tense.

When we meet the speaker of "Conversations," she is waiting to be sent "home." From the perspective of the deporting nation, this act of repatriation

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will resolve the destabilizing situation, returning a citizen to their place of legal habitation. But for the speaker, it is a condemnation to a life only barely livable. Each of the poem's four stanzas explains why, beginning with these sentences in stanza 1:

> Well, I think home spat me out, the blackouts and curfews like tongue against loose tooth. God, do you know how difficult it is, to talk about the day your own city dragged you by the hair, past the old prison, past the school gates, past the burning torsos erected on poles like flags? When I meet others like me I recognize the longing, the missing, the memory of ash on their faces. No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.

This concluding line—"No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark"—has greatly shaped the poem's public uses and critical reception. Consequently, the speaker has been imagined as both a testimonial subject and a supplicant to future sovereignty. This should come as no surprise. Everything in our inherited ideas about a refugee's place in time implies that the speaker's relegation of stability and sovereignty to her past—"home spat me out"—must orient her toward reclaiming stability in the future. If the refugee speaker cannot go back then she must go forward, toward some imminent point of sovereign resolution.

An unquestioning belief in this teleology of temporal and geographic progression underscores Elleke Boehmer's reading of "Conversations" in *Postcolonial Poetics*. For Boehmer, the poem has the distinct shape of an "arc": a passage from traumatic past, through the rupture of displacement, and eventually to the "experience of endurance and recovery that can, for those who survive, lie beyond." She sees it "mapping or scoring a progressive structure, a chronology" (65). She reads this "progressive structure" as redemptive and conciliatory, relegating the "terror-stricken situation" to the past and delivering speaker and reader to a "place beyond" terror: a "temporal process taking them through and beyond such moments" (66). It is understandable, of course, to want to see the refugee move through the terror of displacement and toward security and stability. Boehmer's insistence that the speaker moves toward and draws the reader along to a "place beyond" violence and displacement presupposes that refugees have somewhere to go, a stable place to reach, a temporal end point for the "arc" of their life narrative.

Yet, at the halfway mark of "Conversations," the speaker quits the testimonial style that so moves Boehmer. At this point, she pauses and reflects on her situation not as a position to be left behind but as an experience that generates knowledge about the world: "I know a few things to be true. I do not know where I am going, where I have come from is disappearing, I am unwelcome and my beauty is not beauty here." Here, she marks out her position in time and in history as an enduring interregnum—one that lies between what Arendt calls a past that is "no longer" and a future that is "not yet" ("No Longer"), in a present marred by a false universality ("beauty") from which she is barred. Crucially, there is no sign here of what Boehmer sees as the poem's "breathless rush" or "determined moving on" (80). In fact, the speaker is decidedly not progressing forward to a "place beyond" the non-sovereignty of refugee life.

To the contrary, Shire is performing what Marianne Hirsch describes as a "pause or suspension in both the aspiration to citizenship and in the performance of mobility and migration, whether chosen or imposed" (416). In Hirsch's terms, an upsurge of "stateless memory" in the aesthetic work induces a "hiatus" in a figure's alignment with the "time-space of the nation." These hiatuses are apertures for encountering new and multiple temporalities that do not lead inevitably toward a future that repeats the national past (417). Whereas for Hirsch, this critical pause is effected by the memory of a stateless past, Shire conjures this hiatus through an encounter with the uncertainty of the refugee's future.

Moreover, the "pause" that lies at the center of "Conversations"—"I do not know where I am going, where I have come from is disappearing"—is significant because of the multiplicity of Shire's poetic "I," which interpolates words and phrases taken (often verbatim) from contemporary refugees.

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This shared voice scales the speaker's knowledge upward from the personal to the collective, even to the world historical. This "I" stalled between past and future contains a multitude: millions of refugees who can move neither backward nor forward along a "pathway" to citizenship, but who nevertheless live on. They construct lives and communities in the interstices of national life and chronology. They open up parallel trajectories and multiple temporalities that will never align with citizen time. It was members of this multitude that Shire met as squatters in the abandoned Somali embassy in Rome in 2013: a group of young Somali, Eritrean, Congolese, and Sudanese refugees. These young migrants, "constantly exiled from all the cultures and all the countries that you think you belong to," inspired "Conversations" (Shire, "Q and A"). By synthesizing these voices, Shire creates a collective refugee "I" that no longer begs entry into the nation. The refugee's urgent message to the citizen is not a sentimental appeal for recognition but rather the communication of knowledge about the emergent realities of an unequal, unstable, and mobile world.

This message is clearest in the final stanza of "Conversations," when Shire adopts a second-person address. Here, the collective "I" addresses "you"—a reader-citizen—interpolating us into this interregnum between a disappearing past and a non-sovereign future. This stanza's act of address between refugee and citizen is unique—perhaps singular—in the history of refugee writing. For it does not hail the citizen as a sympathetic, feeling subject, or as the bearer of sovereignty to which the refugee aspires, but as a fellow traveler in an unstable and unpredictable flow of time that does not lead to future sovereignty. The stanza begins with hecklers assailing the speaker:

> I hear them say, *go home*, I hear them say, *fucking immigrants*, *fucking refugees*. Are they really this arrogant? Do they not know that stability is like a lover with a sweet mouth upon your body one second and the next you are a tremor lying on the floor covered in rubble and old currency waiting for its return? All I can say is, I was once like you, the apathy, the pity, the ungrateful placement and now my home is the mouth of a shark, now my home is the barrel of a gun. I'll see you on the other side.

At first glance, the attack seems to invite us to distinguish ourselves from the hecklers and thus affirm our solidarity with refugees. We think we have learned from the poem, and therefore we think we know what the hecklers do not know—that "[n]o one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark." We also know, therefore, that the refugee cannot "*go home*." Ultimately, though, we are mistaken about what the speaker wants us to know. Instead of allowing us to feel distance from the hecklers, the shift in pronoun in the last two sentences from "they" to "you"—"All I can say is, I was once like you"—yokes the reader to the refugee's tormentors. We—progressive readers, academic humanists, imagined allies of the displaced—are just as "ignorant" as the hecklers. Yet exactly what are we ignorant of? What does Shire want us to know?

One answer lies in the distinctive political tense of "Conversations." When the speaker remarks, "I was once like you," she reminds us that she too once was a citizen, uncritically accepting of her stability and "placement" in the world. In this act of address, she calmly positions the citizen-reader within her own past, where the security and stability of citizenship remain. Yet she does not intimate that she will be a citizen again in the future. And this is key. For if readers can recognize that they are the past of the refugee, then the "stability" and sovereignty experienced by citizens—not only in their present but in their vision of the future—must also cease to exist in perpetuity. What Shire's speaker "knows to be true," in other words, is that the conditions of life on our planet and the scale of human displacement now underway mean that the promise of a secure and nation-based future for all—the promise of the postwar order—is a thing of the past.

For the speaker of "Conversations" and the multitude she invokes there is no return to the sovereignty of citizenship and the nation-state. If we want to share in solidarity with her, then there is only a difficult path forward, in the recognition

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not that we will all be refugees in time but that not all peoples will become citizens in the way once projected as universal. The universalist claim that all humans will be refugees in the future, and that we should give up our investment in citizenship on those proleptic grounds, falls back on the familiar ethical premise that we should care for those whom we can imagine as like us. But the fact that more and more refugees do not become citizens—which is to say that humans can no longer be imagined as only ever moving toward a sovereign state—is a challenge to the foundations of modernity itself, and the assumptions that ground our place in the world. This is the challenge that Shire raises. The speaker's parting message—"I'll see you on the other side"—is not a prognostication about an inevitable future where we are all refugees. Rather, it is an invitation to permanently leave behind our sense of the permanence of security and sovereignty in the world—one that has rested for a century on the belief that we are the refugee's future.

The citizen is not the future of the refugee. This is the general proposition I have been tracing in this essay. But let me be clear that there is nothing inherently positive or politically welcome about this theorem. No one should want to become or remain a refugee. Over thirty years ago, Edward Said warned against a potential tendency in the humanities to valorize refugees for their existence outside the boundaries of the nation (147). More recently, Bruce Robbins has lamented that humanists are often all too ready to attack the institution and principles of the "sovereign state" and to "celebrate our entry into the zone 'beyond the nation' on the grounds that this zone is distinctly and radically *open* to the imagination" (1639). Yet when Seghers, Arendt, and Shire relegate the citizen to the refugee's past, they do not celebrate a radically open space beyond the state—a place that Arendt, of all people, understood was a place of utter rightlessness. Instead, they experiment imaginatively with the bare fact of the refugee's ongoingness in order to invite ways of unthinking the conflation of national citizenship and sovereignty with futurity itself. The world historical question posed by all the writers in this essay, and asked directly by Shire at the end of "Conversations," is this: If we can imagine ourselves as a refugee's past, then what kinds of futures are possible?

Instead of auguring a future where all human beings are refugees, this question alerts us to a present where more and more people do not become citizens or can no longer enjoy the security that citizenship once offered. Faced with this fact, it becomes incumbent that we begin to imagine political communities fit for many rather than for a single political subject. What Arendt was perhaps the first to state with her idea of the refugee "vanguard" is that refugees must be empowered to participate in the creation of such a future. Achieving this end, however, will depend on the recognition of refugees not as past and future citizens but as present equals, and as historical and political actors with whom we share a future that will surely be radically different but does not have to be catastrophic.

Notes

1. According to the 1951 United Nations *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*, a refugee is a person "outside the country of his nationality" who is "unable or . . . unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (3).

2. On the ongoing instability and precariousness experienced by refugees who have attained citizenship, see especially Vinh Nguyen on the concept of "refugeetude" and the open question of when a refugee stops being a refugee (109). See also Tang 5; Tran.

3. Literary scholars such as Angela Naimou, Eleni Coundouriotis, and Lital Levy have begun to explore the temporal politics of refugee writing. See Naimou's preface to a recent *Humanity* dossier on "contemporary refugee timespaces" (512), Coundouriotis on the chronotope of refugee camps ("In Flight" 79), and Levy on the "temporalities of Israel/Palestine."

4. This imagined pathway purportedly leads, in Viet Thanh Nguyen's words, from "wretchedness to righteousness" (220), an arc that Nguyen rigorously contests.

5. Citizen time upholds what Cohen has called the "myth of full citizenship," an "inconsistency between . . . the presumption that citizenship in any polity can and must have a single meaning . . . and the existence of various kinds and degrees of citizenship," which are ideas "that many intuitively recognize, although few systematically account for" (3).

6. Two major exceptions are Vinh Nguyen; Levy.

7. See Wilder; Goswami; Getachew.

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8. The slippage of "man" into "citizen" in the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789) is a case in point. Arendt takes note of this slippage in *Origins* 273–75.

9. See, for instance, Arendt's discussion of R. Yewdall's essay from 1939, "Some International Aspects of the Refugee Question" (*Origins* 218).

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Abstract: The birth of the modern refugee is nearly always told as a story of territory, in which the changing character of the European nation-state radicalized processes of exclusion. Yet changes to the nation-state in the twentieth century transformed not only how territory was inhabited but also how time was inhabited and experienced. The powers of national sovereignty thus operate not only through lines on maps or militarized borders but also through policing the borders of the past, present, and future. In this essay, then, I offer a broad reframing of modern refugee writing, focusing on the ways that it has emerged with and challenged national sovereignty's power over time rather than over territory. To do so, I examine a recurring figure: a refugee, real or imagined, who refuses to progress forward into citizenship, taking up a posture in time that is queer, backward, and antiteleological.

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