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At the Limits of the Narrative

Unintelligibility and the (Im)possibilities of Self-Disclosure in the Asylum Claiming Process

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Abstract

This paper offers an intervention into the notion of narrativity. It aims to refract Ricœur's hermeneutics of the subject through a more expanded account of the political dimension of narrative, both to situate the narrative self politically, and to flesh out the ethico-political (im)possibilities of self-disclosure. Focusing on the process of claiming asylum as an instance of politically precarious self-disclosure in which narrative is demanded as a marker of truthful identity, it will explore the limits of narrative as the mode through which subjectivity is made intelligible. Through an analysis of the residues of power in the institution of language that qualify the emergence of the speaking subject and the socio-political assumptions we can excavate from the notion of narrative time, this paper will suggest that narrative unintelligibility could have politically transformative potential.

Keywords: Narrative; Intelligibility; Language; Time; Asylum.

Résumé

Cet article se concentre sur la notion de narrativité. Il vise à réexaminer l'herméneutique du soi évoquée par Ricœur grâce à une prise en compte plus large de la dimension politique au sein du récit, à la fois pour situer le soi narratif sur le plan politique et pour étoffer les (im)possibilités éthico-politiques de la divulgation de soi. En se focalisant sur le processus de demande d'asile en tant qu'exemple de la divulgation de soi politiquement précaire dans lequel le récit est considéré comme un marqueur d'identité véridique, l'article explorera les limites du récit, comme mode par lequel la subjectivité se rend intelligible. À travers une analyse des résidus de pouvoir dans l'institution du langage, résidus qui qualifient l'émergence du sujet parlant, et des hypothèses sociopolitiques que nous pouvons déterrer de la notion du temps raconté, cet article suggère que l'inintelligibilité narrative pourrait avoir un potentiel de transformation politique.

Mots-clés : récit ; intelligibilité ; langue ; temps ; demande d'asile.

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This paper offers an intervention into the notion of narrativity. It aims to refract Paul Ricœur's hermeneutics of the subject through a more expanded account of the political dimension of narrative, both to situate the narrative self politically and to flesh out the ethico-political (im)possibilities of self-disclosure. By leaning into the productive tensions between Ricœur's notion of narrative and post-structuralist concerns with the limits of self-disclosure, it will consider how the potential of narrative appears to be restricted both externally and internally by mechanisms of power. Focusing on the process of claiming asylum as an instance of politically precarious self-disclosure, this article suggests that the experience of being disbelieved exposes the performative limits of narrative for the asylum-claiming subject. The narrative self will thus be shown to be a possibility that is subject to the institution of language, entangled in the broader institution of truth – in this case, the truth of the sovereignty of the state – and implicated in relations of power.[1]

I will begin by introducing Ricœur's notion of narrative, through his negotiation with selfhood and its interaction with his conceptualization of narrative time, to consider the significance of intelligible self-disclosure for his account. I will then offer the case of claiming asylum and the process of refugee status determination as an example in which narrative is demanded as a marker of truthful identity, one that reveals the limits of narrative as the mode through which subjectivity is made intelligible. Through a post-structuralist analysis of the residues of power in the institution of language that qualify the emergence of the speaking subject and the socio-political assumptions we can excavate from the notion of narrative time, this paper will suggest that Ricœur's treatment of narrative could be supplemented through a

[1] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of *Études ricœuriennes/Ricœur Studies* for asking whether, from a Ricœurian perspective, the story expressed by a claimant in the asylum-seeking process is still a part of their narrative identity. While it is possible to interpret the Ricœurian perspective as integrating refugee testimony into one's narrative identity, there is other literature that sees a potential trap in failing to distinguish the self "from one's *lived* story and from one's *life* story" (Gaëlle Fiasse, "Ricœur's Hermeneutics of the Self. On the In-between of the Involuntary, the Voluntary, and Narrative Identity," *Philosophy Today*, vol. 58/1 (2014), 48). In fact, Fiasse insists in this same article that "the self is not equal to the events of one's life, nor to the 'concordant discordance' that one can narrate about them" (*ibid.*). This point deserves further debate and exposition. My aim in this manuscript is to think about the narrative constructed during an asylum claim in relation to the terms of ethico-political recognition, rather than the larger ontology that might be expressed in the notion of narrative identity.

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more thorough interrogation of power. After doing so, it will conclude – as an extension of, and adjustment to, Ricœur's hermeneutics of the subject – that narrative unintelligibility should be a site of ethical and political concern on the level of institutional recognition.

I. Narrative Intelligibility

Ricœur's treatment of selfhood turns towards narrative as the mode of identity capable of mediating the dialectics of selfhood and sameness, concordance and discordance, through which the subject is constituted as a self.[2] By orienting the self between retrospection and prospection, narrative identity furnishes the notion of the "who" with a sense of singularity and unity.[3] The aim and imperative of the narrative mode for Ricœur is therefore shaped around the search for intelligibility: subjectivity is rendered coherent through the narrative wholeness that holds the subject together through the recounting of an intelligible plot; but without the act of interpretation through which experiences are rendered meaningful and formative, life is "no more than a biological phenomenon."[4] The ethical and political implications of narrative are also rendered through the notion of intelligibility. Narrative situates the subject both within time, as amongst and available to others, by bridging the relation between living and recounting. Through the act of emplotment that makes a life account coherent and followable, narrative invites temporality into language as "within-timeness,"[5] and also invites the other into the emergence of the subject through the existential structure of the story waiting to be received. As such, intelligible narrative speaks to the ethical dimension of selfhood, inhabiting the dialectic between self-affirmation and dispossession that introduces solicitude for the other into the formation of the self.[6] This ethical component is a necessary feature of the political subject at the institutional level of recognition, since to designate oneself as narrator of one's own life story is to

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[2] Previous interventions into Ricœur's view of personal narration have already pointed out the tensions between narrative coherence and the particularities of embodied experience: for instance, Jean Greisch extends the narrative model using insights from psychoanalysis, confronting the notion of narrative cohesion with the psychological terrain of desire and impulse (*pulsion*) through which being among others is experienced, to make space for the inconsistency of psychic life and suffering. See Jean Greisch, *Paul Ricœur, l'itinérance du sens* (Grenoble: J. Millon, 2001), 190-4. Helen Buss reads Ricœur through Judith Butler's insistence on the social construction of the body, to contrast the narrative disentanglement out of which Ricœur's subject emerges with the concept of the "embodied imagination" through which bodily experiences create new meaning. See Helen M. Buss, "Women's Memoirs and the Embodied Imagination. The Gendering of Genre that Makes History and Literature Nervous," *in* Morny Joy (ed.), *Paul Ricœur and Narrative. Context and Contestation* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1997), 87-96.

[3] Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another,* trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[4] Paul Ricœur, "Life. A Story in Search of a Narrator," in Mario J. Valdés (ed.), *A Ricœur Reader. Reflection and Imagination* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 432.

[5] Paul Ricœur, "Narrative Time," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7/1 (Fall 1980), 175.

[6] Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 190.

shape oneself as a responsible agent, worthy of being considered as a subject of ethico-juridical recognition.[7]

Given the dialogical character of narrative identity, Ricœur is also concerned with the interplay between narrative and power. He recognizes that power – in the form of "power-over"[8] – marks relationships with a corruptive dissymmetry that distorts one's capacity to be received by another. To be rendered incapable of speech is to be excluded from the very sphere of discourse in which the self as speaking subject is disclosed and attested to, and Ricœur understands this exclusion to be a product of unequal power relations. In fact, he notes that the very capacity to act in language is unequally distributed,[9] which resonates across both the ethical plane of suffering[10] and the political plane of recognition.[11] This paper extends the corrupting function of power beyond Ricœur's purview into the possibilities of narrative itself. It suggests that we might insist on the pervasiveness of unequal power relations to expose and interrogate the limits of intelligible self-disclosure.

II. Asylum Claiming as Narrative Self-Disclosure

The process of claiming asylum offers an example that exposes the limits of and impositions upon narrative as a result of politically entrenched relations of power and norms of discourse. This paper focuses on the UK and Canadian asylum regimes, while also drawing on analysis of the Italian and Belgian contexts to explore the emergence and foreclosure of narrative in asylum testimonies in the Global North. The main point of concern is the process of refugee status determination, wherein asylum applicants are required to demonstrate that they are in need of protection according to the 1951 Refugee Convention. The claimant must show that they meet the definition of a refugee articulated in the Convention:

> [a] person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

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[7] See Ricœur, *Oneself as Another,* 169-202. See also *The Just,* trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 127-32.

[8] Paul Ricœur, *Reflections on The Just,* trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 77.

[9] Ricœur, *Reflections on The Just*, 76.

[10] The destruction of the capacity act (in language) is what constitutes suffering, understood as a "violation of self-integrity." See Ricœur, *Oneself as Another,* 190.

[11] See Ricœur, *Reflections on The Just*, 88.

In the UK system, the evaluation of refugee status primarily takes place through the substantive asylum interview with a Home Office caseworker, while in Canada a similar process is enacted through the refugee hearing before a Refugee Protection Division member. In both these cases, the claimant is tasked with providing testimony and relevant evidence that credibly demonstrate their identity, their genuine fear of persecution, and the practical reality of the risk – and lack of protection – they face in their home country. The explicit aim of these examination processes is to assess the credibility of the claimant and their claim in light of generally known information about the country of origin and case law.[12] Even from this preliminary sketch, it is clear that this process both demands an intelligible narrative through which to ascertain legitimacy, and itself sets the standards and presumptions of intelligibility according to the decision-maker's expectations.

Natasha Carver presents the narrative demanded of the asylum claimant in their testimony as a process of translation, through which the asylum-seeking person's identity is produced and reproduced according to "the coding system"[13] of the (post)colonial authority. Narrative in this context is a forced act of disclosure, used to determine and construct the asylum claimant within a (Western) framework of acceptable and recognizable politico-legal subjectivity. As Robert Barsky spells out, it is via this particular imperative to disclose that the identity encompassed in the status "refugee" is conferred and reified – since this status already contains and presumes a narrative coded and bound by the limits of state recognition – while institutionalized discursive and linguistic practices also bolster and reproduce the socio-political structures in which they take place.[14] As such, under the larger political ideology of the nation-state, the claimant as "asylum-seeker" is located in a "state of suspension"[15] in which, I will argue, the possibilities for self-disclosure are circumscribed by the demand for coherence and the narratives available to the claimant as a subject of international politics.

This rendering of asylum narratives as an imperative – performatively implicated in the ideology of the state and limited by the marks of coherence and credibility produced by this ideology – presents a pertinent counterpoint to Ricœur's notion of narrative. The asylum-claiming case can be read as an instance of narrative self-disclosure that determines the degree to

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[12] See Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, *Assessment of Credibility in Claims for Refugee Protection* (Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, January 31, 2004), 1.2, online document: https://irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/legal-policy/legal-concepts/Pages/Credib.aspx#n1. See also Home Office, *Asylum Policy Instruction. Asylum Interviews,* Version 7.0 (UK: Home Office, 2019), 5.1, online document: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807031/asylum-interviews-v7.0ext.pdf.

[13] Natasha Carver, "The Silent Backdrop. Colonial Anxiety at the Border," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol. 32/2 (June 2019), 164.

[14] Robert F. Barsky, *Constructing a Productive Other. Discourse Theory and the Convention Refugee Hearing* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1994).

[15] Imogen Tyler, "'Welcome to Britain.' The Cultural Politics of Asylum," *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 9/2 (May 2006), 189.

which a claimant can be considered the subject of ethical and political recognition: the asylum claimant is impelled to provide narrative proof of their identity and truthfulness as a speaking subject, while their subjectivity is placed on trial and filtered through the notion of intelligibility. However, the bind placed upon their narrative testimony through the imperative of intelligibility exposes the mechanisms of power that delimit and define the intelligible unfolding of narrative as a mode of self-disclosure. The asylum-claiming example therefore points to a productive tension between Ricœur's concern with narrative intelligibility, and post-structuralist undoings of discourse that mark the limits of self-disclosure. This paper uses the case of claiming asylum to propose a re-reading of narrative through post-structuralist interventions that demand closer attention to the relationships between narrative and power.

This is an attempt both to expose the edges of Ricœur's hermeneutics of the subject and to perhaps expand them. As Johann Michel has highlighted, Ricœur seems to share with many post-structuralist accounts the acknowledgement that "the subject is not the master of meaning,"[16] which opens up the possibility of pushing the boundaries of this certain "finitude of the subject"[17] while also remaining faithful to Ricœur's focus on responsibility and recognition. I will therefore maintain in this paper that, alongside Ricœur's insistence on the meaningful emergence of the subject through recounting itself, we might question the primacy of intelligibility to consider the ethical and political significance of unintelligible narratives. My line of questioning does not entirely contravene Ricœur's treatment of narrative: Ricœur is aware not only of the corrupting possibilities of power in our capacity to speak, but also of the reality of suffering that affects the accessibility and legibility of our experience and thus constitutes a tear in the inter-narrative fabric.[18] He therefore maps the dialectic of "discordant concordance"[19] structuring narrative identity onto his concern with the dialectic of acting and suffering that constitutes ethical identity.[20] However, it does suggest that we pay attention to the edges of Ricœur's account, which I will argue are constrained by his focus on intelligibility.

III. Intelligibility and Power

A foundational aspect of this post-structuralist interruption of narrative self-disclosure will be the Foucauldian concept of "regimes of truth." With this phrase, Foucault means to

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[16] Johann Michel, *Ricœur and the Post-Structuralists. Bourdieu, Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, Castoriadis,* trans. Scott Davidson (London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2014), 47. See also Paul Ricœur, "Entretiens de Paul Ricœur avec Carlos Oliveira," *in* Christian Bouchindhomme and Rainer Rochlitz (eds), "*Temps et récit*" *de Paul Ricœur en débat* (Paris: Cerf, 1990), 35.

[17] Michel, *Ricœur and the Post-Structuralists*, 47.

[18] See Paul Ricœur, "La souffrance n'est pas la douleur," *in* Claire Marin and Nathalie Zaccaï-Reyners (eds), *Souffrance et douleur. Autour de Paul Ricœur* (Paris: Puf, 2013), 31-2.

[19] Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 141.

[20] Gaëlle Fiasse insists on reading narrative identity under Ricœur's larger hermeneutic rubric of the self as both acting and suffering. See Fiasse, "Ricœur's Hermeneutics of the Self," 50.

capture the discourses, mechanisms, and means by which a particular society codes, distinguishes, and accords value to that which it makes function as truth.[21] I want to begin by suggesting, alongside Foucault, that the ethico-political potential of intelligibility as a mode of becoming is circumscribed by particular regimes of truth – marking both the internal coherence of institutional knowledge and the institution of language itself as a self-revelatory possibility. This is made markedly clear in the asylum-claiming case, in which the claimant is required to produce an intelligible narrative that conforms to the "image of an appropriate refugee"[22] projected by decision-makers and produced through the hermeneutics of an institutionally normalized worldview. Carol Bohmer and Amy Shuman have described the techniques of knowledge production and legitimation in the asylum application process as producing "epistemologies of ignorance,"[23] relying upon interrogative practices to determine credibility. These practices replace the question of narratively salient truth (as they put it, "are you in danger if returned to your native country?") with the issue of consistency (which for Bohmer and Shuman is captured in the underlying insistence upon the question "are you who you say you are and have you consistently been that person?"). In fact, they point out that interrogation as a mode of knowledge production actually thwarts the potential of narrative: the claimant may have limited knowledge of details that are determined as significant by decision-makers, while the important facts of a claim as a life narrative might not be organizable or parsable through the interrogative lens of the official. What the claimant does not know becomes the most significant ground for credibility judgements, and for Bohmer and Shuman it is the requirement to explain away missing information via recourse to institutional information or expert testimony that substantiates this epistemology of ignorance. By focusing on the absence of knowledge in an applicant's claim, which is often deprived of particular details as a direct result of persecution, the decision-making process denies claimants the "right to determine what counts in their own stories."[24] The demand for intelligibility, then, seems to be in direct tension with the unfolding of a claimant's narrative. Crucially, the consequence of this tension is that genuine narratives that do not conform to the expectations of the decision-maker are unlikely or unable to offer knowledge that might displace or expand these expectations. The asylum-seeking person, as a subject of knowledge, is subject to knowledge, and it is at the point of confrontation between these two poles that we can begin to see the imposed limits of narrative.

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[21] See Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," *in* Colin Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977,* trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham and Kate Sober (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 131: "Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true."

[22] Barsky, *Constructing a Productive Other*, 5.

[23] Carol Bohmer and Amy Shuman, "Producing Epistemologies of Ignorance in the Political Asylum Application Process," *Identities. Global Studies in Culture and Power*, vol. 14/5 (2007), 623.

[24] Bohmer and Shuman, "Producing Epistemologies of Ignorance in the Political Asylum Application Process," 624.

IV. Language and the Speaking Subject

In fact, the break between narrative and institutional knowledge-production extends into the institution of language more broadly. Foucault reminds us that power and knowledge are co-implicated in the constitution of the speaking subject, since the "technologies of the self"[25] through which the subject shapes and comes to know themselves in relationship with others are deployed through relations of power among speaking subjects.[26] Since power relations permeate the structure of self-disclosure, the possibilities of narrative as a mode of identity fulfilled through the recognition of another will also be circumscribed by power. Judith Butler's disruption of sovereign discourses further unravels the relationship between knowledge and power by drawing our attention to the ways in which language itself determines and frames the very terms of recognition. Her extension of Foucault presents a decoupling of speech from the "sovereign" speaking subject: to be constituted as a subject in language is, for Butler, to be tied to the "linguistic conditions of survivable subjects,"[27] meaning that speech is "always in some ways out of our control."[28] The very fact that we are formed in language constitutes our vulnerability to authoritative schemas of narratability and intelligibility, meaning that to disclose oneself through discourse is to be in some way dispossessed by language.[29]

By introducing the notion of dispossession into Foucault's approach to subject formation, Butler suggests that our exposure as speaking subjects to governing discourses in fact makes its way into the ethical relationship between a self and another, through the structure of the address. Noting that what makes a narrative recognizable on a social and institutional scale is dependent on norms of recognizability, Butler suggests that the moment of address actually represents an interruption of any narrative function and a loss of narrative control. She maintains that narrating oneself to another is a moment of disorientation rather than coherence – and in fact it is this incoherence that "establishes the way in which we are constituted in relationality."[30] The ethical relationship, for Butler, is itself both a condition and a disruption of the possibility of narrative. She leans upon the limits of our capacity to speak, wherein "the very terms by which…we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making,"[31] to maintain that it is at the very threshold of intelligibility that our ethical imperative emerges.

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[25] Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," *in* Luther H. Martin *et al.* (eds), *Technologies of the Self. A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16-49.

[26] Michel Foucault, "Inaugural Lecture, April 2, 1981," *in* Fabienne Brion and Bernard E. Harcourt (eds), *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling. The Function of Avowal in Justice,* trans. Stephen W. Sawyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 28.

[27] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 5.

[28] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 15.

[29] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

[30] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 64.

[31] Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 21.

These initial intuitions prompt us to reconsider, or at least to approach with caution, the function of narrative intelligibility in the emergence of the speaking subject. This can be clarified further by thinking through the performative dimension of speech, and in doing so situating the possibilities of the subject within the performative violence of the state. The performative character of speech is brought into sharp definition through Giorgio Agamben's excavation of the oath, which attempts to expose the movement through which life and language become co-implicated in the speaking being. For Agamben, the institution of law was erected in order to tie the speaking subject to the truthfulness of their speech, and thus to mobilize the performative experience of language into a "sacrament of power."[32] The law contains and preserves the performative veracity of language, determining and sanctifying in advance a necessary relationship between the speaking subject and their speech. As a result, within juridical institutions the subject testifies to a "codified system of truth"[33] founded upon its own performative reflexivity. To return to the refugee determination case, the claimant's testimony is therefore rendered precarious by the very institution of language formalized through the asylum-claiming system. Read through Agamben's terms, the relevantly accurate narrative (to recall Bohmer and Shuman, "are you in danger if you return to your home country") is superseded by an interrogation of this sacramental bond between the claimant and their speech ("are you who you say you are and have you consistently been that person?"). Hence, rather than producing knowledge, this process affirms the gulf between personal narrative and institutionally codified truths: abandoned to language, the narratives available to the claimant admit the limits of their own capacity to speak, revealing the shadow of bare life in the institution of language.

The hermeneutics of narrative are further complicated by the resistant narrative possibilities of silence: of that which is denied to or evades language and lingers under the surface of storytelling. In the asylum-claiming case, in which a person is caught between what must be said and what simply cannot be spoken, silences within a testimony could themselves be a way of speaking about the unspeakable. Gillian McFadyen suggests that the incoherence of trauma, and the destructive quality of violence on the very possibility of speaking, leaves silence as a "space for the untold,"[34] in which a claimant can contain grief and communicate the unshareability of pain. In fact, Johnson's analysis of silence as a site of resistance for LGBTQ asylum seekers conceptualizes silence as a significant form of meaning making. Rather than neglecting the unspoken as "background noise,"[35] Johnson insists that silence has narrative potential. Particularly in the context of LGBTQ claimants, for whom certain aspects of their narrative might be dangerous to disclose, or to whom the "closet" as an imposed or necessary tactic of ignorance might already represent a form of defiant silence, it might be that words and

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[32] Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language. An Archaeology of the Oath,* trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 45.

[33] Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language*, 66.

[34] Gillian McFadyen, "Memory, Language and Silence. Barriers to Refuge Within the British Asylum System," *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, vol. 17/2 (2019), 175.

[35] Toni Johnson, "On Silence, Sexuality and Skeletons. Reconceptualizing Narrative in Asylum Hearings," *Social & Legal Studies*, vol. 20/1 (2011), 65.

language themselves are inadequate. By demanding that we pay attention to the presence and implications of silence in the stories of asylum-seeking people, Johnson underlines how the body of the claimant is marked with alternative narratives that cannot be captured by speech. The question can be applied to narrative more generally: in moments exposing a subject at their most vulnerable, can narrative as speech fully embody the contours of the very experience that brought such vulnerability upon them?

V. Colonialism and Narrative Standards

The limiting role of language in the asylum regime takes on an even more significant hue when considered through the lens of cultural and racialized linguistic and narrative standards. This manifests most clearly in the problem of interpretation during the asylum interview, which is marked by (colonial) assumptions about language, speech, and the containment and conveyance of truth. The Fanonian intuition that language is a carrier of colonial presumptions of identity, through which one's proximity to whiteness is negotiated and reified through the world "taken on"[36] in language, is starkly realized in the interview setting where certain modes of speech are made foreign and suspicious. In fact, the Home Office's (highly criticized) policy of applying Language Analysis for the Determination of Origin of an asylum claimant (LADO)[37] operates on the very assumption that the way a person speaks reveals a certain truth about identity that can be mapped statically. LADO is a process used by the Home Office in some cases in which a claimant's nationality is disputed or doubted, to help ascertain their "true place of origin."[38] This procedure is carried out through private suppliers, who provide language experts to interview claimants "at mother-tongue level"[39] and analyze their linguistic origin. According to the Home Office instructions, alongside inconsistent dialect and inadequate language level, situations that might provoke doubt include when the claimant either "lacks knowledge," or discloses "unreliable evidence" regarding their place of origin.[40] As such, it has been the object of wide and various criticism regarding the tension between these objectively coded judgements and the specific local realities of a claimant's linguistic identity.[41] Carver emphasizes that LADO as a bureaucratic process actually works to construct and determine notions of identity and belonging according to the world order of states, reflecting a deep and naturalized colonial

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[36] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks,* trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto, 2008), 24.

[37] For a fuller account and analysis of the LADO method, see Diana Eades, "Testing the Claims of Asylum Seekers. The Role of Language Analysis," *Language Assessment Quarterly*, vol. 6/1 (2009), 30-40.

[38] Home Office, *Language Analysis,* Version 21.0 (UK: Home Office, 2018), 6, online document: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/685203/Language-analysis-AI-v21.0EXT.pdf.

[39] Home Office, *Language Analysis,* 25.

[40] Home Office, *Language Analysis,* 8.

[41] See Peter L. Patrick, Monika S. Schmid and Karin Zwaan (eds), *Language Analysis for the Determination of Origin. Current Perspectives and New Directions* (Cham: Springer 2019).

commitment to "nation states as containers of identity."[42] The very act of speaking as the emergence of the speaking subject is therefore still subordinate to the colonial global imaginary, through the ways in which identities are established and translated through operations of postcolonial organization.

Marco Jacquemet's investigation of the asylum interview as an intercultural exchange characterizes the linguistic expectations of the interview in terms of a power asymmetry, which creates an ideological hierarchy of language in which claimants are considered unreliable as a result of their inferior speech. Not only do Western norms of coherence and "narrative fluency"[43] impact the credibility of the claimant, but the very semantic texture of claimant's testimonies and the way in which they are uttered are also mediated through the expectations and assumptions of the dominant language. This resonates with Katrijn Maryns' analysis of language in the Belgian asylum procedure, which offers as an example how the idiosyncratic and stigmatized "non-nativeness"[44] of African Englishes clashes with the European expectation that truthfulness is expressed through consistency and detail. These expectations are enforced through norms embedded in the statements and lines of questioning adopted by officials, such as the insistence on identifying particular details of time and place to qualify as a "good verbal performance."[45]

This can be clarified further through the notion of credibility. Under the terms of the decision-making process, a claimant is either who they say they are, and thus deserving of refugee status, or not who they say they are, and thus undeserving. A person must, therefore, be credible to be deserving – and the failure of the failed claimant lies in their credibility as a speaking subject. The regime of truth functioning here is thus concerned with norms regarding what makes a story and a storyteller credible. To be distrusted or disbelieved severely hinders the process of self-disclosure, suggesting that narrative identity presupposes that the narrative self will not just be received, but believed. As has been suggested above, the entanglement of credibility in the limits of narrative is made all the more pronounced in racialized subjects, further highlighting the external impositions on narrative identity, and recalling the colonial assumptions of whiteness structuring and perpetuating this regime of truth. There are two coinciding issues regarding the intersection of credibility, knowledge, and race in this context: not only can a claimant's individual credibility be rendered precarious through racist assumptions,[46]

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[42] Carver, "The Silent Backdrop," 164.

[43] Marco Jacquemet, "Crosstalk 2.0. Asylum and Communicative Breakdowns," *Text & Talk*, vol. 31/4 (2011), 483.

[44] Katrijn Maryns, *The Asylum Speaker. Language in the Belgian Asylum Procedure* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 320.

[45] Jacquemet, "Crosstalk 2.0," 483.

[46] See, for instance, Melanie Griffiths, "Anonymous Aliens? Questions of Identification in the Detention and Deportation of Failed Asylum Seekers," *Population, Space and Place*, vol. 18/6 (2012), 719, which describes how "one experienced NGO representative told me that she had heard immigration judges […] in one case dismissing the birth certificate of a person claiming to be 16 years old on the basis that it was from Nigeria and therefore bound to be faked."

but the very degree to which a person's narrative is counted as knowledge under the ruling epistemic framework is structured by narrative norms into which we can read a degree of (white) colonial hegemony.

The asylum claimant as a speaking subject is in a unique situation in terms of self-disclosure. Through their testimony, they are required to testify specifically to their identity as refugee: a particular predetermined, institutionally legible category. While much has been written about the political and ethical failures of legibility,[47] this tension also reveals something new about the political contours of narrative. Situated within the larger global narrative of the state, an individual account only has a limited capacity both to be heard and to be translated into a meaningful unfolding of the subject. To return to the initial Foucaultian scheme, the asylum-claiming case exposes in sharp relief that one's capacity to give an account of oneself is demarcated by the regime of truth in relation to which recognition can take place.

VI. Narrative Time and Alternative Temporalities

The example of claiming asylum therefore presents us with a particularly stark manifestation of the way in which the unfolding of narrative is politically conditioned by mechanisms of power – at least in the context of institutional recognition. However, probing the concept of narrative further suggests that a certain degree of political contingency, invested in the function of time, is embedded in narrative itself as a mode of self-disclosure. There thus appear to be internal, as well as external, impositions on the ethico-political function of narrative, impacting the degree to which and terms by which narrative is made legible, rendered through the mediating function of narrative time.

Ricœur's conceptualization of narrative time offers emplotment as an ordering and configurating function through which lives are rendered intelligible. His analysis of the structure of emplotment describes two dimensions of narrative time, that reflect the paradoxical dimensions of temporal existence: the episodic dimension, through which narrative time is given a sense of chronology, and the configurational dimension, through which disparate events are drawn together under the temporality of narrative unity. It is the capacity of a narrative to be followed that integrates this paradox under "the poetic act itself,"[48] meaning that the work of narrative is completed in the figure of the person receiving the story. While the plot constructs (or better, retrieves) narrative congruence out of incongruent experiences of time, it is ultimately in the movement of becoming intelligible that narrative time confers meaning onto a life story.

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[47] See, for instance, Deidre Conlon, "Becoming Legible and 'Legitimized'. Subjectivation and Governmentality among Asylum Seekers in Ireland," *in* Philip Kretsedemas, Jorge Capetillo-Ponce and Glenn Jacobs (eds), *Migrant Marginality. A Transnational Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 366-97; Olga Jubany, *Screening Asylum in a Culture of Disbelief. Truths, Denials, and Skeptical Borders* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

[48] Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 1,* trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-1988), 66.

Moreover, through the movement of narrative intervention by which a person inserts their action in time, narrative time becomes public: it unfolds at the level of being-with-others, establishing action in time as interaction.[49] As such, the "followability"[50] of narrative is bound both by expectations regarding the emergence of a plot and by the existential understanding through which a narrative is constituted in time.[51]

The experience of unintelligibility in the asylum claiming case suggests that this very mediating function of narrative time – that which brings the experience of temporality into language – conditions narrative internally in relation to external workings of power. Temporality and intelligibility collide in the asylum claiming case in two interrelated ways: firstly, the state's temporal frame of reference constructs and demands a form of narrative coherence that sits in tension with the temporalities of many refugee testimonies, while secondly, the experience of time can be significantly impacted by the experience of trauma characterizing many of these testimonies.[52]

Beginning with the first form of collision, we might consider the temporalities of refugee testimonies in terms of what Mark Rifkin has called "temporal sensations":[53] distinct modes of being in time, for which there is no universally shared frame of reference. Rifkin's critique is levelled at the particular epistemological and phenomenological violence of settler-colonial time for Indigenous temporalities in the North American context. While his argument is not analogous here, it is reflective of a similar tension against the temporal discourse of the sovereign state. For Rifkin, the insertion of Indigenous histories into the unfolding time of the settler state represents a colonial imposition of settler sovereignty and reveals the normative character of the temporality of the state. The temporal concerns of the sovereign state are manifested in similar ways in the context of international refugee law, providing a parallel example of the state imposition of a normative timeline. Catherine Dauvergne offers one way in which we can trace the priorities of state sovereignty in the temporal discourse of the state, through her analysis of the crisis paradigm underpinning refugee law. Dauvergne understands the notion of "crisis" as the key shaper of the refugee law regime, marking states' responses to the movement of refugees as well as the way state obligations are legally codified. The hermeneutic effects of this "crisis bias"[54] can be read through the way time is construed: under this rubric, people are displaced through temporary and eruptive crises that are short-term and intense in character, and this is paralleled in the image of the refugee as a volatile and liminal figure on the margins of political life.

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[49] Ricœur, "Narrative Time," 188.

[50] Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, 67.

[51] See Ricœur, "Narrative Time," 175.

[52] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the distinction between these two forms of collision.

[53] Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time. Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 24.

[54] Catherine Dauvergne, "Refugee Law as Perpetual Crisis," *in* Satvinder Singh Juss and Colin Harvey (eds), *Contemporary Issues in Refugee Law* (Cheltenham and Northampton: Edward Elgar, 2013), 15.

Dauvergne points out that forms of persecution that are not marked with the sense of acute urgency, such as more chronic generalized harms or the insidiousness of privatized harms, struggle for recognition under the legal paradigm of refugee status. As such, the expected temporality of persecution in Western liberal democracies might be in tension with the experience of fear and harm in an individual narrative, and with the ways in which time slows or sticks to become a "source of suffering in its own right."[55]

This insight is traceable across examples of refugee decision making, which demonstrate a confrontation between institutional expectations and individual experiences of time, troubling the consistency of claimants' narratives. As Hilary Evans Cameron articulates in her critique of credibility findings within the Canadian IRB, refugee testimony often does not conform to norms of linear time, producing inconsistent and incoherent accounts of the unfolding of events.[56] The experience of time for a claimant who is piecing together a traumatic story tends to be shaped by the relative significance of particular moments – fracturing both the episodic and the configurational dimensions of narrative. Moreover, the notions of time and causality are marked by a person's cultural framework, meaning that both the perception and the interpretation of a life story can be rendered interculturally incommunicable at this moment of border crossing.[57] Walter Kälin's analysis of the culturally distorted communication in asylum hearings emphasizes that both time and its relevance are culturally conditioned, so that even the sense of duration of a particular event might be relative.[58] Add to this the experience of uncertainty and instability characterizing the time of the asylum claiming process itself, which Melanie Griffiths refers to as "temporal angst,"[59] and the temporalities of asylum claiming people seem distinct and disjointed from the temporal apparatus of the immigration system. These incompatible frames of temporal reference, obscured and ossified by the temporality of the state, compel us to consider that the intelligibility of narrative time is completed by political power. Dismantling the purported universality of state time (to echo Rifkin) could further enrich our understanding of narrative by reminding us that the normalized expectations built into public time amongst others are also marked by mechanisms of power.

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[55] Melanie Griffiths, "Out of Time. The Temporal Uncertainties of Refused Asylum Seekers and Immigration Detainees," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 40/12 (2014), 1995.

[56] Hilary Evans Cameron, "Refugee Status Determinations and the Limits of Memory," *International Journal of Refugee Law*, vol. 22/4 (2010), 469-511.

[57] See Cécile Rousseau *et al.*, "The Complexity of Determining Refugeehood. A Multidisciplinary Analysis of the Decision-making Process of the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 15/1 (2002), 43-70.

[58] Walter Kälin, "Troubled Communication. Cross-Cultural Misunderstandings in the Asylum-Hearing," *International Migration Review*, vol. 20/2 (1986), 230-41.

[59] Griffiths, "Out of Time," 1994.

VII. Traumatic Time and Unintelligibility

The second significant piece of the temporality of asylum testimony that contributes to its particular narrative incongruity is trauma: undergoing a traumatic experience can impact both a person's experience of time and their capacity to retrieve it narratively. Cécile Rousseau, François Crépeau, Patricia Foxen, and France Houle draw our attention to the ways in which trauma can mutate a person's perception of time while also emphasizing that people who have suffered trauma might often respond with avoidance, dissociation, and anxiety when forced to recall traumatic experiences.[60] Traumatized subjects will regularly struggle with inconsistency and incoherence as a result of traumatic memories,[61] reflecting the tension between trauma, narrative, and time – and reminding us that narrative itself can be traumatic. In fact, Kamena Dorling, Marchu Girma and Natasha Walter emphasize the tangible and continued impact of trauma on an asylum claimant's experience of time, maintaining that memories of past traumas can perversely become spaces of psychological and emotional retreat, preventing traumatized people from building a future.[62] The characteristic of belatedness that pervades the traumatized mind – the rupture in one's experience of time wherein danger is always perceived too late[63] – destabilizes any sense of narrative time as public time, while the disruptive effects of trauma on the ordering and organizing of testimony replaces narrative coherence with incoherence. As Robert Beneduce points out, a peculiar injustice of the refugee determination system is that, as a result of trauma's uncertainty and fragmentation, a claimant's narrative can be the very thing that strips them of their own claim to truth, making their words "accomplices of … refusal."[64] The precarity of traumatic narrative further suggests that the relationship between narrative and intelligibility is troubled: in the context of narrative assumptions bolstered by normalized and normative institutional discourses, the subject might properly emerge only through a degree of unintelligibility.

A particularly peculiar characteristic of asylum testimony in terms of traumatized or traumatic temporality lies in the absence of an ending, further marking the political horizons of narrative time. Griffiths in fact reads the experience of time in the asylum decision-making process in terms of the uncertain wait for a conclusion, which disorients any sense of temporal conviction and further distances the experience of asylum claimants from any notion of public time.[65] Ricœur points to the sense of an ending as a significant feature of the plot, constructing

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[60] Rousseau *et al.*, "The Complexity of Determining Refugeehood."

[61] See Helen Muggeridge and Chen Maman, *Unsustainable. The Quality of Initial decision Making in Women's Asylum Claims* (UK: Asylum Aid, 2011).

[62] Kamena Dorling *et al.*, *Refused. The Experiences of Women Refused Asylum in the UK* (London: Women for Refugee Women, 2012).

[63] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 91-2.

[64] Robert Beneduce, "The Moral Economy of Lying. Subjectcraft, Narrative Capital, and Uncertainty in the Politics of Asylum," *Medical Anthropology*, vol. 34/6 (2015), 560.

[65] Griffiths, "Out of Time."

the shape and meaning of the narrative as a movement towards the end and upending the chronological representation of time through the possibility of perceiving the ending in the beginning.[66] To understand a story is to follow it through to its conclusion, which is rendered meaningful and "acceptable"[67] by the configurational dimension of narrative. However, the gaping and paradoxical lack of an ending in an asylum claimant's narrative reminds us that the acceptability of endings can also be politically charged – since in the asylum claiming case, the legally conferred ending has repercussions on the meaning, acceptability, and intelligibility of the whole story. The absence of an ending is paradoxical when we consider the intended conclusion of asylum testimony, which is the recognition and conferring of refugee status. Before this has been granted, the intelligibility of the testimony remains contingent on the ending it is given by decision makers. However, François Crépeau's critique of international refugee law highlights a significant concern with the contingency of this ending. He brings to light the implications of the principle of recognition embedded in the Refugee Convention, which confers on the Convention a declarative, rather than a constitutive character. As the UNHCR Handbook stipulates, a person is a refugee as soon as they fulfill the criteria contained in the definition, but recognizing this status does not make them a refugee so much as declare them to be one.[68] Crépeau concludes from this that once a person is recognized as a refugee, the state must in fact recognize them as having been a refugee from the moment they became one: from the moment they left their country of origin.[69] Narratively speaking, the recognition of refugee status as the fulfilment of the end of a testimony actually inserts a new beginning into the narrative and completes it as an intelligible story. The awaited conclusion of an asylum claim is not just a legal verdict but shapes the entire testimony as a narrative: we should recall that asylum narratives are required to establish not just the persecution in the past, but the necessity for protection in the future,[70] implying and demanding this ending from the start. We could therefore suggest that claimants whose testimony is illegible by institutional standards, and who are thus denied refugee status as an ending, are in fact denied the narrative intelligibility this ending might offer.

The fact that the ending (and its narrative implications) of an asylum narrative is something conferred by an official decision-maker reflects the power dynamics structuring what

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[66] Ricœur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 1*, 67.

[67] Ricœur, "Narrative Time," 174.

[68] UNHCR, *Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees HCR/IP/4/Eng/REV.1* (Reedited Geneva, January 1992), 1.28: "A person is a refugee within the meaning of the 1951 Convention as soon as he fulfils the criteria contained in the definition. This would necessarily occur prior to the time at which his refugee status is formally determined. Recognition of his refugee status does not therefore make him a refugee but declares him to be one. He does not become a refugee because of recognition, but is recognized because he is a refugee."

[69] François Crépeau, *Droit d'asile. De l'hospitalité aux contrôles migratoires* (Bruxelles: Bruylant, 1995), 126-7.

[70] Bohmer and Shuman, "Producing Epistemologies of Ignorance in the Political Asylum Application Process," 258.

Bohmer and Shuman refer to as the "narrative logics"[71] imposed across asylum testimonies. As they emphasize, the interrogative nature of the asylum interview means that asylum narratives are co-produced by the claimant and the official, with the official holding more authority over the unfolding of the story. Beyond any simple conflict of cultural understanding between the interviewer and the claimant, the asylum interview as a process of interrogation actually produces its own narrative logics through the ways in which the interviewer controls the details of the questioning. These logics then decide and solidify the legitimacy of the story, overriding the narrative logic offered by the claimant themselves. The power asymmetry in this setting makes the working of different and contrary logics particularly clear and reminds us that narrative logic is not singular. Moreover, the intelligibility and success of conflicting narrative logics is to a large extent bound by the dynamics of dominance and authority in the encounter. The political subjectivity and the epistemic subjectivity of the asylum claimant therefore seem to be implicated with each other, exposing the political limits of narrative's epistemic possibilities.[72]

VIII. Narrative Unintelligibility

I believe that the various concerns outlined in this paper prompt us to complicate Ricœur's approach to narrative identity as constituted, offered, and received through intelligibility. In fact, the demand for narrative coherence seems to be bounded by mechanisms of power, both in terms of the external coherence of narrative norms and rules of discourse and of the internal coherence of narrative time. The incoherence of asylum testimony as narrative exposes the relations of power structuring narrative expectations – and suggests that we might reconsider the terms of institutional recognition to account for narrative unintelligibility.

This paper has insisted on taking narrative unintelligibility seriously, maintaining that unintelligible or partially intelligible narratives should not disqualify the possibility of institutional recognition – and might, on the contrary, be a focal point of ethical and political concern. Charles Briggs' commentary on the relationship between narrative and produced knowledge in the context of conflict-related narratives maintains that narratives are not just reflections of certain perspectives on reality, but in fact have the potential to enact particular forms of social transformation. "Stories," Briggs suggests, "both draw upon experience and engender it,"[73] meaning that narratives are opportunities for action, particularly when personal narratives are translated into a more public setting. Leaning on the productive and creative

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[71] Bohmer and Shuman, "Producing Epistemologies of Ignorance in the Political Asylum Application Process," 261.

[72] As such, the asylum-claiming regime manifests a particular form of what Miranda Fricker has termed "epistemic injustice," wherein a speaking subject can be harmed in their capacity as subjects of knowledge. For a longer discussion of the epistemically unjust character of the refugee-determination process, see Lucie Robathan, "On Being Disbelieved. Undergoing Epistemic Injustice in the Asylum Claiming Process" (working paper, School of Religious Studies, McGill University, Montreal, 2022).

[73] Charles Briggs (ed.), *Disorderly Discourse. Narrative, Conflict, and Inequality* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 42.

potential of narrative could help us to re-conceptualize the significance of incongruity and unintelligibility, as a way of drawing attention to the limits of language and the oppressive techniques of discourse. Perhaps the unintelligible form and content of asylum testimony could serve as a disruption to the relations of power and the embedded (colonial) norms structuring institutionalized narrative logics, reflecting the imaginative and transformative possibilities of narrative incoherence. Given Ricœur's own concern with the creatively destructive function of narration, which for him "serves to displace anterior symbolizations onto a new plane, integrating or exploding them as the case may be,"[74] this focus on the thresholds of intelligibility could provide an important supplement to realizing the ethical and political potential of narrative that Ricœur's account has animated.

[74] Paul Ricœur, "The Creativity of Language," *in* Richard Kearney (ed.), *States of Mind. Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers on the European Mind* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 224.

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