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Editorial

Veronica Crosbie
School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies, Dublin City University
Dublin, Ireland

Agnès Maillot
School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies, Dublin City University
Dublin, Ireland

When interviewed on her experience with migrants on board the "Aquarius", French photographer Maud Veith was quite sombre. "I try not to tell them what lies ahead for them in Europe", [1] she explained in September 2018, weeks before the ship had to abandon its search and rescue operation in the Mediterranean.[2] Indeed, prospects for the many fleeing their countries to find refuge in Europe are bleak. For those who make it into fortress Europe, after having walked down perilous roads and crossed the unpredictable Mediterranean, after having passed heavily militarised borders and escaped the frequent and often abusive controls from the police, military, and sometimes even private militias, the ordeal is not yet over. While theoretically they are guaranteed the protection of the states that have signed up to the 1951 Geneva convention, the welcome they receive is, at best, indifferent, but more often than not, hostile. With populism on the rise, migrants have to navigate a difficult and sinuous path that becomes the price to pay for relative safety.

Ireland has been a destination for those seeking international protection since the mid-1990s. However, due to its insular location, it has not been impacted to the same extent as its EU counterparts by the waves of migration experienced since 2015. Thus, the figures of asylum seekers making their first application in Ireland is lower than the European average: 204 per million inhabitants, against 286.[3] Under its international obligations, the Irish State takes responsibility for those seeking international protection and provides them with accommodation and full board under a system known as Direct Provision. First introduced in the very last months of 1999, the system was meant to be provisional, but is now in its twentieth year of existence. Although it is condemned on a regular basis by asylum seekers

[1] Á bord de l''Aquarius : "J'évite de leur parler de ce qui les attends en Europe", interview with Maud Veith, *L'Obs*, 28 September 2018.
https://www.nouvelobs.com/monde/migrants/20180928.OBS3124/a-bord-de-l-aquarius-j-evite-de-leur-parler-de-ce-qui-les-attend-en-europe.html
[2] See "'Dark day': migrant rescue ship Aquarius ends operations", The Guardian, 7 December 2018.
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/07/dark-day-migrant-rescue-ship-aquarius-ends-operations-mediterranean
[3] EU statistics for 2017-18 available at:
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/images/f/fe/Table_2_Asylum_applicants%2C_Q3_2017_%E2%80%93_Q3_2018.png

themselves, but also by NGOs, grassroots movements, civil society and even officials and members of the Irish legislature, the Irish State has so far not heeded the calls for its abolition and for its replacement by a more humane system. The 5,848 men, women and children who live in the 37 centres dispersed across the country[4] are caught in a poverty trap, and the weekly subsistence rate that they receive[5] is grossly insufficient, reducing them to a state of dependency and indigence. Direct Provision has been severely criticised for institutionalising its residents, for being detrimental to their mental and physical health, for restricting their liberties, for isolating them from the society in which they are hoping to be allowed to live and make a new start, and for encouraging a black market economy. It is part of the "race to the bottom", the lowering of reception standards in which most EU states have been willingly participating in order to deter future asylum seekers from reaching their borders, and in which, it could be argued, the Irish State is a serious contender.

The story of Direct Provision is often told, not just by those whom it impacts directly, but also by their advocates. However, no matter how many times newspapers publish asylum seekers' testimonies and report on the malfunction of the system,[6] nobody seems to care much. After all, the system only concerns a handful of people who are, what is more, hidden from sight and whose interests and well-being are often negatively pitted, in public discourse, against those of other vulnerable sections of Irish society, such as the homeless. Researcher Liam Thornton believes that as a society, 'we are constantly coming up with new reasons not to make a change – or continue to recycle old reasons' thus repeating, perhaps unwittingly, the mistakes of the past.[7]

Paradoxically, while asylum seekers and refugees, commonly branded as "migrants", are prominent in public discourse, insofar as they have become, at European level, an "issue", they do not have an audible voice as individuals. Their stories, their experiences, and their expectations are told by those who witness their ordeal, but also, all too frequently, by those whose agenda it is to tarnish the image of political asylum for a host of different reasons. Therefore, these narratives are often distorted, or misrepresented, willingly or unwittingly, by journalists, politicians, reporters and even sometimes by those who work closely with them.

The outcome of this misinformed, and even uninformed, public debate, is an over-simplification of the issues, leading to a generic or overarching narrative which bypasses the complexity and diversity of all the people it is meant to represent. Each asylum seeker or refugee arrives with their personal background, culture, language, and life experience. Therefore, to counter the generalisations that public discourse tends to generate, it is fundamental to give a voice to each individual story. The forced migration trajectory cannot be understood without the voice of those who undertake the journey. Yet how to restitute their spoken words in a context where stereotypes and prejudices abound is a challenging task.

Narrative is a device that can assist us to make sense of our world. Acclaimed philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, argues that 'certain moral truths are best expressed in the form of a story'.[8] The Asylum Narratives project was designed with a specific objective: to

[4] RIA statistics October 2018 available at:
http://www.ria.gov.ie/en/RIA/October%202018%20monthly.pdf/Files/October%202018%20monthly.pdf
[5] RIA Reception, Dispersal and Accommodation information, available at
http://www.ria.gov.ie/en/RIA/October%202018%20monthly.pdf/Files/October%202018%20monthly.pdf
[6] See for instance the *Irish Times* series 'Lives in Limbo', https://www.irishtimes.com/news/lives-in-limbo
[7] Liam Thornton, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind*, UCD Sutherland School of Law,
http://www.ucd.ie/socscilaw/uploads/Liam-Thornton-UCD.pdf
[8] Rachel Aviv, The Philosopher of Feelings, available at
https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/07/25/martha-nussbaums-moral-philosophies

give a voice to those who are often silenced, or not heard, in Irish society, while also analysing the specific context, be it socio-cultural or political, in which they seek asylum. This was achieved by combining the authentic narratives of those who made the journey to Ireland with the expertise of those who work on the ground as activists or volunteers, and that of academics and researchers. These narratives seek to arrive at a deeper understanding of the issues that forced migration raises not only for asylum seekers themselves but for the host societies: the hopes and disappointments; the emotional roller coaster, taking one from fear to refuge, from anger to advocacy; the endless quest for recognition and for stability; the creative outcomes.

A one-day conference was therefore organised which hosted speakers from a wide range of backgrounds: refugees, poets, activists, artists, academics and students. What emerged from these exchanges was a polyphony of voices which, combined, gave an insight into what narratives on asylum can consist of.

This collection of academic essays, journal reflections, observations, audio and video recordings, photography and poetry, builds on these encounters to go deeper into the various issues that arose throughout the debates: the weight of the written and oral word in the dialogue with the host society; the significance of the work of activists and grassroots movements not only in the advocacy of rights but in the restitution of voices; and the all-too often neglected priority of educating public opinion through an ethically based, informed and rigorous approach to the issue.

The first section is dedicated to the academic, theoretical approaches that analyse in depth specific phenomena. Starting with Jacqueline Laughland-Booy & Zlatko Skrbiš's proposed model for cosmopolitan acceptance, a theoretical underpinning and moral guide to the work that follows, it then moves to specific Irish case studies: the political discourses around the right to work by Agnès Maillot, Bairbre ni Chiosáin's study of Dispersal and Direct Provision and Niamh Dillon's scrutiny of intercultural models of integration. This is followed by a literary exploration of forced migration, with Alisha Mathers' study of migrant narratives, and Eva Menger's examination of imaginations of displacement.

The next section focuses on empirical studies of integration initiatives: Fiona Murphy looks at how food initiatives can act as generators of solidarity, Áine McGillicuddy analyses the outcomes of the Silent Book project on refugee and local children alike, and Julie Daniel explains the objectives and outcomes of the Mellie reciprocal storytelling project, supported by the testimonies of participants in the project, Verena Wulf and Fidaa Marouf.

Olivia Ruiz then take us on a poetic journey to the heart of the darkness of forced migration. But the darkness does not end upon arrival, as Christiana Obaro's poems clearly reveal. It continues to cast a shadow on the lives of those who, like her or Lucky Khambule, live, or have lived, in Direct Provision and feel the frustration and the limited liberties of the system to which they are confined, including the right to work. Almut Schlepper's account of working as a volunteer in a refugee camp in Lesbos gives us another perspective of what the life of a those fleeing their home might entail.

The last section of this journal issue is dedicated to media perspectives. All three original pieces featured here show us the power of art to represent the lives and ordeals of those who are all too often reduced to silence. Kevin Brew's sensitively written radio play depicts the final anxious hours of an asylum seeker before landing in an unknown destination. Ellie Kisyombe lends her voice to this narrative of what could have been her story, one mixed

with fear, apprehension and hope. Caoimhe Butterly's insightful and sober approach takes us to Calais where she interviews two young men waiting for the remote possibility of crossing the Channel. Finally, Vukašin Nedeljković's collection of photographs poignantly capture the solitude and sadness of life in Direct Provision.

In recent times, as well as focusing on the traditional twin pillars of teaching and research, the higher education sector has moved increasingly towards the creation of societal impact, pursuing an active engagement with local communities and fostering an inclusive environment.[9] In 2016, Dublin City University became the first institute of higher education in Ireland to be awarded the designation 'University of Sanctuary' for its commitment to creating a culture of welcome for asylum seekers and refugees.[10] Those living in Direct Provision are denied the opportunity to access higher education due to prohibitive fees and a lack of funds to travel to and from college. One of the actions of the sanctuary university, therefore, is to create the means to access higher education through scholarship schemes. In addition, a University of Sanctuary commits itself to the three core principles of 'Learn, Embed and Share'.[11] These centre *inter alia* on the lived experience of seeking asylum, the policies and structures that the State proposes and imposes, and the efforts to integrate those who find themselves in a limbo state into local communities. The initiative to host the Asylum Narratives colloquium in 2017, so richly captured in this special issue, is an example of the kind of learning, embedding and sharing that is the hallmark of a University of Sanctuary. We hope that the narratives encountered in this volume, expressed through diverse voices, genres and media, will engage, educate and inspire.

[9] See DCU Strategic Plan 2017-22, available at https://www.dcu.ie/external-affairs/strategic-plan.shtml
[10] See DCU University of Sanctuary website, available at https://www.dcu.ie/sanctuary/index.shtml
[11] Guidelines on becoming a university of sanctuary can be accessed at https://ireland.cityofsanctuary.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/06/Guidelines-to-the-University-of-Sanctuary-Ireland-.docx