Narratively (Bang) Out of Order

On Hostile Environment

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Abstract This is an everyday text arisen from the critical, performative conjuncture embedded in the politically and personally troubled realities of being an immigrant in the United Kingdom under the Hostile Environment policy. It is a failed venture to orchestrate a congruous symphony amongst the discordant voices in me chiming in and out so abruptly and out of sync in the wake of anti-immigration, racist rhetoric saturating discursive strategies and policy statements that produce immigration as an issue of social epidemic. Every encounter is a bang – a disruptive, inner shock.

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Letting us see the narratives of our own lives as episodes within such larger historical narratives is, I think, as much as the intellectuals are able to do in aid of morality.

(Rorty, 1991, p. 149)

How to begin and where to start. Those moments, once weighed upon the depth of experiential register, have the tendency to impinge on the present as undigestible residues of visceral intensity squeezing and churning in my stomach. The discursive attacks and populist policies put on the table a veritable banquet of human suffering for the immigrant bodies that seek to be here. It is a feast that many of us are not capable of resisting. The suffering of the dehumanised is blameworthy for their failure to exit. American cultural anthropologist Sherry Ortner's (2005) conception of subjectivity reveals the impossibility of the autonomous, sovereign subject. Subjectivity, which Ortner sees as ordered by human responsiveness, is instituted by 'the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that *animate* acting subjects' (p. 31). This temporal institution of the 'I' is subject to 'the cultural and social formations that shape, organize, and provoke those modes of affect, thought and so on' (p. 31). Ortner's conception is deeply theoretically enabling as I attempt to tell a personal story about the social realities of immigration through evoking the

multivoiced subjectivity that I see as the assemblage of 'the voices'. They are voices to me as I believe they – 'perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth' – are *storied*. Although their stories are not readily available for telling at the time and do not 'make easy sense' as they transgress 'the domesticated voice that we are accustomed to hearing, knowing, and naming' (Mazzei, 2009, p. 46). These voices are not autonomous happenings but are, placed within Ortner's conception, invariably tied to a living, experiencing, reflecting subject that is the 'I' by virtue of its capability of being animated, affected, and provoked into responsive action. An 'I' which acts.

We act, as Butler (2012b) argues, when we are moved by 'something that affects us from the outside, from elsewhere, from the lives of others, imposing a surfeit that we act from and upon' (p. 136). The voices are transiently aroused through certain discursive moments, animating the 'I' as they call upon me, move me to act. I may be selective of what I choose to tune in with, whom to speak back to, and what to leave omitted, depending on what elements in the reflexive process I happen to be privileging. Sometimes they drive me mad – falling-apart madness – in moments when I am powerless to be relieved of them, of their impingement to which the 'I' is fully exposed and vulnerable. The question of the origin of the voices is confounded as they are constituted in and through the social relations already in place, preceding the 'I', through the multiple worlds of others which the 'I' relies upon and endures. Plural conditions of the subjectivity patch shaky ground on which the 'I' wobbles single-legged.

For one year, I lived in profound fear of being deported and removed from those I loved and to whom I was relationally committed, from those who had necessarily coauthored the unfolding story of the life that I called mine by virtue of our intimate social entanglements (Sarbin, 2017). Fragmentation is my verbal action, my critical alternative to populist¹ language insisting on producing me as a social ill, a devalued category within the readily compromised categories in a world where the life I was seeking to lead was considered parasitic.

Fragmentation here is called upon also as a narrative act which speaks to the fracturing of, as against the purity of, identity to disrupt the anti-immigration logic that the 'I' can do without the 'you'.²

Still a story demands a departure point.

It is the end of October 2016,³ I have just successfully passed my viva and walked out with a doctoral degree bestowed on the slightly shaken body – 'no revision required'. I have phoned my partner, who had been in another school building this past three hours waiting for me. I am phoning my mum, who I spoke to the day before, who was anxious to know that a big moment of my life upon which four years

work was felt to be depending was to happen in less than a day. Everything she says is infused with excitement, a screaming-for-joy kind of excitement, until the question could no longer hide and burst through the crack in a wary haste, turning a group of cells in me capable of joy into a slime of angst over my still shaken body. Bright hopes dampen – ‘what is to happen now’? Or perhaps it is me who insists on hearing it that way; it must be my nerves from early on, but let us not spoil this one.

This is the irony of things. The cooling matter is not when she should get organised to come over for the glory of a graduation ceremony as a proud mother – that would not be until a few more months. Besides, she dislikes cold. But that, as I now complete my studies, visa cut short as ‘no revision required’, the clock has begun to slap harsh ticks, cards being reshuffled with nothing much left to draw – what is to happen to me and to my relationship with Will, with friends and families who endear me to my life here in Scotland, who give meanings to my time, belonging a palpable, reachable aura. I burst into tears upon the announcement of ‘no revisions required’. Here on the other side of the world, far away from Taiwan where ma-ma is, where the past comfortably dwells and pronounces memories in clear, rhythmic Mandarin with occasional lapses into Taiwanese Hokkien and Japanese leftovers. But here I am, attempting every possible response when the past stretches far enough to reach me, in accented English with occasional, involuntary Scottish twangs: ‘My life is this life, lived here, in the spatio-temporal horizon established by my body’ (Butler, 2012a, p. 11).

Congratulations. *But*. You are on the other side of the bridge now whilst the rest of us keep on. Yes, *but*. You can go on a well-deserved holiday now. *But*. Many congratulations on the achievement. Well done. Well, done.

I will soon learn that when you are congratulated, you should just receive it with equal grace and ease of all expressions. No buts. ‘But’ is the language of a killjoy, a teetotaler at a hen do, or a bah-humbug to Christmas ‘who gets in the way of the happiness of others or, more simply, the one who gets in the way’ (Ahmed, 2014, p. 234) by disrupting that celebratory, positive feeling of collective cheers despite how disgracefully they overwhelm and overpower the responsiveness of my other voices. The Home Office does not care about the ‘buts’ either. Crikey, to them I am numbers after the political calculations. Numbers are victims to procedural necessity and are not supposed act like they could feel. The end of student visa announces needs for an urgent transition to something, anything else, so I can have a choice to remain – to be here – a new status that will grant me the permission to breathe in some more Scottish air, visit our Scottish grandparents in Dunoon on weekends. I have not been receiving photos of red squirrels from Papa this year. He has been ill. No one knows if he is going to make Christmas.

I tuck under the piles of unread posts one from the Home Office with a cautionary line about deportation in red. The letter gives me no update about my application to the new visa category 'Doctoral Extension Scheme' (DES) for which I have been waiting with bated breath every single day. The visa would allow me, a doctoral graduate, to remain and find work for a period of 12 months and, if successful, I may switch onto a more long-term visa – a working visa – to move towards being able to lead a good, or goodish, life. Still no news today; they seem to have two split operating systems – one getting down to the visa matters, the other issuing threatening clanks when they feel like it. I have done my check this month – confirming that I. Am. Still. Here. By virtue of being and calling themselves the Home Office, I, the guest of the land, am at their mercy, perpetually feeling that I am outstaying my welcome. My visa arrived, a new residence permit, with an expiry date of 11 months from today. 'No revision required' means that my student status got revoked, and so the countdown begins early. But it took you six weeks to finally process my application, during which time I was not permitted to look for work. It would only be just to have my six weeks back.

No buts.

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Precarious. Somehow this word came to mind: 'Precarity exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency'⁴ (Butler, 2012b, p. 148). Here we are, visiting Granny and Papa to celebrate the new year. We are pleased that they both seem well, especially Papa. I normally get a hug from Papa, whilst the boys get a firm handshake, which makes me feel special. The gathering is the annual family affair and the relatives have travelled far from near Brighton to be here. They brought the dog, Bobby, with them, who never cared about the conventions. I am the only one that still needs to explain her tea preference. Milk but no sugar, thanks, Granny.

'She calls her Granny as well?' Aunt Sue commented in my presence but not to me, apparently, judging by the pronoun. Was it meant as a rhetorical question or a protest? Sarcasm? The couch was relieved of my weight as I went patting Bobby on the floor. Calais refugee crisis comes in and out of the chatters, diffusing words such as *border control*, *transgression*, *fears*, and *unwanted migrants* into the stuffy air with the fire ablazing. In I breathe but can't get enough air. Everyone has had their round, and it is now my turn to say what I have been up to.

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I have an e-mail template that I use for explaining my visa status, as the doctoral extension scheme has confused so many into thinking I have got an extension on my

doctoral studies. Most never replied; those who did were mainly to say that they could not meet the visa terms to sponsor me. Kind regards. It appears that no one can sponsor me if it is not a PhD-level job, but when it is, I am not good enough to compete for it having only just got it. When I finally got an interview for a lecturer post, they told me two days before the interview that they could not go ahead with the interview as the prorata salary just falls short of the £30,000 Home Office requirement. We were really looking forward to meeting you. Apologies that we are unable to help on this occasion. I am not sure whether I pronounced the person's name correctly; I wanted to say that I like their paper very much but did not get a chance to.

How does one lead a good life? ⁵

'There are millions of people in poorer countries who would love to live in Britain, and there is a limit to the amount of immigration any country can and should take,' Theresa May's voice keeps coming back hauntingly (Stone, 2016). Sibi got married this year. And Cherry the year before. When you fall in love, can't find jobs, and are threatened to be deported, you get married for a family visa sponsored by your partner. You are then enabled to buy a permit to stay for two and a half years for one and a half grand, and when you collect five years you get to apply for the permit to settle permanently. Every desire to belong first gets converted into a loyalty point through this transaction. Let us not spare a moment to consider the power dynamics when your partner becomes the sponsor of your family visa. Social tyranny concedes a domestic tyranny. For now, I am pissed off both with Sibi and Cherry and so many others. They are not helping our reputation here by rushing into marriage that easily, as if we were all just here to get married to denounce that place of origin undoubtedly of a lesser kind. But what choice do they, we, have?

How convincing can I sound when I say it has never been about the United Kingdom nor Taiwan.

How does one come to belong when 'the desire to belong implies an unacceptable loss, and the desire not to belong engenders an unbearable estrangement' (Butler, 2016, p. ix). It's more than just the paradox of choices and consequences, but how this also speaks to the psychical juxtaposition of the voices (of desire, loss, belonging, unbelonging, estrangement, etc.) evoked momentarily, co-existing, collapsing, and impinging upon one another. Always an impasse. Will and I have been engaged for two years now. Even if we get married, oh the word makes me shriek, he does not earn enough to sponsor me – a PhD student does not earn as much as the Home Office is asking, and a joint income does not count. He probably won't find a job that easily after he finishes. He is in sociology. But we are running out of time – only four months left before I face removal of my body from its existing habitation and

relational conditions. Every immigrant is a potential illegal, 'a dispensable sort of being' (Butler, 2012a, p. 10). A deniable sort of being.

Always the us wanting something from them, and never the other way around: 'Immigration is unpopular, with approximately three-quarters of the British public favouring reduced levels' (Blinder & Richards, 2018). One in three chose the option of 'reduced a lot'. Really, what is the point now anyway? Will and I have been fighting almost every single day. Over political correctness and elusive sense of family. I do not like the way his dad continues to confuse Taiwan with China and sometimes with Thailand. I am from Taiwan (for god's sake) and refuse to answer how things are in China, or Thailand. Why would I know? The private is enveloped in the public, the everyday drenched soggy in a suspicious atmosphere framing the hostile environment. What used to be a laughing matter now amounts to a cultural insult and feigned ignorance in an uncaring manner of 'that will do'. Will is not speaking up enough for me. Too little sign of resistance. Under his white skin I don't see blood boiling. Love is in dire need of being refreshed by a more explicit show of being affected and beset as I am. I will say, 'You will never understand what it has really been like for me'. And this will set him off. He will protest, 'We are in this together!' If we are, why is it only my name that is on the letters.

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I am running out of time, and there is too much to correct, so little understanding of what matters to me whilst the *Daily Mail* is digested heartily with breakfast and tea every single day.⁶ Combativeness is the flip side of helplessness. 'Fervour is the weapon of choice of the impotent' (Fanon, 1952/2008 p. 2). Never the shortage of fervour when it comes to the unjust, exploitative political relations 'casting those in need in essentialist terms' (Butler, 2012a, p. 15). The excess was what got me out of bed.

The anti-immigration campaign in the wake of Brexit has not missed any opportunities to shame me for my foreignness, for its being at odds with 'British' culture. Incompatibility is the bedrock to the logics of exclusion (Mintchev, 2014). A shameful desire indeed, I am still clinging on playing this family game without anything to confirm my family status. Like a fraud. I poke a chopstick into a roast potato, lifting it up to my mouth – teeth against its softness. I hate telly these days; they never say anything good about me. Nothing ever does these days.⁷ My social appetite has suffered. I have loved Scotland but can no longer continue to invest myself further emotionally and relationally here, in those around me amid uncertainty about my status. What is the point now anyway; I'd be gone, social ties evaporated, and they

remain here and move on. I'd be gone. They want to cut down on the numbers – foreigners unwanted, let us 'sweep them all away' (Sparrow, 2014).

Another one gone is another political gain, despite this time it might be me. Only a grievable loss can be valued and valued through time, and in this case an immigrant's value is not worthy of protection from relentless ideological assault. If things are really that difficult, why don't you just go home? 'Go home'. Can you see yourself living in Taiwan? Would Will go with you? 'Go and bring everything with you'. I am sure things will work out for you and Will one way or another. There is nothing more to be said. What *really* (ontologically) matters must not matter here, for fear that any more fervour could spoil the simplicity of Sunday coffee. I must go now. Back to looking for jobs. Looking for something that I can be part of, that says 'yes' to me, to my being here. For affirmation of my value, interdependence, which is the ethic of love.

No luck. The future seems increasingly out of reach and the past seems too remote. I am in bits, 'partially living, or already dead and gone, prior to any explicit destruction or abandonment' (Butler, 2012a, p. 10). Who has murdered my political agency? One in three would have liked me gone, if possible, please. Is it you, you, or you?

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A phone call to offer me a job, at last! Yes, I will take *it*, I will take the offer!

No negotiation, just yes. Too much of a risk to lose this one with three months left from the expiry date of my visa. I did not intend to say yes to everything, but that's what I did from the very beginning. Yes to no relocation assistance, to plunge into a steep debt for the visa costs that I will now pay back to my employer by monthly instalments, to their terms. Too fearful of failing my probationary period, which would terminate my visa, I know I cannot afford to say no. They know this, so *probation* becomes the spell word to pin me down to the place of submission. 'As you are still on probation', as they will remind me, and so I will have to say yes to what is being asked. The HR said a case of grievance can take a while for the investigation to conclude. Sorry to hear you *feel* this way, they said. Best case scenario would be to leave the employment with a compromise agreement should I wish to pursue it. I cannot leave the employment, which will threaten my visa – a right to stay that I have tried so very hard to get. 'What do you want then?'

What do I want? I would have been deported, gone, if it was not for the job. What more *can* I want.

Notes

1. Populism, as Laclau (2018) notes, 'simplifies the political space, replacing a complex set of differences and determinations by a stark dichotomy whose two poles are necessarily imprecise' (p. 18). The antagonistic dichotomy between the identities of homogenous British 'people' and those of foreigners often produced by the populist are necessarily sustained by an unquestioned dismissal of a plurality of meanings to group those perceived as near one pole on the oppositional side.
2. Invoking Sarbin's (2017) notion of narrative identity, 'whenever we have an "I", a "you" (thou) is necessarily a part of the social context and ultimately enters into the formation of identities' (p. 221).
3. The historical time here is that Brexit has taken place roughly four months ago from this point on 23 June, 2016, and Theresa May, leader of the Conservative Party and the former home secretary who introduced the 'Hostile Environment' policy in 2012, has become the prime minister in July of that year. During the Brexit campaign, the sentiments towards the purified idea of Britishness and communitarianism were repetitively evoked during the media moments in direct opposition to the remain camp's multiculturalism.
4. I also wish to adopt Butler's differentiation here that precarity may be an existential condition to which any being is subject, but when elaboration is made in favour of specificity of the social and political conditions, it ceases being an existential concern but a political one addressing 'the organization and protection of bodily needs' undermined in the oppressed groups (Butler, 2012b, p. 148).
5. Here I am invoking the Butlerian concept of 'cohabitation': 'If I am to lead a good life, it will be a life lived with others, a life that is no life without those others; I will not lose this *I* that I am; whoever I am will be transformed by my connections with others, since my dependency on another, and my dependability, are necessary in order to live and to live well' (Butler, 2012b, p. 18).
6. The Daily Mail (2018) infamously has a long-standing opposition to immigration and routinely uses sensationalist anti-immigration rhetoric.
7. As The Guardian columnist Nesrine Malik (2018) observes, 'the portrayal of immigrants in the UK is never positive, never enriching, never humane'.

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