**Editorial**

**Envisioning asylum / engendering crisis: or, performance and forced migration ten years on**

*Emma Cox and Caroline Wake*

‘The questions of migration, asylum, the management of international borders, security, and “terror” are at the political heart of our age’. This statement could have been written yesterday but in fact it was published ten years ago, as the opening sentence of Helen Gilbert and Sophie Nield’s editorial for their special issue of *RiDE*, titled ‘Performance and Asylum: Embodiment, Ethics, Community’ (2008, 133). While many things have changed in the intervening decade, one thing has remained the same: the conviction that, as Gilbert and Nield put it, ‘performance, and performance theorisation, [are] exemplary sites to interrogate this field of study, addressing questions of identity, belonging, refuge, bodies, surveillance, and ethics’ (2008, 133). Reading through this new issue and re-reading the old, we were not only faced with our younger selves but also with several striking continuities, as well as differences. In this introduction, we outline these connections and disruptions according to our special issue’s foregrounding terminology of ‘envisioning asylum’ and ‘engendering crisis’, before offering an overview that situates its contributions both in terms of current debates, agendas and trajectories, and in terms of the mapping that the field has undergone over the past decade.

**Envisioning asylum**

In its 2008 *Global Trends Report*, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) stated that there were 42 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, of whom 15.2 million were refugees, 824,000 were asylum seekers (whose applications for refugee status were still pending), and 26 million internally displaced persons (UNHCR 2009, 2). The largest refugee producing countries were Afghanistan (2.8 million) and Iraq (1.9 million) (2). The largest refugee hosting countries were Pakistan (1.8 million), the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria, 1.1 million) and the Islamic Republic of Iran (890,000). Writing in February 2018, the most recent *Global Trends Report* available to us is from 2016, with the 2017 statistics due to be published shortly after this journal issue. In 2016, there were 65.6 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, including 22.5 million refugees, 2.8 million asylum seekers, and 40.3 million internally displaced persons (UNHCR 2017a, 2). This means that from 2008 to 2016, the world gained an additional 7.3 million refugees (an increase of 48 percent), 1.9 million asylum seekers (240 percent), 37.7 million internally displaced people (55 percent). In a devastating reversal, Syria no longer hosts but produces refugees and there are now 5.5 million of them. The report notes that ‘[w]ith 650 out of every 1,000 people forcibly displaced’ either within or across Syrian borders, ‘Syria is the only country in which the experience of forced displacement now affects the majority of the population’ (6). Sadly, Afghanistan still has 2.5 million refugees living in diaspora. Elsewhere, the crisis in South Sudan spurred more than 1.4 million refugees to leave. In attempt to find a ray of sunshine amidst this bleak picture, the UNHCR noted that for the first time the ‘growth in the number of people has slowed for the first time in recent years’ (5). In other words, the number is still increasing but less exponentially than in the period from 2012 to 2015 (6).

While the number of refugees has changed, the Refugee Convention has not. Now 67 years old, the Convention and the associated 1967 Protocol still define a ‘refugee’ as someone who, ‘owing to 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’ (UNHCR 1951, 14). Periodically, someone – whether the British Home Secretary in 2000, the Danish Prime Minister in 2015 or a Tongan MP in 2017 – suggests that the Convention be redrafted (Travis 2000; ABC 2015; Ethics Centre 2017). Their reasons vary: some want to expand the definition in anticipation of ‘climate refugees’ while others want to narrow it, supposedly to short circuit ‘people smuggling’ models (for a summary of these arguments see Ethics Centre 2017). However, both refugee scholars and workers warn against this, arguing that if countries were to renegotiate terms now, we may very well walk away with something *worse* rather than better (see former Assistant High Commissioner for Protection at UNCHR, Erika Feller, in Ethics Centre 2017). What is really needed, they argue, is for states to abide by the spirit as well as the letter of the Refugee Convention and Protocol. With this in mind, the United Nations is developing not one but two new documents: the Global Compact on Refugees; and the Global Compact on Migration.[[1]](#endnote-1) The former came about after September 2016: ‘New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants’. Following extensive dialogues, a draft will circulate in February 2018, followed by formal consultation with Member States between February and July 2018. The High Commissioner for Refugees will then present the final proposal in his 2018 report to the General Assembly. Whether countries will endorse let alone abide by it, remains to be seen.

What modes of envisioning asylum are encapsulated in facts, figures and framework documents? How are we adequately to comprehend what magnitude means outside the context of numerical scales, or grasp its implications for human lives? These questions are paramount – and notoriously difficult – for scholars and artists alike contemplating the connective tissue that binds the aesthetic and political dimensions of asylum. In our own work on performance, we have sought, variously, to elucidate what it might mean to bear *witness* to the lives of others (Wake 2010, 2013), or how we might understand the politics and poetics of *listening* (Wake 2014), or how we might clarify dispositions of *seeing* (Cox 2017). It is clear that the issue of how different modalities of representation can envision asylum is also preoccupying humanitarian agencies. Beyond the content of the two UN *Global Trends Reports*, it is worth noting their profoundly different forms, and more specifically, their divergent visualities. The 2008 report is 21 pages long and features a mere five photos, each of which takes up approximately one-eighth of a page. In addition, there are nine graphs, seven tables, and seven maps. In contrast, the 2016 report is 72 pages long and features 19 photographs, most of which take up an entire page and several of which run across two pages. There are 21 graphs, six tables, three maps, and a child’s drawing. The overwhelming impression is of an organisation that has ploughed substantial resources into graphic design and photography. Indeed, rather than relying on images produced by press photographers, the UNHCR now commissions its own. In 2015, it commissioned three photographers for three months: sending one to Syria, Turkey and Greece, another to Iraq, and the last to Italy (Laurent 2015). Their images are then uploaded to the Refugees Media database and published in long-form stories on the multimedia platform Tracks. The entire operation is overseen by the Chief of Content Production and a Photo Editor.

Meanwhile, the press itself commissions pieces such as the *Guardian*’s ‘Passports, Lifejackets, Lemons: What Syrian Refugees Pack for the Crossing to Europe’ (Kingsley and Diab 2015). In this interactive feature, the reality of the humanitarian emergency collides with the aesthetics of Instagram in a series of ‘flat-lays’. Popular on food and fashion accounts, a flat-lay is a top-down or overhead shot of a series of objects – say, a journal, watch, camera, pen, and some hand-cream – that are arranged at right angles to each other and often colour coded as well. Here, however, the objects include an orange lifejacket, neatly folded shirt and trousers, navy passport, a box of medication and/or cigarettes as well as a bottle of water. In contrast to the white or wooden backgrounds that often feature on Instagram, these are photographed against patterned carpets and rugs. The accompanying captions read, for example: ‘1 a black jacket, for warmth 2 bottle of water, to last the week-long trip 3 passport 4 a booklet documenting his army service’. It is hard to know how to interpret these flat lays: at best, one might say that they make refugees ‘relatable’ because they too are entangled in social media and its curated aesthetic; at worst, though, these images depict a visual and numerical order that is diametrically opposed to the messy experience of seeking asylum. The view from above comes full circle with projects such as Rocco Rorandelli’s project ‘Photographing the Refugee Trail by Drone’ (Estrin 2015). Or indeed, the UNCHR’s own use of drones to capture footage of refugees in Myanmar, Mali, Nigeria and South Sudan (2016b; 2017b). Many of these aerial images are disturbingly beautiful, revealing the grid pattern of the Sayam Forage refugee camp in Niger or the lush green of the Bangladesh border. Like the flat-lay, the drone footage purports to be about chaos but its formal, often symmetrical, composition creates a sense of serenity. Can there really be a crisis?

**Engendering crisis**

The word ‘crisis’ appears twice in the 2008 *Global Trends Report* as opposed to 15 times in the 2016 one. Similarly, searching the Factiva database, which catalogues over 8000 news sources, with the phrase ‘refugee crisis’ produces 748 English-language articles from 2008 and 36,069 English-language articles from 2016 (search conducted 28 January 2018). This represents an exponential increase of 4,722 percent and goes far beyond even the uppermost 240 percent increase in asylum seekers outlined in the section above, suggesting that it is not merely about the number of refugees but their proximity and visibility. Perhaps the air of crisis is accentuated by a dramatically different media ecology: in 2008, smart phones and social media had only just arrived. In fact, no article in the issue mentions social media. By contrast, in 2018, refugees themselves carry smart phones and download apps such RefAid. Images and information circulate differently now, as evidenced by the Alan Kurdi image, something of touchstone for many of our writers and indeed our own CFP.

Yet there is profound disagreement as to what, exactly, this is a crisis of, if anything at all. In September 2015, the *Independent* announced that it would be using the term ‘refugee crisis’ rather than ‘migrant problem’ and that ‘[r]efugees will be referred to as such, while those who do technically meet the definition of migrant will be merely referred to as “people” where possible’ (Baxter 2015). In March 2016, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi declared that it was ‘as much a crisis of European solidarity as […] a refugee crisis’ (UNHCR 2016a). In the *Guardian*’s reading, it was a ‘crisis of Europe’ and ‘European identity’ (Nougayrède 2016). Elsewhere, it has been called ‘a crisis of empathy and poor policymaking’ (O’Neill 2017). Underpinning all of these is, some argue, a deeper crisis of capital ([Khiabany](http://journals.sagepub.com/author/Khiabany%2C+Gholam) 2016; Zizek 2015) which, while perpetuating structural inequalities nevertheless seems to remain undisturbed by all manner of spectacularised human suffering in what Rogier Van Reekum describes as the ‘routinised emergency’ produced in and through the heavily policed Mediterranean space (2016, 339).

But to amplify Mediterranean, or indeed European, crises – whether of policy, solidarity, identity, empathy, or economy – can be to occlude other crises elsewhere. In an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* in November 2016, journalist Mehdi Hasan pointed to the ongoing racialisation of refugees, contrasting the hypervisibility of the European refugee crisis with the near-complete invisibility of the emergency unfolding in Africa. There, people were fleeing from South Sudan to Darfur, from the Democratic Republic of Congo to the Central African Republic, and from Nigeria to Chad while the Kenyan government was threating to close the Dadaab camp, where 300,000 people live (Hasan 2016). Hasan also highlighted Africa’s response to refugees, which has arguably been more progressive than those in the west. The World Bank called Uganda’s 2006 Refugee Act, which allows refugees to work, travel and start their own business, ‘one of the most progressive and generous in the world’. In 2014, Tanzania started granting citizenship to 200,000 refugees from Burundi. Surprisingly, Hasan does not mention Myanmar, where even in November 2016 there were grave fears for the Rohingya population; by September 2017, the UN Human Rights Council was calling it ‘textbook ethnic cleansing’ and 300,000 fled for Bangladesh in three weeks (Al-Hussein 2017). Beyond Africa and South-East Asia, there is also a crisis in Australia and the Asia-Pacific. Since the inauguration of the so-called ‘Second Pacific Solution’ in 2012 – the first ran from 2001 to 2008 – hundreds of people have been held in indefinite detention on Manus Island (part of Papua New Guinea) and the Republic of Nauru. This is deeply dangerous, not only for the men caught in limbo, but for other refugees, since Australia’s punitive policies are so often cited as blueprints or roadmaps for European policies. In October 2015, Tony Abbott, the former Prime Minister of Australia, took the opportunity during a lecture in London to warn that a ‘wholesome instinct is leading much of Europe into catastrophic error’ and urged his audience to learn from Australia ‘because people smuggling is a global problem, and because Australia is the only country that has successfully defeated it […] our experience should be studied’ (qtd in Chan, 2015).

**Performance and forced migration ten years on**

In 2008’s special issue on performance and asylum, there was relatively little writing on performance and forced migration. The majority of articles cited the foundational work of Julie Salverson or Dwight Conquergood. More broadly, scholars were drawing on the ethical and political philosophy of Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas. If the 2008 issue – invaluable though it was as a coalescing of a then-nascent field – sometimes felt like a disciplinary conversation unfolding within small confines, in 2018, work on the intersections between performance and asylum has proliferated, giving our authors a much wider range of scholarship on which to draw. In the decade since the 2008 issue, monographs have been published by several of its contributors (Farrier 2011, Jeffers 2012, Jestrovic 2013, Gluhovic 2013, Cox 2015, Fişek 2017), while other key books have expanded and enriched the field (Thompson 2009, O’Neill 2010, Balfour ed, 2013, Woolley 2014, Fleishman, ed. 2015, McIvor 2016, Wilmer 2018). It comes as no surprise that the theme of the IFTR / International Federation for Theatre Research 2018 conference, to be held this July in Belgrade, Serbia is ‘Theatre and Migration’.

As the field has found a firmer footing, the topics of scholarly attention have shifted, particularly in terms of the asylum jurisdictions placed under the spotlight. In the 2008 issue, theatrical case studies included two solo, autobiographical performances by former detainees who had experienced the bureaucratic indignities and brutalities of the Australian immigration detention system (Shahin Shafaei’s *Refugitive* and Towfiq Al-Qady’s *Nothing But Nothing*), as well as an Australian verbatim play in which Shafaei was cast as himself (*Through the Wire*), and an Australian tribunal play (*CMI (A Certain Maritime Incident))*. Strikingly, while these and other contributions to the 2008 issue considered theatre’s responsiveness in the early years of the twenty-first century to Australia’s notoriously punitive asylum policies – its totalising implementation of detention and its maritime deterrence and ‘turnback’ practices – the 2018 CFP attracted no work specifically concerned with the Australian sphere. To be clear, this should not be interpreted as a hopeful sign of the amelioration of the human rights issues that blighted that political moment – the brutal reality is that Australia has redoubled its hard-line measures – but seems instead exemplary of the very problematic of ‘crisis’ discourses, as outlined above. The flurry of responses by theatre makers to asylum seekers arriving in Australia at the start of the twenty-first century (a remarkable artistic groundswell, which Tom Burvill surveyed in the 2008 issue) has slowed, as has the frequency and vociferousness of public denunciations and demonstrations of Australian government policy. In its turn, scholarly impetus to respond to performance and asylum in this particular geopolitical sphere is waning, at the very moment in which it is on the rise in European arts and scholarship. We are therefore reminded, yet again, that the sustaining of a ‘crisis’ operates independently of structural changes to conditions for refugees themselves in a particular sphere. This is, effectively, a point Matthew Yoxall stresses in the context of Myanmar: while the Rohingya crisis is currently positioned under a white-hot glare of global outrage, there has not been lasting changes to conditions faced by long-term refugees from Myanmar living in the Thai borderlands over the course of a decades-long civil war.

In 2018, both performance and performance studies have changed. Although constitutionally always an ‘interdiscipline’, the scope of cultural practices encompassed by performance scholarship is broader than ever, its approaches more emphatically interdisciplinary, and contributions to the current issue bear this out. In a trans-continental comparative piece, Erika Hughes offers a discussion of interactive museum drama installations at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, DC, and at the Humanity House Museum in The Hague, Netherlands. This contribution adds to one of the most rapidly expanding fields of interdisciplinary study in recent years: of performance at museums and galleries. Storytelling modes persist as does verbatim theatre, but with a slightly different cast: Clare Summerskill’s verbatim play, *Rights of Passage* (2016) offers evidence that, following the height of its prominence in the first few years of the twenty-first century, verbatim theatre (and associated ethical debates associated with performing testimony) is now paying attention to the particularities of seeking asylum for women, children, and LGBTI people. In her artist’s reflections, Summerskill picks up some of these strands with a thoughtful account of how her own making processes gave rise to affective, intersectional LGBTI identity formations.

As well as marking differences in prevailing artistic modes, the current issue indexes certain geographical shifts, both in terms of practice locations and scholarly foci. We are glad to include the scholarship of Yoxall, who writes about his experiences as a ‘Cultural Orientation Officer’ working in refugee camps in the borderlands of West Thailand, as part of a theatre making project affiliated with the US Resettlement Programme (USRP). The previous issue did not engage with Southeast Asia at all and, as the current genocide in Myanmar unfolds, it is clear that we need to do so, even as it is also clear that the neoliberal underpinnings of western humanitarianism, to which Yoxall is so attentive, dovetail in the ‘(once) iconic humanitarian image of Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi [being] submerged beneath a negative, and righteous, backlash of international media attention’ (endnote 4). In his crucial analysis of articulations between two structurally (though differently) marginalised constituencies in Aotearoa–New Zealand, which investigates the ways that hospitality might function to bring the two into fragile but profound allegiance, Rand Hazou builds on Emma Cox’s work (2013) on the nexus of indigeneity and forced migration to consider how the Maori ethical concept of *manaaki* (hospitality, care-giving or compassion) manifests in contemporary refugee-responsive theatre in Aotearoa–New Zealand.

Three essay contributions, by Friederike Oberkrome; Anika Marschall; and Sofie de Smet, Lucia De Haene, Cécile Rousseau and Christel Stalpaert, grapple with different facets of the contemporary German context, offering discussions of documentary theatre, durational art intervention, and participatory theatre, respectively. Germany’s unique and complex position as EU power-broker, and for a brief moment in 2015, willing host destination for one million asylum seekers, situate it at the centre of current debates on arts practices, as well as European responsibility, the weight of history, and the (dis)function of EU realpolitik. Essays by Marilena Zaroulia and Stephanie Hemelryk Donald offer, in different ways, much-needed articulations of the UK’s implicatedness (both as agent of former colonial brutality and present neo-colonial aggressor) in the EU’s politically-engendered refugee crisis, just at the time in which Britain moves to sever its ties with the supranational bloc. Mindful that the current European crisis has been overdetermined as the problem of/for the continent and (especially) its Mediterranean coastline and archipelago, both Zaroulia and Donald are attentive to the ways refugee crises, and artistic responses, are entangled with neoliberal coercions and exclusions. As Donald puts it in her reading of Anders Lustgarten’s play *Lampedusa* (2015), ‘if the debtor is the governed (wo)man in a neo-liberal economy, then the refugee’s (and migrant’s) existence is also necessarily organised – practically and morally – around the subjectivity afforded and demanded by debt’. In her essay, which offers a sensitive reading of interlocking webs of responsibility, comprehension and sincerity in the European sphere, Zaroulia reminds us of the ways the ‘excessive […] austerity measures’ implemented across the European South are imbricated in the much-maligned advent of ‘“unnecessary”, “illegal” migrants [that] are in fact necessary, cheap labour that helps maintain the existing divisions across the world and class inequalities within specific countries’. Zaroulia’s analysis of Ai Weiwei’s installation, *Safe Passage* (2016), and to Gianfranco Rosi’s film *Fire at Sea / Fuocoammare* (2016), offers lines of continuity between the discussions that appeared in 2008: the ethical debates raised by Silvija Jestrovic concerning spectacle, replication and paradox resemble in many ways (as Zaroulia notes) those emerging from Ai Weiwei’s installation art; meanwhile, David Farrier’s analysis of Michael Winterbottom’s *In This World* (2002) as a film situated between genres in the portrayal of space and migration finds an evocative counterpart in Zaroulia’s discussion of *Fire at Sea*.

Important innovations in the current issue come from work responding to institutional and governmental practices and aesthetics. This line of enquiry gestures broadly to the formative work on the performativity of political apparatuses and discourses set out incisively by Nield in her contribution to the 2008 issue on the border as ‘machine of disappearance’ (2008, 138), and traced lucidly by David Williams in his contribution to the same issue on ‘rhetorical performances by [Australian] government ministers and military personnel’ (2008, 199). In the current issue, Marschall’s essay on the Augsburg-based *Grandhotel Cosmopolis* (2012–) situates the durational and cross-institutional formations of the hotel as, in its temporal open-endedness, ‘confound[ing] the politicised narrative of urgency and crisis’, and makes a compelling case for such work ‘shift[ing] the analytic lens from affective phenomenology to institutional aesthetics’. In his piece, Theodore Price writes on the British government’s emergency response Committee COBRA (Cabinet Office Briefing Room A) and its self-appointed creative respondents, COBRA RES (2013–), comprised of artists, writers, filmmakers and academics, who offer artistic renderings of state emergencies or COBRA responses. In a similar vein to Marschall, Price’s analysis shows how an art project that is shaped by principles of the successive and the durational (as opposed to the event) can confound the very basis of what it means to navigate an aesthetic response to ‘crisis’.

Last but not least, we are pleased to include four contributions of photographic and video material, comprising what we are calling the issue’s ‘Artists’ Pages’. These include a powerful photo-essay by an artist who has experience seeking asylum: Vukasin Nedeljkovic’s images offer glimpses of the tough realities of life under the Irish ‘direct provision’ system, which is little known outside Ireland. Miranda Young-Jahangeer and Doung Jahangeer’s contribution combines penetrating portraits of undocumented migrant workers in South Africa taken by the late photographer Peter McKenzie, as well as a short film by Doung Jahangeer. Esther Belvis Pons’s photo-essay on a participatory project in Barcelona engages with the oscillatory tension between spaces conceived as ‘home’ and those understood to be ‘public’. In their image-based reflections upon a participatory arts project, Henry Bell and Bryan McCormack document a collaborative applied theatre initiative that involved intergenerational stakeholders across Europe. In a climate where the often-noted saturation of photographic imagery has the capacity to markedly influence public perception and response, the circulation of visual material produced in and through processes of artistic collaboration between refugees and hosts is especially vital.

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We are grateful for the opportunity to guest-edit this issue, and we thank our contributors and peer reviewers for their hard work, patience and support. Nonetheless, we hope that ten years from now, some of the trajectories identified here might have shifted course, and that it will feel more appropriate for *RiDE* to deliver a special issue on the diverse meanings of home.

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1. For a useful overview and analysis of both compacts, see Jane McAdam. 2017. “The 2018 Global Compacts on Refugees and Migration.” *Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law* <http://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/publication/2018-global-compacts-refugees-and-migration> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)