

Event Title: Centering Displaced Narratives: A Craft Perspective

Event Description: Viet Thanh Nguyen writes, “True justice is creating a world” where displaced people can “tell their stories and be heard, rather than be dependent on a writer or a representative.” This panel examines representational strategies for writing the stories of refugees and displaced people as justly as possible. The panelists focus on developing a co-writing relationship, interviewing around trauma, structuring narratives, challenging stereotypes, and creating space in a crowded publishing field.

Type of Event: Nonfiction Craft and Criticism

Housekeeping announcements: 2 minutes

Welcome to Centering Displaced Narratives: A Craft Perspective.

A few reminders before we begin:

For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel, Jessica Goudeau (that’s me), know and a printed copy will be delivered to you.

- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Opening moderator remarks: 3 minutes

In our panel description, we used a quote from Viet Thanh Nguyen’s excellent introduction to *The Displaced: Refugee Writers on Refugee Lives* and I wanted to read the full quote to help frame our conversation:

The problem...is that the people we call voiceless oftentimes are not actually voiceless. Many of the voiceless are actually talking all the time. They are loud, if you get close enough to hear them, if you are capable of listening, if

you are aware of what you cannot hear. The problem is that much of the world does not want to hear the voiceless or cannot hear them. True justice is creating a world of social, economic, cultural, and political opportunities that would allow all these voiceless to tell their stories and be heard, rather than be dependent on a writer or a representative of some kind. Without such justice, there will be no end to the waves of the displaced, to the creation of ever more voiceless people, or, more accurately, to the ongoing silencing of millions of voices. True justice will be when we no longer need a voice for the voiceless.

I want to point out a few things from this paragraph: first of all, I think it is fair to say that each of us up here would love to live in a just world in which there was no need for this conversation. But we recognize that we live in a world “without such justice,” that there are deep disparities exacerbated by climate change and xenophobic politicians being elected not just in the United States but around the world and current polarized views that pit people against each other along the lines that Dina Nayeri calls “native-born vs. newcomer.” While we all want to work toward “true justice,” we are also aware of how far away we are from that place.

Our task today is to discuss how to mitigate that distance as the kinds of “writers or representatives of some kind” who are compelled to stand in the gap that Nguyen identifies in this unjust world. We are a panel made up of people who are themselves former refugees and asylum-seekers, mediators, and journalists. These differentiations are not clean cut; I as a journalist have never and probably will never be a refugee, and I have a very strict ethical code I follow that I’ll get into later, but there is no abler mediator, in my opinion, that Ahmed as we weaves his own story among representations of other people’s experiences. I want to make sure we are always aware of the many, complex roles in play in our conversation.

In order to fit our panel description into the very tight AWP specifications, I also want to acknowledge the massive spectrum of people that we quickly summarized with the phrase “refugee stories.” I want to give ample space for the vagaries and complexities that we are shoving together for the purpose of this 1-hour-and-15-minute conversation. The phrase “displaced people” can include economic migrants, asylum-seekers, and UNHCR-recognized refugees, but will certainly not apply to all immigrants. I have lived as an immigrant in two other countries, so I clearly want to state that of course “immigrants” are not just people who come to the US (this seems obvious but isn’t always in these conversations). Though there will be moments of overlap and several parallels across this conversation, we recognize the major differences we might not be able to parse out as thoroughly as

we would often like; for the purposes of this conversation, I would like to propose that we are talking about a power difference that is implicit in Nguyen's paragraph—newcomers (even if “new” is a relative term) whose lives and bodies are impacted by policies set by a majority culture that too often considers them to be “voiceless” or even less than human. It is something each of these writers does so capably in their work and I'm thrilled to be gathering some of my favorite writers together today.

Finally, we envision this as a discussion that hits at least a 201 level, if not higher, if we want to think in terms of academic pedagogy. ☺ It is fairly easy to identify what *not* to do when it comes to representing refugee stories as justly as possible; if you have spent five minutes on literary Twitter, you know what not to do.

But how do we craft these stories well? That's a question that is only getting more and more relevant as migration patterns are changing all over the world, and more and more people are finding themselves displaced or underrepresented in public conversations and in need of people who can and want to bring those stories to other people who can and want to hear them.

Here are some of the questions we'll be discussing:

- What are our ethics of representation?
- How do we write narratives that are aesthetically pleasing and compelling?
- What do we do about money?
- Each of these values will determine our craft: what are our approaches?
- Who do we see as the audience?
- What are the venues where we're writing?
- What words are we using?
- What imagery resonates for us?
- What appeals are we conscious of wanting to include or avoid?
- What stereotypes are in our heads while we interview or write?
- What's our relationship to the subjects and audience and how do we communicate that through the act of writing?
- How do we handle the trauma and grief as we write, either our own or others', in ways that lead to well-crafted narratives but also don't break us down as people? How can we sustain this work for the long haul?

I'm going to get to some of these questions and more after an introduction and brief reading by each of us. I also asked each panelist to define their writerly role in relation to this conversation and will give that at the end of their bio.

I'll introduce them and have them read in alphabetical order.

Introduction of the event participants and readings: 15 minutes

Ahmed M. Badr is an Iraqi-American poet and social entrepreneur. He is the founder & executive director of Narratio, author of *While the Earth Sleeps We Travel* (Andrews McMeel, 2020), a National Geographic Young Explorer, and an Ed.M. Candidate at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

[Ahmed reads for two minutes]

Mondiant Nshimiyimana Dogon is a Congolese author, human rights activist, and refugee ambassador. Born into a Congolese Tutsi family in Bagogwe tribe in North Kivu province, he was forced to leave his home village, Bikenke, because of Rwanda Genocide that spilled over into Congo.

[Mondiant reads for two minutes.]

Jenna Krajeski is a journalist and author with work in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, and *VQR*. She is the co-author with Nobel Laureate Nadia Murad of Ms. Murad's memoir, "The Last Girl" and with Mondiant Dogon of "Those We Throw Away Are Diamonds," Mr. Dogon's memoir of living as a refugee.

[Jenna reads for two minutes.]

Edefe Okporo is an Author, Speaker, and Founder the Pont LLC, LGBTQ rights Activist and Refugee, from Nigeria, Edefe Okporo has been featured on major media outlets such as *Now This News*, *the Nation Magazine*, *Yahoo lifestyle*, *NPR radio*, *WNYC*, *Art Newspaper* and *Glaad Media*.

[Edefe reads for two minutes.]

Jessica Goudeau is the author of *AFTER THE LAST BORDER*, which won the Lukas Book Prize, and *WE WERE ILLEGAL* (forthcoming). She's

written for the New York Times, The Atlantic, Washington Post, and Catapult, among other places. She teaches nonfiction at Wilkes University.

[Jessica reads for two minutes.]

Moderated discussion based on the questions above: 40 minutes

Audience questions: 15-20 minutes