

Preface

The Tiny, Fragile Human Body

For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.¹

—WALTER BENJAMIN, 1936

Walter Benjamin describes the decline in value of experience, in the ability to “exchange experiences,” that was the result of the First World War’s catastrophic transformations.² What the violence of war did was “contradict” and call into question the most ontological and basic, the most immediately reliable aspect of human existence—experience. The new technologies of violence could reduce, if not altogether eradicate, what we know, perceive, and remember. Benjamin would live to see the beginning of another period of intense violence—the Second World War—although not long enough to witness the horrors of the Holocaust, arguably one of the biggest devastations to modern human experience.

Like many other intellectuals, Benjamin fled Berlin for Paris as Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party rose to power in the early 1930s, beginning their transformation of Germany into a fascist state, systematically targeting Jewish populations, among many others. After several austere years in Paris trying to eke out a living and applying for French citizenship, Benjamin was briefly interned in a concentration camp as the Nazis invaded Poland and war encroached on France. In 1940, after failing to obtain a French exit visa, Benjamin attempted to cross the Pyrenees into Spain, with the intention of eventually joining his exiled colleagues in New York City at the Institute for Social Research. Denied entry into Spain at the border, Benjamin ended his life with a dose of morphine.³

Benjamin's experience—of uprooting, statelessness, concentration camp, visa denials, and border crossing—is recognizable to us today as that of a refugee.⁴ He wrote many of his most powerful works, including the ones cited here, while in exile or in the midst of seeking refuge. Although he never wrote about the specific conditions of refuge or the refugee, Benjamin might be considered a “refugee writer,” in that his monumental thinking on experience, history, and memory is indelibly shaped by war and refuge seeking, by the material circumstances of displacement, and by the ways that fascism assaulted his capacity to live and think.

Benjamin's words, written over three-quarters of a century ago, both describe what occurred in one major war of the twentieth century and presciently characterize what would transpire in another. Grimly, they also place a finger on a devastating reality of modern warfare—that war is an assault on human experience. Bombings, fires, chemical weapons, genocides, displacements, camps, and closed borders—these are all experiences that erode and alter humanity, that wear away at *the very possibility of experience* for us all. In the midst of this bombardment is the human body, tiny and fragile, standing unprotected in the field of “destructive torrents and explosions” that humankind has created. The target of war is this human, not the human that needs the validation of political rights, but a breathing body exposed to life's dizzying array of impacts and intensities. The notion of experience, particularly in a time of war, a time that modernity has made its default, coalesces in this figure of the tiny, fragile human body.

Benjamin is perhaps best known for his articulation of human history as a totality of ruins. Musing on Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* in his essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin captured, in the figure of the angel of history, an image of historical movement, of how history is fixed on contemplating the past while it is forcefully drawn into the future. The angel, caught in flight in the wrong direction, appears disconcerted—“His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread.” Benjamin continues:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.⁵

The debris of the past, which can only be perceived in fleeting moments, is what we must attempt to grasp and transform. The angel, propelled into the future, cannot stay in the present, which quickly joins the wreckage pile of the past, but only observe its cumulative effect, its buildup of utter destruction. If the angel of history is irreparably pulled into the future while he looks back, then the tiny, fragile human body is the one that *lives in* the catastrophe of human experience. The human body is one that has yet to attain transcendence and become an angel who takes flight

and sees history in retrospect. In this way, the human body is not a contemplator of history but an experienter of the present, a figure of the expansive here and now.

In a contemporary moment of unprecedented mass displacement and asylum seeking, the refugee might be *the* representative *experienter*—the figure in which experience’s impacts and effects are most apparent. Marked by a profound vulnerability—one that is about not just the potential to be harmed, but also the potential to be with others—the tiny, fragile human body of our time is the refugee seeker.⁶ Its fate, as a historical figure, is yet to be determined. What is certain, however, is that the refugee withstands all this violence, even while subjected to the global war machine and the technologies of the state. There, beneath the clouds—from which a bomb, perhaps, has just been dropped and is finding its path to the ground, where the moment of impact will be followed by thunder and blinding light—the refugee is not just a target but a *presence in the world*, part of our collective conscience, our stubborn will not to be erased.

Benjamin dedicated a considerable amount of his writing to diagnosing the modern crisis of experience, which he saw as “spiritlessness” and complacency in his early essays, and as a kind of collective poverty later in his career.⁷ While this impoverishment threatens the very possibility of politics, it also occasions a *tabula rasa*, an opportunity to begin creating the world anew. It is the starting ground for the social, political, and aesthetic avant-garde, for the spirited capacity to dream and foster compassion that Benjamin invested in the category of youth. For him, poverty forces us to “start from scratch; to make a new start; to make a little go a long way; to begin with a little and build up further.”⁸ This crisis of experience is not just a lack or deprivation, but is a condition of necessity ushering in change. Thus, the need to restart is the foundation for building another experience that is different from the one we are currently stuck in. This alternate experience, or act of (re)starting, also aptly describes the refugee’s passage through time and space. *Starting again* might be a provocative verb of “refuge.” To start again is to renew experience. As Raymond Williams reminds us, it is to *try*—in the sense of both attempting and testing—all “kinds of evidence and its considerations.”⁹

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This book finds its central locus in experience. Throughout these pages, I examine lived experiences to offer a different view of what refuge might look like or what it could be beyond, but still entangled with, the dominant juridical-political formation. Experience, as I take it, is not a categorical reality or defined conclusion. Rather, it is hypotheses or acts of trying, working out, and imagining that direct our attention to how people make sense of being a refugee and living in refuge. That is, experience emerges from reflection, (self-) representation, and storytelling in the still-active present moment. Benjamin’s discussion of storytelling as providing “counsel” in an “exchange of experience” is useful here.¹⁰ How we experience is connected to how we tell stories and exchange knowledge, whether that be

through literature, human actions, or ways of relating to others. If the figure of the refugee is an experiencer, then it is also crucially a *storyteller*.

It is difficult to think of a figure that more starkly embodies the urgency and value of narrative in the contemporary moment. For many refugees, matters of life and death hang on a single narrative; or, more specifically, on *how* that narrative is told—its qualities of believability, consistency, and clarity.¹¹ The “right” story becomes a token that opens a door to political rights and protection. A story is exchanged for a new life, or a story forecloses its possibility. And so, refugees must learn to become storytellers: to prove persecution to officials, to describe trauma to reporters, to express gratitude to the humanitarian state, and to articulate their success to the national community. Or to remain silent. Or, compellingly, to protest, organize, and enact politics. What it means to be a refugee and to experience refuge is inextricably bound up with narrative. And narrative, of course, is never neutral, bringing with it a world of affordances as well as demands.

This book not only explores stories but is itself an act of storytelling. More precisely, it is an attempt to tell a story of refuge that highlights experiential complexity, how refuge is made and remade by the very people who have an embodied investment in its possibility. I am one of these individuals, and in writing this book I am also writing about what I have seen and known, what moves me. Every single word on these pages is motivated by my own experience as a refugee subject, as someone who has been on a boat, crossed borders, lived in camps, and sought refuge in Canada. I have recounted this story elsewhere.¹² I have written about my family history and its connection to what is known as the “Vietnam War,” and have argued for the value of research that is personally significant, that takes as its starting point the embodied knowledge of the researcher. In this project on the experience of refuge, however, I have refrained from beginning with my own experience. I do so not because I want to create critical distance or hide myself behind my work. Rather, I wish to resist the desire for a *confession* as an entry point to an idea.

I hesitate because someone like myself, who researches the subject matter that I do, is expected to locate and reveal their personal stakes—and of course there are so many—in order to even begin. I have been advised, more than once, to include my own compelling personal narrative in this project and to show my deep attachment to its ideas. This (auto)ethnographic reveal, I understand, can be productive and empowering, especially because there was a time when I was discouraged from disclosing such information, lest my research come across as less rigorous and, as a result, not of epistemological value. My desire here is to question what embodied or attached research could look like. Or what it means to write *about* an experience or idea. Can what seems to be detachment hold the most intimate of desires? Is not my writing, whatever it may be about or whatever the routes I take to get there, already indelibly shaped by my personal experience of refuge?

This is the reason I begin this book on refuge with Walter Benjamin’s words. Benjamin lived and died before the contemporary legal category of refugee came

into existence, but his experience would have been socially recognized as such. His ideas and way of thinking are useful for us today in trying to comprehend experiences of refuge. That is to say, Benjamin wrote about refuge and what it was like to be a refugee, even though these were not the explicit topics of his oeuvre. He did so simply by writing, or by allowing his experience to animate his expansive thinking on human crisis and the hope of an awakening. Benjamin's ideas are deeply situated in his social and political context, and in what that context did to him. I suspect that this is the case for all of us who engage in thinking—even, or especially, in cases that seem to eschew the biographical life of the thinker.

I am moved to tears when I imagine Benjamin in his final days, carrying a heavy suitcase containing a manuscript that had to be saved from the hands of the Gestapo at all costs, ascending and descending the mountainous slopes between France and Spain.¹³ I weep because, for me, this image is a lightning flash that strikes next to one of my family and me on a small boat in the open seas, the wind picking up, as we spot the shores of Thailand in the distance. It is an image that helps me to recognize my now, and to yearn for the existence and safe arrival of many more manuscripts. In his moment of danger, Benjamin knew that writing must be preserved—that our ideas, thoughts, and experiences are to be protected because they are the most precious parts of ourselves. They are the things that will endure and reach others on distant shores. The work of writing and thinking, as I have learned through this process, is a form of finding refuge, one that propels us onward in the unending journey.

Although opening with Benjamin's words, of the time during and after the Second World War, which produced the modern category of "refugee," this book turns to refugees from the wars in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, which were consequences of the political landscape the Second World War created, of Third World decolonial struggles and the splitting of the world into capitalist and communist superpowers. As participants in one of the largest and most visible cases of global refugee migrations in the twentieth century, refugees of these wars in Southeast Asia provide us with an important entry point into accessing and assessing the concept of refuge. I focus on Southeast Asian refugee displacement as my context of investigation because this is a historically and culturally rich case study, and because this is where my heart lies.

Wrapped up in U.S. foreign policy, Western imperial ambitions, and international refugee resettlement, the Southeast Asian refugee case study is instructive for analyses of war refugees in other geopolitical contexts. It shows how refuge is produced in histories of violence and how it is lived in ongoing struggle. By no means, however, does this make Southeast Asian refugees or the experiences of war refugees (as opposed, say, to sexual orientation and gender identity refugees or climate refugees) exemplary or prototypical for "lived refuge." Rather, Southeast Asian war refugees offer only one illuminating path of many possible paths into analyzing the experience of refuge. Moreover, I recognize that the English-

language and Global North–centric focus of my assembled materials limit the parameters of my insights. Yet my hope is that the ideas explored in this book keep little embers of thought alive for more ambitious projects in the hands of more capable scholars. Thus, while the affective experiences I foreground in this book—gratitude, resentment, and resilience—might resonate with other groups of refugees or in other fields of study, my task is not to produce a total theory that could be imported into and mapped across sociohistorical and disciplinary contexts. Rather, my modest aim is to ask a conceptual question and attempt to offer some working hypotheses.

Lived Refuge is thus an exploration of a concept and how that concept is experienced. I am interested here in the conceptual, not as abstract but as lived and represented. I am convinced that the best path to the conceptual is to wander through the specificities of human lives. The value of what we call “case studies”—of where I come from—is that they do not just demonstrate a concept, but also create and define it. Such attempts to create and define, which is to know and feel, is an entire life’s work. That I have the time and space to take the intellectual journey of this book (a beginning, really) is sometimes incomprehensible to me. Certainly, such an endeavor was not within the realm of possibility in my younger years, or in other moments of life lived elsewhere in another language. In the end, this is my modest investigation into the concept of refuge—what it is and what it might mean.

What, for a refugee subject, is more attached and invested than that?