

# Active Agency, Access and Power: Social Media and Eritrean Refugees in Libya

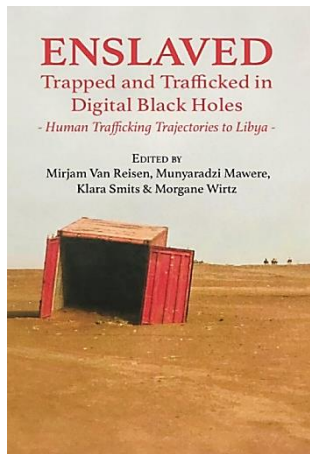
*Sara Creta*

## **Chapter in: Enslaved**

Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes:  
Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya

### **From the book Series:**

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# Active Agency, Access and Power: Social Media and Eritrean Refugees in Libya<sup>1</sup>

*Sara Creta*

### Introduction

In August 2018, dozens of Ethiopian and Eritrean migrants and refugees<sup>2</sup> seekers staged a rare protest in a detention centre 20 kilometres from Tripoli, Libya. Trapped in a country devastated by civil war and at risk of human trafficking, they asked for help to leave Libya, as their requests to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had been unheeded. Among them was a 21-year-old boy who had been kidnapped, sold and exploited before escaping from traffickers and ending up in detention. On Sunday, 12 August, the group posted photographs and videos of the protest on Facebook,

*Refugees in Libya do not have easy access to the Internet and their voices are therefore often mediated by others. Humanitarian organisations and the traditional media speak on their behalf, and may be perpetuating their image as dependent and powerless. This study finds that through social media and digital spaces, migrants and refugees have made attempts to reclaim their own narrative, employing active agency. Even if the means to present their situation online is limited, they seek access to communication and social media. This allowed them to speak for themselves, and this has facilitated and expanded contestations of power.*

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<sup>1</sup> The research for this chapter was undertaken as part of the author's PhD thesis and will be reused fully or in part for this purpose.

<sup>2</sup> In this chapter the terms 'migrant' and 'refugee' are used interchangeably in a non-legal way to refer to people on the move, without drawing any conclusions about their legal status (see Glossary of Terms).

with the hope that they would be shared widely. They articulated their message using UNHCR's vocabulary: 'human rights', 'refugees', 'assistance', 'protection', 'justice'. In just a few hours, their post had reached a hundred thousand people around the world, including journalists and activists, who have since been mobilising to ask for their evacuation.

This protest was not an isolated event. Seeking better conditions and evacuation to third countries, refugees in Libya have been putting their lives on the line to exert political pressure on United Nations (UN) agencies and expose the violence resulting from the European Union's (EU's) practice of externalising border control.<sup>3</sup> Such protests are an example of the political struggle for rights undertaken by refugees, migrants, and activists around the world. In Libya, like elsewhere, protests have become a new form of 'contentious politics' (Ataç, Rygiel & Stierl, 2016) and claim-making that is questioning migration policies and surrounding practices and raising the visibility of migrants and refugees.

This chapter seeks to explore the ways in which Eritrean migrants and refugees in Libya are strategically mobilising resources, asserting claims, leveraging networks, and developing political strategies using digitally-supported processes of narrative and justice seeking. It discusses how digital media, in combination with supportive social relationships and opportunities for participation, are giving voice to agentive selves, mediated by digital interaction and connectivity. The conceptual framework for this chapter is drawn from recent scholarship on narrative, identity, and digital media, with an eye towards agency.

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'externalisation' is used by a range of migration scholars, policymakers and the media to describe the extension of border controls and other border functions to the territory of so-called third countries.



**Figure 17.1. Photograph of a refugee protest in Libya in August 2018 shared on social media<sup>4</sup>**

Within the context of this book, this chapter emphasises the potential of technology, particularly social media, to spread narratives that are usually hidden. When it comes to the digital future and its consequences for refugees in Libya (and elsewhere), multiple points demand attention. The violation of human rights and lack of visibility that refugees encounter in the digital era cannot be understood without considering algorithms and online platforms and the impact that digital technologies have on people's lives. Digital technology, as a tool for self-expression, can become a strategic means by which to cross the Mediterranean Sea (Creta & Denaro, 2022). It can also help refugees and migrants to take new forms of collective action, in which resistance and daily struggle are required. In this battlefield for visibility, voice, and recognition, the relationship between political self-construction, digital storytelling and identity need to be explored.

In precarious spaces, such as the detention centres in Libya, where violence and abuse are widespread, *how can access to communication or social media facilitate and expand practices contesting power?* This is the

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<sup>4</sup> Source withheld for security reasons.

research question addressed in this chapter. As there is little systematic knowledge about the digital practices involved in storytelling and documenting the experiences of refugees, this chapter examines the practices of Eritrean refugees in Libya, as a case study, in order to understand the broader implications of the digitalisation of refugees' narratives in situations of detention and human rights violation. Before presenting the methodology and findings, the following sections look at digital connectivity in exile and outline the Eritrean online public sphere.

### **Digital connectivity in exile: Power and agency**

Early studies suggest that the reduction of participation costs enabled by information and communication technologies (ICTs) can promote participation and challenge conventional collective action theories. However, although smartphones have become ever more mobile and pervasive, including in developing countries (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Earl & Kimport, 2011), little is known about how Internet access can affect the ability of marginalised groups to be part of mobilisation processes. In the last decades, the question of who has the 'right to have rights' has become increasingly important. The integration of digital connectivity into people's lives, often celebrated as liberating and empowering for marginalised groups, raises questions about how online engagement can bring about political change (Papacharissi, 2015). New technologies and new forms of connectivity are facilitating the creation of digital publics, in which the paradoxically precarious, 'speechless emissaries' and humanitarian subjects (Malkki, 1996) are engaging in new forms of resistance using digital tools. This effort to understand active agency, access and power begins with recognition that the existence and visibility of Eritrean refugees in Libya in the "new media, cultural and socio-economic order" (Appadurai, 2005) allows for the interpretation of new 'forms of existence', which are shaping politics from the margins.

Previous studies (Creta, 2021) have explored how digital media can become a 'space of appearance' (Arendt, 1958, p. 195) that allows people on the move to reclaim their narratives and convey their

struggles, as existing in the European communicative order (Georgiou, 2018). At the same time, social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube have provided a space for civic engagement, in which collective production gives rise to a self-organised social system that can mobilise people (Lindgren & Johnson-Glenberg, 2013) and which offers opportunities to construct a “new distribution of power” (Borkert, Cingolani & Premazzi, 2009). Research has also found that exiled communities and activists play an important role in mediating political practices and mobilisation (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013). In this global network of information flows, rethinking the public sphere concept is fundamental, as digital technologies have brought distant ‘others’ into the space of deliberation. These developments have transformed many aspects of economic, social, and political life (Castells, 2001; Silver, Massanari & Jones, 2006), facilitating socio-culturally marginalised voices to be expressed, heard and shared in the public space (Ponzanesi, 2020).

Transnational media flows have mediated people’s participation in the public sphere, allowing the deliberation of socio-political issues and developing transnational connections, creating a cross-border dialogue. For example, Volkmer (2008) describes how international affairs are now mediated through a variety of platforms in a decentralised “globalised public space”, amid shifting “cultures of proximity” (Volkmer, 2008, p. 92). In this decentralised environment, the boundaries between the public sphere and public participation become little more than clusters or nodes in the wider network; citizens are actively and visibly involved in the processes of public communication and deliberation, seemingly without a need for intermediaries to act on their behalf (Bruns, 2008). In documenting the digital traces that transcend the bounds of both nations and states, scholars commonly refer to concepts such as a ‘networked public sphere’ (Benkler, 2008), ‘transnational public sphere’ (Fraser, 2007), ‘extraterritorial public sphere’ (Crack, 2008), ‘diasporic public sphere’ (Appadurai, 2010), and ‘global public sphere’ (Castells, 2008). Central to these concepts are efforts to understand the political dimensions that underpin and sustain transnational networks, virtual communities, and digital cultures of media and communication.



In discussing transnationalism and the way exiled communities can use social media for ‘transnational justice’ (Hodzic & Tolbert, 2017), it is important to analyse how this can enable a process that champions the right of victims to pursue truth and justice – or to at least ensure that such violence does not recur. Previous research has found that media and communication technologies are important, both to the perpetration of mass rights violations, as well as to the promotion of transitional justice responses to them; as Price and Stremlau put it, they “often serve as both a weapon and a mirror of violence” (2012, p. 1078). Questions of access, digital capabilities, infrastructure, platforms and agency, such as raised in this chapter, need to be discussed when developing new theories on how digital media and the ongoing struggles of people on the move intersect with new forms of freedom and agency in our global era, in particular in precarious settings like refugees camps or situations of forced exile (see also Chapter 5: *The Past is not Past: The History and Context of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya*).

This is particularly pertinent for Eritrean refugees in Libya, as well as other groups living in exile outside of Europe. What does the new digital media ecosystem offer to Eritrean refugees in Libya? How does it create collective identities and actions that can enable mobilisation? In particular, it is interesting to understand how user-generated content has emerged as a key mode of mediation, allowing an eyewitness view of events taking place in worldwide locations (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2013; Bruns, 2018; Meikle, 2018). Critically, however, to sustain practices of bearing witness, it is fundamental to understand how suffering and violence can become an aesthetic presentation of the self-narrative. Barbie Zelizer (2002, p. 698) suggests that one of the key functions of bearing witness is that it helps return a community to a state of unity that existed prior to whatever trauma might have befallen it. Similarly, Lilie Chouliaraki (2006) suggests that media coverage of suffering must be brought into a narrative – or else the audiences will not be morally activated.

In the following section, I discuss how political self-construction, digital storytelling and identity play a role in the formation of exiled

publics, and, through Arendt's (1958) understanding of political action as narrative, how the political act of reclaiming voice can expand the idea of 'the political'.

### **The Eritrean online public sphere**

In discussing transnationalism and, in particular, the Eritrean dynamics of deterritorialisation and the online construction of nationhood, scholars have highlighted how new forms of collective expression are created and how virtual spaces have become territories of (political) struggle and identity claims. Although inside Eritrea access to the Internet and social media remain extremely limited, the Eritrean online public sphere needs to be understood in relation to the transnational field of Eritrean politics of which it is a part (also see Bernal, 2004; 2014; 2020).

Bernal takes the Eritrean cyberspace as a case in point to analyse "ordinary people inventing a public sphere that made possible the articulation of ideas and sentiments that could not be expressed elsewhere" (Bernal, 2005, p. 662). Within the Eritrean community, complex intersections of technology, culture, identity, distant authoritarianism, and agency exist, which are both diverse and constantly evolving. The Eritrean online public sphere created outside the country has been described as able to "extend the nation and state sovereignty across borders, and at other times can be used as an extraterritorial space that is safe for civil society and dissent because of its location outside Eritrea and beyond the reach of the state" (Bernal, 2013, p. 2). Similarly, Zere noted that although activists could not bring lasting political change to the country, their efforts are "motivating many to stop paying the diaspora tax; and denied the regime the platforms to conduct their yearly festivals, seminars and cultural shows in the diaspora" (Zere, 2020).

Consistent with the results of other studies, Internet-based Eritrean networks have been able to break the cycle of silence in the diaspora, mobilising protests and consolidating clear political opinions (Tewelde, 2020). By focusing on a popular PalTalk chat-room called Smer, Tewelde (2020) identified how new media can contribute to

peace and national healing. The Eritrean transnational community and their political behaviour has been widely studied (Belloni, 2019; Hirt & Mohammad, 2018) and various scholars have documented how Eritreans refugees use a range of digital affordances and platforms, including diaspora websites, PalTalk, YouTube, and Facebook, to navigate their difficult circumstances, help fellow refugees, and agitate for change in their homeland. However, the ‘cyberactivism’ of refugees has not been systematically studied.

Recent research on Eritrean refugees in Israel sees digital media as crucial, because “online spheres provide spaces for diasporic politics that cannot exist in ‘offline’ spheres”, where Eritreans face repression (Dubinsky, 2020, p. 91). While Eritrean communities living in exile create public political spaces that cannot exist in their homeland, the case of Eritrea is in many ways paradigmatic to understanding the dynamics of co-optation, loyalty, and resistance that characterise many diaspora-state relationships (Müller & Belloni, 2021; Belloni, 2020).

At the same time, recent studies (Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans & Gebre-Egziabher, 2019) have highlighted how digital architecture and its historic development is based on the information networks of colonial times. Hence, structures like the Internet reflect biases in social and political connectivity and can lead to the emergence of ‘black holes’ in the digital landscape,<sup>5</sup> in which people are disconnected from the global digital infrastructure and depend on ‘gatekeepers’ for information. These structures also keep refugees in a ‘black hole’, which plays a vital role in their repression and human trafficking. On their migratory journeys, many Eritrean refugees face imprisonment in underground cells and systematic torture, and phones are often used to extort money from relatives. In this context, Van Reisen *et al.* (2019) highlighted that refugees have very limited

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Black holes’ in the digital landscape are places where access to connectivity is limited, either because of lack of ICT infrastructure and Internet connectivity or control over information technology (see also Chapter 2: *Living in a Black Hole: Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration*).

access to digital networks to send and receive information and easily fall prey to gatekeepers, who are often the facilitators of human trafficking organisations. Digital technologies provide opportunities for human traffickers. This includes using Facebook or other messenger applications like Imo or WhatsApp, which allow refugees to send images of torture to crowd fund ransom payments.

The dynamic nature of communications created by the Internet also opens up new opportunities for authoritarian states to control dissent outside their territory, expanding authoritarian power and practices beyond borders (Michaelsen, 2018). Bots and other autonomous players are also challenging the logic of online communication, and researchers of digital activism have noted the increasing salience of bots in digital organising (Ross *et al.*, 2019). The boundaries between human and technological agents in collective organising are shaped by artificial intelligence and machine learning algorithms, which are not only changing the nature of organising, but also the tactics used by authoritarian states, including ‘troll armies’ and ‘digital armies’; this has been explored in recent studies by Bradshaw *et al.* (2020), who describe how Facebook has removed hundreds of accounts associated with the United Arab Emirate’s trolling activities, many of which were run by an Eritrean task force. Other authors (Shearlaw, 2015; Zere, 2020) also mention that pro-regime agents are constantly targeting Eritrean dissidents overseas with death threats or physically attacking independent researchers and activists who work on behalf of Eritreans in the diaspora. This suggests that the tactics employed by the Eritrean regime and its varied agents are common to other non-democracies and, accordingly, affect communities living in exile.

## **Methodology**

This article adopts a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2010), which is a specific form of ethnography for researching in and about digital landscapes. While observing both content and interactions on the Internet and social media, this method is used to gain an embedded understanding of individual and collective action. Initially, due to the difficult and limited physical access to Libya for fieldwork-based

researchers, I began exploring the subject of this research remotely. By exploring digital and visual methods, I started collecting digital content and categorising it into themes. As I intended to engage with digital methods as well as taking a field critical ethnographic stance (Carspecken, 1996), I decided to continue my research on the ground in Libya. It is important to mention that conducting fieldwork in Libya posed several dilemmas, but also presented opportunities to work against power and oppression by revealing and critiquing it.

A central element in both ethnographic and critical ethnographic research is immersion in the local context (Castagno, 2012). Such immersion allows the researcher to generate insights and explore from the inside how and why people think and act in the different ways they do (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2001). According to Madison (2011, p. 5), the researcher “uses resources, skills, and privilege available [...] to break through the confines in defense of the voices and experiences of subjects whose stories are otherwise restrained and out of reach [...] the critical ethnographer contributes to emancipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice”.

The material I present here is the result of two years of fieldwork among Eritrean refugees in Libya and online. Although my work started abroad, it built on my long standing friendships with several young Eritreans whom I had met in person in detention centres in Tripoli, Al-Khoms and Zintan and in houses in Tripoli between September 2019 and March 2020. One of my Eritrean friends, a 32-year-old refugee from Asmara, Eritrea, was living in an occupied building on the outskirts of Tripoli. Through him, I gained access to a variety of informal occupied buildings in which Eritreans live in the city together with other refugees. I also met many other Eritrean refugees, mostly men in their late 20s, in detention centres. The discussions we were able to have in such circumstances were quite limited, but they helped us to build a trusting relationship in the online conversations that followed. My role was often seen as taking the voices of those encountered to the outside world.

In Libya’s highly-controlled setting, entering a detention centre to have discussions with refugees requires planning strategies to gain

access from ‘gatekeepers’, as well as addressing issues to do with ethics and data security. In the field, I was continuously confronted with ethical and practical dilemmas around confidential and sensitive issues, which remain largely under-theorised, as very little research has been done in these spaces (detention centres and prisons). My approach is partly influenced by Paulo Freire's (1970) seminal text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and considers all inquiry, both political and moral. This position recognises that oppressed people often have no alternative, but to wage struggles for their rights. It recognises the social movement as the starting point of inquiry. At this level, critical qualitative research is always already political. Through these multiple focuses, I compared the claims and views.

Unlike other studies based solely on interviewing refugees who have already reached Europe, using this multi-sited netnographic approach, and from the multiple rounds of in-person and virtual discussion, a grounded interpretation has emerged, which has allowed me to identify recurrent social and cultural tendencies within the digital practices of the Eritrean community. The following sections present the findings of this research on how Eritrean refugees in Libya have engaged in digitally-supported narratives and justice seeking.

The aim here is not to map or categorise the digital practices of Eritrean refugees in Libya, but to provide some insights into the experiences of Eritrean refugees in Libya and explore the interactive space enabled through social media, which has become a battlefield for visibility, voice, and recognition. It analyses this space and the narratives it creates, shifting the border of self-representation through meaningful digital practices aimed at fostering community engagement. Furthermore, it follows Leurs and Smets' call (2018) for more research on the role of ICTs in the lives of migrants wanting to move to Europe, as “refugee voices and experiences are lacking” (Gillespie, Osseiran & Cheesman, 2018, p. 1).

## Findings

### *Bearing witness and self-representation*

As access to Libyan detention facilities remains limited for journalists and human rights organisations, social media platforms and phones have become important tools (when available) for detained migrants and refugees to connect with journalists, advocates, activists, legal representatives and families. Access to social media networks has enabled Eritrean detainees to expose violations, protest their situation and record human rights abuses. Considering the way that “self-represented witnessing” (Rae, Holman & Nethery, 2018) is performed, circumventing the usual mediation of their stories, Eritrean refugees in Libya have documented their own suffering and are communicating this directly to online audiences. This practice, similar to the strategy developed by asylum seekers in other places, such as Manus Island and Nauru (Australian-managed offshore detention centres), has enabled collaborative filtering that allows effective engagement with the public. Their pictures and videos while in detention centres and their attempts to protest their situation have been posted on social media platforms, such as Facebook, to capture their experiences over time and create a community of support. This collective experience of shared feelings and traumas has opened the way for strong human rights claims and social justice.

Eritrean refugees in Libya have used social media as a platform to communicate their struggle and their experiences in detention. An Eritrean refugee held in Khoms detention centre wrote on his Facebook personal wall: “I am giving my words by putting my life in danger. I posted my pictures on Facebook so the world can see our situation” (Wariki, interview with Creta, face-to-face, Tripoli December 2020). This appeal was accompanied by a self-shot and edited video in which the corpse of refugees can be seen on the beach nearby the detention centre. Using a hidden phone, the Eritrean refugee, who had been detained in Khoms for several months, managed to go out to the beach and record a video of him digging up sand in an attempt to cover the body of a dead person, with the main aim of exposing and challenging the EU’s deadly border practices.

The following message was posted, with a photograph, by another Eritrean asylum seeker being held in Qasr Ben Ghashir detention centre, south of Tripoli:

*Merry Christmas and Happy New Year, from Libyan detention center. WE REALLY MISS TO SEE OUTSIDE OF LIBYA. Would they resettle us from this hell this year? What will they tell us? Wait in dark, get torture, experience terrible sexual violence, rape or not? What are the European countries doing so far? What's UNHCR's aim? Dear new year, we have been going through an awful life. What will you say to us? We don't know. We can try to survive because we have our family waiting for us.*<sup>6</sup>

An important element that must be considered is how digital tools are affecting and fostering new networks to facilitate the claims of Eritrean refugees, as well as increasing their visibility.

### ***Reclaiming narratives***

While for years, agencies such as UNHCR have mediated refugees' narratives; these self-represented narratives of refugees offer a significant counter-narrative and provide individual stories, as opposed to collective narratives. At stake are issues of ethics, voice, power and agency, all entwined in the struggle, mediated by the narratives created by the refugees themselves. Another Eritrean refugee wrote the following on Facebook on his personal wall, while

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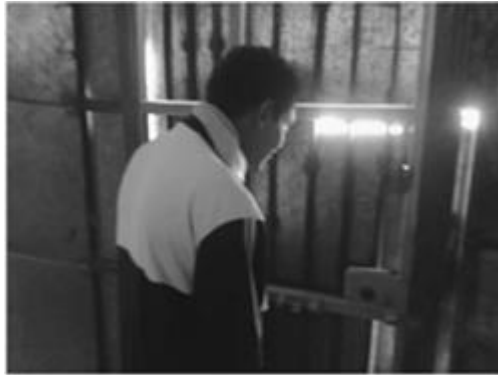
<sup>6</sup> Source withheld for security reasons.



sharing a photograph of Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees:

*I have been looking for help after I was released from prison. But unfortunately, I didn't get any help from the UNHCR. They did nothing more to me. Can you please help?*<sup>7</sup>

One of the criticisms of UN agencies and humanitarian organisations is that, although they aim to help, they have been oversimplifying the claims of refugees, while ignoring vital geopolitical interests, and idealising and representing refugees by focusing on their vulnerability.



**Figure 17.2. Photograph of a refugee in a detention centre in Libya spread via social media** (Source withheld for security

If these life narratives are geared at denouncing injustice and calling for change, it is interesting to explore if they can also resist power. In an era of increasing emancipatory practices enabled by information and communication technologies, these digital practices constitute new opportunities, in a logic of control, questioning restrictive migration regimes. The lived experiences shared via social media provide a window into their personal existence in detention, that runs counter to the dominant discourses in the media and by humanitarian organisations and governments, who currently act as gatekeepers.

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<sup>7</sup> Source withheld for security reasons.



**Figure 17.3. Photographs spread by refugees via social media<sup>8</sup>**

Hence, refugees have created a space in detention for the emergence of practices of articulation, claiming and renewing group rights in and through the appropriation of their own narrative. The act of posting and denouncing violations allows detained Eritrean refugees to capture their experiences over time and create a community of support. This was the case in August 2018, when an Eritrean refugee, after an escape attempt from captivity conditions by human traffickers west of Bani Walid, Libya, posted photographs of people being shot on his Facebook wall.<sup>9</sup> He, together with dozens of asylum seekers and migrants, were wounded after trying to escape captivity and were referred to the General Hospital in Bani Walid. After a few weeks, on 8 August 2018, while still in need of help and support, he publicly shared his story. “We are in Tripoli. Please share our problem and pray for us”,<sup>10</sup> he wrote, while publishing the pictures on his Facebook wall.

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<sup>8</sup> Source withheld for security reasons.

<sup>9</sup> A. (2018). [Facebook], personal wall, posted on 8 August 2018

<sup>10</sup> A. (2018). [Facebook], personal wall, posted on 8 August 2018

An Eritrean refugee explained the vital role that the Internet played in reaching out for help. He said: “This was our true life. We decided to post it as we couldn't get any help from UNHCR and we wanted to move from that hell” (Yonas, interview with Creta, face-to-face, Tripoli, December 2020). Other protests followed in Zintan, Tajoura, Zawya, Sabha and Tarik Sika in Tripoli:

*In Zintan we organised a lot of protests. We urged UNHCR, human right organisations, IOM and others to see our sufferings. It was heard and even some representatives from different organisations like UNHCR and IOM visited us. They made a promise to see our case in priority. But no positive result on the ground.* (Yonas, interview with Creta, face-to-face, Tripoli, December 2020)

To investigate the ways in which the visual is mediated by Eritrean refugees in Libya, it is necessary to recognise why people want to ‘capture’ or share their lived experiences. Although the practice of storytelling can become a ‘healing’ aspect of narration, it is also a way to frame a collective identity, which is used to shape online political identity construction. At any level of analysis, from the individual to the collective, in efforts to mobilise, narratives and visual elements play a central role in the formation of the ties that

constitute networks. They become matters of vital necessity, offering visibility to ensure survival or to expand the visual and discursive modes of expressing politics. From these mediated performances of



**Figure 17.4. Facebook post on the wall of a refugee in Tripoli** (Source withheld for security reasons)

collective action in detention centres, Eritreans refugees have built new forms of political interaction from the margins. The idea that human rights are shaped through collective action fits with Arendt's (1958) view of human rights and political resistance. For Arendt, the most fundamental right, and a precondition for other rights, is the *right to have rights*, or the right to membership of a political community. This membership means having "a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective" (Arendt, 1958, p. 296).

However, while visibility and protection are important, they alone are not enough to guarantee the right to have rights. Some protests in Libya have turned violent. On 26 February 2019, guards at Tariq al Sikka detention centre in Tripoli used indiscriminate violence resulting in the injury of a large number of detainees. Immediately following this event, up to four buses with around 130 detainees were relocated to Sabha and Ain Zara detention centres (also in Tripoli). Approximately 22 detainees were separated from those remaining in Tariq al Sikka and taken to underground cells where they continue to be subjected to systematic beatings and torture (IOM, 2019).

In this incident, hundreds of Eritrean refugees were brutally beaten with metal bars and batons by the Libyan police and their phones taken away. Many were badly injured. A small group of them were detained in an underground cell. They were hurt and bleeding and had only one phone left. United by the will to be safe and free, they shared their photographs to testify about their situation and call for action. The following message was shared by a member of the Facebook group ኮሚቴ ኤርትራውያን ስደተኞቻት ኣብ ሊብያ ትሪፖሊ (Committee on Eritrean Refugees in Libya Tripoli) on 28 February 2019:

*These Eritrean refugees, injured and terrorized, all registered with UNHCR for months, are being told they will never have a chance to be relocated to safety. We are concerned about their life and health. This torture was perpetrated in full daylight in*

*an official Detention Centre partly funded by Europe and the UK, who are fully complicit of these atrocities.*<sup>11</sup>

His appeal for help was followed by numerous posts and messages by members of the diaspora who “were desperate begging for help”.<sup>12</sup>

Eritreans in Libya, like elsewhere, have built a strong system of connection with members of the Eritrean community abroad. They have been successfully able to speak out against human rights violations and abuses, such as arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life, disappearance, torture and the need for fair review of their applications by the UNHCR and others. A major Facebook campaign was created in September 2018 with the slogan ‘Evacuate Eritreans from Libya’.<sup>13</sup> This campaign has gathered Eritreans all around the world to express their indignation in the face of the grave abuse perpetrated by traffickers in Libya. Using the message “with the knowledge of the international community, innocent individuals continue to be subject to the most inhumane treatment”, hundreds of Eritreans, followed by other citizens, have explored the potential of digital media to develop new ways of mobilisation and civic engagement.

A few months later, Eritrean refugee activists from all over Europe arrived on bicycles at the European Parliament in Brussels to raise awareness of the situation of asylum seekers currently trapped in Libya (European Interest, 2019). The initiative #Ride4Justice has been calling for an immediate and non-discriminatory evacuation of people trapped in Libya’s detention centres and investigation into international crimes – potentially amounting to crimes against humanity – committed against migrants in Libya. Their calls have echoed those in detention centres: “this is an immediate result of the

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1664329077199738>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1664329077199738>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/EvacuateEritreansFromLibya>

EU’s politics of containment”, explained one of the organisers of the initiative (European Interest, 2019).



**Figure 17.5. Photograph shared online by Eritrean refugees detained in Zintan<sup>14</sup>**

This campaign has helped Eritrean protesters to mark their affiliation with a collective and to identify their position in a political public self-representation. Digital tools and platforms have extended this opportunity for self-representation, where the imagineering of dissent and visual symbols play a central role in a call for justice: “We are being starved to death”<sup>15</sup> was written on a mattress used during a protest organised by Eritrean refugees in Zintan Detention Centre.

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<sup>14</sup> Source withheld for security reasons.

<sup>15</sup> Photograph shared with the author.



**Figure 17.6. Photograph published by refugees via social media<sup>16</sup>**

## **Discussion**

Framed within notions of agency, access and power, this chapter focuses on active citizenry and online participation among Eritrean refugees in Libya, mediated by smartphones and tempered by online platforms, as valuable sites of the production and dissemination. The insights generated by this research provoke questions about digital capacities and connectivity that are relevant to understanding how technology can enhance new forms of connectivity for migrants and refugees in Libya, and around the world. In particular, although the provision of technology does not by itself necessarily enable security, freedom or emancipation, it is interesting to explore how refugees' voices on digital platforms can "potentially enable both new ways of being political and new visions for the type of politics we wish to imagine in the world" (Nyers & Rygiel, 2012, p. 9). This is especially the case because their voices are often mediated by humanitarian organisations and the traditional media and, hence, channelled in ways that perpetuate their image as dependent and powerless (Kisiara, 2015, p. 163).

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<sup>16</sup> Source withheld for security reasons.

While observing the digital practices taking place in Libya, a few questions arise. Can this self-represented witnessing establish some common ground that allows for a better understanding of the ‘other’? And, can these self-represented narratives bring readers/audiences closer to the person, whose life is often being retold by others?

This chapter suggests that any attempt to theorise and study connectivity, especially when refugees are trapped in abusive and violent situations, should encapsulate a social justice lens, echoing Leurs and Smets’ (2018, p. 10) view on the “particular urgency to assert more firmly our social justice orientation”, as researchers dealing with questions of migration. If oppression, exclusion and injustice are not researched, scholars can fall into what Georgiou (2018, p. 46) calls, “symbolic bordering”, which she describes as “the hierarchical ordering of Europeans’ and migrants’ humanity that subjects migrants to danger, controlled mobility, and conditional recognition”. When Eritrean detainees document their experiences in Libyan detention centres, they challenge mediated refugee narratives and engage in self-represented witnessing. While many Eritrean refugees consider themselves refugees without a voice in Libya, their digital traces are challenging traditional narratives. With very limited access to journalists or lawyers, migrants and refugees use digital platforms to communicate their own digitally-supported processes of narrative and justice seeking.

These lived experiences can be considered ‘reclaimant narratives’ that contest for rights under conditions of oppression – forms of activism from the margins. They define a space for claim-making, re-defining who is allowed to speak as a political subject. While at the national and international levels the political and social rights of refugees are often questioned, here, they themselves articulate their demands for recognition, from the margins.

## **Conclusion**

Digital tools and platforms have extended the opportunity for self-representation for migrants and refugees. These attempts to participate in the digital landscape and in news-making are challenging



the ways that individuals and communities interact, create, and perform their identities during their migration journeys to safety and freedom. In relation to this, it is important to question how agency, access and power are negotiated through digital practices, which have enabled a plurality of voices and levels of participation.

In Libya, Eritreans refugees have created new spaces of hope that can help refugees' voices to be heard and understood. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that barriers to social participation and adequate self-expression still persist. Without access to the Internet, Eritrean detainees held in Libyan detention centres lose the ability to document and expose violations. As authorities and militias control detention centres – and the refugees and migrants in them – they also seek to restrict access to smartphones and stop refugees from documenting, verifying and publishing their experiences, once again lapsing them into silence. Journalists, lawyers, researchers, and other refugee advocates are constrained from accessing Libya's detention centres. The effect is that people seeking asylum are hidden from the public. Unable to engage in public debates, social media platforms become a new space on which to document their experiences and interact with a wider audience. When they do so, Eritrean refugees circumvent the usual mediation of their stories, and engage in self-represented witnessing, while developing political strategies and become visible in a digital mediated world.

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### **Author contributions**

Sara Creta is the sole author of this chapter.

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