

Beyond Arrival: Towards Relation

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Abstract

This encounter invites a rethinking of asylum beyond arrival towards relation as the condition of refuge. What we encounter is not a destination but one another, where ‘opacity’ proves generative. It remains unfinished and open, resisting closure and unfolding through an irreducible relation between us. ‘Home’ dissolves as place and reemerges as proximity, a trembling between bodies suspended in juridical time. We are neither fully arrived nor entirely lost but held within a moving stillness where life persists despite foreclosure. In the darkness of asylum, we are called to see otherwise, guided by faint constellations. What remains is not the decision, but the quiet insistence of moving towards one another, where refuge emerges as relation in continual ‘becoming-with’.

Keywords: Abyss; Asylum; Becoming-with; home; No-refuge; Non-arrival

Introduction

In a recent conversation with a long-time friend, we found ourselves haunted by the condition of asylum in the UK and elsewhere. What began as a friendly exchange opened into deeper reflection.

‘Do you remember what I said to you a few years ago?’

‘What did you say to me?’ I asked.

‘It is written in your book *The Refugee Abyss*’, she replied.

She paused before continuing.

‘We have lost our way home.... I shared these words before coming to the UK’.

‘And now?’ I asked.

She looked at me with steady clarity.

‘No. It remains indefinite’.

‘So what is this, then?’ I asked.

The delay felt necessary, as if any response had to pass through the limits of what can be said.

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Then she replied, quietly, ‘No-refuge’.

We allowed these two words to remain open, resisting completion, as though only in their incompleteness could they remain true to the condition of asylum in the UK.

If I dare to write from the position of those seeking asylum, this translates into an existentially haunting utterance: ‘We have lost our way home’, or more precisely, we have been processed out of it. At first glance, what appears as forced displacement is manufactured, administered, regulated, and sustained violence. Within the asylum system, refuge is perpetually deferred and rendered unattainable. One is not only without home, whatever that may mean, but without the ontological ground upon which any notion of refuge could become meaningful. In this condition, displacement ceases to be an event and becomes a perpetual state of being, where (be)longing is systematically denied and existence itself is held in suspension.

However, before this condition is named, it is lived. We witnessed death along the way to home that was never. Death, in its most familiar sense, marks the end of a life that has been lived. But what are we to make of a death that follows a life never allowed to unfold, a life interrupted, suspended, or foreclosed before it could become? This is what we have called ‘(de)existence’ (Yohannes 2026), a condition in which life is neither fully lived nor simply extinguished, but held in a prolonged state of erosion. Such a life is, as Mbembe (2019) writes, ‘trapped in uninhabitable worlds and inhospitable places’ (2019:10). And yet, even here, something exceeds this reduction. Life within this necropolitical order is not entirely wasted. It is burdened, strained, and forced into a struggle to become otherwise. In this struggle, it refuses quiet disappearance. It moves, lives, and dies.

Movement, as we once reflected together (see Yohannes 2026), long before the friend’s journey to the UK, was never reducible to transit between points on a map. It was an existential necessity, the very condition of remaining alive within a world bordered to immobilise and contain life in ‘the refugee abyss’ (Yohannes 2026). To move was to refuse the slow suffocation of (b)ordering, to inhabit life as ‘errantry’ that refuses to surrender to ‘enclosure’ (Glissant 2009), to sustain the body through its own forced displacement. We understood then that one does not move because one has a home to reach, but because without movement, the possibility of life itself collapses. Movement was not a path towards home; it was what remained when home had already been foreclosed. It was, in this sense, both wound and response, both loss and the fragile persistence of life against its own erasure (Yohannes 2026).

It is perhaps from within this condition that we travelled with stars as our guides. Stars, as we know, reveal themselves only at night. To follow them, one must inhabit darkness, not as absence, but as a field of orientation otherwise. Inhabiting darkness is a form of survival, a learning to see the stars from within obscurity, to trust what flickers rather than what is fixed. If movement was our condition of life, then darkness was its horizon, and the very medium through which orientation became possible. The journey towards refuge has never been illuminated by the certainty of light, but by abyssal constellations that appear only when one inhabits the night. And yet, even this orientation remains fragile, as we are confronted by a world that endlessly speaks and writes of conquering the stars, forgetting the night that makes them visible. A poet who speaks of stars knows that they inhabit the darkness, but the gaze of a writer is forever tilted towards the light. We are writing anyway, suspended between what can be seen and what must remain obscured. Our writing emerges as ‘our poetic cries born from our lacerated flesh, bone marrow, and tears of pain, love, and rage’ (Yohannes 2026: 163).

It is within this necessity to move that our journey towards refuge must be understood. Admittedly, however, what confronts us now is a cruel inversion of that necessity. The movement that once sustained life encounters a regime that captures, arrests, and reorganises it. The arrival in the UK, imagined as a

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threshold of refuge, does not resolve movement into home; it interrupts its very logic. It arrests the errantry that once enabled survival and fixes the moving body within 'juridical time', where 'the future becomes a period of pre-criminality, pre-illegality, and pre-deportation, while the present is marked by hostility and necropolitics' (Yohannes 2026:121). What appears as arrival is, in fact, another form of forced displacement, a stillness imposed upon movement, where life is no longer allowed to unfold but is held in abeyance. The destination that promised refuge becomes a site where refuge is endlessly deferred, where darkness no longer orients but encloses, and where waiting replaces becoming. In this condition, the very movement that once sustained existence is stripped of its generative force and returned as a problem to be managed. This confirms to us, hauntingly, that we did not arrive at home; we arrived at its managed impossibility.

We may seek asylum with the hope of refuge, yet what it often delivers is a prolonged inhabitation of uncertainty, a life stretched across waiting rooms, detention, and temporary accommodation, often punctuated by interviews that fragment the past into pieces that must be made legible to power. Not only seeking asylum, but existence itself becomes evidentiary. One must prove suffering, narrate trauma, and perform coherence under conditions that have already shattered it. And yet, as we write elsewhere, 'our outstretched hands, wounded bodies, and disfigured faces still wait in juridical time, in the realms of death, for the recognition of human relations and the responsibility that comes with it' (Yohannes 2026:171). No-refuge is this endless suspension in juridical time, where darkness does not recede and time does not resolve in human terms, where existence persists only as waiting without end. No-refuge is not the absence of legal structure. It is its saturation, namely the overwhelming density and pervasiveness of legal, bureaucratic, and administrative processes that seep into every aspect of life, such that one is never beyond the system's reach, yet never fully admitted into it. This names the UK immigration system that seeks to prevent arrival while appearing to promise asylum for some. What it offers is indefinite deferral, the organisation of non-arrival as a condition of hospitality-not. One is forced to arrive in a world that has yet to learn how to receive what emerges from its own womb.

In this waiting outside 'human space and human time' (Yohannes 2024:321), the asylum system does not merely evaluate claims; it participates in what Fanon (1986) names the 'amputation of being' (1986:13). In Fanonian terms, this amputation separates the human from the body seeking refuge and enacts the death of the former. Those seeking refuge, whose humanity is seemingly severed in this condition of no-refuge, are expected to translate themselves into recognisable categories, while other dimensions of their existence are cut away as excess, inconsistency, or doubt. They are held within these mechanisms, housed, documented, and monitored, yet never fully received. Asylum decision remains suspended, even when it is issued. What cannot be verified is treated as though it does not exist, or its existence is illegalised, criminalised, and swiftly removed. In this process, those seeking refuge are not only forcibly displaced spatially, but ontologically reduced, made into partial beings whose legitimacy depends on the successful performance of 'well-founded fear of persecution'. Yet status does not resolve their condition; it confirms it. One continues to inhabit the interval between recognition and erasure, between visibility and non-being.

To think this condition requires that we turn to what we have termed elsewhere the 'poetics of refuge', 'a luminous thread within Glissant's poetics of Relation, where human communities, including those displaced, weave spaces of mutuality, intercultural exchange, multilingualism, and opacity' (2026:134). What the asylum system seeks to stabilise, to render transparent, to anchor within a singular and verifiable origin, encounters something that exceeds containment. This excess unfolds in relation, not as a single root, but as a multiplicity that extends, entangles, and transforms. It cannot be fully disclosed. It resists completion. It resists clarity. The urge to speak clearly, to narrate oneself in linear form, to resolve contradiction into coherence, is a demand for reduction. It seeks to translate relational being into

administrative legibility. Yet the fragments that do not align, the silences, and the faint memories shadowed by trauma are not failures. They are traces of relation. They mark a life that cannot be contained within a single narrative frame of (b)ordering.

Poetics of refuge emerges at this threshold, where a system demands transparency and the subject persists in what Glissant calls 'opacity'. For Glissant, opacity names not withdrawal but irreducible relation, where beings coexist and intertwine without ever being fully known. He calls us to relinquish the urge to reduce beings to transparency and instead attend to relation itself, to 'focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components' (Glissant 2009:190). Within this opacity, a communal and interdependent form of life emerges, inseparably entangled with the being of others. This is not a life outside violence, but one that has shed the masks imposed upon it: the masks of legibility, coherence, and compliance. It is a life that refuses to be fully captured, that exceeds the categories through which it is governed. In its untamed form, life does not return to purity or origin. It moves, relates, and becomes otherwise. In this movement, opacity does not obscure relation but makes it possible, sustaining a form of life that persists precisely because it cannot be fully contained.

Towards Relation

It is from within this irreducible opacity that relation persists beyond non-arrival and no-refuge. Within the abyss of no-refuge, relation continues to unfold quietly, without declaration. It circulates between those who share spaces of waiting, in gestures that escape documentation, in solidarities that exceed evidence. This is not the home imagined by policy, nor the one preserved in memory. It is a fragile composition, provisional and unfinished, yet no less real. It is a becoming-home with one another and for one another. To become home here is to inhabit relation, however precariously, beyond the terms that seek to contain it. It is to refuse the totality of amputation, even while being overburdened by its force. It is to exist in excess of the file, the interview, and the asylum decision. This becoming does not complete itself, yet it is not lacking. It unfolds as movement within constraint, as continuity within rupture. It may not resolve the condition of no-refuge, yet it cannot be reduced to it. In this persistent unfolding, something like home, ungranted, unbounded, and unfinished, continues to be made. It is in our bodies. It is in our meals. It is in our language. It is in our stories. It is in every fibre of our being.

'Where do we go from here?' she asked.

'Towards each other'.

'Is that enough?'

'It is the only place where refuge begins'.

To move towards each other is not to resolve the condition of no-refuge, but to remain within it differently. For if, as Glissant (2009) teaches us, relation is not the resolution of difference but its unfolding, then refuge cannot be a return to origin, nor a status to be secured. It is not a relationship with the state re-established, but a movement of 'becoming-with' and being in the common that is neither fixed nor fully known (Yohannes 2026). In the poetics of becoming-with in communion with others, home is not found in singular belonging but emerges through entanglement, opacity, and mutual exposure. To move towards one another, then, is not to arrive but to enter into relation without guarantee, without mastery, and without the demand for full transparency. It is to accept that what binds us cannot be fully grasped. It is in this acceptance, in the space of infinite proximity without domination, that refuge begins without ever arriving.

Yet this movement towards each other takes place within the conditions of the refugee abyss, where life is continuously exposed to forms of slow violence, abandonment, and managed precarity. And still, within

these conditions, life does not cease to exceed its capture. It strains against its reduction, not through heroic rupture of the system, but through fragile continuities, gestures of care, and the quiet insistence of relation. The asylum system seeks clarity, coherence, and verification, yet what remains within its opacity are traces that point beyond it, towards forms of existence that exceed the frame in which they are judged. The fragments, silences, and excesses that fail to align with the demands of juridical recognition do not simply mark absence or deficiency. They bear traces of lives that cannot be fully translated into the language of the law. These poetic traces are not aesthetic supplements; they are forms of living and relating within what escapes capture. It is within these traces that another meaning of refuge persists, one that cannot be exhausted by evidence, nor contained within administrative reason.

To say that refuge begins in moving towards one another is therefore not a gesture of consolation. It is immediate, asymmetrical, and without condition. In the context of no-refuge, this ethical demand becomes even more urgent. Where the system suspends recognition, responsibility must persist without it. To encounter the other in this space is not to know them fully, nor to integrate them into an imagined homogeneity, but to remain answerable to their vulnerability, their irreducibility, and their presence. It is an ethical and relational insistence that persists despite the absence of institutional grounding. It does not replace the need for justice, nor does it resolve the structures that produce forced displacement. Rather, it names a minimal yet irreducible condition of possibility. In the absence of recognition, in the saturation of law, and in the deferral of arrival, moving towards each other remains that which cannot be fully extinguished. It is an irreducible capacity to enter into relation, to respond, and to remain with one another in the face of the abyss.

Conclusion

If relation endures where arrival fails, then home can no longer be thought of as a destination or dwelling, but only as the persistence of that irreducible capacity for relation itself. If there is no way home, then perhaps home is no longer a place to which one returns, but a relation that one inhabits, an opening, a praxis of becoming-with. It is here, in this capacity for irreducible relation, that our conversation ends without closure, opening instead onto what remains.

She looked at me again, this time less certain.

‘So, we do not arrive?’

‘No, we don’t’.

‘Then what do we do?’

‘We remain’.

A pause.

‘Remain where?’

‘With each other’.

She nodded, though not fully convinced.

‘And if we are separated?’

‘Then we carry each other’.

Another silence, longer now.

‘Is that what home is?’

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‘Not what it was. But perhaps what it becomes’.

She exhaled slowly.

‘And the waiting?’

‘It does not end’.

‘Then what changes?’

‘We do’.

She looked away, then back.

‘And refuge?’

I hesitated.

‘It flickers’.

‘Like the stars?’

‘Only when it is dark enough to see them’.

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