

## Border Country:

### Witnessing Testimonies

by KATY McCORMICK

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Words, particularly those of oral testimony, are still connected to the body of the sufferer while the material image implies a separation (spatial, temporal or both) from that which it captures ... As a social act, testimony also permits the survivor to speak to a public, whether to condemn or accuse the perpetrator, to memorialize the suffering, or to teach as a warning against repetition.

–Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas,  
*The Image and the Witness*

*Putting the materiality of blood spilled and the conceptual energy of theory together is unsettling. There are a number of inevitable ingredients that come with the task of witnessing. These include the presence of trauma and its refusal of historical boundaries, the cost of allowing oneself to be impacted upon and ultimately changed by what one hears, the influence of living in a culture where tragedy is consumed as spectacle, and the need to accept a situation with no cure or promise of closure.*

–Julie Salverson, “Taking Liberties”

“Hello?” knock, knock, “Hello?” knock, knock,  
“Hello?”

–Beatrice Aceng

**Artists Melanie Friend** and Lara Rosenoff focus on the testimonies of individuals seeking sanctuary. In *Border Country*, Friend interviews asylum seekers detained in Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs) in the United Kingdom. In *Her Name Is Beatrice/She, You and I/Intersections in Witnessing*, Rosenoff develops an extended dialogue with Beatrice, one of an estimated 40,000 Acholi Ugandans living in Padibe Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Camp in 2007. Through repeated visits and a slow dialogic process, these artists allow their subjects to speak, revealing the particular circumstances of their lives. Acting as “deep listeners,” the artists’ works serve as a means for bearing witness and sharing testimony. In so doing, they work relationally, becoming implicated in the lives of their subjects and bringing viewers into the circle of witnessing. Through artistic works comprising image and sound, both artists unsettle the process of spectatorship while engaging critical questions around human rights by privileging voices outside dominant narratives. In an age of 24/7 media access characterized by images of insurgency,

genocide, and permanent war, these artists present us with seemingly calm images whose hidden traumas are slowly revealed by oral testimonies. The subject positions they represent must be imagined within the larger context of global migration resulting from armed conflict, climate change, and globalization on one hand, and the West’s post-colonial (and post-9/11) protectionism on the other.

Melanie Friend’s *Border Country* portrays institutional spaces haunted by unseen individuals giving voice to their thoughts and experiences while in detention. Located in multiple localities, the IRCs hold asylum seekers under lock and key as they await decisions by the UK Border Agency on their status. According to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), “An asylum-seeker is an individual who has sought international protection and whose claim for refugee status has not yet been determined.”<sup>21</sup> A refugee is defined in Article 1 of the 1951 Refugee Convention as: “A person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his or her race, religion, nationality,

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MELANIE FRIEND,  
*The Moat, Dover IRC*,  
101 cm x 68.4 cm digital  
chromogenic print, 2005

membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution.”<sup>2</sup> According to the UNHCR, refugees are increasingly caught up in the net of economic migrants and treated as “illegals,” criminals, and terrorists. The Jesuit Refugee Service asserts: “The most common basis for immigrant detention is deficient or improper legal documentation to support lawful immigrant presence in the detaining country—for this type of infraction,

detention is standard practice in Australia, France, Croatia, Germany, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Thailand, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States.”<sup>3</sup>

Believing the issue underrepresented in the media, Friend sought permission to photograph individuals in immigration detention. After persistent negotiations, she obtained access to the public areas of eight IRCs, beginning with Dover. Originally built as a defensive fortress during the Napoleonic Wars, Friend’s photographs of Dover’s moat, perched on cliffs overlooking the sea, serve to illustrate local attitudes towards foreign “invasions.” Friend’s photographs, beautifully seen and deceptively cool, provide austere views of the grounds, recreation areas, visiting rooms, and multi-faith spaces found in the centres to which she was given access. Devoid of humans, these scenes are ordered and serene. In stark contrast, the voices of migrants such as Lillian, speak out, asking, “Who is the judge to say, ‘You, you can look for a better life?’—Who is more human than the other?”<sup>4</sup> It is the particular, intimate, day-to-day thoughts and aspirations of individuals like Lillian, Andrej, Isaac, and

others caught in a situation outside of their control, that demand our attention. In multiple interviews conducted with nine men (the vast majority of detainees) between 2003 and 2006 and two women in 2007, Friend provides a listening ear, acting as witness to their three-fold trauma: the violence from which they escaped in their home countries, the severe psychological impact of indefinite detention, and the threat of deportation through forced “removal” back from whence they fled.

If the beauty of her photographs is disarming, the arresting testimonies of these individuals appeal not only to our capacity for empathy but also to our sense of collective responsibility as free citizens. When Lillian recalls her impressions of England before arrival, versus what she actually found, we are ashamed: “I always thought, at least you’ll be given a fair chance ... If they refuse it that’s too bad ... But at least you’re given a fair hearing. But now it looks like it’s a race about numbers. How many can we deport back?” Friend’s subjects may have possessed the possibility of self-determination at some point in their lives, but no longer do. Andrej, from Byelorussia, describes it

thus: “Whatever you wanna do, you need to get permission ... your life can be changed forever, just because somebody said ‘no’ or said ‘yes.’” As Richard from Sri Lanka puts it: “We came from our country to save our lives... But now I feel I came here from one cage to another cage, like a bird.” Listening to Friend’s 75-minute soundtrack (parsed out on multiple tracks in the exhibition and included on CD in the *Border Country* monograph), we come to recognize the distinctive voices of each of her contributors. Friend’s approach to *Border Country*, including the decision not to show portraits of the detainees, grew out of the work she was doing the decade before on Kosova Albanians under the brutal regime of Slobodan Milošević. Repeated visits under the radar culminated in the work entitled *Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible*, where Friend juxtaposed recorded testimonies of police brutalities with colour photographs of the tranquil domestic spaces in which they occurred.<sup>5</sup> Despite contributing to stories in both radio and print journalism, this work was aimed at an audience “who might have more time to contemplate and think in the calm of a gallery space, or alone with a book.”<sup>6</sup>

*Border Country* reveals something of the circumstances of asylum seekers, but focuses primarily on their present situation. Eighteen-year-old Isaac, Friend's first subject, narrowly escaped captors in a Nigerian human trafficking scheme, managing to get onto a flight to Heathrow. In the early interviews, Isaac speaks with a contagious optimism: "Okay, okay, let me put it this way: I am here today. I am alive. I'm breathing. You know, at least if you look at me, you know that I'm a kind of happy person ... So I feel being in Dover here—I have to be happy! Yeah! [laughs]. I have to be happy because ... I feel safe." Friend met with Isaac over fourteen separate visits before his forced "removal" after thirteen months in detention. Reflecting deeply on her working process, she points out the intricacies of a situation in which there is an extreme power imbalance between maker and subject. Originally conceived as *The Story of Isaac*, Friend finds herself questioning the ethics of "selling" Isaac, if not in body, then in the pursuit of her own artistic aims, asking herself: Who gains from telling his story? She examines the entanglements of her process, writing: "I felt keenly the power

MELANIE FRIEND, *The Visitors' Room, Tinsley House IRC (Gatwick)*, 126 x 84.3 cm digital chromogenic print, 2004

imbalance between the detainees and I ... I could not claim that being interviewed was an empowering experience ... or encourage any hope that their voices could effect change; but they might help influence public opinion ... Many of the interviewees said that they appreciated the opportunity to be heard, to be listened to: this was what they felt they had been denied by the immigration system."<sup>7</sup>

Bearing witness to Friend could not offer the detainees any legal satisfaction, but it could fulfill a psychological need. As Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas write in *The Image and the Witness*, the act of bearing witness "occurs only in a framework of relationality, in which the testimonial act is itself witnessed by an other."<sup>8</sup> In breaking their long-held silence, there is relief in naming and controlling, if not their lives, then at least their stories. Feeling deep sympathy for Isaac and recognizing his profound need to speak, Friend admits her own limitations in being able to help him.



When he introduces her to his friend Francis A., she realizes the potential of making the project about more than one person. In the process, she discovers that the asylum seekers have a keen understanding of the underlying issues of detainment practices. Drawing upon inner resources, they also develop coping strategies to deal with imprisonment. Despite that, many articulate the demoralizing effect that indeterminate incarceration has on them. References to being sick, going crazy, and wanting to die, recur frequently throughout the interviews. Such utterances, though pained, seem to offer relief to the speakers. At the same time, they reverberate, like breath, through our own listening bodies.

Friend's patient presence seems to facilitate a form of naming, fulfilling what Guerin and Hallas refer to as "The therapeutic process [which] provides the survivor-witness with a space in which she may begin the difficult process of narrativising the event."<sup>9</sup> Richard admits: "Slowly, I am getting crazy, I think ... this is indefinite sentence for the asylum seekers. We didn't commit any crime. We are not criminals. We have no criminal

record ... But they want to keep me here for a long time—for one year ... This is not fair." Richard does not stop there, but asks Friend: "Can I tell the truth?" "Okay?" He continues: "Sometimes, I want to jump in the—[laughs]—sea. Yeah, I want to die." As Guerin and Hallas assert: "The act of bearing witness is not the communication of a truth already known, but its actual production through this performative act. In this process, the listener becomes a witness to the witness, not only facilitating the very possibility of testimony, but also subsequently, sharing its burden."<sup>10</sup>

The 1951 Refugee Convention states that: "refugees should not be detained or penalized because they were compelled to enter a country irregularly or without proper documentation."<sup>11</sup> However, many countries apply the same controls on refugees as they do on illegal migrants—essentially using detention as a "migration management tool." Demanding evidence of persecution does not take into account the difficulty of obtaining documentation in the face of state-sponsored brutality, or culturally acceptable forms of violence such as female circumcision or some aspects of Sharia law.



Nor does it account for the relative lack of rights of citizens living in states such as Nigeria, where corruption is rampant. It is difficult to recognize Isaac's voice as he rails against the authorities' demands for evidence of persecution to prove his refugee claim: "Evidence—where are you going to get evidence?—When you are dead!"

Facing many of the same issues as Friend, Lara Rosenoff was keenly aware of the inadequacies of hegemonic media practices, including documentary photography, as a means to foster democratic engagement in liberal capitalist societies. Reflection and research led her to conclude that "rational witnessing," as characterized by the free press, could not engage members of an open society beyond passive consumption. She began asking: "How then can a critical-emancipatory documentary approach realistically function in a 'post-political' age?"<sup>12</sup> In *Her Name Is Beatrice/She, You and I/Intersections in Witnessing*, Rosenoff moves beyond "rational witnessing" by taking up the challenge of "implicated witnessing" through sustained contact with Ugandan Beatrice Aceng. Beatrice, like 26 million other IDPs worldwide, was forced to leave her



LARA ROSENOFF,  
*Inside, Padibe IDP Camp,*  
*Northern Uganda, 2007,*  
40.6 x 50.8 cm inkjet  
print, 2007

home due to conflict, but (unlike an asylum seeker) remains within her country's borders, where she is still subject to danger.

From her first documentary projects in Uganda in 2004 and 2005, Rosenoff sought ways to ameliorate the effects of a twenty-year civil war that has displaced more than 1.6 million people into overcrowded camps, leaving local Acholi culture, and especially extended families, splintered. Most disturbing were the high mortality rates in the IDP camps (an estimated 1000 per week according to the Ugandan Ministry of Health), and the abduction of children who

were forced by their Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) captors into participation in killing and maiming others. After the ceasefire in 2006, Rosenoff decided to revisit the region of Kitgum, where in 2005 she had come upon the aftermath of an ambush on the road to Padibe. Deeply marked by that experience, she returned to focus on the welfare of children—girls in particular—who were heads of households. When Rosenoff met fifteen-year-old Beatrice, she was taking care of three brothers. Following upon a year spent with LRA rebels after her abduction at age thirteen, Beatrice was finally beginning to be accepted back into the community. Ironically, she was granted amnesty upon her escape from the LRA rebels by the very government who failed to protect her in the first place. Beatrice recounts: "I saw the fighting with my own eyes and I came to believe that there is real fighting when I was in the bush. Before I did not really understand."<sup>13</sup> Rosenoff's engagement with Beatrice has spawned works comprising video, photography, and verbal/textual testimonies complemented by a website.

Like Friend, Rosenoff needed to articulate her relationship to her subject,

coming to terms with the imbalance of power between them, as well as the ethics of such representation. She writes: "I acknowledge Beatrice's agency in our association ... Her decision on whether she wanted to be represented and how she wanted to represent herself was, and still is, made based on her assessment of the type of person I am, our relationship and what she could potentially gain from our association."<sup>14</sup> Determining to continue her work with Beatrice, Rosenoff writes: "I thought that a more personal, sustained and micro-level view of one girl's experience of conflict might be a right step toward 'engaging in different ways.'"<sup>15</sup> As she continues to work with Beatrice in Uganda, Rosenoff has adopted Julie Salverson's theoretical framework of the "foolish witness." In Salverson's words: "It is absurd, even ridiculous, to risk answering the call of another. It is absurd to think that my availability as a listener, a witness, might contribute anything in the face of another's violation, another's loss, yet, I step forward all the same ... In being foolish witnesses, we allow ourselves to fail while remaining always alert, ready, and willing to try."<sup>16</sup>



LARA ROSENOFF, *In the Gardens,*  
40.6 x 50.8 cm inkjet print, 2007

In this context Rosenoff asks how we can "re-conceptualize global issues such as internal displacement, and children in armed conflict." In bearing witness and being fully present in a dialogue with their subjects, both Rosenoff and Friend shift the relational "us and them" to "you and I," sharing the burden of trauma while holding up a mirror: Knock, knock, "Hello?"

LARA ROSENOFF,  
*Amnesty?*, 40.6 x 50.8 cm  
inkjet print, 2007

1 UNHCR, Field Information and Coordination Support Section, *Asylum Levels and Trends in Industrialized Countries* 2009 (Geneva: 2010), 3.

2 UNHCR, Media Relations and Public Information Service, *The 1951 Refugee Convention – Questions & Answers* (Geneva: 2007), 6.

3 Southern Refugee Legal Aid Network (SRLAN), "Detention of Refugees," sec. 2, [http://www.srlan.org/beta/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=177&Itemid=197](http://www.srlan.org/beta/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=177&Itemid=197).

4 Melanie Friend, *Border Country* (Belfast: Belfast Exposed Gallery and the Winchester Gallery, 2007). Hereafter, all quotes from detainees come from the CD included in the book.

5 See Melanie Friend, *No Place Like Home: Echoes from Kosovo* (San Francisco: Midnight Editions, 2001).

6 Melanie Friend, "Representing Immigration Detainees: The Juxtaposition of Image and Sound in 'Border Country,'" *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 11, no. 2 (2010): par. 6, <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1484>.

7 *Ibid.*, par. 32–34.

8 Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas, ed., introduction to *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 10.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

11 SRLAN, *Detention of Refugees*, sec. 2.

12 Lara Rosenoff, "Her Name Is Beatrice, My Name Is Lara: Experiences in Witnessing, Internal Displacement and Conflict in Northern Uganda after 23 Years of War," MFA thesis, Ryerson University, 2009, 21.

13 *Ibid.*, 56.

14 *Ibid.*, 12.

15 *Ibid.*, 22.

16 *Ibid.*, 7.

**MELANIE FRIEND** has worked as a documentary photographer for over two decades. Between 1989 and 2001, Friend made numerous trips to Kosovo as a photographer and freelance print/radio reporter. Her exhibition on Kosovo, *Homes and Gardens: Documenting the Invisible*, was first shown at Camerawork Gallery, London, in 1996 and toured internationally. Friend's book, *No Place Like Home: Echoes from Kosovo*, was published by Midnight Editions, United States, in 2001. In November 2007, Friend's exhibition *Border Country* opened at Belfast Exposed Photography, Northern Ireland, and toured to three UK galleries; an accompanying catalogue of the same name (including audio CD) was published by Belfast Exposed Photography and The Winchester Gallery. Friend teaches photography at the University of Sussex, UK, where she is a part-time senior lecturer in the School of Media, Film and Music.

**LARA ROSENOFF** is an award-winning artist whose work has been shown at festivals, on television, in galleries and at policy conferences in Canada, Uganda, the United States, and Japan. She completed her BA in Communication Studies at Concordia University (1998), her MFA in Documentary Media from Ryerson University (2009), and is currently a PhD student in Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. She owes most of her life education to the Acholi community in Northern Uganda. Her work mixes film, photography, video and installation to question notions of witnessing and hegemonic narratives on global systemic injustices.

**KATY MCCORMICK**'s solo exhibitions have appeared in Canada at Gallery TPW, The Photographer's Gallery, Saskatoon, and at VOX, Montreal. Recent essays include "Emergence/Legacies," appearing in *Emergence: Contemporary Photography in Canada* (2009) and "Scene as Space Across Time: Presence, Passage and Transition," in *BlackFlash* (2008). In 2007 she curated *Rearrangements: Photography/Performance/Sculpture*. She is assistant professor in photography and director of the student-run gallery at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada.

