ON EXILE

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Commentary by Linda C. Ehrlich

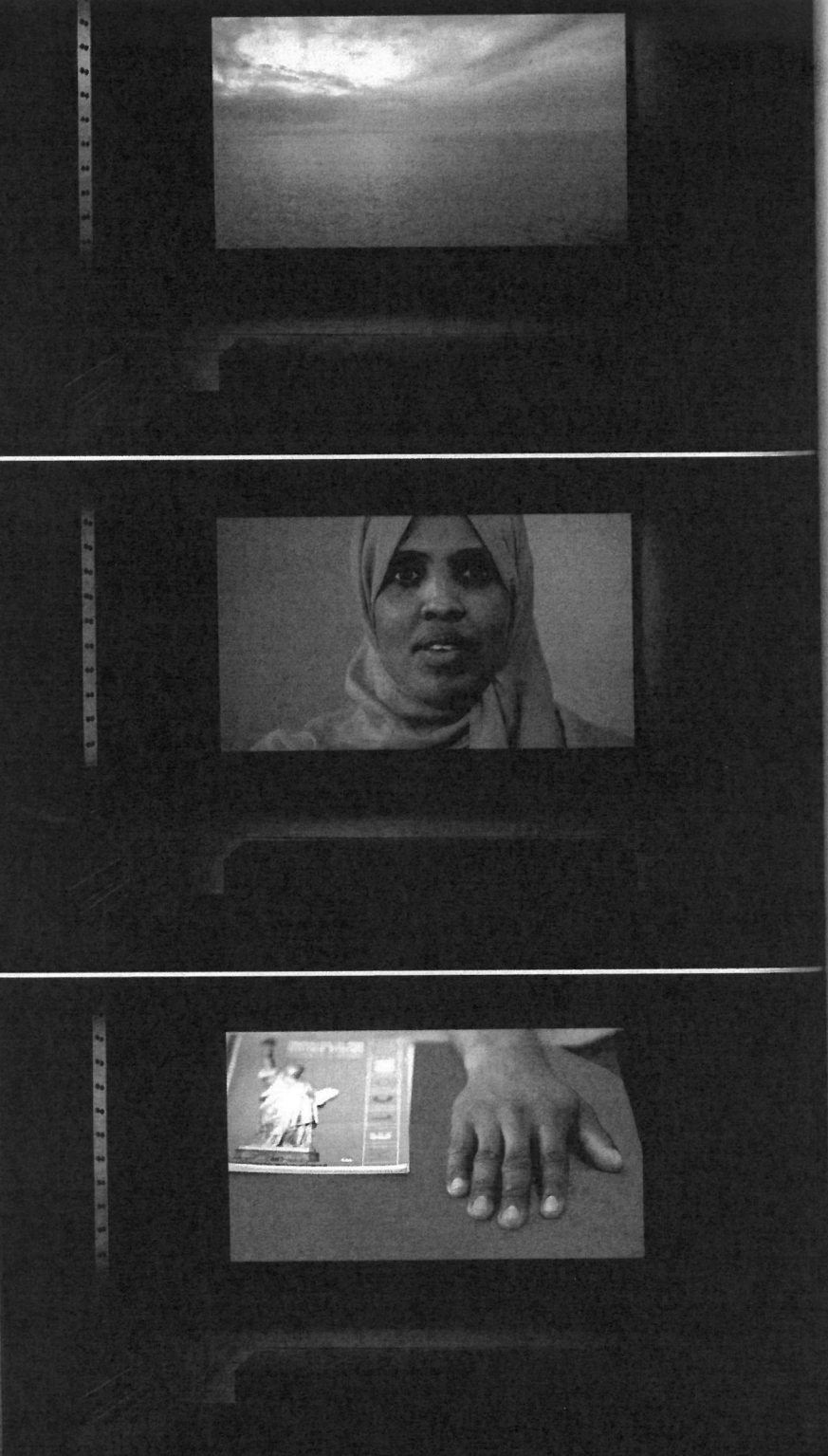
On Exile begins with laughter (in this case, tears of laughter) as our narrator, Sahar Daghstani from Syria, comments on how "unphotogenic" she is. The next shot — a quiet, pensive one — disputes that assertion. Visual artist José Carlos Teixeira (b. Porto, Portugal, 1977) lets the cut-off angles of her face, and close-ups of her hands, speak for themselves.

Figures are often fragmented, never fully identified, in this 70-minute film. This imitates "real life" when we're first introduced to someone new. We feel the "in-between-ness" of the speakers by the way the editing rarely lets the figures rest centered in the frame.

These refugees from Middle Eastern and African nations, now resettled in the U.S. Midwest, have escaped civil wars, ISIS, corrupt and dictatorial governments who crack down on protestors appealing for basic human rights. One Syrian man nods silently as another Syrian refugee speaks bitterly of "terrorists who claim to be Muslims."

All of the major elements of this film are subtly introduced at the beginning: speakers, Lake Erie, the book *The Refugee* (not fully identified until the end credits). Sometimes we hear a voice but see no human figure, only clouds or a lake.

I have chosen some phrases (*italicized below*) from Teixeira's "Notes on an ongoing investigation" from June 2017 to help us see some of the underlying patterns of this "*video-essay*" ("*experimental documentary*").



Co-authorship

What true stories do our hands reveal?

The images tend to be calm but the hands often betray anguish. Looking in one direction or another, speakers reveal their profiles as their hands offer a counterpoint to their words.

Many speak in hesitant English, or a smattering of English before switching over to a more fluent Arabic. One young woman speaks directly in English and reports that she uses the "translation app" on her phone. It's a new world.

Neglected voices;
Without speaking on another's behalf

Neglected by whom? Is it we, the listeners, who have neglected them? Or perhaps it is society as a whole? These are voices that many of us have not heard, and stories that we only knew in the abstract.

Home/homelessness

While writing this essay, I noticed on the wall of the newly established African American Museum in Washington D.C. a quotation from the writer Maya Angelou which is relevant for *On Exile* as well:

"The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned."

Safety/shelter

Instinctively we seek shelter from a storm. The forces that cause a person to flee into exile are a kind of

storm — of violence, hatred, threats, discrimination.

Our empathetic narrator (not technically a refugee herself) describes how the refugees are helping each other. The Syrian father in the orange shirt (Abdulmajid Aljnid) expresses his deep appreciation for what the U.N. staff did for his family, including a furnished house waiting for them in a new country.

As the description for the SPACES exhibition in Cleveland, Ohio states, *On Exile* "reframes assumptions of home and belonging."

Not sensational or sentimental

To approach the theme of exile in an unsentimental way is a difficult feat. Exile is a topic that inspires fear in the listener. It is a fate no one desires.

Allowing space

Exile as a background. Exile as the mountain to overcome. The speakers are often perched in ambiguous spaces.

One Syrian man requested that his face not be shown. He accepts the idea that his children learn English but also is concerned that they maintain their Arab culture.

Not everyone in the film is Muslim. On second viewing I realized that David Paul from Sudan, dressed in an "American Way" t-shirt, is Christian, and was afraid of beheading in his native land. Why did he choose the U.S.? "Because it is a big land."

Active, anxious, displaced, and fragmented

About three-quarters of the way through the film, the tone shifts as the monologues reflect on propaganda against Muslims and refugees in general.

Storm clouds gather over the lake.

The Somali woman in the apron (Kifaya Mohamed, with henna tattoos on her hands) set up a restaurant of Somali cuisine in 2013, Kifaya's Kitchen, and we see women working there together. She reports that some Americans who have entered her shop have apologized for the current President's words about immigration. Another woman reports that her small daughter is afraid to wear the headscarf because it will make her "a target."

Women in exile have special problems.

They are in touch with the everyday-ness of exile
They teach us: Fortitude. Resignation. Dignity.

We come to know Farhiya Gureye from Somalia, with the blue hijab, who arrived in the U.S. as a refugee at age 23. Near the end of the film she makes an especially important statement: "We love America, no matter what, but we will speak the true." I know I can trust the authenticity of her words about the recent immigration policies from D.C. Her statement, with its slight grammatical error, is more urgent than all the polished lies from FOX News.

As the subjects of the film speak to us, we sense that these new residents in the country they call "America" have a keener sense of the U.S.'s highest values than the man who currently resides in the White House. When the refugees in Teixeira's film speak of their

hopes for peace, they ask this not just for their "in-group" but for the world as a whole.

At moments like this in the film, there is a shock of recognition. These parents want their children to grow up in a better place than what they experienced; these parents fear for the future. They desire to return to see friends and family, if only for a short while. All very familiar, yes, but the magnitude is quite different from anything most of us have ever experienced.

Along with words come Images. On I-pads, on phones, appear images of beloved homes, "grandfather's house," now reduced by bombs to rubble. Children play in the foreground.

We unravel some details from the speakers:
The man in the orange shirt has 4 children; the woman with the sad face saw her husband killed by a rocket; the young woman with the grey hijab affirms, in excellent English, that she has the will to move past remembered traumas. An older woman (later identified as her mother) sits wordlessly at her side. The young woman describes herself as "Somali-American."

Light on the lake changes over the course of a day.

Many of the statements are brief and restrained, but resonant with deep feeling. Speaking of the death of her husband when two missiles struck their house, the Iraqi mother says simply: "Our suffering started at that moment."

INTERLUDE: OTHER WORKS

José Carlos Teixeira works with repetition. He is not in a rush to change the framework of the investigation at hand. Repetition and subtle change. This is especially true in his earlier film *The Fall, o exercício da queda* (2012). Unlike *On Exile*, however, there are no inserted interludes to break the pattern or expand the frame.

The initial premise of *The Fall* is a minimalistic one: What does it mean to fall?

A bare stage, and a series of people respond (in Portuguese and through their actions) to that simple question. They talk, they move, then on to the next person. In contrast to *On Exile*, the speakers in *The Fall* often begin centered on the edge of the bare wooden stage and then explore its depth.

How do people fall, and why? Some stand up and fall quickly — mostly to the side, but a few try a riskier fall forward or backwards. Some fall first to their knees and then collapse (2 steps). Theme and variation. Some make several attempts, each time altering the direction of the fall. Others ruminate first — about fear, about Camus's last novel "The Fall." One fall becomes connected to the others, in an unexpectedly symphonic way. The last person we see gives several different attempts, each time altering the direction, and ends up looking down as she contemplates the wooden planks of the stage. An appropriate ending.

On Exile itself is a rumination on theme and variation, but, in that case, the stakes are much higher and the fall more permanent. Exile is not taken lightly by anyone. Nicholas Wynia's camera lingers on the faces just long enough to reflect their inner pain.

CODA: RETURN TO *ON EXILE*

Art critic Stephen Litt wrote in his Aug. 21 (2017) exhibition review: "The de-emphasis of names, along with Teixeira's practice of focusing tightly on his speakers' hands and faces, underscores the universality of their fears and dreams in a way that using their names might not have" (www.cleveland.com/arts, "'On Exile' video at Spaces reveals hopes, dreams of refugees").

What Litt says has validity. The films of Scandanavian director Carl Dreyer come to mind.

And yet, after I requested a list of the names and photos of the speakers, I came to know the individuals in a more specific sense: Iraqi mother Israa Al-Obaidi and her son Aws Alallawee; soft-spoken husband and wife Adel Atyeh and Haifa Al-Khateeb from Syria and their daughter Reem. I know that the young woman with the steadfast gaze, in the grey hijab, is Hawo Abdi from Somalia, who spent time in a refugee camp in Kenya.

At times the lake is turbulent; then there are periods of calm.

Ideas approached in a non-conclusive way

Teixeira's films ask the viewer/listener to become the camera and engage in a "dialogue" with the people speaking. On my second viewing, I suddenly realized, to my surprise, that I had been listening to monologues. That's how intense my silent "conversation" with the speakers had been.

The refugees remind us that our past closes up behind us. They remind us to take time to hear the stories of others, and to care about what we hear.

Near the end of the film, the exquisite blue of the lake is topped by a strip of pink, and by the cry of gulls.