



ROUTLEDGE
HANDBOOKS



The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Activism

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What is asylum?

Translation, trauma, and institutional visibility

Aria Fani

What is asylum? The definition of asylum has preoccupied the minds of diplomats, judges, lawyers, legal institutions, immigration rights advocates, and asylum seekers since its codification in the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1951 in Geneva. The Refugee Convention of 1951 defined the term ‘refugee’ as a person with a ‘well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion’ and outlined certain rights that pertain to such persons (UNHCR 1951, 1967). In 1967, the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees removed time limits (initially defining asylum ‘as a result of events occurring before January 1, 1951’) and expanded the document’s geographic scope beyond Europe. These changes notwithstanding, the legal category of asylum, along with its legal lexicon, has remained at the core of a transnational practice since the second half of the twentieth century.

This chapter does not revisit the definition of asylum, no less at a time when long-standing precedents regarding asylum are being unravelled by nativist governments worldwide. Instead, I aim to illustrate how the legal category of asylum assumes a degree of both institutional literacy and visibility in the process of making a viable and credible asylum claim. I understand institutional literacy as familiarity with a set of assumptions and norms within any given legal system in any given period that validates certain refugees as asylum-worthy and denigrates others as unworthy of protection. To have institutional literacy means being able to present one’s claim in a style that is viewed as credible, in a way that fits certain legally codified criteria for asylum, and overall to navigate the invasive and lengthy process of seeking asylum from start to finish (which may take 4–5 years or even more). In many cases, it means having the skills to make your client visible within institutionally recognised categories of persecution. And for many asylum seekers, particularly those who do not speak the language of their host country, it means ceding agency to others to tell their story and establish their credibility.

This chapter draws from my experience working with Central American asylum seekers as an immigration rights advocate at the East Bay Sanctuary Covenant (EBSC) in Berkeley, California, since January 2017. Through conducting asylum interviews,

I have mainly served EBSC as a translator. My primary training is in literary and translation studies; I have no specific background in immigration law. I have lived and travelled extensively in Latin America and speak Spanish, particularly its Mexican and Central American variations. My linguistic and writing skills have helped me to conduct preliminary asylum interviews and present my clients' declaration in a manner that both stays true to their experience of trauma and speaks to legal criteria outlined in asylum forms. My training in literature may seem irrelevant at first, but in the course of volunteering at EBSC I realised that my analytical and language skills translated well into the field of immigration rights advocacy. Earning a doctoral degree in the humanities has placed me among an extremely privileged group. Advocating for the rights of a particularly vulnerable community has helped me better understand the extent and power of that privilege.

Given that the majority of my clients have come from El Salvador and Guatemala, it is necessary to briefly delve into the history of immigration from Central America into the United States (US) and explain EBSC's role in pioneering what came to be known as the Sanctuary Movement in the early 1980s. In 1960, civil war erupted in Guatemala and in El Salvador it began in 1980. These conflicts consumed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. Under the banner of eradicating communism, Central American states brutally targeted dissidents and vulnerable communities. In El Salvador, the war mainly affected union members and leaders, students, farmers, catechists, and Catholic monks, nuns, and church delegations who denounced state violence. In Guatemala, the war took more than three decades (as opposed to 12 years in El Salvador, which is much smaller in size) and mainly affected the country's indigenous communities that speak more than twenty Mayan languages (as opposed to the Salvadoran population, which is predominantly Spanish-speaking). Between 1980 and 1983 half a million Salvadorans and Guatemalans fled military and political persecution by crossing into the US (Lesser and Batalova 2017). Asylum, at the time, was primarily granted to refugees fleeing from the Soviet Union (Goodman 2018).

On 11 December 1981, the Salvadoran Army, trained and sponsored by the US Army (some soldiers were trained within El Salvador while others had received training in Panama and the US state of Georgia), massacred close to a thousand Salvadorans, many of them women and children, in the town of El Mozote and surrounding villages (Maslin 2016). It has been characterised as the worst massacre in contemporary Latin American history. The US State Department repeatedly lied about the massacre—initially it even denied that it happened (Danner 1993). After the massacre, US President Ronald Reagan continued to fund the 'friendly' government of El Salvador (Danner 1993). Reagan equally ignored atrocities unfolding in Guatemala. When he met with the Guatemalan president, Efraín Ríos Montt, on 5 December 1982, Reagan praised him as 'a man of great integrity' and 'totally dedicated to democracy' as the latter was committing a genocide of indigenous Mayans (Grandin 2013). His administration deliberately mischaracterised what was happening in Central America with the objective of turning away Salvadoran and Guatemalan asylum seekers. Of all Central American asylum seekers in the US, only 2 percent of Salvadorans and 1 percent of Guatemalans were granted asylum (Gzesh 2006). To put this into perspective, 40 percent of Afghan and 32 percent of Polish refugees who had fled from the Soviet Union, a political adversary, were granted asylum in the US.

The majority of US Americans were uninformed of what was going on in Central America. That changed with the assassination of Óscar Romero. During a sermon on

23 March 1980, Romero, the Archbishop of El Salvador, the country's highest-ranked religious and cultural figure, demanded an end to violence in Central America. He was gunned down the next day during a mass at the chapel of the Divina Providencia Hospital in San Salvador. In response to military repression, people's insurgency began the day after Romero's killing in El Salvador. For most of his career, Romero had been a politically conservative figure. But in 1977, he had a change of heart after the assassination of Rutilio Grande, a Jesuit priest and Romero's close friend, after which he fully devoted himself to the cause of social justice for indigenous communities. Grande's murder was part of a brutally systematic effort by the Salvadoran state to silence any legitimate dissent. This effort included killing tens of peaceful students from the National Autonomous University of El Salvador who were marching for social and economic justice on July 30, 1975. The news also reverberated far beyond El Salvador, with services held in the San Francisco Bay Area and in other major cities across the US.

On 24 March 1982, on the second anniversary of Romero's assassination, five congregations in Berkeley, California and one in Tucson, Arizona formed a national coalition with the mission of providing advocacy for asylum seekers who were denied protection by the US government. Under the leadership of Reverend Gustav Schultz, immigration rights advocates in Berkeley and Tucson risked arrest by giving refuge to asylum seekers. Their activism marked the birth of the Sanctuary Movement which was built on transnational solidarity (Mineiro 2019). It defied inhumane immigration policies in the US and drew its inspiration from the Latin American discourse on Liberation Theology. Formed in the 1950s and 60s in South America, Liberation Theology set out to bring Christian theology into alignment with the experience of marginalised indigenous peoples and amplify their demand for social dignity and economic egalitarianism across Latin America. The most prominent thinkers of Liberation Theology include José Comblin, Helder Câmara, Leonardo Boff (all three from Brazil), Jon Sobrino (Spain/El Salvador), Óscar Romero (El Salvador), and Gustavo Gutiérrez (Peru), whose book *Teología de la Liberación (Liberation Theology: 1973)* has become the movement's seminal text.

Founded in 1982, the EBSC has been a pioneer in the Sanctuary movement in the US. The organisation, currently located in the humble basement of a church near the campus of the University of California, works with seven lawyers, sixteen paralegals, and more than thirty volunteers. Our volunteer translators, such as myself, often work from the office while interpreters usually work off-site by going to asylum hearings in San Francisco. EBSC has taken on more than two hundred cases of affirmative asylum every year (cases that take place in a non-courtroom setting as opposed to cases of defensive asylum which take place in court on the order of removal). Of all cases that EBSC has undertaken over the years, 97 percent have been granted asylum. The organisation works with asylum seekers from around the world, but it specialises in El Salvador and Guatemala. The organisation has kept an extensive database of Guatemalan villages that were attacked and destroyed in the 1980s. This database has helped to reunite brothers and sisters, parents and children, now residing in the US years after their traumatic separation. Today, EBSC has adopted a broader mission to combat widespread hostility and misunderstanding about immigrants by educating the public about why immigrants flee to the US. For instance, the project *Amplifying Sanctuary Voices* (2018–present) gathers stories of asylees who have settled in the San Francisco Bay Area with the aim of presenting them to the general public, releasing these narratives from the confines of immigration records.

Many of EBSC's clients today are the children of those who experienced the violent turmoil of the 1980s in Central America. Peace treaties may have been officially signed in El Salvador (1992) and Guatemala (1996), but war has left in its wake a pervasive ecology of abuse and criminal impunity. Until recently, survivors of genocide that took place during the Civil War feared disclosing what they had witnessed and were instead forced to believe in false narratives forged by their governments, narratives that were validated by the US government. In the course of the Civil War, US-sponsored governments in Central America brutally cracked down on what they viewed as elements of communism or any progressive grassroots organisation; this led to a violent counter-insurgency. First-hand accounts such as *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1983), written by the Nobel-winning human rights activist, the reporting of US American journalists, and most importantly, the oral accounts of asylum seekers who bravely fled to the US clearly illustrate that the indigenous population in Guatemala was the most vulnerable target of an ethno-racial war that masked itself as a western front against socialist ideology (Nairn 1982).

Thanks to increasing international pressure, certain government officials have since then faced trials but the prospect of real accountability has remained distant. In 2013, Efraín Ríos Montt became the first statesman charged with genocide in his own country; he was sentenced to eighty years in prison. The ruling was met with a sense of closure in Guatemala and its diaspora. But the ruling was overturned ten days later by the country's Supreme Court, to the profound dismay of Mayan communities who survived Montt's crimes against humanity (Malkin 2013). The children of Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees, most of whom had been denied asylum in the 1980s, were deported in the 1990s by the Bush and Clinton administrations to a country virtually foreign to them. Some of them took to Central America a certain type of gang organisation from Los Angeles which overwhelmed legal institutions and civil society and led to the formation of *maras*, or gangs, such as MS-13 in El Salvador. *Maras* kept growing in the following years, posing a daily threat to the life and livelihood of Guatemalans and Salvadorans (Denvir 2017; Restrepo 2018). My clients at EBSC are survivors of this abusive and crime-infested ecology.

Unsurprisingly, women and members of the LGBTQ community are among the most vulnerable people in Central America, where rampant misogynistic and homophobic hate crimes face little to no legal consequences. In 2017, I interviewed a mother who, along with her teenage daughter, had been gang-raped in a coffee field in Guatemala. The mother was pregnant at the time. María (not her real name) had a miscarriage and had to head north the next day to protect her daughter from being killed or kidnapped. Here, it is necessary to describe the mechanics of preliminary asylum interviews. María had heard about EBSC through word of mouth, as with most of our clients. She walked into our office with no prior appointment and inquired about seeking asylum. Like most of our clients, she did not know what the asylum process entailed or, if granted, exactly what type of status it offered.

I introduced myself to María in Spanish, offered her a glass of water, and walked with her to a private office. I emphasised that I was not a lawyer and could not give her legal advice. I said I was there as an immigration rights advocate to obtain her declaration and submit her request to be represented by EBSC. I explained that a declaration is a person's story about why they cannot return to their own country and why they are seeking protection from the US government. I briefly went over EBSC's four-page preliminary asylum interview form designed to obtain basic information about asylum

seekers, their family, how and when they came to the US, whether they have been a victim of a crime in the US, and finally, why they are seeking asylum. Before I began the interview, I put the form aside and told María that, regardless of the outcome, on a human level I valued her story and courage. I shared with her that there are no right or wrong answers and that I was deeply sorry she had to relive her trauma today and possibly again in an asylum hearing.

Once María began telling her story in Spanish, I began to take notes. I stayed silent so she would work through long pauses without any interruption. When she would choke on her tears, I asked if she would like to take a short break. After forty-five minutes, I had a broad sense of her narrative: María's parents escaped to the mountains in order to flee persecution during the Civil War. She was left at her grandparents' house where she grew up in extreme poverty and suffered from malnutrition. As a child, she worked on the field to help her grandparents put food on the table. She left her grandparents when she met her partner. She started a small business by selling clothes and almost immediately faced threats of extortion from *maras*. She could not manage to pay them and keep the business open, so she closed her shop. Meanwhile, her elder daughter was being coerced by *maras* to join their gang. Fearing that her daughter would get abducted, María pulled her from school and sent her to live with relatives in a different part of town. But the *maras* managed to find her. After the horrific incident, María was given twenty-four hours to leave Guatemala or have her daughter forced into sexual slavery.

Once I heard her story, I began to ask pointed questions to document specific dates and establish a clear timeline. Whenever I would run into a question, I would consult with our asylum director who was not present in the same room. For instance, María had a hard time remembering exactly what year her parents returned from the mountains. It was the director who shared with me that calendar years may not mean much to rural Guatemalans and suggested that I reframe the question through María's life. So, I asked María if her parents returned before or after the birth of her daughter, and I received a more reassuring answer. Once our asylum director had no more follow-up questions and certain details had been outlined, I thanked María for telling her story and reassured her that EBSC would get in touch with her soon. Then, I sat down to weave all my notes, written in Spanish and English, into her final declaration to be submitted to our director as part of María's application.

While writing María's declaration, the role of translation and many of its social and cultural valences became clearer to me. From the outset, María had to have some degree of faith that I would retell her story in a culturally sensitive and linguistically accurate manner. By now, it is hardly contentious or novel to suggest that translators and interpreters are far more than 'transmitter of words' and should be seen as 'agents of culture' (Barsky 1996: 46). In context, it means that after chatting with María I would have understood her level of access to educational institutions and her unique cultural background. María grew up in a Mam–Maya household and did not know much Spanish before moving to the US. During her ten years of residence in California, she learned Spanish from Mexican friends and co-workers. Many indigenous Guatemalans are ridiculed for not understanding Spanish. Given the conflicted relationship María had with the Spanish language, I was very careful not to move on to the next question even if she nodded affirmatively or answered briefly. I would rephrase questions multiple times to get a fully clear answer.

For instance, there is a section in the first part of the preliminary asylum interview that outlines different types of persecution. The categories that more closely applied to

her included *la etnia* (ethnicity) and *el género* (gender). Past experience had taught me that relying on a transnational social-scientific vocabulary, as exemplified by the question of whether she had experienced persecution based on her ethnicity or gender (*¿Usted ha sido objeto de persecución basado en su origen étnico o género sexual?*), would have led to silence, or upon insistence, a very brief answer. The term ‘*persecución*,’ outlined in the legal document of the Refugee Convention of 1951, had no meaning for someone like María. Given that I do not speak or understand the Mam language, the least I could do was to tap into a linguistic register attentive to María’s lived experiences, as opposed to using a generalised Anglophone lexicon with no roots in her local realities. With that in mind, I asked her the following questions: When you would walk on the street, would people ever make fun of your clothing? (*¿En la calle, la gente no se burlaba de su traje típico?*) or, When you would speak Mam on the street, would people call you names? (*¿Cuando hablaba Mam en la calle, que le decía la gente?*). This turn to a vernacular, non-imported lexicon proved to be the cultural-linguistic register through which María accessed the depth of her trauma. I no longer received silence or brief answers; instead she opened up and gave detailed answers about how she was regularly called ‘worthless [*no vales nada*]’ on the street and was told people ‘like her’ were not wanted in Guatemala (*aquí no queremos a gente así*).

Sahar Fathi’s chapter in this volume (Chapter 18) highlights the challenges asylum seekers face in the courtroom without an interpreter. Fathi shows how the US immigration system has failed to meet its own requirements regarding interpretation standards and identifies speakers of indigenous Latin American languages as among the most vulnerable communities in the US today. Later in this chapter, I will outline the implications of my work as a translator for the practice of interpretation. The success of a claimant’s institutional visibility may often rest on a particular iteration of their story produced in the process of translation. For instance, given María’s ethnic background, our asylum director advised me to ask if her rapists said anything before, during, and after the horrific incident that indicated she and her daughter were raped because they are indigenous or perceived to be so. I returned to María from the director’s office, again apologised that she had to relive her trauma, and asked: when they were raping you, did any of them make fun of your looks or way of speaking? (*¿Cuando le violaban, uno de ellos se burló de su idioma o vestimenta?*). Yes, she responded, ‘one of them kept saying that you are Indian, you shouldn’t be here [*eres una india, no deberías estar aquí*].’ With that response, my line of questioning gained an entirely different angle.

Establishing the fact that María and her daughter were targeted *because* they were indigenous (or perceived as such) helps to make her case more visible within asylum criteria and practices today. The Trump administration has attempted to make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for survivors of gang and domestic violence to seek asylum in the US. In a ruling, the former Attorney General Jeff Sessions argued that gang and domestic violence is not grounds for asylum (Benner and Dickerson 2018). The question of history seems to be all but elided from discussions on asylum. The 1970s and 1980s may be seen as bygone decades by the US legal system, but the history of Central American civil wars and their aftermath provides a key in understanding the psyche of Guatemalan and Salvadoran asylum seekers today.

Most survivors of violence in Central America are just beginning to come to terms with its personal, emotional, and cultural impact. For instance, in El Salvador there exist many support groups today that provide a platform for people to finally speak publicly about what they witnessed as children or adults during the Civil War. For years, their

governments denied any wrongdoing and heavily punished those who challenged its narrative (Danner 1993). The US government has still not apologised for or acknowledged its military and political support for dictatorial regimes, its facilitation of their genocide, and for criminalising legitimate and credible asylum cases in the 1980s. Political figures such as Elliott Abrams, responsible for providing cover for crimes against humanity, have not even been reprimanded, let alone charged (Abrams was charged only for lying to Congress, but was pardoned by George H. W. Bush in 1992). In fact, Abrams was named a special envoy to Venezuela by the Trump administration in January 2019. Given this background, it is entirely unsurprising that most lawyers and immigration rights advocates who have worked with Central Americans tell of these refugees' deeply internalised lack of self-worth and value in their lived trauma. That is why I begin every interview with a personal note: 'I value your story regardless of any outcome.' Accessing the depth of one's trauma and establishing credibility in order to achieve institutional visibility requires placing a degree of value in one's story.

Members of the LGBTQ community in Central America have been a particularly vulnerable target of gang violence and rampant homophobic acts. In 2017, I interviewed Julio (also not his real name) who was born and raised in San Salvador, El Salvador. He has lived in the US as an undocumented immigrant for the past eighteen years. He heard about EBSC through a friend who has an ongoing case with us. Today, Julio identifies as gay. As a child and young adult, he was perceived as effeminate and was subject to verbal, physical, and sexual abuse as a result. During the preliminary asylum interview, I asked Julio if he had been a victim of verbal or physical abuse. Julio had finished high school in El Salvador so I translated the question on the English-language form word by word and without modifying its register: *¿Has sido la víctima de acoso verbal o físico basado en tu orientación sexual?* He answered yes, and elaborated on how such treatment made him feel.

Asylum declarations need to be detailed, mainly to establish credibility. Julio was extremely embarrassed to divulge any details of his abusive treatment in El Salvador. Given that I was still establishing my own trustworthiness to him, I did not insist further. After an hour, I took his declaration to EBSC's managing attorney. She had a number of questions regarding the nature of certain encounters and asked for more details concerning verbal abuse. So, I returned to Julio, sitting by himself in a separate office, and explained why those details would matter to his case. It was clear the idea of repeating abusive terms pained him a great deal, so I said: 'I know how deeply upsetting this must be for you and I am terribly sorry you have to hear them again, but would it be OK if I read you some of those terms and you could tell me if you have been called by such labels at home, work, or school?' He agreed. At EBSC, I had learned about homophobic attitudes and behaviours in Central America and Mexico, so I was familiar with a number of pejorative terms unique to that region (for instance, the word '*hueco*' in Castilian Spanish merely means 'hole,' but in Central America it is also a homophobic term).

Several weeks later, EBSC decided to take on Julio's case. I was assigned to work with him to produce a more extensive version of his declaration, one that EBSC would ultimately submit as part of his petition for asylum. One of the areas in which our attorney needed more clarity was Julio's experience with sexual abuse. When he was ten years old, Julio had been regularly raped for three years by his older cousin. During our second meeting, I noticed that Julio did not use terms like *abuso sexual* (sexual abuse) and *violación* (rape) to characterise his experience. I was less wedded to any single term and more committed to creating a space wherein Julio could describe his

trauma on his own (linguistic) terms. He was deeply conflicted about it and was thinking through what it did to him then and how it impacts him now. He said, 'I feel like it took away my innocence [*me quitó la inocencia*].' I asked, 'What do you mean by that?' He replied, 'I didn't know what [act] was good or bad [*no sabía si estaba bien o estaba mal*].' He then shared that he had never disclosed his story to anyone before.

In another session, he talked more about how 'feeling different [*me sentía diferente*]' as a child and being 'perceived as different [*me veían diferente*]' shaped his relationship with his parents and extended family. He shared that his father regularly told him 'you are not from God [*no eres de Dios*]' and his uncle, their family barber, refused to ever cut his hair because that required touching him. So, I asked him 'What would it mean to see what your cousin did to you as rape?' He replied, 'Yes, it was [*Si, era*],' followed by a long silence. But he still did not feel comfortable uttering the term '*violación*.' I asked, 'do you think the reason he raped you was because he saw you as different?' He said, 'yes,' but did not elaborate. I had to dig deeper by tapping into his experience with homophobic attitudes and behaviour. I said, 'When he was in bed with you, would your cousin ever make fun of your appearance or way of walking or speaking?' 'Yes,' he said, 'he would often tell me to "behave like a man [*compórtate como hombre*]."' Julio's answer offered me a new angle with which to explore his trauma, specifically his experience with rape.

At the end, EBSC made Julio's case visible within what is enshrined as 'discrimination based on sexuality' in asylum laws. But simply asking Julio whether he had been a victim of homophobic acts would not have activated the details of his trauma, blocked by his survival instincts. Doing so necessarily requires speaking in a register that is attentive to a claimant's lived experience and that highlights the importance of translators and interpreters whose linguistic knowledge goes beyond books and classrooms and is complemented by knowledge of culture and history. In my first encounter with Julio, I took him to an office space with a poster of Óscar Romero on the wall. It was an attempt at making him feel more welcome, letting him know he was in a space where the suffering and resilience of his people were acknowledged. Julio referred to our sessions as therapy and at the end of each one he would tell me, 'Thank you for listening [*Gracias por escuchar*].' In September 2018, Julio was granted asylum in San Francisco.

Translators and interpreters have played a formative role in the Sanctuary Movement. Translators afforded legal institutions access to a host of key documents in the evaluation of an asylum claim, including birth certificates, police reports, testimonies, psychological evaluations, and medical records. Interpreters played a vital role by giving asylum officers and judges access to stories of suffering and survival. Both translators and interpreters cultivated an inclusive and trustworthy space wherein asylum seekers opened age-old wounds and in so doing facilitated their ability to tell their full story with dignity and respect. By making thousands of first-hand testimonies available in English at a time when Central American and US governments were actively silencing them, translators and interpreters helped to create a 'counter-narrative' that later guided international investigators to uncover the extent of atrocities committed in Guatemala and El Salvador (Baker 2006).

In 1982, EBSC was established in response to an urgent humanitarian crisis in Central America. Very few people who got involved then thought that the Sanctuary Movement would be alive and well in 2020. Today, EBSC does much more than represent cases of affirmative asylum. It has fostered a community of lawyers, advocates, immigrants, and

asylum seekers who seek to create more ‘counter-narratives.’ It understands that the questions of history, cultural visibility, and social empowerment are necessarily interconnected. EBSC has worked with a population that has been told by their government that they did not matter, then they were told by the US government that they were unworthy of protection, and finally they were made invisible within a legal system that ignored their struggles and the resilience it took to overcome them.

Given these hostile conditions, it is unsurprising that so many Central American asylum seekers feel ashamed of coming forward to seek asylum. They have been told by different US administrations that their stories are unworthy of being heard. Like all translators and interpreters at EBSC, I have understood my task as more than translating from Spanish into English with accuracy but also remain attentive to the historical, social, ethnic, and cultural power dynamics that are embedded in our mode of encounter. On the record, I attempted to tell a story that closely reflected asylum seekers’ cultural and linguistic registers. It was my job to convey to them that their story meant more than just a ‘declaration in support of a petition for asylum.’ What enabled me to do this was the context in which I had learned Spanish, and was able to effectively understand oral statements, while translating them into written documents. I studied Spanish in Mexico, where I personally witnessed how xenophobic attitudes negatively affected indigenous Mexicans. I noticed how indigenous languages with their own distinct literary tradition, like Zapoteco, are often dismissed as dialects (*dialectos*). Bringing an awareness of language politics into asylum interviews helped me to better connect with my clients on a cultural level and speak to them with a more familiar social register.

Finally, what does the Central American case teach us about the role of translation and interpretation and their interplay in immigration rights advocacy? To make a credible and compelling asylum claim is to be made visible within a legal category. The asylum lexicon used by legal institutions worldwide may pose as universal, but it is entirely detached from linguistic, cultural, and historical realities in Guatemala, El Salvador, and many other countries. When it comes to the practice of interpretation, fluency and grammaticality should be seen as far less ideal than the ability to form questions that asylum seekers would understand by speaking directly to their lived trauma without using any legal jargon. In fact, interpreters should be given more leeway by courts and asylum hearings in ignoring institutionally imported terms like ‘persecution’ or ‘ethnicity’ and rendering them intelligible within a specific cultural, socio-economic, and linguistic context. Unlike interpreters, translators are less constrained by time and can delve deeper into questions of translation through the process of give-and-take with asylum seekers whom they interview. In fact, translators with a literary background can enrich the field and practice of interpretation from which it is often separated. Ultimately, I understand both translation and interpretation in the context of social activism to be a work of empathy.

As I began writing this chapter in December 2018, a large group of Central Americans headed toward the US on foot, most of them asylum seekers, women and children. Their exodus represents the failure of the state as a political institution in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. The Trump administration responded by equating asylum seekers with MS-13, blocking their access to legal ports of entry, separating children from their parents, and placing them in woefully crowded facilities and conditions (Amnesty International 2018). These unlawful policies have again summoned a group of translators and interpreters, from organisations like EBSC, to advocate for their rights. Unlike the 1980s, there is now a significant community of Central Americans in the US

who are demanding to be part of the national debate on immigration and asylum laws. In February 2019, three thousand holders of Temporary Protective Status (TPS), most of them from El Salvador, marched in front of the White House with a single dignified slogan: Nothing about us, without us (Lang 2019).¹

Related topics

Activist Narratives; The Right to Understand and to be Understood; Resistant Recipes; Citation and Recitation.

Note

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