Sengupta on Bakara, 'Journal of Narrative Theory'

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It was a fortuitous coincidence that this special issue of the Journal of Narrative Theory with a focus on refugee literature came to me at almost the same time as a compilation of Tibetan children’s artwork done in exile collected in a meticulously edited volume called The Art of Exile, which came out of painting clubs run with the help of the Friends of Tibetan Women’s Association and Sarah K. Lukas. The two texts have been speaking to each other in my mind. At this moment, the issues of refugeehood, labor, and aesthetic representation have taken an urgency in an unprecedented way while refugee literature has undergone significant narratorial and generic changes that we need to be attentive to. In the process, words like “exile,” “home,” and “belonging” assume a new resonance that is “fulsomely political and critical” where “in an epoch marked by perpetual war and rising inequality across the globe, and the intensification of Europe’s decade’s long ‘refugee crisis’ the ideas and affects found in writing by and about refugees have become sources of intellectual and aesthetic resistance to both xenophobic nationalism and neoliberal globalisation” (pp. 290-91). In the introduction to the volume, Hadji Bakara’s words quoted above are prescient: they alert us to the new narrative and aesthetic strategies of survival and belonging in an ever-shifting and chaotic world of global capital as the refugee narratives from the margins of nation-states challenge stereotypes of national sovereignty and rootedness to posit their stories not as victims but as agents of a political consciousness of creating a sustainable world of community and affect.

The volume opens with the words of an old exile, Bertolt Brecht, whose Refugee Conversations (1956) is discussed by Jana Schmidt. Yasmine Shamma’s brilliant essay, “‘Heaven is Green’: The Ecoglobalism of Refugee Desert Gardens,” is thought provoking and challenges many assumptions about refugeehood. Shamma’s interview of a Syrian woman refugee in Al Azraq camp in Jordan who planted a tree is the highlight of this volume. The poems of Khaled Mattawa are a searing testimony to what it means to be a refugee today, literally so, as in his poem “Fuel Burns.” Ashna Ali’s “Ugly Affects: Migritude and Black Mediterranean Counternarratives of Migrant Subjectivity” studies two overlapping fields of cultural studies through the works of Shailja Patel and Igiaba Scego. The poetry of Kenyan performance poet Patel in Migritude (2008) shares certain racial concerns with the word “negritude” but “refers to a generation of greater racial and geographic diversity” as when Patel asserts the migrant’s obsession with fitting in with the new culture: “We absorb information without asking questions / Questions cost us jobs, visas, lives. / We watch and copy / We try to please” (pp. 378-79, 381). Ali posits the idea that migritude shares some issues with Black Mediterranean studies that look at transhistorical relationships on both sides of the Mediterranean, especially regarding
issues of labor, contingency, and an emphasis on material history of movement and scarcity. Nasia Anam’s essay, “Encampment as Colonization: Theorizing the Representation of Refugee Spaces,” another valuable addition to the volume, takes up the liminality and temporariness of migrant spaces, like tents and encampments, to deconstruct how they challenge European notions of citizenship and sovereignty. Anam looks at three texts: Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson’s play *The Jungle* (2017), Jenny Erpenbeck’s novel *Go, Went, Gone* (originally published in German in 2015) in English translation, and Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* (2017).

This volume of essays asks an important question of its readers: what is a home? And in moments of extreme and widespread movements of people in this century through wars and climatic depredations, that question remains at the center of our societies. Is home a sacralized space where, even when gripped by fear and loneliness, we always go back to in deed and in memory? When asked about their sense of home within the refugee camps of Jordan, displaced Syrian women in their conversations often came around to “their makeshift (and often illegal) gardens” where the plants and the greenery added to the sense of a home (p. 325). The refugee respondent told Shamma that she was ridiculed by her neighbors for planting a tree outside her caravan but she did not care. “I would tell them that it does not matter if I stay here for a long time or if I leave tomorrow. If I leave tomorrow this tree will stay as a standing memory of us to the people that will live here after us. It could serve as a means of shadow for a passer-by or a place where a bird could nest. After that I started planting more things, until it became a garden” (p. 330).

The volume captures some extraordinary moments like this in the lives of refugees and its success lies in these moments. However, in the many issues regarding transnational movements of peoples and their affective representations, I missed the presence of children or young adults in these essays. It would have been both just and important to assess their experiences of homelessness or their resistance to a stultifying transitional vagabond life in camps and refugee settlements. This missed opportunity to locate and recognize the experiences of children is a lacuna in an otherwise thoughtfully presented volume. That is why reading *The Art of Exile* along with this anthology was a profoundly moving experience for me. For the thousands of Tibetan children who have grown up without a homeland, exile has meant a surreptitious loss of a distinct spiritual culture. “To them, Tibet is a real, albeit imagined place that must be conjured up and preserved in any way possible.”[1] For refugees, that is the singular most important aspect of an itinerant life: to sustain a little bit of home wherever they go.

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