

Voices from the "Jungle": Stories from the Calais Refugee Camp by the Calais Writers

Sabreena Ghaffar-Siddiqui

Volume 35, numéro 1, 2019

Racialized Refuge

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1060681ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1060681ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Centre for Refugee Studies, York University

ISSN

0229-5113 (imprimé)

1920-7336 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Ghaffar-Siddiqui, S. (2019). Compte rendu de [Voices from the "Jungle": Stories from the Calais Refugee Camp by the Calais Writers]. *Refuge*, 35(1), 88–89.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1060681ar>

Copyright (c) Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees, 2019



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

of whiteness was, in reality, politically advantageous for white Creoles. Free black Creoles, on the other hand, found it imperative to reinforce the triracial system as a means to mitigate the oppressive confines of the black/white binary system under Jim Crow. While social and cultural differentiation from Anglo-American understandings of blackness was vital for black Creoles, it was not until the late twentieth century that black Creoles cautiously began to conceptualize their racial identity in Anglo-American terms. It was the efforts of black Creoles that steadfastly deterred the Anglo-Americanization and consolidation of blackness for many decades in Louisiana. Likened against such historical experiences, Parham's present-day empirical work unearths how white Creole identity exists as merely a historical form of racial identification deriving from the Latin/Caribbean system. Furthermore, she outlines how contemporary experiences for black Creoles continue to be defined by struggles against competing racial interpretations, mainly how to manage their Creole heritage against Anglo-American notions of blackness.

The sheer depth of the genealogical experiences uncovered by Parham attests to the strength of her methodological rigour. Parham skilfully sketches how racial systems were not merely eclipsed by another. Instead, she demonstrates how each system has shaped the identification and integration experiences of black and white Creoles with historically invariable points of vigour. *American Routes* captures the multifaceted ways in which the racial landscape of Louisiana, marked by the existence of a palimpsest, makes accessible alternate and more flexible forms of racial identification and interpretations. Cautiously, however, Parham asks readers not to mistake such adaptability in the racial palimpsest as evidence of the diminution of racial inequality, since racism and white supremacy persist, even in such multilayered contexts, to disadvantage racialized people.

The theoretical offerings of *American Routes* are plentiful. The book's distinctiveness is palpably highlighted by its historically comparative efforts. While Parham's work focuses on the specificities of the route from St. Domingue/Haiti to Louisiana, she also briefly reflects on how contemporary Latin American and Caribbean immigrants similarly offer new racial logics and cultural interpretations, imparting a similar complexity and variability that effectively resists Anglo-American interpretations of race. Parham opens up a pathway to not only consider non-white immigrant experiences across time and space, but also to recognize how racialized integration is affected by the historical, spatial, and political contexts of immigration routes. Immigrants to the United States are framed as arriving with history, culture, and racialized ways of being that do not necessarily dissolve once borders are crossed. Notably, the racial palimpsests approach makes visible the socio-political challenges faced by immigrants of colour as they oscillate between racial systems that are at times incongruous.

What Parham's work most strikingly demands is a centring of the experiences of racialized immigrants as a way to thwart the too often de-racialized frameworks for considering immigrant integration. In addition, this approach departs from the methodologies of critical race theory, which seek to centralize and frame race relations within a black/white binary. By bringing to the fore immigrant struggles to negotiate racial interpretations, categorizations, and logics, the racial palimpsests analytic offers future researchers an innovative framing of immigration more attuned to the dynamic realities of race and racism.

Sonia D'Angelo is a PhD candidate in the Sociology Department at York University. The author may be reached at sond3@yorku.ca.

Voices from the "Jungle": Stories from the Calais Refugee Camp



Calais Writers

London: Pluto, 272 pp.

Statistics can place a sobering spotlight on the global refugee crisis but cannot possibly convey the immeasurable and detrimental impact of the forced displacement of human beings who become labelled "refugees." *Voices from the "Jungle"* is a collection of haunting first-hand accounts of life before, during, and after living in a makeshift refugee camp located on a reclaimed landfill site on the outskirts of Calais,

France. Notorious for its poor living conditions, the infamous Calais refugee camp was home to those fleeing a variety of social and political conditions from all over the world.

At a time when Western media/politics seem to centre on conversations of war/conflict in faraway lands and immigration policy at home, this important book gives voice to the people most affected by, but most often excluded from, the discussion.

The book is co-authored by the “Calais Writers,” twenty-two former residents of the “Jungle.” The stories were initially written as part of a University for All education initiative launched by the University of East London between 2015 and 2016.

A key theme found in the stories is dehumanization. Studies have shown how media portrayals contribute to the consistent dehumanization of refugees. As a man named Africa, from Sudan, described it, “Because we have come here, we are not human beings, we become animals, a new kind of animal that has developed at this time; it’s known as ‘refugee’ ... they treat us worse than they might treat animals” (135.) In describing his need for “respect, dignity a stable life and solidarity,” one refugee from Afghanistan interestingly uses the terms *humans of Calais* and *refugees of Calais*, instead of *people of Calais* (154). This type of desperate call for refugees to be seen as human beings is echoed in many other stories throughout the book.

Another important theme in the book is identity and discrimination. In addition to severe physical difficulties, the writers detail numerous social, psychological, and philosophical challenges they faced living in the jungle. One hurdle was coming to terms with their newfound identity labels of “migrants/refugees,” with all other elements of their identity ostensibly stripped away. Babak, from Iran, put it this way: “A migrant is not only a word, not only news, not only a problem for society: a human being is living behind this word. He has feelings, hope for future, and there are some people waiting for him to come back, and a family waiting for good news” (126).

The experiences of racism, discrimination, and hate faced by refugees are interwoven with experiences of humanity, care, and compassion, as well as the very uncomfortable experience of being pitied. Ali, from Iran, juxtaposes the contradictory emotions directed at him: “Sundays in the Jungle: pity. Outside the Jungle: hatred” (128). Sadly, many wondered how differently they would have been seen and treated if they were not refugees. Babak put it this way: “And they look at me differently from how they did before ... they were waiting for a weird event to happen but they finally saw a human being but with different skin colour, hair colour, culture, language ... maybe we met in an inappropriate place. Maybe if they saw me in a coffee shop in a different city they would have another idea about me” (126).

Africa (from Sudan) details the racism he feels in the small Welsh city he moved to after his time in the Jungle: “You can feel racism sometimes in peoples’ eyes when they look at you, and in the expressions on their faces” (224). The stories convey a strong sense that those who are Black experience the strongest effects of racism.

Another theme in the volume is agency. As one reads Shaheen’s story about his long and traumatic journey into

Calais, led by cruel and greedy smugglers (78–82). It is hard to believe a human being could survive such an ordeal. Those being smuggled appear comparable to a powerless herd of animals with no voice or control over their fate. The smugglers’ callousness and the police brutality at border checkpoints reverberate in almost every story. Mani (from Iran) interestingly compared the smugglers to the rats he had mistakenly fed: “After some weeks, one night, I saw a rat in my shelter, they had grown so much, and I had helped them” (182). He was fully aware that in his desperation he had been paying and, in a sense, feeding the smugglers’ greed. The overwhelming burden of responsibility, the feelings of helplessness, loss, and guilt, and then ultimately having little to no agency resounds throughout the stories in this book.

A final observation is what is missing from the book. As pointed out by the editors, the book lacks female voices. Also it would have been appropriate to dedicate a chapter to the theme of faith, as it is de facto an important part of almost all the stories in the volume. For many, the persecution they faced for their faith, or lack thereof, became a reason for them to leave. For many, their faith became another reason to be hated in Europe, and for many others faith became a powerful tool for survival and hope. Shaheen gives a harrowing account of one of his attempts to illegally cross into Bulgaria. After being attacked by police dogs, brutally beaten, and shot at by border guards, he and his friend were put in a cold dirty room and told, “You are Muslims ... we are keeping you here in this room, pigs” (68). Here, we see how race, religion, and refugee status intersect and triply affect the discrimination and hate directed towards the men. Alternatively, Majid (from Iran) describes how his faith became a means for survival: “The ship slowly went back to the Turkish side ... Maybe this had happened because our navigator was so brave, or because of our prayer, or because God was on our side, or because our dreams were so powerful, or all of these things!” (78).

Similarly, after unsuccessful attempts to enter England, Shikeb (from Afghanistan) insists, “One day I will cross. Because there is God, there is hope” (187). Multifaceted identities and individual stories are too often drowned out by stereotyped, essentialized, and stigmatizing narratives of what the Western world imagines is the universal definition of “migrant/refugee”—“desperate” and “dangerous” “other.” This book pays homage to the tens of millions of refugee voices that have never been heard.

Sabreena Ghaffar-Siddiqui is a PhD candidate and researcher in McMaster University’s Department of Sociology and can be reached at sabreena@mcmaster.ca.