

## Book Review

**MARIE GODIN, KATRINE MOLLER HANSEN, AURA LOUNASMAA, CORINNE SQUIRE, and TAHIR ZAMAN, editors, *Voices from the 'Jungle': Stories from the Calais Refugee Camp*. London: Pluto Press. 2017, 266 pp. (pb £14.99).**

Between the summer of 2015 and October 2016, the Calais refugee camp hosted 10,000 refugees from countries including Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Sudan, and Syria. The camp quickly became known in the French and global media as the 'Jungle' – a name suggesting a wild and unruly home to thousands of faceless inhabitants. Many of the camp's residents themselves came to adopt this name for the camp, describing it as unfit for humans. The 'Jungle' was notorious for its poor sanitation and healthcare and insufficient food and water supplies. *Voices from the 'Jungle': Stories from the Calais Refugee Camp* relays in their own words the experiences of those who lived there. The University of East London offered an undergraduate course on 'Life Stories' in the Jungle in 2015 and 2016, during which it became clear that course participants wanted their stories to be known to a wider audience. Many were familiar with portrayals in the media of refugees as 'greedy, deceitful and dangerous' (p. 6). This book presents an alternative narrative of suffering, but also of resilience.

The book is organised into five chapters to reflect the different stages of each author's experience – of home, of journeys, of living in, and finally, of leaving the camp. The

structure of each story varies between poems, prose, diary entries, photographs, and drawings, reflecting each author's unique voice. In this way, the book replaces the dehumanising 'refugee' label with ethnographic insight into the realities of displacement. Babak from Iran reminds us that 'A migrant is not only a word, not only news, not only a problem for society: a human is living behind this word' (p. 126). The refugee as anthropologist gives a detailed view of individual journeys towards the camp. Shaheen from Afghanistan, for example, describes his terror when, in the middle of the Aegean Sea, the five-person boat he was sharing with twenty-one others began to sink. Only five were to survive. Majid from Iran tells of a journey filled with waiting and queuing, and being directed onto trains and buses by soldiers whilst having no idea of his destination. On finally arriving at the camp, the waiting was not over. Many people were forced to spend long periods in the Jungle as they waited for the outcomes of their asylum claims. Teza, from Iran, describes waiting for the results of a legal appeal to join his wife in the UK: 'It's too hard. I am standing by for the visa – every day I check the email. Maybe they will reject the application. Maybe, I don't know' (p. 136). The impact of a life lived in limbo on mental health is hinted at, with the last line of Babak's 'shopping list' poem reading 'Please buy an empty mind, this one I want for myself' (p. 127).

Many authors were convinced of the importance of showing the outside world what living conditions in the Jungle were like, stressing, 'We are not animals' (p. 115). We hear about the dangerous ways in which people struggle to keep warm, making fires in their tents by burning wood and plastic. We get a sense of the shame of living in makeshift accommodation. Several refugees admit that they lie to their families back at home about where they are living: 'I told [my mother] a lie because I don't want her to worry,' says Habibi, from Afghanistan (p. 125). And we catch a glimpse of the deplorable conditions in which one mother struggles to raise her children: 'They gave us one caravan. But there are no toilets. We don't have anything...and everything is dirty, there are lots of bacteria' (Safia from Afghanistan, p. 120). The brutality of members of the French police force towards the refugees who tried to get to the UK through the Channel Tunnel is frequently alluded to. Haris from Pakistan, for example, photographs people running from tear gas: 'They use

tear gas and throw water from the water trucks to stop the people. They use that a lot. I can see it from where my tent is', he says (p. 132).

In spite of the many difficulties refugees experienced while living in the camp, many authors also made the conscious decision to show that, as Babak writes, 'in this "Jungle", in the hardest situation, good things still exist' (p. 126). Haris explains that 'There is a lot of beauty in the camp. Beauty depends on the mind and the eyes through which you look at things. You can capture good images as well as bad images. It depends on you. I want to give a good image' (p. 147). Religion is shown to be a source of strength and hope for many. Ali from Iran took pictures of Friday prayers: 'It's a beautiful day. All the praying shows that they have hope in God' (p. 140), while Teddy from Eritrea photographs two women praying inside the church (p. 144). Africa, from Sudan, describes the kindness of others: 'Someone sees someone who is cold. Maybe he will give you his blanket: "Take this, you are colder than me." You can find the real kind of human being here' (p. 155). Babak describes an old man who takes pride in his home: 'I took a picture of a man sitting in his chair in front of the container. It is sunny and he is looking at the sky; he made tea. It is his home. I think he lives alone here. He cares about his house' (p. 145).

The 'Jungle' has since been demolished. Some of its inhabitants have dispersed to housing and processing centres in France, while others sleep rough on the streets. Many have scattered elsewhere across Europe. This book remains as a valuable artefact of people's experiences there, from which many lessons can and should be learned. By presenting multiple narratives about the camp from an emic perspective, *Voices from the 'Jungle'* encourages readers to reflect upon their own perceptions of and responses to refugees. As Haris puts it: 'When someone hears the name "Jungle", they think about animals, not human beings. Here in Calais there is a jungle, yes, but humans are living in the "Jungle", so...You show them the people who are living in here. You show them the human life' (p. 254). In particular, the book challenges narratives of refugees as vulnerable and passive victims – a trope often used by the international aid sector to generate funds during 'crises'. Ali from Iran notes that even some of the volunteers who visit the camp are 'Full of kind hello with pity. Pity!' (p. 128). Whilst acknowledging the suffering they have endured, the

authors also highlight their own strength, dignity, and hope for the future. Such a meaningful form of 'participation' could be of much value to an aid sector that often seems to forget the humanity and resilience of those it is seeking to help.

As with anything so original as to set a precedent, *Voices from the 'Jungle'* has its flaws. The chapter structure, which divides people's stories into themes, can feel disjointed. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the choppiness of this narrative technique sometimes risks creating a depersonalising effect. Only one woman's voice is included. The introduction explains why – 'women did not attend the potentially mixed-gender Life Stories classes or the photography workshops, and the team was not able to provide women-only classes or workshops, because of lack of resources and access' (p. 11) – but their absence draws attention to the work that remains to ensure that all refugees' voices are heard and included in local, national, and global arenas. As a first step, however, this book is nothing less than a triumph. It offers an innovative approach that has the potential to change how the public, governments, and humanitarians, view, represent, and respond to refugees.

*Emma Soye (University of Sussex)*

## **About the Author**

Emma Soye has worked as a research consultant on refugee wellbeing for several organisations in the UK and the Middle East. Emma has an MA in Development Studies from the Institute of Development Studies. She is currently undertaking a PhD at the University of Sussex on migrant and refugee wellbeing in UK schools.

e.soye@sussex.ac.uk