

Book Reviews

Citizens of Nowhere: From Refugee Camp to Canadian Campus



Debi Goodwin

Canada: Doubleday Canada, 2010. pp. 326.

With one of the worst droughts in over half a century, the population of the Dadaab refugee camps bordering Somalia—originally built to accommodate 90,000—has swelled to over 440,000 as of August 2011.¹ Given the hardships borne by individuals “warehoused” in one of the most prolonged cases of exile in the world today, Goodwin’s book *Citizens of Nowhere* offers a timely and poignant account of persevering young refugees in Kenya who seek to better their prospects by resettling in Canada. The idea for the book was germinated during Goodwin’s 2007 trip to Dadaab as the producer of the award-winning documentary *The Lucky Ones*. Like the documentary, *Citizens of Nowhere* offers an intimate look at the conflicting emotions faced by refugee youth (between seventeen and twenty-four years old) who are the recipients of a coveted resettlement opportunity to pursue their tertiary education at colleges and universities across Canada. It is an opportunity that represents both a solution to protracted exile and a new form of dislocation—a journey away from the familiarities of “home.”

Over the course of five chapters (326 pages), Goodwin traces the turbulent lives of eleven refugee students (ten Somalis and one Oromo) for one year as they resettle in Canada through the World University Service of Canada’s Student Refugee Program (WUSC SRP), and confront the challenges of cultural adjustment, isolation, and integration. The WUSC SRP offers a particularly intriguing (and exceptional) case study as it is the only program of its kind in the world to link resettlement with access to post-secondary education. In featuring eleven of the over 1,000 students who have been sponsored by the WUSC SRP since 1978, the book offers “a snapshot of a refugee’s first year in Canada [...] of the challenges to their identities, of the changes in their attitudes toward their own culture and their new country.”² While *Citizens of Nowhere* displays the same narrative qualities as other popular literature on transnational refugee youth (such as *They Threw Fire on Us from the Sky* and *What Is the What*),³ Goodwin moves away from the

subject of “Lost Boys” in America, to engage with the previously unexamined case of Somali youth in Canada.

Goodwin’s knack for storytelling enables her to paint a vivid image of the many localities surveyed in the book (from the camps of Dadaab to the bustling streets of Toronto and Vancouver and prairie communities in Brandon and Saskatoon), as well as to construct an intimate portrait of each student’s psychosocial journey through the resettlement process. What results is an engaging narrative that skillfully blends subjective, sociological, and historical elements. She refrains from being an omniscient narrator by acknowledging her positionality within the story, both as a witness and a source of social support to the students, weaving in personal reflections and anecdotes where appropriate. That said, Goodwin also gives voice to the students in creative ways by incorporating their Facebook and email communications, editorials written for Dadaab newsletters, and excerpts of essays written at Canadian universities.

Goodwin draws on over one hundred interviews⁴ and hours of observation, in both Kenya and Canada, and her journalistic background is ever present. She provides a brief, yet thorough, background on refugee issues in Canada and Kenya, the role of the UNCHR and other NGO actors in Dadaab and the Somali conflict, though remaining more descriptive than analytical in her approach. As such, the book has the potential to reach beyond academic and journalism circles and engage a broader audience in discussions of refugee issues. Although not academic in nature, and despite a lack of footnoting and citations that may dissuade scholars from drawing on it as a resource, the book offers several recurring themes for academic inquiry.

The youth perspective encapsulated throughout the book is one of its greatest contributions to ongoing scholarship in refugee studies. Themes that are often explored in relation to migrant adults, such as the importance of sending remittances, fiscal responsibilities to family, and efforts to retain cultural conformity in the diaspora, are shown to be paramount aspects of the youth experience as well. Despite physical separation from their communities in Dadaab, the

students maintain their cultural norms and often struggle to understand and/or accept Canadian customs; as one young woman articulates, “If I lose my Somali identity or my Muslim identity or my African identity, I don’t believe I can understand Western culture. If I can keep my identity, I can look at the other things from other cultures and understand them.”⁵ For her and her peers, religious and family obligations provide consistency and strength in an unfamiliar world.

Also noteworthy is their unwavering desire to support those in Dadaab. While Somali remittance sending has been explored in great detail by numerous academics, the generational aspect of these flows is often overlooked.⁶ Goodwin’s work reveals how responsibilities to provide for family are often a key motive for many of the students to accept placements in Canada, yet to what extent pressures to remit may implicate students’ academic performance and social integration remains outside the scope of the book. As such, long-term research on the economic and social integration of these students could prove valuable, as there is a paucity of research on refugees’ experiences with higher education in Canada.⁷

Like Horst’s research in Dadaab,⁸ Goodwin’s account also sheds light on the agency exhibited by refugees who are able to use personal resolve, transnational networks, and in some cases deception and manipulation to navigate the confinements placed on them by “the refugee regime.”⁹ Goodwin offers glimpses into the ways young Somalis mobilize their agency, using diasporic communication and remittance sending to bridge multiple homeplaces, sustain important networks, and demonstrate solidarity with those still in exile. In particular, she explains how Somali refugee youth in Canada were able to draw upon their agency to initiate Students for Refugee Students¹⁰—a voluntary group of WUSC students who pay annual membership fees to support secondary education in Dadaab. Again, while there has been increased academic engagement with diaspora philanthropy, youth-led associations are largely overlooked.¹¹ Moreover, like many diasporans, the youth in *Citizens of Nowhere* use the Internet as a transnational space both for social organizing and for debating socio-cultural and political issues from abroad.¹² Using Goodwin’s narrative as a springboard, further investigation into the role of Somali and/or resettled youth in remittance sending, philanthropy, and online networking could greatly contribute to studies of transnationalism and diaspora.

Beyond this, the book explores several crosscutting themes that emerge from the variant, often evolving, youth perspectives on gender roles, Somali clanism, and politics. It is apropos the first of these themes where cultural differences between the author and her protagonists are

most evident. Goodwin is often perplexed by the students’ concepts of gender, describing one young woman’s views of gender roles as “confusing.”¹³ That said, the students’ opinions on the subject are often quite divergent; while one young woman maintains that “girls are not equal,” another eagerly enrolls in women studies courses, interrogating the gender roles of her own culture and those in North America.¹⁴ Again, a more long-term study could help unveil to what extent refugees’ understandings of gendered norms are contested and reconfigured over time in Canada.

The sensitivity surrounding Somali clanism is another subject Goodwin becomes acutely aware of through her interviews. Many youth were hesitant to discuss their clan identity, frequently reiterating a desire to transcend clan-based differences. For example, one student asserts: “Any Somali is my brother or sister, and one of my ambitions is to eliminate this clan issue. When people ask me if I am Somali, some people try to ask me from which clan, and I am not going to answer it,” while another concurs, “When I associate myself with a clan, I blame another clan for the tragedy of my family. That would be something I don’t like. It would be against my principles.”¹⁵ Such statements invite parallels to scholarly work examining how refugee youth use their generational and geographical liminality to redefine ethnic or clan-based hierarchies.¹⁶

Clan affiliations are just some of many “labels”¹⁷ these youth navigate in life and throughout *Citizens of Nowhere*. They traverse not only multiple places, but also multiple social and institutional categories: “asylum seeker,” “refugee,” “permanent resident,” “student,” “Canadian.” Goodwin is able to elucidate these developments in a more accessible and personal manner than most academic literature, and I highly recommend her book to anyone interested in refugee youth, resettlement programs, and/or transnational identities and networks. An exceptional piece of non-fiction, Goodwin’s work will, I hope, inspire more (former) refugee youth to publish their own reflections. As Goodwin says: “In the end, I was a witness. Someday, I know, some of them will write their own stories with their own sensibilities. I hope they do. One year in Canada is, after all, just a beginning.”¹⁸

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NOTES

1. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Horn of Africa Crisis—Humanitarian Update*, accessed August 16, 2011, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=4e45075e5&query=dadaab>.

2. Debi Goodwin, *Citizens of Nowhere* (Canada: Doubleday Canada, 2010), 7.
3. Benjamin Ajak, Benson Deng, Alephonsian Deng, Judy Bernstein, *They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky: The Story of Three Lost Boys from Sudan* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005); Dave Eggers, *What Is the What* (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2006).
4. Goodwin interviewed actors at all levels of the program including faculty advisors, alumni, overseas partners, program coordinator Asni Mekkonen, and Director of CIC's refugee resettlement Debra Pressé, to paint a very accurate picture of the complexity of the SRP and the contribution it has made to Canada's resettlement program.
5. Goodwin, *Citizens of Nowhere*, 175.
6. Cindy Horst, *Xawilaad: The Importance of Overseas Connections in the Livelihoods of Somali Refugees in the Dadaab Refugee Camps of Kenya*, Working Paper Series / Transnational Communities (Oxford: University of Oxford, Transnational Communities Programme, 2002); Anna Lindley, *The Early Morning Phonecall: Somali Refugees' Remittances* (US: Berghahn Books, 2010); Laura Hammond, "Obligated to Give: Remittances and the Maintenance of Transnational Networks 'at Home' and Abroad," *Bildhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies* 9 (2010). One exception is: Laura Hammond et al., "Cash and Compassion: The Role of the Somali Diaspora in Relief, Development and Peace-Building" (commissioned for UNDP, Somalia, 2011).
7. As I have identified elsewhere, there are, however, numerous studies on the integration of refugee youth in Canadian primary and secondary schools, including: Lori Wilkinson, "Factors Influencing the Academic Success of Refugee Youth in Canada," *Journal of Youth Studies* 5, no. 2 (2002): 173–93; Lana Stermac et al., "Educational Experiences and Achievements of War-Zone Immigrant Students in Canada," *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies* 5, no. 2 (2010): 97–107; Isabel Kaprielian-Churchill, "Refugees and Education in Canadian Schools," *International Review of Education* 42, no. 4 (1996): 349–65; Cécile Rousseau, Aline Drapeau, and Ellen Corin, "School Performance and Emotional Problems in Refugee Children," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 66, no. 2 (1996): 239–51; Ahearn et al., "The Experience of Refugee Children," in *Refugees: Perspectives on the Experience of Forced Migration*, ed. A. Ager (London: Pinter, 1999).
8. Cindy Horst, *Transnational Nomads: How Somalis Cope with Refugee Life in the Dadaab Camps of Kenya*, Studies in Forced Migration (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2006).
9. For example, one student is described as "a guy who knew how to work around restrictions [in Dadaab]," and Goodwin suggests that "all of the students know the stories of people who pretended to belong to minority tribes like the Bantu who were resettled earlier"; see Goodwin, *Citizens of Nowhere*, 70.
10. Goodwin, *Citizens of Nowhere*, 150.
11. Exceptions include Aysa-Lastra, Garchitorena, Fagen, and Tchouassi, who all mention youth associations in passing, and Hammond et al., who investigate the ways in which Somali youth, specifically, are making valuable contributions to diaspora philanthropy. For example, the University College London Somali Students Society fundraised 700 pounds for the Dadaab refugee camps in December 2010. Similarly, the Worldwide Somali Students (WSS) promotes youth activism and fundraises for the higher education of Somali students. With over six hundred members in the UK, US, Canada, Australia, Malaysia, India, Egypt, Kenya, Uganda, Bangladesh, and China, WSS is currently organizing an initiative titled Operation Restore Hope 2012, whereby one thousand educated young Somalis will return to Somalia from the diaspora to offer their services and expertise in a variety of sectors. Maria Aysa-Lastra, "Diaspora Philanthropy: The Colombia Experience" (Boston: The Philanthropic Initiative Inc., Harvard University, 2007); Victoria P. Garchitorena, "Diaspora Philanthropy: The Philippine Experience" (Boston: The Philanthropic Initiative, Harvard University, 2007); Patricia Fagen, "Migration, Development and Social Services," in *Transatlantic Perspectives on Migration* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of International Migration, Georgetown University, 2009); Patricia Weiss Fagen, "Haitian Diaspora Associations and Their Investments in Basic Social Services in Haiti" (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2009); Gérard Tchouassi, "Altruistic Preferences as Motivation for Migrants in the Diaspora to Remit to Home Communities" *Research in Applied Economics* 2, no. 1 (2010); Laura Hammond et al., "Cash and Compassion."
12. Goodwin, *Citizens of Nowhere*, 171. Numerous scholars have begun investigating how information communication technology (ICT) is enabling diasporas to organize, pool their funds, and engage in debates (see Johnson, "Diaspora Philanthropy," 11; Van Hear, "Refugee Diasporas, Remittances, Development, and Conflict"; Newland et al., "Diaspora Philanthropy"; and Jennifer Brinkerhoff, *Digital Diasporas: Identity and Transnational Engagement* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Social networking sites such as Somali students on Facebook (with over four thousand members) are engaging in conversations around social remittances, diaspora philanthropy, and peace building (Hammond et al., "Cash and Compassion"). Brinkerhoff also draws upon Somali youth as an example of how diaspora organizing is being revolutionized through the internet. See Paula Doherty Johnson, "Diaspora Philanthropy: Influences, Initiatives, and Issues" (Boston: The Philanthropic Initiative, Harvard University, 2007): 11; Nicholas Van Hear, "Refugee Diasporas, Remittances, Development, and Conflict" (Migration Policy Institute, 2003), <http://www.migrationinformation.org/feature/display.cfm?ID=125>; Kathleen Newland, Aaron Terrazas, and Roberto Munster, "Diaspora Philanthropy: Private Giving and Public Policy," in *Migrants, Migration and Development*

- Program* (Washington, DC: USAID Migration Policy Institute, 2010); Laura Hammond et al., “Cash and Compassion.”
13. Goodwin, *Citizens of Nowhere*, 183.
 14. *Ibid.*, 185, 230.
 15. *Ibid.*, 266
 16. For example, in his 2008 research, Hoodfar finds that while Afghan refugee youth remain loyal to their families and communities of origin, they often seek to challenge the dominant ethnic/clan ideologies underpinning these social institutions, believing that clan affiliations “contradict a sense of equity and citizenry.” Homa Hoodfar, “The Long Road Home: Adolescent Afghan Refugees in Iran Contemplate ‘Return,’” in *Years of Conflict: Adolescence, Political Violence and Displacement*, ed. Jason Hart, Studies in Forced Migration (Portland, OR: Berghahn Books, 2008), 185.
 17. Roger Zetter, “Labelling Refugees: Forming and Transforming a Bureaucratic Identity,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 4, no. 1 (1991).
 18. Goodwin, *Citizens of Nowhere*, 8.

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Dual Disasters: Humanitarian Aid after the 2004 Tsunami



Jennifer Hyndman
Kumarian Press, Sterling, VA, 2011. pp. xvii, 171.

Jennifer Hyndman sets an ambitious goal in this slim volume, nothing less than a re-examination of the way in which humanitarian aid is provided in the light of the increasing complexity of humanitarian disasters. The international response to the tsunami, which struck countries around the Indian Ocean on December 26, 2004, provides the starting point for her analysis, but the scope of the book is broader than the impact of the tsunami alone. The bulk of the empirical material comes from Sri Lanka and the Indonesian province of Aceh, both locations where terrible devastation as a result of the tsunami coincided with ongoing separatist conflicts. This combination of political and environmental emergencies leads to the characterization “dual disasters” that forms the central theme of the book. This clear, straightforward term encapsulates a complex and detailed argument and is sure to be widely cited.

The core of the argument is that environmental emergencies and politically focused conflict have much in common and (in contrast to the common characterization of specifically natural disasters) both may be exacerbated by human action. The notion that there is no such thing as a purely natural disaster is now widely accepted but it is given new force here through the comparison of Sri Lanka and Aceh. In Aceh, the tsunami was a “key catalyst” (p. 105) for a peace agreement which ended the decades long conflict and still holds. In Sri Lanka, in contrast, the central agreement to

deliver assistance to areas of the country controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam broke down. The tsunami was followed by a gradual resumption of conflict which escalated to a catastrophic end in 2009 with what an official UN report has since estimated was as many as 40,000 civilian casualties.

Systematic comparative analysis of the two contexts is deliberately avoided. Hyndman anticipates and avoids any potential criticism that she is using the nation-state as a unit of analysis, which such a comparison would inevitably involve. Rather, she emphasizes the significance of scale, incorporating multiple scales into her analysis, from the individual human body (an analysis of the changing status of widows) to global political economy (discussion of the securitization of international aid). All of the analysis is empirically informed, including interviews with many of the key participants. The policy context is a key component of this analysis so there are obvious conclusions for policy—the inequality of responses received by individuals caught up in the different disasters, for example. Yet policy analysis is not the principal aim and the key questions are of a more theoretical nature. This approach is engaged since it seeks to address the context in which particular policy approaches are conceived rather than the policies themselves. Hyndman’s critical engagement has become a