

2018

Review of Making Refuge: Somali Bantu Refugees and Lewiston, Maine by Catherine Besteman

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Recommended Citation

Block, Ellen (2018) "Review of Making Refuge: Somali Bantu Refugees and Lewiston, Maine by Catherine Besteman," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, 102-104.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol2/iss1/10

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***Making Refuge: Somali Bantu Refugees and Lewiston, Maine.* Catherine Besteman. Duram and London: Duke University Press, 2016. 352 pages, \$26.95 paperback, \$94.95 cloth, ISBN 0822360276.**

Catherine Besteman conducted fieldwork in the late 1980's in the small village of Banta in southern Somalia. Implausibly, she was reunited with many of her former friends and interlocutors in Lewiston, Maine two decades later, laying the ground for this impressive ethnographic study. In Making Refuge, Besteman traces the experiences of Somali Bantu refugees from Somalia, through the Kenyan refugee camps, and to their resettlement in the United States. She shows how the prevailing view of refugees as "apolitical, docile, and dependent recipients" (Pg. 29), and as passive and grateful objects of humanitarian aid is both misconstrued and morally deficient. By tracing the particular journey of Somali Bantu families, she also underscores that not all immigrants are alike, and assimilation is not a universally desirable or feasible expectation. Finally, she shows the complex ways in which immigrants and host communities grapple with "the seepages, mutual transformations, and slow border crossings of all kinds," (Pg. 31) which characterize human mobility. While a transcontinental coincidence of migration brought Besteman back into close contact with her former interlocutors in this methodologically innovative work, it is Besteman's skill as an ethnographer that provides the emotional and intellectual rigor for this outstanding book.

In 1987 and 1988, cultural anthropologist Catherine Besteman lived on the banks of the Jubba River in the small village of Banta in southern Somalia. She was conducting research for her graduate studies on the impact of a new land privatization reform policy on rural Somali farmers. She left the Jubba Valley in 1988 in order to write her dissertation, with plans to return to visit her friends and interlocutors and to continue her research in the coming years. Before she was able to return, Somalia was consumed by civil war. Besteman received word that many of her friends had died or fled to refugee camps in Kenya, and she assumed she would never see them again. However, in 2005, Somali Bantu refugees began arriving in Lewiston, Maine, only an hour away from where Besteman worked as a professor at Colby College. Implausibly, Besteman reunited with many of her old friends and interlocutors nearly two decades later.

In this book, Besteman traces the experiences of Somali Bantu refugees from Somalia, through the Kenyan refugee camps, and to their resettlement in the United States. She shows how the prevailing view of refugees as "apolitical, docile, and dependent recipients" (p. 29), and as passive and grateful objects of humanitarian aid is both misconstrued and morally deficient. By tracing the particular journey of Somali Bantu families, she also underscores that not all refugees are alike, and assimilation is not a universally desirable or feasible expectation. Finally, she shows the complex ways in which refugees and host communities grapple with "the seepages, mutual transformations, and slow border crossings of all kinds," (p. 31) which characterize human mobility. While a transcontinental coincidence of migration brought Besteman back into close contact with her former interlocutors in this methodologically innovative work, it is Besteman's skill as an ethnographer that provides the emotional and intellectual rigor for this outstanding book.

Near the start of the book, Besteman poignantly asks: "How do people whose entire way of life has been destroyed and who witnessed horrible abuses against loved ones construct a new

future? How do people who have survived the ravages of war and displacement rebuild their lives in a new country when their world has totally changed?” (p. 4). In order to answer these questions, Besteman begins in Somalia, by presenting the pre-war context in the Jubba Valley among rural farming communities. She traces the intensifying social and political tensions into the heart of the valley, where neighbors turned against each other in the early days of the war, driving the so-called Somali Bantu families to endure a dangerous journey to the Kenyan border where they lingered for fifteen years in supposedly temporary camps, awaiting resettlement.

Besteman finds that Giorgio Agamben’s idea of “bare life” is exemplified by the depoliticized figure of the refugee: “the person stripped of community, belonging, sociality, and identity” (p. 58). She launches a harsh critique of humanitarianism, following such scholars as Lisa Malkki and Miriam Ticktin, by showing how humanitarian crises are almost always connected to the neoliberal economy and the post-colonial context, yet humanitarianism is not motivated by charity or altruism. Rather, it is “set up to maintain inequality, disempower refugees, and protect the borders of the global north” (p. 64). She argues that while refugee camps provide minimal food, shelter, education, and healthcare, they simultaneously deny the right to self-determination, mobility, and participation in democracy. Furthermore, the right to non-refoulement (the right to not return to a country in which one is likely to be harmed), is not matched by a legal right to asylum. In other words, while a refugee cannot be forced to return home, they also do not have a right to go anywhere else.

It is in the refugee camps where Besteman’s interlocutors remake themselves as Somali Bantu, an externally imposed and arbitrary category that was initially used by humanitarian authorities in order to identify the persecuted *jareer* Somalis for resettlement. Of course, like all essentialized racial categories based on phenotype, some friends and loved ones were excluded from the Somali Bantu category. Using ethnographic interview data, Besteman powerfully demonstrates how families had to remake themselves to conform to the expectations of the humanitarian aid workers whose job it was to screen refugees to see if they were deserving of resettlement. During a years-long process of screening, refugees were forced to retell (and fabricate) traumatic stories of their persecution and flight in order to be considered needy enough to gain asylum status.

Once the Somali Bantu families were granted asylum, they found themselves in Lewiston, Maine. In the early 2000s, Lewiston was a small, predominantly white city, which was in the midst of economic decline due to changing industry and diminishing social services for its residents. In this section of the book, Besteman presents three different versions of Lewistonians’ perspectives on the sudden and fraught influx of Somali and Somali Bantu refugees to Maine. She skillfully gives voice to the real concerns the white citizens of Lewiston had about their rapidly changing town, while revealing the misinformation, racism, xenophobia and islamophobia that characterizes much of the town’s response. She also presents a welcome counter-narrative of hospitality and communitarianism shown by social workers, teachers, community activists and advocates who worked diligently in Lewiston on behalf of their Somali Bantu students, neighbors and clients.

In the last section of the book, Besteman masterfully details the challenges that Somali Bantu families faced in trying to “rebuild their fractured community” in Lewiston “according to totally

new and barely understood rules for social life” (p. 212). This section details the disjuncture Somali Bantu families felt in trying to maintain an ethos of mutual social responsibility in a place that values individual autonomy. She details the conflicts that arose because of changed gender roles, eroded parental authority and an emerging hybridized youth culture; and the powerlessness, frustration, and discrimination that comes with being black, Muslim and poor in America.

Besteman’s book has a number of ethnographic and theoretical highlights. In one of the most powerful moments of the book, Besteman and her photographer husband, Jorge Acera, who lived with her in Banta, present a slideshow of old photographs to their newly reunited Somali Bantu friends in Lewiston. Men and women watched in awe as photographs of loved ones, long deceased, were projected on a large screen. Young adults saw photographs of themselves as babies before the war and of relatives whose faces they did not remember. People admired the tidy rows of crops in their fields, and community members wept while listening to an audio recording of a wedding celebration and the spoken word poetry of a beloved village elder. While Besteman worried these photographs and recordings would be too painful, the community demanded the slide show be shown multiple times and requested copies of the photographs and recordings to keep. Besteman also learned that many of her former friends pictured had become the perpetrators of violence, as communities were driven apart by war. This event was the starting point for Besteman, as she began the arduous process of filling in two decades of lost time.

Another highlight of the book is the way in which Besteman forces the reader to confront their own assumptions about what integration and assimilation should look like. Through her powerful ethnography, Besteman forces us to think about what “making refuge” might mean for Somali Bantu families in America. She shows how Somali Bantu communities did not perceive themselves as passive and grateful recipients of humanitarian aid who had been given the great good fortune to come to America, but as a community who was forced to leave their homes and worked hard to maintain cultural autonomy in a new and unfamiliar place. They struggled to maintain a relational view of the world under pressure from a neoliberal logic of work that equated self-sufficiency with economic autonomy. She brings these ideas to life by giving us a window into the everyday lives of so-called “New Mainers,” detailing their daily struggles, feelings, and experiences in trying to forge a new life in an unfamiliar, and in many ways, unwelcome, place. She forces us to confront the mutual transformations that take place in our communities and among ourselves when confronted with the difficult realities of transnationalism and human migration. This book is essential reading for students and scholars interested in Africa, migration, transnationalism and race, and is particularly important for those living in communities with large Somali and Somali Bantu populations, in order to understand the lived experiences of Somali Bantu refugees.

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