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Book Reviews

Transitional Justice and the Politics of Inscription. Memory, Space and Narrative in Northern Ireland by Joseph S. Robinson, London and New York, Routledge, 2018, 244 pp., £38.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-138-29151-5.

This book uses Northern Ireland as its primary case study to reflect on how societies and individuals deal with a traumatic past, this being the key thread that weaves and unravels throughout its eight chapters. Robinson provides a thoughtful reflection on the deep-rooted legacy of victimization and wounding in the province, arguing that while conflict casualties in Northern Ireland are geographically clustered, leaving an uneven distribution of suffering, a significant number of people across the entire province have been directly affected by death, violence and traumatic injury and more needs to be done to address those legacies.

The book's introduction is a short overview of Northern Ireland Troubles focused on the IRA and Loyalist ceasefires in 1994 and continuing through to the signing and ratification of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement on 22 May 1998. In the intervening 18 years, Robinson argues not enough has been done to address the legacy of the Troubles. There has been no serious or in-depth official truth recovery process, with more than 3,000 killings remaining officially unsolved. In his analysis of this, Robinson provides an extensive and rich academic discussion of transitional justice, memory studies and the concept of 'state of exception' stemmed from the Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Then, the book moves to a more empirical reflection, heavily indebted to interviews with 52 'memory curators', across the six counties of Northern Ireland.

The book is divided into two sections. The first four chapters provide a robust academic analysis starting from the question: How will 'we remember them'? This question is addressed with a review of the various strategies formulated to look at the possible ways to recognize the pain and suffering of the victims of violence in Northern Ireland. These chapters explore and reflect on concepts of victimhood, peacemaking, the politics of inscription, transitional justice and the politics of memory, social memory and 'state of exception' to unravel the complexities of how societies and individuals reckon with a traumatic past and the challenging imperative of national reconciliation. The final four chapters draw on interviews and ethnographic field notes, that Robinson collected at places and times where memory was performed publicly in Northern Ireland. This is coupled with an analysis of secondary literature from a range of other transitional cases, to look at the creation of places of memory, how those places are presented, and to look at the lasting impact of violence.

This fine and ambitious book, raises from the outset, the difficulties faced by divided societies going through a transitional period and dealing with questions related to justice, accountability, truth recovery and reconciliation. The book provides a well-argued discussion about the challenges surrounding the refusal to confront the past, the shared future imperative, and repercussions in the dominant visible geography of paramilitary justification in public space in Northern Ireland. Robinson emphasizes that what is needed in Northern Ireland, and in other transitional societies, is an approach to victimhood and truth recovery that is guided by a philosophy of empathic dissonance.

Furthermore, this book presents, in a clear and balanced way, the academic underpinning, and the author's experiences during his fieldwork, to enrich and broaden the various debates on emphatic dissonances and the hierarchy of victims, social haunting, places of memory and remembering loved ones in contested societies in the aftermath of a Peace Agreement.

Much of the book is the result of the author's attempt to allow the 'memory curators' to speak for themselves and to limit his own authorial interference. These first-hand impressions of the 'memory curators', a term coined by the author, steer the book's discussion away from an overly centralized notion of control by the author. The author's academic and narrative commitment to give the voice to the 'memory curators' transcends the discussion typically raised by a given agent or group or agents about a given public memory performance. In doing so, it raises in a practical way the possibility that public memory performances may, in some cases, leap the boundaries of curatorial intent in terms of emphatic dissonance.

Furthermore, this discussion, between practical and theoretical, leads Robinson to questioning the assumption that post-conflict societies can and should mediate public memory into frameworks conducive to a reconciled future. He argues instead that such an impulse marginalizes survivors of political violence who narrate the past as still-present wounds. The book questions the complications that result from a linear temporality, since transitional justice usually presupposes a lineal trajectory through time, away from violence and towards reconciliation. Robinson argues that this linear, strongly future-oriented temporality, renders survivors with traumatic pasts anachronistic in relation to the possibility of political change.

The book succeeds in articulating these reflections through the performative re-temporalization of public exercises of memory in Northern Ireland, which are narrated by the 'memory curators' outlining how they performed victimhood in public. It looks at how memory places are created in post-conflict space, what narratives and mnemonics are and can be inscribed in them to harness the survivors' demand that their memories resonates in the political space of transition.

The book concludes with a reflection on the concept of 'state of exception' where Robinson argues that the conflict in Northern Ireland was enabled and facilitated by the state of exception, proclaimed by belligerent groups in response to a social construct of an existential threat to legitimate the dehumanization of bodies that could be cognitively conflated with the ongoing threat. Robinson calls for rehumanizing narratives, even those

that are not consciously political, in order to re-inscribe the victims of the conflict into Northern Irish memory-space, thus resisting the continuation of the ‘state of exception’ that continues to trap Northern Ireland.

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The In-Between Spaces of Asylum and Migration: A Participatory Visual Approach. Zoë O'Reilly. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020; XII and 303 pp., appendix, bibliog., index. €72.79 Hardcover (ISBN 978-3-030-29170-9); €58.84 eBook (ISBN 978-3-030-29171-6). DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-29171-6.

An "asylum seeker" is a legal category assigned to people who upon arrival to a sovereign state exercise their right to make a claim to asylum. While an "asylum seeker" has gained physical access to the territory of the sovereign state, s/he has yet to be included within the sovereign state as a full member. Indeed, similar to other legal categories such as citizen, work permit holder, student immigrant, this category is used to distinguish "asylum seekers" from other groups residing within the sovereign state and determine their rights and responsibilities. In most countries across the world, an "asylum seeker" has limited rights and restricted access to the labor market, education, and health care services. The category "asylum seeker", therefore, tells us something about a person's legal status and their relationship to the state. Yet, it does not offer us much – if any – information about the individual person assigned this category. "Behind" this legal category are people with names and faces, distinct identities and personal histories, hopes and dreams, politics and opinions. These various identities and complex life stories are often erased in simplistic and stereotypical representations of "asylum seekers" as "victims" of war, exceptional "heroes" of survival, financial "burdens" on the welfare state, and "threats" to Western societies.

In her important and timely book *The In-Between Spaces of Asylum and Migration*, Zoë O'Reilly provides insights into the lives and experiences of people who have sought asylum in Ireland. Based on ethnographic and collaborative research, O'Reilly presents a comprehensive account of what it means to be an "asylum seeker" in Ireland, living with the conditions established and enforced by the Irish Direct Provision system. Through this system, people seeking asylum are required to reside in shared and often cramped accommodation, provided with three meals a day yet unable to choose what and when to eat, given a meager welfare allowance, and subject to everyday surveillance practices. While Direct Provision was established in November 1999 as an emergency measure to temporarily accommodate an increasing number of people seeking asylum in Ireland, O'Reilly shows how twenty years later this system remains in place and has become part of a growing commercial industry, where private companies profit from the control and confinement of people seeking state protection. Furthermore, O'Reilly situates the Irish Direct Provision system within a much broader landscape of liminal spaces, such holding centres in airports, detention centres on islands, and accommodation centres in remote places, designed to intercept and regulate the movement of refugees and other unwanted migrants. Within these spaces, people are forced to wait. Their lives are put on hold and their freedoms are curtailed, while state agencies decide whether these people are to be admitted into the sovereign territory or deported to their country of origin. As O'Reilly explains, spaces like Direct Provision centres in Ireland represent the spatial manifestation of the politics of exclusion, which dominates the contemporary geopolitics of migration.

The book's central argument, however, concerns the ways that the politics of exclusion is lived, experienced, and negotiated daily by people on the ground. Situated within feminist geography, O'Reilly calls for the need to examine Direct Provision from the perspective of "asylum seekers" themselves in order to better understand the architectures of exclusion and the microphysics of power through which this system operates. O'Reilly offers an empirically ground account of everyday life within one of Ireland's Direct Provision centres, illustrating how people live in highly surveilled and controlled spaces, lack autonomy over basic everyday routines and activities, and feel trapped by endless waiting and uncertainty. Here, she draws on the concept of liminality to show how the politics of exclusion is materialized and experienced temporally, spatially, and ontologically by people living in Direct Provision. In doing so, this book contributes to the growing body of research on refugees' accounts of living in liminal spaces.

In one of the most provocative insights of the book, O'Reilly argues that we need to pay attention to how people seeking asylum negotiate and resist the systems imposed on them. Here, O'Reilly builds on feminist geographers' critiques of Giorgio Agamben's work and how it has been applied within studies of asylum and exclusionary geographies. Across a range of disciplines, scholars have taken up Agamben's ideas of 'the camp', 'bare life', and *homo sacer* to illustrate how asylum seekers and refugees are excluded and forced to live in 'spaces of exception'. However, O'Reilly argues that reducing Direct Provision centres to spaces of 'bare life' ignores the agency of those who reside in these spaces. Moreover, she documents that while Direct Provision seeks to exclude and marginalize people seeking asylum, people themselves build attachment to places and become part of communities beyond those determined by Direct Provision.

Thus, while Direct Provision centers are often located in places far away from major cities, O'Reilly's work importantly illustrate how people living in Direct Provision form relations and connections to these places. Thus, we are reminded that while these centres are sometimes remote, we cannot and should not assume that they are completely isolated and disconnected from the rest of Ireland. Rather as Gilmore (2007, 11) reminds us "this apparent marginality is a trick of perspective, because as every geographer knows, edges are also interfaces" that "connect places into relationships with each other and non-contiguous places". As O'Reilly shows, people living in Irish Direct Provision centres develop particular relationships to places and became involved with other residents and communities through education, religious activities, and volunteer work.

In sum, O'Reilly's book contributes to geography, critical refugee studies, carceral studies, and other related fields. The book represents an important feminist contribution to political geography because it places people seeking asylum at the center of analysis, rather than state agencies, elite leaders, and policy makers. As O'Reilly repeatedly shows, "asylum seekers" are people who intimately know and feel state power as it materializes through Direct Provision. They have insights into the ways in which power works and is negotiated on the ground. Here, O'Reilly's methodological commitment to conducting research *alongside* – rather than *on* – people is essential. The book offers practical information, lessons learned, and reflections on conducting collaborative research and

creating exhibits, insights valuable to other researchers, activists, and artists interested in collaborative work. Furthermore, O'Reilly's work shows us how we together – as co-creators – can create different representations of "asylum seekers" and life in Direct Provision that challenge imposed stereotypies and can potentially reach broader public audiences beyond academia. This approach of taking people living in Direct Provision seriously as knowledge producers, photographers, artists, and co-creators, holds the potential to create spaces and social relations beyond Direct Provision. As we face yet another rise of anti-immigrant discourses and xenophobic asylum policies across Western countries, this book provides us with a vital resource for building solidarities with people inside institutions like Direct Provision and contributing to the existing work towards abolishing these systems. As O'Reilly shows, these are systems that have and will always fail to protect the rights of those seeking state protection in Ireland and elsewhere because they are "open prisons" (p. 147), build on carceral logics and police practices. Thus, O'Reilly concludes, "the containment, marginalization, and institutionalization of people seeking protection in Ireland must end" (p. 250).

References:

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