

Tragic hope at the cruel edge: Toward an appreciation of the everyday struggles of the displaced

Author

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“On Exile” or “Hope Without Optimism”

We stand on an edge
 Uncertain how we arrived here
 On one side: denigration, despair, destruction
 On the other: an abyss.

Arising from the abyss
 Persistent piercing noise –
 a cacophony of promises:
 refuge,
 a temporary place to rest,
 a scornful unwelcome,
 violence disguised as benevolence.

And Silence that envelopes –
 not the peaceful kind,
 the unsettling kind:
 ambivalent,
 uncertain,
 without guarantees.

On the edge -
 our choices are only ever risk
 On the edge -
 there is hope without optimism.

Tragic hope at the cruel edge: Toward an appreciation of the everyday struggles of the displaced²

Surrounded by deep dark waters – teetering on an edge in the South China Sea in a not-quite-sea-worthy fishing boat – my parents looked back toward a homeland on fire. Decades of war preceded that moment. Decades of exile followed. That war – long since ended – is still ever present.

All those years ago, my parents saw their world set on fire. Many might now suggest that the world is on fire. Set ablaze by violent conflict, intolerance and hate, shameful inequities, economic polarization and precarity, obscene consumption alongside extreme food insecurity, arrogant disregard and disrespect for the earth. Perhaps the kindling was the denuding of our moral resources and political will to gaze directly on the misery and destruction that we have wrought.

The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that since 2021 more than 100 million individuals have been forced to flee their homes—which is likely a gross underestimate. Across the globe, this figure represents 1 in every 78 individuals. Of these, more than 40% are children. The professional and scholarly literature focused on refugees, migrants, asylees, stateless and displaced peoples tends to center

¹I want to acknowledge that I borrow Terry Eagleton's book title here and draw from his work on hope without optimism.

²I want to acknowledge my spouse and colleague, Brendan Maxcy. Our partnership—together feeling out and working the edges, cruel and otherwise—enlivens my intellectual life and fortifies my spirit.

psycho-social conditions of those who suffer displacement and multiple dislocations. It asks: whether and how they are able to integrate into new “host communities;” whether return to their countries of origin is possible; what are the social, psychological, and health implications of protracted refugee status; etc. Far less attention is given to the ways these individuals and communities are treated as objects of containment within a human management project designed to administer global movement.

Dr. Mamadou Sy’s allusion to the politically expedient treatment of those who experience the same conditions of displacement as alternately “refugee” and “migrant” (Sy interview, this issue) illustrates one way the human management project categorizes and contains “human objects” in order to efficiently manage flows of people and allocate meager resources. As Dr. Sy points out, certain aspects of this technical management of human flows typically receives bipartisan support. Moreover, media headlines suggest that even in the face of anti-sanctuary and anti-immigration efforts, individuals, communities, philanthropic and faith-based organizations, will pull together to welcome and assist refugees. What is obscured by such bipartisan support and popular human interest stories are the political and moral conditions that make it possible for us to look past the ways we’ve produced, multiplied, and populated the cruel edges of our social and material worlds.

In 2021, of the 90 million individuals who experienced forced displacement, 27.1 million were given the label “refugee” (UNHCR). Some 15,000 were resettled in the United States. The articles included in this issue of EN-GAGE! provide windows into particular moments of exile. The pieces focus our attention on those who were allowed to resettle. They encourage us to move beyond technical knowledge and demand that we rehabilitate our atrophied empathy. They remind us of the persistent, severe, and

compromised health conditions of those who have suffered protracted displacement, physical violence, oppression, exclusion, dislocation, and alienation. They point to social, historical, cultural, and political complexities that are often ignored in our rush to provide well-intended palliatives. They illuminate how our conventional and over-generalized framing of “problems” may interfere with the “intentional engagement” (Morse, this issue) of the diverse communities we hope to serve (Kameniar, et al, 2010).

Tu’s personal essay highlights the complexities, contradictions, and unsettling conditions shaped by a legacy of imperialism and exile. These reverberate across generations and oceans and between a mother and daughter. Her essay demands that we read and sense the fragmentation of experience and anxious meaning-making born of divergent and haunted desires. In what may be viewed as a superficial endeavor – pageantry – Tu’s account points to how pregnant with meaning are the practices and attendant labor for her, her mother, their communities. It provides a needed window on and a call for empathy after the immediate threat of violence and expulsion.

The condition of displacement is increasingly common. It will no doubt touch all of our lives as the global temperature and sea levels rise and as shores recede, as the strength and frequency of natural disasters increases, as violence continues unabated. Of what he called a “generalized condition of homelessness,” Salman Rushdie wrote:

The effect of mass migration has been the creation of radically new types of human being: people who root themselves in ideas rather than place, in memories as much as in material things; people who have been obliged to define themselves – because they are so defined by others – by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented

³ Data collected by UNHCR are obtained through a few organizations that use movement tracking systems. These systems are not fully capable of handling the massive population flows we have seen in modern times. Thus, system capacity can be overwhelmed. Such tracking systems are also limited in their access to routes and locations in unstable areas. Individuals are many times disinclined to provide information for a variety of reasons (e.g., safety of self, loved ones, etc.). Agency reporting of human movement is subject to political pressures to suppress accurate information.

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unions between what they were and where they find themselves.

If Rushdie is right, if radically new types of human being are created in the wake of mass displacement, then perhaps in this moment we will find the courage to look directly upon the world ablaze in deprivation and despair. Perhaps in doing so we would recognize that the tens of millions of individuals currently “living” on the run, in temporary shelters, those who have spent years and even decades in organized refugee camps – even as they resist tyranny and oppression (Alwan, this issue) – are victims of a slow genocide.

How do we engage this world on fire? Perhaps, we will finally discard impotent (and sometimes dangerous) optimism in favor of “tragic hope” (Eagleton, 2015). As Eagleton argues, the former is grounded in cheery irrational belief while the latter demands reflection and strenuous commitment in the wake of defeat and the recognition that there are still battles to be fought. Perhaps we have suffered enough tragedy to finally awaken from the fantasy that things will improve because it cannot be otherwise.

As I ponder where to go from here, my parents occupy my thoughts. The weight of innumerable defeats experienced over and again as exiles and forever foreigners must have been near unbearable for them. My and my siblings’ younger selves – our inability to empathize, to fully resist incomplete and unkind narratives about our parents, to squelch our own petty desires – no doubt compounded their pain and littered the edge they traversed with thoughtless shards of glass. Memories of their dignified struggle and their struggle for dignity on behalf of their family—families—are suggestive of what constitutes tragic hope. Their daughter’s

desires for their grandsons – Tâm Bình and Tâm Minh, my sunrise (binh minh) – to honor a legacy of living with dignity even as others who by dint of malice or benevolence would undermine that dignity, too illuminates the political clarity and cultural humility (Horton & Freire, 1990) required to recognize and engage the cruel edges.

For those working in and with communities that have long embodied and operated from spaces of tragic hope, I want to center different questions. Who constitutes “our” communities? Under what conditions might our notions of community expand or contract? How do we understand our responsibilities to those who are forcibly displaced? In what ways might we have mistaken infantilization for responsibility? Is it possible to shake our captivation with the horrors of the strife and its casualties that occludes the “dignified,” quotidian, and necessary struggles that follow? In what ways does the allure of the spectacle shape our treatment of Others? Might we engage differently if we understood those at the edge as operating with agency, humanity, and dignity rather than as an enfeebled mass pushed to and over the edge?

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