
**Book Review – Angela Sahi**

*Lights in the Distance: Exile and Refuge at the Borders of Europe* written by Daniel Trilling was published in 2019 by Picador in London, England. The book, comprised of 281 pages, weaves a collection of diverse migrant experiences observed by Trilling. Spanning years and continents, beginning in 2012, Trilling traces migrant journeys from Africa and Asia, with interviews taking place in transitory settlements such as hostels and detention centres. Trilling is an author and journalist, with many of his works shaped by his own familial histories of displacement. As such, his works focus extensively on the “hostile system” of migration, with specific reference to the experiences of undocumented African and Asian migrants seeking asylum in Europe. *Lights in the Distance* examines the motivating factors for migrants to leave their home countries via precarious routes and the daunting migration journeys that follow.

Trilling’s observations are drawn from nine personal testimonies: Jamal, Zainab, Ousmane, Caesar, Fatima, Hakima, Nisrin, Azad, and Farhan. Each migration journey reveals a new perspective, yet speaks to the comparable transnational political barriers and brutal hardships facing undocumented migrants before, during, and after their entry into Europe. Furthermore, Trilling reports on the lived experiences of migrants that have been homogenized by ‘Europe’s refugee crisis’. The purpose of the book is evident and unwavering throughout: to unveil the humanity concealed by the highly politicized refugee crisis. In Chapter 24 “Teresa”, Trilling positions himself as the maternal grandson of refugees. He explains that his Russian Jewish grandfather migrated from Bialystok to London following the revolution in 1917, while his grandmother’s migration to London was instigated by two conflicts: the civil war in Russia in 1917 and the rise of Nazi Germany in 1939. These living memories arguably shape Trilling’s understanding of refugees and the motivations behind his book.

Although all nine of the primary testimonies are vastly different, there are also stark similarities that compel the reader to unpack their understandings of the refugee crisis and reflect upon the realities of the global migration regime. I found myself surprised by the complicated dichotomy of trauma and desensitization that many migrants are forced to endure. Furthermore, I was deeply unsettled by the harrowing details that were expressed as normalcies within the daily routine of an undocumented migrant. This was acutely exemplified by Jamal’s recount of how to find passage to Northern Europe from Greece by hiding underneath a lorry and Caesar’s description of the treatment inside the prison compound near Ghadames, Libya.

Trilling chronicles his own observations, personal testimonies, and global statistics to produce a comprehensive commentary on the experiences of undocumented migrants. Although each personal testimony highlights a unique experience, there are central themes that emerge. Each experience, without fail, outlines the vulnerable positions and precarious circumstances that undocumented migrants are forced to assume. Furthermore, intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, and class heavily influences the migrant experience and the obstacles that obstruct refugees’ ability to claim asylum. I appreciated the space given to the personal testimonies,

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whereby the conversations were authorized, guided, and controlled by the interviewees. I also perceived this to be an intentional approach, and an opportunity for migrants to reclaim their agency. For instance, Zainab is given a Dictaphone to record her migration journey to Britain after being forced to leave Iraq with her three children due to unsafe conditions. This holistic approach also established trust among the interviewees, which was a necessary accomplishment in order to retell authentic experiences. The personal testimonies underpin the entire book, and are the most significant source of evidence. Trilling complements the oral histories with statistical data, most often retrieved from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). However, Trilling admits that these statistics are “complete at the best of times” and thus are not always representative of the realities facing refugees. Unfortunately, these discrepancies are not actively recognized by the reader, since they are only acknowledged in Trilling’s afterword.

Trilling’s interviews expose the varying risks associated with certain categories of identity, due to how governing bodies and European citizens will perceive ‘the other’ as a threat. I was most captivated by Fatima’s migration journey from Niger to Libya to Italy via multiple smuggler routes over the course of five years. In 2010, Fatima was forced to leave her home and children in Lagos after she organized protests against the oil spills that were poisoning the area and her life was threatened. Then in 2015, Fatima was once again forced to leave her adopted home in Tripoli due to the ongoing civil war. Despite these distressing experiences, Fatima continued to engage with activism in Sicily on behalf of the refugee community. She was relentless, constantly speaking out about the injustices and finding ways to support her community. I was amazed by Fatima’s ambitions to create change for refugees, and her candid openness to perspectives outside of her beliefs. While Fatima should not have to carry the burden of solving the entire refugee crisis, I was overwhelmed by her determination to do so.

Overall, Trilling presents real, meaningful, and complex migrant experiences that are unbridled from notions of victimhood. The examination of the migrant experiences opposes damage centred narratives and highlights the humanity of the highly politicized ‘European Refugee Crisis’.

8 Ibid.