

Hsiao-Hung Pai, *Bordered Lives: How Europe Fails Refugees and Migrants*, Oxford, UK: New Internationalist Publications Ltd 2018, 288 pages, \$16.95 (paperback edition), ISBN: 978-1-78026-438-7

Paul Choudhury has suggested that people feel comfortable ignoring the photos of starving, stranded polar bears in the arctic by assuming each one is simply an “unlucky individual” and not part of the greater trend of climate change and environmental destruction.¹ It seems as though people apply the same mindset towards refugees: a singular story of their mistreatment — by a government, by local townspeople, or by the sea — becomes just that: a singular story about a singular “unlucky individual.” Hsiao-Hung Pai’s *Bordered Lives: How Europe Fails Refugees and Migrants* seeks to unveil a systematic mistreatment of migrants in Europe, forcing readers to confront a more realistic portrait of all these “unlucky individuals.” Pai travels through Europe, starting in the Italian island of Lampedusa — known as the “gateway to Europe” — and continues to Germany, interviewing migrants along the way. By merging the individual stories into a compelling collective, she reveals the abuses that migrants face, no matter the city and no matter the camp, and she forms a compelling narrative of migrant experiences.

During the course of her interviews, Pai continually emphasizes four types of injustices that migrants face: the first is the treacherous journey they must endure on the path to Europe. She details the story of one journey after interviewing a survivor: “after two-and-a-half days at sea, the boat sank and around 100 people were drowned. Only six bodies were found... it seemed clear that Europe’s anti-smuggling missions have not only been unable to stop the crossings, but in effect have also made it much more dangerous for migrants who try to cross the Mediterranean.” (129-130). Both while discussing the deaths on the Mediterranean as well as other topics, Pai is quick to emphasize the connection between misguided laws and their potentially deadly results. Second is the concept of the “parallel society,” which she defines as “tourists, mostly from Europe and the developed world, who can afford travel, alongside impoverished migrants seeking a living on the edge of society” (140). Third, she highlights the commercialization of migrant centers which are, as a result, inadequately resourced. She states that the outcome of the “business-oriented system” is shelters like one in Berlin, which is “a shelter for 1,000 people with only four bathrooms” and which places “culturally or politically conflicting groups in the same room” (171). Finally, Pai comments on the lack of legal and properly paid work opportunities for migrants. A particularly salient example of this final injustice at play is when one of the migrants she had met with excitedly confers to her that “he would be working part-time for no pay, but with ‘some pocket money’” (261). Despite his unclear and limited amount of pay, she emphasizes that this is a coveted position for him given the limited availability of other options. Throughout the book, Pai reiterates these four injustices. She recognizes the necessity of repetition in her narrative, making it clear that these injustices are illustrative of common experiences rather than simply the misfortune of an “unlucky individual.”

At various points in the book, Pai reminds the reader about the senseless deaths of migrants that occur on the Mediterranean. She argues that European laws designed to deter migrants simply make the journey more unsafe, but do not prevent migrants from attempting the trek. She writes that “over 25,000 migrants have died in their attempt to reach or stay in Europe since 2000. These deaths would be entirely avoidable if legal routes were made available” (263). Throughout *Bordered Lives*, she recounts and updates the death count of migrants on the Mediterranean; in 2016 the death toll rose from 3,800 to more than 5,000 during the course of her interviews; the first half of 2017 added 2,207 more. Although her research focuses mainly on migrants’ struggles once they’ve reached Europe, she frequently reminds the reader of those who

never even made it to Europe in the first place. Towards the end, she offers the reader a shocking statistic: “According to the IOM, over 25,000 migrants have died in their attempt to reach or stay in Europe since 2000.” She uses this number to emphasize a salient point: “Those deaths would have been entirely avoidable if legal routes were made available” (263).

Her emphasis on the deaths on the Mediterranean complements another recurring element, the concept of the “parallel society.” While interacting with migrants in popular tourist cities, she highlights the parallel societies which exist in Europe, societies in which some groups of people are barred from particular spaces in the interest of protecting tourists from the uncomfortable sight of their current plight. Juxtaposed against wealthy tourists from Europe and other parts of the developed world are impoverished migrants who exist and attempt to survive on fringes of society that are patrolled, protected, and fenced-in.

In these spaces officials engage in harassment and even the destruction of migrants’ tents — their homes — or, notes Pai, even to relocate migrant centers altogether in order to preserve and enhance the tourist experience: “Anyone visiting Berlin would no longer find long queues of asylum seekers ... outside the LaGeSo (the State office for Health and Social Affairs), which had been moved to the suburb of Wilmersdorf, so wealthy North American and European tourists did not have to suffer the sight of newly arrived migrants” (170). The contrast that Pai makes here between the “suffering” of tourists who are disturbed during their travels versus the real suffering of migrants who struggle to survive in a new country without homes or jobs, is a striking representation of the parallel yet opposite societies in which these groups coexist. I specifically witnessed the contrast between migrants and tourists last year in Rome as a tourist visiting the Colosseum, surrounded by hundreds of migrants desperately attempting to sell their merchandise or services in an effort to simply survive. The coexistence of these two groups reveal two forms of citizenship, a superior one in which individuals are allowed to cross borders freely and hold whatever jobs they want, and an inferior one in which individuals are forced to remain in a country or a specific migrant reception center without a sense of freedom.

Unsurprisingly, this phenomenon of parallel citizenship is hardly confined to Europe. Last year, while I was conducting interviews with a refugee woman from Ethiopia, she related to me her story of crossing the border from Ethiopia to Kenya, and she explained how checkpoint officials would grope young girls to determine their age (and would allow younger girls to cross the border while sending older ones back). While searching for pictures of this particular border crossing to accompany the interview, I found a German blog detailing their crossing of the same border. The German tourists described the “border procedures” as “easy” and marveled at the fact that there was “no hassle” by the agents, who were “really friendly and helpful.”² The juxtaposition of experience at this same place, at which a refugee experiences sexual assault but a family holding EU passports has a hassle-free morning on their way to their next vacation destination, perfectly captures the parallel experience that migrants face in Europe.

Bordered Lives’ biggest exposé involves the commodification and profitization of migrant centers; a point that Pai adamantly conveys throughout the book. Government allotments for individual refugees and immigrants routinely find their way into the pockets of the center’s owners, while migrants suffer in atrocious conditions and with minimal activities in an effort to maximize profits. Migrant centers have become a lucrative commercial industry, transforming migrants into products and profits. The irony of the issue here is that these centers are one of the ways in which governments are actively attempting to help migrants, but greedy management and a lack of enforcement and oversight causes the centers to become more of a detriment than a benefit. In one center that she visits, a migrant from Gambia tells her that “the water is only switched on twice per day, only 30 minutes each time” (85). Although she only conducts

interviews in Italy, Germany, and France, this misuse is seemingly rampant across Europe, especially along the border isles. At Moria, a refugee camp on the popular holiday destination island of Lesbos, the scale of the issue is exposed. A recent *Guardian* article found that in the Lesbos camp: “the money existed to transform the camp into a centre that could have resembled the Hilton.”³ Yet despite this five star funding, the camp has been on the verge of closure due to an “uncontrollable amount of waste” “a high risk of disease” and “people living in shipping containers.”⁴ The vast discrepancy between the amount of government funds provided and the conditions in which migrants live implies a lack of oversight and enforcement, which will simply allow for the problem to continue.

In their zeal for larger profits, camp administrators routinely postpone the asylum process to ensure that migrants remain at their facilities for longer periods of time. This contributes to migrants sense of desperation and hopelessness, creating what Pai calls “deliberate isolation.” These emotions, reinforced by a lack of adequate food and water leads adults and children alike flee the camps, only to be replaced by more migrants in need of shelter. Pai’s emphasis on this exploitation is one of the shining features of the book: through careful research and fieldwork she demonstrates how migrants of all types — from economic immigrants to persecuted refugees — could experience this same fate. By interviewing migrants regarding this topic, she uncovers an undeniable pattern which forces the reader to confront the harsh reality of the migrant condition.

In order to make ends meet once they have fled the horrible conditions at the centers, migrants seek out work opportunities. Pai’s interviews reveal that time and again migrants are forced to seek underground work because the state has delayed their work visas, or has simply prohibited their group (ex: new immigrants, “illegal immigrants” and refugees awaiting resettlement) from working altogether. At the borders in Italy, “hotspot” policies result in the “immediate illegalization” (22) of migrants who are seeking asylum but are unable to properly convey their stories to the authorities and are labeled solely as economic migrants. The denial of work visas to immigrants and refugees — regardless of their purpose for coming to Europe — is nonsensical, and counter-productive, because all migrants need an income to survive. When they are forced to take work that is unapproved, and therefore unregulated by the state, migrants end up working for as low as 80 cents an hour (177). In addition, they find themselves in exploitative situations because their employers have the power to reveal their undocumented work to the authorities at any moment. Furthermore, their presence on the illegal job market reinforces the far right’s argument that they are stealing jobs from citizens, engaging in illegal activities, and creating an undue financial burden on the State.

Although anyone can read statistics regarding the low wages paid to migrants, Pai’s narrative approach provides a compelling account of the people who earn those wages, or experience exploitation, or came close to drowning in the Mediterranean Sea. In other words, she uses her journalistic skills to bring the facts to life, expertly chronicling the lives and experiences of a variety of migrants in Europe. In addition, she offers updates on their experiences as they travel around Europe looking for a place to call their home. With each person’s experience, she consistently returns to the same key issues: the atrocious working conditions, the corrupt migrant centers, the idea of “parallel societies,” and the tragic deaths which occur on the Mediterranean. She skillfully recognizes the inherent necessity of repetition in a field where singular stories of struggle are comfortably written off as not reflecting a broader experience. As a result, *Bordered Lives* serves as a guide to the collective injustices faced by migrants in Europe and the ways in which, in Pai’s terms, Europe is failing them.

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