On being made feel out of place

Annika Lems
August, 2018

Based on the experiences of two young Eritreans who arrived in Switzerland as unaccompanied minors, this article thinks through the feeling of being made feel out of place.

In my contribution to this thematic week I want think through the experience of being-out-of-place. I aim to show why the idea of *being made feel out of place* better captures the struggles refugees in Europe face on an everyday basis than the term *displacement*. In my previous work I have pointed out that the term "displacement" has a particular intellectual baggage that tends to romanticise the

sense of homelessness and boundlessness the figure of the refugee or exile embodies (Lems 2018; 2016).

In Western theory the figure of the refugee has come to be symbolic for an age of movement and deterritorialisation.

It challenges established notions of a "national order of things" (Malkki 1995) and the idea that specific people "belong" to particular places. While in anthropology this de-essentialisation of place was of crucial importance to the reformulation of a discipline wary of being complicit in the reproduction of exclusionary boundaries and practices, I have argued that the emphasis on deterritorialisation this initiated has led anthropologists to overlook the continuing importance of place in refugees' actual lived experiences. I therefore stressed the need for a more complex and nuanced view of displacement – one that values refugees' lived experiences and one that takes the *placement* in displacement more seriously.

In my current research I have come to think more deeply about refugees' everyday struggles for emplacement in a Europe that perceives itself to be in the midst of a "crisis" of displacement. The reflections are based on my conversations with a group of young refugees in the Canton of Bern in Switzerland who were categorised "unaccompanied minors". I have been following their everyday pathways in and beyond educational and institutional settings for close to two years.[1] As I was accompanying them into the refugee reception classes they attended, caught up with them in weekly meetings or joined them in their daily activities, I came to observe the hard social and emotional labour the young people invested into becoming a valued part of the towns and villages they had come to live in. This involved continuous acts of learning in order to understand the places' particularities and habits. Yet, these placemaking efforts were frequently unsettled by the defensive attitude they encountered on the side of people who felt that they should not be allowed to lay claim to this place.

While Switzerland is one of the wealthiest and safest countries in the world, anti-immigration campaigns have long been a crucial ingredient of the

country's political landscape.

With the establishment of the far-right Swiss People's Party (SVP) as a mainstream political player, the figure of the asylum seeker has turned into the contemporary folk devil par excellence – a figure riddled with societal anxieties, racial prejudice and envy. Against the backdrop of this exclusionary social landscape, the young people I worked with were not so much struggling with a sense of displacement, but with a deep and utter feeling of being-out-of-place. As the conversation snippets with two young men I will zoom in show, this sense of being-out-of-place is not due to the inherent impossibility of being-at-home refugees have to endure. They reveal that in a socio-political climate where migrant bodies are marked as problem cases in need of integration, control or expulsion, refugees are actively kept from laying claim to places – they are pushed into a feeling of being-out-of-place.

In what follows I will focus on a brief conversation that occurred during one of the weekly gatherings with the unaccompanied refugee youth in Bern in March 2016. That afternoon, only two people showed up – Samuel and Filmon, two Eritrean young men who were aged seventeen at the time. Both of them had left Eritrea when they were fifteen years old in order to escape the compulsory military service they would have been drafted into by the end of secondary education. Both of them had spent many months on the move, escaping violent attacks by gunmen or imprisonment in Libya, sleeping rough in deserts or parks, and surviving the passage to Italy crammed into the underbellies of leaky wooden boats.

Like many of the Eritrean young people I met, Samuel and Filmon had taken the decision to leave the country without the consent of their parents. And like many other young refugees, they did not describe the forces propelling them to migrate solely as a reaction to the oppressive political situation in Eritrea. Rather, they had been drawn towards this decision because of the radical transformation of self and personhood they believed a migration to Europe would offer.

If "displacement" is to capture the experiences of these two young men it thus needs to be thought of as an active process that involves elements of choice and circumstance as well as force.

Photo by Alexandr Blinov (fotolia.com)

That afternoon in early spring 2016, when we caught up in Bern, Samuel had been in Switzerland for six months, while Filmon had been there for one and a half years. They were very talkative that day, eager to share and discuss their thoughts. Samuel kicked off the debate by stating that if he were to receive a negative decision on his asylum application, it would not bother him. He would simply pack his bag and go somewhere else. He said that this would not be much of an effort for him as the Swiss had made him feel like he should be somewhere else anyways. "Look, I can stay here, and I am happy to work and learn and do everything they [the Swiss] want me to do", Samuel said. "But do they really want me here?" He fortified this statement by telling us that he would never bring his parents here, even if the authorities allowed him to do so. Upon hearing this, Filmon shook his head. "You're crazy, man", he exclaimed. I asked Samuel why he would not bring his parents to Switzerland. "How can I explain this to you?" he asked, struggling for words. "Look, when I am in Eritrea I am rich, right?" By describing himself as "rich" Samuel, who came from a farmer family in the Eritrean highlands, did not refer to his economic background. Rather, he was

talking about the feeling of being surrounded by meaningful others, of having the sense that one's social existence was reciprocated by the people he lived amongst. Samuel explained that when he was in Eritrea he was a "rich" person because people there knew him, he belonged to a family and other people cared about him. "You see? And here in Switzerland I am poor because nobody wants me to be here." Samuel said that he did not want his mother to be treated like a "poor" person and that this was why he believed she would be better off remaining in Eritrea than coming to Switzerland.

Samuel's story and the question whether people in Switzerland really want them to become a part of society initiated a long discussion between him and Filmon about the small, everyday things that made them feel out of place. "It's true, they don't want us here, right?" Filmon asked me. I returned the question by asking him what made him feel this way. Filmon explained that he gathered it from the way people treated him in public spaces, like train stations, parks or shops. He said that people often stared at him and made him feel bad. I could relate to the unsettling feeling of the stare. While often not recognised by Swiss people themselves as it has become so normalised that it has become part and parcel of everyday interactions, the act of staring as a means of social control and singling out otherness is a frequently discussed theme amongst foreigners living in Switzerland. So much so, that newspapers picked up on the theme not long ago, labelling it as the "Swiss stare".[2]

> *Filmon had many stories about the ways people made him feel like he should not be there without saying a word, simply by staring at him.*

"You know how often I enter a shop and the shopkeeper stands right behind me the entire time, making sure I don't steal something", Filmon said. Samuel nodded his head in agreement. He told us that the same thing happened to him in his local supermarket on a daily basis: One of the shopkeepers there kept following him through the entire shop every time he went to buy something. It was the closest and cheapest shop to the shared accommodation where he was

living with other unaccompanied refugee youth, so they went there almost every day. Samuel said that although the shopkeeper knew them by now, she did not leave them alone. She kept on following Samuel and his friends – always at a distance, never directing a word at them – from the minute they entered the shop to the moment they left again.

That afternoon, Samuel and Filmon told many more stories about the small, intangible things that made them feel like they did not have a right to belong to this place.

They included experiences on public transport, when people refused to take a seat next to them, interactions with bus drivers who refused to stop when it was "only" refugee kids waiting at the village bus station next to the home for unaccompanied minors, or with teachers who kept telling them that they were so far behind Swiss students' abilities that they should not get their hopes up of finding an apprenticeship. While these stories did not necessarily show openly racist behaviour, they revealed the small, everyday actions through which the young people were actively being kept from laying a claim to the place.

In attempting to understand the links between these vernacular moments of exclusion and genealogies of migrant marginalisation in Switzerland, I find Ann Laura Stoler's current work very helpful. In a keynote speech held in the context of a conference on Switzerland's entanglement in colonial projects in April 2018, she used the term "interior frontiers" to describe the formation and defence of everyday affective thresholds of belonging that attempt to delineate who is "in" and who is to be kept "out" of particular places (Stoler 2018). Like the moments that made Filmon and Samuel feel like they were not wanted in Switzerland, interior frontiers often do not show in openly racist expressions. Rather, the feeling of being-out-of-place is commonly produced through small, seemingly unimportant actions and interactions in everyday life through which barricades between self and other, familiar and alien are set up and defended. As Stoler points out, these barricades do not come into being in a straightforward way or on

the spur of a moment. Rather, they are often based on long genealogies of racialised scripts. Increasingly these scripts do not use openly racist ideas, but justify acts of exclusion through liberal ideas such as the "integration" of migrants and refugees that turn out to be moral crusades against their perceived cultural otherness.

Photo by Naeblys (fotolia.com)

The small, everyday actions and interactions such as their encounters with shopkeepers continuously reminded Filmon and Samuel of the many barricades they had to tear down in order to become an accepted member of Swiss society. Filmon commented that all these incidents showed him that "the Swiss don't really want people like us". He said that they ("the Swiss") did not care about what had happened to them or where they were from. All they cared about was that they did not want people like them to come to their country. Yet, although this feeling of being-out-of-place was very powerful, the young people did not passively succumb to the everyday techniques of exclusion they were subject to. They developed their own strategies to divert, challenge or simply live with them.

Some of the strategies they deployed were as silent and intangible as the barricades that attempted to lock them out of place. Filmon, for example, refused to openly act against the exclusionary behaviour he encountered. Instead, he invested all his energy in learning and perfectionising the social and linguistic codes that would enable him to speak and act like his Swiss peers. This involved mimicking their expressions, learning when to be quiet in order not to stick out and internalising unwritten rules about how to or not to move about in public spaces. While in our weekly gatherings he spoke very openly about his struggles with the feeling of being-out-of-place, he made sure that he never revealed it to anyone outside this protected circle of friends. For Filmon the only way of combatting this feeling was by not accepting the underlying idea of non-belonging. By learning the secret codes people used to justify his exclusion, he hoped to be able to stun them into a defeat, thereby provoking a collapse of the interior frontiers.

Samuel's strategy was less subtle. He said that having experienced the dehumanising behaviour of Libyan gunmen who had held him and a group of Eritreans ransom and treated them like slaves, he had sworn to himself that he would never again silently accept the mistreatment by anyone. In this vein, he explained that the last time he went back to the supermarket where the shopkeeper kept shadowing him, he had his own trick in store. When he was waiting in the cue at the cash desk, after she had been following him around the entire shop as usual, he waved at her, telling her to come closer. He prompted her to have a "proper look" in all his pockets to make sure he had not stolen anything. Samuel's witty strategy to unmask the shopkeeper's racist behaviour in front of the startled other clients made Filmon and me laugh. And he already had the next manoeuvre in store. The next time, Samuel announced, *he* would be the one to look for her when he entered the shop. Rather than waiting for her to start shadowing him and unnerving him with her stare, he would actively seek her out. He would politely invite her to accompany him around the shop, all the while commenting on each piece he was adding to his basket.

References

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[1] My research is part of a larger project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation entitled "Transnational Biographies of Education: Young Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers and their Navigation through Shifting Social Realities in Switzerland and Turkey" led by Sabine Strasser from the University of Bern and Kathrin Oester from the University of Teacher Education (PH) Bern. I was responsible for the research in Switzerland, while my colleague Eda Elif Tibet conducted research in Turkey.

[2] "Expats stören sich an starrenden Schweizern", in *20 Minuten* online, December 8, 2016. Retrieved online: http://www.20min.ch/schweiz/news/story/Expats-stoeren-sich-an-starrenden-Schweizern-31515992

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