

Book Review

Citizens of nowhere: From refugee camp to Canadian campus. Goodwin, D. (2010). Toronto: Doubleday. 336 pp. ISBN: 0385667221.

If Canada were a nation that openly and without prejudice understood, accepted and welcomed refugees from war torn nations, the book, *Citizens of Nowhere: From Refugee Camp to Canadian Campus* by Debi Goodwin (2010) would not likely have had to be written. Since early 2000, Goodwin had been producing documentaries for the CBC on Sudan and the plight of Sudanese refugees in Kenya. During one of these projects, she discovered the existence of the Student Refugee Program (SRP), run by the World University Services of Canada (WUSC). The SRP is made possible through the volunteer work of student, staff and/or faculty-led Canadian post-secondary, Local Committees, and through financing raised by institutional tuition waivers and student levies (WUSC, 2007). When Goodwin met two selected WUSC student refugees in 2007, she created a CBC documentary, *The Lucky Ones*, focused “on the initial shock of displacement” experienced by the two students in their transition from refugee camp to Canada (Goodwin, 2010, p.4). This impacted Goodwin so deeply that she returned to Kenya two years later to cover a more in-depth story.

Goodwin took a strong, distinctive stance to journalistic integrity in *Citizens of Nowhere*. While she employed a traditional mix of relaying observations and quotes, she also censored sensitive information and, in varying degrees, developed personal ties with each student. Early into her research, she discovered that the participants would restrict what they chose to share with her due to their fear of persecution, retribution or shame. Nevertheless, her book is replete with revealing information, from photographs of the students to descriptions of their homes, from comments about and by friends, families and university administrators to anecdotes on refugee and post-secondary school and work experiences. Goodwin also related her own reflections, from taking students out for Tim Horton’s coffee or long drives to the ocean to having a female student over for dinner who befriends her daughter. She presented this story following a logical timeline, breaking it into transitional periods and developing associated thematic elements. This chronology began at the end of the summer at the refugee camps in Kenya as the students prepared and departed for Canada and ended with the students becoming helpers for the new group of student refugees the following year.

She highlighted early on that her book offered “a snapshot of the challenges to [refugees’] identities, of the changes in their attitudes toward their own culture and their new country” (p. 7). Throughout each chapter, she shared stories and reflections of the students’ challenges in adapting to Canadian society, their shifting interdependence with both old and new relationships and their conflicted, pragmatic decisions regarding their employment and academic studies. She interweaved the students’ expressions of initial loneliness, isolation and longing for home with their gradual integration into university and Canadian life. The students described becoming part of student council, getting jobs, making new friends and taking active roles in supporting the arrival of new student refugees. This transformation was marked by the students’ challenges in dealing with the academic culture of Canadian post-secondary learning environments and the requirement to develop organizational skills to deal with the demands of their studies. They also faced unfamiliar interpersonal relationships and cultural norms, where they experienced cultural differences that challenged their sense of identity.

What remained constant for the students in their personal development was their sense of responsibility to their home, family and cultural and/or religious or spiritual roots, having social, financial and/or political significance. This element of purpose in the student refugees' identity development was in context to the extreme poverty, violence and insecurity, but also of the intense interdependence and hope that they had lived and that was still lived by their friends and family in the refugee camps. The students made difficult, pragmatic decisions, such as giving up the dream of becoming a doctor or deciding to take summer work in the oil sands to ensure being able to provide financial support at home as soon as possible.

Goodwin created a parallel of this conflicted pragmatism with the students' uncomfortable expansion of their sense of identity. In particular, she noted the struggles the students faced in adapting to a different cultural frame for male-female roles and relationships. Goodwin observed differences in how the students adapted themselves to this new cultural frame. Some students became more comfortable with certain cultural norms, such as shaking the hand of someone of the opposite sex. Some students started to question more openly the cultural norms of their own society. Others demonstrated a solidification of their sense of difference, expressing disdain for the gendered and sexual norms of Canadian society, or feeling disempowered to act against male oppression. Goodwin sought out these personal reflections from the students, demonstrating the unapologetic liberalist emphasis of her work.

This focus on the students' emergent self-concept and search to humanize, personalize and develop congruence in their value systems emerged as the meta-narrative that held the book together and exposed underlying global social injustices and ethical conundrums. The students she interviewed in the Kenyan refugees campus described the unlikelihood of being the next "needle in the sea" who is "plucked from Dadaab" to continue their education past high school (Goodwin, 2010, p. 73). She related the convictions of Njogu, an education advocate in Kenya,

"Not educating those young people who are completing secondary school in the camps is a big security threat. These are young people who are energetic. These are young people who want to have an education. [...] The world should take this seriously. Take these young people, take them to the universities out there not only in Kenya, but to universities outside, so that young people can be transformed and get education that will help them start thinking positively." (Goodwin, 2010, p. 75)

The narrative in Goodwin's book confirmed this assertion from Njogu, as Goodwin related the students' increased confidence and individual hope for the future through their first year of studies in Canada. Some even began to speak of their future active participation in helping their homeland. This underlying theme of refugee emancipation becomes a value in and of itself, asserting the impact of the WUSC program as "fostering tomorrow's global leaders" (WUSC, 2007).

Goodwin's alternative frame focused on a critical, multicultural discourse. She delved into personal development of not only the students themselves, but of herself (and others) by having been in contact with them. She wrote,

As I watched them both talking excitedly to the new students, I realized how familiar they had become to me. I would never be able to fully grasp the impact that their experiences, their culture and their religion had on them. There would always be a world of difference between us. But they were familiar enough to me to make it impossible not to care, not to worry about their worries. (Goodwin, 2010, p. 311).

Goodwin transformed her narrative into one that explored moral responsibility – to care or not care about the young, hopeful, intelligent, energetic students around the world who are trapped in protracted refugee camps without access to post-secondary schooling. Rather than politicize the immigration issues associated with refugees, she personalized them. An example of this personalization is when Goodwin described a discussion among young university women about female genital mutilation (FGM), global social justice and gender. She kept the story anonymous, knowing the dire implications it could have on the Somali woman who shared her perspective on this practice. Goodwin described how three young Canadian-born women and one Somali-born woman delved into this difficult topic and, in the process, demonstrated the Somali woman's self-awareness about her freedom to choose for her own daughter and the Canadian women's self-awareness about what it might mean to be denied such a freedom.

This discussion was not posted on facebook by the students. It was not given a grade in a course. It did not result in a change to Canadian foreign policy. And yet, this discussion may have a real impact on the lives of these post-secondary students, upon their self-concept and sense of integrity, and even upon their future decisions and political views and actions. It was a moment of deep connection and learning, one that would not have happened without the educational context that brought these four women together in the first place. It was a discussion made possible through the Somali woman's will, supportive family environment, hard work and resilience to be selected for sponsorship through the WUSC refugee program. It was a lived experience made possible through the efforts of Canadian students, staff and faculty and WUSC staff and volunteers. It was a dialogue that reflected the whole of Goodwin's narrative.

In this manner, *Citizens of Nowhere* is a book that leads us to question our immigration, multicultural and foreign policies through the meaning such policies have upon those who are most affected by them. It is a book that requires not only the willingness to listen empathically to those who have lived as citizens of nowhere. It also demands reflection and action upon the moral and ethical demands of being citizens of somewhere.

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Reference

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