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Writing against expulsion in the post-war world: Making space for the human

by David Herd, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023, 296 pp., £78.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780192872258

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BOOK REVIEW

Writing against expulsion in the post-war world: Making space for the human, by David Herd, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023, 296 pp., £78.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780192872258

Expulsion, argues David Herd in this provocative new book, names the active removal – physically, legislatively, and rhetorically – of certain groups of people from the category of "human" to produce a state of "geo-political" and "juridical non-personhood" (6). Herd's work in this area is rooted in his long-standing collaboration with the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group (Refugee Tales n.d.). Thus, the principal "group" that informs this study is people seeking asylum, who face the suspension of human rights in "detention centres, removal facilities, or various forms of camp" (3) located at the limits of the nation. This focus foregrounds how the production of non-personhood is legitimized by national, racial, and ethnic essentialisms.

If such spaces as the detention centre and the refugee camp manufacture and maintain non-personhood, the book asks how it is possible to re-imagine "a non-expulsive international space" (266), where human rights are guaranteed and not contingent. In response, Herd turns to the immediate post-war era, when a cognizance of colonialism and the Holocaust meant that "the figure of the geopolitical non-person [...] was so *present* [...] as to constitute a condition of thought" (7; original emphasis). Across its five chapters, *Writing Against Expulsion* provides an analysis of mid-century responses to geopolitical non-personhood produced by Hannah Arendt, Frantz Fanon, the American poet Charles Olsen, and the authors of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). At the heart of this disparate but intersecting corpus of philosophical, literary, and legal post-war texts lies the assertion that "human rights are always a disruptive concept" and "require a reimagining of political space" (110). At a time when far-right populism and imperial nostalgia are eroding human rights across the globe, Herd makes the persuasive argument that these texts can provide the intellectual roots of advocacy for the rights of refugees today.

In chapter 1, "The Non-Place" (43–83), Herd confronts the question of how non-personhood has been produced in the past, and how spaces are created where rights are deemed open to suspension. This involves important insights into the lived experience of non-personhood under Nazism and colonialism, characterized by a violent control over one's ability to move, work, and speak. Chapter 2, "Writing Against Expulsion" (84–125), focuses on a terminology of "recognition" that acts as the necessary starting point for any founding of "non-expulsive space" (90). Chapter 3, "Moving" (126–171), argues for the right to free movement; chapter 4, "Making" (172–208), offers a passionate claim for the right to work as an "activity whereby collectively people make their home in the world" (203); and chapter 5, "Speaking" (209–255), advocates for the right to be heard without speech taking place "in the context of violation" or "duress" (247).

Two key aspects of the book that are of significance to postcolonial scholars are, first, the links made between human rights discourse, global migration, and European colonialism and, second, Herd's readings of Fanon as being integral to an understanding of the production of non-personhood in colonized regions. The book's enlightening investigation into the writing of the UDHR reveals both its importance as a touchstone for anti-racist human rights activism *and* the fact that "a number of

the European signatories were operating brutal two-tier jurisdictions across great swathes of the globe" (91). Fanon's writing is thus read as bringing a colonial dimension to the moment in which western powers sought to enshrine human rights whilst also seeking immunity from the violent realities of imperialism. This aspect of the book is not only a substantial contribution to scholarship on human rights but demonstrates an engagement with Fanon that counters some of the ways in which his writing is decontextualized or oversimplified in postcolonial studies.

It is a mark of the times that this book is so pertinent in its call to return to an historical moment defined by mass migration, decolonization, and the defeat of fascism. Comprehending the contours of this body of mid-century writing will only become more necessary in a future where international conflict and the climate emergency are set to exacerbate displacement, especially in settler colonial and post-colonial regions.

Reference

Refugee Tales. n.d. "About Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group." Refugee Tales. Accessed July 22, 2024. https://www.refugeetales.org/.

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