



## POSSIBLE SPACES OF SOMALI BELONGING

Vivian Gerrand, 2016, \$36.95, 262pp ISBN 978-0522869286

### BOOK REVIEW

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*Possible Spaces of Somali Belonging* (hereafter *Possible Spaces*) by Vivian Gerrand is a brilliant piece of original research work. The book stretches the definition of displacement into the particularities of Somalis’ colonial and historical encounters with Italy while exploring their recent migration experiences to Australia. Characteristic of forced displacement concerns, the 262-page petit paperback is cramped with Somalis’ struggles of belonging, resulting in a continuous search for alternatives and resistance to exclusion strategies in their host countries. Using innovative approaches, such as films, documentaries, artwork, and youth advocacy, Somali migrants endeavour to restore their belonging by “writing-in” to the historical and public memories of Italy and Australia.

*Possible Spaces* is divided into three parts containing seven chapters in addition to the Introduction and Conclusion. Part I briefly narrates pre-colonial, colonial and independence history of Somalia. Chapter 1 proceeds with emphasis on Italy’s colonial rule (1950-60) and partitioning of the country leading to political instabilities after independence (1960-69) that later descended into a civil war in 1991. Branded as a “failed State”, Somalia’s civil war claimed the lives of about a million people with around 35,000 fleeing “unliveable conditions produced by a combination of drought and rigid Islamist rule which had declared Jihad on Premier Meles’ Ethiopia” (p. 49). Chapter 2 continues with a comparative analysis of Somalis migratory trajectories in Italy and Australia. For Gerrand, the most important distinction between Somalis’ diasporic displacement in Italy and Australia has to do with citizenship and multicultural perspective. Despite Somalia’s unique colonial connection with Italy, “in Italy, citizenship is seldom granted to Somalis, offering little stability” (p 59). Whereas “Australia offers official recognition to Somali refugees in the form of citizenship within a multicultural model, however limited or ‘thin’ this may be” (p. 59). Italy’s seeming unwillingness or inability to afford Somalis citizenship in the face of its colonial legacy and Australia’s multicultural citizenship coated with distinct limitations, impels displaced Somalis to cultivate unusual spaces of belonging in each country.

Highlighting a number of visual representations (e.g., documentaries), Part II examines Somali-Australian identities of belonging through media and publication frames. Situated within their “host countries imaginaries” (p.83), Chapter 3 argues how powerfully media in the host country influence, construct and frame group identity, thereby shaping Somalis’ sense of belonging in Australian society, albeit adversely:

In recent years Somalis have often been figured as threat to the security of other members of Australian society. The manipulation of this fear, especially when it is not offset by positive images of Somali belonging in Australia, has reproduced a desire for Somalis to assimilate or be excluded. These fear-based representations and reporting have indirect yet material effects on the sense of belonging to nation Somalis might experience (p. 85).

Within the above scope, agency and resistance manifest through new and emerging representations such as, *Mohamed Ali's Happy Day Feast*, *Dehabo and Hard to Understand*, and *Africa to Australia: Do I really Belong Here?* On the other hand, ongoing lack of attention to Italian colonial history by Italians and the effects it has on Somalis' national memories entices other acts of citizenship for Somalis through Italian publishing houses is discussed in Chapter 4. Contributions made by intercultural associations, publishing houses and websites is displayed by "writers with origins in ex-colonies – particularly Somali women" (p. 127). For example, Eks&Tra, Terre di Mezzo, Edizioni dell'Arco and Sinnos are a few publishing houses that "have been crucial in the establishment of a body of Italian migrant writing in Italy" (p128).

The last section of the book enforces the importance of writing Somali stories into Italian public memory to challenge dominant identity as well as shared remembering of the past. Here, displacement and loss inhabit emblematic sites of belonging for Somalis in Italy, particularly in the writings of Ali Farah and Igiaba Scego. For example, in *Madre*, *Piccola*, *Rhoda* and *Olre Babilonia*, the metro station, the road and the telephone "serve as polyphonic sites [of belonging] replete with critical encounters that may be described as dialogic and heteroglossic" (p. 163). In the final chapter, Gerrand applies ingenuity in carving out Somali bodies in public spaces of belonging as: "representations of lived, bodily experiences of multiplicity offer[ing] a powerful mode of contestation of exclusive, racialised national imaginaries" (p.182). In essence, "the use of bodies to interrogate the borders between insiders [Italians and Australians] and outsiders [Somalis] which are revealed to be mutable and contingent, may be viewed as a political imperative whose goal is restore dignity to bodies which all need 'food, the environment, love and respect' (p. 184). In conclusion, Gerrand reasons that Somali artists' insistence on "interstitial belonging resists categorisation thereby complicating preconceived notions of Australianness or Italianness, while personifying multiple combinations of belonging through ethnicity and citizenship. Thus,

[Somali] artists' inhabitation of a space of 'nonfixity' represents movement beyond the essentialist Western/Islam dialectic, revealing the degree to which such thinking about identities fails to grapple with the complexities of belonging in the contemporary world. In addition to celebrating the ability to combine different cultural influences – fluency in moving between different ways of living – the representations discussed challenge reductive images of Somali migrants. [Eventually] in both Australia and Italy more spaces for complex identity and multiple affiliations are needed to offset the reductive dominant media images in circulation (pp. 230-231).

*Possible Spaces* defies conventional understanding of displacement, redefining alternative locations for Somalis by extending "citizenship to a fuller sense of potential belonging that reflects the structural hybridity and multiplicity of affiliations that shape contemporary global belonging as it takes place" (p. 232). The book will attract the likes of academic theorists interested in displacement as well as citizenship and multiculturalism advocates and policy-makers.

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