

Ali Bhagat, *Governing the Displaced: Race and Ambivalence in Global Capitalism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2024. ISBN: 9781501773600 (hardcover); ISBN: 9781501773617 (paperback); ISBN: 9781501773624 (ebook)

We are living in a moment of unprecedented displacement. In June 2023, the total number of forcibly displaced people in the world climbed to over 110 million for the first time in recorded history—more than one hundred million individual people, uprooted from their homes by “persecution, generalized violence, or human rights violations” (UNHCR 2023) and pulled into lives of movement and dislocation, precarious resettlement, and existential uncertainty. If this abstract figure fails to capture the sheer scale of upheaval, violence, and loss wrapped up in this displacement, there are images that do: photographs of overcrowded fishing boats carrying refugees across the Mediterranean; bodies of children drowned on those boats captured on film; vivid reports of police brutality against refugees in the Calais encampments; footage of millions of internally displaced Palestinians fleeing the bombardment of Gaza. Yet instead of astounding viewers or shocking elites into action, these images have become nearly normal. As Ali Bhagat¹ writes, “media coverage of mass death has desensitized viewers to the spectacle of mass migration and created a passive tolerance toward the displacement of dark-skinned people, particularly at Europe’s shore” (p.6).

In *Governing the Displaced: Race and Ambivalence in Global Capitalism*, Bhagat actively works against this desensitization by focusing on a distinct and often hidden dimension of forced displacement: the struggle for survival that begins after the moment of expulsion and continues long after resettlement, as displaced people make new homes, search for new livelihoods, and reformulate their aspirations and fantasies in unfamiliar nations where anti-migrant sentiments form a hostile backdrop for these life-making activities. Rather than dwelling on the moments of spectacular violence and death that are often associated with the refugee experience, Bhagat asks readers to consider the everyday experiences and survival tactics of the displaced—particularly as they play out within a global capitalist system that renders refugees

¹ I was introduced to Bhagat’s work as a graduate student, and we have since written together.

disposable in some instances, exploitable in others, and always vulnerable to the whims of the market.

The book achieves this shift in perspective—away from the spectacular and toward the mundane—through a relational comparison of refugee life in Paris and Nairobi, two hotspots of migrant hosting in Europe and East Africa. It explores the political and material conditions of what Bhagat calls “refugee survival” in three realms: shelter, work, and political belonging. Across these cases, Bhagat uses participant observation and interviews to take readers into an array of spaces where this survival plays out: a visit to a queer refugee safehouse on the outskirts of Nairobi prompts reflections on the illusory nature of political belonging and the queerness of the refugee experience; interviews in NGO offices in Paris reveal the absurd cruelties of refugee life under austerity urbanism, as caseworkers advise their homeless clients to get arrested in order to access limited emergency shelter; trips to informal settlements in Kenya shed light on the entrepreneurial survival strategies of refugees who are denied work permits on the ideological grounds of “nonbelonging”, but are granted business licenses and loans easily.

Through this empirical focus on survival, Bhagat formulates a compelling critique of the material inadequacy of liberal rights-based refugee policies, framing them as “fantasies of benevolent nations that treat refugees with fairness and justice” (p.138). For Bhagat, this fantasy is deeply connected to the dynamics of racial capitalism. Refugee governance represents a “set of violent processes underpinned by the systemic brutalities of always-racialized capitalism” (p.9), which devalues refugee life but rests on a liberal veneer of equal opportunity, humanitarianism, and inclusion. This gap between representation and reality informs the book’s central argument: that “the material practices of refugee governance are informed by immaterial fantasies that surround the prospect of refugees entering the borders of a nation-state” (p.2). These fantasies are always infused with imaginaries of race and ethnicity, so that an influx of refugees is often framed as a “crisis” less because it strains the capacities and material resources of the host state (as popular narratives would have it), but because it “challenges the racial (and supremacist) visions of a nation-state” (p.2).

Straddling migration studies, urban geography, and global political economy, the book covers some terrain that will be familiar to radical geographers. It contains sensitive treatments

of debates on urban neoliberalism, multi-scalar governance, Marxist state theory, and feminist political economy, and its technique of relational comparison is firmly rooted in a geographical sensibility. For scholars interested in migration, the book contains useful insights into the architecture of the global refugee governance system, charting the intersection of states, NGOs, charities, international and national governing bodies, and corporations that intervene in and shape refugee survival. But perhaps the most compelling aspect of *Governing the Displaced* is its approach to the issue of social difference and multiplicity within racial capitalism, a topic of growing concern within radical geography and critical political economy.

For Bhagat, axes of social difference sit at the heart of many of the puzzles, absurdities, and contradictions that characterize refugee survival and governance. While the book rests on a Marxist analytical framework, Bhagat shows that differences of race, sexuality, and gender do not operate as abstract categories within capitalism, simply rendering certain populations as “surplus”, “exploitable”, or “disposable”, and thereby reproducing the social hierarchies that capitalism thrives on. Rather, Bhagat argues that these differences are *embodied experiences* that are woven into the search for survival, not only in the material realms of shelter and work, but also on the emotional registers of belonging and desire. Refugees are never treated as passive recipients of aid or surplus bodies that are alternately absorbed into or ejected from capitalist social relations. In *Governing the Displaced*, they are active agents who navigate hostile migration systems, build lives on the fringes of formal labour and housing markets, and pursue desires that are “oppositional to those of states and an increasingly anti-migrant society” (p.4). It is here, in its emphasis on agency, drive, and desire, that the book provides two compelling interventions in the burgeoning geographical debates over social difference and racial capitalism: first, it offers an analysis of racial capitalism that draws from psychoanalytic theory to contend seriously with the problem of ideology; and second, it develops a reading of refugees as queer subjects that offers a framework for imagining the possibilities of refugee life beyond mere survival.

Fantasies of Racial Capitalism

In recent years, radical geographers have increasingly used the lenses of black radical, anti-colonial Marxist, and intersectional feminist theory to analyze how racial oppression intersects with and enables capitalist development (see, for example, Al-Bulushi 2022; Alami 2023; Pulido 2017; Strauss 2020; Werner et al. 2017). *Governing the Displaced* draws on a similar set of theories—rooted in the work of thinkers like Cedric Robinson (2000), Robin D.G. Kelley (2017), Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2002), Gargi Bhattacharyya (2018), and Robbie Shilliam (2018)—to explore racialized refugee governance. But the book creatively puts these theories into conversation with psychoanalytic work on capitalist fantasy and desire (see, for example, Dean 2011, 2013; Wilson 2013; Žižek 1989) to develop a layered account of refugees as a “disposable” population that has been relegated to the “edges” of capitalism by material forces *and* by immaterial racial imaginaries.

For Bhagat, fantasies—of endless accumulation, of “national identity” and “liberal benevolence”, of refugees as both passive bodies and phantom threats that need “to be managed for the purposes of economic and cultural stability” (p.7)—provide the ideological underpinning for the state and societal practices that govern refugee life. They also help to explain the basic ambivalences that characterize refugee governance in both Paris and Nairobi. This governance is ambivalent in the sense that the French and Kenyan states sometimes act as providers and protectors, living out their fantasies of progress and enlightenment through the acceptance and rights-based management of racialized refugee bodies. But they simultaneously abandon refugees on the level of basic survival, withdrawing social supports, encouraging self-reliance and exploitative labour practices, turning a blind eye to anti-migrant violence, and demonstrating a general indifference to whether refugees live or die. While the empirical realities of refugee life in Nairobi and Paris vary, Bhagat argues that this ambivalence stems in both cases from conflicting fantasies: the state’s desire to police the (race-based) borders of national belonging and to punish the “undeserving” poor competes with the impulse to demonstrate their liberal legitimacy; the capitalist drive for accumulation imagines refugees as an exploitable workforce in one moment and discards them as waste in another. In tracing this complex ambivalence, the book makes a compelling case that analyses of racial capitalism can benefit from deep attention

to the ideological dimensions of both race and capital—and shows that psychoanalytic theory offers one path toward this.

Queer Politics of Survival

If one of the empirical strengths of *Governing the Displaced* is its focus on the political economy of everyday life and survival, this is not just because this lens disrupts the numbing tendency to fixate on the spectacular violence of the refugee experience. It also allows Bhagat to open a *queer* engagement with refugee governance. This is not only a project of highlighting the experiences of queer refugees, but also of exposing the queerness that already exists within refugee survival by highlighting the instabilities of the refugee governance system and uncovering the “perverse installed within” (Puar 2005: 126). As Bhagat writes, “the parallels between the queer experience and the refugee experience are hinged on liminality and dis/belonging” (p.135), as refugees carve out their social lives “on the edge”, in spaces where they ostensibly have “no future” (see Edelman 2004). Presented with nearly impossible conditions on arrival in their host nations (piecemeal incomes, scarce food and shelter, impenetrable immigration systems, racist societies), the refugees that Bhagat follows do achieve small triumphs; they create their own conditions of possibility and pursue desires that rub up against the disciplinary logics of states and capital. In this context of “structural, epistemic, and everyday violence ... survival is both a constrained choice and an infinite number of radical acts performed by those who are forgotten in global capitalism” (p.8).

In *Governing the Displaced*, it is these radical acts that provide the basis for a political engagement with the refugee governance system that does not fetishize death and violence but instead centres the feat of survival. If we have become inured to the spectacles of forced migration, Bhagat proposes that we turn our attention instead to the everyday moments of subversion and persistence that are tangled up in the struggle to survive. In these moments, Bhagat finds the perverse logics of state discipline, capital accumulation, and racialization operating at every turn. In this light, it is impossible to diagnose our heightened moment of forced displacement as a purely humanitarian crisis, solvable through the granting of rights and the dispersal of aid. Instead, as Bhagat shows, the lives of the displaced are intimately entangled

with the structural dynamics of racial capitalism. Any meaningful challenge to our violent system of refugee governance will have to contend with this connection.

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