

Making Home in the Earth: Ecoglobalism in the Camps

To preserve our places and be at home in them, it is necessary to fill them with imagination.
(Wendell Berry, "Poetry and Place")

Earth is anywhere earth
(Gwendolyn Brooks, "Horses Graze")

In the summer of 2016, at Al Azraq refugee camp in Jordan, a Syrian refugee shared the story of her arrival to the camp. She explained:

After I cried when I came here, I decided to keep myself strong for the children and start building the caravan to make it like home. They were at an age where they understood what was going on. They were sensitive to the situation and they could lose all that they have if they weren't nurtured in a way that made them feel like they were home. I found it very hard on them to leave their rooms and their computers and all the things that they loved. So I sat them down and told them: the five of us are here, me you and your father, wherever the five of us are, that place should be your heaven. Whether it's in a caravan, in a deserted land ... the most important thing is that we are together. [The most important thing is] that we did not lose one of ourselves on the way. That we didn't bury any one of ourselves. [From here on out], wherever the five of us are—together—that will be our heaven and our home.

I also told them not to listen to the people around us. The people were asking why we were fixing the caravan. They would ask: do you think that you will be staying here for long? The day I planted that tree outside, all the neighbours ridiculed me, calling me ridiculous for planting outside my caravan. They would say: "... with all that planting you're doing it seems you are planning on staying awhile!" I would tell them that it does not matter if I stay here for a long time or if I leave tomorrow. If I leave tomorrow this tree will stay as a standing memory of us to the people that will live here after us. It could serve as a means of shadow for a passer-by or a place where a bird could nest. After that I started planting more things, until it became a garden.¹

Such testimony from Syrian refugees living in the refugee camps of Jordan reflects a myriad of engagements with the environment. In what ways might these engagements be read as indications of an ecoglobalism at play? I am interested in pursuing such a reading to suggest that

¹ This interview is printed in full as "The Woman who Planted a Peach Tree," Interview with Yasmine Shamma, *Journal of Narrative Theory* 50.3, Fall 2020: *Refugee Literatures* (Eastern Michigan University: 2020).

the seemingly simple acts of nesting connote deeper implications of both progressive and apriori “whole-earth” thinking.

I borrow the phrase “whole-earth thinking” from arguably the leading ecocritic in contemporary American literary studies, because that is the field informing my own lens in cultivating oral histories from Syrian refugees in the camps of Jordan. Lawrence Buell explains:

To think “environmentally” or “ecologically” requires thinking “against” or “Beyond” nationness even more self-evidently than thinking “Culturally” does. Seldom do jurisdictional borders correspond to ecological borders. For the island nation of Iceland, yes. For the US-Canada and the US-Mexico borders, clearly not. Arguably “the oldest form of globalization” is the environmental rather than the economic or political.... Particularly during the last half century, supposedly integral “landscapes” have become “timescapes” subject to inexorable reshaping by exotic permeations we are just starting to learn how to measure...

From this standpoint the case for a planetary perspective over against a nation-centered approach to environmentality seems open and shut. The whole earth image taken from the moon a third of a century ago has long since become a logo, a cultural cliché. But ecoglobalism, that is a whole-earth way of thinking and feeling about environmentality, is at the time of writing more a model that has begun to take root than an achieved result: a model for inquiry, furthermore, that is quite unevenly distributed across the disciplines.²

Much of Buell’s opening argument is offered in my own opening argument, because this chapter’s “inquiry” is modelled along the lines he advocates. Where Buell attends to the ways in which American literature lends itself to being considered as a mode of “whole-earth” thinking, here I consider the way refugee testimonies, and sometimes literatures, tend towards “whole-earth” thinking, especially when reflecting on small but meaningful efforts to make home in a “whole-earth” beyond the limits of one’s liminal, stateless, tent.

Pursuing this “whole-earth” model of inquiry, this chapter will dwell on testimony from the woman who planted a peach tree, among other descriptions from refugees nesting through gardening, while gathering its sustenance from emerging theories of ecoglobalism.

² Lawrence Buell, “Ecoglobalist Affects: The Emergence of US Environmental Imagination on a Planetary Scale,” in *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* (edited by Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell, Princeton UP: 2007), 227.

Environmental Caring as Home-Making

In referring to “ecoglobalism,” I draw on Buell’s above definition, which is informed both by a close reading of the American ecocritical tradition—ie writing that engages the environment in as its subject if not its antagonist—and also theories from the likes of Val Plumwood and Doreen Massey. Plumwood argues for an ethics of care to be enforced in engagements with the environment. Her theory steers away from rationalist, romantic, conceptions of nature as a thing to passively behold, and or relate to at a remove, and urges instead for an ecological framework of engagement—one in which humans understand that they live within an integrated environment, alongside, and or involved with the non-human. In this way, her theories predate and or anticipate Timothy Morton’s *Ecology Without Nature* (2009), and his work’s arguing for a ridding of the human-made construct of “nature,” to make space for actual nature, or ecology, to flourish.

Further informing Buell’s work, Doreen Massey’s “Global Sense of Place” pursues “the vision of a particular site understood to be a nodal point of interconnected force fields of planetary scope (qtd in Buell. 233) which resists the time-space compression of modernity and confusing signals regarding place which it can promote. Buell ultimately pushes this “planetary scope” further, but suggesting that American literature be reconceptualised as World literature (in various articles), but this is pivotal to Buell’s conception of ecoglobalism because it relies so heavily on re-reading the American literary tradition, and its obsession and romanticization of the pastoral. By removing the insistence on “American” in considering the Pastoral, Buell’s ecoglobalism frees its reader of the limits and problems of nationalism, such as those inherent in the American conception of “manifest destiny.”

So what does this have to do with refugees, and what their displacement does to notions of home? I went into the camps on fieldwork intending to ask refugees what “home” meant to

them; how they made themselves at home; when they decided to nest; what made them feel at home, away. What happened instead was that they frequently spoke of the space surrounding the home, such as in the interview excerpted above. The garden, or the space surrounding the caravan or tent they resided in, came to become a frame for their sense of home—both past and present. Talk of gardens also lent itself to a safety in our conversations. Later on in my interviews (years on), I was not permitted to ask refugees about the past or the present. I was instructed by the officials accompanying me that it was no longer possible to ask them about the past or the future. “It’s too difficult; too painful” one explains. The directed framework of these conversations complicated the already complicated field of oral history within which I was operating (Alessandro Portelli’s notion of the interviewed interviewer here come to mind). So instead I took to asking only about the flowers, bushes and trees. One person I was speaking to explained that he has been planting things for “some time.” I asked when he began and he explained briefly, before being cut off by the aforementioned official’s hand in the air, that he started “when we realised we would be here awhile.”

Like the refugees, I understood that Zaatari would be there “awhile,” and returned to the camp four times after that first visit. The first time I went to Zaatari refugee camp, I was struck by three physical facts. One, it is far away from Amman; two, it sits on an old abandoned olive grove; and three, it is, despite being known as a grass-roots creation, organised. Refugee camps are rarely set in the middle of capital cities, with the possible exception of Yarmouk, in Syria. They are fringe spaces, abstractly and concretely liminal, so the first fact was easy to move past. The third fact was interesting, but again, not unexpected. A contemporary post chaos-theory called ‘emergence’ suggests that organisations are connected, especially when growing from the ground up. The history of Zaatari refugee camp is quick to remind one that the camp has sprawled and grown as a direct response to the emergency of the Syrian migration crisis from its

start. As John MB Balouziyeh writes in *Hope and a Future: The Story of Syrian Refugees*,³ in 2015, Zaatari was “the fourth most populous city in Jordan and among the largest refugee camps in the world, with some estimates ranking it as the world’s second largest refugee camp. Unlike other refugee camps that compete in size, Zaatari Refugee camp took only two and a half years to reach its current population. In contrast, Dadaab Refugee Camp in Northeast Kenya, which currently stands as the world’s largest refugee camp, took two decades to reach its current size.” Six years since Balouziyeh’s writing, the camp is still registered to have 80,007 inhabitants, but Kutapalong, housing over 800,000 Rohingya Refugees, has edged both Zaatari and Dadaab Refugee Camps out, and Zaatari currently sits at the fifth largest camp in the world.

It was not so much the size of Zaatari that struck upon entering it the first time, but rather, its rapid and organic sprawl, or organization, depending on your vantage point. Its economic self-made market, for example, nicknamed the “Champs de Elyses,” sprouted out of a communal desire to have Syrian bread rather than Jordanian bread. That was, the story goes, the first shop, and now over 10,000,000 is circulated *monthly* in this refugee-made marketplace (cite JM). UN “shelter policy” argues that refugees are more likely to feel greater well-being and senses of agency when offered the material to make a life, rather than the complete top-down created infrastructure of that life. If Zaatari’s reputation as “the camp with soul in it” is any proof, senses of agency, despite the limbo of displacement, grow strongly both inside and outside the sense of this specific camp. Georgio Agemben’s depiction of camp-inhabitants (and in the case of his most central argument, concentration-camp inhabitants) lack agency, finds complication in the case of the Syrian refugee in Jordan, who not only makes and participates actively in home-grown marketplace activity, but also makes a garden, and plants a tree that in multiple ways, discretely evades the otherwise overwhelming issue of nationality.

³ John MB Balouziyeh, *Hope and A Future: The Story of Syrian Refugees* (Time Books, 2016).

How does the refuge of a garden provide refuge from the notion of the state? Does the refugee tendency to garden satisfy recent definitions—both in structure and in implication—of ecoglobalism? In what ways my literary criticism, an outlier of contemporary discourses around migration policy reform, illuminate the ecoglobalism at play in refugee gardening tendencies? These and other questions, honouring the resilience and wherewithal demonstrated by refugees I have had the privilege of talking to in the camps of Jordan from 2015-2019, offer the possibility of deepening conversations about the nascent, palpable powers of the ecoglobalist refugee imagination.

Ecopoetics in Action

The repeated tendency of the interview subject to engage in an imaginative and figurative drifting to explore and explain an outside nesting experience suggests that the description of the space surrounding their tent or “caravan” was as central as the creation of a space within. These structures are uniform dwellings made of sheet metal, offered as sturdier portable small one-room spaces by the UN after the crisis began to appear long-term. These caravans replaced tents that were used for upwards of five years by many, but were not originally meant to withstand the elements beyond a year. Most refugees whom I spoke with expressed a relief to have moved out of their tents to a caravan, though some, as late as 2016, were still residing within the tents. Though the focus of my interviews was on the internal domestic space, the refugees themselves tended to shift the conversation towards discussions of the make-shift gardens that surrounded their tents.

Moreover, when a contemporary political crisis seems too traumatic to engage with, when the horror of what we do to ourselves feels too immense or complex to outline, the imagery and language of ecology – even the ecology we know we are destroying or living within

depleting – often offers itself as familiar respite. While conversations with refugees circle the possibilities of escape in looking to the larger earth to eclipse the turmoil of more local, and or national, complexity of crisis, poetry—and strangely, American poetry—offers fleshed out metaphors for such negotiations to be riffed on further.

There are many poems in which this respite finds form, including Adrienne Rich’s *What Kinds of Times are These*. Rich’s poem, for example, marries humanitarian crises with ecological ones – that of the disappearing compound ‘leafmold paradise’ and the ‘country moving closer to its own truth and dread’ – through the soothing symbiosis of a made object, which, like a garden, represents a sense of order and balance. The poem, first published in 1955, reads:

There’s a place between two stands of trees where the grass grows uphill
and the old revolutionary road breaks off into shadows
near a meeting-house abandoned by the persecuted
who disappeared into those shadows.

I’ve walked there picking mushrooms at the edge of dread, but don’t be fooled
this isn’t a Russian poem, this is not somewhere else but here,
our country moving closer to its own truth and dread,
its own ways of making people disappear.

I won’t tell you where the place is, the dark mesh of the woods
meeting the unmarked strip of light—
ghost-ridden crossroads, leafmold paradise:
I know already who wants to buy it, sell it, make it disappear.

And I won’t tell you where it is, so why do I tell you
anything? Because you still listen, because in times like these
to have you listen at all, it’s necessary
to talk about trees.⁴

Like a garden, this poem is steeped in metaphors that point to things but do not necessarily circle them, such as the things this chapter on refugee gardening and the environmental imagination gestures towards, without necessarily making unequivocal declarations.

⁴ Adrienne Rich, “What Kinds of Times are These,” *Collected Poems: 1950-2012* (2016).

More explicitly speaking, it and other ecopoetic formulations invite the reader to flesh out the possibility of linking the refugee pursuit of an often maternal home-making process to an ecoglobalist agenda, a link that is encouraged by the refugees themselves who so often describe lost homes-- both their recently “ghost-ridden crossroads,” and a more primordial “leafmold paradise”—and new homes, through “talk about trees.” Considering this poem, and the refugee tendency to reach towards the “here” (in Heidegger’s sense) of the earth in times of disaster, feels especially possible at a time in which the relation between ecopolitics and migration is becoming understood as informed by the experience of mass migration created by environmental disasters in the era of climate change. Indeed, environmental literature critic (ecocritic) Buell’s coinage of the phrase “ecoglobalism” might come to be applied to responses as they become increasingly global.⁵

Buell’s sense of the term is inherently transnational, as opposed, for example, to the definition offered by Ursula Heise, who writes instead of an “eco-cosmopolitanism.”⁶ In work that defines the term, he links the emergence of such notions with “economic modernization,” explaining that “The emergence of U.S. ecoglobal imagination is symbiotic with the history of economic modernization,” while also being aware that such linking risks leading to “capitalism-bashing (which blocks one from understanding how a ‘responsible’ ecoglobalism might arise as a messily partial yet partially honorable reaction against the conquest mentality itself” (232). As Buell gestures towards the slipperiness of such terms which inherently respond, in the case of Buell’s work on American literature, to an “American settlement” “culture of economic entrepreneurialism” (232), my own work with Buell’s phrase “ecoglobalism” draws on its transnational potential, as Buell offers a definition that reaches towards the implications of

⁵ Buell writes of ecocritical imaginations frequently, though only defines the phrase “ecoglobalism” throughout his more recent work, but I here return to my earlier citation of his chapter published within *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*, edited by Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell (Princeton UP, 2007), 227-248.

⁶ Ursula Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford UP, 2008).

engagements with the physical environment, which, though site specific, is also inherently global.

He explains:

By ‘ecoglobalist affect’ I mean, in broadest terms, an emotion-laden preoccupation with a finite, near-at-hand physical environment defined, at least in part, by an imagined inextricable linkage of some sort between that specific site and a context of planetary reach. Either the feel of the near-at-hand or the sense of its connection to the remote may be experienced as either consoling or painful or both. Diaspora can feel wrenching and liberatory by turns.

Buell is not the first to suggest the romantic implications of the wandering diasporic subject, before moving away from the implicitly understood complications of such romanticizing.⁷ What interests me here, though, is that the diasporic subject is the first example Buell reaches for, when describing what a lived-in ecoglobalism, in action might come to mean.

Returning to the words of the woman who planted a peach tree, we find an ecopoetics in practice; in action. Her noting that the tree might serve as a home for a bird in the future demonstrates not only an ecoglobal appreciation of the interrelatedness of the human and its region (and importantly, not “nation”), but also a posthuman, transnational approach to home-making. Whether ecoglobalism and transnational posthumanism are the same remains to be disentangled by ecocritics and postcolonialists currently at quiet war about the stakes of each term. The question I am pursuing is less about terminology, and more about possibility: if the refugee’s home-making pursuit is permitted to be re-envisioned as stretching to the limits of the refugee’s own articulation of “home,” and the refugee describes home-making as gardening, and gardening as a whole-earth project—anational, important before their resettlement or waiting in

⁷ In the popular imagination, Paul Simon’s 1983 title song, “Hearts and Bones” (released at what might be called the height of Simon’s musical career) begins with lines that imply that subjects of a Jewish diaspora’s “wandering” are “free to wander wherever they choose.” Though Simon has explained that the song was written about his relationship with Carrie Fisher, he also notes that the song’s opening phrase “was true.” An early review of the album in *Rolling Stone* ends with the claim that in this song, Simon “gets to be alone with his earth angel.” (Don Shewey (24 Nov 1983), “Paul Simon: *Hearts And Bones*: Music Reviews : Rolling Stone,” [Rolling Stone](#). Archived from [the original](#) on September 30, 2007. Retrieved 10 February 2020).

transitory spaces, and lasting beyond it—then is it possible to imagine the refugee’s home-making practices, however small, as largely ecoglobalist?

Oral Histories of / through Gardening

The quiet ecoglobalism of the woman who planted a peach tree seems manifest in the sequence of actions she describes as home-making:

So I sat them down and told them: the five of us are here, me you and your father, wherever the five of us are, that place should be your heaven. Whether it’s in a caravan, in a deserted land ... the most important thing is that we are together. [The most important thing is] that we did not lose one of ourselves on the way. That we didn’t bury any one of ourselves. [From here on out], wherever the five of us are—together—that will be our heaven and our home.

I also told them not to listen to the people around us. The people were asking why we were fixing the caravan. They would ask: do you think that you will be staying here for long? The day I planted that tree outside, all the neighbors ridiculed me, calling me ridiculous for planting outside my caravan.

Here she ties heaven to home—the two are synonymous, in much the same way as “Syria” and “mother” are later in her interview: “What can I tell you? Syria makes the rocks cry. The last thing I remember is my mother.” Her linguistics slips and slides suggest the dense entanglement of Rich’s “dark mesh of the woods,” which make heaven and home one, in much the same way that the tears she explains might be brought on by her country, are brought on in this conversation, by thoughts of her mother (she did cry at this moment and we did take a pause). As the interview continues, the landscape—actual descriptions *of* landscape—become further enmeshed in the complexities of an essentially resilient and vibrant and deeply ecological imagination: the woman without a home becomes engrossed in the whole-earth project of creating homes—acquiring “the language of ecological humility” (as Christopher Manes calls

such a language “free from the directionality of humanism”) to think and act beyond the human.⁸

[insert image of her peach tree]

Conversations I have had and things I have seen in the refugee camps have brought these ecoglobalist tendencies into focus. Gardens became central to the conversations with Syrian refugees living in the deserts of Jordan, yet also afforded us a way into talking about something that persisted beyond camps and the complexities of nation-states. On a literary level, they conversations about gardens bridge the chasm between postcolonialism’s appreciation of the pastoral, environmentalists denunciation of the cultivated (and implicitly colonial) garden, and the more recent “world” turn of ecoglobalism—ultimately suggesting that the “home” refugees in the camps make, is triumphantly in the earth at large.

Though I have returned to the camps many times since that first time, I am still in many ways stuck on the second fact that I noticed on first entry: that the tents and caravans sit on an old olive grove, which breathes life into a space that was abandoned.

[insert image of remaining olive trees]

Those that I have spoken to living in the camps have tended to utilise the spaces they’ve been allocated for nesting, in various ways—but the garden has come up so frequently in the conversations I have had with Syrian refugees that it begs attention be given to it as its own form.

For an anonymous, and somewhat random sense of examples of the ubiquitous of garden-references in conversations about home, I am excerpting here conversations with various

⁸ Christopher Manes, “Nature and Silence,” *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, Georgia: U of Georgia P, 1996) 15- 29, 17.

Syrian refugees in the camps (Zaatari and Al Azraq) of Jordan from June 2016 – December 2019):

August 2016:

Q: Can you tell me about your house in Syria

Refugee: yes, everyone had a garden. We lived outside the city. Everywhere you looked was green. Trees and fertile lands. We grew our own food with our own hands

Refugee's daughter: We grew olives and plums.

August 2016:

Q: did you grow your own garden here? I see some green outside

Refugee: yes, it makes me feel at home. Seeing and feeling green and nature

March 2018:

Q: What makes you feel at home? Objects, food, ..etc

We have some cousins here and my children and husband. We have to get used to the situation because otherwise it will be hard for us to survive. Hope is always there of course.

Some time ago I visited a friend of mine because she had a newborn. Once I entered her place I felt like I was back in Syria because she had a lot of greenery inside her caravan. Back in Syria our houses were filled with greenery. I was very happy to see the greenery and flowers. I was thinking of telling my husband to fix up a space outside the house for a garden. That's his job; he works as a carpenter.

Planting a garden would make me feel more comfortable and closer to home.

November 2019:

Q: what was your house in Syria like?

Refugee: we had a four bedroom house with a small garden. It was beautiful. Small, but to me, it felt like paradise. We are mighty strong people.

This is just a small sampling from the over 60 interviews I conducted over 5 years with Syrians in the camps. Though I entered each caravan with the intention of asking refugees how they made themselves at home *inside* their tents or caravans (what they call the sheet metal structures that replaced their original tents), conversation repeatedly veered towards the space bordering each make-shift home. Indeed, the act of gardening itself has cropped up, more frequently than other acts of nesting, as a way to view manifestations of refugee rooting and as a way to talk about the need for roots without being direct with the vulnerable subjects of this research. So acute is the

displaced subject's sense of interminable waiting and displacement, that talking about the tree outside their caravan was easier for both them and myself, than talking directly about the fact that the caravan is their home. To add, as mentioned above, in later conversations (in 2019) topics of conversation were limited by security guards accompanying me on these visits, and the garden became one of the few neutral subjects available for us to gather stories through. Instead of introducing myself, and the topic of the research I was there to conduct, I'd resort to pleasantries around plants. "What beautiful flowers," I said, to a father of five on an autumn day in 2019. I had made a point of revisiting certain caravans, to ask about the ways in which refugee senses of home have changed, or grown, or regressed, according to the passing of time since we last spoke. He invited me in and I'm soon being offered Arabic coffee, while my questions about nesting were indulged.

When asked about their nesting practices within their allocated tents, even the most resourceful refugees I spoke to were either embarrassed or apologetic, often using the space of the question to recall the technology and comforts of their lost homes. But when asked about the nesting implied in the immediate spaces surrounding their tents—in their makeshift (and often illegal) gardens, pride or enthusiasm colored the response. For an example of this, consider the below excerpt, from an interview I conducted in 2016 with a woman from a suburb of Aleppo.

Q: What makes you feel at home? Are there any objects, stories, or meals that make you feel particularly at home?

We have some cousins here and my children and husband. We have to get used to the situation because otherwise it will be hard for us to survive. Hope is always there of course.

Some time ago I visited a friend of mine because she had a newborn. Once I entered her place I felt like I was back in Syria because she had a lot of greenery inside her caravan. Back in Syria our houses were filled with greenery. I was very happy to see the greenery and flowers.

Q: Do you think of planting a small garden outside your house?

Yes, I was thinking of telling my husband to fix up a space outside the house for a garden. That's his job; he works as a carpenter. Planting a garden would make me feel more comfortable and closer to home.

Q: How do you pass the time?

I spend most of my time reading the Quran and listening to religious songs [humming]. The Quran makes me feel comfortable from the inside. I teach Quran to the young as well. If it weren't for the Quran, I wouldn't have forgotten all the suffering that we went through.

Q: What is your favorite meal that reminds you of home?

Stuffed vegetables. It is the meal that reminds me of home. But I don't have time (or the garden!) to cook with here, so I do easier more local meals like *mansaf*.

Even when asked for descriptions of the material and or of the home, the refugee redirects the conversation to green spaces, products of green spaces (vegetables), and divinity. In the context of the imposition of such various metaphorical and actual ecological space it bears mentioning that these are Syrian refugees living within the camps of Jordan—a desert land. Many of these refugees hail from provinces, such as Aleppo, which enjoy a Mediterranean climate: and in this way they share the experience of Palestinian refugees living within camps and resettled within Jordan, a desert country whose population is often estimated to be 75% refugee. These migrants come from landscapes where fruit grows off trees in Edenic ways, and where the diet is accordingly plant based. In moving—however temporarily—to the camps and cities of the desert of Jordan, they experience an environmental and dietary shock: leaving the green spaces of their homelands to be surrounded by a sepia toned pastoral of sand and dirt, and moving from a diet rich in vegetables to a meat-based Jordanian cuisine. In shifting from consuming the oft-mentioned stuffed vegetables (which, in various forms, managed to receive citation in almost every interview I conducted), to the Jordanian meal of mansaf (a lamb, yogurt and rice dish traditionally consumed with one's hands), the refugee is incorporating a shift in greenery, inside-out.

This specific refugee also had attempted to recreate the architecture of her lost home within her caravan-space. Her aforementioned husband—the carpenter—had, at her request—

built a fountain in front of their caravan, in a simulation of the traditional Syrian courtyard, which ironically has its architectural roots in a previous, nomadic tradition.⁹

It was more difficult to visit the camps the second time—to see some of the same people who had felt ignored for not five years now, but seven, but it was not as difficult as it is to be resident in them. In 2016, the woman from Aleppo had a strength in her insistence on offering her children a religious education, on creating a sense of home and safety for them within Zaatari. In 2018, strength was palpably aching for replenishment—physical and spiritual—in much the same way that the dirt by her make-shift windowsill was wanting seeds and water. And yet the sense that if there could be green, there might be hope, seemed consistent throughout the years and the responses from these desert camp inhabitants.

Watering the Garden

Seeking permission to continue talking, in 2019, to the above refugee who mentioned “being here awhile,” I returned to the topic of flowers. He explained that they need water – a theme of many of my interviews. Zaatari is not only set on an old abandoned olive grove, but also in the desert of a desert land: Jordan, a desert land without water.¹⁰ Indeed gardens, I was told in 2016, were prohibited in the early days of the camps, because they implied some sort of water stealing. In subsequent camps electricity was solar and water was rationed. And the issue of water remained pressing on the refugee mind over my years of entering Zaatari and Al Azraq camp. I returned to the tent of the woman from Aleppo—the woman with the courtyard fountain who had dreamed of a garden 2016 in 2018. Two years later, her tone in discussing gardening was

⁹ I discuss this tradition and the implications of its inheritance and replication within the camps, in an essay titled “Heaven is Green” in *Journal of Narrative Theory*, Summer 2020 (Vol 50.3).

¹⁰ “Jordan, a land without water...” <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02600-w>

distinctly despondent. I ask her what her hopes are for the immediate present and the future. She responds

I pray that my kids get better at school and in their studies. Financially, I do hope we get better. I hope we have enough to make this caravan nicer, like the other caravans. I hope we can pour concrete onto the floors so that we no longer live on the dirt. I hope we can grow a garden, which we can water with abundance.

Here, the request is not only for a garden, but for one that might grow—there is a decidedly long-term thinking evident in this mother’s hopes. There is also the implicit reference to the third implicitly subversive facet of gardening within the camps of Jordan: that the refugees who are doing so are doing so within a country that is, again, a desert. The lack of water is a well-documented ecological and political problem in Jordan suffered as a result of the occupation of Palestine (consider the 1964-1967 War over Water),¹¹ but it has taken new forms in the context of the evolution of the refugee crises within Jordan. In his *Hope and a Future: The Story of Syrian Refugee*, John M.B. Balouziyeh explains:

Even before Syrian refugees began streaming in, Jordan suffered from scarce water supplies. Public institutions often lacked sufficient water to maintain sanitation standards. Water supplies were often inadequate to perform the Islamic daily ablutions. Neighbors would often visit one another to obtain water, but would often find that their neighbors’ water supply similarly ran dry.

At the inception of the Syrian civil war, the tense water situation further worsened. The thousands of refugees that poured in from Syria added stress to and increased tensions over the Jordanian water supply. Today, areas of Jordan with significant refugee populations face water shortages on the threshold of emergency levels. (105)¹²

It is for these reasons and a few others that gardens are actually heavily policed, especially in Al Azraq camp.

The issue of water brings two rebellions in refugee gardening to focus: The first is the practical one—that to plant a garden in a place without abundant water resources is a slightly

¹¹ According to the World Health Organization, “Jordan has one of the lowest levels of water resource availability, per capita, in the world.” (“The Health and Environment Linkage Initiative, *World Health Organization Pilot Projects*, <https://www.who.int/heli/pilots/jordan/en/>, last accessed 16 February 2020).

¹² John M.B. Balouziyeh, *Hope and a Future: The Story of Syrian Refugees* (Time Books, 2016), 105.

subversive act of hope: It implies an intention to find a way, or a hope that a way will be found, to attain water, despite its limitations. It plants the refugee squarely within a broader crisis of ecology beyond the crisis of nationalism which they would have left at home. the refugee crisis and the climate crisis coincide in the example of gardening in refugee camps. It also marries this specifically noted pursuit of gardening into an ecological emergency, offering the refugee garden the possibility of being read into as an explicitly critical act. The refugees I spoke to knew there wasn't much water with which to water the gardens they grew, yet they planted them anyways, because, as they mentioned so frequently, the sight of greenery provided necessary nourishment to the *human* soul in its own crisis.

As proof of the need for greenery, aid workers and the UNHCR have, in Zaatari and beyond, permitted aid workers to paint caravans with murals of seashores and lush forests. [insert picture]? To add, refugees I spoke to made their need for gardens amidst senses of displacement explicit where and when possible. In concluding my return interview with the woman from Aleppo, I asked her how she has, over the past two years in particular, made her caravan more homey. I ask her this using a strange mix of words—as the Arabic language has one for “house,” and one for “homeland,” but not one for “home.” She explains: “To be able to live here one has to recreate a home as much as possible. We spend most of our time here, don't we? So you have to do things to achieve that.” Her tone is despondent and so I work to change it by complimenting her nesting efforts. Pointing to her makeshift bed and mattress, I tell her that I like the blue colors she used in her quilt. She responds, “—And green. Green brings me comfort.”

“And you have flowers on the wall” I mention, pointing.

“Yes, one can create—”

Here we are interrupted by her daughter asking about offering me juice, to which the Aleppo mother replies that it is not proper to even ask—that it is a given to offer the guests a drink,

though I am politely explaining that it is not necessary, and the daughter—no more than seven years old—disappears obediently on the errand. The mother returns to the topic at hand without hesitation, explaining emphatically:

Simple things can create home atmosphere; the curtains, the closets, such things we've tried to make. We put some dirt there under the windows in hopes of planting a few things, so that when I open the windows I will find flowers, like I did in Syria. There my in-laws had a big planted area with vegetables and greens, everything we needed. Here we have put the dirt but not the flowers yet. They need a lot of water.

Here was a woman explaining the desire for flowers, and the lack of water to grow them, while also insisting on performing the etiquette of offering me a temporarily thirst-quenching drink. To add, the “simple things” she identifies as home-making are concrete and place-based, yet in the curation of her home-space she has identified (and, in offering me a drink, created) more abstract, spatial configurations, or interrelations that constitute home-spaces. For example, she desires the flowers to be the focal point of the act of “opening the windows” and “finding flowers, like I did in Syria.” To add, in doing so, she'd be recreating not just her home, but her ancestor's offering of home: “my in-laws had a big planted area with vegetables and greens, everything we needed.”

Though the speaker claims to want things as “simple” as “curtains,” she is actually pursuing more complicated inter-relational experiences to cultivate a sense of home. This pursuit of process over physical place speaks to Paolo Boccagni's theories of home: “Central to the concept of home ... is the interaction between the built environment and the subjective attribution of meanings and emotion to it” (30).¹³ According to Boccagni, it is possible for home to be “reframed as a meaningful relationship with place... [an] interactive endeavour.” When that “place” is ecological, rather than built, might its “meaning” compound or present the possibility of post-human elasticity? In another article, Boccagni writes with Andrea Mubi Brighenti that:

¹³ *Migration and the Search for Home*

Once we ask, in a provocatively naïve way, ‘Where does home begin, Where does it end?’ a number of relatively neglected phenomena, issues, and problems can be revisited. Since home is a relational, incomplete achievement rather than a pre-given and unproblematic domestic space, even from a merely spatial point of view, the separation between domestic and non-domestic space can be marked, asserted and experienced in radically different ways. The fixation—not to speak of the obsession—with a sharp outline of home boundaries is simply unknown in many contexts of emigration, as well as in different civilisation patterns. (4)¹⁴

What the above offered testimonies and oral histories from interview subjects offer, is a subtle yet consistent refutation of the “fixation... with a sharp outline of home boundaries.” In pursuing the porosity of home, through the porosity of the liminal garden space, the refugee tendency to garden divulges an eco-globalist pursuit: an engagement in the whole earth of the land surrounding caravans, as opposed to an entanglement with a pursuit of nationhood, or selfhood in seemingly unproblematic domestic spaces. They offer instead small yet notable relational, and ambitiously incomplete achievements (such as a tree that “could become” a bird’s nesting space) that both challenge western notions of the fixity of home, while making an inter-relational, implicitly precolonial, home in the earth at large.

¹⁴ Boccagni, Paolo, and Andrea Mubi Brighenti. “EDITORIAL: Immigrants and Home in the Making: Thresholds of Domesticity, Commonality and Publicness.” *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 32, no. 1 (2017): 1–11. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44983728>.