

Review: ‘Human Archipelago’ shines light on refugees and our shared humanity

By SHARON MIZOTA MAY 02, 2019 | 4:10 PM



A photograph featured in the book "Human Archipelago," Night-walking in Benares, India, 2012. (Fazal Sheikh)

“Who is the stranger?

Who is kin?

What do we owe each other?

What, in the inferno, is not infernal?”

Thus opens “Human Archipelago,” a quietly powerful collaboration between writer Teju Cole and photographer Fazal Sheikh. Created in response to the inferno of the current global political moment, the book intersperses Sheikh’s

photographs of displaced people and sites of trauma across the globe with short, textual responses by Cole, himself a photographer, writer and photography critic for the New York Times Magazine. The result is a poetic, episodic meditation on nothing less than what it means to be human.

There are no refugees, only fellow citizens whose rights we have failed to acknowledge.

— TEJU COLE

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In other, less fraught political times, this ambition might have come across as pretentious. The appeal to a universal humanity would have seemed naïve, or worse, reductive, reminiscent of Edward Steichen's much-criticized 1955 exhibition and book, "The Family of Man." But in these times, when basic human dignity is assaulted in lethal and symbolic ways every day, it feels wholly necessary to return to first principles.



A photograph featured in the book "Human Archipelago." From left, Shamso, Zahara and Alima, Somali refugee camp, Liboi, Kenya, 1994. (Fazal Sheikh)

Sheikh's portraits are frank, beautifully framed and lit; they give the dignity of portraiture — traditionally reserved for aristocrats and the wealthy — to refugees, homeless people and orphans. For the most part, the subjects' gazes are direct, unflinching. They look back at us, person to person. By contrast, the landscapes and aerial views are dispassionate, atmospheric, often bordering on abstraction. Their beauty belies the fact that many are records of violence, ruins of aggression, sites of imprisonment. Both people and places bear the scars of a human pact that has been broken.

Why should the ruins of an American internment camp be any more affecting than the ruins of a bombed-out Palestinian town?

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Cole's short textual responses — none longer than a page, most barely a paragraph — read like prose poems. They draw on multiple, far-flung sources, from Homer and Shakespeare to Martin Luther King Jr., postcolonial theory and recent news stories on racial profiling. They proffer meditations on the bounds of our common humanity: the stranger and the obligations of hospitality; the bonds between mothers and children; who speaks and who is silenced. Throughout, the texts return in fugue-like fashion to these concepts, building in a slow crescendo to a quiet rage against racism, torture, war, environmental degradation and our own blindness. "We've tried to tell you in every different way and can only now conclude you'd rather not know," he writes, despairingly.

The alternating texts and images feel almost cinematic, illuminating one another or creating unexpected juxtapositions. Commenting on a suite of portraits of older people, Cole compares their wrinkled faces to the folds of cloth draped around their heads: "We are folded beings. Our skin, which is our

interface (the word is carefully chosen) with the world, is a zone of folds.” It’s a touching conceit, that a person might be a collection of folds, of unknown depths that might one day unfurl before you.



A photograph featured in the book "Human Archipelago." Annu, Jai Hind squatter settlement, Delhi, India, 2008. (Fazal Sheikh)

Another particularly lovely sequence takes advantage of the bilateral symmetry of the book. It’s all images, pairing portraits of Palestinians and Israelis on opposite pages. When one closes the book, it’s as if they kiss. There’s only one problem. You wouldn’t know they were Palestinians and Israelis unless you looked for the captions in the back of the book. Similarly, it was only by flipping back and forth that I learned what looked like a pockmarked wall was actually an aerial view of the remains of a WWII Japanese American internment camp.

Footnote chasers like me will find our enjoyment of the book's lyricism hampered somewhat by the compulsion to know at whom and what we're looking. (Cole's texts are also copiously annotated.) To be sure, a stream of notes would have interrupted the book's clean design and our ability to regard its subjects simply as people, apart from racial, ethnic, national, class, religious, gender or geographical associations. However, their absence turns the subjects into generalized symbols of human suffering, dangerously unmoored from specific historical and contemporary realities. It makes it easy to extend our sympathy without having to confront very real differences of circumstance, background and belief.



Anisa Aḥmad Jāber Maḥamīd,
Born in al-Lajjūn, Jenīn District in
1908, Umm el-Faḥem Arab-Israeli
town, 2011 (Fazal Sheikh)

Yet this appeal to something larger is Cole and Sheikh's point: Why should the ruins of an American internment camp be any more affecting than the ruins of a bombed-out Palestinian town? Both are evidence of disregard for our shared humanity. As Cole writes, "There are no refugees, only fellow citizens whose rights we have failed to acknowledge."

In "Human Archipelago" this truth unfolds page by page, plain as day.

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"Human Archipelago"

Fazal Sheikh and Teju Cole

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