

Book review

Gastrow, Vanya, 2022.

Citizen and Pariah

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Citizen and Pariah is the title of a book by Vanya Gastrow that is based on her doctoral and postdoctoral research. In the preface Gastrow informs the reader that “the book investigates violent crime affecting Somali shopkeepers, their ability to access informal and formal justice mechanisms, and efforts to regulate their economic activities” (p.xii). As one navigates the different chapters of the book it becomes clear that Gastrow uses the term “pariah” as a social and geographical metaphor. Socially, the “pariah” is economically excluded, and geographically, the pariah’s condition of precarity compels them to occupy the street as the space to pursue livelihoods during the daytime and then to retreat in the evening to their ethnicized spaces.

Gastrow produced a very readable book that is divided into three parts consisting of twenty-one essays that delicately address the marginalization and victimization of immigrant entrepreneurs. Foreign shopkeepers with business interests in urban spaces have been victims of xenophobic attacks in most parts of South Africa. The victims’ frustrations to access justice mechanisms and protection from such attacks have been highly documented. Drawing from narratives emerging from qualitative research, Part 1, which consists of eight chapters that provide rich personal migration experiences of Somali immigrant entrepreneurs, explores the theme, *arrival and reception*. The chapters offer revealing insights into how social networks, involving established Somali immigrants, help the new arrivals to adjust to a new environment and to livelihood opportunities in the immigrant economy.

The contours of the urban geography of migrant entrepreneurship in South Africa become clear as Gastrow unpacks how “Somali spaza traders have found themselves in a foreign country as modern pariahs” (p.11). As social pariahs residing in ethnic enclaves that are cut off from mainstream society, Somali migrants in South African cities have become entrepreneurs largely because of the various impediments, such as lack of requisite documents, in the path to formal employment. Gastrow argues that in addition to being spatially and socially marginalised, the “Somali migrants are largely unwelcome guests in South Africa and criminals target their businesses with relative impunity” (p.39). Given this intolerable situation, Gastrow

observes that flight and relocation have become the primary responses by the Somali entrepreneurs to the structural xenophobic attacks that are prevalent in the migrant neighborhoods and which have “created a fertile environment” for general lawlessness (p.67).

Part 2, on *regulation and containment*, consists of eleven chapters that provide nuanced analyses of the survival strategies employed by Somali entrepreneurs to remain viable in an environment that is generally hostile to African migrant entrepreneurship. The ethnographic studies conducted by Gastrow in Cape Town reveal that most of the Somali entrepreneurs interviewed were deeply concerned about the xenophobic environment in which they operated and the determination of the South African police to close down their shops. Gastrow asserts that by casting migrants as criminals, the police are perpetuating the unfounded view that many Somali shop owners in South African cities are “engaged in illegal trading” (p.87). She contends that the police raids on foreigners, codenamed “Operation Fiela” – meaning “sweep clean” in Sesotho – should be regarded as part of a grand design “to rid neighbourhoods of unclean foreign criminals” (p.90). Part 3 of the book focuses on *the politics of pariahdom* and it consists of the final two chapters. The last chapter on pariah justice is arguably one of the strongest in the book, suggesting that the pariahs can empower themselves “by becoming conscious of the roles imposed on them and actively rebel against them” (p.185). However, Gastrow readily concedes that Somali traders who reside in the predominantly low-income townships are not empowered to change their status as spatially and socially marginalized pariahs, without triggering a violent backlash. In view of this untenable situation, they are unlikely to resort to anything that would exacerbate their already precarious situation.

Citizen and Pariah is a well-researched and informative book; its well-formulated collection of essays is essential reading for scholars and students seeking a grounded understanding of African immigrant entrepreneurship in South Africa. The book contributes substantially to the academic conversation on Somali immigrant entrepreneurship and its attendant challenges and dangers in South African cities.

Prof Daniel Tevera, University of the Western Cape, South Africa