



ART AND RESILIENCE: REFUGEE YOUTH IN TRANSITION

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This paper explores how the lived experiences of Middle Eastern refugee youth have been taken up within recent practices of arts-based representation. This discussion is framed by an aesthetic analysis that compels questions around how representational practices simultaneously negate and create avenues for refugee agency within contexts of war and migration, and how ‘visibility’ is central to such agency. These representational practices are inevitably buttressed by the norms by which state processes around human rights, citizenship, and notions of belonging and exclusion are established. In particular, audience engagement around refugee issues and art within the North American context means contending with norms of multiculturalism and white spectatorship. An ethical appeal towards citizen engagement would rather involve implicating audiences in state processes of belonging and exclusion, along with sustained critiques of white supremacy and cultural relativism. Visibility thus entails space for tensions and contradictions around lived experiences and cultural difference to be taken up within public realms in ways that counter patterns of cultural assimilation.

In considering the role of art in processes of refugee migration, a review of recent youth art projects within Middle Eastern refugee camp settings reveals a pattern of therapeutic and trauma-oriented discourse. Notions of trauma in these projects are generalized and assumed to be a primary principle structuring refugee narratives and experience. Art is being used to define the issues refugees face to global audiences, while circulating an affective discourse centered on simplified notions of hope, healing, and victimhood. Universalized notions of trauma within NGO projects overlook how lived experiences might intersect in complex ways and come to be politicized in relation to various identities, histories, and contingencies of power and oppression. Alternatively, the mobilization of affect within cultural production can be read in connection with new political imaginings that have been posed through street-based artistic practice of the Arab Spring movements. The role of art in these movements frames notions of Middle Eastern youth resiliency in connection with practical needs for relational and material security. Rather than notions of trauma-based healing, collective resilience has appeared through art that creates spaces for ideological tensions and contradictions to enter into public circulation.

The political potential of this art lies in its responsiveness to the everyday issues and needs of refugee youth, as a reflection of their experiences of cultural, political, and generational shifts. The role of art as a learning modality within processes of transition and social integration is evident in recent advocacy projects with refugee and marginalized youth. A review of these projects provides considerations for the development arts-based pedagogical practices led with and by refugee youth. Creative modalities can show the constellations of thought, needs, and issues youth face, in ways that are specific to their own unique experiences. Cultural production in this sense can be understood as integral to processes of transition as an active process of meaning-making through youth-led decisions.

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