

Gendering Placement in Displacement: Transnational Im/mobility and the Refugee Camp in Emer Martin's *Baby Zero*¹

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Abstract. This article concentrates on the analysis of the space of the refugee camp in Emer Martin's third novel *Baby Zero* (2007), critically appraising this space as a fundamental site of transnational im/mobility simultaneously "homing" those who have been violently expelled from their home, as well as retaining them as a measure of containment of migratory flows. As such, the camp will be posed here as a relevant example of the necropolitics (Mbembe) that extremely precarise the lives of displaced populations thrusting them into bare lives (Agamben), while concurrently pushing forward a much needed insight into its gendered inflections. This examination will evidence not only that "placement in displacement matters" (Hyndman 25), but also that placement in displacement is profoundly gendered and brings with it distinct forms of violence that feed on the extreme social vulnerability of women and girls in conflict zones and also in refugee settlements.

Key words. Transnational im/mobility, refugee camp, gender, displacement, Emer Martin.

Resumen. Este artículo analiza el espacio del campo de refugiados/as en *Baby Zero* (2007), tercera novela de la autora irlandesa Emer Martin. El campo se constituye en la novela, al igual que en la realidad, como un emplazamiento crítico en relación a la in/movilidad transnacional; un espacio que simultáneamente acoge a personas que han sido desplazadas forzadamente de su hogar, mientras que al mismo tiempo las retiene ejerciendo un papel determinante en la contención de flujos migratorios. Partiendo de esta premisa, el campo se examinará aquí como ejemplo significativo de la necropolítica (Mbembe) que precariza de forma extrema las vidas de las poblaciones desplazadas, hasta el punto de empujarlas a lo que Agamben llama "la nuda vida", poniendo además en primer plano la imperiosa necesidad de abordar estas cuestiones desde una perspectiva de género. Así, este análisis evidencia no sólo que el emplazamiento en una situación de desplazamiento importa (Hyndman 25), sino también que tanto uno como otro están atravesados por el género, y traen consigo formas específicas de violencia derivadas de la extrema vulnerabilidad social de las mujeres y las niñas en zonas de conflicto y también en los campos que han de proporcionarles refugio.

Palabras clave. in/movilidad transnacional, campo de refugiados/as, género, desplazamiento forzado, Emer Martin.

Baby Zero is Irish writer Emer Martin's third novel, published in the UK and Ireland in 2007, and released in the U.S. in 2014. Described by the author as a "book about a family caught between the East and the West" (Martin, Interview), the novel sets out to deconstruct such binary conceptions of the world, predominantly challenging Samuel P. Huntington's much publicised and deeply controversial "Clash of Civilizations" theory,² while concurrently exploring the complexities of exile and migration in its multiple forms and types in the post-9/11 milieu. As one reviewer has put it, *Baby Zero* "is cogent and urgent in depicting migration and dislocation as the predominant narrative of 21st century history" (Allfree) and, as this article argues, it is certainly equally cogent and urgent in situating women at the centre of this narrative. Official data by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) register that in 2007, publication date of the novel, "women represent[ed] half of most populations falling under UNHCR's responsibility" and they represented slightly "less than half (47%) of the refugees and asylum-seekers" ("2007 Global Trends", 12). Even today, "women and girls make up around 50 per cent of any refugee, internally displaced or stateless population" (UNHCR, "Women"), and it is still a fact that these women's and girls' vulnerability to violence of all sorts, but especially sexual and gender-based violence, is not only extreme but often overlooked.³ As Judith Butler points out, "women and minorities [...] are, as a community, subjected to violence, exposed to its possibility, if not its realization", a direct consequence of how "each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies" (*Precarious* 20). And it is precisely this social vulnerability of the bodies of displaced populations, and most especially of unhomed women and girls, together with the gendered forms of violence these women and girls confront in their transnational dislocations, that stands out at the core of Martin's novel.

Baby Zero focuses on the female members of a family dramatically broken up by the sudden burst of an Islamic revolution and the consequent war in their home country, a fictional (but sadly familiar) Middle Eastern state named Orap. Led by the initially unnamed female narrator, the reader follows the traces of the Fatagagas family: Farah and Ishmael, their eldest children Zolo and Leila, and their youngest, Marguerite, not yet born or even conceived at the time of their exile, and who will later be revealed as the unnamed retrospective narrator. Their stories take us, first, from war-torn Orap to a refugee camp in its frontier where those escaping from the war are provisionally sheltered. From there, Zolo and Leila will be sent in adoption to their uncle in the U.S., while the parents, now expecting their third child, wait in the camp for some country – which they hope will be the U.S., but which will eventually be Ireland – to accept them as war refugees. The camp thus anticipates in the narrative these latter host (and hostile) lands where the characters will ultimately find themselves simultaneously placed and displaced. As such, it is positioned in the novel as a "non-place", in the sense anthropologist Marc Augé theorises these: spaces associated with transit and mobility and/or defined by their transitory nature, amongst which he includes "the extended transit camps where the planet's refugees are parked" (34).

Almost immediately after the family's displacement from their homeland to the refugee camp, Ishmael looks at a map included in an article in a *National Geographic* magazine devoted to that "colossal continent called Pangea" (Martin, *Baby Zero* 135) and wonders about how "this whopping continent fractured, and the separate pieces floated away to their present positions" (135). This passage expands on a recurrent figurative presence of maps in the novel and, particularly, on the symbolic fact that Orap never seems to be in any map.⁴ Reflecting on his own present position and the fracture of his family after the children's parting for the US, Ishmael notices: "It was hard from the drawing to tell where landlocked Orap had been. Orap had always been disappearing" (135). In this map, as well as in their current lives, Orap is not "there" even if the territory actually exists: the family's "home" has become a "place of no return" (Brah 188), a "mythic place of desire" (Brah 188). Avtar Brah

argues that “‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination ... even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’” (188), and it could be claimed that it is much more so for refugees as even this possibility is cancelled for them. And while they wait for another possibility to emerge for them to build a new “home”, they are trapped in the in-between space of the camp. As Jennifer Hyndman writes, refugees “are given temporary safety and protection from refoulement – forcible return to the country from which they fled – but the price they pay for this safety is high” (25). They get trapped between this forced return to the horror of war “at home” and the reality of rejection by potential host states, and this “non-place” space materialises in the camp: the refugees’ safety “is spatially circumscribed” (Hyndman 25).

By concentrating on the analysis of the refugee camp where the main characters in the novel are banished after being forced to flee their home country, this article will examine, first, what Achille Mbembe has identified in his formulation of the type of governmentality operating in camps as their ultimate aim, that is, to “immobilize and spatially fix whole categories of people or, paradoxically, to unleash them, to force them to scatter over broad areas no longer contained by the boundaries of a territorial state” (34). *Baby Zero* recognises and in fact draws attention to how life is lived in that paradoxical interstice, ultimately delineating a kind of roadmap or travel guide through which to explore the complexities of globalization’s dis/allowed mobilities. In this delineation, the refugee camp is foregrounded as epitomic “elsewhere” space which initiates the novel’s exploration of the transnational transits and transitional spaces its female protagonists will come to dwell in and negotiate in their exilic journeys. In doing this, the narrative pays detailed attention to how the camp is literally and symbolically configured, as well as to how it is inhabited and lived by those who forcibly stay fixed within its limits, and especially to how it is precariously inhabited and lived by displaced women and girls. This will be the main focus of the second part of this article, which will consider not only how “placement in displacement matters” (Hyndman 25) but principally how this placement in displacement is profoundly gendered and brings with it distinct forms of violence.

In *Baby Zero*, as in real life, the refugee camp stands as a fundamental site of transnational im/mobility simultaneously “homing” those who have been violently expelled from their home, as well as retaining them as a measure of containment of migratory flows. As an obvious example, the novel foregrounds the critical function of passports, visas, official documents and/or citizenship rights as crucial mechanisms of governmentality, regulating even the most intimate parcels of refugees’ lives and, at a macropolitical level, articulating processes of un/belonging. In their escape journey from Orap, the Fatagagases are intercepted by the rebels who confiscate their money, their car and all their papers, and leave them to proceed on foot and undocumented until they get to the country’s border, where they are sheltered in a refugee camp managed by transnational organizations such as the United Nations and the Red Cross. The novel focuses at this point on the family’s loss of documents, which indeed leaves them neither here nor there: not recognised as citizens by their own state and, at least temporarily, unable to move to any other country until their political status is decided upon and therefore, until their identities get normatively fixed again in an internationally sanctioned official form. After Farah and Ishmael legally renounce their two children in favour of their uncle Mo and send them to him in the U.S., they desperately try to be admitted as refugees in the U.S. but its “quota is full” (Martin, *Baby Zero* 145) and they end up in Ireland. Towards the end of the narrative, adult Marguerite reflects back on her family’s geographical dispersal after this forced stay in the refugee camp where she was born, and she laments: “we were separated by visas, passports, and stamps, official documents, standard procedure. And those are the dreams of refugees, seemingly simple things, patterns on paper, but as elusive as happiness itself” (Martin, *Baby Zero* 290).

Once divested of their documents refugees are left “bare” (Agamben), their bodies the only proof of their existence and their lives. Although this could optimistically entail a positive metaphor of a world where people and not identitarian categories matter, a real humane world which approaches the issue of mass displacement from an empathic perspective, the novel confirms this is not the world we live in. As teenage Zolo explains when asked about his parents and child Marguerite’s chances of getting from Ireland over the US with him and his sister Leila, these chances are “Zero. Absolutely Zero [...] We have no history, no prior existence. All our papers were confiscated by Orapian rebels when we left [...] We arrived in the camp with no evidence of our past or ourselves except our bodily existence” (Martin, *Baby Zero* 220). Ours is in fact a world where your identification papers determine in too many ways the kind of life you can live and beyond that, in full operation of what Mbembe has termed necropolitics, they may serve to identify “who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not” (Mbembe 27; original emphasis), a disposability of bodies without papers which Zolo’s words above certainly attest to. For Mbembe, Foucault’s concepts of biopower and biopolitics are “insufficient to account for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death” (39). For this he coins the terms “necropower” and “necropolitics”, which more clearly draw attention to the “creation of *death-worlds*”. These are described as “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*” (39; emphasis in the original), amongst them the refugee camps where “stateless people” are dis/placed.⁵

The narrative’s emphasis on how the violence of forced mobility (in exile) and equally imposed immobility (in the refugee camp) drags the body into bare life also brings to mind, as suggested above, Giorgio Agamben’s influential work *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, and his definition of the camp (concentration camp, refugee camp and other detention areas) as “the biopolitical paradigm of modernity” (69), “a space of exception” (96) where “the normal order is de facto suspended” (99). However, this status of the camp is importantly, as Agamben claims, a paradoxical one: “[t]he camp is a piece of land placed outside the normal juridical order, but it is nevertheless not simply an external space. What is excluded in the camp is, according to the etymological sense of the term ‘exception’ (*ex-capere*), *taken outside*, included through its own exclusion” (96). The refugee camp in *Baby Zero* is shown as such an ambiguous space, which is symbolically represented by its location in the frontier: outside the homeland but giving meaning to it because it contains what the homeland expels or abjects; in this case, the refugees whom all nations relegate, in Jennifer Hyndman’s words, “to the domain of the excluded, or the ‘abject’” (xxii).

The camp is therefore an abject zone with regards to the nation, a configuration that can be further disentangled by recourse to Judith Butler’s engagement with Kristeva’s theory of abjection. Considering “[t]he exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed” (*Bodies* 3) and transferring this process from the individual to the social domain, Butler claims that “[t]he abject designates here precisely those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject” (3).⁶ Butler thus theorises zones of abjection as spaces symbolically (but often also literally) occupied by those who are expelled from the social body, (the) Others to society’s “subjects”. The lives of these Others are made “unlivable” or, in Butler’s reworking of these ideas in her more recent work, extremely “precarious” in their (social) vulnerability. In this way, Butler links the abject to “a degraded or cast out status within the terms of sociality” (*Bodies* 243n2) that suits the conceptualisation of the refugee camp as an “‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zone” that ultimately shatters any possibility of it becoming a decent place of dwelling, even if temporarily.⁷

For Jennifer Hyndman, who has written extensively on contemporary refugee camps as a “strategy of containment with assistance” (23), “[t]hough camps are arguably a useful and acceptable short-term emergency measure, the second-rate status accorded to refugees in these ‘temporary cities’ is problematic” (23). Hyndman claims that through discourses of so-called preventive protection, refugees are “territorialized” (xxii) and their mobility gets heavily restricted by associated measures that “aim to protect people in their home countries and to prevent states from having to bear the legal obligations and costs of asylum” (xxv). This author describes an “emerging humanitarian and geopolitical discourse of preventive protection” (xxv) that legitimises “a recent shift in humanitarian practice from allowing people to leave their countries of origin in the face of danger to ensuring their right to *remain at home*” (xxvii; emphasis added). The fact that the refugee camp is obviously not the refugees’ home either in terms of homeplace or homeland does not seem to be considered in these discourses that respond to “neoliberal policies among national governments and declining support for refugee settlement” (xxvii). As Hyndman stresses,

[t]hough states remain the members of the United Nations, they have proven less inclined to harbor refugees and more inclined to intervene in conflict areas so that the need to provide asylum is prevented if possible. This trend recognizes the limitations of states and illustrates the limits that states place on their obligations to those displaced in and by the new world order. (xxv)

In this appraisal of the refugee camp as a space of placement in displacement, Hyndman also points out how humanitarian funds cross borders more easily than do displaced people. Relief and assistance often move to crisis locations more quickly than adversely affected populations can move from them. *Baby Zero* subtly comments on this issue too, when the refugees in the camp overhear that “[t]he Red Cross was building more permanent looking structures. Mobile-home housing that they were told had been ordered from a Canadian company that specialised in emergency housing” (62). Here, the narrative introduces an explicit reference to the global business of humanitarianism which makes profit out of massive disgrace. It is not only governments which take advantage of the containment of refugees in not-so-temporary camps. While these prevent the entrance of refugees within their own political borders by keeping them at a distance, NGOs and other humanitarian foundations receive funds from governments to manage these camps, and companies and corporations make large amounts of money selling privatised services, equipment and other provisions. This makes containment and “preventive protection” not only possible but, more perniciously, even convenient and hugely profitable (for certain states, institutions, corporations, companies, and individuals); and hence suggests a complex operational mechanism of governmentality that gives shape to a sordid and cruel “geopolitics of mobility” (Hyndman 30) and immobility.

The refugees’ precarity thus becomes obvious not only in the tragedy of their bare lives in the camp but also in the ways they, and their tragedies, are kept at a distance: offered help from afar (as capital and humanitarian aid effortlessly cross borders while they stay put and immobilised in the camp); and concurrently, either unseen (or, more precisely, invisibilised), or paradoxically made hypervisible in ways that frequently reproduce neocolonialist and Orientalist discourses. This help from afar keeps refugees at a distance both geographically and in a mediatised form. When violence and death take place “elsewhere”, they serve to demarcate the distinct territories of “them” (victims) and “us” (compassionate witnesses), a dividing line that establishes a hierarchy of power. The way in which *Baby Zero* introduces and deals with the presence of girl soldiers in the border location of the refugee camp illustrates the all too frequent dilemma when facing the (journalistic or

artistic) representation of violence: the focus on the wounded victim often runs the risk of victimization, but doing otherwise may imply a silencing of their pain.⁸ At the same time, the novel engages too with the role gender plays in these representations as a highly manipulated category which is, similarly, sometimes obscured and sometimes utilised, more often than not utterly ignoring the realities of the gendered experiences of girls and women in conflict zones (UNHCR, “Global Trends 2019”; Hyndman). Part IV of the novel, entirely set in the refugee camp, opens with the words “It was a bad time for girls” (134), and follows up with a description of the Orapian revolutionaries using girl soldiers to fight inner resistance and the neighbouring country which had declared war on them. Martin shows here her awareness of the reality of girls recruited in armed conflicts, a reality that frequently becomes obscured behind the term “child soldier” that often refers exclusively to boy soldiers, ignoring and obliterating the distinct experiences of girls (Mazurana et al. 97-8). This gender-blind use of terms is reflected in the novel, where the narrator pervasively refers to girl soldiers while both the UN workers and the *New York Times* article reporting on these girls’ participation and death in the conflict refer to them as child soldiers or child warriors. Women and girls, whose status within their local communities is already a subordinated one, often bear the worst brunt in wars and conflicts. The narrative signals this further devaluation of girls’ lives by pointing out that the revolutionaries’ “distaste of them was illustrated by the fact that they were putting them in the most danger [...] Trained them to run ahead of the regular forces” (Martin, *Baby Zero* 134). Furthermore, the narrator’s observation pointing to “the ugliness of their dreams shocking even the most seasoned war men” (134) digs into the gendering of these girls’ experiences, suggesting they face risks and endure violences that are unique to them as female subjects.

While reclaiming visibility for these girls in battle in order to give voice to the gendered violences they confront, Martin does also show concern for the type of visibility they are granted and, in particular, the role of the international press in this visibilization. In *Baby Zero*, the Fatagagas patriarch, Ishmael, hopes for the world to pay attention to his country and its people’s plight, and he trusts the benevolence and efficacy of international intervention and help. But he soon realises their tragedy is being mostly overlooked by the world. It is not until the dead bodies of the girl soldiers appear that the revolution and war in Orap make the news in the international press: “Ishmael brought the paper to his wife. ‘Mehrdad showed me this article about girl soldiers. The world is finally paying attention. ‘Child Warriors in Former Tiny Principality of Orap.’ Page eight. We’re not even front page,’ he shouted” (135). It is the UN workers who recognise the potential of these “ideal victims” (Höijer) for capturing the attention of the press, so they provide them with the “bodies in pain” that can unleash compassion and thus stimulate foreign intervention either in military or humanitarian form: “When the UN collected bodies in the trenches and the live ones were patched up in the camp hospital, they brought in a reporter from the *New York Times*. ‘Look, child soldiers.’ They pointed” (134). In this way, the narrative shows awareness of the problematic role of the press in the visibilisation of the plight of populations whose needs are often responded to from the perspective of an audience that voyeuristically witnesses the Other in pain but does not really engage critically with this suffering. The media coverage of wars happening “elsewhere” (not in the “civilized” West) contributes greatly to the production and circulation of stereotypes of Other women as helpless victims of their local patriarchies, thus producing and reproducing humanitarian discourse in neocolonialist terms. The dead bodies of women and children – especially women and children because they are indeed the “ideal victims” in the contemporary discourse of “global compassion” that “designates some victims as ‘better’ victims than others” (Höijer 516) – are often morbidly spectacularised with varied interests which range from humanitarian organizations’ need to attract donors, to governments’ geopolitical interests in strategic areas or countries which

frequently lead them to intervene politically and also militarily (Hyndman; Rieff).⁹

Instead of focusing exclusively on the spectacular violence that commonly finds sensationalist visibility, *Baby Zero* focuses on the refugees' day-to-day lives, established routines and small details which reveal the harsh conditions of life in the camp as well as how even bare life is gendered in numerous ways. In the camp, Farah and Ishmael with their two children are allocated in a tent they will share with another family, evidencing how personal and familial privacy gets compromised in such an emergency situation. Refugees are forced to give up their privacy in exchange for safety. The sharing of tents in the camp brings a sudden loss of privacy that affects everyone but especially women, as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees recognises in its guidelines for the organization of camps: "The physical circumstances in which refugees are housed affect their safety. Too often refugee women face dangers stemming from poor design of the camps: for example, communal housing that provides no privacy for women" (cited in Hyndman 94). Not only does this reminder point to the fact that the safety offered to refugees in the camps may be easily compromised by the organization of the camp itself, but it also indicates how women face forms of violence that are unmistakably gendered.

Furthermore, it is not only safety which is jeopardised in situations of suspended privacy, but also the refugees' most basic rights and sense of dignity. In the novel, the most intimate acts normally preserved for the space of the home find no room now to happen, so they are unwillingly performed "in public", in the presence of strangers. Farah and Ishmael have sex in the tent – "We were like irresponsible children fooling under a blanket, with another family in the room" (Martin *Baby Zero*, 138) – and Farah gets pregnant, which evidences the occurrence of such a private act in a dwelling place that is nonetheless public: "The family knew she had conceived amongst them and that irked her" (139). Gender plays a determining role in this experience as Ishmael's opposite reaction to this same exposure attests to: "he liked people knowing he had still some last vestiges of potency, even basic animal ones" (139). Farah also sees herself forced to experience the changing conditions of her pregnant embodiment in front of unwanted gazes: "She threw up beside the bed and they complained immediately about the smell before she had had a chance to fetch water and clean it up" (138). The immediacy of the other family's complaints reflects their spatial immediacy, which deprives Farah of a time and a place of her own.

From the very beginning of the pregnancy, Farah looks in both disbelief and anger at her situation: "Farah kicked a hardened piece of snow. First with one foot and then with the other. Anger focused on to the snowball. She frowned and repeated the words, 'I can't believe this is happening'" (136). Being pregnant at this time is felt as a curse that befalls her, as a woman, and not her husband: "'I can't believe this has happened to me.' 'To us.' [says Ishmael] 'No. To me'" (138). Later, in a state of advanced pregnancy, Farah's anxieties concentrate mainly on her bodily safety:

She knew what was coming. The eighth month of her pregnancy was in the autumn. Women were naturally different from men because there was a situation in which they found themselves that was completely intractable. The eighth month. Knowing where it has to come out. Knowing there is nowhere large enough. Almost every woman she saw [...] had been through the same terror. (140)

And this terror surely gets augmented for Farah, or any woman forced to give birth in a refugee camp. When the moment of labour arrives, a caesarean section is needed for which there is not enough medical staff. Out of necessity, the doctor in charge asks Ishmael (a cosmetic surgeon) to help him in the operation: "It had been a long time since he had performed non-cosmetic surgery. His fingers groped around, and he let himself be guided by

the other doctor. He sliced through the womb and felt his child's head. They pulled. Farah felt a huge force dragging her insides out; she couldn't breathe" (143). Here, the narrative focuses closely on the very bodily experience of labour, and points to how extreme, but not so uncommon situations of war, displacement, poverty, and subsequently insufficient health care and infrastructures impact directly upon women's bodies.

Queuing is another experience the novel considers from an angle that evidences the gendered impact of bare life in the camp. For the Fatagagases as well as for the other Orapian refugees, queuing occupies most of their time in the camp: "There was nothing to do all day but stand in queues: queues for water, queues for food, queues to see a Red Cross doctor" (Martin, *Baby Zero* 58). Refugees struggle to live dignified lives in the midst of deprivation and their efforts include the most basic acts of living: "I [Farah] am not eating in public sitting at the side of the road. We must maintain our dignity" (Martin, *Baby Zero* 138). Moreover, as Hyndman reports, the refugees' "containment in camps renders them wholly dependent on international humanitarian assistance" (25). They are deprived of any power of decision over their own lives, and they are turned into "children" under (transnational) guardianship. In the novel, the narrator notices precisely how "camp life was nothing if not infantilising" (137), something that is again remarked when revealing that "Farah had never cried in front of anyone in her life since she was a little girl, but now she was alarmed to feel tears squeezing out of her eyes" (151).

The narrative shows how at the beginning of their stay in the camp, both Farah and Ishmael wait together for the food parcels and to collect water, or they take turns in securing these vital necessities and visiting the UN offices asking for placement in a host country; however, Farah's perspective in the voice of the narrator soon introduces the intense gendering of queues and other life-sustaining tasks. Outside the tent, the camp becomes an extended homestead where gender inequalities in the distribution of roles, especially as it attains chores associated to domesticity, are preserved:

Abrasive women battled in the mud, trying to heat unmarked canned food on camping gas rings, standing in queues for water because the men were too proud. The daughters were as shrill and embattled as their mothers, their feckless sons smoking opium and strutting around, aggressively bored. In extreme times, roles revert and any tiny gains disappear over night. Even if the men felt powerless, they had one power left. The power over women.

The camp women were workhorses for the camp men. That way a man always had a servant, was never quite at the bottom. The women had their children, but there was an innate servitude in that dynamic. They did everything for their children, more for the sons who would take them over and less for the daughters who would become them ... Every Orapian women [sic] seemed to be a force, even if it was to secure their children's future and not their own. (Martin, *Baby Zero* 140)¹⁰

Here, the narrative pays attention again to the amplified toll wars take on women, though not concentrating on the many, certainly real and frequent tragedies which often attract sensationalist interest towards the victimised female Other. Instead, it focuses on the much more invisible hardships of their day-to-day realities, and the bravery of these women confronting life in the camp. Women take charge of every controllable aspect of their families' well-being, apparently becoming heads of the family unit, but still (or even more) divested of any real power.

The refugee camp is configured in *Baby Zero* as a crucial example of the bio- and necropolitical logics that extremely precarise the lives of displaced populations thrusting them into bare lives. At a macropolitical level, it fulfils a managing and controlling role of

displaced, stateless and homeless populations, placing and fixing them in displacement. In its micropolitical articulations, the camp cancels any possibility of privacy and intimacy, stripping individuals and families of the right to a dignified life while openly participating in the social reproduction of the family and its patriarchal structures, and distinctly exposing women and girls to forms of violence that are deeply gendered. Martin's appraisal of upended and degraded life in the camp evidences that any considerations of the ruptures and convergences of the "here" and "there", location and dislocation, placement and displacement that occur in this space need to critically appraise how gender has often been either thoroughly ignored or, more perniciously, exploitatively mobilised in political, media, and even humanitarian discourses; which in both cases results in the erasure of the particular experiences of women and girls in conflict and also in refuge zones. The way in which these approaches privilege spectacular/ised violence against women and children as "ideal victims" is explicitly questioned in the novel, which proposes a shift in focus and demands attention to the less sensational/ist but even more pervasive violences and hardships that punctuate women's day-to-day realities in the abject, "unlivable" space of the camp.

Notes

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² This is a reading that the author herself has encouraged. As she explains in her interview with Niall McKay: "I started the book in the year 2000 when I was pregnant with my first child. A baby Zero. So it came from a personal place but yes, *Baby Zero* has found its time well. The US gunning for Iran and Iran predictably spitting back. A book about a family caught between East and West [...] This clash of civilisations is really just a clash of like versus like. Oligarchic West imposing rule onto monarchic East in a bid for raw materials under the guise of inflicting a better life on those who aren't asking for one" (2007). Asier Altuna-García de Salazar also signals to this issue pervading *Baby Zero* in his more recent interview with Martin (2016), and I have explored this connection in more depth in previous works (Rosende-Pérez 2017; Rosende-Pérez 2015). The novel recurrently points to the predominance of Huntington's dualistic and simplistic view of world politics at the time, and it creatively disarticulates his Manichean theory, exposing a much more complex history of global encounters and disagreements framed by relations of power. More importantly for the purposes of this article, *Baby Zero* explores the consequences of this "clash" in the lives of women in both the Western and non-Western world, focusing particularly on the lives of those who find themselves trapped at the intersection of a series of literal and metaphorical frontiers, such as the space of the refugee camp.

³ For a more detailed review of available data, see the latest UNCHR report "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2019". This report finds that "[i]n 16 out of the 20 [UNHCR] operations where demographic data is available at the end of 2019, women constituted on average 52 per cent of all IDPs [Internally Displaced Persons]" (34), as well as that "51 per cent of the stateless population in 2019 were women, and 48 per cent were children" (60). This report also offers a deep insight on the vulnerability of displaced women and children and the specific violence they confront on a day-to-day basis.

⁴ The way in which Orap is absent or "disappears" from the maps where the characters try to picture it directly connects to the lived experience of its citizens who see how, every time power changes hands, the prior history of the nation is erased, forcibly forgotten: "What a country. Every time there is a new regime they turn the year back to zero" (Martin, *Baby Zero* 268), Marguerite explains. This connects to the title of the novel, *Baby Zero*, as all the women in the Fatagagas family are born in successive years zero, an issue that signposts the way women are recurrently erased from history.

⁵ The "camp" is noted by Mbembe as illustrative example of what he terms our contemporary "repressed topographies of cruelty", which refer not only to the material places precariously occupied by "'stateless' people in refugee camps" (27), but also to the political spaces that massively displaced populations in conflict zones are pushed to by being "disaggregated into rebels, child soldiers, victims, or refugees, or civilians incapacitated by mutilation or simply massacred" (34).

⁶ Although Butler predominantly refers here to the exclusion of women and gay and lesbian people from heteronormative patriarchy, her arguments have been often (as I do here and as she herself does mainly in her

later works) brought to bear on multiple other categories which can demarcate the abject in society: race/racialization, disability, class, nationality, religious creed, and a long list of other axis of social difference.

⁷ This presumption of the “temporariness” of refugee camps is relevant because, although the family’s stay in the refugee camp in *Baby Zero* is in fact temporary, this temporariness is very often quite far from being true in real life, as the long existence of many refugee camps all around the world attest. The camps for Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, the West Bank or the Gaza Strip; the Sahrawi camps in Algeria, or the Kashmiri camps in India, among others, have been sheltering several generations of refugees for decades.

⁸ See Butler’s *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), especially the closing essay “Precarious Life”, and also *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable* (2009), particularly “Torture and the Ethics of Photography. Thinking with Susan Sontag”.

⁹ As Hyndman notices, attracting money from donors “depends, in large part, on representing need as urgent and deserving” (xxii), especially in the case of governments that “understand that aid has strategic value” (xxii).

¹⁰ It is worth mentioning here, though none of these aspects are explicitly dealt with in *Baby Zero*, that this unequal distribution of roles presents us with a paradox regarding women’s access to the male dominated public space and their vulnerability within it. On a positive note, historically, women’s traditional nurturing and hygienic roles and associated tasks such as collecting water or washing clothes in the outside have provided them with otherwise banned access to the public space and, even more important, with an outside space of their own (the fountain, the river, or the washing place to name the most relevant ones), where women could meet and sororise. However, as Hyndman warns in *Managing Displacement*, the organization of the camps which frequently places water and other facilities at a considerable distance from women’s tents or provisional family dwellings forces them to walk distances alone risking violence and, predominantly, sexual assaults.

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