

Book Review: Little Mogadishu: Eastleigh, Nairobi's global Somali hub by Neil Carrier

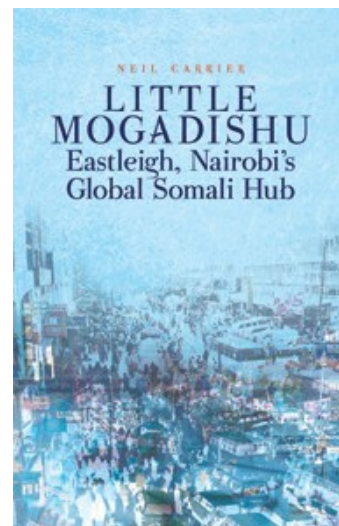
Constance Smith says that the publication of Neil Carrier's Little Mogadishu: Eastleigh, Nairobi's global Somali hub is timely and evocative demonstration of how great opportunity can emerge out of displacement.

In this era of politicised austerity and global terror, the easy suspicion and scapegoating of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants of all sorts is seemingly ubiquitous. The 'refugee crisis' and the 'war on terror' are increasingly entangled discourses, in which anxiety over migrant flows as potential conduits for terrorism shapes refugee policies and national security strategies. In addition to being politically suspect, refugees are also frequently portrayed as an economic burden, unsustainably consuming benefits and resources meant for their hosts. This is a narrow and prejudiced perception of the economy as a zero-sum game, but one which has a tenacious grip on populist discourses about migration.

The notion that refugees might make positive economic and social contributions to their host country, and even catalyse wider opportunity and innovation, is less pervasive, despite being supported by considerable evidence from around the world. Neil Carrier's new book on Eastleigh, a vibrant, Somali-dominated neighbourhood of Kenya's capital city Nairobi, is thus both important and timely. His book convincingly demonstrates how out of displacement great opportunity can emerge. In the case of Eastleigh, the area has been a base for Somalian and Kenyan Somali communities since the earliest years of Nairobi's history, but has seen incredible growth since the collapse of the Somalian state in the 1990s. He traces how, despite being treated with great suspicion by the Kenyan state, and in Kenyan popular discourse more broadly, for perceived (though mostly exaggerated) connections to terrorism and piracy, Eastleigh has become a highly successful economic centre.

As Carrier argues, 'the vast networks that displacement often generates can breathe new life into the places into which they are woven: hubs forged out of migration become sites of innovation, and often sites of commerce' (p. 6). Eastleigh's enormous success in becoming one of Kenya's leading commercial hubs, as well as one of the country's most dynamic and culturally diverse urban neighbourhoods, is a tribute to the energy, hard work and investments – financial and otherwise – of those that have made it their home. It is now a major player not only within the Kenyan economy, but a node in a transnational Somali network that stretches west from Eastleigh to Minneapolis and London, and east to Dubai and Guangzhou.

As well as an important study of diaspora and migration, the book is also a welcome ethnography of globalisation 'from below': its materialities, processes and consequences, as well as its humanity. Rather than, for example, tracing a single commodity through anonymous global value chains, Carrier examines how globalised commodities and commercial activities converge on one locale, shaping everyday lives and aspirations. The section examining how trust and risk-taking – idealised attributes of the Eastleigh entrepreneur – relate to Islamic edicts on *halal* and *haram* business practices highlights how far globalised commerce in Eastleigh is also a project of self-making.



Eastleigh owes much of its success to a highly effective exploitation of the shopping mall as a site of investment and business. But Eastleigh's malls are not glossy retail outlets for global brands; rather they are made up of hundreds of smaller stalls run by individual shopkeepers. Yet they are nevertheless distinctly global in their reach. This is 'low-end globalisation', based on trade in cheap imported commodities, such as clothing, often produced in China and sold on through informal networks characterised by personalised trust rather than legal contracts. Through his encounters with Eastleigh's entrepreneurs – or hustlers, as many prefer to be known – Carrier shows how they are well-placed to take advantage of such globalised flows, calling on transnational Somali networks for both investments from and trade with the diaspora; whether it be a money transfer from a relative in the USA to be used as capital in setting up a shop, or accessing cheap goods through Somali wholesalers operating out of Pearl River in China.



Traders in malls at Eastleigh Photo Credit: [Patrick Vidija](#) via [The Star](#)

Although Eastleigh is most well-known for its Somalian and Kenyan Somali-dominated businesses and entrepreneurs, Carrier is also careful to highlight how the estate is far from ethnically homogenous. In fact, in many ways, the nickname 'Little Mogadishu' is a misnomer, masking the many ways in which the estate is both distinctly Kenyan and also linked to migration politics beyond Somalia. Through detailed historical and ethnographic exposition, the book explores how the transformation of Eastleigh has its roots in a much longer history of urban change in Nairobi, and owes its success to the activities of a diverse set of protagonists. These extend from early twentieth century Asian speculators in land to today's booming construction industry, which attracts a wide range of investors from around Kenya and beyond. Eastleigh is also home to a large Oromo community, most of them fleeing persecution in Ethiopia and seeking refuge in the estate. Drawing on some of his previous research, Carrier also examines Eastleigh's role in the trade in *khat*, a leafy stimulant favoured by many people of Somali origin around the world. The plant is primarily grown in the Meru region north of Nairobi, but Eastleigh has long been a centre for its processing and transportation, attracting many ethnic Meru to the estate, eager to profit from its trade.

Little Mogadishu is an exhilarating and colourful ride through the streets of Eastleigh, a compelling ethnographic account of those seeking the 'Eastleigh dream'. From the transformations of place wrought by property speculations and political wrangling, to the transformations of selves effected by the hustling of ordinary people, Carrier reveals with extraordinary detail and care the energy, passion and commitment of those who find hope and opportunity in displacement.

[Little Mogadishu: Eastleigh, Nairobi's global Somali hub](#). Neil Carrier. Hurst Publishers. 2017.

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