

## Book Review: Mendel, Gideon (2017): *Dzhangal*. London: GOST Books

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*Dzhangal* the book was launched to coincide with an exhibition and installation of the photographs by the photographer and author Gideon Mendel held at Autograph in London between 6<sup>th</sup> January and the 11<sup>th</sup> February 2017. The title of this book, "*Dzhangal*" relates to a Pashto word meaning 'This is the forest', which apparently is the origin for the Calais refugee camps becoming known as the 'Jungle.'

*Dzhangal*, by the photographer Gideon Mendel, and published by GOST books in 2017, constitutes a collection of photographs, framed on an absorbent black background, of objects collected in the Calais refugee camps, known as the 'Jungle,' during multiple visits to the camps during 2016. Collected after the southern part of the 'Jungle' camps was bulldozed and burnt by the French police in 2016, many of these objects are burnt, turn, unusable, damaged beyond repair, eerie fragments of a life, a past, a journey of hope, desperation and despair .... a burnt check shirt (page 4) or a smock top with lace trim (page 9). Fragments of a life and an experience many of us will have the luxury never to experience, of hopes, fears, and the search for a safe and secure life in Europe. Burnt scraps from children's books (page 25) and toys reinforce to us the passive reader of these images, that up-rootedness through war, climate change and politics impacts us all, and highlights the brutality of these conditions, especially for children who have been forced to flee their homeland and find a home in a refugee camp.

The account by 'Africa' on page 14 documents segments of the experience of a journey from Africa to the Calais 'Jungle':

"It was big trouble when I came here. I can't believe this is Europe? Where is humanity, where is democracy? I think, because we have come here, we are not human beings; we become animals, a new kind of animal. A new kind of animal that has developed at this time. It's known as 'refugee.'" ('Africa', p.14)

The narrative accounts included in *Dzhangal* are adapted and drawn from the *Voices from the Jungle: Stories from the Calais Camp* book published by Pluto Press in 2017 (ISBN: 9780745399683). *Voices from the Jungle* is a compilation of work by 22 authors who were living in the Calais refugee camps between 2015 and 2016. The writing formed a part of the 'Life Stories' accredited university short course, developed and run on three occasions by members of the Centre for Narrative Research at the University of East London, led by Professor Corinne Squire. Additional

writing was also undertaken as part of the Centre for Narrative Research's 'Displaces: Multimodal narrative photography' workshops delivered by the author of *Dzhangal*, Gideon Mendel, and Crispin Hughes.

Included within the book is poetry by Babak Inaloo (page 34) and by 'Mani' (page 44), combined with an account by Shaheen Ahmed Wali, (page 58). A selection of these testimonies are also available online as part of a Voices from the Jungle archive located on the Living Refugee Archive, established by Dr Rumana Hashem and Paul Dudman during a project to document living narratives of migration as part of an ongoing civic engagement project documenting migration in East London, and available at: <http://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/voices-jungle-testimonies/> These testimonies are open access and enable access to reflections, creative writing and life history narratives from the Calais 'Jungle.'

Photographs within *Dzhangal* are grouped into sections, including clothes, children's toys, daily objects like chairs and utensils, although no section indicators are included in the book, with just a very short basic description of the item photographed and the date collected in the camp. It therefore encourages the reader to engage with the objects selected and to start to interact with them, and to consider the wider context of each item. Why was it chosen? Where exactly was it found? Who it may have belonged to and where did it come from? This lack of context to the images helps to reflect the transient nature of the Calais 'Jungle,' and the dehumanising nature of the experiences that these objects bare witness too. The quest for humanity, safety, security and the hope for a better life, reduced to a selection of burnt fragments and tattered remnants of a normal life. A double page spread on pages 30-31 includes a depiction of forty-eight tear gas canisters collected during visits in May, September and October 2016, reinforce the shocking conditions many of the residents of the camp were forced to endure. Whilst a collection of decorated tear gas canisters, collected on the 28 October 2016 (page 63) testify to both the police brutality within the 'Jungle' but also to the resourcefulness and resilience of the camp residents, turning a symbol of oppression into an art form – a representation and narrative of their journeys and experiences, allowing their voices to be heard through art whilst turning a symbol of oppression into a symbol of hope and agency.

All of these images, including metal chair frames (Pages 28/39) and a children's bicycle (page 41), a collection of burnt and rusty kitchen utensils (page 57) burnt by fire and rusted by the elements, no longer fit for their intended purpose, but a stark reminder of the conditions within the camp and the personal and domestic nature of the camp. *Dzhangal* concludes with two short contextual essays, 'Forensics (photography in the face of failure)' by Dominique Malaquais (pages 73-74) and 'A Planet Without a

Visa' by Paul Mason. Mason chooses to focus on the political and economic climates in which the 'Jungle' can be situated, mixing statistics highlighting the economic need of Western economies and the need for migrants to help counter-act an ageing workforce and decline in birth rates, mixed with the growing hostility of host populations to new arrivals "and the political sickness of xenophobia and racism' (Mason, p. 77), and the dangers of right-wing nationalism and the increasingly restrictive border controls indicative of the 'hostile environment.'

"Refugees are not just treated like dirt in the asylum systems of the West. They are forced to live in dirt. Their possessions become mixed in the dirt, just as they are amid the charred ruins of that pop-up Troy, the Calais Jungle." (Mason, p.79).

Some of the most poignant photographs are of children's toys, including 'Olaf the Snowman' (page 10); a 'teddy in Pyjamas' (page 13) or the burnt remnants of a knitted soft toy (page 12). The photographs are inter-dispersed with selected narratives and writings from residents of the Calais camps, whether as individual life histories, poetry or creative writing. One-off workshops were undertaken with residents of the Calais camp utilising multimodal narrative methodologies to enable participants to reflect upon and tell their own stories and life history narratives. "The project involved visual storytelling workshops in which participants were asked to create visual stories about themselves, their journey or their life in the refugee camp." (Esin, 2017).

From the failures of Globalisation and neo-liberal economic systems in the West, Malaquais chose to focus on the rationale for the forensic approach to Gideon Mendel's photography in *Dzhangal*. There is no commentary in the book from the photographer himself, so it is left to Malaquais to contextualize the photography and the approach of Mendel in his choice of material and subsequent visual representation. Malaquais chooses to reflect upon the forensic approach of Mendel.

Malaquais initially chooses to reflect on the ethics and dangers of undertaking photography in difficult situations by highlighting the sheer abundance of photographers and media that were in evidence in the Calais camps. The endless stream of images in the Western media and online and the de-humanization of the refugee as so many of these photographers focused on the refugees themselves. She quotes one interaction with Mendel during a Christian procession within the 'Jungle' in May 2016. Mendel is confronted as he prepares to document the procession, "You fucking photographers! You come here and take our photographs and you tell us it is going to help us, but nothing changes. The only person it helps is you." (M., p. 73).

Malaquais uses her essay to argue in favour of Mendel's attempts to "de-aestheticize the encounter with refugee bodies" (p.74) through his forensic approach in avoiding his gaze away from the refugee body to the remnants of their existence from the southern section of the camp bulldozed and burnt as part of a "slum clearance" by French police. From the perspective of an archivist, it is interesting to reflect upon Malaquais's discussion around the notions of western traditions of collection and the role of objects as evidence.

"The process of compiling physical evidence to account for "others", making "sense" of their difference, and, thereby, of the collector's power to examine, name, bracket and administer, has a long and violent history." (Malaquais, p. 74).

Mendel's realisation that many of those resident in the Calais camps did not want to have their photographs taken, partly due to a fear of being recognised, and partly due to an inherent distrust of the motives of those seeking to take their photographs, enabled Mendel to focus his work on reflecting their humanity by documenting the damaged objects he found in the camp.

"I set about forensically photographing these found objects as if they were precious archaeological artefacts that might help us to make sense of the complex relationships and politics of the place." (Mendel in Miller, 2018).

Through his utilisation of this approach, Mendel was able to collaborate with MOLA on the Dzhangal Archaeology Project, focusing on the life histories of the objects themselves, "their use, re-use, and eventual destruction and the wider political and economic context that led to their being and eventual disposition in the camp." (Janet Miller, MOLA, 2018).

It will be interesting to see how this forensic approach to the objects photographed for *Dzhangal* is developed as a potential methodology for helping to document the refugee experience through an object-driven approach. One of the major reasons for establishing the *Displaced Voices* journal was to help encourage exploration of new and alternative methodologies for engaging with archives and cultural heritage in their broadest sense as a means to better represent the narrative experiences of those who have been displaced and to re-assess best practice, and to facilitate new approaches to multi-disciplinary engagement and the cross-pollination of knowledge and cultural heritage co-production. I think the role of archaeological methods to the forensic assessment of these objects can only add to our knowledge and understanding of life within camps like the 'Jungle' and I will continue to follow this approach with interest.

## References

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