

Refugeetude and its discontents: Anders Lustgarten's *Lampedusa*

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Abstract: Anders Lustgarten's *Lampedusa* is a play that addresses the contemporary issue of refugeetude through the parallel stories of two distinct characters. The play humanises the refugee crisis by focusing on Stefano and Denise's personal experiences. Rather than presenting migrants as statistics or political pawns, the play delves into their individual stories, struggles, and aspirations. Through Stefano and Denise, audiences gain insight into the human cost of migration and the challenges refugees and host communities face. *Lampedusa* also highlights the structural injustices that perpetuate the refugee crisis. The play rigorously investigates the fundamental causes of migration, including poverty, conflict, and environmental degradation, while elucidating the role of Western nations in aggravating these challenges. Through Stefano and Denise's experiences, the audience confronts the systemic barriers and inequalities that prevent refugees from finding safety and security. This paper aims to discuss the refugee crisis in the play in light of Vinh Nguyen's concept of refugeetude.

Keywords: contemporary British theatre, Anders Lustgarten, *Lampedusa*, Vinh Nguyen, refugeetude

Introduction

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines a refugee as “a person who has been forced to leave their country or home, because there is a war or for political, religious or social reasons” (1271). According to the United Nations General Assembly (1951), a refugee is a “person who has been forced to leave his or her home and seek refuge elsewhere, especially in a foreign country, from war, religious persecution, political troubles, the effects of a natural disaster, etc.; a displaced person” (1951). Vinh Nguyen, “[a]ffixing the suffix *-tude* to

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the word *refugee*” invokes “past projects of political recuperation - namely, negritude, coolitude, and migitude - that take social experiences of marginalization and oppression and recast them as states of being or agency” (Nguyen 2019, 110). According to Nguyen *refugeetude* “is a continued state of being and a mode of relationality” (Ibidem). In this context, it signifies an important redirection and an epistemic modification in our understanding and definition of the term refugee. *Refugeetude* is a new name that defines and moulds the traditional concept of refugee. It starts with refugees but differs significantly from refugees. It is not a humanist movement to rescue a marginalised, excluded, stifled, and dispossessed position. Instead, it is to look at *refugeetude* a new from a different angle and ask how it can give rise to being and politics. (Ibid, 111) *Refugeetude* is actually a state of heightened consciousness that enables individuals to recognize the impact of capitalist refuge on the material life of refugees. As a complex concept, *refugeetude* manifests in various ways, highlighting the multifaceted nature of displacement and the challenges that refugees face daily. “*Refugeetude*, then, turns away from readily available discourses of victimhood and commonplace knowledge of refugees to highlight how refugee subjects gain awareness, create meaning, and imagine futures” (Ibidem). The phrase denotes an understanding of the structural obstacles that refugees face in this context, such as the difficulty in obtaining necessities like food, shelter, and medical care, as well as the social and economic disparities that influence their lives. According to Nguyen (Ibid, 119), comprehending the refugee experience requires an understanding of the concept of *refugeetude*. It offers a deeper understanding of the difficulties faced by refugees and highlights their perseverance in the face of hardship. We can create more effective policies and interventions that uphold the dignity and well-being of refugees while advancing social justice by expanding our knowledge of them.

Refugeetude in Anders Lustgarten’s *Lampedusa*

Refugeetude is a set of intricate behavioural, emotional, and cognitive processes that help people remain human in the face of the world community's cruel treatment of refugees. According to Nguyen (2019, 127), it entails detecting and analysing environmental cues, controlling emotions, coming up with original solutions, and acting to adjust to unfavourable circumstances. As refugees negotiate the difficulties of displacement, resettlement, and integration, their distinct experiences,

needs, and goals are reflected in the dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon known as refugeetude. One of the most important global issues of our time is refugeetude, which is the subject of Anders Lustgarten's *Lampedusa*, which had its world premiere on April 8, 2015, at London's Soho Theatre. The play, which debuted at the High Tide Festival on September 10, 2015, was well received during its run in London. It examines the intricacies of the present refugee crisis, providing a distinct viewpoint on the matter that is thought-provoking and educational. Lustgarten's work is a prime example of how art can spark important conversations and increase public awareness of social and political issues.

But for migrants and people everywhere, a terrible thing has happened in the last few days. This was the picture of Alan as a baby. We are reminded of the frailty of life and the pressing need for compassion in our world by this photograph, which shows "three-year-old Alan Kurdi lying face down on a beach in Bodrum, Turkey" (Silverman 2015), as the waves gently embrace him. In the middle of conflict, his little body bravely stands against the vastness of the sea and represents the fortitude and bravery of refugees who fearlessly seek a better future. The tragedy of Alan Kurdi highlights the severe effects of the ongoing refugee humanitarian crisis. A young Syrian child's lifeless body was found washed up on a shore in Bodrum, Turkey, in September 2015. People all across the world were moved by the eerie picture of Alan lying face down on the sand, which sparked increased awareness of the difficulties faced by those escaping Middle Eastern conflict, especially the Syrian civil war. The scene of Syrian child's dead body on the beach swiftly came to represent the tragedy and great human suffering that millions of refugees around the world endure. Widespread public indignation, demands for action, and demands that governments take more steps to address the refugee crisis were all triggered by the situation. The picture acted as a sobering reminder of the human cost of war, displacement, and the inadequate response of the international community to the needs of refugees. Deeply affected by this catastrophic event, Stephen Atkinson, the Artistic Director and co-founder of High Tide, decided to stage the play by the Sea. Atkinson's experiential strategy had a significant impact on the audience. As he confirms:

As we started rehearsals for *Lampedusa* in March 2015, the refugee crisis, then referred to as the migrant crisis, started to headline the TV news. [...] In September when we were again in rehearsals for the High Tide Festival run,

public opinion finally shifted away from the growing fear and xenophobia. Alan Kurdi, a three-year-old Syrian boy, washed up ashore in Bodrum, Turkey. His limp body lay flat, face down in the sand. [...] On the opening night, with the wind rushing the dome and the sound of the sea outside, one audience member stood up mid-show and promptly fainted. The designer, Lucy Osborne and I staged *Lampedusa* in a wooden amphitheatre, with the audience sat on benches corkscrewing upwards, and the cast sat amongst them. Some audiences cried. Some were motivated to action. Others were affronted by Anders's mode of direct politics. Anders is admirably uncynical. (Atkinson 2016, xiii)

Lampedusa delves into the entangled realities of the refugee crisis and the global financial crisis. It explores the hope that emerges unexpectedly from these crises and highlights the different forms of communication and empathy discovered. The play presents two contrasting parts of Europe: Lampedusa, a picturesque island renowned for its beaches, where migrants often lose their lives in pursuit of a better future, and London, one of the world's largest cities, where people without financial means are often excluded. *Lampedusa* is a powerful play that presents the intertwined tales of Denise and Stefano. Despite living in different countries and facing unique struggles, they both experience the harsh realities of trying to make ends meet. While Denise works as a foreclosure clerk in London, Stefano dedicates himself to rescuing refugees who arrive at Lampedusa Island, Italy. He “dreads especially the boatlands of women and children who will be abandoned mid-voyage by smugglers who tell them that there is one last payment owing, and leave them to float, possibly to be rescued, but also possibly to drown” (Donald 2018, 197). After years of unemployment, Stefano is forced to accept work and initially focuses solely on his own troubles. Because of the unemployment, Stefano has to do “the job no-one else will take” (Lustgarten 2015, 7) and has to witness the life no one has to live. However, he eventually befriends Modibo, a Malian refugee, he meets during work. Similarly, Denise cannot ignore the hand of friendship extended by Carolina, whose house she is foreclosing. Throughout the play, Stefano and Denise encounter the faces of loved ones who have passed away unexpectedly. The story is a poignant exploration of how hope can blossom even in the face of adversity, drawing striking parallels between the lives of these two characters.

Lampedusa starts with Stefano's comments about the long history of human migration across the Mediterranean Sea. The play portrays the effects of migration on the human experience through history:

This is where the world began. This was Caesar's highway. Hannibal's road to glory. These were the trading routes of the Phoenicians and the Carthaginians, the Ottomans and the Byzantines... We all come from the sea and back to the sea we will go. The Mediterranean gave birth to the world. Step into the shoes of those whose job it is to enforce our harsh new rules: an Italian coastguard and a payday lender from Leeds. How do they do it? And what happens to them? (Lustgarten 2015, 3)

This quotation embodies Nguyen's explanation of refugeetude. Nguyen indicates that "Redirecting dominant perception of refugee as a temporary legal designation and a condition of social abjection toward refugee as an enduring creative force, refugeetude opens up new ways of conceptualizing refugee subjects and the relationalities that extend beyond the parameters of refugeeness, generating connections to past, present, and future forms of displacement" (Nguyen 2019, 110-111). In this quotation at the beginning of the play, Stefano states that the Mediterranean has been the home to great leaders and civilisations. While in the past it gave life to people, today the Mediterranean has ended lives, and death has begun to swim in its waters instead of birth. Both the Mediterranean and Europe represent death for migrants: "And do the migrants not understand Europe is fucked? And Italy is double-fucked? And the south of Italy is triple-fucked?" (Lustgarten 2015, 9). The regional geography and the social and economic crises experienced in the small island of Lampedusa and the social and financial crises in global geographies are intertwined with the movement of mass migration. Stefano heavily criticises the migration movement between local and international geographies (Gallo 2016, 33). The confliction between regional and global geographies is also observed among the characters "while Stephano is forced to salvage dead bodies, and his brother works as a chef in London" (Ibidem). Stephano also explains murderous aspect of migration: "bloated corpses from the wreckage of flimsy boats, including the tragic shipwreck near the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa in October 2013 which killed 450 people" (Mount 2015). Refugeetude refers to the deconstruction of time, space, and borders. In this context, we can observe the situation of memories and refugees being together with today's refugees. Connection from the past to present also reflects exploitation, displacement, marginalisation, and the undesirable conditions. What the imperial powers experienced in the past is also experienced today.

Nguyen also describes all these experiences using the term ‘refugeography’. Refugeography expands the meaning of the concept of refugees by defining its experiential and spatial geographies. It fills the concept of ‘refugee’ with a plethora of individuals, places, and experiences, offering an alternative way of understanding a category that, for many, signifies emptiness and incompleteness (Nguyen 2016, 171-172). Refugeography is important in perceiving the suffering experienced by refugee(s), forced displacement, political effects, and geographical changes between the past and present. People are forced to migrate to other geographies in order to get rid of the difficulties they have experienced and witnessed, such as economy, war, destruction, and genocide. In the geography they migrate to, if they are lucky and do not drown, they are put in the position of a despised and unwanted subject as they strive to hold on. “The term locates the refugee within and without the nation, in the past and the present, and as formative to an understanding of subjectivities and communities that lie on the horizon” (Ibid, 172). In the play, Lustgarten situates the characters Stephano and Denise (British-Chinese) within their nation and different nations. Refugeography can geographically describe the survival (selected others), disappearance (deselected others), or loss of life of migrants who are categorised as refugees. Unfortunately, migrants are humiliated or used with rising racism and “fucking migrants” (Lustgarten 2015, 11). Within this context, Denise indicates that “They take all the little things that people do to make a good impression, the things we do to prove that we are human beings, and they use them to fuck you. That’s the cruelty, the breathtaking cruelty of it” (Ibid, 16).

People always search for a new way to live better and cope with difficulties. In the play the Italian Modipo plays a song titled *Lampedusa*, Stefano explains it as: “It’s meant to be about all the people who’ve come here seeking a better life. The drowning and the terror. The hopes and the futures. I don’t know if I can hear all that in there personally, but it’s beautiful” (Ibid, 14). The song guides to refugeetude, which signifies new shelters and integration for people from different countries and geographies. Stephano also shares Modipo’s thoughts about selected and ‘dysselected’ (Knittelfelder 2023, 117) others’ hopes, motivations, and intentions:

He turns to me and, very quietly, he says that it’s deliberate. That our glorious leaders want the migrants to drown, as a deterrent, a warning to others. They want them to see TV footage of the bloated bodies and the

rotted faces of those who trod the watery way of death before them, so they'll hesitate before they set foot in one of those rickety little deathtraps.

And he says they do see – and they get I anyway. They know what the dangers are, but they keep coming and coming because, in his words, 'if those men in their offices knew what we were coming from, they'd know we will never, ever stop' (Lustgarten 2015, 19).

Migrants have to risk their money and their life or like Stefano and Denise, people have to work to find solutions to their economic crises. They are in search of new hope, stories and a brighter future. Refugeetude fosters a sense of shelter and awareness that "might be a catalyst for thinking, feeling, and doing with others" (Nguyen 2019, 111) offering them fulfillment, consciousness, and a sense of co-existence. The playwright clarifies that "Syrians are the latest thing. Palestinians last summer when Gaza got bombed. Egyptians and Libyans the past couple of years. We read the papers and we see a disaster, a crackdown and a famine. We say: 'They'll be here next.'" (Lustgarten 2015, 8). Unfortunately, like Aylan Kurdi, many children lost their lives and Syrians were not the latest thing and this quote was a foreshadowing for Gaza; nearly 50000 people were killed in Palestine, and they could not reach the sea. For that reason, people need refugee tide and consciousness to create a sense of shelter against "racial, capital, and mobile inequality" (Nguyen 2019, 119). In his plays, Lustgarten generally aims to reflect that the society "in which he lives must undergo radical change, a revolutionary transformation" (Gültekin 2021, 124). Refugeetude intends to portray this revolutionary intention and radical change to save migrants from xenophobia and humiliation.

Conclusion

Anders Lustgarten's *Lampedusa* is a compelling and thought-provoking exploration of the refugee crisis, offering a nuanced portrayal of the human stories at its heart. Through its themes of empathy, identity, and structural injustice, the play questions audiences to face the complexities of migration and encourages the pursuit towards a more inclusive and just society. *Lampedusa* is a call to action for social change and activism. Through its depiction of the refugee crisis, the play prompts audiences to acknowledge their privilege and take responsibility for addressing the injustices faced by migrants. *Lampedusa* hopes to encourage group action to build a more compassionate and just world by igniting discussion and increasing

awareness. Refugeetude represents the connection between marginalised and assimilated people, as well as those who band together to fight against death and suffering. The marginalised friendship and partnership of destiny are portrayed in the play. Through refugeetude, people can develop awareness and discover purpose in order to mould their new futures. Lustgarten's play depicts a universal tragedy of refugees, shattering the conventional wisdom of refugee experience and memory in order to establish a universal consciousness.

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