

THE LANGUAGE OF HERE TUKAJ SMO *Društvo Super Mario, 2021*

Tukaj smo/We Are Here (2021) is a collectively authored book written by “a small community of people living in Slovenia” (p. 4), most of them refugees. Its authors hail from countries including Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Algeria, Eritrea, and Palestine, and the book is written in four languages: Slovenian, English, Arabic, and Farsi. It is a project of care: a “newspaper” that shares first-hand experiences of racism, exclusion, and the fight for recognition, aimed both at “refugees [...] [to] help them see that they are not alone in their struggles” and at “Slovenians, to help them understand the problems we face” (*Tukaj smo*, 2021, p. 4). In its dedication to the millions suffering at Europe’s borders, as well as to “all the bastards who have contributed their curse to migrants” (p. 4), *Tukaj smo* is also a statement: a refusal of erasure, and a call to see and name political violence. Its defiant title gains added meaning when we take into account that the publication of these stories was supported by Ambasada Rog, a solidarity initiative which early last year lost its longstanding premises after the forced eviction of Ljubljana’s autonomous social centre Tovarna Rog, and which has since reopened in a new location. To obtain a copy of the book one can contact Ambasada Rog (or else find it in the library of the Department of Educational Sciences at the University of Ljubljana’s Faculty of Arts).

The assertion of presence inherent in “we are here” is a powerful claim which resonates with histories of activism. Writing in the US context about the 2006 mass mobilisation of migrants and their families against a draconian anti-immigration law, Nicholas de Genova (2010) describes the protest slogans “¡Aquí Estamos, y No Nos Vamos!” (Here we are, and we’re not leaving!) and “¡Y Si Nos Sacan, Nos Regresamos!” (And if they throw us out, we’ll come right back!) as a “profoundly anti-assimilationist gesture”, which defies the logic of illegality to make visible the fact that migrants are already inextricably bound up in the economic and social reproduction of the nation that reserves the right to deport them. De Genova (2010) draws out historic parallels with the queer activist chant “we’re here, we’re queer, get used to it”, highlighting its “incurability”: not only “we are here”, but also “you’re not getting rid of us” (p. 103).

The claim made by *Tukaj smo* contains these imperatives, but moves them into a different register. It is not, in the same way, an assertion of cumulative mass, of the power to collectively challenge state practices. The number of refugees and newcomers living in Slovenia and their committed allies is too small to permit a defiant takeover of public space, nor have their concerns been central to the political protests that mobilised against

Janez Janša's government in 2020. The book's "we are here" is a quieter statement, if no less political. It reserves the right to speak back: to fears about "migranti" at the border, to the violence of the "gejm" that thousands are forced to play on the militarized postsocialist frontier (Baker et al., 2021), and to the white innocence (Wekker, 2016) of Slovenians who insist that their prejudice has nothing to do with racism. Furthermore, by seeking to make connections between the difficulties faced by its authors and by other segments of Slovenian society, "who also have problems in their jobs, searching for work or apartments" (*Tukaj smo*, 2021, p. 4), the book shifts the terms of engagement away from exceptionalism and toward the possibility of solidarity. *Tukaj smo* is thus both an assertion of visibility and a call to think and act together: now what?

The collection of first-person testimonies, dated predominantly 2020 and early 2021, balances between individual experience and a narrative that is more than the sum of its parts. Some stories deal with the impossibility of leading a normal life when renting an apartment, opening a bank account, or taking a cross-border trip with friends are all thwarted by the stigma of a "refugee passport" (*Tukaj smo*, 2021, p. 78), regardless of the bearer's legal rights. Some recount the conditions inside the Postojna Center za tujce, a detention and pre-deportation facility which multiple authors describe as a "prison" where detainees suffer both physical and mental harm. There are stories of interminable waiting for status, for family, for what turns out to be refusal. Others call attention to the continuous and transnational nature of wrongs – spanning Slovenia, Germany, Greece, "the murderous land of Croatia" – or highlight the brutally transactional nature of the EU's asylum policy: "They stripped us of our rights and insulted our dignity, again just to get money from European funds. [...] Slovenian people, do you like this system where the government takes [the] freedom of innocent people and trades with them like objects?" (*Tukaj smo*, 2021, p. 138).

Stories of struggle are interspersed by more tender moments, affirmations of friendship, found family, and solidarity. Yet even these are often threaded through with loss: the loss of a friend, "a good man everybody liked" (*Tukaj smo*, 2021, p. 208), deported after seven years of waiting for his asylum claim to be resolved; of an elderly Iraqi man in the asylum home who "died from sadness" (p. 150). The book ends with the forced eviction of Rog in early 2021 as told in two contributions, "Rog - my home" and "We are still here". The stories detail the brutality with which the long-standing social centre was destroyed, contrasting the eviction with the indelible legacy of Ambasada Rog, which was "like a museum to me" (*Tukaj smo*, 2021, p. 232). The final contribution, written by "S, Syria", names this act clearly:

A war was announced to us by gangs affiliated with the new government, which puts in place new laws and amendments in mere hours. The distance between them and us in a conversation is like the distance between the Middle East and Morocco. It's kind of interesting for us to observe how they move away from democracy. [...] But I want to say: we are still here. And we will continue with our mission until this tyranny ends. (*Tukaj smo*, 2021, p. 238)

In telling their stories, the book's authors speak about Slovenia from a perspective that in this space all too often goes unheard. In fact, one of the book's defining features is its approach to language, translation, and, consequently, to the authorial voice. Individual contributors are identified by a first name, sometimes only by an initial or an "x", which is usually accompanied by a country. Each story is printed first in Slovenian, then in English, Arabic, and Farsi, with no indication of which language it was originally written in (although the front matter contains a list of translators, they are not credited with individual contributions). As a reader fluent in two of these languages, I found myself switching between them, sometimes reading in English, sometimes in Slovenian, and sometimes one after the other. I gradually came to notice that when the title seemed to indicate a particularly harrowing story, I was more likely to read it in Slovenian, as if to put some emotional distance between myself and the author whose words I (perhaps falsely) presumed had been translated – and as if Slovenian were not, often enough in this book, the language of violence. This discovery troubled me, but it was only possible to notice because other options were available to me, because the language of my engagement was not foreclosed from the beginning. At other times, it was precisely the act of reading a first-person story in Slovenian that made this still highly homogeneous and inward-looking country feel infinitely more expansive, a hopeful reaching for the slogan that "everyone who is here is from here" (Gardner, 2018). Insofar as radical adult education is an integral aspect of any movement for social change (Kump, 2004), *Tukaj smo*'s most radical potential lies in this multilingual, collective authorship, where language is not only an assertion of presence but also an invitation to project oneself beyond the narrow limits of individual understanding.

I began reading *Tukaj smo* during a week marked by two separate events, both of which call to mind the contingency inherent in whom the state chooses to acknowledge as worthy of protection. The first is the 30th anniversary of the removal of more than 25,000 people from the register of permanent residents at the time of Slovenia's independence, "the Erased", who have only this year received an official apology (see Samaluk and Lihtentalner in this special issue). Their struggle for material and historical restitution continues. The second is Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent upswelling of support in the EU and internationally for Ukrainian refugees, including within the ranks of the Slovenian government, which suddenly announced in a sharp reversal of policy that Slovenia would be able to accept "up to 200,000" refugees from Ukraine (MMC RTV, 2022).

On 1st March, a post on the *Tukaj smo* Facebook page, where migrants' stories have continued to be published since the book's release, shared a since-deleted Tweet by the Slovenian government's official communication office (translation mine): "Ukrainian refugees come from an environment which is in its cultural, religious, and historical sense completely different from that of Afghan refugees" (similar sentiments, incidentally, were proclaimed by officials from countries including Poland, Bulgaria, and Hungary). The Facebook's post's anonymous author dissected the racist assumptions underlying the

government view and detailed the difficult and risky labour that refugees from the Middle East and Africa had undertaken as frontline workers during the pandemic, all so that “Slovenian society could keep functioning”. He concluded by extending his welcome to Ukrainians, murdered by the same “criminals” who bombed Syria, and pledged to help them – after all, he knows what it is like to be a refugee in Slovenia, where politicians “humiliate and dehumanise”.

With great generosity, the authors of *Tukaj smo* have taught the rest of us about some small part of their experiences. They have told us that they are here, so that we can’t pretend not to see them. And they have reminded us at every turn that their problems are shared problems, too. At the time of writing, a follow-up *Tukaj smo* book is just preparing to go to print. Who will heed its authors’ invitation to change “here” together?

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