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Nelkem Jeannette Londadjim, *Chadian Sister Engages Kansas City Youth about Peace and Justice: Citoyenne du monde en construction à Kansas City*. Bamenda: Langaa Research and Publishing CIG, 2020. 124 pp. ISBN-10: 9956551775 & ISBN-13: 978-9956551774.

Reviewed by: Cecelia Lynch, University of California, Irvine.

This short book, including both French and English translations, provides unique perspectives on national and transnational peacebuilding, Africa-USA knowledge transfer, and youth education. However, it does not set itself up as doing any of these things, because it is not an “academic” book. Instead, it is a series of short talks by Nelkem Jeannette Londadjim, hereafter Sister Jeannette (of the Sisters of St. Joseph), accompanied by wonderful drawings by the talented artist Bianca Akeyo Okwayo.

The text and drawings, as well as photos, address issues that arose as part of Sister Jeannette’s position as the first “Activist-in-Residence” for peace and nonviolence at Avila University in Kansas City, Missouri, in the fall of 2017. As a result, the book represents a series of short meditations on faith, geography, racism, migration, and activism, by a Chadian nun who has chosen to spend three months in the middle of the U.S., a couple of years before the U.S. Black Lives Matter movement went global.

I am originally from the Kansas City area, and, as a child, I occasionally went to Avila (then a college) to participate in stress-inducing piano competitions. So, I was very curious to read this book about intercultural peace and nonviolence. As an adult academic, I have conducted research in many parts of Africa, including Cameroon, where Sister Jeannette’s family fled for a short time, although not in Chad, where she is from.

As a series of short meditations on faith and nonviolence, the book was in many ways a pleasure to read, and also a pleasure to look at with drawings and photographs accompanying each chapter. But each chapter also left me wanting more of Sister Jeannette’s analysis, which was prescient although it invariably left out additional insights and descriptions that could teach us so much more. Sister

Jeannette is clear though too modest in her writing, as she obviously has a great deal to teach scholars and practitioners of peacebuilding and humanitarianism. Many of her insights, for example, concern significant questions and issues that my collaborators and I also try to address on the Critical Investigations into Humanitarianism in Africa blog (www.cihablog.com).

Sister Jeannette states that she learned, and, for a while, took it as a given that the causes of the Chadian civil war were religious in nature, a power struggle between the politically-favored Muslim North and the Christian South. “I grew up, read a lot, and grew wiser. I learned that the war in Chad was much more complex and involved invisible foreign actors. I learned that it is the underground riches of Chad that became the problem of the country and its people” (p. 21). But it would be good to know more about whether she sees interference in Chad explained by the “resource curse” concept, or whether (which I think she is hinting at) that explanation is also too reductionist?

Sister Jeannette models the kind of diffidence that humanitarians would benefit from in her discussion of racism in the U.S. She notes that she was surprised (in Fall 2017) by the extent of systemic racism and its ongoing effect in her discussions with Avila students and other Kansas City youth, given that she (like so many others from the continent) “thought it was old history” (p. 35). She meditates on the white supremacy and centuries of racist structures that again came to the fore with Donald J. Trump in 2016, and says, “I felt helpless in front of these youngsters. I tried to know what they were made of, their dreams, and their aspirations for happiness and the future” (ibid). Given her own extensive experience as a refugee and long-time peacebuilding activist, she models a very different attitude towards those she is trying to serve than many humanitarians from western countries who are convinced that their expertise allows them to solve the problems of their host societies.

One of the most interesting reflections in the book concerns Sister Jeannette’s story of her family’s multiple flights from civil war (to Cameroon and back, then to Central African Republic). She provides the reader with significant insights in her meditations linking, yet delinking, the migrant from the refugee. She discusses the fact that she is a “temporary migrant” for three months to Kansas City, contrasting this encounter, one of relative security, with the insecurity involved in her family’s refugee experiences in Cameroon and CAR. Still, she points out, both kinds of experience require courage (p. 53); and the refugee, despite their often-desperate condition, retains dignity and agency.

Sister Jeannette meditates on the necessity of reciprocity in the relationship between refugees and those who would aid them. “A gift is not really a gift unless it is given in a spirit of reciprocity.” But frequently, those who provide services want nothing from the refugees in return; they want the refugees to tell their stories but maintain a distance. And when the refugees want to work, they are given menial and degrading tasks, despite their own stores of knowledge and experience (p. 60). Sister Jeannette eloquently shows the necessity of practicing equity in this as in all relationships, in order to keep human dignity at the forefront of peacebuilding. But connecting these observations to more detail regarding her own experiences and subsequent work would be invaluable.

Sister Jeannette’s meditations also connect to her critical observations on “sustainable development” and “interfaith relationships.” Regarding the former, she notes with surprise how the lights are always on in Kansas City; how energy that is not available to so many others in the world is wasted so easily. “I cannot hide my sense of bewilderment. In countries where people have little energy, we talk about conserving it, yet here there seems to be so much that it can be wasted. How can my small daily conservation efforts contribute to humankind’s good, when I see the lights of a whole apartment complex shining day and night for, I suppose, 365 days a year?” (p. 42). She then questions herself regarding how to make these interconnections visible for her hosts. Again, it would be invaluable to hear more about Sister Jeannette’s attempts to do so and how they were met by others.

Regarding human rights, Sister Jeannette’s work with Algerian women provides yet another model for humanitarians and human rights activists to follow. In Algeria, she participated in a sewing workshop to find out about women’s experiences of rights. She suspects, however, that the approach is wrong: “I had the impression that my questions felt like a judgment and that my presence was somehow injurious, because my questions introduced myself into the private matter of their family life“ (p. 81).

Later, however, Sister Jeannette sought advice from the same women regarding setting up a center to train youth about nonviolence. This discussion opened further dialogue with the women about their own experiences of domestic violence, which leads her to ask whether it is “necessary to feel strong and as a bearer of solutions? I discovered that you have to be weak, without any real possibility of action, to allow the solution to emerge... To listen and support discussion among the women was for me the only commitment for peace in that context.” (p. 82).

Finally, Sister Jeannette's own spirituality and her constant interpretation of her situation vis-a-vis Church teachings, also extends to her observations about the Algerian women with whom she works: "The women are very different from one another, each with her particular situation. Although they are all Muslims, they have different ways of practicing their religion and relating to others. ... I tried to meet others in a spirit of respect. We welcomed each other as different, and, little by little, wove bonds of trust and shared experiences of suffering. Such was my mission of justice and peace in Algeria" (pp. 81-82). Again, Sister Jeannette's empathetic perceptions, observations, and analysis are extremely important; and this reader is left wanting more of each.

Still, Sister Jeannette is not an academic who is used to taking "field notes" or providing a great deal of historical and political context for her meditations. As an activist, Sister Jeannette seems surprised by her ability to write at all. Let us hope that she continues to write much more, and that she also returns to Kansas City to continue her work for peace and justice.

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