

“There’s a Lot of Us That Can’t Go Home”: Martyna Majok’s Sanctuary City

by Pancho Savery

Rightly or wrongly, the United States has thought of and called itself “a nation of immigrants.” The theoretical meaning of this has been that the country was open to newcomers who would enrich and expand the definition of “American.” The symbol of this attitude was The Statue of Liberty and the adjacent Ellis Island. The statue was a gift from France in 1886, and was sculpted by Frederic Bartholdi and Gustave Eiffel (yes, that Eiffel). At the bottom of the statue’s feet is a broken chain, symbolizing the end of the U.S. Civil War and the end of slavery. The Statue, with Lady Liberty holding a torch in one hand, has always been meant to be a beacon of hope, a sign that all were welcome to the home of liberty, freedom, and equality. Interestingly, it wasn’t until 1903, seventeen years later, that a bronze tablet bearing the words of Emma Lazarus’s poem “The New Colossus” was added (“Give me your tired, / your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to be free.”). On the other hand, this symbol has had a troubled past. Over time, we have excluded Jews fleeing Hitler, whites not from northern and western Europe, and we put Japanese Americans citizens in concentration camps. African Americans, brought here more than four hundred years ago in chains, who have had to endure slavery, sharecropping, and Jim Crow, are still looking for full freedom. And of course, let’s not forget how the United States has historically treated the Indigenous population, those who were here first, and who were forced onto reservations, another form of concentration camp. In the aftermath of the attack on the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001, the United States, under George W. Bush, began limiting the immigration of Muslims and people from the Arab world. These examples all went against what the United States was supposed to stand for.

In more recent times, we have been told that there is a crisis on our southern border. We have been told that those attempting to come here are “murderers and rapists,” who are deliberately being sent here by their home countries. We are being told that parents and children need to be separated, that a wall needs to be built that another country will and should pay for, that it is okay to build a barbed-wire barricade in the Rio Grande to keep people out; that it is ok to lie to asylum seekers, put them on a plane, and force another city to deal with them. The question never gets sufficiently asked, “Why are these people trying to come here in the first place?” They are attempting to come here to escape the horrible conditions in their home countries. They are not attempting to come here because they want to be here. It is the murderers, rapists, and drug lords in their home countries who have forced them to seek asylum here. If we want to solve the “border crisis,” we need to do something to alleviate the conditions in Central and South America. Because people are desperate, they end up being here “illegally.” They enter the US without the proper paperwork; they enter with the proper paperwork; but when their temporary visas expire, they are forced to stay rather than return to the horrible conditions back home. But in this situation, they are also exploited. They are limited in terms of what kinds of jobs they can get, what their wages are, where they can live, and what types of programs they are eligible for to help make their lives better. Every day, they face the possibility of ICE raids, deportation, and separation from their children born here, who are automatic citizens. Some struggle to make ends meet, and some others choose to return to an original home where there is no welcome mat awaiting them.

In a humanitarian response, a number of entities declared themselves sanctuary states or cities. What this meant was that these entities would refuse to cooperate with law enforcement

in terms of dealing with immigration law. This movement did not begin as a response to 11 September, but had actually begun decades earlier. So when 11 September happened, there were many entities already in place to deal with attempted government lockdowns.

This is the social and political background of Martyna Majok's Sanctuary City, a play centered in Newark, New Jersey from 2001-2006, a time period in which many continued to be both traumatized by the events of 9/11, and fearful of how the events of that day would continue to have repercussions on their lives. Majok's work has as its focus the working class, the underbelly of American society, those who are most affected by the majority's failure to recognize those who are in the minority.

The play speaks from Majok's personal experience, in that she herself was born in Poland, came to the US as a child, and grew up in New Jersey. Her plays primarily look at life from the perspective of those from the immigrant community, and their attempt, often a failure, to achieve the American Dream. Her work is also geographically specific. As August Wilson wrote about Pittsburg, and Faulkner wrote about Yoknapatawpha County, Majok writes about Ironbound (the title of her 2014 play), a subset of Newark.

The prime action of the play takes place in 2006, but that is not what we begin to see. Tennessee Williams's The Glass Menagerie is called a "memory play." The main character, who has moved on past his early life, is looking back on his family situation in order to figure out how he has gotten to where he presently is. Majok uses a similar idea. The first two sections of the play consist of memories from the main character, "B," who is looking back on the situations of the past in order to understand his present. Williams's play mostly follows in a chronologically logical way from past to present. While Majok starts from the beginning of the past, there are

actually multiple pasts, and the play jumps back and forth between them. In this concentration on memory and what actually happened when, the play resembles Harold Pinter's Old Times (1971), which also deals with memory. Majok's play begins with an epigraph from Old Times, and the play is filled with Pinter-like "active silences."

The "present" of the play, actually part 2, begins with B, living in New Jersey as an "illegal." He is presently 26, working in a low-paying job. His mother brought him to the US when he was seven, and the United States is the only country he has ever known. His mother has decided to leave and return to her country of origin, after trying and failing to make it in the US. She gave her son the choice to return with her or to remain on his own, and he has chosen to remain. As he thinks back on his life in the present, his memories focus on his best friend, "G." Two different strains of memory play in his mind, he goes back and forth between them, and we are left to figure out which is which.

In the first strain, he and G are high school junior classmates who have known each other since the third grade. She climbs up the fire escape one night, knocks on his window, and asks to be let in. She needs a sanctuary from her home life, where her mother is living in an abusive relationship. G has also been physically abused by her mother's live-in boyfriend so badly that she has to skip school and invent fake illnesses such that she will not have to be questioned about her bruises by school authorities. (One of the play's funnier moments is when B and G go through a list of possible diseases, and she is willing to admit to anything but lice.) G ends up spending many nights with B in his twin bed because both she and her mother are constantly being beaten. A second stream of memories takes place a year later. B's mother has left, G has learned that her immigrant mother has secretly been studying and has passed the test to

become a citizen, which automatically makes G a citizen because she hasn't yet turned eighteen, and G has been accepted into college in Boston. At some point soon after learning she is now a citizen, G proposes a plan to help B. They will get married, live together, and he will eventually be on the path to citizenship. At their senior prom, they start to practice answering questions that could be proposed to them by immigration to make sure their marriage is "real." At the end of the summer, as G is leaving to go to Boston to start college, B presents her with a ring left to him by his mother.

The second part of the play is about present action, not memory, and so there is no longer a constant jumping back and forth between unclear memories. Three years have passed, and B and G have not seen each other. Although they have stayed in communication and she has not dated anyone else, her feelings have become complicated. She feels guilty for liking college life, and simultaneously guilty for not liking it as much as she thought she would. B even reveals that he once went to the campus to see what it was like, sat in on a class, managed to get in to a campus cafeteria, but never directly contacted G. But one night he calls her in pain and asks her to come home. She refuses, at least in part because he reveals to her that he is gay, that he has a lover, that they have had a fight, and that he is out on the street with no shoes. How long G has known or suspected that B is gay is unclear. But as a result of the phone call, G has changed her mind about the idea of marriage. Several weeks after the phone call she does come down and shows up unannounced at B's restaurant job. This sets up the play's final scene. G says she has changed her mind because she is upset that B hadn't told her about his two year relationship with Henry, but that she also realized she was afraid of getting caught by immigration, but then changed her mind again and now is ready to do it. The finale displays the

truth of Yeats's "The Second Coming": the falcon cannot hear the falconer; / Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold, / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

What we are left with at the play's conclusion is a clear case of Hobson's Choice, in which no options are ideal:

-Because B and Henry are in a committed relationship, any "marriage" between B and G would also have to involve Henry. He insists, for example, on going on the honeymoon.

-G has been willing, most of the time, to marry B in order for him to have a path to citizenship; but having to deal with Henry as a second marriage partner is unacceptable to her, and so her choice is to bow out. For her, this arrangement would not provide a sufficient sense of home between her and B. This also essentially means the end of her friendship/relationship with B.

-B asks Henry to accompany him back to his home country. He will be reunited with his mother, and he will feel a true sense of home and not have to fear deportation. Henry predictably says no because he would then be an immigrant in a foreign environment where he doesn't speak the language, and he would therefore have no sense of home.

-Even if G is out of the picture, B and Henry's relationship is problematic. It is 2006, nine years before marriage equality becomes law. They can't get married, and Henry is in law school. He is afraid that getting caught having a gay relationship with an "illegal" could threaten his law career.

-G and B have no real future, nor do B and Henry. Where, then, does that leave us?

Mayok is making several arguments. The first is on the importance of home. Both B and G are traumatized in their homes, G because she is the victim of abuse, and B because his mother has left him to return to her home country. They try, in their teenage ways, to create a sense of home together, most notably by G's original decision to suggest marriage to B in order to help him. G's sense of home with B is disrupted by the existence of Henry. Henry's sense of home with B is disrupted by the anti-gay marriage law, forcing them to have a clandestine relationship. G's sense of home is also disrupted by the loss of both B and Henry.

At the play's conclusion, both G and Henry have left, and B is alone. The stage directions tell us that B stands at his window, and we have "another night /another week /another year / years. Years passing by a young man in a small city." Time passes, nothing changes. B is at "home" alone, presumably continuing to work, "doin whatever job – shitty job – whatever shitty job" he can find, hoping he is not exploited too much, but always having to look over his shoulder in fear, despite living in a sanctuary city, of being picked up and deported because of his "illegal" status.

What do we, as a country, actually stand for? Is there a gap between what we say and what we do? And if there is, what are we going to do about it? Don't we need to do a better job of putting our feet in the shoes of others and showing more compassion? The Statue of Liberty has always stood as a symbol of this country's status as a sanctuary country, a place where those oppressed could always find refuge and a sense of home. Martyna Majok has peeled back the layers of this "truth" to reveal that it is only a myth that operates for the selected few. Who, exactly, are we as a country? Majok demands that we meditate on that.