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## ***A response to Sarah Keenan's Subversive Property - Law and the Production of Spaces of Belonging***

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### **Introduction**

I have recently had the pleasure of reading Sarah Keenan's new book, *Subversive Property: Law and the Production of Spaces of Belonging*. I am honoured to have the opportunity to respond to it. I dithered for some time about how best to approach my contribution. I found Sarah's work both interesting and engaging and much of it resonated with my own research interests. Initially, I intended to base my response on the themes in Sarah's book which are of common interest in our academic work. However, as I read more deeply into the book, I could not escape the feeling that the most significant effect of her words on me were in provoking and catalysing reflections on my own personal and political experiences of place and belonging.

As a second generation migrant who has never quite felt at home, in all senses of the word, and who has often been made to feel not to belong – the archetypal means being the question relentlessly asked of me, “But where are you really from?” – I found Sarah's concept of subversive property and the political potential it holds both uplifting and empowering. The idea of subversive property is alluring in its assertion that, as Sarah writes, “spaces of belonging produced by property do not have to be oppressive, exploitative or conservative”.<sup>1</sup> The concept is deeply comforting in its capacity to absolve oneself of responsibility and blame for the sense of unease and alienation one feels as a different body inhabiting a hegemonic space. Sarah's book reassures me that to feel as though one does not belong holds the potential for something else, something new, something both personally and politically liberating. In a world in which we so often feel powerless in the face of oppressive structures in which, in struggling to free ourselves, we are sometimes unsure if we are merely becoming further ensnared, it is reassuring to come to an understanding that, as Sarah writes, significant political potential can come when “particular bodies that do not belong according to dominant networks of belonging nonetheless *remain* in that place”.<sup>2</sup>

On reading Sarah's work, I felt myself to be living proof of the soul of her

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<sup>1</sup> S. Keenan, *Subversive Property: Law and the Production of Spaces of Belonging* (Routledge, 2014), 92.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

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contentions. With this inspiration at the core of my reaction to the book, I eventually settled on responding with a personal narrative written as an allegory on subversive property. The piece is written in the spirit of the feminist and critical race studies tradition of story-telling and experiential writing. It is an account of experiences which capture many of the themes Sarah addresses in her book, including the sense of feeling 'out of place' everywhere, the sense of feeling pain happening elsewhere that comes of diasporic existence, and the productive unsettling that can occur from staying in place.

### **A Tribute to Subversive Property**

Arabic was my mother tongue. Until my elder sister and I were five and four years old, my parents spoke to us only in Arabic. Like many children, I used to make up words as a girl. My mother tells me that if I liked something, I would say it was "garmeeze" and if I disliked something, it was "garbaza". They sound like made-up Arabic words, not English ones, because Arabic *was* my mother tongue. It was the tongue through which I first made sense of the world, the tongue through which I learned what I loved and what I didn't.

When my sister started school, her class teacher called my parents in to account for their daughter's lack of English. I have often imagined that meeting and wondered what it felt like for my parents, my proud immigrant parents, with their shining English language credentials, to be told that they had failed their daughter, that their daughter would fail in school, in life, because they had not taught her English. My parents, who had fled what for them had been a repressive society, but who had clung to their language, the language of the books through which they first escaped their difficult daily lives. Did my parents begin to wish they'd twisted their tongues to form English words from the moment of my sister's birth? Did they hang their heads in shame in the face of this white woman's disapproval? What I know, is that my parents, fearful for their daughter's future, took decisive action. Overnight, they swapped Arabic for English as the language of our home.

And so, overnight, our tongues were orphaned. We lost the language through which we were first loved, through which we first loved. Our parents' soothing tones became all at once harsh and incomprehensible. Sometimes I wonder about that first night. Did those whispered words, "good night" slip easily enough from our parents' lips? Did we feel their warmth and that of their lips on our cheeks as they tucked us into bed?

I have sometimes wondered if we resisted. Did we hold our tongues? For how long did we fight for the tongue we knew, the kinder, softer one?

I have not always known of the alienation from home, from my parents,

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brought about by that long ago rupture in tongues. Having been raised in the white city of Exeter, there was never a shortage of sources of alienation. Who knew the real genesis of my disorientation? Did we ever really have a chance of belonging? After all, my parents abandoned their home, their country, before I was born. Home could always have been something, somewhere, else.

I was living and working in London when the January 25<sup>th</sup> Egyptian revolution, as it was called then, began. I lost count of the number of times I almost dropped everything to go to Cairo to join the protests in Tahrir Square during those first eighteen days. I knew that what held me back was a sense that it could never really be my fight, that my parents' neglect of the country, my vicarious neglect, for all these years meant I wasn't entitled to call this struggle my own. Then there was the language. My stunted Arabic tongue that never failed to betray my outsider status. "3aysha bara? [Living abroad?]" taxi drivers would ask on hearing my English accented Arabic. So I suppressed my instinct to travel for some months and instead sat wired to the news, buffeted by elation, guilt and resentment.

In my defence, in defence of my identification with that struggle, in an attempt to explain that sense of urgency, panic, that turning this way and that, from here to there, I have always loved Egypt. But let's be honest, I loved Egypt in a second generation migrant child's back-of-a-cereal-box-family-photo sort of way. In that beguiling image was everything from the annual warm, tearful, food-saturated embrace of my extended family to the country's airbrushed poverty and authoritarianism. In that photo was an Egypt I wanted to see, to visit, to taste, but for no longer than a summer holiday.

Over the next two years, I contrived ways of travelling to Cairo at every opportunity. I fell in political love with the country, as did my parents. What a gift for them, a miracle, to happen upon an entirely unpredicted, late-blooming, political romance with the country of their birth. For me, what had been a wholly emotional attachment to Egypt became a mature commitment to the country's future. My engagements with activists there reflected my political engagements here, and for the first time in my life I felt my connection with Egypt was complete, whole and finally re-made to last.

There was an unmistakable revival of Arabic at home. One day, on the phone to my father, we conversed in Arabic. I had been working hard to overcome the shame at my broken tongue. As he spoke my voice caught in my throat. I felt an outpouring of love. Was it so easy, just like turning on a tap, to love my parents?

But on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2013, I was reminded that nothing is made to last. With the death of my uncle, I was set adrift. I lost my anchor, the linchpin of my life in Cairo, the city's centre of gravity. It was in his home that we always stayed, and

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to which the extended family flocked to welcome us on our return each year.

It was a routine procedure, the doctors said. But nothing is routine in a country where corruption corrodes every inch of infrastructure, public and private alike. As his condition worsened, the doctors withheld treatment until all monies had been paid. When all hope of recovery was lost, the doctors insisted that another procedure was all that was needed, so my uncle suffered and my family paid, only to learn later that nothing could have saved him then. Crouching on the hospital floor, my head in my hands as I listened to the sound of my aunts' and cousins' wails, I wept for my uncle, for the needless pain he had suffered, for the years he had lost, for the meals he would never eat, for his favourite, most prized bar of Cadbury's Milk chocolate that he had especially asked me to bring for him and that now he would never taste. I wept for my lost tongue. Its loss had disarmed me. For in my anger at the hospital, I wanted my mother tongue more than ever before. I wanted the familiarity and ease of use of my mother tongue so that I could unleash the rage I felt on the doctors who had killed my uncle.

In the days that followed, I feared the whole city would collapse. It happens all the time in Egypt, after all. Buildings collapse, trains crash, flyovers fall, and the sick die needlessly.

Who killed my uncle? I would ask, over and over again. Who is responsible for the death of my uncle? Was it the hospital, with its greedy, money-grabbing doctors? Was it the Egyptian government, with its corrupt officials who bleed the country and its citizens dry? Was it the British, who had colonised, enslaved and plundered Egypt years ago?

Weeks later, a military coup would devastate revolutionaries across the country and set in motion a counter-revolutionary movement so vicious that it alarmed even the deepest cynics.

This year Egyptians went to the polls and most of them voted for Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the counter-revolution's candidate of choice. Britons also went to the polls and a great many of them voted for UKIP. I am fortunate to live in London. My parents live in a city, on a street, with neighbours who would rather someone else lived next door. What does it mean to be a political stranger in both one's homes?

This year, my immediate family gathered in Exeter to mark the anniversary of my uncle's death. None of us had returned to Egypt since. I could not shake the nightmarish sheen the city had assumed since his death. Neither could I shake the embarrassment I felt at my naivety, at my selfish ignorance. As though Egypt had not always been a nightmare. As though it was not that nightmare that the revolutionaries had lived and fought and died so that they and their

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children could wake up from it once and for all. I recalled a graffiti slogan I'd seen once in Tahrir: "If you will not let us dream, we will not let you sleep". Had I never really understood until now quite what was at stake in all my marching and chanting?

One evening, as my family and I drove home from a day spent at a local seaside town, we found the route was lined with large UKIP placards and posters – untampered with, undefaced. With each one we passed, I felt as though familiar towns, villages and streets from my childhood were taking on a new persona, becoming alien. Except *they* were telling *me* I am an alien. My father suggested we stop at a pub for dinner, but I was reluctant. How could we walk into one of these village pubs when at the gate of the city looms a UKIP banner? We drove on when once we would have stopped. Even at the best of times, I had always felt the eyes of the locals bore into us when we entered pubs and restaurants in Exeter and its surroundings.

Every year, my parents' next door neighbours hold a Christmas drinks party at their home to which those living nearby are invited. On one occasion, I happened to be home and went along. My father and I stood conversing with our host, who began to tell us a story about an expensive leather briefcase which he had given his son for his birthday. The case was stolen from him on a trip to London. I was on the verge of expressing my regret at the loss of such a valuable gift when he leaned towards us, lowered his voice and with a knowing elbow nudge, said, "Of course, the thief wasn't British. He was one of our black brothers, if you know what I mean".

I am sure my parents' neighbours voted for UKIP. When Exeter's mosque was refurbished last year, one of them told my parents that this was surely because of a corrupt Muslim councillor. When my father retired, his first question to him was, "when will you be moving back to Egypt?" My parents have lived in their house for nearly 20 years and their neighbours moved onto the street five years ago. Even so, they have been waiting for my parents to one day pack up and go back to where they came from.

Where are my parents now if they belong neither in Cairo, nor in Exeter? They look upon recent events in Egypt in horror and are reminded daily of their reasons for leaving years ago. Yet their neighbours in Exeter use their presence as a means of both enacting and legitimising their own racism while waiting for them to go home.

I have always wanted to shout at times like this. My father would always say I'm like a bull in a china shop when making an argument. My parents' form of resistance is a quieter one. I see that now. I have accused them of accommodating oppression too much. But it is they who are accommodated nowhere. I was a disruptive child, they tell me. Disruptive at school and at the

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dinner table. I've no shame in disrupting state and family institutions. But my parents are disruptive too. In their move from Egypt, in their staying away, they are resisting the country's cultural and political oppression. By staying in Exeter, quietly asserting their presence, living next door to people who want them out, they are disrupting, resisting the everyday racism of Britain and challenging its self-image as a tolerant society.

I am grateful to Sarah for enabling me through reading her work to reflect on these experiences and to come to an understanding and appreciation of them that is both emotionally reassuring and politically encouraging. The beauty in Sarah's book is that she not only convincingly and engagingly articulates her theory of subversive property, but in doing so she grapples with personal and political realities sensitively and insightfully.