

**Cecile Sandten and Kathy-Ann Tan, eds.,** *Home: Concepts, Constructions, Contexts* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2016), 234 pp.

What makes a home a home in a time when 68.5 million people are forcibly displaced because they flee from poverty, war, destruction, death? According to figures released by the UNHCR, there are not only such staggeringly high numbers of refugees in 2018 but also 10 million stateless people, people that may have a physical abode but no country they belong to (“Figures at a Glance”).

Home country, hometown, roots, belonging, how do we fill these concepts with meaning, is a consensus even possible? Home Office, Homeland Security, *Heimatministerium*: these institutions imply clear-cut notions of home, designated by borders that are eventually haphazard lines on a map, invisible from outer space. Is home a building? A feeling? A smell? A person? Can home be claimed, appropriated? What is stable, reliable, and recurrent about the concept and its application?

“Home” as concept and perceived reality often brings with it the notion of another time. It is romanticized, nostalgic, dated, longed for, imagined, constructed, and defended. My home is my castle, my property, my history, my narrative, my family; strongly emphasizing ownership and control. At the same time, “home” is in flux, shifting, moving, and migrating, there and back again. “Home” is evoked, advertised, sold, and craved. “Homemade” is a popular marketing label that insinuates honesty, tradition, handiwork, knowledge. So without a home there is no stability? Can “home” thus ever be made from scratch or reiterated? Is homesickness the disease of the twenty-first century? Are we all homesick in one way or another, sick for a home, made sick by a home? Taking a bird’s-eye view on current sociopolitical climates in many European states and the United States makes apparent an overall dualism: those with a home seek to fortify it against alleged intruders whereas those in flight are forced to rebuild it elsewhere. Home is where the heart is; all too often today home means security, shelter. Emotions and politics collide within the term and leave their mark also on scholarly discourses of the concept.

Constructing belonging in the sense of experiencing being at home, building a home in the spatial sense, is a precarious endeavor that implies several complex challenges. Belonging often only becomes palpable when it is absent, when we begin to feel as an outsider and only then take action. Overcoming this feeling of alienation can be hampered by the emotional plane, because places are no neutral entities but charged with memories, feelings, and meanings. Such a sense of nostalgia can forestall efforts to belong again after a time of absence, because places are not static and amongst others subject to the remaking of their inhabitants. Simply returning to the town I was born in does not guarantee it still feels like home. And what if we try to belong to two places? Migratory movements and trajectories of home-making are as complex and heterogeneous as the people performing them.

In her study *Beyond the Borderlands: Migration and Belonging in the United States and Mexico*, Debra Lattanzi Shutika elaborates on this phenomenon and thereby helps steer away from monolithic perceptions of migration from Mexico to the United States that focus on the south-north trajectory exclusively and imagine the migrating individual as stuck in the new sphere, having to respond to a feeling of crisis. Shutika concludes that the Mexican families of Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, strive for multilocal belonging, belonging to two or more spaces that they call home.

These men and women had a strong desire to make a home in Kennett Square and to provide more opportunities for their families. At the same time, they wanted to maintain connections to their home community in Mexico and preserve their identities as Mexican in the United States. [...] Their ties to Textitlán constitute a complex binational existence that has shaped their experiences in Kennett Square, everyday life in their hometown, and how they find and maintain their place and sense of belonging in both communities. (3)

Note that Shutika explicitly refers to an active maintaining of ties, not an appreciation of homeland culture in new surroundings, but efforts to be physically present in both places alternately. Returning “home” for these families, sometimes once a year, sometimes more often, requires ongoing acts of adaptation and negotiation, reconstructing the bond with the local community. This is especially challenging but also is increasingly found in a globalized world with transnational individuals.

Interrogating such complexities of conceptualizing, representing, contextualizing, and reifying “home,” this imagined space that is at once a lived reality and a scholarly conundrum, is what ties otherwise only loosely connected essays together in *Home*. After a ten-page introduction written by the editors that thoroughly engages with the complications and contradictions of the term and concept “home” in a globalized world as sketched above, the volume is divided into two parts, “Concepts and Constructions,” and “Contexts.” Each part contains seven articles with contributors from the United States, the Netherlands, Kenya, Germany, Palestine, Australia, and Hong Kong. This editorial choice reaffirms the volume’s very international and interdisciplinary nature and its declared intention to put forward a diachronic approach towards “home” across such disciplines as poetry, photography, film, painting, narrative, music, museums, and history. In line with this openness, the collection features a refreshingly broad range of writing styles that freely move on the academic writing spectrum.

To name but a few, there is Ahlam Shibli’s contribution “Phantom Home,” a collection of intense photographs that portray homes of Palestinian resistance fighters. The photos seek to make the invisible visible or, as the artist puts it, “the ones who are absent become present again” (29)—all families have lost members in the fight against Israel and keep their memory alive in their homes. These homes are thus marked by loss and incompleteness and simultaneously recreate the presence of their loved ones as integral parts of their concept and practice of home. There is only a very short introductory note by the artist, the contribution as such is of a visual nature. Similarly yet differently, Keguro Macharia’s contribution is poetic, a creative, associative collection of thoughts and impressions revolving around home and diaspora.

Irene Cieraad’s essay, as another example, discusses two very particular ways of imagining home from afar, Dutch Genre paintings and “Sailing Letters,” letters written by sailors in the seventeenth century. Cieraad makes the argument that both media complement each other in their construction of a romanticized vision of home from a distance. The homesick sailors’ letters, filled with longing for a home they had to leave, are mirrored in intriguing ways by domestic paintings from the same period that portray what Cieraad calls “a female-dominated home front” (59), the women that stayed behind and took care of the home. In the paintings, these women are often shown reading or writing, thus imagined to be communicating with their absent husbands, fathers, brothers, safely ensconced in the private sphere. “Home” is therefore invoked in highly

individual ways in both the letters and the paintings; at the same time, it is also firmly gendered.

As meaningful and worthwhile as each article is, the collection's two-part distinction into "Concepts and Constructions" and "Contexts" strikes me as somewhat random. Both parts contain essays that problematize the concept "home" and/or analyze a case in point and could easily be put into the other part or go without that distinction altogether. That said, *Home* remains an intriguing, thought-provoking and well assembled contribution to one of the most relevant questions of the twenty-first century: what is "home"?

## Works Cited

- "Figures at a Glance." *UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency*. <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>. Web. 19 Oct. 2018.
- Shutika, Debra Lattanzi. *Beyond the Borderlands: Migration and Belonging in the United States and Mexico*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2011. Print.

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