

BEING-HERE

Placemaking in a World of Movement

*Annika Lems. 2015. New York: Berghahn Books.
ISBN 978-1-78533-849-6. 252 p.*

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Over the past decades, dominant researchers in social science have taken it almost for granted that movement, deterritorialization and placelessness have become a syndrome of the human condition. In her insightfully written ethnography, Annika Lems invites readers to take a step back from this general assumption, and to reconsider the complexity of mobile existences. The author demonstrates that displacement and emplacement are nuanced realities made of multilayered tensions between intimate experiences and larger politico-spatial contexts, between the need for place attachment and the imperatives of movement, and between resilience and resistance. From a phenomenologically inspired approach, the book questions what it really means to create a new existence in a foreign country. Through the life stories and photographs of three middle-aged Somalis who fled their home country to settle in Australia – Halima, Omar and Mohamed – readers discover their ceaseless efforts to build a new sense of home and to give meaning to their *being-here*.

In her work, Annika Lems responds to the emergent call in anthropology for the use of life story methods. The author brilliantly advocates the relevance of the dynamics of storytelling as a point of entry into people's emotional universes. With skilful writing, the author navigates the intermingled flows of temporalities, places, memories and emotions that constitute the protagonists' lives on the move. Moreover, instead of being a silent listener, Annika Lems borrows from her own memories of childhood in the Netherlands, of life in Vienna, and of her fears and hopes as a foreigner in Australia, to actively take part in the process of creating a narrated common ground.

To articulate the self, places and mobile experiences, the author draws inspiration from Edward S. Casey, Gaston Bachelard, and Martin Heidegger. She also refers to later proponents of existential phenomenology such as Michael D. Jackson, Albert Piette and Tim Ingold for whom *place-based* and *persona-based* focus is primordial. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the author avoids the usual criticism directed at phenomenologists, who are said to overlook the experiential and to underestimate the social and historical determinants of life. With fluid writing, Annika Lems intertwines the complex interplay of intimate inner *life-worlds* and the structural historical, political situatedness that constitute Omar's, Halima's and Mohamed's sense of *being-here*. Through their stories and photographs, places do not appear as isolated vacuums, but as contested constructions inscribed within broader political and historical considerations.

The urge to understand mobile existences from the everydayness of being-in-place is present throughout the book. Most chapters of *Being-Here* begin in the realm of intimate atmospheres, such as small coffee shops, living rooms, and Somali malls in Melbourne, where Annika Lems shares words and pictures, laughs and silences, hopes and despairs with her protagonists. Their stories transport us far beyond the immediate locations. The readers are invited into the intimate landscapes of what Ricœur calls “memory places” (2004: 41). Omar, an NGO spokesperson for the Somali community in Melbourne, recalls fond memories of Mogadishu streets, the ever-illuminated skyscrapers of Dubai, overcrowded New Delhi, and of feeling lost at the airport border control upon his first arrival in Australia. For her part, Halima, a mother of four and coordinator of social projects for Somali children, describes the long stony path to the sea she happily walked as a child with her father, or a classroom in Moscow where she was an exchange student and met her husband. Through visual stories, Mohamed, a chairman of the Somali Cultural Association, shares images of the remnants of a demolished church, an abandoned National Somali television studio, and a marketplace in the centre of Mogadishu where everyday life carries on despite conflict, violence and chaos. These places are inscribed in their lives as they create links between the past *there* and *then* in Somalia, and the present *here* and *now* in Australia. In my opinion, it is regrettable that there is an imbalance between the three stories: Mohamed’s lifeworld remains elusive, as his photographs seem only to introduce and illustrate the rich depictions of Halima’s and Omar’s lives.

Through Omar’s stories of migration, Annika Lems raises the question of how to piece together lived realities from Melbourne and Somalia, a place destroyed by a series of political violence and the passage of time. By navigating between memories and present realities, Omar expresses that throughout his long journey of displacement through different countries, Somalia became an unfamiliar and lost place. The feeling of losing *his* Somalia created the urge to understand the political and historical events that led to the disintegration of his home country. Making sense of what happened to Somalia, “how a well-respected country could deteriorate into a ‘dust-state’” (p. 79) helped him to *make peace* and create bridges between his past life in Somalia and Australia.

Through her encounter with Halima, Annika Lems explores the different facets of what *being-at-home* means, and challenges the conception of home as an enclosed and unmovable space. If the experience of *being-at-home* is deeply attached to place, it does not always need an exact physical location. The importance of intimate emotional connections with family or loved ones often outweighs that of the physical attributes of a place or a landscape. Memories of a place, nostalgia, imagination, and sometimes religious faith and family bonds, are the quintessential elements that constitute the feeling of *being-at-home*. Referring to Hage’s work on *existential mobility*, she notes: “In order to feel at home, a place needs to be open enough to perceive opportunities to move forward in one’s life” (2005: 119). Besides the need for security, community and familiarity, home also emerges from the sense of possibility and opened opportunity for a “good life” and a “better future”.

Omar’s and Halima’s life trajectories also reveal the dynamics of place-making, considered through the double lens of intimate experiences and larger politico-spatial tactics that regulate individual movement. Places inhabited by Omar and Halima in the course of their

lives are not only “experienced on an intimate level” (p. 106) but are also politically inscribed into a broader system of power relations and dynamics of space inclusion and exclusion. The author argues that the Australian context of migration and integration policies, as well as bureaucratic labeling of people as refugees, citizens or migrants, “have profound effects on the ways people experience and identify with place” (p. 108). Nonetheless, despite such a spatial “set of complex ordering principles” (p. 107) that aim to keep people like Omar and Halima from settling down, the quest for home-building drives them to find ways to outwit and constantly challenge those exclusive power dynamics.

To conclude, based on a phenomenological approach, *Being-Here* is a well-executed example of how the analysis of everydayness can inform broader mobile realities in a globalized world. At a moment when narratives of movement are becoming paradigmatic, this book invites readers to look beyond metaphorical explanations that tend, on the one hand, to crystalize representations about mobile individuals and, on the other hand, to deterritorialize their experiences. The author demonstrates that images of migrant and refugees as homeless or helpless do not represent the complexity of lived realities. The stories in this book go beyond the suffering and hardship lens through which “refugee stories” are often narrated. Dynamics of place-making, emotional bonding, social and political resistance also play an important role. By emphasizing the multilayered paradoxes entangled in the process of emplacement and displacement, this ethnography contributes greatly to anthropological understandings of place-making, experiences of migration, and mobility in general.

References

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