Cecile Sandten and Kathy-Ann Tan (Eds.)

Home: Concepts, Constructions, Contexts

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Home: Concepts, Constructions, Contexts – An Introduction

Cecile Sandten and Kathy-Ann Tan

> no one leaves home unless
> home is the mouth of a shark
>
> you only run for the border
> when you see the whole city running as well
> your neighbours running faster than you
> breath bloody in their throats
> the boy you went to school with
> who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory
> is holding a gun bigger than his body
> you only leave home
> when home won't let you stay.
>
> Warsan Shire, "Home" (2013)

The notion of "home" is typically associated with ideas of permanence, indigeneity, familiarity, refuge and sanctuary. Conversely, the term "unhomely" (which, of course, calls to mind Sigmund Freud's concept of the "uncanny," *das Unheimliche*, with its sense of familiarity, yet strangeness) commonly denotes a sense of discomfort, foreignness, impermanence/transience and transit. This binarism, which underpins a broad range of discourses from the political rhetoric of "homeland security" to the institutional vernacular of social care in nursing and retirement "homes," clearly focuses on the positive connotations of the term "home." Yet, we propose in this volume that the term "home" is also one fraught with ambiguity, contradiction and the "burden of history" (White 1966), namely transatlantic histories of exile, expulsion, forceful removal and resettlement. The relocation of Native Americans from the southeastern United States to "Indian Territory" (present-day eastern Oklahoma) following the Indian Removal Act of 1830 (commonly referred to as the "Trail of Tears"); the Atlantic Slave Trade where an estimated 15 million Africans were forced to undertake the "Middle Passage" to the Americas; and the legacy of aboriginal Stolen Generations in Australia all exemplify, in different ways, the more troubling legacies of "home" and its contestations.

The current context of mass deracination and resettlement variously referred to as the European migrant crisis or global refugee crisis has resulted in diverging viewpoints across the globe. In Germany, this has manifested itself in a polarization of perspectives that range from the "Refugees Welcome" and "No Border" projects on the one hand, to the Pegida and "Nein zum Heim" movements on the other. While advocates of both ends of the spectrum tend to focus on the asylum seekers or refugees, accordingly ascribing them with narratives of crisis, emer-

gency and need or, conversely, interpellating them as threatening, socially 'problematic' and aberrant bodies, fewer scholars and activists have focussed on the concept of "home" and its resonances within the framework of trans-national mass migration and forced relocation due to the fear of racial, religious, social or political persecution and severe economic hardship. What happens when home is no longer where the heart is, no longer the place one immediately associates with feelings of security, rootedness and familiarity, in the company of loved ones, family and friends?

The poems "Home" and "Conversations About Home (at the Deportation Centre)" by Somali British poet Warsan Shire directly address these questions. In graphic metaphors ("I think home spat me out") and haunting images ("tearing up your passport in an airport toilet/ sobbing as each mouthful of paper/ made it clear that you wouldn't be going back"), Shire directs her reader's attention not only to the asylum seeker's harrowing journey and experience to the country of refuge, but also to the migrant's point of origin and departure, the space of "home" which becomes a place of vanishing ("where I have come from is disappearing"), instead of materialisation or existence. What alternatives are there for the female asylum seeker for whom home becomes "the mouth of a shark" rather than a nurturing safe space? What recourse does she have when the physical spaces of home become tainted with the memory of "a truckload of men who look like my father, pulling out my teeth and nails, or fourteen men between my legs, or a gun, or a promise, or a lie"? Shire's poems thus put a spin on the prevailing notion that all migrants 'suffer' from a postcolonial condition of exile, loss and the trauma of expulsion from home, one frequently accompanied by what Stuart Hall has termed an "overwhelming nostalgia for lost origins, for times past" (1990: 236). When home becomes "the barrel of a gun" and "chases you/ fire under feet/ hot blood in your belly," the longing for a sense of belonging, shelter and protection becomes one that can no longer simply be encapsulated by the maxim "my home is my castle."

Accordingly, this volume of essays sets out to examine and analyse the complexity and significance of the notion of "home" in its various permutations and manifestations. We want to put forward the notion of "home" not only as a physical spatial/geographical location, but as a cultural, socio-economic and ideological paradigm that is gendered and racialized. In exploring the different concepts, constructions and contexts of "home," and challenging the common associations of the term, we propose that it might be less a static and fixed entity than a flexible, multivalent and even inherently contradictory term as, for instance, the German oxymoron "Fremde Heimat" ("foreign home") suggests. In the vein of Shire's poems, the essays collected here suggest that the concept of home remains highly contested not only in the framework of stories and experiences of migration but also within the realm of public and popular discourse that reflects the influence of mass media, state apparatuses and socio-political movements. As Rainer Piep-

meier (1990) summarizes, "home" designates not only the name of a certain space/place, but always also an instrumental, political-strategic and socio-cultural organization of this space.

The notion of home thus commonly entails four dimensions: 1. a spatial dimension – with reference to real places, landscapes, towns, cities, regions, countries or nations; 2. a temporal dimension – since often a particular time period or a period of time decides whether a person will feel at home after having been relocated; 3. a social dimension – home is where the family is and where friends are; 4. a cultural dimension – home is where familiar traditions and customs are maintained, where 'local' delicacies are eaten and local dialects spoken. However, the fulfilment of all four categories does not automatically constitute a sense of "home" or belonging; indeed, various push and pull forces, such as its adoption in both far right (romanticised notions of "Heimat") and far left ("Refugees Welcome") political slogans, often ensure that the term "home" contains productive tensions. This is reflected in Freud's well-known work, *Das Unheimliche* (engl. "The Uncanny"; 1919), in which he defines the term "unheimlich" as, on the one hand, that which is not known, unfamiliar, peculiar or unsettling, also in relation to something done secretly ("heimlich"), while, on the other hand, stressing how the incorporation of the word "heim/heimisch" in "unheimlich" includes the notion of home in the concept of the uncanny. In his essay *Heimat als Utopie* (2000 [1999]; "Home as Utopia"), German author Bernhard Schlink also demonstrates the ambivalence of the term "home" by focusing on the experiences of citizens of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) who felt they were in exile in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification, in spite of the fact that they continued to live where they had always lived (7). This example illustrates how external circumstances can affect one's perception and experience of "home" even if one has not physically migrated from one place/country to another. Schlink also puts forward the notion of home as a 'non-place' (32) because it exists by and large in memories of the past.

Most notions of home addressed so far in scholarship in the humanities and the social sciences originate in the fields of philosophy, political science and law. What our collection of essays does is to provide interdisciplinary approaches to existing notions of home in its many different facets that include and go beyond those in these subjects. As literary and cultural studies scholars, we are interested in diachronic approaches to the concept of home from various disciplines such as literature, cultural studies, history, sociology, art, media, architecture, legal studies, philosophy, and psychology. Thus, our volume includes a broad variety of case studies and individual conceptualizations of home in literature, film, media, and the arts.

In order to provide a practical approach to the topic of "home," the volume is divided into two sections: "Concepts and Constructions" and "Contexts." The essays in the section "Concepts and Constructions" lay the foundations for a composite

and multifaceted approach toward the notion of home from a variety of perspectives. **Simone Diender's** essay on "Concepts of Home and the Private Sphere in Twentieth-Century North America" begins by focusing on the role of popular media (television, radio and mass-market paperbacks) in conceptualizing the notion of home in the twentieth century. Diender assesses the boundaries of private spheres in which individuals performed their roles as responsible members of a greater, national, community. Examining dominant American discourses on the notions of home and nation, Diender maintains that the development of these notions in the private and public spheres should not just be attributed to the American government who intervened in the private sphere of the family home, but also – albeit much more subtly – to the influence of talking heads and public intellectuals who gently steered the discourse on the home, the concept of the private, and a discussion that merged the two, into a particular direction.

The various permutations and manifestations of home are explored in the second contribution in this section by **Ahlam Shibli**, a Palestinian photographer whose work explores themes of home and belonging. In the project "Death," Shibli documents the daily lives of Palestinians in sixty-eight color images. The selected photographs and accompanying commentary by the artist included in this volume bear witness to the artist's documentary aesthetics which depicts the discrimination, expulsion, and violent death of Palestinian soldiers fighting to achieve the recognition of their country as a sovereign nation. Shibli's camera enters private homes where the dead are commemorated among the living, where family members are not absent but jarringly present. Shibli's photographs make their viewer reflect on the ambivalence of the 'home space'/spaces of home, and ponder the flipside of the notion of home as sustenance and security, whereby its four walls result in a sense of confinement instead of sanctuary.

Moving from visual/photographic conceptualisations of home to a more poetic and linguistically-reflexive exploration of the themes of home and exile, departure and return, **Keguro Macharia's** piece "departures:arrivals" asks the pressing question of how a black diasporic imagination inhabited by "we who/ can no longer write of home" can nevertheless figuratively transform histories of dispossession and deracination and "exten[d them] into belonging (and dissolution)."

Expanding on the notions of longing for home and (imagined) return, **Irene Cieraad** notes in the next essay in this section that the first medical cases of near-fatal homesickness or nostalgia, among Swiss mercenaries who craved for their homes and livelihood in the mountains, were reported in the seventeenth century by physician Johannes Hofer. In particular, Cieraad's essay analyses the recently discovered collection of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch letters in the English National Archive, the so-called "sailing letters." At the time of their seizure, these letters were captured by the English in the many sea battles between the two nations. As a consequence of these hostile acts, many of these letters