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Thinking Home

Preliminary Reflections

Erschienen in: Wohnen | Dwelling

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In the preface to his book, *The Idea of Home*, John Hughes reflects on storytelling and its relation to home. In his reflection, he thinks through Walter Benjamin's categories of two kinds of storytellers: the traveler and the tiller of the land. For Hughes, both traveler and tiller of the land seem stuck in their pursuit. They are haunted by "dissatisfaction" as their attempts of return to a supposed fixed location or some distant temporal past collapse; they are "haunted by the same ghost" and that ghost is "*home*".¹

Thinking about *home* is not a simple matter. While it may seem like we know exactly what it is, home remains an elusive category. While a house can be described as a structure that houses and shelters, a home is not only that. Home is also an idea and/or a feeling. It means different things to different people, points to things beyond itself and refuses to be bounded by its own walls. But even that is not encompassing enough, as Paolo Boccagni reminds us, because it fails to recognize the ongoing experiential side of home and homemaking. Paolo Boccagni suggests that home should also be theorized as a verb, *homing*, to highlight "the processual and often incomplete constitution of home, rather than essentialising it".²

A productive means of approaching home would be to invoke the Alexandrian poet C.P. Cavafy, who foregrounds not the arrival but the journey itself:

When you set out on the journey to Ithaca
pray that the road be long
full of adventures, full of knowledge.³

Contemplating the concept of home as it emerges in different literary works, I will share with you four short vignettes of home and homing, not as a comprehensive list but merely as glimpses or springboards for ideas about home, homemaking, home feeling and that desire for *homing*.

ONE



Fig. 1, © ForestWanderer Nature Photography, licensed under Creative Commons⁴

In eighth century-Andalus, an Emir from Syria, who escaped the defeat of his family at the hands of the Abassids, wrote poems of home and loss to a palm tree in the garden of his palace.⁵ Built in memory of his grandfather's palace in Rusafa in Syria, *munyat al-rusafa* was commissioned to help the Umayyad Caliph, Abdul Rahman *al-Dakhil* [the émigré], cope with the pain of that "unhealable rift" brought on to him by his exile from Syria.⁶

For the young Arab émigré, 'home' is reduced to this one object of affect, the palm tree, which evokes Syria for him. The structure of the Emir's new villa and the palm tree in his gardens become a reminder of his own uprootedness and his attempt to recreate home by duplicating it, a nostalgic gesture to at least create a sense of being home. It becomes easy to point to the role of memory and affect in the conjuring of home. These moments of encounter between the Caliph and the palm tree show a convergence of temporalities and geographies and thus evoke the Caliph's past house as well as his homeland and family.

TWO

Memory plays a central role in the first part of Nada Awar Jarrar's novel, *Somewhere Home*.⁷ Maysa, Jarrar's protagonist leaves her own house in Beirut and finds refuge in her memories by going back to her old family house in the mountains. While this centralization of the house in the narrative may be seen as an attempt to simply fix the past, to create a sense of its permanence, the house is depicted as a container for Maysa's own personal narrative which she weaves together in a notebook during her stay in the house. Maysa records her memories of the house and recollections of her ancestors' family dinners, conversations, and daily life activities, like her mother cleaning the house or grandmother cooking or watching over the children; her aunt attending to the herb garden, all the while taking extensive liberties by filling gaps and sometimes even making up stories altogether. To Maysa, the house becomes an affective archive consisting of densely layered stories and memories which inhabit its walls, stories about daily activities and repetitive patterns. Home manifests itself in her notebook as a *practice*. It is depicted in the form of narratives about that dynamic relation between the house and its inhabitants, and those inhabitants and each other. In fact, it no longer stands only for a place, but also for the people who inhabit it.

THREE

In the second part of that same novel, Nada Awar Jarrar depicts the character of Aida.⁸ Aida leaves Beirut to Europe at the break of the Lebanese civil war, and the second part of the novel charts her return to her home city after the war. Paradoxically, however, instead of finding peace, her return leaves her even more restless. Growing up, Aida only felt at home with Amou Mohammed, a Palestinian refugee who took care of her and her sisters as children. Amou Mohammed got killed in the war and she still had dreams of him while she was abroad. It is not until she returns to Beirut that the idea of his loss becomes most real, and he, as well as the home she knew, become irretrievable. Yearning for home thus is often mixed with a yearning for people, for those relationships and experiences which took place in a particular place, and often the place and people become synonymous. Aida leaves Beirut thus with the hope that in her departure she can retrieve what has remained etched in her soul of *home* and where she would be able to find Amou Mohammed. Her spiritual journey to find Amou Mohammed and home highlights the complex temporalities inherent in efforts of homing, which, while informed by the past, are often "future-oriented"⁹.

FOUR

In his short story collection *Farewell to Alexandria*, Harry Tzalas, the Alexandria-born Greek writes about his hometown with a lot of nostalgia and affect. In his book, he portrays a German character, Frau Grete and her reaction to the very rare incident of snow falling in the Mediterranean city.

“Schnee! Schnee! . . . Komm Karl, komm Brigitte, Schnee! Schnee!” [...] If I remember right, it was 1947, or perhaps a year later. They said it had not snowed in Alexandria for a hundred years. [...] For Frau Grete the event was exceptionally significant, especially *moving*. [...] “Ah, Karl, my sweet,” she sighed, tenderly stroking her son’s blond head, “will we ever go back home, I wonder?” (italics mine)¹⁰

The incident for Grete is “moving”, and the snow, like Abdul Rahman al-Dakhil’s palm tree evokes memories of an almost forgotten home. “Silently, she gazed toward the distant horizon, as if trying to will herself across the sea to the distant Bodensee.”¹¹

Grete moved to Alexandria with her father after the First World War, where he opened a shop alongside a Jew and a Greek in the true cosmopolitan spirit the city boasted in the early 20th century. And while she expresses feelings of nostalgia for what she calls in this passage “home”, the narrator highlights that Grete loved Alexandria and did not intend on staying permanently in Germany, she only wished to visit the place of her birth.¹² In fact, as she packs up her apartment in preparation to move away from Alexandria to the New World after the end of the Second World War, when many of the foreign communities started leaving the city, Grete starts to realize “how attached she was to this apartment”, Alexandria was also *home*.¹³

If we think of home in terms of a location on the map, then, it becomes impossible to answer the question: Where does home *really* lie for Frau Grete, Aida, Maysa, or AbdulRahman al-Dakhil, or anyone, for that matter? But what these, as well as similar aesthetic negotiations of home, do is help us think about the rich and variable ways through which we can approach the question of home as spatial, and affective, located yet relational and transnational, inhabiting the present and yet drawing from the past and projecting into the future.

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