

## BOOK REVIEWS

### *Inhabiting Borders, Routes Home: Youth, Gender, Asylum*



Ala Sirriyeh

Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013, pp. 230

Home—something so ontologically important, and at the same time, so taken for granted that we don't much think about it until we are away from it or it is away from us. Home, like culture, is woven into our everyday lives, shaping us as much as we shape it. Feeling at home, longing for home, being homesick, coming home—all emotions that we share, yet describing exactly what home is remains elusive. To be cast out of home is one of the many violences of forced migration. The relationships between people, place, and home is a much studied topic in the scholarship on forced migration. The book by Ala Sirriyeh, *Inhabiting Borders, Routes Home: Youth, Gender, Asylum*, employs the concept of home as the central organizing theme for exploring the experiences of 23 young refugee women living in the county of West Yorkshire in the United Kingdom. Sirriyeh adopts an anti-essentialist position to the concept of home, describing it as fluid, complex, embedded in social relations, and, importantly, not necessarily fixed to one place. In line with contemporary thinking about home and away, this book sets out to describe the intricacies of homemaking among these young women, with a view to illuminate the dynamics of gender, age, and social position. Sirriyeh hints, however, that while it is important to de-naturalize the links between home and place, this does not mean a total rejection of attachments to place. Indeed, as she shows, home is a slippery creature that refuses to be pinned down by sociologists of forced migration and by scholars of many other disciplines. Perhaps that is why this book is so intriguing, with its promise to explore the many dimensions of home from the context of local, lived experiences of young refugee women who remain unsettled in the United Kingdom.

In setting the scene, the book is based on Sirriyeh's doctoral work and, in many respects, reads like a PhD thesis.<sup>1</sup> This is disappointing, if one expects something other.

However, when accepted as such, the work offers important insights and raises intriguing questions about young refugee women coming of age in a mobile and uncertain world. Using a narrative approach, Sirriyeh interviewed 23 young women aged 16 to 25 in 2007 and 2008. She also gave them disposable cameras and used their photographs as a tool for eliciting their reflections and stories about their lives and the places they inhabited. The women represent a diversity of socio-demographic backgrounds and experiences of their forced migration. Some arrived with families and some alone. Some personally experienced violence pre-migration while others did not. Sirriyeh embraces this diversity and cautions that while it is important we learn something generalizable from these women, we must not do so at the expense of erasing the significance of individual experiences of past and present and how these are differentially shaped by the structural conditions in which they are placed.

There are other cautions set out in the book by Sirriyeh worth highlighting, as they are useful signposts for other researchers of forced migration. First, Sirriyeh warns against casting the young women within a trauma and/or asylum account. The women are not only or always victims. Using the framework of home, Sirriyeh attempts to capture a more holistic picture of the lives of these young women—a picture that resists being anchored in an asylum narrative. Further, while not avoiding discussing the traumas of the past with these women, Sirriyeh argues that it is also important to acknowledge the possibilities of the traumas of the present and how they affect women's lives. Second, Sirriyeh argues convincingly that it is important to ask what can be learned about the ordinary, the everyday, in women's narratives about their past and their present. She warns us that a focus on the extraordinary risks erasing the young women's personal, social, and political histories. Third, we are reminded

that although women have a range of pre-migration experiences, their encounters with settlement in a city such as Leeds are mediated by more than the physical locations—rural, small town, and city—from where they lived in their home countries. Class position and cultural identities mediate how Leeds is experienced. Some found Leeds quiet and slow in contrast to the cities they had lived in while others felt at home with the Westernized way of life as they considered their own experiences to be more Western prior to their forced migration. And finally, regarding nostalgias of home, Sirriyeh cautions against assumptions that home past and/or present is necessarily safe. Home, while often portrayed as the haven from which one ventures out into the world, and to which one returns to where one belongs, can also be a place of conflict and violence. Home as a place of privacy and security can equally be a place of privacy and risk, where violences can be enacted unseen by the outside.

As this book is centrally about home in a mobile world, what are these young women's experiences of home and homemaking? Each chapter interrogates this question from a different standpoint—"Becoming Refugees," "Cartographies of Age," "Beyond Hospitality," "Social Relationships," "Safe Havens," and "Routes Home." This is where the book perhaps promises more than it delivers. The major strength of each of these chapters is Sirriyeh's review and discussion of relevant literature but, in doing so, the voices and stories of the women themselves tend to disappear. Although Sirriyeh presents quotes from interviews to illustrate particular arguments, and summarizes specific examples drawn from the interviews, I was hoping for the stories of the women to lead the reader through the complexities and nuances of their life worlds within the context of home. As a reader, I wanted to come to know the women, and through doing so, better understand both the comforts and the insecurities of home—through their experiences, feelings, reflections, and voices.

The final chapter—"Routes Home"—focuses on the dual transitions of migration to settlement and childhood to adulthood within the context of cross-border migration. Importantly, Sirriyeh convincingly shows how a sense of home is ongoing, and affective attachments to home are made and had, even for those women without refugee status or the legal right to settle. So what does this book tell us about home, forced migration, settlement, age, and gender? It perhaps raises more questions than it answers and would be stronger if it were more provocative and less cautious.

One challenge facing social research into home, place, and forced migration is skirting the political correctness of the times, and Sirriyeh's book on borders and home takes

a somewhat safer epistemological path. In spite of the current predilection for de-naturalizing assumptions about home—for emphasizing the fluidity of the contemporary world and for resisting the emplacement of people in time or geography—there is something *essential* about home that matters. Home matters emotionally, socially, and materially. It is our security in the world, and this cannot be theorized away completely. Cathrine Brun<sup>2</sup> has cautioned wisely against adopting either an essentialist or anti-essentialism perspective when dealing with the relationships between people, place, and home in refugee studies. There are merits to each position, and while scholars now lean towards de-naturalizing place and homemaking in a mobile world, the perspectives of local people who are displaced but who are also in a particular place at a particular time and in a particular socio/political context count in essentialist ways. Hearing these voices of local people and their experiences of home and homemaking highlights the strength of small, in-depth studies such as Sirriyeh's in the broader field of forced migration research.

This book by Ala Sirriyeh makes a good attempt to navigate this difficult territory of home and homemaking. The scholarship makes important contributions to the wider literature on settlement, gender, and forced migration. However, a less restrained approach and a deeper interrogation of the stories that the young refugee women have to tell would make for a richer, bolder, and more provocative engagement with problematics of home, forced migration, and asylum.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Ala Sirriyeh, "Inhabiting the Borders: A Study of 16–25 Year Old Refugee Women's Narratives of Home" (PhD diss., University of Leeds, 2010).
- 2 C. Brun, "Rematerializing the Relationship between People and Place in Refugee Studies, *Geogr. Ann.* 83 B, no. 1 (2001): 15–25.