

From Mogadishu to Melbourne – rediscovering place in a globalized world

Review by Firouz Gaini

Lems, Annika. *Being-here: Placemaking in a World of Movement.* Berghahn Books 2018, 220 pp. ISBN 978-1-78533-849-6

In her monograph, Annika Lems searches for answers to questions about the meaning of place, home and memory through the biographical narratives of three persons who left Somalia in early adulthood and quite accidentally ended up in Melbourne (Australia) after complicated trails through different countries. The main body of the book, nine chapters organized in two parts entitled 'Emplacement' and 'Displacement,' discusses and analyzes the experiences and life stories of the two main protagonists, Omar and Halima, who with their storytelling (or 'story-building'), 'have opened up the possibility of understanding human emplacement as located at the crossroads between the closeness of place and the infinity of the universe' (213). In this seminal publication in the framework of existential phenomenological anthropology, Lems links *Sein* (Being) and *Da* (Here) in her theoretical illustration of the relationship between space and place in a globalized world. A perspective reflecting her empirically-based effort to rethink the meaning of place in dominant contemporary anthropological scholarship. Storytelling, she says, 'is another crossroad at which places and memories from the past and impressions and experiences from the present begin to leak into each other' (216). Drawing on anthropological and philosophical studies of space and place, with focus on the work of existential and philosophical thinkers, for instance Heidegger, Casey, Bachelard, who, she says, stress that 'there is no being out of place' (17). Lems advocates a 'turn towards lived experience of place' (21). In moving through places, and not just through 'indifferent space,' Lems argues, people 'shape them and are in turn shaped by them' (22). Resonating Ingold's *wayfarers*, showing how people move through – not across – the world in the quest for a better life.

Being-Here is an impressive book. It demonstrates the power of storytelling among people who were born in a country famed for its love of the art of storytelling. Mohamed Ibrahim, Omar and Halima, who fled their native country because of the war and violence and the disintegration of Somalia, do not want to be labelled

refugees. Through their life stories, a method creating 'an understanding of humans as being born *of* and *into* the world, we get a more complex understanding of displacement' (p. 51). We are looking at their everyday struggles, walking and talking with them, and getting used to 'the lived messiness' of the story-telling moment (38-43). Lems focus on 'everyday acts of meaning-making' in order to get a richer understanding of the 'role of place in a world of movement' (53). Her humane and intersubjective approach to the life worlds of Omar and Halima, linking her own experiences as an European academic immigrant in Australia to their cultural narratives, and her personal reflections on home and family to their stories about Somali family networks and 'home building,' creates an image of people who want to dwell in a place 'open enough to perceive opportunities to move forward in one's life' (119). Melbourne is their home and they want their children to be recognized as Australians without having to excuse the migration history of the family. Omar says for instance:

'Yes, I am Somali, and I am born Somali from one of the Somali families; however I didn't chose to be born Somali; it just happened that way. But I believe Australia offered me more than what Somalia offered me in terms of the past and in the present' (134).

Of course, memories from Somalia, the smell, the sky, the colors, the sounds, etcetera, is part of the 'story.' Some things of the past are easy to talk about, others are kept in silent painful stories. Drawing on Ricoeur's concept of memory places, but connecting it to the present, Lems argues that memory places illustrate the 'lived messiness of life's temporal flows.' In her creative autobiographical book 'What the Oceans Remember' (2019), Sonja Boon writes her family's story and its movement between countries and continents through centuries. In the last section she writes: 'Maybe origins are a mirage. Maybe belonging is a fiction, something each of us creates for ourselves. And maybe, then, home is the journey itself' (262). For the Somali community in Melbourne, and most clearly through the voice of Halima, 'home, place and family seem to almost become one' (158). They have their shops and social events in Melbourne, keeping people connected to each other, and helping the unemployed and lonely to find new hopes for the future. They invite, according to Lems, an understanding of place allowing it to 'touch and reach out to the wider world' (157). Nevertheless, the loss of Somalia as a place to return 'home' to, its extreme destruction through the last decades ('the age of desperate exodus,' as Ahmed Samatar calls it), is traumatizing. It is, says Halima, a lost place (178). Halima and others from her community do not give up, they work hard to establish a 'place-bound stability' and to avoid the 'continuous state of limbo' (204). They work hard 'to belong' (205). This contradicts images of nomads avoiding homeboundness in the twenty-first century. It also opposes the simple 'rootlessness' as the expression of mobility and freedom. Paradoxically, many people experience roots 'like an extra pair of wings,' says Hage (22).

Being-Here is a thought-provoking book unravelling the key role of storytelling in migrants' movements, place-making and everyday struggle. Her study breaks out of the tautologies of the study of international migration, manifesting the openness, in its ambiguities and potentials, of human life.

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