3. The Borders of Belonging: Mapping the Moment

While I, with great privilege, wielding both EU and US passports, have been moving about the world freely, tethered nowhere, experiencing no borders on my journeys, and while information and communication fly across invisible networks of connection more quickly than ever before—making proximity relative and presence virtual—there has been a heated debate and complex renegotiation of territorial belonging happening on a global scale.

Physical walls are being built between nation-states, or within nation-states between communities—walling out economic migrants and refugees, walling in the rich—all with little effect on trade, commerce, or me (Brown 2010). According to UNHCR, as of December 2015, there are 65.3 million displaced people worldwide, including recognized refugees, displaced asylum seekers and 37.5 million internally displaced people—those forced to flee from their homes but remaining somewhere within the boundaries of their country (“Asylum and Migration” 2015; Domonoske 2016). Feminist philosopher, Rosi Braidotti calls this paradox of “high levels of mobility of capital flows in some sectors of the economic elites but also high levels of centralization and great immobility for most of the population” the “schizophrenic character of advanced capitalism” (Braidotti 2006, 60).

Leading Indian scholar, eco-feminist activist, and anti-globalization author, Vandana Shiva (1993) writes:

within globalization we must distinguish between different modes of mobility: ‘One group is mobile on a world scale, with no country no home, but the whole world as its property, the other has lost even the mobility within rootedness, lives in refugee camps, resettlement colonies and reserves’ (Mies and Shiva 1993: 98 in Braidotti 2006, 60).

Yet, across these diverse and discrepant experiences of mobility and rootedness, we are intimately and intricately interconnected, and thus there is a shared question of what home can mean to any of us moving forward. And as Shiva and Braidotti make clear, this is economic, political and deeply personal. Living and working in Berlin, part of an international privileged class of extremely mobile young artists and immigrants, while working with newly arrived refugee youth in the context of ‘integration’, I am acutely aware of the tension Shiva describes. In fact, in this oh-so-hip and cosmopolitan capital of Germany, a country where the connection between identity, land, spirit, people and nation, has an at once beautiful and terribly violent past, encapsulated in the evocative word, Heimat, and in a country which has taken in more refugees than any other, this tension is palpable.

3.1 Refugees and the Crisis of Home

For a long time Heimat was self-evident, it was simply there. But suddenly the word jumps at you from all sides, politically interpreted from the left and from the right, it is charged like never before, ideologically heated, societal conflict is revolving around it: What is Heimat? Who belongs to it? What propels people to leave their Heimat? How do people change when they have lived in one place for a long time and strange people become their neighbors? And who decides, actually, what Heimat is? 26 (Brost and Wefing 2016, 18, translated by the author)

26 Lange war die Heimat etwas Selbstverständliches, sie war einfach da. Auf einmal aber springt einem das Wort von überallher an, politisch betrachtet von links und von rechts, es ist aufgeladen wie nie, ideologisch erhitzt, gesellschaftlicher Streit kreist darum: Was ist Heimat? Wer gehört dazu? Was treibt Menschen dazu ihre Heimat zu verlassen?
In September 2016, one year after the landmark opening of Germany’s borders and the outpouring of volunteerism, Die Zeit (Brost and Wefing 2016), Germany’s most well-respected weekly newspaper, dedicated its magazine to the topic of Heimat. Home, Heimat, belonging—what was once self-evident is now contested from all sides, but what is it, actually? Who belongs? And, who decides? The article describes home as the most urgent, contested and destabilizing question facing present day Germany. Its title page asks:

What is heimat? The rising moon. The feeling of safety, of security, of protection. Or an empty concept? On the meaning of a word, that has again become very relevant (Brost and Wefing 2016, translated by author).

So, what is it? I began to ask myself. For months I struggled to define it. Is it a spiritual connection to the life world? To our families? To the earth? Or the feeling of security? And what can ever provide security anyways? Is it something to protect and defend? Is it in fact, as the author asks, an empty concept, too big and diverse to mean anything? I have sometimes felt that it is, feeling it slip through my fingers as I try to grasp it, try to figure and articulate it as a thing. So, slowly, I have come to think it more as an emotional geography—a site, real or imagined—of our selfhood, our being and becoming in whatever way we conceptualize it. In this way it is ontological. It is about the shape and texture of what is and what we are, or are not. What are the borders of me? What and who do I let in and out? What and who feels safe? And why? I think our answers to these questions are reflected in our imaginations of home. The authors of the article in Die Zeit describe how this topic of home and belonging is so deep and emotional that talking about it tends to bring up unknown sides of not only our neighbors but even ourselves. And it is fiercely political.

3.1.1 Nation as Home

Dutch sociologist, Jan Willem Duyvendak (2011; 2016), has been doing research into the rising politicization of the feeling of being-at-home in western Europe, a trend he also acknowledges is increasing in the US, and has manifested most obviously in Donald Trump’s campaign and rhetoric. He documents white Dutch nationals feeling less and less ‘at home’ in Holland with the increase in migrants, particularly Muslim migrants, and observes political rhetoric that actively asserts the distinction between natives and foreigners—those who belong and those who do not.

The framing of the nation itself as ‘home’ is a notable characteristic of the debates raging in Western Europe. While this is nothing new in the history of nationalism, the longing for a homogeneous national home is a novel development in those European countries that had so assiduously distanced themselves from traditions of ‘Boden’, ‘soil’ and ‘Heimat’ in the postwar years. Observers may be surprised by the timing of this surge in national feelings in societies that have for decades considered themselves to be ‘post-national’. Western European societies have never been so diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion, and culture as they are today. But it is precisely this increased diversity that largely explains the renewed popularity of the nation-as-home ideal (Duyvendak 2011, 1).

Everyone needs to feel that they belong, feel at home in the world, he writes. It is a central human need. This feeling of losing home and grasping to redefine it on a national scale seems to be coming from an anxiety about losing centrality in society, losing power, and losing certainty (Duyvendak 2016). So, at the same time as millions of people are mate-