

Book Review

Home is Political

The Politics of Home: Belonging and Nostalgia in Western Europe and the United States.

By Jan Willem Duyvendak. (2011). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 978-0-230-29399-1; 161 pp.

The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction.

By Rosemary Marabgoly George. (1996). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. ISBN 0-520-22012-9 276 pp.

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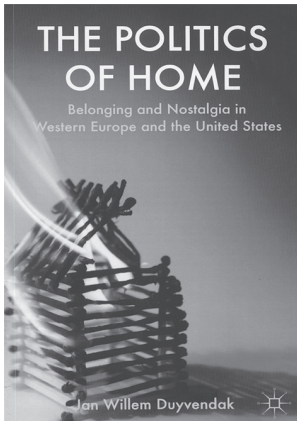
The idea that “the personal is political” is perhaps less controversial than when it was a slogan of the feminist movement in the 1970s. I say “perhaps” as I am only too aware of the suspicion of and resistance to “politics” in psychotherapy — as if the clinic, consulting room and couch can or should be situated outside society or (from the Greek) the *polis*.

As a relatively recent emigrant/immigrant (my family and I came to settle in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2009), I have been thinking — and feeling — a lot about home; roots; family; location; familiarity and strangeness; identity, nationality and citizenship; belonging and association; in short: home and aspects of home and “not home”. These thoughts and feelings have been further stimulated by some articles I read about migration, including Akhtar (1995), Anttila (1995), and Thorpe and Thorpe (2008); by the NZAP Conference in Dunedin on the theme “Home is Where we Start From”; and by editing and doing some background reading for this special issue, as a part of which I came across these two books.

Whilst these two books have little in common other than their title (and that they each comprise six chapters), they are both well-researched and well-written, and make specific links between politics, specifically power, and home.

Jan Willem Duyvendak, the author of *The Politics of Home: Belonging and Nostalgia in Western Europe and the United States*, is a Dutch academic who, while on sabbatical in the United States of America (USA), began to think about nostalgia and the different forms that this takes in the two countries and continents: in the Netherlands for “the good old days”, in Western Europe for the lost nation, and in the States for lost family life. If nostalgia is or involves some reflection on loss, then that suggests that we might think

Tudor, K. (2012). Home is political. [Review of the books *The politics of home: Belonging and nostalgia in Western Europe and the United States*, by J. W. Duyvendak, and *The politics of home: Postcolonial relocations and twentieth-century fiction*, by R. M. George.] *Ata: Journal of Psychotherapy Aotearoa New Zealand*, 16(1), 108-112. DOI: 10.9791/ajpanz.2012.11. Copyright © 2012 New Zealand Journal of Psychotherapists Inc.



about “home” as an object to which we are or were attached — and, of course, “we” are or were attached to different objects. Thus, depending on our position and history, we may be nostalgic for lost homes: self-determination, independence, Mother country, free association, or self-regulation. Duyvendak himself suggests that in order to understand increasing nationalism (in Western Europe) “we need to better understand this framing of nations in terms of ‘home’ and the attendant nostalgia for times past.” (p. 2)

As Duyvendak points out, there is a long and rich history of research on marginal groups and their rights to settle and belong; on the home-making practices of immigrants when far from an original home, etc. In his

book, Duyvendak focuses on the “home feelings” of the majority, specifically in response to two major “revolutions”: the gender revolution, and globalisation. Although this is an interesting reversal, and Duyvendak does consider alternative home-making strategies that aim to transcend what he refers to as the “logic of identities” whereby one group’s ability to feel at home comes at the expense of other groups, he does not discuss the colonisation of indigenous peoples and what happens when those “at home” become “marginal”.

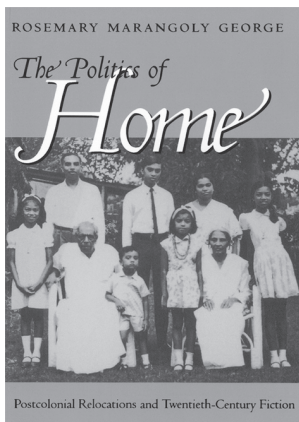
He does discuss why feeling at home has become important and the meaning of “place attachment” in a globalised and globalising world (Chapter 1); aspects of “feeling at home” (Chapter 2); the “crisis of home” in the USA (Chapter 3); best, inclusive practices, with specific reference to two formerly excluded groups: gay people and the mentally handicapped (his term) (Chapter 4); the “crisis of home” in Europe; and strategies to strengthen feeling at home (Chapter 6).

Points that I found of particular interest include:

- A distinction Duyvendak draws between universalists, that is, those social scientists that are sceptical about the importance of attachment to place and space, especially in an increasingly mobile world; and particularists, that is, those for whom place continues to matter as a sense of home in an increasingly turbulent world. Duyvendak posits this distinction alongside a dimension about mobility, viewed negatively or positively, thus creating a taxonomy of four elements which he refers to regularly elsewhere in the book.
- The discussion of nostalgia. Later in the book, and drawing on Boym’s (2011) work on nostalgia, Duyvendak distinguishes between restorative, reflective and revanchist nostalgia, which, respectively, seeks a longing for former times; reflects on the value of the remembered past for present purposes; and seeks revenge with the purpose of the regaining lost territory — all of which has a resonance and relevance for the politics of home here in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- A classification of the elements of “home”: familiarity (knowing the place); haven (to do with security, safety, comfort, and domesticity); and heaven (to do with identity and exclusivity).

- The discussion of work (Chapter 3), including the fact that some people feel more “at home” at work.
- The discussion of alienation among native-born citizens in The Netherlands who no longer feel at home in their own country (Chapter 5). Duyvendak handles this discussion — which encompasses multiculturalism; consensus and dissent; (Western) values; racism; nationality and citizenship; being “native”; integration; patriotism; and “thin” and “thick” notions of home — with great sensitivity. Again, this is a discussion which is topical here and perhaps especially for those of us who are not “native” to Aotearoa New Zealand.

In all, this is great book: short and concise, well-written and well-presented.



At school, I studied and enjoyed English literature, although it is a long time since I read a book *about* literature. Inspired by the title, I read George’s book on *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* with interest. One of the first challenges George poses the reader is to accept a shift from “English literature” to “literatures in English”; as she herself puts it (p. 1): “Bringing global English into the discussion challenges the very logic of a literary field and of an academic discipline that has been hitherto organized into two or three compartments”. Citing Novalis (the German philosopher and poet, Georg von Hardenberg [1772-1801]), who wrote that “Philosophy is really homesickness; it is the urge to be at home everywhere”,

George suggests that all fiction is homesickness, and that (p. 1): “The word ‘home’ immediately connotes the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture and protection.” George’s review of global English fiction encompasses:

- The notion of “home countries” (Chapter 1), in which she challenges traditional readings of nationalism by drawing on post-colonial theories of nationalism and subjecthood (subjectivity).
- The literature on setting up home — and self — in the colonies (Chapter 2), in which she considers that the colonial occupation of the Indian sub-continent established an arena in which some English women achieved a kind of authoritative self, encapsulated in the figure of the “memsahib”.
- The (great English) tradition of “writing home” (Chapter 3), in which George analyses the work of Joseph Conrad (1857-1924), and argues that his examination of the “foreign” has the purpose of making “the most disturbing assessment of domestic culture.” (p. 65) For those familiar with Conrad’s work, and especially *Alymayer’s Folly* (1895/1996), *Heart of Darkness* (1899/1990), and *Lord Jim* (1899/1989), this is a particularly interesting chapter as George argues that Conrad’s writing, far from buttressing the dominant ideology and idealisation of “home”, challenges the colonial “fetishized understanding of England as “Home” (p. 7), and thus positions

Conrad as an international rather than a modernist writer.

- A theoretical chapter (4) on nostalgic theorising in “Third World” fictions, in which the author discusses the problems of fixing or locating “Third World” literature exclusively in nationalist movements.
- A perspective on domestic post-coloniality (Chapter 5) in which, with specific reference to R. K. Narayan’s (1938/1994) novel, *The Dark Room*, George argues that “The Third World Novel”, which focuses on national allegory, despair after independence, horrors of gender inequality, etc., is only one type of writing and that this can be mistaken for the whole.
- The immigrant genre (Chapter 6), in which themes of loss, homelessness, lack in the “less-than-whole” subject, and assimilation are prominent. Again, drawing on a particular novel, this time, M. G. Vassanji’s (1989) *The Gunny Sack*, George demonstrates that the immigrant genre is marked by “a curiously detached reading of the experience of ‘homelessness’ as well as by excessive use of the metaphor of luggage, both spiritual and material.” (p. 8)

This is a supremely rich book, with references to a wide range of literatures in English, with much to stimulate the reader about the literature and politics of home, both in terms of the literature cited, summarised and analysed, but also with regard to reflecting on “New Zealand” literature — and other media. Although the author is duly modest about the book’s coverage and scope, I found it both vast in its range, and thorough and challenging in its analysis. In the course of writing this review and editing this special issue, I found myself returning to it, finding further gems and connections, and being stimulated to read more of the sources she cites.

Whilst Duyvendak’s book provides a solid sociological analysis of how concepts and constructions of home can be mediated across divisions, such as gender and race and, as such, holds some hope for how we might understand and mediate “home”, homes and housing in disputed and shared homelands, George’s book provides a poignant literary analysis of how notions of home are built on a pattern of select inclusions and exclusion and, as such, is a reminder of how contentious the concept of home is. It seems to me that both perspectives are relevant to current disputes and debates in Aotearoa New Zealand, and to helping us to understandings that need to be both psychological and political.

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