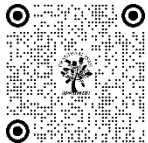


FROM SOCIAL TIES TO SPATIAL BELONGING: RETHINKING HOME IN REFUGEE STUDIES WITH A FOCUS ON DEEP HALDAR'S BLOOD ISLAND

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ABSTRACT

The forced displacement of millions due to war, persecution, and environmental disasters presents a significant challenge to the international community. Refugee Studies, a field dedicated to understanding the experiences of refugees, has traditionally focused on social interaction and integration. However, this emphasis overlooks the profound impact displacement has on refugees' sense of place and home. This article argues that a more nuanced understanding of the refugee experience requires incorporating insights from spatial theory and the concept of "home tactics."

The article begins by examining the limitations of the dominant social interactionist paradigm in Refugee Studies. It critiques the "nomadic subjectivity" model, which views refugees as essentially mobile, and the policy-oriented use of "place rootedness" as a tool for resettlement. Drawing on the work of Catherine Broome, the article proposes a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between refugees and place. This includes acknowledging the strategic use of place claims for political purposes while recognizing the genuine emotional attachment refugees have to their lost homes.

The concept of "home tactics," developed by Mariano Ortega, offers a valuable framework for understanding how refugees navigate displacement. Home tactics refer to the everyday actions and practices refugees undertake to create a sense of familiarity and belonging in their new environments. The article explores how home tactics transcend economic and political strategies, reflecting deeply personal and emotional connections to land and space.

The book "Blood Island" by Deep Haldar serves as a powerful case study for examining home tactics in action. The article analyzes how displaced Bengalis in Dandakaranya recreate a sense of home through rituals like the "Posto Mela" harvest festival. These performative acts connect them to their past and the land they lost. Furthermore, the article explores the embodied dimensions of home and belonging, highlighting the profound sensory connection refugees maintain with their lost homelands.

The article concludes by emphasizing the importance of studying refugee narratives to gain deeper insights into their experiences. By analyzing narratives, we can move beyond theoretical frameworks and understand how refugees themselves perceive displacement, place, and home. Incorporating these insights into refugee policy and practice is crucial for developing ethical and sustainable responses to the ongoing global refugee crisis.

Keywords: Refugee Studies, Displacement, Place, Home, Home Tactics, Refugee Narratives, Embodiment

1. INTRODUCTION

The global challenge posed by the forced displacement of individuals due to various factors such as war, persecution, and environmental catastrophes is significant and pressing for the international community. As indicated by statistics

from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2022, a staggering 82.4 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced by the conclusion of 2021 [UNHCR, 2022]. This vast number encompasses a diverse array of individuals, including refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons (IDPs), who have been compelled to flee their homes out of a well-founded fear of persecution, violence, armed conflict, or natural disasters. It is imperative to comprehend the experiences of refugees thoroughly to devise effective policies and strategies that cater to their needs and enhance their overall well-being.

Refugee Studies, a field that emerged during the 1980s, has been instrumental in advancing our comprehension of forced displacement. Initially, Refugee Studies concentrated on examining social interaction and integration, delving into how refugees acclimatize to new surroundings and how host communities assimilate them [Castles, 2004]. This approach yielded valuable insights into the social, economic, and political obstacles confronted by refugees. However, an increasing body of research suggests that the prevailing focus on social interaction neglects a crucial aspect of the refugee ordeal: the profound influence of displacement on refugees' attachment to place and home.

This article contends that a more nuanced understanding of the refugee experience necessitates the integration of insights from spatial theory and the notion of "home tactics." Spatial theory underscores the significance of place and space in shaping human experiences and identities [Soja, 1996]. The concept of home tactics, formulated by Mariano Ortega [2009], underscores the everyday actions and practices that refugees engage in to establish a sense of familiarity and belonging in their new environments. This article examines the constraints of the dominant social interactionist paradigm in Refugee Studies and advocates for the integration of spatial theory and home tactics to garner a deeper comprehension of place, home, and the intricacies of displacement for refugees.

2. SOCIAL INTERACTIONIST PARADIGM

The prevailing paradigm in Refugee Studies has predominantly been social interactionism, which underscores the significance of social relations in shaping the refugee experience. Central to this approach are concepts such as social integration, assimilation, and social networks. Scholars in Refugee Studies have investigated how refugees navigate social interactions within host communities, contend with cultural disparities, and rely on social support networks for successful resettlement [Castles, 2004; Hugo, 2010].

While the social interactionist perspective has provided valuable insights, it falls short in comprehensively understanding the refugee experience. One notable limitation is its disregard for the influence of place and space. This approach often perceives refugees primarily as mobile entities, focusing on their adjustment to new social environments. However, as argued by Catherine Broome [2000], refugees frequently maintain strong attachments to their places of origin, even after relocation. This challenges the notion of "nomadic subjectivity," which suggests that individuals in the modern era are inherently transient and disconnected. Broome's research with internally displaced Muslims in Sri Lanka illustrates that despite being resettled elsewhere in the country, these refugees maintain a profound sense of identity linked to their northern homeland. This underscores the enduring importance of place for refugees, even amidst displacement.

Another drawback of the social interactionist approach is its emphasis on social integration as the primary objective of resettlement. Policymakers often promote

the concept of "place rootedness" to encourage refugees to assimilate into host communities. However, as Broome criticizes, this emphasis on place rootedness can be exploited. Refugees may strategically claim rootedness to access resources or garner political backing from their home countries. While such tactics are understandable, they obscure the genuine emotional bonds refugees harbor towards their places of origin. The social interactionist perspective often overlooks these deeper emotional connections.

Table 1**Table 1 Limitations of Social Interactionist Paradigm in Refugee Studies**

Aspect	Limitation	Example
Focus	Social interaction and integration	Neglects the impact of displacement on refugees' sense of place and home.
View of Refugees	Mobile entities	Ignores the enduring attachments refugees maintain to their places of origin.
Policy Emphasis	Place rootedness for resettlement	Overlooks strategic use of place claims and genuine emotional ties to lost homes.

3. RETHINKING PLACE AND HOME: SPATIAL THEORY AND HOME TACTICS

In response to the constraints of the social interactionist paradigm, scholars have increasingly looked to spatial theory and the concept of "home tactics" to elucidate the refugee experience. Spatial theory underscores the significance of place and space in shaping human identities and experiences. Edward Soja [1996] contends that space is not merely a passive backdrop but a socially constructed entity continually shaped by human interactions. Conversely, place denotes a specific location infused with personal and cultural significance. For refugees, their place of origin holds profound meaning shaped by memories, experiences, and cultural traditions. However, displacement disrupts this connection, leading to feelings of loss and disorientation.

The notion of "home tactics," introduced by Mariano Ortega [2009], provides a valuable framework for comprehending how refugees grapple with this disruption and endeavor to reconstruct a sense of home in unfamiliar surroundings. Home tactics encompass the everyday actions and rituals refugees undertake to cultivate familiarity and belonging. These practices can range from preparing traditional meals to cultivating familiar flora or observing religious customs. Despite their apparent simplicity, these rituals hold deep significance for refugees as they serve to tether them to their past and the home they have lost. Home tactics transcend mere economic or political strategies; they are about forging emotional bonds with a new place.

Table 2**Table 2 Rethinking Place and Home in Refugee Studies**

Concept	Description	Example
Spatial Theory	Importance of place and space in shaping human experiences and identities	Refugees' sense of place is disrupted by displacement, leading to feelings of loss and disorientation.
Home Tactics	Everyday actions and practices used by refugees to create a sense of familiarity and belonging in new environments	Bengali refugees in Dandakaranya celebrate the Posto Mela harvest festival to reconnect with their lost homeland.

**Refugee
Narratives**

First-hand accounts of refugees' experiences with displacement, place, and home

Narratives reveal the challenges and strategies refugees employ to establish a sense of belonging.

4. BLOOD ISLAND: A CASE STUDY OF HOME TACTICS

Deep Haldar's book "Blood Island" serves as a compelling narrative that offers a profound exploration of home tactics in practice. Focusing on the plight of Bengali Hindus displaced during the tumultuous partition of India in 1947, Haldar's ethnographic study delves into the intricacies of how these refugees grapple with displacement and endeavor to reconstruct a sense of home in their new and unfamiliar surroundings.

Central to the Bengali refugees' efforts to recreate a semblance of home is the annual celebration of the "Posto Mela," a cherished harvest festival from their East Bengali homeland. Through this ritual, which involves the preparation of traditional foods, the singing of folk songs, and the performance of dances, the refugees carve out a space imbued with memories and a sense of belonging. Haldar vividly portrays how the Posto Mela serves as a poignant reminder of their past, their cultural roots, and the land they were forcibly separated from. In the midst of the remote region of Dandakaranya, the performance of this ritual becomes a means for the refugees to construct a temporary sanctuary of familiarity and connection.

The example of the Posto Mela underscores the embodied nature of home and belonging for refugees. Embodiment theory posits that our bodily experiences shape our understanding of the world around us. For refugees, this often entails a deep sensory connection to their lost homelands – from the sights and smells to the sounds and tastes that evoke memories of their former lives. Haldar skillfully captures these sensory reminiscences in "Blood Island," as he recounts the refugees' recollections of the fragrance of mango trees in their villages, the tactile sensation of the earth beneath their feet as they toiled in the fields, and the melodic cadence of birdsong that once filled their mornings. These sensory cues serve as poignant reminders of home, evoking a profound sense of yearning and nostalgia among the refugees as they navigate their displacement.

In essence, "Blood Island" provides a poignant portrayal of the multifaceted ways in which refugees employ home tactics to negotiate their displacement and cultivate a sense of belonging in unfamiliar environments. Through rituals like the Posto Mela and the evocation of sensory memories, refugees engage in acts of resilience and agency as they strive to reconcile their past with their present realities. Haldar's narrative offers valuable insights into the complexities of the refugee experience and underscores the enduring importance of place, memory, and belonging in shaping individual and collective identities.

5. UNDERSTANDING REFUGEE NARRATIVES

While spatial theory and home tactics provide valuable frameworks for comprehending the refugee experience, it's equally imperative to heed the voices of refugees themselves. Refugee narratives offer profound insights into their firsthand encounters with displacement, place, and home. These narratives extend beyond mere objective recollections, being shaped by memory, culture, and the surrounding context. By delving into refugee narratives, we can transcend theoretical constructs and attain a deeper grasp of how refugees personally interpret displacement, place, and home. Researchers can employ diverse methodologies to gather refugee narratives, including in-depth interviews, focus groups, and life history approaches.

Subsequently, these narratives can undergo thematic analysis to unearth recurring experiences, emotions, and coping strategies employed by refugees.

For example, refugee narratives may unveil the intricate methods through which refugees uphold connections to their places of origin while simultaneously forging new lives in their host communities. Additionally, these narratives can illuminate the hurdles refugees encounter in establishing a sense of belonging in their newfound surroundings. While refugee narratives may expose sentiments of loss, disorientation, and estrangement, they may also spotlight instances of resilience, ingenuity, and the cultivation of fresh ties to place.

Incorporating refugee narratives into our comprehension of displacement not only enriches our understanding but also fosters the development of more nuanced and ethically sound policies and practices. Here are several avenues through which this can be accomplished:

Policy Development: By heeding refugee narratives, policymakers can shape resettlement policies that are attuned to refugees' necessities for cultural preservation and connection to their places of origin. For instance, policies might advocate for the preservation of cultural traditions and languages within resettlement communities, acknowledging their importance in maintaining refugees' sense of identity and belonging.

Community Integration: A deeper understanding of refugee narratives can facilitate the creation of more inclusive and embracing host communities. Recognizing the significance of place and home in the lives of refugees, communities can establish environments that not only embrace diversity but also provide spaces where refugees can cultivate a sense of belonging while celebrating their cultural heritage.

Mental Health Support: Refugee narratives shed light on the emotional ramifications of displacement, underscoring the imperative for mental health services tailored to address issues stemming from loss, trauma, and the complexities of rebuilding a life in a foreign land. By acknowledging and responding to these challenges, mental health support systems can better meet the needs of refugees and assist them in navigating the psychological hurdles associated with their displacement journeys.

6. CONCLUSION

The vast scale of forced displacement worldwide underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive grasp of the refugee journey. While social interactionist methodologies have yielded valuable insights, they often fall short in capturing the profound upheaval experienced by refugees regarding their sense of place and belonging. Integrating spatial theory and the concept of home tactics offers a more nuanced lens through which to examine the intricate layers of displacement. Additionally, tapping into the narratives of refugees provides a direct pathway to understanding their lived realities, shedding light on their perspectives regarding place, home, and the arduous process of rebuilding life after displacement.

This holistic approach, which combines spatial theory, home tactics, and refugee narratives, stands as a linchpin in crafting ethical and sustainable responses to the ongoing global refugee crisis. By recognizing the enduring significance of place and home in the lives of refugees, we can formulate policies and practices that not only safeguard their well-being but also facilitate their integration into host communities. Moreover, such an approach holds the potential to empower refugees to rebuild their lives with dignity and resilience, fostering a sense of hope amidst

adversity. Through this concerted effort, we can pave the way for a more compassionate and inclusive response to the plight of displaced populations worldwide.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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