Book review of Winters, Nanneke, Drotbohm, Heike, and Guevara González, Yaatsil (eds.) 2024. *(Un)Settling Place: Diverse and Divergent Place-Making of People on the Move*. Berghahn Books, 241 pp.

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BOOK REVIEW

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Edited by migration scholars Winters, Drotbohm, and Guevara González, *(Un)Settling Place: Diverse and Divergent Place-Making of People on the Move* brings together anthropological, geographical, and sociological perspectives on how place is continually made, remade, and transformed by people on the move. Through nine empirically grounded ethnographic chapters and an afterword, the volume explores diverse settings where migrants interact with and shape their environments during their journeys.

A central thread running through the volume is that places should not be seen as static locations or solely as destinations or points of origin. This premise is established in the Introduction by Drotbohm and Winters and further developed through Wendy A. Vogt's opening chapter via the metaphor of 'etchings'. Just as acid incises grooves into a printing plate, which are then filled with ink to create an enduring image on paper, so too do the actions, memories, and relationships of people on the move leave lasting, layered imprints on the places they traverse. Etchings refer both to concrete, material traces – such as carvings, graffiti, or handmade artefacts physically inscribed in place – and to socially shared meanings that accumulate and become embedded in these landscapes, thus deepening the understanding of place as simultaneously tangible and abstract. Complementing this, and drawing on earlier work of Annika Lems (who also contributes an Afterword to the volume), Vogt notes that the relationship between people on the move and place is bidirectional: people shape places and 'are in turn shaped by them' (Lems 2016, cited in Vogt, p. 31).

This bidirectional relationship appears most explicitly in Georgina Ramsay's Chapter 9 on political ecology and displacement. Ramsay examines how extractive mining industries in the Democratic Republic of Congo have systematically disrupted Congolese people's relationships to land and ecology, producing a form of ecological displacement. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with internally displaced Congolese people in Bukavu and with refugees in Uganda and Australia, Ramsay demonstrates how environmental degradation and industrial extraction leave profound imprints

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on displaced populations. She describes, for example, how one family was forced to abandon their village when the local water supply became contaminated by mining operations, leaving the father to call the land '*machafuko*', a Swahili word that broadly translates as disorder, unrest, and chaos. Ramsay shows how Congolese people respond through what she calls 'ecological fixes': creative practices of place-making, such as cultivating gardens of familiar Congolese food plants, that enable them to reconnect materially and existentially to place, even in new settlement contexts. Ramsay's analysis highlights the bidirectional nature of place-making: extractive systems reshape landscapes and displace populations, yet displaced people also reshape places through ecological practices that reconnect them to land and community.

All nine empirically grounded chapters explore diverse geographical and infrastructural contexts, showing the concrete ways migrants interact with places. Opening with Vogt's study of migrant shelters in Mexico (Chapter 1), the volume then moves to Michael Stasik's exploration of urban transport infrastructure in Accra, where West African migrants establish social connections through informal networks of transport workers, traders, and fellow travellers (Chapter 2). The bus station becomes a place where newcomers find their footing, establish temporary stability, and eventually build pathways towards more permanent settlement.

From transit hubs to sites of community-building, the subsequent chapters analyse place-making within an expanding array of contexts. In Chapter 3, Noelle K. Brigden examines a community gym in San Salvador that serves as both a site of sanctuary and a site of contestation for residents of a heavily stigmatised neighbourhood. The gym serves people from multiple *barrios* (neighbourhoods) divided by histories of internal displacement and mutual distrust, who navigate complex relationships with gang members, police forces, and community leaders. By creating gym membership cards that function as 'local passports', residents attempt to repair systems of exclusion while simultaneously creating new forms of documentation and surveillance. Brigden shows how everyday fitness practices become a means of building community and claiming belonging in a context marked by violence and spatial fragmentation.

The volume's remaining chapters take readers to equally compelling sites: a shopping mall in Buenos Aires, where Franziska Reiffen shows how migrants navigate public and social places, dwelling in areas such as benches and shops while avoiding zones marked by exclusion or tension as part of hesitant place-making (Chapter 6); a German reception centre, where Friederike Eichner examines the limits and possibilities of shelter as a 'safe haven' (Chapter 4); and the precarious maritime journeys of Vietnamese boat people and the Rohingya refugees, as detailed by Antje Missbach and Gerhard Hoffstaedter (Chapter 7). For these communities stranded at sea, place emerges not through physical location but through the relationships and survival strategies that sustain life aboard overcrowded vessels. Through these richly explored cases, the book invites readers to reconsider place as an ongoing collective accomplishment rather than a passive backdrop, a perspective well articulated in Joris Schapendonk and Tine Davids' concept of 'place acrobatics' (Chapter 8).

To grasp the complexity of defining place, it must be critically contrasted with the dominant conventions of understanding place that shape policy and practice. This is perhaps most powerfully realised in Lirio Gutiérrez Rivera's contribution (Chapter 5), which examines the role of immigration attorneys and expert witnesses in U.S. immigration courts for Central American asylum seekers. Gutiérrez Rivera

demonstrates how institutional frameworks of law often simplify, reduce and distort the lived complexities of place and mobility. Academic expert witnesses in asylum and immigration hearings are required to testify about the applicant's country of origin, distilling complex and often contradictory realities into essentialised legal narratives that characterise places as uniformly violent and unsafe. The legal demand for clear-cut categorical statements conflicts fundamentally with scholarly and lived understandings of place, which recognise multiplicity, ambiguity, and nuance. Gutiérrez Rivera illustrates how this generates what she terms a 'clash of epistemologies': the simplified, operational demands of law and its positivist approach to evidence clash with the inherently complex realities conveyed by expert knowledge and migrant experience. Indeed, the book challenges the foundations of systems designed to control mobility by asking whether rigid categories and binary truths can suffice in a world where places and identities are constantly shifting and answering that they cannot.

Furthermore, the book's narrative power merits attention. With its rich collection of empirical case studies and ethnographic accounts, *(Un)Settling Place* offers an engaging reading experience that extends well beyond theoretical discussion, inviting readers to reflect on a wide range of questions, not only the dynamic nature of place but also broader issues of belonging and adaptation within the context of migration studies. Spanning the Americas, West, Central, and East Africa, Europe, Australia, and Southeast Asia, the chapters offer a compelling exploration of experiences across a remarkably diverse geographic area. Although the volume does not include specific cases from the Nordic countries, its approach and insights provide fertile ground for Nordic migration scholarship to draw on and adapt in their own research.

Importantly, as the book is grounded in vivid narrative accounts, it will appeal to both practitioners and scholars. It is especially relevant for practitioners working with migration, not only because of the way it challenges established operational assumptions about place within institutional framings but also because of its wealth of global perspectives on people in motion. These accounts serve as a reminder that policy debates often view migration through narrow lenses, shaped by local politics or the confines of a particular region. In contrast, the book foregrounds the lived realities and diverse strategies of people on the move, resisting top-down perspectives and amplifying marginalised voices within migration contexts. Through detailed, situated accounts, the volume offers a plurality of perspectives, showcasing the diversity of narratives about migration and place. It provides a timely and grounded reflection on place as fluid and constantly reshaped in a world oriented towards stability, order, and control.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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