At My Mother’s Table

MIGRATION, (RE)PRODUCTION
AND RETURN BETWEEN
HADCHIT, NORTH LEBANON
AND SYDNEY

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This thesis\(^1\) reflects my own original research

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\(^1\) The pictures on the front cover are of the village of Hadchit and of Sayde, Our Lady, as depicted on the door of the Sayde El Shiffe (Our Lady of the Cliff) Church in Hadchit, taken by Nelia Hyndman-Rizik, 2007.
Acknowledgments

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Abstract

In the era of globalisation, studies of migration focus on mobility, deterritorialised identities and diasporic forms of belonging across nation state boundaries. Indeed, uprootedness from the soil of home and place has resulted in a general condition of ‘homelessness’ in late modernity, referred to as the diasporic condition. The search for an ‘absolute home’ has become the Holy Grail for pilgrims in late modernity and forms the basis for this study, which explores the ‘migrant’s conundrum’: does home move where the migrant moves, or is it forever tied to the primordialism of place, soil and kinship? Through an examination of the construction of homeliness amongst an immigrant community of 500 households from the village of Hadchit, North Lebanon, who reside in Western Sydney, Australia it will be shown how their strategies of home-building depend upon the capacity to imagine themselves as being united by kinship, a shared village of origins and as part of the broader communal Maronite identity (Mwarne), which now transcends nation state boundaries. Patrilineage (bayt), village (day’aa) and sect (ta’eefa) have historically defined Lebanese sectarian identities and now, as this study shows, are deployed as a strategy of home-building and community construction in diaspora. However, capitalist social relations of production in Sydney have transformed bayt, day’aa and ta’eefa amongst the second generation through the gendered renegotiation of the marriage contract from relations of descent to relations of consent. Thus, the Hadchitis now face a crisis of (re)production and attribute this to the Australian state being hukum niswen, ruled by women, an inversion of the gendered order of power in Lebanon. Through pilgrimages to the ancestral village émigrés seek a spiritual resolution to the contradictions of migration through the restoration of their connection to place, but find they cannot seamlessly belong in Hadchit. Meanwhile, multicultural crisis and a milieu of anti-Lebanese racism limit their claims to national belonging in Australia. This study finds that the contradictions of the migration process are unresolvable through physical mobility, because the feeling of ‘home’ is ultimately an affective and social construction that transcends place. The elusive quality that defines home and provides a sense of unconditional
belonging is, in fact, socially constructed by women, through their daily practices of care within the home and the most important woman for the construction of homeliness is the matriarch, *sit el bayt* – the power of the house. Thus, the place where the immigrant can be at home is metaphorically at their ‘mother’s table’. The shifting and gendered construction of home amongst the Hadchitis in Sydney has also led to a transformation of cultural identity amongst them. Through the process of migration, (re)production and return the Hadchitis have become Lebanese-Australians.
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Then a ploughman said “speak to us of work”...

Often have I heard you say,
as if speaking in sleep,
“He who works in marble, and finds the
shape of his own soul in the stone, is nobler
than he who ploughs the soil”.
“And he who seizes the rainbow to lay it on a
cloth in the likeness of man, is more than he
who makes the sandals for our feet”.
But I say, not in sleep, but in the
overwakefulness of the noontide, that the
wind speaks not more sweetly to the giant
oaks than to the least of all the blades of
grass;
And he alone is great who turns the voice of
the wind into a song made sweeter by his own
loving.

Work is love made visible.
And if you cannot work with love but only
with distaste, it is better that you should
leave your work and sit at the gate of the
temple and take alms of those who work with
joy.
For if you bake bread with indifference, you
bake a bitter bread that feeds but half man’s
hunger
And if you grudge the crushing of the grapes,
your grudge distils a poison in the wine

Excerpt from “The Prophet”
(Gibran, 2005 (1923): 33-34)