

# At Home in the Borderlands – Multiple homing from the perspective of European borderlands

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## Abstract

In this article, we problematize what home is from the perspective of the borderlands. We illustrate how 'homing' is influenced by ongoing belonging trouble and a living-in-tension making for multiple versions of, not only home, but also the borderlands. We do this by using a methodological comparison, mirroring field access, and including art-based research, thereby adding to studies of home-making practices. Joined with our theoretical framing using the lens of multiple homing practices, we can juxtapose the competence that lies at the core of *border studies*, its visual and socio-spatial character.

## Key words

Homing, Borderlands, Belonging Trouble, Visual methods, Autoethnography

## 1. Introduction

In this chapter we zoom in on homing practices in the borderlands, problematizing struggles people go through to arrive and feel at home. *Border studies* have, over the last two decades, been influenced by a “practice turn” (cf. Andersen/Sandberg 2012) and while extensively adhering to such turns when investigating flows, mobilities and interactions across borders, the study of spatial belonging has taken a back seat. However, as Peña (2023) argues, moving beyond the territorial trap by investigating practice does not necessarily undermine a spatial understanding of borders. As we will show, borderlands can be perceived as complex choreographies of space in the survival tactics of everyday life (cf. Peña 2023, 785), without falling into spatial and temporal dichotomies such as mobile and settled.

Along with Sheller and Urry, we argue that places cannot be conceived as “relatively fixed, given, and separate from those visiting” (2006, 214). Instead, places should be understood in relation to the practices through which they come into being. As we will illustrate by using methods based on knowledge transfer, borderlands may be understood beyond land straddling state borders and as emergent, materializing whenever and wherever borders come to matter (Aubry 2022). Our empirical instances show how

living in borderlands involves a doing and questioning of what home is and who has the right to feel at home.

Sheller and Urry also recognize the need to connect mobility practices with immobility as co-constitutive; travelling attains meaning in relation to dwelling; home in relation to the foreign. Analysis of mobilities is thus: “A question [...] of tracking the power of discourses and practices of mobility in creating both movement and stasis” (2006, 211). In a similar vein, notions of dwelling and home must be understood in relation to movement to avoid erasing the lives that do not thrive in the flow, the flux, the drift, or those who long for rootedness and being grounded (e.g., displaced people). Heidegger even understood dwelling as essential to being; feeling safe, settled, a precondition of searching for and constructing home: “By situating the idea of dwelling as an equivalent to being on earth, Heidegger reaches an unprecedented depth – one that transcends crises, emergencies, constructions and deconstructions, cultures and global trends, gentrification and frameworks of production” (Dalal 2022, 21).

Hence, we aim to highlight the relation of the mobile and the settled by investigating home not just as reified pre-given but as done in a multiplicity of ongoing practices of active space appropriation and spatial creation. Here we also engage with the concept of 'homing', opening towards a practice-oriented understanding of what home might be: “...homing can be reconceptualized as a range of actions and interactions – some physical, virtual or imagined mobility – whereby people orient themselves towards what they feel, see or claim as home, or at least homely enough” (Bocconi 2022, 585-86). Entanglements between borders and home are thereby revealed, allowing us to transcend the binaries between mobile and settled, and illustrating how home is multiple, always-already in the making and being dismantled, uncanny and reminding of the unsettled.

We additionally add a co-creative element to the idea of knowledge transfer by using methods capturing homing practices from the perspective of borderlanders: (auto-)ethnography, drawing, mapping and filmmaking as access to 'seeing (home) from the border'. Ethnographic drawing and mapping (Ingold 2011; Causey 2017) is used to document the emergent and dynamic nature of places and things, like home and borderlands. Drawing adds layers of reflexivity, implicitly asking what is there, what was left out and why thus bringing attention to how heterogeneous things 'weave' to produce homing spaces. The filmmaking method allows for an exploration of transformative natures of inhabited spaces (Breeze 2021), requiring engagement with the protagonist's situation and the filmmakers’

positionality (Gutiérrez Torres 2023). Co-creative acts by means of montage and through rhythm and movement immobilize time and shape space, thereby illustrating moving boundaries between being on the move and settling. Finally, auto-ethnography captures the muddled complexities of everyday life (Jago 2002), thus also reaching into the layers of emotions expressed in these complexities (Pelias 2004). In dialogue with the other two methods, autoethnography gets us closer to the experience of arrival in the borderlands. The methods aim at doing away with the epistemic violence of 'seeing' (Haraway 1988), as a matter of positivistic objectivity and reconfigures seeing and knowing into a situated sensing and imagining-with, leaving room for uncertainty and heterogeneity (Law/Mol 2006).

## *2. Entangled in the settled-mobile: Homing as mapping out, settling in and arriving*

How do we operate academic conversations that commit to dismantling dichotomies between the mobile and the settled, while entrenched in the borderlands? Our choice has been to engage with homing practices in three dynamics of homing in borderlands: Among welcomers in Paris; among refugees settling in temporary shelters in Berlin; in the confessions of a cross-border commuter in Flensburg, thus focusing on people who move or have moved to settle in new places.

### Mapping out

The first fragments are an analysis of homing situated in grassroot welcome practices that emerged across Europe in 2015. This analysis is based on a one-year-long ethnography of Parisian welcome cultures between 2019 and 2021, during which ethnographic methods, such as interviews and participant observation, were used alongside more experimental methods, such as drawing. Ultimately these homing practices can be understood as ways in which welcomers map out, stay with, inhabit, and stir up the trouble of their entanglements in processes of b/ordering and othering, thereby challenging dichotomies between mobile and settled in multiple ways.

## Fragment 1

When taking up drawing classes, one of the first lessons is to draw what you see and not what you think you see. Drawing thereby has the potential to challenge habitual ways of seeing and knowing the world, where concepts pervade perception. Hence, Ingold (2011) presents drawing as a form of inquiry and way of knowing, rather than a representation of the already known. In this empirical study, drawing was part of a broader situated diffractive research strategy using a variety of techniques aimed at thinking with, moving and being moved by participants and the field. Drawing created attunement to the heterogeneity of welcome spaces and the making of place when understood as a thick and lively knot(s) of stories folded into materialities, practices, and movements. The technique was used when documenting registers of home by which welcomers and exiles participated in the becoming and imagining of home and borderlands.

Grassroots welcome spaces are known for their creativity, which contrasts with conventional reception practices enabling them to reimagine reified objects like home. Such spaces are often formed through opportunistic partnerships, bringing together different stories, and contrasting blocks of space-time-mattering allowing new questions and practices to arise through frictions and differences. One such space is Solidarity Breakfast, a soup kitchen specializing in daily distributions of breakfast food. It was started by a woman who decided to distribute traditional French breakfast to migrants within makeshift migrant camps next to her flat, as a form of material help and a symbolic gesture of welcome. Neighbors joined her, and over time, the collective grew, merged with another, and found a permanent place to stay despite the shifting geographies of the makeshift camps across the city: a public garden in the north of Paris.

The collective kept mobilizing the material-semiotic web of “French Breakfast at home” playing with the notion of home in the street (cf. Andersen/Aubry 2022). Spatial arrangements and material and practical additions, such as placing objects out of context, revealed volunteers’ efforts to create a space beyond the traditional soup kitchen format of white people distributing food to queuing exiles. When on the field, the author regularly drew different objects that mattered in the practices of Solidarity Breakfast, thereby illustrating practices and materialities coming together (e.g., fig.1): the use of ‘homely’ objects (teapots, waxy tablecloth) and food (French toast with Nutella and jam) as well as the choice of colorfulness in the objects

brought to the distribution contrasted with the grey of the street, and echoed the warmth associated with the volunteer's idea of home.

Sketching the initiative's everyday enactments of home, with its additions, absences and movement revealed how homing was transformed and compromised with. The recent addition of a bowl of soup to the traditional French breakfast menu was a response to how exiles rapidly became hungry because of a mainly sweet menu imitating traditional breakfast in French homes yet not ideal for migrant newcomers living in the streets and in camps who sometimes only eat once a day. It was also stirred up when attendees disliked the food because of differences in taste and conceptions of homely food. Questions like “Whose home should we enact” and “Do our guests feel at home?” came up regularly and were responded to through socio-material adjustments. In another incidence, knives – after being used for preparation – were removed from the main distribution table in fear that this could lead to harm to self and others, considering the context of exile and deteriorated mental health in the borderlands. Homing was thereby brought back into movement and multiplied, weaved into the borderland, transformed by other conceptions of homeliness forcing shifts in what homing should and could be in that context.



*Fig.1: Sketch of the socio-materiality of practice in Solidarity Breakfast (courtesy of Lola Aubry)*

## Fragment 2

Welcomers bring to the fore intricate relationships between mobile and settled in how they reconfigure the borderland as a space that can be habitable and moved through. Here homing is defined as the practices through which one establishes a set of primary relational patterns, orders, and habits where humans are understood as emerging from habitual relation within environments (cf. Ingold 2015). Thereby, homing becomes the consecutive constitution of an inside (self) and outside (world) that allows for further explorations and movement. Volunteers in Paris participate in homing practices making the borderland habitable. They do so through the identification of risky zones in Paris regarding identity control, or monitoring patterns of migratory law enforcement making the borderland geographically tangible and predictable, and in parallel, by favoring practices of mutual care and support, transforming the borderland into a place that can be inhabited.

One such instance is another welcome space in the city called “the Kitchen” initially envisioned as a place where volunteers and exiles could meet for cooking take-away food, yet turned gradually into a place where exiles could talk about and support each other in the sense of cohabiting the same Parisian borderland, the main reason for returning to this space and workshop:

The Kitchen took my mind off things, and I met other people [...] and people who were in the same situation as me. These people gave me ideas [on how to cope] because at one point, I was too stressed and they said to me: “No, don’t stress, it will pass,” and that gave me hope. In fact, you don’t tell what is happening to you because it can be embarrassing. But suddenly, you are there [in the Kitchen], you can explain! I am in this situation.

Aminata, interview, May 2021

As highlighted by Aminata, “the Kitchen” created sense of hope and agency, making the borderland habitable, however precariously. This manifested in exchanges of words of advice and encouragement concerning the asylum process or the difficulty to “arrive” and practices of mutual care and support during the workshop: taking care of each other’s children while one is resting, dealing with administrative issues or engaging in self-care practices (fig.2).



Fig.2: Field Sketch showing attendees in “the Kitchen” caring for each other’s kids, braiding each other’s hair while chatting about organizing a holiday “once everything is over.” (Courtesy of Lola Aubry)

### Settling in

In our second borderland we deliberately play with notions of settled and mobile to hint at their entanglements by using a cinematic form in filmmaking. The engaging and processual nature of the cinematic allows us, in a co-creative act with the spectator, to immobilize time and shape space through montage, rhythm and movement, and reversely, mobilizing a certain immobility. The cinematic language offers its own images, iconography, symbolism and style, as Breeze (2021, 3) puts it, the “cinematic core is neither a language nor a linguistic system, but rather an expression [...]”. Dealing with topics of displacement and the architecture of shelters, film provides a tool to visualize socio-materiality at the same time as allowing for a discussion of the spatial dispositif of dwelling. We thereby gain access

to a highly flexible and mutable mode of vision: A new vector of thought to pursue the ambition of 'seeing from the border.'

### Fragment 3

We enter with a scene from the documentary film "13 Square Meters" made by one of the authors in shelters set up in Berlin, prefab containers called "Tempohomes". A boy is playing a game on his mobile device while lying on a bed in his container home (fig.3). The image is static, and the child appears as a homogeneous part of the container environment, only distinguished by being a (living) human. One could argue that the boy is in a homely environment, as the image suggests privacy and a cozy ambience in a clean, white habitat on a makeshift couch. However, this setting is the result of an act of adapting the space, negotiated with the camp's administration in a constant and prolonged process of homing: "I dismantled the bed and put it aside, because it is not allowed to put it outside. It is forbidden. We put the bed that we took apart and I put it under my son's bed. I've put the mattress on the floor so my husband can sleep on it." (Bembnista/Dalal 2021, TC05:18-05:38). The regulations and supervision exercised by the camp management makes homing limited to the rearrangement of furniture. Still, it is possible to create a good-enough state of being at home. One observes how the arrangement of standardized elements like furniture is taken out of their original layout and placed differently to create living spaces within the strictly designed and controlled shelters. By using the stable image in combination with the off-voice articulations, the film enables an understanding of settling as dynamic processes of negotiation and resistance.





*Fig.3. Scene home on the move: a young boy trying to adapt in his temporary shelter "still(s) from the film 13 Square Meters, directed by Kamil Bembnista & Ayham Dalal; courtesy of SFB 1265 Re-Figuration of Spaces."*

#### Fragment 4

The second frame refers to a scene where protagonists are watering the patch next to their container-homes (fig.4). The patch looks provisory with its self-made fence, but also well-cultivated with its powerful green stems sticking out of the soil. Again, the image is static, only the water spraying out of the hose illustrates some dynamic, while the rest, including the two persons, seems to be frozen. Yet the analogy to the settled is distinct. Metaphorically, the settlers managed to create their own garden, developing roots, which start to grow. The analogy to the rooted inhabitant becomes even clearer when a woman speaks about her home in Syria: "In Syria, we had a small piece of land next to our house where we made a small garden. It had trees such as apple, peach, cherry, plums and loquat" (Bembnista/Dalal 2021, TC 00:33-0:55). This information about the family's former home makes the picture dynamic. Local conditions are integral to such processes: while in Syria the family could grow juicy fruits and vegetables, in Germany they are able to grow potatoes and garlic. Again, settling in does not only mean arrival at a new place, statically living a life there. Settling in means to bring a certain predisposition in knowledge and culture of how home could be constructed, actively making it feel like

home. To settle requires the engagement and negotiation with the place and thus adapting to the flux of the borderlands: homing as a dynamic 'dwelling-act'.



*Fig.4. Gardening scene: a metaphorical practice of rooting on the move “still(s) from the film 13 Square Meters, directed by Kamil Bembnista & Ayham Dalal; courtesy of SFB 1265 Re-Figuration of Spaces.”*

#### Fragment 5

In a third scene images are dynamic, but the surrounding setting illustrates static living-conditions. A drone-camera (fig.5) orbits the container-homes, suggesting a dynamic environment in a widespread surrounding with clean, prefab houses, ready to use. However, the ready-to-use containers, supposedly provided with everything that is needed in daily life, do not prevent inhabitants from appropriating, negotiating, adapting: homing, as it were. “The refugee camp is a paradox. On the one hand it aims to protect refugees, on the other hand it controls by imposing a specific way of living. Refugees resist. They bring their knowledge, memories, culture and capacities to the space of the camp. Its standardized structure becomes perpetuated by individualities, identities and the necessities of every-day life” (Bembnista/Dalal 2021, TC11:18-11:48).



*Fig.5. Moving the static: Drone orbits the immovable container homes “still(s) from the film 13 Square Meters, directed by Kamil Bembnista & Ayham Dalal; courtesy of SFB 1265 Re-Figuration of Spaces.”*

## Arriving

Our last borderland builds on an auto-ethnography where representative language turns into an open-ended questioning. The example is thus lacking the reflective, meta-level language, which guides the reader in our previous examples, aiming at making the reader enter the universe of the speaker, reliving her experiences. In auto-ethnography these are tricks used to make the experiences and feelings of the ethnographer talk to wider problematics, in this case that of belonging and being at home.

## Fragment 7

The people in the Health Insurance bureau quickly and effectively registered me and the same can be said for the *Bürger Büro* [citizen bureau]. I feel welcome, people are friendly despite their somewhat awkward ways of being so. My being here is obviously accepted, but a question remains of whether I am also accepted as a part of it all?

I wrote these words in 2007 when I first arrived in Flensburg. The friendliness was the perhaps most enduring impression of the place and its people, the feeling of being welcome and accepted despite of background. An inclusive culture (cf. fig.7). Today I would characterize this as a narrative about Flensburg, which is repeatedly emphasized and talked about as making the town atypical in Germany; the borderland deliberately aiming to be one without stress (Donnan/Wilson 2010).



*Fig.7. Stickers from one of the places in Flensburg where homeless people usually hang out during the day (courtesy of Andersen)*

## Fragment 8

In the beginning of 2019, I found myself back in the *Bürger Büro* having to register at a new address. Why are the people in the waiting area 80% of another background than German, speaking other languages? I thought about how I do not see myself as an immigrant. Are cross-border commuters different than other migrants because of our competences and abilities to transgress borders? Or are some border crossings associated with having resources and others with having none?

Amid the talk about inclusiveness, hospitality and openness sits a woman who does not feel comfortable with the claim that she, according to the storyline, is at home. Is this just an effect of her own understanding of what it takes to be at home and what is demanded when we speak of belonging? Or does the feeling also say something about place itself?

The questioning seems to remain. Minor differences reflected in practice, and by those who are 'not quite there yet'. The fine line between the ability to raise questions because of one's experiences and the feeling of remaining excluded, always just arriving. The paradoxical thing about being a cross-border commuter and living in more institutional cultures at once is that of having tools to question everything. Bureaucracies seem more legitimate when they remain structures to comply with and not human practices to be questioned.

*Fragment 9:* In the reflections I had in 2007 upon arrival in Flensburg I noted down my immediate impression of the woman in the *Bürger Büro* as one of acting friendly but not really knowing how to perform friendliness in a convincing way. Knowing the story but not playing the part. Making me question.

When in the *Bürger Büro* in 2019 talking about the reasons for my change of address and related problems, I felt the woman I spoke with was genuinely friendly. I felt understood. Has the place changed? Have I changed? Has the place changed me?

### *3. Eternal arrival: Ongoing struggles to feel at home in the borderlands*

Our fragments illustrate how dwelling in the borderlands involves mundane everyday work to make and feel at home; invitations, small adjustments, raising questions, making homing a constant state of becoming (Boccagni 2022, 598). By using visual data from the border, we illustrate the ongoing socio-material adjustments that compromise with an initially culturally situated homeliness, including practices of making the borderland habitable by blurring lines between mobile and settled. As in Parisian welcome practices, inhabitants' re-arrangements of space in refugee shelters in Berlin illustrate this by juxtaposing the design of the shelters, their architecture is questioned, and discussions of dwelling conditions opened by the inhabitants. Homing in the borderlands cannot be regulated into 'a German way of living', nor any other socio-materiality prescribed by a place such as "homely foods" in France. Here homing is about finding answers to the need to dwell, empowering and alienating at once. The authors therefore opened questions to transfer the knowledge of what it takes to arrive in the borderlands. If one is constantly reminded of one's otherness in everyday interactions while aiming to dwell and feel secure, does the road to home become never-ending; or does the realization itself infer a certain arrival? Is the feeling of being at home in the borderlands also a feeling of being at home while on the road?

Ours are just part of the unfolding of entanglements of settled and mobile, making for constant struggles to arrive. In the classical territorial borderland, borderlanders may be understood as the dwellers of the borderlands; in ours, borderlanders come about in bordering practices, turning borderlands into transitory places, existing in becoming. Our fragments thereby challenge traditional distinctions between borderlands and

the unbounded; the who is, who becomes, and who stays a borderlander. In the borderlands, dwelling is the hard work of creating the sensation of being at home. Even when the aim is to arrive at a stable point of being and be at rest, homing cannot come to a halt. In the borderlands one never quite 'gets there', 'arrival' is always postponed, it remains 'on the road' and homing therefore involves an ability to be at home in the entanglements of mobile and settled.

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