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Not Quite Home or Alone:  
A Conversation on Belonging  
in a Digital Age

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# Not Quite Home or Alone: A Conversation on Belonging in a Digital Age

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## Table of Contents

I. Introduction.....	1
II. On positionalities and other “Personal is Political” matters .....	2
III. There is no place like home, even when home is no place .....	6
IV. Not quite home or alone: a digital and mobile netting of inescapable choices .....	15
V. Conclusion .....	22
References.....	24
Information on the competence network Crossroads Asia .....	29
Publications in the Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series .....	30

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## I. Introduction

This paper is the product of conversations we have had over a significant period of time about the meaning of belonging in a digital age. It began as a series of personal answers to the question: “Where would you consider as home?” and now seeks to reach out to other debates on this essential question. Our dialogue was inspired by a paper, “*Heimat*”, *Mobility and the New Media: How a changing lifestyle influences people’s identity* (Bier, 2014), written under the rubric of a Crossroads Studies MA-course conducted at the Center for Development Research (ZEF).<sup>3</sup> The catalyst for our ensuing discussions, at that time, was Bier’s use of the term “Heimat”,<sup>4</sup> which did not hold meaning for one of us, as it appeared to be a concept unique to Germany.

For several months, we—two women from different origins, of different ages, with different skin tone and very different memories—have been reflecting on our past inhabitations and the mobility turns that we have taken in our lives. In doing so, we find that “Heimat”, or if you wish to translate it, “home”<sup>5</sup>, is this fuzzy, flexible concept that is being altered—even as we speak—by the new digital forms of our modern times and the increased mobility that many of us experience. Additionally, “home” proves to be a key concept for understanding where a person belongs. It follows then that in the process of our personal inquiries, we faced at times angst-ridden questions about our own definitions of home and our concomitant senses of belonging to them.

Finding a place one calls “home” is no easy task in the world that we currently live in. Basically, we are in a process of ever changing lifestyles, alongside the extensive distribution of smartphones and other electronic devices all over the world; plus a related rapidly increasing gap between digital natives and immigrants,<sup>6</sup> who differ in the languages and codes that they use (Prensky, 2001). At the same time, as we are experiencing a loss of physicality via the internet, questions of belonging and rootedness gain importance. “Where do I come from?”, “Where do I belong?” and “Who am I?” still remain as essential queries that one has in this highly flexible and mobile world; that is, on a globe where, in one day, it is possible for some to travel to almost any location they can think of; plus

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<sup>3</sup> The course entitled *Crossroads Asia & Counter-Narratives of Development: The ‘Post’ in Area Studies & Development Theory*, was taught by Epifania Amoo-Adare in the University of Bonn summer semester of 2014 and co-designed with Anna-Katharina Hornidge. The course sought to introduce students to various spatially-oriented counter-narratives that contest normative notions of development as modernization and the nation state as its nexus. More specifically, course participants analyzed the significance of the migrating “body,” as agent, interacting in networks of relationships within, and beyond, developing societies; most especially in contexts where conflict arises as a consequence of boundary marking in the formation of nation states. Utilizing spatial lenses, derived from post-Area Studies, postcolonial and feminist perspectives, participants also discussed questions such as What is space? What is the relationship between spatial conditions and power? How does conflict arise as a consequence of struggles over space? and How does mobility become a strategic response to conflict? What kinds of spatial mobility occur in conflictual contexts? How does mobility differ for men versus women? Additionally, research work developed under the Crossroads Asia umbrella were used to interrogate the above questions, as well as to reveal the intimate and self-reinforcing connections between conflict and migration in certain ‘developing’ societies on the Asian continent.

<sup>4</sup> Note that throughout this paper, we use a capitalized version of the word Heimat, as it would be written in German, except where it is in lower case within a quotation.

<sup>5</sup> Note that a full translation would also include the term “homeland”.

<sup>6</sup> For Prensky (2001), digital natives are the Net-generation who has been born into the current digital age and who, through substantial use, have become very conversant with the digital language of the Internet, computers and video games. In contrast, digital immigrants are those born before this age, but who have over time come to learn how to navigate the digital arena with a different level of fluency.

where both physical and digital borders lose their importance for some, while manifesting forcefully for others.<sup>7</sup> Within a contradictory complexity such as this, the inquiry “What do we mean by belonging in a digital age?” must arise.

It is in pursuit of a semblance of an answer to such a crucial question that we in turn asked ourselves a series of questions, some of which we have outlined in this paper. The result of this exercise is our personal and academic reflections on the concepts “Heimat”, “home” and “homeland”, as well as our ruminations on the effects of spatial mobility and digitalization (e.g., New Media) on the definitions of those concepts and their accompanying senses of belonging. The reader will find that there are understandable differences in how we speak on these important issues, even when we both agree on the points at hand. These distinctions are why we deem it important to illuminate our discussions by beginning them with brief accounts of our diverse positionalities in section II. This, of course, also highlights the fact that as co-authors of this paper, “we write together without presupposing unity of expression or of experience. So when we speak in unison it means just that—there are two voices and not just one” (Lugones & Spelman, 1983, p. 573).

In other words, German or negotiating Ghanaian-British, with political notions of these concepts or not, plus from our definite age difference and decidedly female perspectives, we find that defining “home”, or even “Heimat”, in these digital times presents as a substantial challenge for anyone. Still, we believe it is critical to try to understand this contemporary conundrum, especially if one seeks to determine how to foment a pluralistic, post-oppositional and loving sense of belonging - even within the social constructions of our diverse becomings. Basically, we would argue that with improved comprehension of our possessive selves, we can perhaps begin to create a sense of WE-ness that recognizes the validity of various life-forms and the variegated kinds of knowledge for better comprehending the inter-being of all living species with their environments and the larger cosmos, both across space and time.

## II. On positionalities and other “Personal is Political” matters

### **MAREIKE:**

If someone would ask me “What is your ‘Heimat’?” I would not have to think about it for very long. When I take the train home, and it passes this bridge right before the city, you can see the whole skyline of the town. At this point, I feel immediately at home; that is, because with the buildings, I associate the past: the days I have spent there and all the localities I visited for different reasons. It is a feeling of returning somewhere that is very well known to me. I feel safe, happy and welcome, surrounded by things and people that are meaningful to me.

I left Mainz, a rather small town at the river Rhine for my master’s degree, which they did not offer there. At the same time, almost all of my friends also left the city; therefore, I knew that the city was not the same for me anymore. Still, I was really sad because the time I spent there was perfect in my memory. Due to the rather short distance to my new home in Bonn, I was able to travel back every other weekend, see some of my friends and family and also the city itself. It was very important for me to keep in touch, because my connection to the place did not just end when I left it. So I travelled back almost every other weekend, called my friends, wrote short messages or skyped with them. Not

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<sup>7</sup> As an example, see the recent debates in German media about displaced persons who badly want to obtain “the European lifestyle” that is already known to them via digital media. For example, commentary by Anne Hinrichs (2014) in an article entitled *Flüchtlinge – mit dem Rücken zur Heimat*, written in *ZEIT ONLINE*. Also, commentary by Jan Liebhold and Nino Seidl (2015) in their article titled *Verzweifelt: Warum Flüchtlinge ihre Heimat verlassen*, written for NDR.

only did I want to hear what was going on at home, I also still wanted to be part of it; I wanted to be included in their activities. Even though I was physically staying in another location, my mind, thoughts and spiritual center was still in Mainz. So when I left, I did not abandon the several Facebook groups or digital platforms that connected me to my friends.<sup>8</sup> One of these groups, for example, served the purpose of organizing our rugby practice. When I moved away, I could still follow the posts in this group and knew pretty well what was going on in my teammates' lives, even if we were not as close as before. This helped me to stay in touch, not fall out of the group, and participate almost on the same level as the others when I was home for the weekend. I had a sense of what was going on and sometimes was surprised by how little had changed during the weeks that I was absent.

My hometown Mainz is definitely a source of identity for me. While studying there, I discovered a lot of what makes me what I am today. I always loved the city. The big group of friends and my family living close by always provided me with a feeling of security, warmth and acceptance. What I discovered quickly when I left the city was the fact that, to "feel at home" somewhere, it takes more than just living in a place. Also, for the first time, I actually thought about the term "Heimat". It occurred to me that, by leaving it, it had become so much more definite for me. The fuzzy feeling of security and warmth had turned into a longing for the past, a longing even for certain places I had just taken for granted while living there.

In the beginning, I just studied and worked in Bonn and travelled back home on the weekends. I did not establish any personal connections in my new hometown, but rather focused on my old "Heimat". Soon, it became obvious that this would not make me happy in the long run. Even though I had a lot of information about what my friends were doing, it was not exactly the same as being there. The internet provided me with information, facts, but could not compensate for the feeling of being a part of it all, actually seeing the others, feeling them and joining in on their activities. At the same time, I felt alienated in my new town, alone and really miserable. So I started to meet people, joined a sports team, got in contact with other students and did not travel back home as often. I tried to get my new friends to do some of the things that we did back in my hometown, and it worked. Soon I felt a lot happier and started to consider my new town as a sort of "Heimat" as well.

When traveling back to Mainz now, I see that a lot has changed. I do not know the schedules of the buses anymore, new localities have opened up that I do not know of, and most of my friends are gone. I still love the city and I cherish the memories I have of it, but my feeling of having a concrete "Heimat" there is gone; it only exists in my thoughts now. When I ask myself: "Where is your Heimat?" I am clueless and do not really have an answer. It exists somewhere in the past and in the future. I cannot locate it but merely have the vision that it will feel like "Heimat" again somewhere, someday. And, in between, I have all of these memories, tokens and pictures from the past, digital connections to the now, as well as ideas and wishes for the future.

#### **EPIFANIA:**

Much more than in Mareike's case, my life epitomizes the increased mobility associated with today's world citizens. More specifically, I am an Asante woman who was born in London, raised in Nairobi and Accra, studied in Cape Coast, London and Los Angeles, and now works in Bonn (Germany), after employment stints in Doha, Kabul, Herat and the South Caucasus (based out of Tbilisi). For these, and many other reasons, I often suffer a contradictory crisis of being placeless and yet simultaneously filled with the knowledge of different (urban) spatialities. Ironically, my sense of placelessness was

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<sup>8</sup> On the digital platform for this group, the coach would inform us about additional units, hours and game days. We also used it to share personal information. For example, a group member would ask for help because she was moving to another apartment or we would organize celebrations and parties via this digital medium.

first—and most rudely—experienced in my country of ancestral origin, when we moved to live in Ghana—from Kenya—in 1978. I was age eleven. I had been born and lived in London until age three and then moved to Kenya, where we remained until that return ‘home’. All through the time spent in Kenya, I had been in no doubt that I was Ghanaian – so imagine my dismay when we relocated to Accra (Ghana’s capital), where I was constantly being told by Ghanaians that I was not Ghanaian, but different. This all because of my ‘foreign’ ways and also the fact that I spoke my mother-tongue, Twi, with an English accent and worse still that English, with a Kenyan accent. For this alienating reason, Ghana fast became not so much my “home,” but rather that distant geographical place where my mother currently lives and that cultural location where my grandparents and other ancestors came from.

As is to be expected with life’s contraries, while abroad<sup>9</sup> and whenever asked where I come from, I tend to first say “I am Ghanaian” or else I use the more nuanced, “I come from Ghana via the UK” response. For me, these statements are intentional. More specifically, they are a kind of political statement to signify my categorical positive identification with the African continent with its many (dark) misrepresentations and omissions in the media, news, research and popular culture around the globe - even it seems within the African continent itself (take for example the predominant use of westernized knowledge systems versus local ones in the areas of education, economics or politics).

My overt political identification with Ghana began in my late teens (age sixteen to eighteen), in London, after my first encounters with everyday racism. Before landing in the United Kingdom, I had never thought of myself in raced or gendered terms. But soon enough, I found that I was a black girl/woman; even if as far as I was concerned, I was simply my personality and good name (i.e., my family’s reputation). In London, I saw the significance of being Asante or, the pan-ethnic category Ghanaian, as a form of protest against being called “black.” This was until I learned of the political term “Black,”<sup>10</sup> which I also identified with for reasons of solidarity with my diasporic cousins; thus, acknowledging the multiple oppressions (and ongoing effects) they had suffered at the hands of Europeans and fellow Africans who engaged in the lucrative 400-year business of the slave trade. At the same time, I identified myself as African with others from the continent, often because we had something in common that was also different from our Afro-Caribbean friends and others under the Black-British umbrella.

This political identification sometimes led to an anti-British sentiment in my self-identification speech, again as a form of resistance and minority self-acknowledgement. But in reality, I also very much held a more ambiguous, nuanced and at times global stance on my identity, as can be seen in the below poem—written in desperation and defiance—on 28 March 1995.<sup>11</sup> And from this contradictory stance, I often referred to myself as “a citizen of the world”.

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<sup>9</sup> I left Ghana in 1983 in order to study in the United Kingdom, and have never returned to live there since, apart from very brief stints in 1990-1991 and 2009-2010.

<sup>10</sup> In the United Kingdom, during the 1980s and 1990s, this political term “Black” also included South Asians.

<sup>11</sup> Although, you will notice that I inscribed the word British in lower case, which again evidences my continued political identification with all things Asante, Ghanaian and/or Black whilst in London. Yet in its subsequent publication (Amoo-Adare, 1995), I was required to raise it back into upper case on the demand of the publisher for obvious grammatical—and perhaps also political—reasons.

## **Culturally Asante/ is it british?**

I am not a part of this  
and also not equally a part of  
Yes that typical that  
So what is new  
except from how I or you may make it  
more or less of an issue  
and is that issue then a lot more pertinent  
than being a little less than a part of  
everything  
but what the self has grown to be  
and of course LOVE/d  
greatly.

This theme of grappling with my identity and experiencing acute discomfort whenever in my “homeland” is one that not only repeats in much of other creative writing that I have done, but it also permeated into my academic pursuits,<sup>12</sup> when I moved to conduct doctoral research in the United States, during my thirties. Here, I (interestingly enough) became more British and often too European because of others who—like me—did not fit into metropolitan US customs, norms and language use. Again, it was a kind of informal resistance as we would often talk about the strange “American” ways, or in the case of the Los Angeles city itself, the strange “Los Angeleno”, or “Hollywood wannabe”, ways as described by Others; i.e., friends who were European, Asian, Latino, Middle Eastern and even other US North-Americans coming from different states.<sup>13</sup>

Upon graduation, I transitioned into the field of international development work and the revelation here was that most people I met—aside from friends and colleagues from the local populations—were just like me, individuals who travelled a lot and, thus, have no strong intellectual (and at times emotional) connections to any specific “homeland.” In other words, a significant result of my numerous experiences of living and often belonging in different geographic locations, is that I now find myself with an accumulation of several “homes” that increase exponentially with age and travel, while my “homeland” tends to remain the same, at a kind of zero level,<sup>14</sup> aside from when my ancestral hometown (Fawade) or pan-ethnic national origin (Ghana) is used by me to score political or cultural brownie (resistance) points. This non-commitment to nation and politics with a capital P, was further concretized when I decided to stop voting in the United Kingdom, as a matter of principle, and so consequently do not vote in any geographical location.

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<sup>12</sup> These ideas are elaborated upon in a chapter on my positionality within a book entitled, “Spatial Literacy: Contemporary Asante Women’s Place-making” (Amoo-Adare, 2013). The book is based on the research I conducted for my doctoral study, from 1998-2006, on migrant Asante women living in Accra, Ghana (Amoo-Adare, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that none of these Europeans were of African descent; however, I also had several friends who were from Ghana but no other parts of Africa. Additionally, we were very aware of the homogeneities we fabricated by our labelling of Los Angeles inhabitants, seeing as we hardly got to know the wide spectrum of often highly segregated communities of people of African, Asian, Caribbean, European, Latin American, and Pacific Island origins.

<sup>14</sup> A point of interest is that I have never experienced a deep connection with land that some people seem to have. For example, speaking strongly about where they would like to be buried or where they would like to retire, live, work, build their home, etc. It has only been twice in my life when I have felt this is a place in which I would love to live and this strangely enough was both times while I was in Madrid visiting friends. There is something about that city that calls me, although I could not tell you why.



For me now, “home” has become wherever I have family (in Ghana, the UK, the USA), close friends (on every continent, except Antarctica), my stuff (in Germany, in my mother’s house in Ghana, and in my sister’s basement in the USA), fond memories, and/or where I physically live. This means that I have several homes away from home, and these places wax in and out of the “home” category depending on my level of activity with the people there or the temporal and emotional distance from associated fond memories. Today, I would argue that that I can live just about anywhere, if required, because of the many cities I have loved (e.g., Kabul, London, Bristol) or grown to like (e.g., Los Angeles, Tbilisi, Accra, Bonn), while either working or studying there. This has been even when those urban locations have proven to be difficult places in which to remain for economic, sociocultural or security reasons. And to a great extent, nowadays, technology facilitates this mobile process of multiple home acquisitions because one is always seamlessly in electronic touch with friends, loved ones and memories, wherever you go.

### III. There is no place like home, even when home is no place

What is “Heimat”, and could it be a universal concept?

(Mareike Bier, May 2015)

#### **EPIFANIA:**

Alexandra Ludewig (2007) states that the term “Heimat” exists with a very “specific cultural baggage”, which also has deep roots in various moments within German history; particularly, as connected to local and national shifts of political power and the various attempts at homogenous identity construction linked to certain types of community, or nation-building processes.<sup>15</sup> In its original iteration amongst “the Teutons, ‘heima’ denoted the traditional space and place of the clan, society or individual” (Ludewig, 2007, p. 1). But with the passage of time and as a cumulative result of migration, often due to expulsion, the term has acquired a rather ambiguous, tension-filled quality that is shaped by simultaneous feelings of belonging, as well as feelings of significant loss. The term as it currently stands in Germany, is a palimpsest of meanings attached to centuries of loss and displacement, marked by events such as World War II and the fall of the Berlin Wall, with the subsequent development of concepts such as “Ostalgie” and “Westalgie” (Ludewig, 2007). And in all these cases, cultural memory has played a strong role in the formation of mainstream- and quasi-political identities, but always as examples of *recherché* versus recuperation (Huysen, 1995); that is, as contested narratives comprised by the efforts of powerful individuals and groups working towards a rehashing—and at times even a false reconstruction—of memories about social groups that are associated with specific times and spaces (Huysen, 2003).

That the term “Heimat”, in relation to “homeland,” is also a gendered imaginary (Ludewig, 2007) would be considered a given by Anne McClintock (1995), who traces the gendered formation of

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that there has been much in-depth debate and detailed analyses of the meanings and relevance of Heimat to (and for) people of German descent. These are discussions held in the German language, thus, to which I am not privy. The following are some of the key institutional actors in such deliberations: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde (see: <http://www.dgv-net.de/>), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Volkskunde (see: <http://www.d-g-v.org/>), and Institut für Volkskunde der Deutschen des östlichen Europa (see: <http://www.jkibw.de/>).

modern-day nations to their gendered imperial histories<sup>16</sup> and further argues that nations are not simply an imaginary, but they are also “historical practices through which social [particularly gendered] difference is both invented and performed” (p. 89). This has resulted in the needs of the nation often being equated with those of men (not all of them though), and nationalism being a consequence of masculinized memory, humiliation and hope. The same is true, even, in certain countries where “motherhood and nationhood are seen as co-terminus” (Chenoy, 2010, p. 6). For these often masculinist and heteronormative reasons, “home” (and too “homeland”) are considered to be vexed locations especially for queer subjects (Fortier, 2001; Gopinath, 2005; Garvey, 2011; Rouhani, in press), who—according to Wilkinson (2004) —must also include single people, as they all disrupt tidy, domestic notions that assume the norm for “home” as that of housing a reproductive heterosexual couple in this basic unit of capitalist production. Consequently, it may be considered disingenuous to separate the notions of “home” embedded within the term “Heimat” from those of “homeland”, especially when we consider the gendered and heteronormative spatio-temporal historicity of these terms.

Moreover, as Harvey (1989) and Massey (1994) remind us, we live in a period of intense globalization; i.e., a condition that is marked by technological advancement, increased mobility and what they both describe as “time-space compression”; when space is annihilated by time and a global sense of space is created through immense spatial upheaval, leaving in its wake a loss of a local cultural sensibility and a desperate need for a sense of geographical belonging. It is this quest for belonging that often results in the reformation and reconstitution of somewhat localized community and national identities. Similarly, Sabine Königs-Casimir (2005) posits that this worry of globalization, due to increased mobility and the loss of the familiar, is the reason why “a growing number of Germans are finding their way back to a love which for many years dared not speak its name: the love of ‘Heimat’ or homeland” (p. 1). It should be noted that, at the same time, Chandler Lewis and Christopher Patterson (2011) argue that the younger generation of Germans “do not associate heimat with the need to find a national identity”, as did the generations before them. They posit that instead, young Germans “strongly associate heimat with a connection to home, a place where they have fond memories” (p. 6).

Nevertheless, Ludewig (2007) also reiterates that there is currently a transition in “the concept of ‘home’ as an idyllic sphere of belonging and attachment to that of a threatened space; a space under siege from a range of perils in the areas of safety and security, whether due to natural disasters, terrorism or conventional warfare” (p. 4). In this way, she posits that the everyday concept of “home” is increasingly aligning with “the semantics of Heimat, i.e., an emotional experience, which is progressively less grounded in feelings of security and comfort, yet even more so in those of ambivalence and, in particular, insecurity and hysteria” (p. 4); that is, one which is most likely also informed by post 9-11 questions of national security in ‘war on terror’ discourses.

In light of these arguments, one may not be considered unreasonable to pose a concern about how notions of belonging with regard to “home” and “homeland” might continue to be negatively influenced towards Nimbyism<sup>17</sup> and jingoism by the increased mobility associated with today’s world citizens (Urry, 2007; Sheller & Urry, 2006; Sheller 2011), as well as by a politics of a mobility

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<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Ramon Grosfoguel (2013) talks of a racist/sexist colonial matrix of power that is rooted in imperialism and continues today in various global structures, including forms of knowledge production in westernized universities. It is also why Maria Lugones (2007) speaks of gender itself as a violent colonial introduction used to destroy other people’s cosmologies and, consequently, cementing heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System as a cornerstone of “western civilization” spread all over the world.

<sup>17</sup> The word Nimbyism, is comprised of the acronym NIMBY, which means Not in My Backyard.

(Cresswell, 2010)<sup>18</sup> that is marked by “translocal geographies as a simultaneous situatedness across different locals” (Brickell & Datta, 2011, p. 4). Additionally, belonging is further complicated by the multiply-identified migrating body, interacting, struggling and negotiating in various networks of relationships (with people, ideas and things) within, and beyond, the confines of a single society (Latour, 2011) or the estrangement felt within one’s own home, which in some cases leads to a queer subject paradoxically “coming home” by “movement out of [that] place” (Fortier, 2001, p. 406).

In sum, the concept “Heimat can be read as signifiers of continuity and disruption, reorientation and return, and as such, ever-changing notions of Heimat mirror values and social change” (Ludewig, 2007, p. 4). The same might also be argued about the various other linguistic terms used around the globe to designate identities in the shape of belonging to specific physical places emplaced in particular geographies and histories; be that the far more political notion of “homeland” or its mild, but highly implicated, counterpart “home”.<sup>19</sup> More importantly, notions of “home” are reliant on factors such as physical space (built or ecological environments), sense of place (as per Relph, 2009),<sup>20</sup> language (symbolic, non-verbal and social aspects), and relationships (or networks) of people, things, and ideologies. Additionally, ideas, structures, dynamics and relations of power are critical to the formation of these notions that are negotiable and fluid, whilst also being subject to and influencers of contextual factors. Consequently, one might be able to say that yes, “Heimat” (in the deep denotative sense of the word “home”, or “homeland”) is a universal concept, yet at the same time what it connotatively categorizes cannot be homogenized into only one kind of understanding of the term, even within Germany itself.<sup>21</sup> Ultimately, I would further argue that notions of “home” or “homeland” are multiple, fluid and even amorphous; making them as much social constructs and floating signifiers as “race” is, according to Stuart Hall (Jhally, 1997).

#### **MAREIKE:**

As a German-born, I have never really thought about what the linguistic or even scientific term “Heimat” means. It has just always existed for me. It comes to me naturally when thinking about where I grew up. I would therefore not say that I primarily identify myself as “a German”. The term bears more meaning for me than just belonging to a nationality. Still, “Heimat” in connection to the term of homeland has a historical background in Germany, following World War II. As Lewis and Patterson (2011) describe it, “Heimat” was a legitimate way to be proud of one’s country without denying the crimes of Nazi-Germany. Natural territory and patriotic notions of fatherland and

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<sup>18</sup> Cresswell (2010) argues that there are “constellations of mobility”; i.e., “particular patterns of movement, representations of movement, and ways of practicing movement that make sense together” (p. 18). The first is about how a person, thing or idea physically gets from one place to another, the second is the shared meaning that is given to the movement, and the third is the embodied nature or practice of the movement. All these three aspects are intertwined with each other.

<sup>19</sup> Important to note that “home”, as a location, is often viewed as the smallest unit wherever there are economic, political and sociocultural systems, especially those that reflect hierarchical power structures or scales.

<sup>20</sup> According to Relph (2009) “sense of place” is “the unique environmental ambience and character of a landscape or place” (p. 25). It is constituted by the following: 1) physical characteristics of a place, 2) embodied activities (cultural practices, social interactions), and 3) affect and meanings (place attachment, place memory, place associations, emotions, stories and myths, personal and cultural identities). Sense of space is a critical aspect of belonging because of the centrality of affect and meaning to its definition, both of which speak to the “emotional geographies” embodied within ideas of belonging (Waite & Cook, 2011, p. 239), e.g., questions of how “home” or “homeland” evoke feelings of love, loss, fear, hate, joy, and so on.

<sup>21</sup> As can be attested to by the divergent standpoints on the concept, taken by German social scientists (M. Kaiser, personal communication, August 11, 2015).

“*Deutsche Erde*” are terms that we are still forbidden to use to describe where one belongs or comes from, even 70 years after the war. The term, however, has found its way into the common usage of younger generations, because in Lewis and Patterson’s (2011) words:

For Germans, heimat is more than just a word, it is a way of life, it is their connection to an idealized good life, a means of connecting with not only the current generation of Germans, but also those who came before. As Germany moves past a time of tyranny and conflict, Germans around the world continue to keep heimat close to their heart and are united with the same love and passion that they all share for the place they call home (p. 6).

In my view,<sup>22</sup> “Heimat” can overcome its specific German background and, thus, be described as a universal concept. This is because people, no matter where they come from, are undeniably tied to certain stages of their lives and the locations where these stages have happened, physically and emotionally. This may be the house they grew up in or the town where they studied or raised their children, and it is highly connected to the emotions that have taken place there. Anastasia Christou and Russell King (2010) call these places “emotional landscapes” (p. 638). Additionally, people have a sense of belonging, a rootedness that is very highly connected to their identity and corresponds with places and landscapes, even though they have not been to these places for a long time. If asked an equivalent of “What is your Heimat?”, in any language, people’s responses may differ a lot from each other, but the idea of having a “somewhere” that one comes from and that is the base of who one is, is likely shared by all, even though, in most cases, this does not have to be a specific locality. You may base your answer on the places where your beloved are located, where your stuff is, or where you currently live. “Heimat”, much like the term “home”, can thus be a very flexible term, not so much based on localities but rather on emotional connections to these localities.

This connection to certain localities, or nature even, is deeply rooted in the German understanding of “Heimat”. Edgar Reitz<sup>23</sup>, a German film producer and writer has worked for several years of his life on developing a cinematic understanding of what “Heimat” means. In his film cycle on “Heimat”,<sup>24</sup> he features Paul Simon, a young man who returns home to the fictional village “Schabbach”, after several years of fighting in World War I. And later, the second return, after a long and very successful migration to the United States. The film trilogy follows Paul through different stages of his life in Schabbach and elsewhere, also portraying other characters who never left the village. It is a slow paced trilogy, with very little dialogue and very powerful images of landscapes. Cinematically, the town houses and infrastructure, as well as the ties between the characters, are established to provide a very detailed understanding of certain localities and their meaning for this prodigal son. Even though we know nothing about Paul Simon or his village, we are provided with a sense of his deep feelings for this place, through his expressions in the very first minutes. The memories and emotions, awakened in him (as he wanders the streets), are made tangible to the audience, even though he never vocalizes any of them. This idea of finding comfort in well-known landscapes may be rooted in the history of Germany’s role in the World Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Soldiers who left for many years, fighting an unjust cause—and who most of the time knew this to be the case—returned

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<sup>22</sup> This is a view that is also based on a review of literature that includes the work of Brickell and Datta (2011), Waite and Cook (2011), Christou and King (2010), and others.

<sup>23</sup> For more information and scenes from Reitz’s work, see: <http://www.edgar-reitz.com/>

<sup>24</sup> Reitz’s film cycle is as follows: *Prolog: Geschichte aus den Hunsrückdörfern* (1981), *Heimat – Eine deutsche Chronik* (1984), *Die zweite Heimat – Chronik einer Jugend* (1992), *Heimat 3 – Chronik einer Zeitenwende* (2004), *Epilog: Heimat-Fragmente – Die Frauen* (2006).

to find comfort (in the years following this dark episode) in the highly romanticised and idealized “Heimat-films” of the late 1940s and 1950s.<sup>25</sup>

I would argue that this kind of nostalgia for intact and poetic ‘natural’ homelands, is a phenomenon not only known to Germans. People all over the world have intimate relationships to the landmarks and/or nature surrounding them. Referring to Anastasia Christou (2011), I would therefore also argue that directly locatable places and their emotional attachments are two fundamental factors for the constitution of “Heimat”.<sup>26</sup> Even second generation immigrants experience a sense of “Heimat” somewhere, as—for example—do Jews who have never been to Israel (Haviv-Horiner & Heilbrunn, 2013). This idea of “homeland”, or “Heimat”, might not be “real” or easy to grasp, but there is the overall understanding that something like an ideal home exists. Nostalgia, memories and other people’s interpretations of a current situation add to this feeling. People emphasize either locatable places or emotional attachments, but in the end, it is always a combination of both that forms notions of “Heimat”. After all, a place without any ascription, is nothing more than a place. It only gains meaning through emotional attachment. Furthermore, an emotional feeling is always tied to a locality; be it as trivial as having your tokens stored in your sister’s basement.

What constitutes “home”, and how might it differ from “Heimat”?  
(Epifania Amoo-Adare, May 2015)

#### **MAREIKE:**

It is hard to find a general definition for the term “home” (here not referring to a person’s house or apartment), because it is highly subjective and inseparably tied to people’s personal thoughts about it. Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2006) talk about the idea of “home” and “not home”; i.e., the difference between dwelling and traveling. In my view, this is one of the most accurate definitions because it not only incorporates a mixture of place and placelessness, but also focuses highly on the subjectivity of the term. Accordingly, “home” as a concept “is primarily understood both as a physical location of dwelling as well as a space of belonging and identity” (Brickell & Datta, 2011, p. 13). Furthermore, Katherine Brickell and Ayona Datta refer to the duality of home as an actual place that becomes meaningful through the thoughts, memories and people that are associated with it. Home therefore is a construct, which is connected to one’s past, present and future. Home, however, is also more than a location in which people live; it is a place “*zu dem sich Menschen zugehörig fühlen, der Schutz bietet, Identifikationsmöglichkeiten und Aktivitäten eröffnet* [where people feel connected, that offers them protection, identification and freedom to act] (Kühne & Spellerberg, 2010, p.30). Home is a place where people know “what is going on”, how to behave, where to find things, and what is going to happen next. But at the same time, any search for a sense of an exclusively place-based identity must necessarily be reactionary. A sense of “home” must be a construct out of an introverted, inward-looking history and only the sum of its linkages to elsewhere is what constitutes

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<sup>25</sup> The German “Heimat-film” originates in the early 1920s and 1930s. Its original purpose was to strengthen German peoples connections with their homeland and manifest their claim on the lands, “that are rightfully theirs”. Hitler also exploited the genre as propaganda for his cause. It is only after the Second World War, when the films gained their highly idealized and nostalgic view of a world in which: “the horrors and the hunger crisis could be forgotten through an intact relationship to nature and Happy Endings.” (“Fantasie-Welten”, n.d.).

<sup>26</sup> These are factors that are described in more detail later in this paper.

a place's identity (Morley, 2001). In this, most of the scholars writing about home and "Heimat" agree<sup>27</sup>.

Similarly, the main assumption when talking about "Heimat" is "that people are generally rooted and settled in particular places" (Schetter, 2012, p.1), to which they attach themselves – alongside meaning, emotions and memories. Very often, "Heimat" is associated with the place where people were born or spent most of their childhood, even though the subjective notion of "Heimat" goes far beyond that actual location. This process is important because "[a] 'sense of place', of rootedness, can provide – in this form and on this interpretation – stability and a source of unproblematical identity" (Massey, 1991, p. 26). Massey further argues that because the world is changing so rapidly, due to increased mobility and technology, people crave stability and need to know that some things never change. In this sense, "Heimat", which is often not a real place but a romanticized idea (a memory of times without stress), serves as a refuge.

Essential to the idea of "Heimat" is a positive feeling, an idealized understanding of feeling "in place", so being welcomed and understood. This feeling is rooted in people's search for safety in ideas of community (especially in the family), plus an understanding of "home" as a sacred space, which exists permanently and cannot be violated by unwanted intruders (Morley, 2001). In this way, "Heimat" is something fixed, in direct opposition to highly mobile lifestyles, globalization and the rapid advancement in technology all over the world. "Heimat" is an idea of values which are unchangeable, untouched by time and season. People preserve their image of "Heimat" in their memories, mix it with nostalgia and glorify it. So that in the end, it becomes: "*ein Wunschort absoluter Geborgenheit*" [a "dreamland" of absolute security] (Kühne & Spellerberg, 2010, p.28). This also becomes evident in people's ongoing searches for "Heimat". A recent example, in history, being of the diasporic Jewish communities and their claim on modern-day Israel as their "Heimat", even though most had never been there before (Moosmüller, 2002; Haviv-Horiner & Heilbrunn, 2013). Therefore, "Heimat" does not necessarily have to be a place, where a person has ever been; it can be made up, a construct, a place that somehow pulls people to it or a place that has changed significantly in people's mind, so much so that the image they think of, does not match the reality (Sheller & Urry, 2006).

The English term "home", however, does not always neatly fit into this concept of "Heimat", because "home" is also used for the place in which a person currently lives. This may be a kind of home, also tied to certain ideas and memories, but is not comparable to the idea that "Heimat" is the essence of where a person comes from, where she or he belongs to and what has shaped him or her. Therefore, the German term "Heimat" is often used to describe the imaginative concept behind a person's identity; "for the term *Heimat* carries a burden of reference and implication that is not adequately conveyed by the translation *homeland* or *hometown*" (Applegate, 1990, p.4). "Heimat" is more than a home; "it represents the modern imagining and, consequently, remaking of the hometown, not the hometown's own deeply rooted historical reality" (p.5). It follows then that in the German language, two terms for "home" exist. The first one, "Zuhause", is connected with the locality, the country, town or actual building one lives in. It describes where a person is "at home". But it does not describe, "Heimat", the space where a person "feels at home". It is in this combination that I consider the term "Heimat", together with the term "home", both implying the imaginative concept under discussion.

"Heimat", more so than the English "home", is a very subjective construct, which is based on various factors. Most authors differentiate between place-based concepts and imaginary concepts, which are often linked closely together and do not exist or constitute "Heimat" without each other. These two factors combine notions of locatable places and non-locatable feelings, described as "locatable

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<sup>27</sup> See for example Morley (2001), Kühne and Spellerberg (2010), Christou (2011), Christou and King (2010) and some of the other authors cited in this paper.

factors” and “emotional factors” in the table below. In addition, there is a third category, “indirectly locatable factors”. I would argue that the constitution of “Heimat” is a triad of these three factors.

**Table 1. The three pillars of “Heimat”**

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Objectivity</b>	<b>Can be shared</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Locatable Factors	Yes	Yes	Houses, landscapes, other people, things, etc.
Emotional Factors	No	No	Feelings of love, connectedness, belonging, security, nostalgia, etc.
Indirectly Locatable Factors	Yes and No	Yes and No	Smells, memories, languages, pictures of things or places that are gone/destroyed, New Media posts, etc.

Locatable factors refer to visible landscapes, objects, or places that can be experienced by anybody. For example, the house that one has grown up in, because as long as the building is not destroyed, it can be shown to others who can see, touch or smell it. In the traditional conception of “Heimat”, emotional factors are also relevant to this place to which one could return. Basically, childhood memories, feelings of love, nostalgia, security, belonging and so on, are tied to real places and load them up with emotions. A further new addition to this concept is the idea of indirectly locatable factors, which somehow serve as containers for memory and association. Unlike the childhood home, these factors can be transported, and unlike the emotional ties, they can also be made visible to others in various ways. An indirectly locatable factor could be the recounting of a memory, a picture of a garden, an old newspaper clipping, tokens of affection, toys, smells and so on. These objects and actions refer to locatable places, but these localities only become meaningful through the personal attachment to them. They also have strong links to the locatable and the emotional factors, thus, become important for transporting the very subjective concept of “Heimat” to others. And in a digitalized world, New Media gains central currency as an indirectly locatable factor.<sup>28</sup> Together, locatable factors, emotional factors and indirectly locatable factors “carry” or “embody” the idea of home that someone possesses.

**EPIFANIA:**

Here, I would agree with Mareike that the term “home”, much like that of “Heimat”, is a rather nebulous and slippery one—associated with ideas to do with various scales of physical space; plus our relationships to those geographical locations, as well as to particular familial or social practices and relationships that have occurred in those locations. This results in certain associated emotions and memories, be they “good”, “bad” or ambivalent ones (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). Pushing my perspective on this matter further, I would reiterate that “home” is a contested—complex, fluid, multi-scalar—spatial imaginary that often invokes a sense of family (or a lack thereof); that is, your own, your parents’, your grandparents’, your great grandparents’, your great, great grandparents’, and so on, ad infinitum. This sense of family could be that arising out of direct blood relations or be that of affiliation and/or adoption. In addition, science today suggests that we all share the same genetic code, which has implications for further broadening our notion of family to that of belonging

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<sup>28</sup> It is important to note that New Media *are not* “Heimat”, although they do *represent* “Heimat”.

to a larger human family (Horai 1995; Horai et al 1995). Basically, depending on one's definition of family, the related sense of "home" can be as narrow as one's self living all alone or as broad as the whole planet earth (or even the universe for that matter). Taking the above stretched notion of family and "home", one's home—depending on the individual—invokes notions of family homes, hometowns (one's roots, if even not born there), places of birth, locations in which one has lived for a significant time (including places of exile), nation-states, and/or the entire universe (or even the galaxy, if one is so inclined).

More specifically, when it comes to "homelands", for some this conjures up feelings of love for those locations; that is, for one's nation, native land, or native country, all of which Anderson (1991) describes as an "imagined community."<sup>29</sup> For many, the notion of "homeland" (like "home") is also intimately tied with the idea of belonging, although there is not always a guarantee of membership or a sense of ownership to both locations or their sets of entangled relationships. In many ways, one can have the uncanny experience of being in place and out of place at the same time (Gelder & Jacobs cited in Blunt & Dowling, 2006). So that "homeland" is not a neutral or unemotional term, especially when it comes to questions of belonging. Christou (2011) in her article, *Narrating Lives in (E)motion*, highlights the importance of embodied and emotional mobilities in shaping Greek migrants lives and identifications in Denmark, including their gendered negotiations of "diasporic belongings as sociocultural understandings of sense of self" (p. 249). In this article, Christou defines belongingness "as a process of identification and contestation generated by migrants' struggles to understand their sense of self through place-based emotional attachments" and argues that belonging is also "the mediated representational practice of the diasporic condition articulated through experiences of homing and exile" (p. 249). Ultimately, migrant accounts of their travel and diasporic circumstances "are emotional stories of complex entanglements of feelings, experiences and imaginations" (p. 252).

In describing the experiences of diasporic African communities in the United Kingdom, Louise Waite and Joanne Cook (2011) similarly invoke emotion as a fundamental factor engaged in the development of a sense of belonging. More specifically, they describe how "discourses of love" are expressed in relation to descriptions of national, and even supra-national, identities linked to native or adopted lands. But also of significance is the fact that migrants additionally express feelings of non-belonging and exclusion in relation to native or adopted lands, in ways that highlight that belonging is not simply a question of the desire to be connected to a place.<sup>30</sup> Significantly, belonging is also reliant on one's acceptance by others into that community, as well as to one's familiarity with "the system" - as one measure for assessing one's ability to fit in. At the same time, it can be said that it is possible to have more than one "home", and even "homeland"; i.e., the ability to feel a sense of belonging to more than one physical place or for that matter, to a certain configuration of people gathered together in—or scattered across—a geographic location. In fact, Waite and Cook (2011) discuss the plurilocal homes accounted for by diasporic African communities living in the

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<sup>29</sup> Anderson (1991) argues that nationhood is a social construct that is difficult to analyze and define. Additionally, he states that the creation of nations began towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, all as a result of the interplay between colonial expansion (making of panoptic time), capitalism, print-technology (newspapers and the novel, creating a single time frame and languages of power), and the loss of linguistic diversity (fatality).

<sup>30</sup> This is something that Jasmin Darznik (2012) learned the hard way, at age thirteen, when she made the mistake of calling the United States her home; thus, stated such on immigration papers that she completed for her and her mother's re-entry into the country on a business visa. This resulted in a visa denial and a two-year appeal process that included her taking her US education as a correspondence course, until she was able to return. Jasmin was tasked with completing the forms on her mother's behalf, at such a young age, because she had the stronger English literacy skills.



United Kingdom; that is, individuals with translocal subjectivities and “stretched” and/or “in-between” senses of belonging (p. 241), along with feelings of “inbetween-ness” and “transiency” often experienced by first and second generation immigrants (p. 246). At the same time, in their research, they found accounts of non-belonging to both “host” and “home” countries with some distinctions linked to generational groups, and often attached to issues of not knowing the system, as mentioned above. The result is then translocal geographies; a constant juggling of migrants’ multiple identities in different space-times (Brickell & Datta, 2011).

On this topic of diasporic experiences within migration, as linked to notions of home and belonging, Rouhani (in press) calls for us to also engage in a “queer intervention on migration studies” in order to:

illuminate the impossible positions migrants often occupy; challenge diasporic norms over authenticity; destabilize conventional understandings of gender, nation, and home; bring a coalitional understanding of politics to the fore of migration analysis; and situate diasporic experiences within present and future possibilities for new ways of expressing intimacy and kinship beyond the limited scope of nationality and citizenship (p. 1).

Rouhani further tells us that by fulfilling such a task, we begin to not only deeply question and probe notions of “home” as a safe and secure place, but we also find ourselves with more nuanced concepts of belonging like that put forward by Garvey (2011), who enables us to move beyond the binary of belonging versus non-belonging towards what she describes as “spaces of queer (un)belonging”; that is, ambiguous in-between “spaces that undo belonging while not leading to the destructive erasure of not belonging” (p. 758). This, of course, highly nuances the established idea that people can belong to a place by de facto, or even de jure, although they do not feel a true or full sense of belonging to that place; as argued by Waite and Cook (2011) and illustrated extensively in literature about queer migration (Fortier, 2001; Gopinath, 2005; Garvey, 2011; Rouhani, in press).

Furthermore, in these global times that herald more human migration than historically (Urry, 2007; Sheller & Urry, 2006), it can be argued that the idea of home generates more angst and confusion than ever before. The time-space-compression effects of globalization draw our attention to the loss of unitary and specific homelands (Harvey 1989, Massey 1994), however, we may imagine them to be. In other words, a person can find his or herself living in diasporic conditions, even when ensconced in her or his country of origin. Nowadays, we find that multiple locations have become homes for many and their dispersed families. This is especially the case in places where we make meaningful relationships, connections, memories, discourses, and material constructions. Beyond the more practical and tangible aspects of scattered blood relatives and acquired adopted families—or determining the differences between the terms “home” and “Heimat”—I would argue that both science and spiritual beliefs insist that we expand our notions of family, home and belonging. Basically, when we consider various spiritual concepts about the oneness of humankind (Schuon, 1984; Hanh, 2003) or for that matter the biological science that says (despite phenotypical multiplicities) we all share one genetic fingerprint (Horai, 1995; Horai et al, 1995; Macer, 1998), emerging from Africa, we might begin to seriously consider abandoning the false sociocultural constructs of family-home, hometown, nation, etcetera. Instead we might assume a broader concept of belonging that encompasses the whole world, with its 7.3 billion<sup>31</sup> plus inhabitants, who are epigenetically entangled with all manner of flora and fauna (Lock, 2015).

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<sup>31</sup> As retrieved from Worldometers, on July 13, 2015, at: <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/>

## IV. Not quite home or alone: a digital and mobile netting of inescapable choices

Does mobility complicate notions of home and belonging?

(Epifania Amoo-Adare, May 2015)

### **MAREIKE:**

Having established that “Heimat”, much like the term “home”, is a mixture of place and non-material things associated to this place (e.g., memory, feelings of security, certain relationships to people, etc.), it becomes evident that people - through their definition of “Heimat” - also give a definition of where they come from, what they believe in and what is important to them. Since “Heimat” is more than a home, because it connects wishes and dreams about the future with essential memories and feelings from the past, it offers a very intimate view into a person’s inner core. People, especially those who have left their “Heimat”, have a strong idea of it. They know what they are missing and how this has influenced them. Alois Moosmüller (2002), on writing about the term “Diaspora”, cites Stuart Hall when he says:

The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual “past”, since our relation to it, like the child’s relation to the mother, is always-already ‘after the break’. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or future, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence, but a positioning (p. 20).

The cultural identity, which Hall talks of, is naturally also a source of personal identity. Even a “Heimat” where a person has never been (like Israel for some diasporic Jews), still shapes their image of themselves. Brickell and Datta (2011) talk of “the traditional space of the home, family, community, and neighborhood, which are often the immediate site of encounters with ‘otherness’ and where notions of belonging and attachment are produced” (p. 16). Even though they use the term “home” here, what they mean also includes the idea of “Heimat”. The essence of “Heimat” is therefore not only the feeling of belonging somewhere, it is also strengthened through a contrast to others; i.e., those who do not belong there. Instead of being just a local place, this can also be a construct of similar ideas and a certain moral understanding that ties people together. A sort of collective cultural identity, like for example a specific religious behavior or the knowledge of a hybrid, imaginative and translocal identity can also serve as a “Heimat” for people, especially those who are forced out into a world they never actually wanted to go to (Moosmüller, 2002).

This feeling of identity differs significantly from the feeling people had even a few decades ago. Increasing mobility and losing your “Heimat” not only once, but sometimes several times in your life, is changing the way people look at it. “Heimat” and also identity are becoming more flexible constructs. The emphasis from the locatable factors (visible landscapes, objects, etc.) in the equation is shifting, supported by the indirectly locatable factors (containers for memory and associations), to a higher focus on the emotional factors (feelings of love, nostalgia, belonging, etc.). People, who are highly mobile and have to adapt to different settings more than once in their lives, are able to recreate their identities through this process. They incorporate the places and experiences from their past with new ones and sometimes look back to several “homes” that mesh together into a distinctive view of what their personal “Heimat” is to them. The actual sites are still important to them, although they are not a constant anymore. The unchanging, fixed factors are rather to be found in the indirectly locatable factors. Social identity, as Olaf Kühne and Annette Spellerberg (2010) describe it, is defined by the perception of belonging to a specific social category. The assignment to this category is shaped less through the locality where people grow up, and more by symbolic signs, which allow the mutual identification and exclusion of foreigners to this category.

Losing your “Heimat” can be harder for some people than for others. Edward Said quotes Ovid with the famous phrase: “*Exilium mors est*” [Exile is death] (as cited by Lal, 2005), stressing that some people are never able to process the fact that they are no longer “at home” and so simply cannot adapt to their new environment. These people can be described as not actually being mobile, but rather trapped in a new setting they do not want to be in or even consider as their new home; i.e., a place that is not their new “Heimat”. These individuals stress the importance of locatable factors (visible landscapes) more than any other factor, and at times the indirectly locatable factors—such as photos or social media posts—are used to contribute to that feeling of loss.

The answer to why some people cope better with exile than others, might be related to the reason why they left their homes in the first place, but it is also due to increasing worldwide mobility of people, information, images and attitudes. For those in exile, there is the reality of never being able to return home; whereas for other migrants, there is the possibility to return to the homes left behind more frequently. For these more mobile migrants, the concept of other places, the memory or still existing connections to them, keep playing an important role in their lives. Brickell and Datta (2011) state that “people are all firmly rooted in a particular place and time, though their daily lives often depend on people, money, ideas, and resources located in another setting” (p. 9). In these cases, people take advantage of widespread networks and connections, which add to their social capital. Most of these migrants travel voluntarily. They leave their “Heimat” because global pulling factors as described by Sheller and Urry (2006) offer opportunities that they would not have in their former homes. Mobility has not only become cheaper, but also faster and contact to home can be maintained through various channels, so that a person cannot only maintain “social relations that are located in the place in which he or she is corporeally standing, but also [...]experience social relations that are located in places elsewhere” (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 275). This ability benefits from the omnipresence of information on the internet: Real-time pictures, information, news on current events and politics, and relations to other people, are enabled and transported via computers, mobile phones and other electronic devices.

Leaving your home has become a more commonplace phenomenon in these highly mobile times. Resultantly, “Heimat” is not necessarily as fixed a place as before. It has rather transformed into a netting of ideas, memories, concepts and former homes. This is not a general alteration in structural conditions, but rather a change in awareness. It is a shift away from locatable factors to a stronger emphasis on emotional ones, escalated by indirectly locatable factors, mainly New Media. People who have never left their home, do not have very strong concepts of what “Heimat” means to them; whereas, people who are far from home can describe it more clearly. They are able to look back at their “Heimat” from the world out there and differentiate more clearly between the place they have left and the feelings they associate with it. At the same time through globalization processes, information, news and especially material goods have become more available all over the world. The image of the global village, where you can get anything, anywhere, anytime, may still be an utopic vision, but as Doreen Massey (1991) reminds us: “Dinner consists of food shipped in from all over the world” (p. 24). For some people, being able to eat what they loved when they were a child, is a huge part of what they consider as part of their “Heimat”. Therefore, the locatable factor like a certain restaurant can become less important, because the emotionality can be recreated in a setting that is very different from the original.

At the same time, there are localities that are not landmarks because they are the same all over the world. These might be the airport, or a restaurant chain like Burger King. In her essay on “Global Heimat”, Regina Römhild (2011) describes these sorts of places as a neutral territory, where immigrant children from different cultural backgrounds can meet, free from all “Heimat-associations” (p. 24). These places, however, do not just appear, they are created by people.

## EPIFANIA:

As outlined above, migration (in particular) and mobility (in general) have major implications for ideas about belonging, thus, too of “home” and “homeland”. Globalization and its effects have rendered fixed (if even fabricated) notions of “home”, as null and void. In fact, I would argue that what mobility does is expand the notion of “home” and belonging into trans-locational fluid entanglements of people, flora, fauna, things, languages, ideas, places and related memories. A person begins to become a collector of homes, while at the same time being in a sense homeless; hence, at any given time, one can experience belonging, non-belonging, (un)belonging and stretched belonging simultaneously as a consequence of the size and scale, as well as the ebb and flow, of one’s translocal and transnational network(s). One can also argue that even if a person is immobile, she or he experiences mobility and its effects vicariously because of links to others, who are mobile due to the high levels of displacement around the globe.<sup>32</sup> These are people displaced by natural disasters, civil strife and even large-scale infrastructural development, as well as numerous others who migrate<sup>33</sup> or travel for economic, educational, leisure and other reasons.

Additionally, since feeling at home is often a question of familiarity with the place, system and people located within that system or place, it follows that one might equally feel at home in Römheld’s (2011) neutral territory, or what Marc Augé (1995) describes as non-places; that is in airports, malls and the like. Take as a contemporary example, the case of renowned Hobbyist—Ben Schlappig—who has more or less lived up in the air since April 2014 (Wofford, 2015). For twenty-five year old Schlappig, the pressurized cabin of an airplane is his bedroom, office and playroom. In other words, travelling—for Schlappig—is in fact dwelling, and it is within this spatial mobility that he has found a place to belong.<sup>34</sup> This is why he says, “I don’t really physically associate anything with being home... but this is about as close as it gets... The Hong Kong airport, the Virgin Atlantic Clubhouse at JFK. I do feel at home there” (as cited by Wofford, 2015, pp. 27-28).

Here, I cannot help but also think of my own feelings when I come across one of my favorite stores, Desigual, in any city around the world. I know their products and have fond memories about acquiring items that I like at favorable prices and so it follows that I am at once at home in any Desigual store, anywhere in the world. And this has been exactly my experience with stores in Doha, Berlin, Bonn, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Amsterdam and Paris. At a different scale, the same can be said for what was my local gas station in Doha, where I knew most of the attendants from their tasks of filling my tank, washing my car and the odd conversations that we had whenever I stopped by for petrol. What is significant about all these non-places is that they do not come with the heavier emotional baggage and responsibilities that are tied to places like family-homes, home-towns, and nations. There also tends to be a greater element of choice associated with belonging to non-places. And, of

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<sup>32</sup> According to The UN Refugee Agency, in 2014, the total number of persons of concern to them was 46.3 million, as compared to 42.9 million in 2013. By mid-year 2014, there were 13 million refugees and 26 million internally displaced persons being assisted by UNHCR. Additionally, there were approximately 1.3 million asylum seekers, as well as a reported figure of 3.5 million stateless people (UNHCR, 2014).

<sup>33</sup> According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in 2013, there were 232 million international migrants living in the world (UN-DESA, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> Ben Schlappig is described by Wofford (2015) as being “one of an elite group of obsessive flyers whose mission is to outwit the airlines” (p. 3), by flying for free as much as is possible within the bounds of legally manipulated ticketing algorithms, frequent-flyer programs, other airline perks, and manufactured expenditure on credit cards. According to Wofford, Schlappig has flown more than 400,000 miles since age fifteen and spends on average six hours, up in the air, daily. This excessive spatial mobility has afforded Schlappig a kind of social mobility, which is represented by his self-orchestrated employment of continued uber-first-class travel and is also fueled by his advice on the “art of travel hacking” in style, as outlined in numerous posts on his blog *One Mile at a Time* (found at: <http://onemileatitime.boardingare.com>).

course, this choice—laden in the “politics of mobility” (Cresswell, 2010)—is exponentially associated with affluence, because the same non-place probably does not hold similar fond memories for a stowaway, a deportee, or a badly paid blue-collar worker.

It is to such affluence that David Pollock and Ruth Van Reken (2009) attest in their book, *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds*, where they provide a detailed discussion of the psychological and emotional effects on the children of expatriates, missionaries, military personnel, and others who live a significantly mobile life outside their passport country. Utilizing substantial qualitative evidence, Pollock and Van Reken highlight the unique cultural and life experiences of these children, who they categorize as Third Culture Kids (TCKs).<sup>35</sup> According to them, TCKs—especially those who lead a privileged expatriate existence—neither truly identify with their “host” country nor with their “home” country, which is often their parents’ country, or countries, of origin. Instead, TCKs see themselves as connected to an evolving global culture; i.e., a third culture that is made up of globally mobile expatriates. Additionally, TCKs tend to have spent most of their existence living in states of acculturation.<sup>36</sup> They are also apparently highly-skilled and high academic achievers, who have learnt to be adaptable, flexible and inter-culturally aware; however, TCKs are also prone to suffer from a lack of belonging—a certain kind of rootlessness and restlessness that involves a sense of insecurity, plus some difficulties in relating to settled individuals and communities in their “home” culture.

Additionally, I would argue that wealth, high income and other forms of capital (social and cultural) play huge roles in making it possible for TCKs to make their belonging to a global culture not only a vivid imaginary, but also a lived reality that is enacted daily through the acquisition of multiple homes in different locations; the access to influential networks, for work and leisure, spread around the world; the ability to buy or order-in various cultural, literary, cinematic and musical products or artefacts, wherever they are stopped; the ability to gain legal entry and residency in multiple locations, for study, employment or pleasure purposes; and/or the easy availability of valuable information and transportation technology for these purposes. As highlighted by Cresswell’s (2010) discussions on the “politics of mobility”, these kinds of assets and resources are not readily available to all; hence, there may very well be distinctions in how socioeconomic status, gender, nationality, “race,” ethnicity, sexuality, disability and other intersectional vectors mediate ideas of belonging—in a more mobile world—and the ability to embody those ideas. It is also economic differences that become significant for determining one’s ability to reap the benefits of mobility, particularly in a world in which the income inequalities between the filthy rich and the middle classes, never mind the poorest of the poor, are more marked than ever (“Feral Rich”, 2013; Sardar, 2010, 2015; Smiley & West, 2012) and continue to widen as a consequence of the globalization of capitalism as we now know it.

I am of the view that just as places called “home” or “homeland” shape our identities, as in the case of TCKs and their third (global) culture, our identities also shape those places; thus, the spatiality of these two categories is a product, producer and reproducer of social relations and power dynamics (Soja, 1985). What is significant for our time is that we are yet to fathom the full-scale effects of information and communication technology—alongside new social media—on this socio-spatiality of belonging, home-making, or even nation-building. Nowadays, we must consider the fact that most of us are fluidly and precariously nested in an ever-changing material-semiotic assemblage of people, things, places and ideas, at subatomic, cellular, organism and cosmic levels (Deleuze & Guattari,

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<sup>35</sup> One example of a self-described adult-TCK (ATCK), is Dr. Mary Mkandawire based out of Malawi, where she is currently writing a blog series on the pros and cons of living such a life, plus on how best to parent and raise TCKs. See: <http://drmarylivingonpurpose.com/2015/06/12/let-me-share-this-powerful-breakthrough-with-you-2/>

<sup>36</sup> Due to high international mobility of many expatriate families, some TCKs may spend their entire childhood, teenage and adult lives in acculturation or adaptation contexts.

1987; Latour 2011); all to which digital technology (and its spatiality), is increasingly and epigenetically becoming a key part.

Digital acquisition has grown to the extent that previous alarm cries about a digital divide, are increasingly being dampened through the advent and incredible uptake of the smartphone, for example, which has transformative powers arising from its portability, plus the continuous reduction of costs for connectivity, hardware and software (“Planet of Phones”, 2015). Additionally, our smartphones play a lynchpin role to “the success of the ‘internet of things’” (“Truly Personal Computer”, 2015, p. 19). Now with each of us and the proverbial “spy in one’s pocket” (p. 21), notions of insecurity, democracy,<sup>37</sup> governance, surveillance, migration, etc.—embedded in the German notion of “Heimat”—should be expected to raise their ugly heads, even as we do not as yet have the language or tools to determine their composition, thus, effects.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, concepts like solidarity, resistance, belonging, anarchy and revolution will take on new characteristics, yet to materialize or be understood in order to face the stark realities of our increasingly postnormal existences (Sardar, 2010, 2015) and the uncertain futures.

How does digitalization (e.g., New Media) influence notions of “home” and belonging?

(Mareike Bier, May 2015)

#### **MAREIKE:**

Earlier in this paper, I argued that there are three factors that constitute “Heimat”. A thesis derived from this idea is that, since “Heimat” is never a concept of the present, people hold on to tokens or tangible memories that might mean nothing to others, but represent highly individualized homes to those who keep these tokens. Ultimately, these tokens are a link between visible, place-bound connotations of “Heimat” and purely emotional thoughts and memories about it. A picture is a good example of this. On it, for example, you might see a happy family, together in their backyard. The picture shows only the exact moment the photograph was taken. Everybody is smiling, probably because the photographer said to do so and maybe also because it *was* a happy moment. Now the person in possession of that photograph no longer lives in that place, their parents have died, and the house has been sold to some investment firm that has built a parking lot there. Still, even though the picture *is not* the “Heimat” place itself, it still *carries* the message of belonging to that place. The person looking at the picture *can travel back* through the photo to the house, is *reminded* of little details, *feels nostalgic* about her or his childhood and *remembers* this diffuse feeling of happiness and security that he or she had during that exact moment. At the same time, the picture can be shown to others, a story can be told to recreate the associated feelings, so that others can share them. It is indirectly locatable factors, such as this, that serve as the container for combining the very abstract level of emotions and the immediately experienced level of locatable sites.

Nowadays, instead of that picture, New Media serve as platforms, tokens or links between past and present. They resemble locations and (re-)create emotions that are tied to those places. Since the invention of the telephone, advanced technologies in the communications sector have enhanced a form of virtual mobility, available for millions of people all over the world. The television and the

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<sup>37</sup> Victoria Bernal (2014), as described in reviews of her book, *Nation as Network: Diaspora, Cyberspace and Citizenship*, provides us with evidence on how Eritrean sovereignty and citizenship are being transformed by migration and new media (Willeke, 2015; Oladepo, 2015).

<sup>38</sup> A blog post by Clifford Lee (2015) discusses the importance of developing conscious digital natives and describes the work being undertaken, in this regard, by “Youth Radio” in Oakland, California; including the development of a digital footprint lesson plan.

internet, especially, enable people towards forms of “mobile privatization”; that is, “an experience of simultaneously staying home while imaginatively ‘going places’” (Morley, 2001, p. 437). According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a specialized agency of the United Nations researching ICT all over the world, almost three billion people had regular access to the internet in 2014; that is, almost 40 percent of the world population. Additionally, more than 95 percent of people worldwide had a mobile phone, which was out of a total of 6.9 billion people.<sup>39</sup> Facebook was used by 1.2 billion people in 2014<sup>40</sup>, Twitter claimed to have 271 million active users per month<sup>41</sup>, more than 500 million people used the instant messaging tool WhatsApp,<sup>42</sup> and, in 2013, Skype congratulated itself on having two billion minutes of us “connecting with each other” every day.<sup>43</sup> And this list does not even include the huge online players in China or South America, where Facebook and Co. have equally successful competitors. Still, there is a digital divide between the rich and poor. But this gap is closing. Nowadays, with more than 95 percent of the world population having a mobile phone, it is only a matter of time before all these phones contribute to guaranteeing access to the internet, even to the less fortunate.

Communication, including the wish to stay in touch with people and places of the past, is an essential feature for those living far away from what they consider as their “home”. Communication, compared to the time when people had no internet and collect-calls were extremely expensive, has become very cheap, very omnipresent and also very simultaneous. Modern technology allows for participation in real-time; via satellite and instant-messaging, people can participate in almost everything around the globe at the same time that the events are actually happening. New forms of presence and absence are being created, simply through the internet and “online-world”. Olaf Kühne and Anette Spellerberg (2010) even talk about a dis-embedding of people from the real world due to connections made in the virtual world of the internet. Distance, for example, is not a major factor anymore. If a person uses Skype to call someone, it does not matter whether they are in the same city or on another continent, as long as the internet or 3G connection is stable. An email can be written anytime and will be received by the addressee, no matter what time of the day it is. Attachments, like pictures, videos or audio files, do not incur any extra fees, are easy to create, and add to the real-time feeling (Kühne & Spellerberg, 2010). Most of these features can even be performed on a single device, even a rather cheap one. Via satellite and Google-Maps, people can see their hometown every day. They can even check the weather at home on their mobile phone and read the daily local newspaper via the internet; no matter how far away they are and how long they have been gone. Online games or chats can be accessed anytime and the feeling of really talking face-to-face with someone, as if he or she is in the same room, is almost perfectly imitated.

Therefore, New Media are the best way to demonstrate how indirectly locatable factors work nowadays. The availability of information, pictures, live streams, telephone calls, local newspapers and so on—all online—contribute to the feelings a person attaches to certain locations. While they emphasize the connection to places from the past for some, they can also destroy them. It is

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<sup>39</sup> As retrieved from International Telecommunication Union (2014): Statistics, on August 17, 2014, at: <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/default.aspx>.

<sup>40</sup> As retrieved from Statista.com, on August 17, 2014, at: <http://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>.

<sup>41</sup> As retrieved from Twitter Inc., on August 17, 2014, at: <https://about.twitter.com/company>.

<sup>42</sup> As retrieved from Statista.com, on August 17, 2014, at: <http://www.statista.com/statistics/260819/number-of-monthly-active-whatsapp-users/>.

<sup>43</sup> As retrieved from Skype, on August 17, 2014, at: <http://blogs.skype.com/2013/04/03/thanks-for-making-skype-a-part-of-your-daily-lives-2-billion-minutes-a-day/>.

important to stress here that New Media do *not create* a new form of “Heimat”, but rather *create a new awareness* of it. They function as “memory-holders”, containers which link the already described factors (locatable, indirectly locatable and emotional) together and have an essential part in redefining indirectly locatable factors in a mobile age. New Media either stress the locality of a place (e.g., when video-skyping with someone back home) or the emotional connection (e.g., when looking at old pictures found in an online picture library).

We can safely agree that new forms of mobility, physical as well as digital, have changed the way we communicate and see the world around us. On the other hand, “Heimat” is not just an imaginary concept, completely free of all locatable factors. I would strongly argue that no one sees their belonging as exclusively rooted in a digital world, free from all “objective” factors; that is, basically placeless and detached from material things or the body itself. In other words, New Media *are not* a new form of “Heimat”. They merely serve as a *new way* to understand, transport and define “Heimat”. They act as an “in between” factor (linking locatable and emotional factors), and thus they do not replace one of the others, but merely connect them to each other. And this, in its core, is not new. Links between localities and emotions have always existed. Tangible objects have always been the bridge between locatable and emotional factors; however, New Media, as described by Prensky (2001), serves as a fully new language, which is spoken by many; some still with an accent, but the digital native population as described in our introduction is growing. The internet, communication technologies<sup>44</sup> and social networks are changing the way that people interact with each other, and also how they structure their lives.

#### **EPIFANIA:**

I beg to differ on the potential of New Media to act as a new kind of “home” or “Heimat”, especially as one can observe that new media and digitalization, do not only serve to facilitate expressions of associations to “homes” and “homelands”, or belongings to places and groups, but also provide some with other (digital) locations to call home. This can be argued to be the case with a game like SimCity,<sup>45</sup> where virtual communities and identities are constructed, or for that matter with real-time discussion circles on WhatsApp, Facebook and so on. Social media platforms also provide us with dynamic podiums for exhibiting and sharing various forms of belonging; be that as part of a Facebook group for football fans, for dieters, for artists, for writers, for Afghan, Ghanaian or British nationalists, for ex-pats, for we-love-the-Kardashians groupies, and so on; the possibilities are endless and can be as innocuous or adversarial, local or global, apolitical or political, as one chooses. As a further case in point, Heike Greschke (2012) takes us through her study of whether there is indeed a home in cyberspace by looking at the daily interactions of Paraguayan migrants within the digital space of Cibervalle. Here she finds that “Cibervalle is a social formation that allows its members to live together regardless of geographical distance” (p. 22) and within this cyber place, Cibervalle’s inhabitants discuss political, cultural, social, and everyday concerns - irrespective of whether they knew each other before joining this “socio-electronic network” or not. The result of these engagements is that a virtual meeting point becomes a central location for the establishment of a global community that, albeit based on “nation-ethno-cultural belonging”, is detached “from the territorial place of residence” (p. 21).

Today, technological interfaces such as New Media are powerful tools and perhaps even actors within the ebb and flow of material-semiotic assemblages (Latour, 2011), but ones that are increasingly a part of a burgeoning digital spatiality, which is rhizomatically intertwined—sometimes

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<sup>44</sup> This includes the telephone, digital chatrooms, e-mail communication, messenger services, and even visual modules like emoticon or emoji.

<sup>45</sup> See the URL for SimCity at: <http://www.simcity.com/>



in symbiosis and often too in direct competition—with social spatiality that embodies various cultural nuances, political ideologies, environmental conditions and economic realities. As Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) tell us, a rhizome is many things including a conception of knowledge, an image of thought, a model for a society or culture, or an attitude or strategy. A rhizome is also a way in which multiplicities connect together—in open-ended becoming—as a non-stratified plane of consistency, with no center, no periphery, no hierarchy, no middle and no end; however, being here a discussion of real societies that are often still mired in a language of hierarchical Cartesian binaries (Ravetz, 2015; Funtowicz & Pereira, 2015), then, we must also assume that they are made up of complex and changing mixtures of the following two types of formations: meshworks and hierarchies (De Landa, 1995, 1998).

As the cost of mobile technology decreases, the levels of telephony-gadgetry ownership will increase globally; along with the potential for individuals to be members of—and also ostracized from—all kinds of digitized communities. At the same time, membership to online groups will continue to have effects on face-to-face social interactions and questions of presence in the real world (Greschke, 2012).<sup>46</sup> In some cases, real world presence will be extended or enhanced through the digital, whereas in others it will be hampered by attention deficits and inability to engage with one's immediate surroundings without some sort of digital interface. Already there are suggestions that prolonged new media use has adverse effects on the formation of long-term memory (Gregoire, 2013), plus there are visible differences across generations between digital natives and digital immigrants in terms of uses of the technology and its many platforms (Prensky 2001). So whether this extends to our different conceptions of home would need to be further studied; however, bearing in mind the differences that most likely already exist between highly mobile individuals and their immobile counterparts; all of whose experiences also vary along intersectional lines of socio-economic status, gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and much more.

## V. Conclusion

In this paper, we were not only in conversation with each other, but also with the various texts (and texts about texts) on concepts of migration and homesteading within both the Global North and South; two locational constructs for which knowledge on similar notions is rarely ever seen to share the same discursive space. And yet what becomes clear from our contemplations on “Heimat”, “home”, “homeland” and belonging—even within a digital age—is that none of us is truly free from the struggle over geography (Said, 1977/1995). It follows then that contemporary quests for personal, and especially national identity, take on specific political connotations linked to constructing notions of “home” and “homeland” (plus “Heimat”), alongside questions of belonging within a confluence of spatial dimensions signified by place, scale, territory, networks and an always becoming positionality. As Edward Said also posits, the struggle for geography is not just encapsulated by combat over territory and resources, but also over ideas, images, imaginings, memories and notions of belonging; hence, the significance of digital and actual spaces in the construction of those narratives and our somewhat angst-ridden quests to better understand what “Heimat”, “home” and “homeland” mean in both reality and concept.

Nowadays, positionalities are very much contingent on a negotiation among core identities, border identities and transnational figurations based on ethnic, linguistic, religious and other alliances in support of these kinds of, often, political projects intended to produce models that convert

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<sup>46</sup> More specifically, Greschke (2012) tells us that in the case of Ciberville, there is the co-construction of “varieties of interactions and presence through which the boundaries between imagined, virtual and physical reality, presence and absence, sociality and technology become increasingly blurred” (p. 210).

minorities into majorities (Deleuze, 1995). Yet these minority becomings, with their emergent identities, are not without the tensions inherent in forming the “personal is political” (Hanisch, 1969), “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991), “imagined worlds” (Appadurai, 1996), “multiple modernities” (Eisenstadt, 2000), “strategic essentialisms” (Spivak & Grosz, 1990), or even “whole nations becoming diasporic in relation to their past under the pressures of global media and the maelstrom of postnationalism” (Huyssen, 2003). Additionally, as Huyssen (1995) argues (and mentioned earlier), the cultural memory cultivated for ‘local’ identity formation is always a case of *recherche* versus recuperation; i.e., a case of (re)formulating and re-constructing social imaginaries, which are under constant contestation – even when retrieved from the annals of history.

This noisy and controversial melee of discourse, materiality, action and interaction over belonging and identity—as intimately tied to notions of “home”, “homeland”, and “Heimat”—is now also being mediated by mobilities and a rapidly increasing—yet barely understood—digital landscape. This is a space within which the rapid spread of mobile telephony alone, in the Global South, has led to multiple commentaries about “technology leapfrogging” (Cascio, 2004; “Limits of Leapfrogging” 2008; Fong, 2009; Kimenyi & Moyo, 2011), which supposedly empowers the poor into “making bottom up initiatives of personal choice” (Davies, 2011, p. 140).<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, contemporary phenomena like New Media provide us with a variety of options over where to locate our homes, what makes us feel at home, and who to include in or exclude from these ‘safe’ spaces. Paradoxically, New Media also houses an illusion of such choices, as a critical component for an age in which Noam Chomsky (as cited by Achbar & Wintonick, 1992) argues that consent is purposely manufactured by the media in order to sustain political hegemonies.

In such a complex, chaotic and contradictory context, and especially through our own distinct personal stories (Farman, 2015), New Media assists in the reinforcement of emplacement (including by creating new spaces and platforms for engagement), just as much as it also—simultaneously—contributes to maintaining mobilities and displacements from home settings. Additionally, one might argue that living in this postnormal era—epitomized by the filthy (feral) rich, avarice and neoliberal market economies (“Feral Rich”, 2013)—we find ourselves more and more in rather individualistic pursuits of real and virtual homesteads that are required to be both secure and yet open to the world, as we negotiate an inescapable netting of ideas, memories, concepts and realities of our “home”, “homeland” or even idyllic “Heimat” choices, which cannot be easily availed by all.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> According to Rakesh Kapoor (2011), in India alone, there was an over thirteen times growth of telephone use (mostly mobile phones) over a period of just eight years; i.e., an increase of telephone use from 45 million in 2002 to 600 million in 2010. It can be assumed that this number has further increased in the past five years since then.

<sup>48</sup> This being a reality that is even visible in the differences in our own past inhabitancies and mobility turns as described much earlier in this paper, within the section on our distinct positionalities.

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## Information on the competence network Crossroads Asia

The competence network Crossroads Asia derives its name from the geographical area extending from eastern Iran to western China and from the Aral Sea to northern India. The scholars collaborating in the competence network pursue a novel, 'post-area studies' approach, making thematic figurations and mobility the overarching perspectives of their research in Crossroads Asia. The concept of figuration implies that changes, minor or major, within one element of a constellation always affect the constellation as a whole; the network will test the value of this concept for understanding the complex structures framed by the cultural, political and socio-economic contexts in Crossroads Asia. Mobility is the other key concept for studying Crossroads Asia, which has always been a space of entangled interaction and communication, with human beings, ideas and commodities on the move across and beyond cultural, social and political borders. Figurations and mobility thus form the analytical frame of all three main thematic foci of our research: conflict, migration, and development.

- Five sub-projects in the working group "Conflict" will focus upon specific localized conflict-figurations and their relation to structural changes, from the interplay of global politics, the erosion of statehood, and globalization effects from above and below, to local struggles for autonomy, urban-rural dynamics and phenomena of diaspora. To gain a deeper understanding of the rationales and dynamics of conflict in Crossroads Asia, the sub-projects aim to analyze the logics of the genesis and transformation of conflictual figurations, and to investigate autochthonous conceptions of, and modes of dealing with conflicts. Particular attention will be given to the interdependence of conflict(s) and mobility.
- Six sub-projects in the working group "Migration" aim to map out trans-local figurations (networks and flows) within Crossroads Asia as well as figurations extending into both neighboring and distant areas (Arabian Peninsula, Russia, Europe, Australia, America). The main research question addresses how basic organizational and functional networks are structured, and how these structures affect what is on the move (people, commodities, ideas etc.). Conceptualizing empirical methods for mapping mobility and complex connectivities in trans-local spaces is a genuine desideratum. The aim of the working group is to refine the method of qualitative network analysis, which includes flows as well as their structures of operation, and to map mobility and explain mobility patterns.
- In the "Development"-working group four sub-projects are focusing on the effects of spatial movements (flows) and interwoven networks at the micro level with regard to processes of long-term social change, and with a special focus on locally perceived livelihood opportunities and their potential for implementation. The four sub-projects focus on two fundamental aspects: first, on structural changes in processes of transformation of patterns of allocation and distribution of resources, which are contested both at the household level and between individual and government agents; secondly, on forms of social mobility, which may create new opportunities, but may also cause the persistence of social inequality.

The competence network understands itself as a mediator between the academic study of Crossroads Asia and efforts to meet the high demand for information on this area in politics and the public. Findings of the project will feed back into academic teaching, research outside the limits of the competence network, and public relations efforts. Further information on Crossroads Asia is available at [www.crossroads-asia.de](http://www.crossroads-asia.de).



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