

H

Homeⁱ

Ashrafal Alamⁱⁱ

Shadow place: reimagining connections in an era of climate change



Figure 1. Finding home, Gabura, Bangladesh (2015) © Ashrafal Alam

This photograph (fig. 1) was taken in January 2015, six years after Cyclone Aila devastated the island settlement of Gabura in coastal Bangladesh. In the photo, Jomila¹ was out for a walk on that day to look over her family's land, which remained inundated with seawater for months in the aftermath of Aila. The family's only arable piece of land lost its productivity due to increased soil salinity, forcing them to leave their village. I first met Jomila in Khulna, where I was exploring the ways climate displaced coastal villagers² negotiate home after

¹ Name anonymized.

² Moving to cities has been a common coping strategy for displaced coastal communities. Every day, 4000 Bangladeshis are moving to cities in search of a safer life away from the challenges of increasingly extreme weather. See Roy, Hulme and Hanlon, "It's too early."

arrival to a nearby regional urban centre³. Jomila recounted:

“We left the village about four months after Aila as there was not much left to survive. Five years passed, I still feel that I am tied to here; whenever I can afford, I come back for a day or two, I sit on the edge (of the land), try to convince myself - I might be able to start here again. Khulna city helps me survive, but there are times, I feel denied, if not, sometimes I can feel that I am unwanted there, it suffocates, I then rush back here, to home...”

The distress, uncertainty, refusal and longing in Jomila’s words were all too familiar, resonating well with many island communities in the Pacific, who are on the brink of displacement at a much larger scale due to sea level rise.⁴ The gravity of the crisis is felt even in well-established urban centres, such as Jakarta in Indonesia, where a plan is under way for moving the country’s capital city to a newly developed urban settlement because the existing capital city is sinking.⁵

Be it voluntary relocation by the individual or a planned resettlement initiative *en masse*, it does not necessarily guarantee a successful ‘home’ for those displaced.⁶ Home is both a spatial and temporal sense of belonging that provides familiarity, security, comfort, order, and permanence for the homemaker.⁷ However, we need to rethink what the meaning of home should entail in an increasingly mobile world triggered by sea level rise and climate change induced displacement.

It is timely to emphasise that home is essentially multi-scalar beyond the normative, sedentary and place-specific qualities that construct the popular imagination of home – ‘home’ can be felt in multiple places. Home, being “shaped by everyday practices, lived experiences, social relations, memories and emotions,” is not necessarily always bounded within a material shelter or a place.⁸ Feelings of home can be very intimate, at the scale of the individual’s body and can extend across the household, neighbourhood, city, state and beyond.⁹

The ways Jomila and many displaced communities struggle to make sense of home over time and across the origin and new destinations, imagining home beyond its place-specificity has much to offer in rethinking spatial and environmental justice. Because, those who are most affected by sea-level rise and lose home are neither solely capable of bettering their situation nor are any of their actions deemed responsible for the climate-change crisis in the first place.¹⁰

Val Plumwood’s “shadow place” concept is helpful to reveal the nature of these climate change “double inequalities.”¹¹ The concept challenges the “false consciousness” of a “singular home place” that leads us to see salvation in “attachment” to place, and enjoins us to selfishly care for and belong to “our place” by dissociating and dematerialising all those

³ Alam, McGregor and Houston, “Women’s mobility.”

⁴ Matthews, “Climigration.”

⁵ Lyons, “Indonesia moving its capital.”

⁶ Price, “Looking back.”

⁷ Blunt and Dowling, *Home*.

⁸ Blunt, “Cultural Geography,” 506, 510.

⁹ Blunt and Dowling, *Home*.

¹⁰ As we know, those most affected by climate change are neither responsible nor capable whereas those who have capacity are not showing the responsibility to those vulnerable. See Füssel, “How inequitable,” for example.

¹¹ Füssel, “How inequitable,” 597.

extended networks, communities and places that we might need to exploit.¹² The ‘split’ between our place and those shadow places paves the way for denial of any responsibility to those affected.

For example, the city of Melbourne is a quintessential place for many to call ‘successful’ home, ranked within the top five most liveable cities in the world.¹³ However, one “nice ‘north’ place”¹⁴ like Melbourne, shockingly, comes at the expense of an ecological footprint “twenty-eight times” its direct physical footprint,¹⁵ causing environmental harms to those “not so nice” shadow places. Yet, should the communities from those distressed places seek refuge in Melbourne, those responsibilities are denied.¹⁶ If allowed, those shadow communities are reduced to convenient stereotypes such as the cheap workforce in the city’s informal sector.¹⁷

Recognition of shadow places triggers a new moral positioning of how the marginalised (shadow) communities can be given the right and opportunity to negotiate home in the places where they move. Because of their presence, the receiving communities suffer xenophobia and fear that their place might be lost, its identity altered. Shadow place helps disentangle the mindset of the elevated ‘our place’ or ‘home’ to accommodate others. This would help to alter attitudes that disenfranchise vulnerable communities from their rights and privileges in places of resettlement, enabling opportunities for flourishing and comfort.

Shadow place as a concept provides a relational reading of multiple places to help rethink the ways home can be disengaged from a ‘singular’ place discourse – home can be dwelt in and practised over time across multiple places. This has significant practical implications for migrant resettlements. By disintegrating the notion of home (and wellbeing) from the fixity of a specific shelter it would help displaced communities develop a sense of belonging to a range of places that satisfy their spatial and temporal needs, not by trying to achieve the self-sufficiency of a singular ‘present’ place but making oneself ‘at home’ in more-than-one places, as required.¹⁸

Overall, the concept of shadow place opens up opportunities to rethink home (and homemaking) as a greater ecological awareness and environmental justice project that challenges the notion of a closed-off and “self-sufficient place.”¹⁹ Recognising multi-scalar or multi-sited home ‘places’ means recognising and connecting multiple places of affiliations, linkages and flows that displaced communities require to initiate the aesthetic, cultural and economic practices to negotiate and make sense of home in a transitory world.²⁰ Often these are “slow, small and shared” processes of finding home in which migrants’ past lives shapes the meaning and the demands of the present.²¹

As a point of departure, I suggest that in rethinking home for climate displaced communities, we must unsettle the loose discourse about the ‘home’, including the dominant “politics of

¹² Plumwood, “Shadow Places,” 139.

¹³ Henriques-Gomes, “World’s most liveable cities.”

¹⁴ Plumwood, “Shadow Places,” 140.

¹⁵ James, *Urban sustainability*, 5.

¹⁶ Sparrow, “Australia’s Orwellian anti-refugee system.”

¹⁷ Alam and Miller, “Slow, small and shared.”

¹⁸ See Alam and Miller, “Slow, small and shared” for examples.

¹⁹ Lloyd and Vaasta, *Reimagining home*, 1.

²⁰ See Alam, McGregor and Houston, “Neither sensibly homed nor homeless” for details on aesthetic, spiritual and economic imaginaries that inform climate migrants’ homemaking practices in cities.

²¹ Alam and Miller, “Slow, small and shared.”

propinquity” that tend to “rule in everything that vies for attention in a given location.”²² The concept of shadow place calls for a renewed consciousness and conscience of living in the world as a shared place. This is a call for a new politics of connectivity, freed from the baggage of place-based chauvinism and nostalgia for both “us” (the privileged ones) and “them” (such as Jomila), that can be privileged over a “xenophobic and selfish” notion of our place or home.²³

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Fiona Miller, Emily Potter, Eva Lövbrand and Donna Houston of the Shadow Places Network for inviting me to contribute to the collection. Thanks to two anonymous reviewers for giving valuable feedback.

References

- Alam, Ashraful, Andrew McGregor and Donna Houston. “Neither sensibly homed nor homeless: re-imagining migrant homes through more-than-human relations.” *Social & Cultural Geography* 21, no. 8 (2020): 1122-45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2018.1541245>.
- Alam, Ashraful, Andrew McGregor and Donna Houston. “Women’s mobility, neighbourhood socio-ecologies and homemaking in urban informal settlements.” *Housing Studies* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2019.1708277>.
- Alam, Ashraful and Fiona Miller. “Slow, small and shared voluntary relocations: Learning from the experience of migrants living on the urban fringes of Khulna, Bangladesh.” *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 60, no. 3 (2019): 325-38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.12244>.
- Amin, Ash. “Regions unbound: towards a new politics of place.” *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 86, no. 1 (2004): 33-44.
- Blunt, Alison. “Cultural geography: cultural geographies of home.” *Progress in Human Geography* 29, no. 4 (2005): 505-15.
- Blunt, Alison and Robyn Dowling. *Home*. Oxon: Routledge, 2006.
- Füssel, Hans-Martin. “How inequitable is the global distribution of responsibility, capability, and vulnerability to climate change: A comprehensive indicator-based assessment.” *Global Environmental Change* 20, no. 4 (2010): 597-611.
- Henriques-Gomes, Luke. “World's most liveable cities: Vienna's win leaves Sydney and Melbourne in a spin.” *The Guardian*, September 4, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/sep/04/worlds-most-liveable-cities-viennas-win-leaves-sydney-and-melbourne-in-a-spin>.
- James, Paul. *Urban sustainability in theory and practice: circles of sustainability*. Oxon: Routledge, 2014.
- Lloyd, Justine and Ellie Vasta, eds. *Reimagining home in the 21st century*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017.
- Lyons, Kate. “Why is Indonesia moving its capital city? Everything you need to know.” *The Guardian*, August 27, 2019.

²² Amin calls for a non-territorial reading of and an alternate politics of ‘place’ that are not spatially bound processes and institutions; Amin, “Regions unbound,” 39.

²³ Milman, “UN drops plan to help move climate-change affected people.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/27/why-is-indonesia-moving-its-capital-city-everything-you-need-to-know>.

Matthews, Tony. “‘Climigration’: when communities must move because of climate change.” *The Conversation*, September 16, 2019. <https://theconversation.com/climigration-when-communities-must-move-because-of-climate-change-122529>.

Milman, Oliver. “UN drops plan to help move climate-change affected people.” *The Guardian*, October 7, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/oct/07/un-drops-plan-to-create-group-to-relocate-climate-change-affected-people>.

Plumwood, Val. “Shadow places and the politics of dwelling.” *Australian Humanities Review* 44 (2008): 139-50.

Price, Susanna. “Looking back on development and disaster-related displacement and resettlement, anticipating climate-related displacement in the Asia Pacific region.” *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 60, no. 2 (2019): 191-204. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apv.12224>.

Roy, Manoj, David Hulme and Joseph Hanlon. “It’s too early to talk about climate change refugees in Bangladesh.” *The Conversation*, November 11, 2016. <http://theconversation.com/its-too-early-to-talk-about-climate-change-refugees-in-bangladesh-68444>.

Sparrow, Jeff. “Australia's Orwellian anti-refugee system hints at what's to come for climate refugees.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jul/16/australias-orwellian-anti-refugee-system-hints-at-whats-to-come-for-climate-refugees>.

© 2020 Ashraful Alam

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)



ⁱ Alam, Ashraful. “Home.” *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2020). <https://www.shadowplaces.net/concepts>

ⁱⁱ Ashraful Alam is a Lecturer in the School of Geography at University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand <ash.alam@otago.ac.nz>