The Paradox of Home

Fenneke Wekker

'Acad-Slam';

Three minute paper to

The Academy of Urban Superdiversity

Berlin, 10-04-2015

1.

In many studies on migration and diasporas, as well as in political programs and social policies, there is a persistent emphasis on the importance of feeling at home in the country of residence.

At the same time the notion and meaning of home is hardly elaborated upon by policy makers and social scientists.

But what is home? What does home mean and why does home seem to be so self- evident? I think it is important to learn more about the notion of home, in order to understand its intertwinement with citizenship, identity and mechanisms of national and local in- and exclusion.

Based on my research, I first of all suggest that feelings of home refer to the feeling we had as a child: the feeling that home was just the way it was, normal and good, because we didn't know any better.

It refers to a very specific combination of sensorial, material, emotional and social aspects. Home is a situation, rather than a fixed place, that is imbued with moral ideas of care, intimacy and personal relationships.

2.

I conducted ethnographic research in three Dutch neighbourhoods. I asked many residents, both migrants and refugees, as well as native born Dutch, whether or not they felt at home in their neighbourhood and why.

Figure 1. Drinking coffee in public space

It turned out that those residents who did feel at home could hardly explain why they did so. They were just feeling at home, they said.

Figure 2. Having dinner at a neighbourhood restaurant

At the same time, those who said they did not feel at home, could not stop talking about it. Their feeling of a home-that-is-lost touched upon deep feelings of displacement, exclusion and insecurity.

3.

I found that the *feeling* of home is of great importance and shared by all of my respondents. It seems to be a universal feeling.

However, *notions* of home differ widely.

Home, first of all, turns out to be a normative idea about what a good home should be.

Moreover, it is an exclusive idea: no one can feel at home anywhere with anyone. My research shows that whenever one group starts to feel deeply at home in the neighbourhood, the other group tends to experience a loss of home (Duyvendak & Wekker, forthcoming).

So, if home is a moral category, which by definition excludes those who embrace a different notion of 'a good home', should we then try to enhance these feelings in public space? Or should we rather stimulate a light sense of home only?