

Review: Annabelle Wilkins, *Migration, Work and Home-Making in the City. Dwelling and Belonging among Vietnamese Communities in London*

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*Migration, Work and Home-Making in the City* is an ethnographic study of the experiences of the Vietnamese diaspora within the city of London, focusing on their experiences and practices of home-making and belonging and how these impact on notions of identity and home. This work reflects the historical sweep of Vietnamese forced to flee Vietnam as refugees in the 1970s through to more recent Vietnamese migrants for both work and educational purposes in more recent years. At the time of writing, the author, Annabelle Wilkins, was a Research Associate on the project 'Translation, interpreting, and the British Humanitarian Response to asylum seeker arrivals since the 1940s' at the University of Manchester.

The book itself is divided into seven chapters plus an introduction focusing on issues including: Conceptualisation of home, work and migration within urban contexts (Chapter One) focusing on the conceptual framework and methodologies underpinning the study; Locating Vietnamese communities in East London (Chapter Two) focusing on East London as a site of migration and its history of migration, settlement and diversity and the arrival of the first Vietnamese communities; Experiences of departures, journeys and arrivals (Chapter Three) frames the narrative of Vietnamese refugees and migrants and the "experiences of departure from Vietnam and arrival in East London, highlighting the diversity of their migration trajectories and providing a backdrop to the personal and geopolitical factors that influenced their decisions" (p. 6); Experiences of work, home and the city between Vietnam and London (Chapter Four) considers the importance of visual cultures and the role of objects as a basis for how individuals construct their notions of home between Vietnam and East London, and considers notions of transnationalism that help formulate relationships between multiple "homes", work and the city; Material and spiritual concepts of home (Chapter Five) considers the importance of spiritual and religious influences on the Vietnamese diaspora; and The concept of home itself within a super-diverse city; Future of home-making and the (im)possibilities of belonging (Chapter Six) focuses on the narrative experiences of the Vietnamese diaspora around the concepts of future homes and the possibility of return migration to Vietnam.

"For the migrant, home is a carpet bag of memories, emotions and experiences." (Anne Kershan, senior editor's preface, in Wilkins, 2019, p. vii).

*Migration, Work and Home-Making in the City* draws extensively on the experiences of the Vietnamese community located within the London Borough of Hackney. Over 20 million Vietnamese have resettled in Britain between 1975 and the late 1980s, although Wilkins points

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out that the Vietnamese population in Britain 'has been regarded as "invisible" in comparison to other migrant groups' (Wilkins, 2019, p. xx). Her research has focused on how the turmoil of migration can help to forge new identities and senses of belonging within new community contexts. The aim of this work is to explore the intertwined relationships of home, work and migration on the daily existence of Vietnamese residents in East London. Through this work, Wilkins aims to bring to the fore the individual narratives of the Vietnamese diaspora and to focus on the diversity of their migration experiences.

In the Introduction, Wilkins highlights how there have been few studies undertaken on the situation of the Vietnamese community in East London, compared to an established and growing base of literature focusing on other ethnic and migrant communities in this part of the city. Have the experiences of the Vietnamese community just been overlooked or been silenced within the wider discourses looking at migration experiences within East London? This is a concept we have been working with in relation to our Refugee Archives at the University of East London. How do we ensure that we are collecting archival materials that are representative of minority communities and, where their voices are absent, how can we ensure we can ethically engage to ensure these narratives are documented?

Wilkins highlights the significance of her theoretical framework in under-pinning the narrative engagement within this book by connecting work, home and migration within the wider aspects of the city and considering geopolitical aspects of home and the relationship to migration. The theoretical framework brings together notions of geopolitical perspectives on migration, work and human mobility whilst also considering the challenges of (re)making home within conditions of super-diversity and restrictive immigration practices framed within the Hostile Environment. It also considers the influence of power relations and political structures and their impact of the experiences of Vietnamese migrants on their experiences of navigating migration, work, study and their daily lives in inhabiting a multicultural city.

The research framework encompasses both ethnography, qualitative interviews and visual methods with the purpose of enabling a holistic approach to consider both practices and meanings of home, work and migration within the wider framework of the city. The book also attempts to highlight the importance of visual cultures in relation to notions of remembering and recovering home. The referencing and use of visual and material cultures was one of the key aspects that drew me to this work as, in recent years, this has been an area of interest in relation to the Refugee Archive collections we house here at the University of East London. The [Crafting Resistance exhibition](#) in 2018 focusing on the Chilean diaspora community in London, focused heavily on a collection of over one-hundred objects loaned especially for the exhibition, and created by Chileans whilst detained as political prisoners during the military Junta of General Augusto Pinochet. This generated interest in how we, as an archival repository, determine what we mean by "the archive" and how we can look to move beyond established definitions in looking to document the experiences of diasporic communities. Throughout the work, Wilkins reflects upon the importance of "visual cultures in remembering and recreating home in diaspora", whilst noting that refugees and migrants "do not only take objects that are necessary for physical survival, but also items of emotional value, letters and ornaments." (Wilkins, 2019, p. 18). Objects in this context are markers for national or cultural identity as well

as invaluable reminders of home and those left behind, thereby reinforcing notions of belonging. Through her interviews and fieldwork, Wilkins considers how domestic possessions are by their very nature, intertwined with her participants' notions of memory, identity and belonging, both in East London, and transnationally as reminders of home in Vietnam. It was interesting to note the author's collaboration with the Geffrye Museum during her research for this book, which helped facilitate outreach projects with local Vietnamese communities and the challenges of data protection and informed consent in relation to such projects (Wilkins, 2019, p. 28).

Two key aspects of this work were the focus on narrative research as a methodological tool and the importance of documenting the notion of community within the Vietnamese diasporic context. The narrative approach can be important to enable participants to be able to share their memories within an open and safe environment, whilst also demonstrating "how the memories of refugees are shaped by their experiences of diaspora (Nguyen, 2009, p. 5)", whilst also being an opportunity for empowerment and to give a sense of voice and agency to community members (Wilkins, 2019, p. 31). The narrative approach as undertaken by Wilkins also presents an opportunity for participants to take ownership of their stories and their experiences, by enabling their narratives to be told in the way they want to be told. This work provides a useful approach through the engagement with participants with differing experiences of their journey to London. This enables both a multi-generational perspective but also the differing experiences of those forced to flee alongside those who have elected to migrate for work or study. This facilitates a wider and more inclusive baseline of the experiences of the Vietnamese in the city: their journeys and their sense of identity and belonging in relation to making home in a new city and home and communities in Vietnam.

*Migration, Work and Home-Making in the City* also engages with the important discussion around notions of "community". Wilkins argues that "discussions of 'Vietnamese communities' should be situated within an understanding of the complexity of this term and the diverse population that it describes." (Wilkins, 2019, pp. 34-5). Wilkins rightly situates her analysis within an understanding of the difficulties associated with the term 'community' within both academic and public discourse, describing it as "a complex and problematic concept." (Wilkins, 2019, p. 35). The concept can be linked to multiple overlapping notions including place, locality and also territory and related structures of class, ethnicity and gender in relation to diasporic communities. Wilkins argues in favour of understanding "communities as potential sites of exclusion as well as belonging" and to consider this when working within the Vietnamese diasporic communities, who "are heterogeneous, differing in terms of ethnic background, circumstances of migration, age, religion, and socio-economic status." (Wilkins, 2019, p. 35).

The importance of home in relation to East London is also highlighted with a number of the interviewed participants expressing a sense of home as being in relation to East London, and also within Hackney itself. Early in the book, Wilkins quotes from one of her research participants. Vũ, who was forced to flee Vietnam in the 1970's and spent three months in a refugee camp in Singapore before moving to the UK: "It was fear of getting lost and not being able to find our way. We had no beginnings to help ground us. We weren't at home." (Wilkins, 2019, p. 1). Wilkins emphasised the importance of the concepts of home (nhà) and homeland

(*quê hương*) for Vietnamese communities, both within Vietnam and abroad, and considers the translocality of belonging as being a process that situates diverse spaces and practices within different locales', arguing that Vietnamese migrants' senses of belonging are experienced through both national boundaries, but also negotiates through attachments that can be considered 'local-local.' Wilkins draws "upon concepts of translocality in integrating the multi-scaler connections that are formed between East London and Vietnam through everyday mobilities and practices of dwelling." (Wilkins, 2019, p. 8).

*Migration, Work and Home-Making in the City* successfully explores the intertwined relationships of home, work and migration within the context of the everyday lives of Vietnamese residents in East London. The book articulately considers participants narratives of belonging and their multiple perceptions of home, especially for those who have experienced an enforced departure from Vietnam, Son reflects: "But because us boat people, we've been away so long, we don't say that is home anymore. We say we go home to visit family, but we call the UK home now. We settle, we feel safer coming back to the UK then we say we go back home, back to Vietnam." (Wilkins, 2019, p. 83).

Specific elements of the book focus on the notions of Vietnamese "identity" and what is meant by community within the context of a super-diverse city. Wilkins does not assume that "the Vietnamese' constitute an homogenous community" (Wilkins, 2019, p. 8) within the wider context of East London, and considers that communities must also be considered as sites of exclusion as well as belonging, especially as Vietnamese communities in East London are heterogeneous, differing in terms of ethnic background, circumstances of migration, age, religion, and socioeconomic status. This is beneficial to the overall narrative of the work as it facilitates a diversity of migration experiences, from Son's experience as a refugee and Minh's experience moving to London to further her education:

"I lived in Vietnam until 1979 when the whole family left the country by boat, and I came to the UK via Hong Kong, and I've been in the UK ever since." Son. (Wilkins, 2019, p. 39)

"We felt excited, we felt so happy that we are here, finally we're here! Because to be able to be here, we had to pass IELTS exam, you have to pass the visa process, and so many things we have to deal with." Minh. (Wilkins, 2019, p. 39)

Vũ, one of the author's participants, who had arrived as a refugees in London, subsequently went on to found the An Viet Foundation community organisation which helped to support the Vietnamese diaspora in Hackney for over thirty-five years, providing drop in services on issues relating to social welfare, immigration and housing in addition to interpretation and translation services, employment advice and cultural activities (Refugee Council, 2021). Hackney Archives in conjunction with Hackney Chinese Community Services were recently awarded a grant from The National Archives Covid-19 Emergency Fund (The National Archives, 2021) to help stabilise and conserve the An Viet Foundation Archives after their former offices were taken over by squatters and the archive left out on the roof (Sheridan, 2019). The awarding of this grant reinforced the invaluable community work undertaken by the Foundation and the importance of the Archive for generating a sense of community identity and belonging for an under-documented group. Additionally, the UEL Archives has also received Testbed Funding from The National Archives for a collaborative project with artist Moi Tran, to establish a Civic Voice

Archive documenting the Vietnamese experience in Hackney “by exploring creative methods to disturb and challenge traditional archives usage and structure, including taking agency in narrative as activism, promoting conventionally subjugated knowledge systems through archival processes and to explore contemporary arts practice in a community archive.” (The National Archives, 2021)

*Migration, Work and Home-Making in the City* by Annabelle Wilkins provides an important addition to the literature both in relation to documenting the experiences of Vietnamese communities in East London, and Hackney in particular, whilst also providing an important theoretical approach for how we as researchers, and archivists, can work with, support, and engage with diasporic communities more broadly. Through her multifaceted conceptual framework, bringing together discussions of geopolitics and the super-diverse city, with an understanding of home-making, identity and belonging within a diasporic community, Wilkins has utilised both narrative and visual methods to facilitate an in-depth representation which help to emphasise the diverse relationships and everyday practices that are involved in creating a sense of belonging within a multicultural city.

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