

**African Performance Review**

**Vol. 13, No. 1&2, 2021**

**pp. 95-99**

**Book Review**

Kathy A. Perkins (Ed.), *Telling our Stories of Home: International Performance Pieces by and about Women*, Methuen Drama, London, 2022, pp. 280, paperback<sup>1</sup>.

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The question of home especially in times of social, cultural and political instability is a complex and deeply troubled one. Kathy A. Perkins states in the introduction of *Telling our Stories of Home: International Performance Pieces by and about Women* that home conveys different meanings to each and every one of us and 'resonates with people everywhere...' (2022: 1). This book is a collection of eleven performances authored by playwrights who employ engaging experimental theatre conventions to represent home from multiple perspectives. As a material object, but also as a concept and a philosophy, the authors clearly demonstrate in the eleven performances that the notion of home becomes problematic if anxieties about belonging, displacement and integration emerge. Generally, in the context of mobility, forced and involuntary migration, home becomes fluid and ambiguous as individuals evoke memories of loss, trauma and nostalgia when they leave home under challenging circumstances, but hope to return to it someday. While others seek outright rejection of home in search of new spaces of comfort, guiding their decisions with valid reasons, some have never found a home, occupying fragmented liminal spaces. This ambiguity, especially in a postcolonial diaspora context, is conveyed by John McLeod when he states that 'If imagining home beckons only fragmentation, discontinuity and displacement of the migrant, can new homes be secured in the host country? Migrants tend to arrive in new places with baggage: both in the physical sense of possessions or belongings, but also the less tangible matter of beliefs, traditions,

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<sup>1</sup> DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30817/0111apr0182>

customs, behaviours and values' (2010: 244). Migration could also embody varied forms of psychological, supernatural, and material mobility within national, regional and transnational borders. Therefore, associating different connotations of mobility with home, equally allows us to imagine that the quest for a site where one wishes to be finally laid to rest, as in Fidaa Zidan's 'On the Last Day of Spring,' contributes to the persistent search for home.

The different characters' quests for home in the anthology of performances collected by dramatists from Lebanon, USA, Haiti, UK, Venezuela, Uganda, Palestine, India, and Brazil evoke exciting narratives about the meaning and materiality of home, but importantly how occupying home provokes conflict between family members. When two sisters seek their roots within and without a family home in Lebanon, misunderstanding overturns its accommodative meaning to that of mistrust. In a politically troubled space like Palestine, in diasporic spaces in the UK and Dominican Republic, on a Transatlantic slave ship and in the waters beneath it, in a slave-holding mansion in 18<sup>th</sup> century New York, all evoke thematic concerns in the anthology that complicate the concept of home, sometimes making its discussion a taboo subject. But do some of the characters that the dramatists discuss ever find home in their very own homelands in Venezuela, Uganda and Zimbabwe?

The last play in the anthology, titled 'Those Who Live Here, Those Who Live There' by Geeta P. Siddi and Girija P. Siddi, is inspired by the personal accounts of two sisters who are in the quest of identity and belonging in the broader Indian society. As former inhabitants of the western forests of Karnataka, the sisters being descendants of African slaves are marginalised, provoking an anxiety which makes them 'look like foreign bodies in cities, because of our hair and color' (275). Both authors must endure racism, which invoke memories of slavery suffered by their enslaved ancestors. As a consequence, they must deal with identity questions such as 'Why are we like this? How can we pull our curly hair to make it become straight? How to wash our body color to make it white?' (277). Like the Siddi sisters, Aldri Anunciação in *Antimemories of an Interrupted Trip* revisits the history of the transatlantic slaver trade as he adopts an experimental approach to give agency to slaves who were thrown overboard slave ships into the ocean. Her protagonist, The Woman at the Sea Bottom, inhabits the ocean transforming it into a home office in which she employs to reassess the horrors of the middle passage. The bottom of the ocean becomes a critical space in which objects of memory thrown into the ocean are analysed, given agency and a life story. Through what is caught between internal monologues and soliloquys, the protagonist rejects being put on a ship, otherwise '...internal storms will happen, tearing hearts from both sides...' (206). The quest for identity and home are conveyed in the protagonists' code switching to Yoruba. The horrors of the middle passage that Anunciação's protagonist escapes befall Happy, the eponymous character of Kia Corthron's monologue 'Happy'. Set in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the monologue chronicles

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the lives of enslaved Africans serving in the homes of white slave owners. The monologue enables the protagonist to narrate her life of servitude and reveal an unimaginable act that she commits to gain freedom in her later years. Her monologue, which is delivered through an analeptic approach, unravels how she spent all her life 'slavin for the Hennesseys... cared for Miss Gracie's newborn twins. And later care for Miss Gracie's grandchildren, her great grans ... I raised em all...' (44). Moving from forced migration, the anthology also contains performance pieces on contemporary migration with focus on its effect on characters' identity and understanding of home. Lupe Gehrenbeck in 'Leaving, But Can't Let Go,' articulates the ambiguity that marks one's connection with a specific space and the objects embedded therein. The protagonist of the play is faced with the necessity of leaving her home for North America, but finds it incredibly difficult to leave behind pieces of memory embodied in objects that include pictures, porcelain doll, her grandfather's chair, books, and art objects. The thrust of this performance is entangled in memory, nostalgia, and pain that these objects evoke. The play's subject of contention is the dilemma of the sixty-five years old Elvira who is based in Venezuela but her daughter Caroline who has emigrated to New York insists that she relocates to the USA. Zodwa Nyoni in 'Nine Lives' imagines the character of Ismael as a transnational migrant. Through his character, the audience follows his story that narrates his flight from homophobia in his home country in Zimbabwe as he attempts to find a safe place in the United Kingdom. The complexity of home, identity and relocation are conveyed through the several characters that Ismael impersonates. Seemingly a dialogical monologue, Ismael employs the first person's point of view to communicate internal questions about his identity and sexuality in the following words:

Some of us leave pieces of ourselves  
In all the places that we've been.  
Some of us are still counting how many  
Battles we have to face  
Some of us are just at the beginning  
Hoping to call somewhere home again (100).

Évelyne Trouillot in 'The Blue of the Island,' chronicles the ordeals of economic migrants who leave Haiti to the Dominican Republic. Trouillot employs her characters to examine the concept of migration as she elaborates on the push and pull factors that instigate people to travel to another country and the arduous psychological and physical tasks that are required to make the journey successful. A quest for a better and safe life across the border is also the drive of Jacqueline E. Lawton's 'So Goes We.' The political tone of the performance is underscored through the treatment of four black asylum seekers, all of different professional

backgrounds, as they seek to enter the U.S.A. Facing intimidating questions and injustices from border officials, the characters play out traumatic happenings at the border that include the separation of children from their parents. How the characters employ their bodies, stage properties, voices, repetitive actions and dialogue demonstrate the state of uncertainty and trauma that mark migration, but also the resilience that accompanies it. While they hope to find a home in the U.S.A, their original homelands are besieged by political turmoil and other social problems. A Ugandan woman in Doreen Baingana in 'Questions of Home' constructs her meaning of home based on her return to Uganda from the USA, after eight years. Returning to work at the Uganda Human Rights Commission, the protagonist realises that she has, indeed, estranged herself from Ugandan culture that involves etiquette, food, and marriage. Faced with the repercussions, she is about to encounter an identity crisis when she admits that 'there is a lot to untangle, to make sense of, including why on earth, I was so troubled. I was home, right' (154.). The audience, however, realises that in the performance, the question of home is not resolved because 'I would have to learn all over again how to live in this new old place called home' (159).

The quest for home in 'The House' by Arzé Khodr and in 'On the Last Day of Spring' by Fidaa Zidan creates complex imaginaries of how home is constructed: where should it be located and who may have access to and control over it. 'The House' is based on Nadia and Reem, two sisters who with conflicting views about home are unable reach a compromise over their family house left behind by their deceased parents. Reem wants her and her sister to sell the house and share the proceeds. But Nadia who feels rooted to the space, and the family history which it embodies, finds the idea despicable. To resolve their difference over the house, the sisters trigger manipulative strategies that only plunge them into unresolved questions about belonging. 'On the last day of Spring' is a build-up of tension that result in a fatal outcome about who has authority over certain sites on a geopolitically contested space like Palestine. Caught between an Arab and Israeli identity, the protagonist who is caught up in these two worlds unravels the uncertainties that are hinged on her identity in the following words: 'when they split us into two groups, as per usual 'these people are from here and these people are from there,' I would become very uncomfortable. There is something in me that resembles this group, but I came with that group. This group was always careful not to upset that group, and that group was always careful not to upset this group, but when I would speak both groups would stare at me. None of them could place me' (170). 'Let Go and Moving on' revisits the aftermath of a natural disaster left behind by a hurricane. Constituting two monologues, Louella Dizou San Juan seeks to find home in the middle of this chaos. One draws from the monologues that although home is tangible in terms of its material frame, to which one might one day return, there is an incredible feeling of elusiveness associated with it. This elusiveness is tied to the fact that a home might still be

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physically located in its space after a natural disaster, but only intangible memories of that home are still alive as its material frame stands in fragments.

*Telling our Stories of Home: International Performance Pieces by and about Women* edited by Kathy A. Perkins is a timely intervention that brings to light the many questions about identity that continue to touch the lives of many people across the globe. The contributions are relevant to students and lecturers of postcolonial, diaspora, cultural, gender and Anglophone literary studies. The performances of these plays will make exciting workshop projects for students in the performing arts.

### **Work cited.**

McLeod, John. 2010. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.