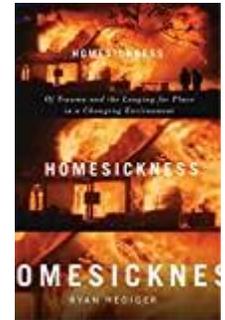




**Ryan Hediger.** *Homesickness: Of Trauma and the Longing for Place in a Changing Environment.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019. 352 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-5179-0654-2.



**Reviewed by** Kristen Greteman (Iowa State University)

**Published on** H-Environment (April, 2022)

**Commissioned by** Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

Newtok, Alaska, boasts the basic amenities of life in a rural community. Newtok is laid out in the typical checkerboard street grid, where a visitor will find a school, a post office, and a church surrounded by a few dozen houses. Less basic is the airstrip that exists to fly locals and visitors in and out of the tiny remote community, located in the most rural of places just inland from the Pacific coast in western Alaska. The landscape of Newtok resembles Swiss cheese, the ground plane littered with small bodies of water and a river. An aerial view of Newtok displays its place within the water world of west Alaska, a stone's throw from the Bering Sea, making the imminent threat to the community obvious. Due to the rising oceans and erosion, Newtok is slowly falling into the sea.

The story of slow violence in Newtok is one example in Ryan Hediger's *Homesickness: Of Trauma and the Longing for Place in a Changing Environment*. Situating the work within the intersection of several different literatures, including posthumanism, ecocriticism, and mobility, Hediger focuses on the idea of homesickness, defined

as “both the desire to go home, a kind of nostalgia; and the awareness, which registers often as a kind of nausea and weakness, that we are far from home and perhaps always will be” (p. 2). For Hediger, homesickness and nostalgia exist interchangeably and, within the Anthropocene, are feelings that all will experience with more urgency. These feelings will hit closer to home as “solastalgia,’ defined as ‘the pain experience when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault ... a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at home’” (p. 16). These claims underlie the contribution of Hediger’s book.

Through a range of texts, film, and television from World War II to the present, Hediger examines the desire for place, the “dynamics of identity and home in a place” and “among the placed,” and “the meaning of home for travelers or dislocated persons, or the displaced” (p. 38). Homesickness, and the desire for place, are historical, geographical, and temporal forces; understanding homesickness through time is vital. Quoting such thinkers

as Martin Heidegger and David Harvey, the book is partially an exercise in combining several different fields of thought along a common strand, that of place, sense of place, and placelessness. Within the context of literary analysis and interpretation, each chapter contains an umbrella theme moving outward in scope from local to planetary—animality, home, travel, slavery, shopping, and war, respectively. Within those themes, Hediger examines homesickness, violence, trauma, haunting, mobility, disability, and change.

Hediger questions who or what can experience homesickness. Within ecocriticism there is a struggle between local and global. Hediger wrestles with this. Within both realms “ecological losses can be seen as nostalgic” (p. 10). It is a phenomenon that crosses species. “Changes to places, of course, affect nonhuman life as well—often, much more profoundly than human life—creating feedback loops of trauma and homesickness that cycle back to humanity and then turn outward again to the nonhuman” (p. 21). Yet some ecocritics think globally, with global interventions as the main solution to the ecological crisis. This is dismissive of the local. Hediger acknowledges that imagining the planet as a whole is difficult but local and global are interdependent. “Thinking global requires also thinking local, and vice versa. In other words, ‘global’ and ‘local’ are necessary poles in a continuum of geographical orientation” (p. 12).

Haunting, violence, and trauma are consequences of mobility and change. All contribute to someone’s knowledge and relationship to place. Through these phenomena, people experience “re-inhabitation,” meaning that “we cannot quite recover that old place ... our old sense of place” (p. 34). Violence can happen when people irrationally attach meanings to the local and their place that includes some and excludes others. Globalism also contributes to violence through colonialism. “Haunting” comes out of lingering trauma. For Hediger “this means that when we feel homesickness, we know both more and less of ‘our’ place.

We know more in that we can position ‘home’ in a new frame of reference ... but we know less ... that we lose ownership over knowledge itself, since we must recognize that knowledge requires distance” (p. 33).

Hediger’s book makes a contribution to the literature of place, sense of place, and placelessness by examining how the meanings and attachment subjects have to place changes as places change or disappear. The book is dense and covers themes that can be dark and triggering. The thick theoretical commentary is both enlightening and, at times, overwhelming. Despite the density, it is filled with nuggets that add to the understanding of place and placelessness. Hediger’s work at wrestling with several literatures in an attempt to bring related, but not often connected, thoughts together makes a valuable contribution that is worth the effort to read.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

**Citation:** Kristen Greteman. Review of Hediger, Ryan. *Homesickness: Of Trauma and the Longing for Place in a Changing Environment*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. April, 2022.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56174>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.