

# Human Rights & Human Welfare

---

Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 13

---

7-2005

**Peter W. Van Arsdale on This Place Will Become Home: Refugee Repatriation to Ethiopia by Laura C. Hammond. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004. 257pp.**

Peter W. Van Arsdale  
*University of Denver*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw>



Part of the [African Studies Commons](#), [Human Rights Law Commons](#), and the [International Relations Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Van Arsdale, Peter W. (2005) "Peter W. Van Arsdale on This Place Will Become Home: Refugee Repatriation to Ethiopia by Laura C. Hammond. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004. 257pp.," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol5/iss1/13>

This Book Notes is brought to you for free and open access by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Rights & Human Welfare by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact [jennifer.cox@du.edu](mailto:jennifer.cox@du.edu), [digitalcommons@du.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@du.edu).

**This Place Will Become Home: Refugee Repatriation to Ethiopia by Laura C. Hammond. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004. 257pp.**

Anthropologist Laura Hammond has written a thorough, engrossing, and in many ways touching account of the challenges confronting refugees repatriating to Ethiopia. At first glance, given the plethora of refugee studies published during the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, this case, in itself, might not seem important. Yet given the paucity of studies about one type of refugee emplacement—the re-creation of home in one’s original homeland, especially in Africa—this book emerges as very important.

I first met Laura Hammond (now as Assistant Professor at Clark University) in 1994, in Addis Ababa. I was on my way to Tigray, Ethiopia’s northernmost province, to assist with water resource assessments and to conduct “how-to” trainings in rapid rural appraisal. My stay in Tigray was short; hers in that same province, long—and indeed, she now is among the few outside anthropologists who can claim multiple years on-site there. In 1994 she was in the midst of ethnographically assessing what was unfolding as several thousand returning Tigrayan refugees attempted to establish a new settlement in a part of their home province unfamiliar to them. I believe that her three most important research questions might be summarized as follows: Which experiences of displacement (for these people, while in camps in Sudan) can be “tapped” to facilitate community (re-) development? What are the core processes at play as a new home is created under conditions of uncertainty and resource constraint? In what ways can (or should) the new home re-create the life ways of the old home?

The refugees’ new settlement of Ada Bai, as Hammond so clearly describes it, came to be created under great hardship. Whereas ten years of life in Sudan’s refugee camps had required one type of fortitude and determination (forged on the heels of oppressive life in war-torn Ethiopia under Mengistu Haile Mariam’s Derg regime), building a village and associated agricultural system, virtually from scratch, required another type of fortitude and determination. More members of the emergent community were Christian, fewer were Muslim, and the interplay of these religious traditions also contributed to the adjustment challenges. Indeed, Hammond does an excellent job of presenting within-community variations in adjustment according to religious tradition, gender, and work role.

Several theoretic and conceptual threads are interwoven in This Place Will Become Home. Some are merely highlighted briefly, others explicated in depth. Emplacement theory is the unifier. Here Hammond’s research owes a debt to Arjun Appadurai and Liisa Malkki, among others. Physical space, while seen as important, is not conceived as the nexus of home establishment; what counts more is the complex web of social, economic, and political processes which are erratically yet persistently used to shape “home.” While focusing on emplacement at the local level, Hammond also appropriately addresses this set of processes in the context of the wider world. She notes the forces at play as Ethiopia attempts to craft a democratic state of semi-autonomous regions under current leader Meles Zenawi. She notes, albeit briefly, the impact of globalization, in particular the impact upon the Ethiopian Diaspora, both in a hard-core political sense (as John Prendergast might state it, in his critique of NGOs operating in Africa) and in a nuanced, media-savvy sense (as John Sorenson might state it, as “imagining Ethiopia”). Another theoretic thread involves forcible displacement. Here, as Hammond stresses, her research owes a debt to Barbara Harrell-Bond. Less obvious but still significant is the thread that involves

adaptation and adjustment, especially for Ethiopians and Eritreans in the Diaspora. The influence of Lucia “Shan” McSpadden is seen here. A thread that involves famine and disaster theory also emerges. The influences of Alex de Waal and Anthony Oliver-Smith are duly recognized.

Hammond believes that anthropologists and other researchers engaging refugee issues should avoid what John Davis calls “comfortable anthropology.” While not without value, the study of social organizations, “which we represent as working more or less normally, ticking over, with occasional spasms of adjustment,” ( Davis in Hammond: 209) can inadequately represent reality. The refugees of Ada Bai did not so much re-create a home, as create a home. They did not so much innovate out of certainty, as innovate out of uncertainty. They did not so much tap a social organization that had laid dormant “while they were away,” as tap bits and pieces of a social organization that was imperfect but useful. Upon her return to Ada Bai in 2001, eight years after the refugees had returned, Hammond found a true community, one that had solidified its social roots and solidified its resource base. She also found a community upon which the recent Eritrean-Ethiopian border war had a negative impact. She found a community built upon individual successes and failures, small-scale triumphs and small-scale tragedies.

While the writings of John Prendergast, John Sorenson, and Tsegay Wolde-Georgis could have profitably been cited as Hammond fleshed out her discussions of NGO assistance, “Ethiopian contextualization,” and Tigrayan agricultural/market problems, her book is well-referenced and carefully crafted. While not targeting human rights issues *per se*, I deem it a “must read” for any scholar or practitioner concerned with Ethiopian refugees generally, problems of the Ethiopian Diaspora, and processes of Ethiopian repatriation.

*Peter W. Van Arsdale, University of Denver  
July 2005*