

[Barr on Matt, 'Homesickness: An American History'](#)

Review published on Tuesday, March 8, 2022

Susan J. Matt. *Homesickness: An American History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 360 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), [ISBN 978-0-19-537185-7](#). 

Reviewed by Erin Barr (Purdue University) **Published on** H-Emotions (March, 2022)
Commissioned by Sara Hidalgo García de Orellán

Printable Version: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=57412>

While most monographs examine events, periods, people, or places, Susan Matt's *Homesickness: An American History* examines the history of an emotion. The ways American view the eponymous emotion, Matt argues, have evolved constantly over the course of American history from the colonial period to the present day. What has remained constant, the author contends, has been the presence of homesickness itself, and its cousin nostalgia, as major factors in Americans' emotional lives. Furthermore, Matt argues that this study of the history of homesickness "recovers the story of how Americans learned to manage their feelings," and how they learned to live with the emotional and psychological fallout of America's transformation into a mobile and individualistic society (p. 7). The significance of this is to reintroduce the emotional complexities and contingencies of centuries of Americans' decisions to migrate, relocate, go to war, and seek out personal opportunities. For as Matt says, "to focus only on external behaviors misses much of what went on in the past" (p. 9).

Matt's examination of the history of homesickness begins with an examination of colonial American experiences of separation across the Atlantic. As many new arrivals from the Old World to the New, mainly African slaves and indentured servants, were not free to make their own choices, feelings of homesickness took on very different meanings than for those who undertook the journey of their own volition. For most, missing one's place of origin or longing for a lost time and place were openly discussed and generally accepted as a part of life, as was the promise of reunification in the next life. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the concept of rugged individualism set up by the American Revolution began to slowly shift popular notions of homesickness. At the same time, modern technology presented Americans with increased opportunities for separation. The tumult of industrialization, the growth of the American economy, the push for western settlement, and technological advances in transportation not only presented native-born Americans with more chances to leave, but also drew in immigrants from all over the world to the United States. While emotions related to homesickness and often permanent separation were still openly admitted, it became a sign of virtue and maturity to conquer those emotions and find success despite one's feelings. This was especially true for American immigrants, whose distance and likely length of separation was greater than for most native-born Americans who left home. Still greater feelings of permanent separation from home and family were felt by those African American slaves whose families were broken by the auctioneer, and for those Indigenous peoples permanently removed from their homelands by federal authorities.

War and military enlistment were also causes of separation. According to Matt, during the Civil War

letters home allowed for homesickness and nostalgia to be expressed as soldiers read and wrote letters, and openly wept as they expressed their emotions. Meanwhile, regimental doctors feared the repercussions of such negative emotions on soldiers' abilities to wage war effectively. By the time the United States entered World War I, volunteers and draftees alike were subjected to mental evaluations so that any man deemed emotionally compromised by the possibility of homesickness could be excluded from the military and prevent that problem before it began. According to Matt, these changes in military policy reflect the overall changes in Americans' views on homesickness from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century. Over time, Americans had been encouraged to place their loyalties in organizations, corporations, and the bureaucracies of government itself. By the end of World War II, it was generally accepted that the ability to put away one's feelings of homesickness was necessary for the success of the individual, the economy, the nation overall, and American interests abroad. Americans also believed for a time that commodities, such as familiar food products and nostalgic consumer goods, could be purchased as a sort of balm for those emotional pains. Matt asserts that these attitudes persevered throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, as Cold War tensions continued to promote the idea of American strength and individualism. Yet by the end of the century Americans' increasing mistrust of American institutions, government, and economic system also resulted in "frustration with the constant uprooting so long required in a capitalist society" (pp. 247-247).

As one can imagine, vital to Matt's approach are the personal writings of hundreds of American men, women, immigrants, soldiers, college students, parents, and children from over two hundred years of American history. In fact, one of the biggest strengths of this work is the sheer number of American experiences and backgrounds included. Matt expertly interrogates these sources and teases out their authors' motivations, biases, perspectives, and, most importantly, their emotional states. Added to the many letters and diaries are religious and secular commentaries from newspapers and pamphlets, advertisements, government documents, and the writings of mental health professionals. The incredible volume of source materials considered in this work, as well as the methods by which Matt highlights the importance of homesickness and its evolution, provide ample support for Matt's arguments. If the book has a weakness, it is that the nuances of emotions related to the experiences of American racial minorities, such as African Americans and Indigenous peoples, are not as developed as they could have been.

Matt ends *Homesickness: An American History* with a look at the state of homesickness and related emotions in contemporary America. Today, Matt argues, homesickness and nostalgia, which were once synonymous, have been separated. On one hand, nostalgia is a harmless emotion because it comes with the understanding that the past one misses cannot be recovered, but it can be remembered and enjoyed as a temporary escape. On the other hand, homesickness is rarely acknowledged publicly, but its presence is identifiable in the ways Americans chase the latest technological advances that allow people to remain more connected, though still not present, from a distance. It may also be found in the increasing number of Americans who return to their home states and towns every year. Ultimately, Matt declares that American culture is "a homesick culture; the ideology of rugged individualism that holds sway, however, denies the relevance of the emotion," a tension which this book and its contents successfully illuminates (p. 267).

Citation: Erin Barr. Review of Matt, Susan J., *Homesickness: An American History*. H-Emotions, H-Net Reviews. March, 2022. **URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57412>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).