AMBIGUITIES IN THE LOCUS OF HOME:
EXILIC LIFE AND THE SPACE OF
BELONGING

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There is a tension built into the very dynamic of being human upon this earth, ever in the world, yet never of it. The problem is not just that we are alienated dwellers, but that we are irreducibly both dwellers and wayfarers…. Home is not a place; it is a posture, willing to be at home, whose forms in this life are never final and for ever,
--Erazim Kohák

The home is a tool for the process of creating or becoming an identity. It has both a hidden, private, recuperative aspect and an open, presentational, hospitable aspect. It conceals and it reveals….
--Katherine Platt

The real secret of the ruby slippers is not that “there’s no place like home,” but rather that there is no longer any such place as home; except, of course, for the home we make, or the homes that are made for us, in Oz: which is anywhere, and everywhere, except the place from which we began.
--Salman Rushdie

The sense of moving on as expressing life’s transitoriness, of settled life as a point of departure rather than a locus of stability, the feeling of inexhaustible space, creates a new nomadic conception of home… deterritorialization,
--Edith Wyschogrod

The ability to welcome others into the home ensures that home does not become isolation. Hospitality means a letting go of certainty and control — and paradoxically it’s only this letting go that allows the richness of growth and change that makes real and not pretended continuity possible,
--Rosemary Haughton

In the vast technical structure of our civilization we are all patients. Our personal existence is clearly something which is everywhere denied and yet it is also something which is always involved in the attempt to regain that balance which we need for ourselves, for our lived environment, and for the feeling of being at home in the world.
--Hans-Georg Gadamer
Perhaps the most subversive attack on the home is to be present physically without joining in its multiple coordinations.

--Mary Douglas

Is it possible to retain an idea of home as supporting the individual subjectivity of the person, where the subject is understood as fluid, partial, shifting, and in relations of reciprocal support with others?

--Iris Marion Young

The job of coming home is experienced only by those who have gone through the experiences of an adventure. No adventure without a home, no home without an adventure.

--D. J. Van Lennep

Becoming a citizen of the world is often a lonely business. It is, as Diogenes said, a kind of exile — from the comfort of local truths, from the warm, nestling feeling of patriotism, from the absorbing drama of pride in oneself and one’s own ... as if the removal of the props of habit and local boundaries had left life bereft of any warmth and security.

--Martha Nussbaum

Home is a concept and desire that expresses a bounded and secure identity. Home is where a person can be “herself”; one is “at home” when she feels that she is with others who understand her in her particularity. The longing for home is just this longing for a settled, safe, affirmative, and bounded identity.

--Iris Marion Young

Homemaking consists in preserving the things and their meaning as anchor to shifting personal and group identity. But the narratives of the history of what brought us here are not fixed, and part of the creative and moral task of preservation is to reconstruct the connections of the past to the present in light of new events, relationships, and political understandings.

--Iris Marion Young

If any common pattern can be traced in the many versions of home that contemporary cultures provide us with, it is one of exclusions. Homes are not about inclusions and wide-open arms as much as they are about places carved out of closed doors, closed borders and screening apparatuses.

--Rosemary Marangoly George

“Being home” refers to a place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; “not being home” is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself.

--Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty

We children of the future, how could we be at home in this today? We feel disfavor for all ideals that might lead one to feel at home even in this fragile, broken time of transition; as for its “realities,” we do not believe they will last. The ice that still supports people today has become very thin; the wind that brings the thaw is blowing; we ourselves who are homeless constitute a force that breaks open ice and other all too thin “realities.”

--Friedrich Nietzsche
Those who dominate and oppress us benefit most when we have nothing to give our own, when they have so taken from us our dignity, our humanness that we have nothing left, no “homeplace” where we can recover ourselves.... I want to speak about the importance of homeplace as a site of resistance and liberation struggle...[as] that space where we return for renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole.

--bell hooks

Any time you go back where absence began....the familiar underpulse will start its throbbing: Home, home! and the hole torn and patched over will gape unseen again...The child’s soul carries on in the wake of home building a complicated house a tree-house without a tree finding places for everything the song the stray cat the skeleton the child’s soul musters strength where the holes were torn but there are no miracles: even children become exhausted And how shall they comfort each other who have come young to grief? Who will number the grains of loss and what would comfort be?

--from “In the Wake of Home,” Adrienne Rich

Human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions. Partial beings, in all the senses of that phrase. Meaning is a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved; perhaps it is because our sense of what is the case is constructed from such inadequate materials that we defend it so fiercely, even to the death.

--Salman Rushdie

If nationalism legitimizes an appeal to blood loyalty and, in turn, blood sacrifice, it can do so persuasively only if it seems to appeal to people’s better natures, and not just to their worst instincts. Since killing is not a business to be taken lightly, it must be done for a reason that makes its perpetrator think well of himself. If violence is to be legitimated, it must be in the name of all that is best in a people, and what is better than their love of home?

--Michael Ignatieff

To resignify home as a differentiated site of coalition and to accept the impossibility of the conventional home’s promised safety from conflict, dilemmas, and difference is not to reject home but to recover it for the sake of an alternative, future practice of politics. The recovery does, however, admit and embrace a vulnerability that may look like homelessness...

--Bonnie Honig

Are we to expect that we will know in advance the meaning to be assigned to the utterance of universality, or is this utterance the occasion for a meaning that is not to be fully or concretely anticipated? If standards of universality are historically articulated,
then it would seem that exposing the parochial and exclusionary character of a given historical articulation of universality is part of the project of extending and rendering substantive the notion of universality itself…. The futural articulation of the universal, however, can happen only if we find ways to effect cultural translations between those various cultural examples in order to see which versions of the universal are proposed, on what exclusions they are based, and how the entry of the excluded into the domain of the universal requires a radical transformation in our thinking of universality.

--Judith Butler

[The Great Khan] said: “It is all useless, if the last landing place can only be the infernal city, and it is there that, in ever-narrowing circles, the current is drawing us.”

And Polo said: “The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.”

--Invisible Cities, Italo Calvino

We have made our decisions, our lives have been set in motion, and they will go on and on until they stop. But if that is true, then what? I mean, what if you believe that, but you keep it covered up, until one day something happens that should change something, but then you see nothing is going to change after all. What then? Meanwhile, the people around you continue to talk and act as if you were the same person as yesterday, or last night, or five minutes before, but you are really undergoing a crisis, your heart feels damaged….

--“So Much Water So Close to Home,” Raymond Carver

Human homecoming is a matter of learning to dwell intimately with that which resists our attempts to control, shape, manipulate and exploit it.

--Joseph Grange

If we were to regard ourselves as “fields of care” rather than as discrete objects in a neutral environment, our understanding of our relationship to the world might be fundamentally transformed…. Being such a field means more than being a body; it means being-in-the-world, and it also implies a different sense of environment…. If we encounter nature as natural resources, then we deny it any of the character of worldhood.

And we simultaneously deny ourselves access to it as home.

--Neil Evernden

The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him.

--Henry David Thoreau

Today we should ask whether and how there can still be a home in the era of the technical and standardized world civilization.

--Martin Heidegger

I. Situating the Space of Home as a Central Problematic of Contemporary Life

There is something oddly difficult about the concept of home. As a species of “lived space,” home appears to be an inherently ambiguous phenomenon. For starters, home can reflect a context of dwelling that is dependent on walls, but it can also reflect a context of experience completely free of physical
determinations, as when we speak of home in reference to a state of mind. On another level, homespace can reflect a place of one’s own, or a place of shared belonging. As a place of one’s own, it can provide a retreat from estrangement, or a base-camp for life-affirming adventures. Home can be the place we have to leave if we are ever to find ourselves. Or it might reflect an ideal we yearn for but never seem to realize. Homespace can be a safe, secure comfort zone, or a place of abuse and disruption. Home can be lodged in our subjective life as a place of memories; it can emanate from the place “…where the heart is.” Or perhaps it radiates from a place where the warm hearth of belonging welcomes us. For some people, home is a fortress or sanctuary whose protection requires constant vigilance. For others, home is a place where the human soul is drawn, or where we feel emotional links to a greater community. In some cases, home is a place of unconditional love where we are accepted for who we are; in less desirable cases, home is the place where the expectations of others expose our most disturbing vulnerabilities or dependencies.

Despite the common assumption that homespace represents a comfort zone for living a safe and secure existence, home is often a place of ongoing contestation. It is also commonly a place where we learn to dance a fine line between domestication and innovation. While home can be a place of emotional attunement, it is often a place of anxiety. Home is often comprised of relations of power that sustain a context for interpersonal dynamics that are both within and beyond our control. Even so, our homespace can offer us a private domain for preparation, withdrawal or resistance; it can also offer a shared field of experience held together by strategic alliances. Home can offer us a context for struggling with disruptions in our identity formation. It can also provide a context for opening ourselves to heterogeneous forces. Home can provide a place to escape from tensions or conflicts in our life, or it can serve as a place to visit when we need to “find” ourselves, or reclaim a sense of being “at one” with ourselves. And of course there are now homesites we can “log on” to, as well as a veritable avalanche of public spaces of home where we can feel free to drop in unannounced and disappear into the anonymous flow of the modern labyrinth.28

Yet despite all of these ambiguities, every sense of home would seem to manifest in some way a “lived space” that gathers us within a “field” of experience. What is the nature of this “gathering” force of home, and what sense can we make of the “field” of experience into which we are gathered by our relation to home?

If we acknowledge a “field-like” character to home, we are still left to ponder the challenge of tying down a location or locus of home in the context of contemporary human life. The longing for home is a dominant motif, not only with respect to the increasing numbers of displaced people in the world, but just as frequently in the lives of people who would appear on the surface to experience the greatest privileges of home. The menace of the unhomely strikes at all walks of life, unleashing nostalgic hunger, anger, violence, depression, withdrawal, social and political tensions, nationalistic fever, exilic immigration, refugee camps, and gated communities. The menace of the unhomely has even spawned a host of critical attacks on the seductive dangers of our dominant social ideals of home,
on the premise that these ideals simply ensnare the masses within webs of servitude and exploitive forms of self-sacrifice. For all the challenges it presents, the drive to secure a safe and happy home remains one of the dominant and defining focal points of contemporary human existence. But the dominant paradigms of homemaking are being challenged in creative ways from a broad range of perspectives. Questions abound concerning the viability of our prevailing investments in such things as the notion of a core personal identity, the ideal of the settled “private” life of the individual, the wisdom of the exclusionary tendencies of insulated communities, and the sociopolitical exploitations of nationalistic models of belonging. There are even challenges to the very notion of home as a privileged domain. What are we to make of the broad disparity of attitudes about home? Is there a basis for identifying the place of home in modern/postmodern human life? And what sense can we make of the ambiguous locus of home in contemporary human experience?

The traditional model of home as a domain of safe, secure and private existence is challenged by tensions inherent in the makeup of our contemporary world. Can we reconfigure the structural dynamics of homespace in the aftermath of this interruption in the ideal of secure intimacy? What does it mean to conceptualize homespace as a site of ongoing tensions, contradictions and ambivalent values?

The challenge is to acknowledge displacement as a constant element of the human dynamic, and to see how the fate of exilic existence touches us all in some way. But this recognition attacks the efficacy of the idealization of home as a personal, privileged domain over which one is entitled to exercise rights of inclusion and exclusion. If we factor in the increasingly exilic dimension of contemporary human life, how might this transform our sense of home as a space of belonging?

The longing for home as a secure refuge from the stresses and anxieties of contemporary life is a dominant motif of human existence in societies throughout the world. But more than ever before, the meaning of home is an enigma fraught with contradiction. We seem forever torn between a desire to live in a safe, settled place and a longing for engagements beyond the safe and settled space of our life. Our hunger for security and reconciliation inclines us to draw sharp boundaries between “inside” and “outside,” thereby effecting a wall of inclusion and exclusion. But in tension with this, we sense a tacit awareness of the constraints of the safe and settled mode of life and seek to expand our sense of home beyond these boundaries. In the process, home becomes an ambiguous domain, something we have, lose and long for all in the same breath of life.

If we take this tension seriously, it becomes apparent that home is less and less about the houses or nations into which we might settle ourselves. It may also be that the preservation of home is less about setting boundaries and more about developing a subtle attunement to the gathering forces of hospitality and belonging. As the tension builds between the safe, secure spaces of familiarity and the need to incorporate engagements beyond the domicile of the familiar, the meaning and function of homespace is slowly transformed. The resulting dynamic
promises to introduce complexity into our understanding of what it means to be a human being; it may also challenge our distinction between private and public domains of existence. But out of this tension emerges a new sense of dwelling, albeit one that could leave more than just a few lives hanging in the balance.

In what follows, I will focus on some key features of this dynamic field of experience and reflect on the resulting sense of home and its “place” in contemporary human life. I see the task of situating the place of home as a central problematic of our modern/postmodern life. The increasing variety of homespaces we see emerging in contemporary life illustrates the creative lengths human beings will travel to produce a context in which to feel at home in the midst of their terminal exile from the longstanding seductive ideal of a safe and settled domicile.

II. The Gathering Force of Home

The concept of home is comprehensible only against the backdrop and constant vigilance of the unhomely in our lives. The never-ending risk of disruption and displacement threatens even the coziest of homespaces. No matter how successfully we hold our decentering anxieties at bay, there is no way to erase them completely from our lives. As a result, we cannot take homespace for granted. When we are fortunate enough to have a sense of being at home, we must work to preserve and protect our home against the erosions, corrosions, erasures and transformative energies arising from the ever-changing circumstances of our life. Thus, while homespace offers protective insulation against the disruptions of the unhomely, it cannot secure the boundaries of home against the constant menace of displacement.

Even so, homespace provides relief from our face to face encounter with the unhomely. As such, home is a crucial artifice in human life. It should come as no surprise that we long for home when we confront the absence of its protective insulation from the unhomely reminders of our contingent existence and become attuned to the ease with which a human life can lose its contextual (and centering) frame of reference. The ultimate value of home resides in the gathering force around which our life becomes centered and grounded within a place of existence that offers insulation against uncanny assaults on our vulnerabilities.

How we make a home will depend on the choices we make concerning where to “give and take” with regard to contingencies and vulnerabilities in our life. The home we make will also depend on our give and take with respect to the needs and desires of those we choose to include or exclude from our homespace. The more home is organized around relations with others, the more the continuity of the homespace will depend on the efficacy of those relations. In effect, the gathering force of home becomes a contextual frame of reference in support of the various interpersonal relations upon which it is dependent. To the extent that home provides contextual support for the various relationships upon which it depends for its continuity, the process of homemaking would seem to
require a constant vigilance to the qualitative dynamics of the interpersonal relations upon which the preservation of homespace depends.

Of course, those with whom we are in relation do not by virtue of this association share our homespace unless the home we make (or contribute to sustaining) gathers them into our centering frame of reference. It is certainly possible (and probably not so uncommon) for people in these relations to make separate homes of a common space, and so to live in different places (and separate homes) under one and the same roof. At the extreme, it is possible for certain people in the relation upon which my homespace depends to be rendered homeless within the home, that is, captive to my home without the corresponding privilege of being at home themselves. In this case, the dominant partner establishes some form of domination over another person (e.g., by initiating terror, dependence, or practical consideration), the result being to elicit exploitive contributions to a homespace from which the relational partner is effectively excluded. Here, the private “silent” space of home can rear its ugly head to disenfranchise relational partners, all too often without initiating an overt, explicit dynamic of oppression. In these situations, the homespace of the disenfranchised partner is transformed from a space of belonging to a space of isolation.

When there are external restrictions on the schemes of domination or types of dependency I am allowed to impose in good conscience to preserve the continuity of my homespace, I must decide the extent to which I will adjust my homespace to the parameters of a larger homespace. The less inclined I am to make these adjustments, the more self-reliant I will need to be in the constitution of my homespace. Since the preservation of homespace requires the conservation of emotional as well as material conditions, a purely private sense of home is unlikely to provide the gathering force we yearn for when setting out to make a home for ourselves. But this is just the tip of the iceberg, for there are also going to be hidden (and not so hidden) conflicts between our personal ideal of home and the possible realities accessible to us within our field of experience.

The delicate process of framing a workable sense of home is a critical factor in successful homemaking. Indeed, our sense of home demands a special attunement if we are striving to include others in our homespace. For then we need an awareness that reaches beyond the scope of our personal needs and desires to sensitize us to the boundaries we need to respect for the sake of our relational dependencies. If in addition we adopt a mode of homemaking that requires resources we must borrow on credit or labor intensively to produce (as when we seek to anchor our home around the purchase of a private residence) the process of framing a workable sense of home can become acutely complex.

Within these parameters of commitment, the process of homemaking can become overwhelmingly difficult to sustain for an extended period of time. And even if we succeed in “making ends meet,” there is no guarantee our efforts will sustain a place in which to feel “at home” in our life. If the stresses of homemaking happen to overwhelm the sanctuary of our relational dependencies, the gathering force of home will dissipate and our sense of being at home will
collapse. When this happens, a crucial field of experience is lost, and with this, a sense of belonging that hinged on our relationship to this field. The gathering force of home dissipates, and the unhomely mode of life resurfaces in sharp relief.

As I drive by billboards advertising tracts of huge new “homes” for sale in a fast-growing town in the agricultural belt of California, I sometimes think of Maya Angelou’s short autobiographical snapshot of three pivotal houses in her life: two classy California houses that broke her marriage to a man she loved, and an old house she relocated to in rural North Carolina which “reeked of home” the moment she saw it, from “an aroma of gingersnap cookies and fresh bread” that “reached out to the landing, put its arms around me and walked me through the front door.”

One of the California houses had swallowed up her prized possessions so completely, it left her in a vacuous space to face the real problems in her marriage. The cozy art-deco house she and her loving husband escaped to fell apart or frustrated her intentions so consistently it left her with the distinct feeling that “the house hated us.” But the North Carolina house she escaped to was different. It gathered her into its homely space and helped her reclaim a “settled” relationship to herself so decisively she was given to exclaim “this is no longer my house, it is my home.”

And because it is my home, I have not only found myself healed of the pain of a broken love affair, but discovered that when something I have written does not turn out as I had hoped, I am not hurt so badly. I find that my physical ailments, which are part of growing older, do not depress me so deeply. I find that I am quicker to laugh and much quicker to forgive. I am much happier at receiving small gifts and more delighted to be a donor of large gifts. And all of that because I am settled in my home. (Angelou, 9-10)

Clearly the house alone does not make the home. In this sense, the billboards promise too much. But the people who design these billboards know what they are doing. It is enticing to think we can buy a new house and move into a home, but only because we long to be where we have not yet arrived, namely, in the settled space of home. Maya Angelou made it home, but not because she was looking to buy her way into a home. That approach had already failed her twice, when she was most expecting it to succeed. No, she made it home quite unexpectedly, suddenly finding herself gathered into the inviting, settled space and disposition of a homely life.

Fortunately, there are other points of entry to homespace than might be acquired when we buy or lease a private residence. But if so, then the field of experience sustaining the gathering force of home extends beyond the locus of the types of residences we most commonly associate with the site of “home.” What can we say about home as a “field” of experience to sustain a broader range of places we might legitimately call home?
III. Home as a Field of Experience

Many of the questions of ‘what you mean by home’ depend upon specification of locus and extent, in what might be likened to a set of Emersonian conceptual concentric circles…. The feeling that one’s home is itself really the center of a series of radiating circles of hominess becomes most apparent when we consider how one returns to a slightly different sense of ‘home’ from the one which one ventures forth from.

--John Hollander

Our most prevalent senses of home are often tied to specific locations. The locus of home is commonly identified with a specific living space over which we exercise or claim the right to exercise significant degrees of control. But in a context of issues concerned with social identity and the radical displacement of individual populations both large and small, the temptation is to trace the locus of home to a specific region of social-political identity, more often than not a nation or geographical concentration of ethnic heritage. In each case, the operative concept of home implies access to a space with which we can identify: in one sense, as a space intimately our own; yet also as a space of belonging within which our existence enjoys significant acknowledgement and refuge. “At home” means belonging to a field of interrelatedness. As we operate in this field, we experience and acknowledge bonds of commitment, obligation and affection. These bonds reflect our investment in a complex relational economy of stable and shifting concerns and attunements. Through our life-specific ways of caring (or not caring) and being (or not being) attentive, we come to be lodged within intimate horizons of involvement, and within these horizons we project the locus (or absence) of our homefield of experience.

If connectivity and relatedness are inherent in the field of experience we associate with homespace, perhaps these elements are integral to our sense of home. If we focus on the “connectivity” and “relatedness” so central to our sense of home, we open a field for investigating the ever-expanding range of contexts and places associated with the space of home. This in turn may shed light on the homelessness of so many people who live with a roof over their heads in a room or space of their own.

In the process of expanding the concept of home to cover a broader range of human experiences, we need to distinguish between “physical space” and “homespace.” The space of home is a lifeworld space, not a geometrical space. As a field of intimate involvements, home gives context and orientation to our unfolding life. It does this by establishing and sustaining an “openness” that invites, gathers and assimilates us to relational elements upon which so much of the meaningful character of our life depends. When this gathering orientation is suspended or lacking in our life, we are struck with a sense of homelessness, perhaps also with a hunger or longing to return home. Of course, when the “gathering orientation” of homespace eludes us, an existential sense of disorientation or dislocation can set in, and with it the temptation to erase our anxiety through preoccupation with other matters.

What is the “field of experience” we can rightfully call home?
Our experiential relation to a homefield is rooted in several layers of involvement. These different layers of involvement are themselves involved in lateral relations of power. While some vertical relations of power serve to stabilize our guiding priorities and principles, the lateral relations of power fuel our responsive attunement to the surrounding world. These lateral relations form when the different layers of involvement sustaining our life intersect in complex ways. Among the numerous layers of involvement figuring prominently in life-world experience, those reflecting our emotional, passionate or anxious modes of life have a pervasive influence on our relation to homespace. Equally pervasive are the layers of involvement in terms of which we relate to boundaries, especially those layers reflecting the “walled-in” and “walled-out” manifestations of our exposure and vulnerability as human beings. In response to this exposure, social habituation tends to accentuate a concern for personal and collective security, often conspiring with socially validated (or contested) considerations of personal privacy, as a basis for framing our dominant concepts of home. In tension with this framework of response we find another influential layer of homefield involvement reflecting our relation to possibilities for personal growth and development.

The oikos of the homefield, the domestic economy of energies and resources needed to sustain the open field of experience…

The domus, or domestic systems of order…

Home as a place of identity formation…

Nostos, or home as a place of safe return…

Home as the anchor of our creative, expansive longings for growth and adventure…


11 Iris Marion Young, “House and Home” (see note 8 above), p. 157.

11 Ibid., p. 154.


16 bell hooks, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics (Boston: South End Press, 1990), from the essay “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance,” pp. 43 and 49.


28 This latter theme is developed in relation to the work of Walter Benjamin by the Dutch philosopher/pop culturalist René Boomkins in the second half of an unpublished paper entitled “The Myth of Homelands: Benjamin and Other Exiles.”


