HOME AS A REGION
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ABSTRACT. This essay explores the processes by which place becomes home and examines the characteristics of a home region that distinguish it from other types of regions. In contemporary Western society, weakening human identification with place and with social groups seems to be reducing home to a mere accumulation of habits that are elaborations on modern or postmodern lifestyles. A home region is a system of interlinked patterns of habitual association and attachment. However, realization that the world is increasingly interconnected and interdependent may produce the backlash of a return to home contexts that are most familiar and intimate. Intense affection for home points to a dialectical relationship between the extent of personal or collective homes and attachment to them.

Key words: home, human interaction, place, region.

In daily lives people interact with their environment through personally and culturally apprehended behaviors. The result is regions, landscapes, places, and homes that differ on the basis of collective and individual choices and constraints and that are structured by purpose, custom, desire, and circumstance. This essay defines the unique geographical properties of regions of home and, by extension, the geographical contexts of home. It explores the processes by which place becomes home and examines characteristics of home regions that distinguish them from other types of regions.

Home regions are culturally constructed and geographically and historically contingent. They exist to serve fundamental individual and group needs, and, as human constructs and cultural products, they also sustain these needs. Indeed, every human activity or experience to some degree affects the delineation of a home context. In this way, a lifeworld becomes a collage of overlapping and ever-transforming personal and collective geographies, a system of irregularly shaped nodal regions that correspond to homes of individuals or groups of individuals. In each case, the sense of home varies in space: some places are conceived as more homelike than are others. The strongest sense of home commonly coincides geographically with a dwelling. Usually the sense of home attenuates as one moves away from that point, but it does so in no fixed or regular way. At the same time, as the world becomes increasingly interconnected and interdependent, concepts of home increasingly shed their spatial character to become contingent on flows of information, exchange of ideas, long-distance connections, and proliferation of lifestyles. Such change leads to a conceptualization of lifeworld and lifestyle patterns in terms of interlinking systematic networks rather than of various types of home regions.

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The changing cultural landscape of the Western world, albeit increasingly homogeneous, is deeply ambiguous and contradictory. It simultaneously expresses on one hand the easing of constraints and prejudices about human identity and behavior and on the other hand an idealization of materialism and individualism. In contemporary Western society, with its sharply divided spheres of meaning, materialism and individualism provide ways for any person to develop more or less desirable techniques for coping with the often contradictory pressures of public and private life. At the same time, materialism and individualism constantly impinge on intimacy, home, and community, the areas of life formerly governed by ethical norms. For these reasons, a reassessment of the idea of home is essential before any discussion of its geographical properties.

The Concept of Home

Humans occupy space and use symbols to transform it into place; they are creatures of habit who appropriate place and context as home. The idea of home is broad and profoundly symbolic, a parameter that infiltrates every relationship between humans and environment as humans reach out to the unknown and return to the known. Every activity or experience in which people engage to some degree affects their geographical delineation of home.

Home has been defined first and foremost as a spatial context (Porteous 1976) and the basis of one of the most fundamental geographical dichotomies: home versus nonhome. The prevailing equation of home with house in American society has been restrictive and misleading (Hollander 1991). Place exists at different scales: a favorite chair in a crowded household, a backyard, a trailer camp, a plot of land, or a country of birth. The earth itself is a collection of homes, the ultimate home itself, because it fulfills the need for refuge, for a frame of reference, and for a context of self-identification. The scale of home obviously depends on the extent of actual or expressed power, control, or personal investment in space. Home, however, connotes not only a physical or spatial condition but also social and habitual conditions. The essence of home lies in the recurrent, regular investment of meaning in a context with which people personalize and identify through some measure of control.

If home is where a person starts, then it must begin with the self. People feel at home with themselves as a rule, because they are familiar with both their past actions and their ongoing activities, feelings, preoccupations, tendencies, and intentions, which are anchored in the self and spatially expressed through personal geographies. People construct their geographies of home at the interface between their self and their world. It is at this interface that the idea of home takes shape, and the dichotomy
between us and them, fundamental to shaping personal place in the world, arises.

Historical time becomes the central dimension to the idea of home, because habits that repetitively unfold in specific contexts differentiate these locales or circumstances from the rest of the known world. Therein lies the meaning of home as "a place where every day is multiplied by all the days before it" (Tuan 1977, 144). Over time an individual develops numerous behavioral, cognitive, and affective routines by investing resources and emotional commitment. The same process occurs at a group level in the creation of a collective home in the form of a common cultural background and a common homeland. The problem of meaning is temporal, a passage of time linked to experiential consciousness (Bachelard 1964; Schutz 1967). Although regular routines are not always place specific, they are usually repeated in daily life. The individual or the group returns to these patterns time and again, because they represent unique strategies for survival and personal fulfillment that encapsulate all consolidated lessons from past trials, errors, and successes. These patterns become part of home because they represent recurrent, familiar points of reference in time, space, and society. Repetition is an essential element in the transformation of place into home.

The third dimension of home is its social component. It becomes salient in the development of the idea of home by establishing a circle of social relations that validate an individual as a human being. The word family in old Chinese, which translates into English as "people in house," emphasizes the connection between home and family. The first home is the mother. Later in life, broad and complex social associations expand and reinforce the sense of home. Personal homes may be closely linked to and articulated by familial and communal associations. Collective homes may be delineated by ethnic, nationalistic, civic, or ideological parameters. As the sense of a collective home is connected to the past and to the future, ethnicity and nationalism constitute powerful poles of attachment.

Most human knowledge is created through comparison; humans define themselves relative to an other. Personal, national, or subgroup identity cannot exist in a contextual vacuum. Individuals define and redefine their lifeworlds as home by assigning the unfamiliar or the foreign to "them," the other, whoever they may be, and by creating a distance between the two sides. The sense of personalization of the immediate environment is expressed as some measure of control or identification that transforms place into home.

Geographical Properties of Home Regions

Regular projection of the self or the group on a specific spatial and social territory is filtered through a broad range of individual and cultural
particularities that attach unique meaning to the context and to its contents. Collective and individual regions of home are constantly being constructed and deconstructed. When an individual attaches meaning to them, it is clearly subjective, a product of intentionality in a given and changing social context (Agnew 1982); when meaning is collectively attached to a home region, it is intersubjectively experienced as such by the members of the group. In this way a city or a neighborhood represents home for its inhabitants, and its various contents and characteristics become signs of home. Because a sign is not only the sign for what it means or signifies but also the sign for the subjective or intersubjective experiences of those who use it, representations of home become representations of the self or the group. Homes become the symbols of selves or cultures. Whereas the residential landscape, for example, undoubtedly conveys symbolic notions of the house (Rapoport 1982; Lindsey, Buchan, and Duncan 1988), the idea of home itself becomes a symbol of the feelings, circumstances, or types of relationships that it has come to represent in distinct epochs or cultures, such as a people (Sopher 1979), a local way of life (Jackson 1957), the family (Lynes 1957), or sentiments of ease, relaxation, comfort, and familiarity (Rybczynski 1986).

Some parts or aspects of home, which is better sketched as a nodal rather than as a formal personal region, are laden with meaning to a higher degree than are other parts or aspects: some parts of home are more home than are others. Consequently, homes, as they have been conventionally conceptualized, may be laid out on maps that indicate where the sense of home is at its strongest. Likewise, different levels of attachment in given regions of home may be graphically distinguished one from another. Nomadic and displaced people obviously have spatially dispersed notions of home, but for most people the strongest sense of home coincides spatially with the site of the domicile. From there the sense may gradually attenuate outward: a neighborhood, for instance, may feel more like home than does a mall at the edge of the suburb but less like home than the house itself. Home is a multidimensional and profoundly symbolic term that cannot be mapped as an exclusively spatial concept, but it can be depicted as one aspect of human emotional territory (Bunkse 1990). Home as an expression of personal or group identity is geographically transportable in the human quest for a place in the world, a point of reference. In “Out of Africa” Isak Dinesen (1937) beautifully described how the Masai relocated home symbols in the establishment of a new home region by taking with them the names of their hills, plains, and rivers and giving them to similar features in the new area.

Home regions attain certain unique geographical qualities that characterize them and contribute to their distinctiveness from other types of regions. These qualities stem from distinctive characteristics of home and
of human attachment to various aspects of the lifeworld. I explicate four of the qualities: the home-nonhome dialectic, the expansion of home and distance, home and life cycle, and dynamics of attachment.

HOME–NONHOME DIALECTIC

The experience of home from a nonhome perspective, that is, from outside the home, is significant to the idea of home. Many literary and poetic references to home have been written either by someone in exile or when a home is in danger of being lost or changed in unwanted ways (Wolf 1980). More often than not, home does not become an issue until it is no longer there or is being lost, because the concept of home is constructed on the division of personally known worlds into home and nonhome contexts. The definition of home rests on a dynamic dialectical relationship between home and the outside, on which people build their everyday geographical understanding of the world. Consequently, they come to know home much more by its absence from a nonhome perspective.

With distance from home a person is temporarily or permanently dissociated from it and becomes both more conscious of its role in life and increasingly appreciative of its inherent qualities as well as its contribution to personal sustenance and psychological well-being. At the same time, by personally submerging oneself in new environments, associations, and experiences, a person gains new perspectives on and an enlightened understanding of home. Away from home, human horizons expand, and an individual may discover new aspects of the self that result in an inevitable reordering of the intimate world and a reevaluation of past, present, and future situations. In this dialectical relationship between home and nonhome, the farther from home, the better individuals will know their home on return. Home differs with each instance of return. A continuous process of synthesis between the home and the nonhome occurs, as parts of nonhome are embodied into home and as home is incorporated into new frameworks of understanding and new contexts of evaluation and identification.

Whatever term is used to identify the antithesis of home, an indisputable tension exists between the two poles of the dialectic. This tension often takes the form of a struggle between staying at home and moving on or between order and freedom that surfaces in the mythology or popular culture of a society and urges people one way or another. The best-known example in the United States is the phrase, “Go west, young man.” On the other hand, the pull of home may be so great that tourists in a foreign country will seek out reminders of home, such as familiar food. The English word nostalgia is rooted in the ancient Greek word nostos, which translates as “return home.” The concept of returning home has been central to Greek culture since Odysseus. Modern Greek folk
culture decries emigration and refers to foreign land as "criminal," precisely because such a large proportion (41 percent) of the Greek population lives outside Greece. Estrangement from home and the condition of emigration or exile are of such importance to the Aegean culture, for example, that the islanders use two distinct words to describe different degrees of estrangement. The modern Greek word that signifies the foreigner, the outsider, is *xenos*. In the Aegean area, the word *xenikos* connotes a quasi-outsider, somebody originally from an island who left the village to reside elsewhere permanently.

**Expansion of Home and Distance**

Rootedness is another inherently geographical concept and is central to the notion of home. Rootedness has acquired temporal, cultural, and psychological connotations in its everyday use. The word describes a state of mind or being in which a person's whole life and pursuits are centered around a broadly defined home. The core meaning of rootedness is found in the sense of literally belonging somewhere. The notion of rootedness is important in understanding how home contexts expand spatially as a person's distance from home increases.

Willa Cather illustrated this point in "The Professor's House" (1925), a novel in which she described a man's intense emotional attachment to Lake Michigan. "Even in his long, happy student years with the Thierault family in France, that stretch of blue water was the one thing he was home-sick for" (31). Yet, when he is back at his house in the Midwest, the lake is his escape from the everyday drudgery of the home: "You had only to look at the lake and you knew you would soon be free" (30). At his midwestern residence the lake stands as a symbol of nonhome, characterized by the lure of freedom; when he is in a foreign country, his notion of home expands to encompass the lake. Similar patterns of home delineation emerge from countless personal accounts of home. In fact, the contraction and expansion of home depending on a person's physical location at the moment explains why when most exiled adults remember where they came from, they remember their homeland, not the domestic hearth or the family residence. As a historian observed, emigrants from villages in the department of Creuse did not discover themselves as Creusois until they moved to Paris (Hobsbawm 1991).

Spatially and socially constricted people rooted in space, society, and time find themselves unable to associate with place as home much beyond their immediate living and working environment. This restriction occurs regardless of the size of the home, because they have not developed knowledge and familiarity with the nonhome and have not incorporated it in their habitual routines and because they have no control over it or do not personally identify with it.
Yi-Fu Tuan (1980, 4) defines rootedness from an objective standpoint as long habitation at one locality and from a subjective standpoint as “a state of being made possible by an incuriosity toward the world at large and an insensitivity toward the flow of time.” In either case, rootedness ties an individual or a group of individuals to one or more specific place-people-time points of reference, which prevents individual growth. On the other hand, some form of rootedness may be beneficial for the fulfillment of daily routines, because it may instill a sense of comfort and a feeling of balance in life. If felt positively as part of growth, rootedness carries the potential to enlarge personal being by making individuals aware of their own identity through an expanded appreciation of local customs and traditions and of the possibilities that arise from extending their life circumstances to the past and to the future. Thus culture is created and provides guiding principles for the continued existence and identity formation of the community. In this sense cultural rootedness is directly related to the creation of a collective home. Personal or collective rootedness at a large geographical scale may come with distance from the family or the homeland hearth. Tuan (1980, 5) contends that “Americans may not need to have lived in the same locality for many generations. Rootedness as a mood or feeling is theirs if only their lives seem pleasantly humdrum and timeless, and if they do not yearn to see a world beyond that which they ultimately know.”

HOME AND LIFE CYCLE

The process of expansion and contraction of home with movement in space also occurs in time. The concept of home alters with the passage of time and the accumulation of age. The process unfolds within an individual’s lifeworld and lifetime. A child’s first home is its mother. As the child ages, curiosity about the world and the urge to conquer its surroundings and expand into new horizons drives the young adult to create new homes and to claim the whole world as its own. With time, family and community ties are established, elaborated, and lived through, to become the frameworks on which numerous behavioral, cognitive, and affective routines are superimposed. The individual acquires a familiarity with and a stake in these ties and routines by investing time, resources, and emotional commitment in them: they become a projection of the self. Attachment to the specific context of home expands, and home constitutes the whole world of the individual, as the powerful association between the individual and home is strengthened by constant reinforcement of the relationship between the two. The person shapes and modifies home with the widely varying inputs from other individuals, a lifetime process that expands home horizons, until home begins to shrink with loss of faculties, infirmity, and death (Goyen 1948). The role of other people in the creation of a home becomes apparent in the story of a wife
who joins her husband at a place he intends to make his home: "As it was, she came as a stranger into the country where I had spent my life, and made me feel more free and comfortable in it than I had ever felt before. That is the most graceful generosity that I know" (Berry 1981, 35).

The creation of a home as a compound product of many acts, thoughts, and feelings as well as symbol-laden spaces and relationships occurs through the personalization of a context that is partly chosen voluntarily and partly imposed by external circumstances. The inevitability of constraints posed by old age and infirmity limit the elderly's scope of aspirations and activities and lead them back to the safest, surest, least-questioned home, the childhood home or, if it no longer exists, to the current home realm. In somewhat parallel circumstances, home is more contained and smaller in size for children than for adults; children, like the aged, have less control over their home contexts or have only a certain degree of power over a limited part of their homes. The construction of personal home regions seems to follow the same pattern of ebb and flow in time as it does in space, the dialectical relationship between creating a home and extending into the nonhome. The latter two tendencies are highly interconnected and seem to define and counterbalance each other either in space or in time. Home is best discovered from a distance, whether physical, social, cultural, or historical.

DYNAMICS OF ATTACHMENT

Coming full circle with the three attributes of home—the home-nonhome dialectic, the expansion of home and distance, and home and life cycle—the expansion of home reinforces the need for human beings to attach themselves to a context that is unquestionably theirs, so that they are secure in the changing associations with place, society, and time. To secure and define personal or collective identities, humans return to small-scale homes, for example, the house or the intimate contours of the place where they grew up. Another kind of a dialectical relationship emerges: one between the extent or size of home and the attachment to it. As definitions of home change, people yearn more for home and thus tend to become more intensely attached to it. In other words, they value more what they seem to be losing. The smaller the home context, the greater is attachment to it, and vice versa. Perhaps this pattern results from the nature of home itself: a refuge in the world, a cozy, warm place in juxtaposition to its immense, unknown surroundings, where people may regenerate themselves (Vycinas 1961). This dialectic of the home becoming more valued when it shrinks relative to ever-expanding surrounding horizons counterbalances the tendency of home to grow with increased distance from it.

Similarly, decreased time spent with people or performing routines that are part of home correlates with higher attachment to these aspects
of home. In the contemporary Western world, fraught with alienation and individualism, the concept of quality time was invented to compensate for the dissolution of home by engaging in intense, concentrated patterns of interaction. In other words, concerted efforts are being made to share diminishing free time with people or routines that are part of home. Thus people seek to endow value and reinforce their attachment to a part of their lives that is in peril of being lost or altered by the constant expansion of their lifeworlds through communication and transportation. A related phenomenon of contemporary North American culture is that at some point in midlife people turn toward sharing the intimacy of home or lifestyle with people they consider part of home instead of striving to surpass outsiders. The current, widespread nostalgia for the home and the family, however they might be construed, becomes all the more poignant, because people find themselves not independently but through other people and institutions (Bellah and others 1985).

However Americans envision the good life, they cannot imagine living it alone. In other words, they value more what they seem to be losing. Often they retreat to an unquestionably personal home context, the self itself, to secure some sense of identity and individuality in a rapidly changing world, where home regions are constantly redefined. To Westerners home is clearly no longer primarily a place: it is more and more a state of being, constructed on the accumulation of personal habits, thoughts, or emotional patterns of the lifeworld.

HOME REGIONS IN A CHANGING WORLD

Weakening identification with place and social group in the contemporary Western world seems to be reducing home to a mere accumulation of habits or to the elaboration of a lifestyle. During the twentieth century Western societies have witnessed a shift from bourgeois notions of home based on themes of interiority, domesticity, and the nuclear family to an individualistic concept of home based on lifestyle gratification. Individuals are no longer defined on the basis of shared group characteristics alone; instead, the ultimate value is assigned to individual advancement and satisfaction. High degrees of residential mobility also disrupt the sense of community that exists in traditional places. The legacies of industrialization and urbanization that are at the basis of modernization have resulted in the loss of the physical community or region as home. The social worlds of neighborhood and village are now less important as transitional zones between home and nonhome settings. Instead of physical communities, ones of interest cultivate and nurture personal ways of being, the habitual routines of their constituent members’ geographies of home. Channels of human and information flow seem to be increasingly holding the web of home contexts together and fostering attachment to them. Dynamically interwoven systems, not regions, of home are formed.
The recent proliferation of transportation and communication technologies makes it possible for commuting couples to maintain families, for migrant workers to consider their country of origin as home by returning there frequently, and for friendships and business connections to thrive across long distances.

It is no wonder, then, that as communication and transportation systems become increasingly improved and accessible and as they threaten to become substitutes for conventional home ties based on physical propinquity, awareness of locality and family roots are also intensified, with many positive and negative consequences. As contemporary humans realize that they belong to an interconnected and interdependent world, they turn to their ethnos, their region, their community, or their ancestral place to secure their distinctiveness. They look for the ways in which they are different and unique to protect their identity, which is best experienced as a familiar context or set of habitual patterns. They divide the world into us and them; they create homes, the us of today, that tend to shrink geographically, as a necessary consequence of the attempt to reach out and become one with the rest of the world. The overwhelming resurgence of racism and xenophobia in Europe is only one such frightful instance in which the dialectical relationship between home and nonhome becomes apparent.

A self-conscious world identity develops in lieu of rootedness and life tied to locality. European identity is coming to overshadow European national identities; similarly, world citizenship tends to reinforce regional identity in terms of free-market trade associations. The consequent backlash of the expansion of home with increased distance from it can be quite intense. Such trends are evidence that attachment to home is becoming stronger, especially to those parts of home that seem most imperiled by time-space compression, which again points to the dialectical relationship between the size or extent of home and its human attachment. The home becomes even more significant as a pole of attachment amidst an increasingly alienating, impersonal, and crime-ridden world, as is strikingly characteristic of large North American cities. The more public the lifeworld realm, the greater the pull toward the inner self; the more private life's everyday stage, the greater the yearning for and the urgency of intimacy with the larger human community. Precisely because the Western world has reached such a tremendous level of technology and sophistication, the notion of dwelling becomes crucial to the major task at hand: personal responsibility for the world by responding to it and caring for it (Heidegger 1977).

As personal geographies are necessarily adjusting to and promoting modern and postmodern lifeworlds, they are increasingly assuming their meaning from the ties between a placeless self and surroundings. Home regions in this changing world are no longer place bound; they are
systems of interlinked patterns of habitual association and attachment. Fundamental properties of home contexts, regardless of how they are identified, persist and may offer valuable insight about the human situation in the world and in fulfilling human potential through a harmonious coexistence in a shared home.

CITATIONS


