

Seeking Home in a Strange Land

*True
stories
of the
changing
meaning
of home*



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Being at home and being the stranger

*Home, home on the range,
where the deer and the antelope play,
Where seldom is heard
A discouraging word,
and the skies are not cloudy all day.*
— Brewster Higley (1870s)

Clearly, finding home and being strange are highly dynamic concepts whose meaning depends on cultural and social context, as well as on the circumstances of a specific historical epoch. Home, coming home, detachment, becoming strange or alienated, taking root, settling in: throughout this collection of stories, such terms take on different and multi-layered meanings.

Feeling at home can become the primary measure of one's ability to adapt—to make the strange new world into the home world where one feels most at ease. In his study *The Politics of Home: Belonging and Nostalgia in Europe and the United States* (2011), Jan Willem Duyvendak describes how growing mobility has placed at the heart of debates on identity and care the question of how a person or a group experiences home. In his international comparative study, he argues that notions of home and strangeness are culturally contingent. Americans mainly have a spatial notion of home; in their experience, home represents the geographical entity of one's "homeland" or "home town". For the Dutch, by contrast, home is associated with the private environment: the family home, domesticity, intimacy. This Dutch emphasis on the familiar within a small enclosed space expresses a sense of home very different from the big houses and yards, endless highways, vast shopping malls and big-box stores, wide-open spaces and rugged American horizons, and the conviction that one is most at home on the range and on the road.

Not surprisingly, it is common in the United States for people to move several time zones away from where they started, even to a state on the other side of the country, all without crossing national borders. Accordingly, the question "Where are you from?" has a much more open character to Americans, given that so many of them are on the move at any given time. It seems sometimes that nearly everyone in that "nation of immigrants" originally hails

from someplace else: now here, now there, and soon on their way again to somewhere new. Meanwhile the millions of undocumented immigrants, picking up work wherever they can find it, have nowhere they can be sure is safe to lay their heads. And in some of the socio-culturally retrogressive regions of the United States, a genuine devotion to home and a deep reverence for homeland correlate tightly with an aversion to moving away from a narrow-minded heritage. That attitude has often been romanticized, as in this famous example, composed long after the end of legal slavery in the U.S. and once the state song of the state of Virginia:

*Carry me back to old Virginny ...
 There's where I labored so hard for ole massa,
 Day after day in the field of yellow corn,
 No place on earth do I love more sincerely
 Than old Virginny, the state where I was born.*
 — James A. Bland (1878)

The question of where someone “hails from” or belongs can just as well result in “othering”. Stephan Sanders (2013) introduces the Dutch term *uithuizen* (loosely, “thrown out of the house”) for this phenomenon, which he applies to labeling other people “allochtonous”, or “not from here” so that they feel excluded and homeless. Many, some say most of the descendants of the “darky” slaves who “labored so hard for ole massa” (the plantation master) in the American south were “othered” right out of their native states by rank racism that persists to this day as “America’s original sin”. Devotion and loyalty to home and homeland in the developed world can come with the same extreme xenophobia and institutionalized violence that Jared Diamond observed among the many hunter-gatherer societies he described in *The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?* (2012).

These observations merely confirm the observation made in the introduction that “home” has a broader significance than just one’s own dwelling, broader than a particular house or any sort of permanent abode. The sense of home can incorporate feelings, customs, and cultural traditions in a world where the best choice often seems to be, to keep moving.

5 - PLACED AND DIS-PLACED IN MONTANA: FINDING HOME IN RELATIONSHIPS TO PEOPLE AND PLACE

Walter Gulick

Home. It's that place from which we go but never really leave. It's where we are centered, where we have roots. Home is our castle, our place of security. Or at least that's what home ideally is.

All too often, however, home actually turns out to be where you can't go again. For some workaholics, it's the place they are avoiding. For some rebellious adolescents, it's the place from which they are trying to escape. For millions of transient Americans, rich as well as poor, no place qualifies as home in the ideal sense.

The notion of home has many rich yet elusive meanings. This essay is an attempt to examine the meanings of home from my experience as a professor who has lived in many places, but for about the past forty years has called Billings, Montana his principal home. I've also taught outside the U.S. quite a few times, including four occasions in the Netherlands. Montana is a sparsely settled, rough-edged region abutting Canada where the plains meet the mountains. The Netherlands is a densely settled low-lying land with a palpable sense of history. Yet I've experienced a sense of home in both places. It's not the same sense, though, as we shall see.

Join with me, then, in a meandering inquiry into the nature of home. Selections from several Montana authors will be used to describe both how some people are securely placed in this landscape and how others are displaced from any sense of nurturing presence here. Our exploration of the meanings of home will be centered around three questions:

- 1 Where are you from?
- 2 Is where you now live your home in the ideal sense?
- 3 If it isn't, what might make it home?

7 - HOME, AN ENDLESS JOURNEY: ON BEING COMPLEX, (NEVER) BELONGING, AND FINDING IDENTITY HOMES

Katie-Lee Weille

Where is the character at home? The question bears less on a geographical territory than a rhetorical territory... The sign of being at home is the ability to make oneself understood without too much difficulty, and to follow the reasoning of others without any need for long explanations. The rhetorical country of a character ends where his interlocutors no longer understand the reasons he gives for his deeds and actions, the criticisms he makes, or the enthusiasms he displays. A disturbance of rhetorical communication marks the crossing of a frontier, which should of course be envisaged as a border zone, a marshland, rather than a clearly defined line.
—Vincent Descombes, 1987, p. 179

What is home? In this opening passage, Descombes shifts the definition of home from the physical world to the realm of shared meaning, and the frontier he refers to defines the boundaries of alienation and belonging. In my own life and in my encounters as a psychologist with the lives of expatriates and global nomads, there is an underlying, universally poignant longing that I have come to associate with the pervasive themes of home, identity, and belonging. Where is my home, truly, in the deepest felt sense of the word? Who am I really, my authentic, true self? Where do I belong and with whom? We are all pregnant with yearning for lost belongingness, for long-ago homes, or for the missing sense of embeddedness we once knew. We are all embedded in this world of (hopefully but not always) shared meaning, and we are all vulnerable to the alienation lurking there at the frontier, beyond its boundaries.

8 - A SHIFTING QUEST FOR A SENSE OF HOME

Halleh Ghorashi

Where do I belong? Ever since 1988, when I was forced to leave Iran, the country of my birth, that question has often played through my mind. Though I had occasionally felt homeless in Iran as well, the question of belonging has never been so open-ended as it is now.

I felt homeless in Iran at times, as when I was beaten by armed groups of Islamic fanatics or in the nights when I did not dare to go home because I was afraid the police were lying in wait for me there. I felt a stranger in my own country in the period full of violence and oppression after 1980, but there was not a doubt in my mind where I would belong: in a democratic Iran.

As a seventeen-year-old girl, like so many of my peers at the time of the 1979 Iranian revolution I felt drawn to politics. I was one of the most fervent supporters of the left-wing organization I had joined, and I dreamed of one day becoming a full member of this organization as a partisan. Everything I did was filled with conviction and dedication. I felt completely at home in my new political identity and just as homeless when the utopia of a democratic Iran proved to be a thing of the past. Yet never did I lose hope that this sense of home would one day return.

When I fled Iran and entered the Netherlands, the country that I would come to consider my new home in due time, the question “Where do I actually belong?” took on a new meaning. It became that question without a clear answer, a question that, more than ever before, revealed a deep sense of uprootedness. My flight had destroyed the innocence of a self-evident sense of home. When the roots have lost their self-evidentness, so has the notion of home been lost.

In this chapter I outline the way in which, step by step, issues of my identity and my sense of home got intertwined with my academic career. I distinguish several steps on that path:

9 - A SHIFTING QUEST FOR A SENSE OF HOME

James Clement van Pelt

To Bear Any Burden

Americans take special pride in one particular trait regarded as a source of their country's greatness: to be considered a nation of immigrants.¹ For over four centuries the perilous ocean crossings from Europe and Asia, the harsh desert crossings from Central and South America, and, horrible to recall, the massive human trafficking from Africa to the Americas² have populated the American landscape with diversity "from sea to shining sea"³, forming the pulsating undercurrent of American history.

There is nothing exceptional about a certain percentage of a population shifting from region to region for economic and ideological reasons. Like most other developed nations, the United States has its undocumented immigrants, itinerant workers, and foreign employees overstaying their visas, often moving from place to place within the U.S. to follow work opportunities or stay ahead of the ICE men (Immigration and Customs Enforcement).

Then there are the white-collar salarymen climbing the ladder within any number of corporations and agencies, ready to be transferred to this or that far-flung branch office when a superior thinks it might help streamline the operation; the salesmen and executives of the mighty IBM used to joke that it stands for "I've Been Moved".

And toward the lower end of the economic scale, migrant farmworkers and braceros⁴ follow the harvests far from home, as in Woody Guthrie's words:

*California, Arizona, I work all your crops,
Then it's up north to Oregon to gather your hops...
We work in your orchards of peaches and prune,
And sleep on the ground in the light of the moon.
On the edge of the city you'll see me and then
I come with the dust, and I go with the wind.⁵*

10 - PORTRAIT OF KIYOKO

Sietske Dijkstra

The place we married is our place now. Not the place I was born, but his place is my place now. Because of... we have been there for almost thirty-six years now. After marriage... it's my home now.

Kiyoko calls Tokyo home. She celebrated her sixtieth birthday there on the day following our interview in Amsterdam at the World Trade Center there. Her husband explained that for the Japanese, becoming sixty is a significant milestone called Kanreki or “life calendar turning over” to celebrate the completed cycle of five times around the twelve months of the Asian zodiac. It marks a person’s rebirth and a fresh start on life. Accordingly, since babies in Japan wear red, Kiyoko received red presents for her Kanreki.

I met Kiyoko in Amsterdam at a conference on migrant studies in August 2012. During the first day we discovered that we both felt like strangers and outsiders at this particular conference. That feeling created a special bond, and we found that we really liked each other. We emailed a few times after the conference, and I asked to interview her for this book.

She presented a true cosmopolitan spirit, having lived in several countries due to her husband’s business. She has lived in Egypt, in Japan, and in the Netherlands, where she was studying the Qur’an when I interviewed her. Kiyoko and her husband have three grown children and several grandchildren. English is not her mother tongue. I wonder what “home” and “strange” meant to her.

11 - YOU HAVE TO DO IT ALL BY YOURSELF...

Mick Matthys

A blessing for society?

In an earlier time, sociologist P.A. Sorokin characterized social mobility as a blessing for society but a burden for those who strive to be upwardly mobile while running the risk of social isolation (Sorokin, 1927). The academics I researched (Matthys, 2010, 2013) are individuals who achieved a higher social position by acquiring a college education—children from the working class making a “class jump” (Nelson, C.S., 2006). The burden can take diverse forms. One form can be typed as “inadequate career attitude”: instead of making a career plan, constructing a social network, or putting themselves forward, they devote their primary attention to attaining job security and collegiality.

The unknown culture of the new social milieu is a source of conflict and exclusion as well (Matthys & Thijssen, 2013). Nevertheless, it is an undeniable fact that these academics achieved high positions in society and business (see for instance Lubrano, 2002). In my qualitative research at the University of Utrecht I interviewed thirty-two graduates whose origins were in the working class and who were in the last phase of their working lives: university professors, lecturers, company directors, teachers, lawyers, public servants, engineers, therapists, surgeons and other medical practitioners. I asked them about how their working class backgrounds had affected their lives and careers. Almost all of them reviewed their lives with feelings of satisfaction even when frustrated in their ambitions. For most of them, experiences of frustration, crisis, and bitterness had been transformed into a sense of being at home in their new milieu—yet not entirely; a certain sense of not belonging remained. The message was: I succeeded by my own efforts, my own virtue, without connections and without belonging to the “club”; but as a rule I ran my race in the outside lane (Vandekerckhove & Huyse, 1976).

12 - MIGRATION, MOBILITY, AND INTERGENERATIONAL INNER STRENGTH

Anita Nanhoe

“I never again want to hear you say you’re not lucky!
I have paid in my life, for my children to reap the
benefits.”

In April 2012 I defended my Ph.D. thesis “Mijn ouders migreerden om erop vooruit te gaan” (thesis “My parents migrated to achieve better life standards.”) For this study I interviewed Hindustani, Moroccan, and native academics about the factors contributing to their successful educational careers.

The choice of this topic arose from professional interest, nevertheless I repeatedly had aha-erlebnis, “eureka moments”, during the study. Among both the Moroccan and the Hindustani respondents were women, but also men, in whose stories I saw parallels to my own life. The literature on Suriname and the life stories of the Hindustani respondents gave me a broader and deeper insight into the history of my ancestors, in the context of their upbringing and their socialization.

Now at the age of forty, I often wonder: where do I come from? Where am I now? Where will I journey in the future? They say such thoughts come along in the phase of life I’m now entering.

In this essay I focus on the first question: “Where do I come from?” It is a question that requires long exploration. Socialization has mechanisms that are transmitted from generation to generation. The life of each person affects the generations that follow.

Most of my family history is still a mystery to me. I have only a little information on the parents of my father’s father. I need to know more about at least six great-grandparents to understand my own history and to map my personality and life in a broader context. They are my cultural roots and the source of the emotional baggage that has been passed down to me from generation to generation.

14 - LESSONS IN MODESTY: TRAVELING TO PERU

Jeanine Suurmond

I must have been about six years old when it dawned on me that there are more countries besides my home country, the Netherlands. I thought it was an extreme injustice that the Netherlands is so little, and other countries so big. I thought it very unfair that I faced the threat of growing up in a country that was so much smaller than I would have liked it to be. In retrospect, I think that this was when my love of traveling originated. My search for countries bigger than the Netherlands became a kind of compensation for the unfairness that went with being Dutch. From then on, I considered myself truly cosmopolitan, feeling as I did much more a part of humanity in general than a part of the Dutch identity.

As a six-year-old world citizen, my traveling ambitions naturally were quite limited. For one thing there was my fear of dropping off the edge of the Earth (I knew for certain that the Earth is flat, and if I ventured into a country with Indians, somewhere near the edge, I could fall off). For another, I was of course dependent on the action radius of my parents. Nonetheless I remember being always curious about what would be around the next corner—and for me “the next corner” was sometimes literally the next corner. I remember that—still six—I dragged my three-year-old sister along on a trip to the corner of another street where I had never been before. Our joint travels came to an unexpected, joyless end when, with the next corner in sight, my sister fell, scraped her knee, and insisted on returning home. Grumbling, I acceded to her demand.

Fortunately, my curiosity for what’s “around the next corner” also worked metaphorically: I loved learning new things and could do so without having to undertake complicated outings (including the danger of a little sister falling down). As a six-year-old I simply bombarded my parents with all kinds of questions so I could find out all kinds of things. Looking back, my nearly infinite curiosity was another trigger for my love of travel.

15 - MIGRATION: PASSAGE TO A BETTER LIFE FOR WOMEN?

Bea Lalmahomed

The recent history of worldwide Hindu and Muslim migration suggests that patriarchy is in for a tough time. That history reveals that, ultimately, the autocratic rule by the male head of household can exist only in contexts in which it can be implemented. That presents no problem for patriarchy in a country where laws and traditions have their roots in Islam or Hinduism. It explains why India, a country rapidly advancing by most other measures, passed a strong law against rape only in 2013, and even then only after a horrific gang rape of a female student on a public bus triggered worldwide outrage. It was in a similar context of opposition to patriarchal excesses that I signed a petition to save a fifteen-year-old incest victim who had been raped for years by her assailant and then sentenced by the Maldives court to receive a hundred lashes in the public square for having sex outside of marriage.¹

Emigration to another country can bring liberation to women coming from such benighted cultures, but only when they can embrace their new freedom and open themselves to change. My experience is that women tend to be reluctant when it comes to turning away from familiar traditions and adopting new cultural values, perhaps because of their fear of the unknown, fear of family dishonor, and fear of being rejected and held in contempt by those closest to them.

Yet there are women, such as those I will describe here, who carefully introduce changes in behavior in a group or family. By doing so they indirectly influence the behavior of other women, who in turn proceed to adopt beneficial changes in behavior. My research on migration in its historical context indicates that this is a trend that is increasingly common. To illustrate that finding, I can share a chapter in my life and in the life of my mother. To do so is hard for me, because I lost her when she passed away in 2011, and remembering our very close and loving relationship is still poignantly painful. My hope is that her sweet, bright, tough nature comes across in what you are about to read.

16 - HOUSES WITH NO ROOF? MIGRATION, MOBILITY, AND IDENTITY AS THE ESSENCE OF HOME

Sietske Dijkstra, Lia van Doorn

Wat uiteindelijk overeind blijft is de strijd die mensen moeten leveren om van de ene plek naar de andere te komen en daarvoor moeten ze delen van hun geschiedenis en hun heden anders vormgeven. Dat doen ze in volle glorie. Translation:

Ultimately, what survives is the struggle—the struggle people endure to move from one place to the next, requiring, as they do so, that they reshape both their history and their present, and gloriously.

—Wim Brands (poet, journalist), 7 April 2012

As this journey in search of home and the unknown reaches its end, we invite you to reflect on how its principal ideas have been presented. In what different ways have the various essays addressed them? Does the atypical form of the essays, combining personal narrative and academic commentary, provide a mixture of insight and experiences useful for illuminating the changing meanings of home from both first-person and third-person perspectives?

In those essays, the central concepts of home and strangeness are explored in different ways and brought to bear on key terms such as mobility, migration, and identity. Drawing on their personal experiences as well as on their research and professional careers, the authors implicitly share their emotional lives and core values.

As the essays have unfolded, one after the other, they are intended to illustrate the connection of those central concepts—home and strangeness—with migration and identity. The connecting link between these dimensions is mobility, which is yet another concept with multiple meanings, referring to both transition from one place or state to another, and also upward or downward social mobility, linked to geographical, economic, cultural and political changes.

Seeking Home in a Strange Land

True stories of the changing meaning of home

Editors

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James Clement van Pelt

Authors

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Walter Gulick, Bea Lalmahomed,
Katie Lee Weille, Mick Matthys,
Anita Nanhoe, Jeanine Suurmond
James Clement van Pelt

Here is an exploration, unlike any before, of the fascinating, often poignant tension between the changing meanings of home and the experience of being the stranger in place and time amidst an era of runaway change. Individuals share their intimate stories of family and struggle, and through those personal narratives come insights about the global phenomena of migration and mobility, as whole populations cross borders and oceans in their desperate search for that safe, comfortable abode that seems just beyond “not yet from here, no longer from there”.

This unique Dutch-American collaboration presents nine essays and three portraits by accomplished authors and scholars who anchor their observations in relevant academic research. They share quests across miles and generations that have led them not only to new places but also to contemplation and humility, religious doubt and spiritual openness, and a sense of nimble relativity in expectations for their personal lives and professional careers. Their stories point toward the essential meaning of identity in ways that help us face the question of who among us is entitled to declare that we are home.

Finding home — a space to express who you are and connect yourself with others who are different — is not always easy, requiring both self-esteem and a strong belief in your own identity. From both scientific and personal perspectives, this book points the way home.

Professor Karen van Oudenhoven-van der Zee

Dean of the Faculty of Behavioral Sciences, University of Twente (NL)

The book provides a framework for considering the impact of great changes and relating your own experiences to those of others. By linking personal experiences and professional perspectives, it gives insights from sociology, psychology and philosophy. Seeking Home in a Strange Land offers a valuable contribution to the next stage in the debate on migration, mobility and identity.

Febe Deug

Journal of Social Intervention



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HISTORY

Kristallnacht to Dachau *Diary* by **Ernst Geiduschek**

During Kristallnacht on november 10th, 1938, the Gestapo arrested, mistreated and transported Ernst Geiduschek together with 11,000 Jews from Vienna to Dachau concentration camp. His family managed to buy emigration papers for him to travel to England, while he struggled to survive the horrors of the camp. This diary of Ernst Geiduschek was written december 1940 in England. The revenues from this book will be donated to ShelterBox. (www.shelterbox.org)