

Home on a wall: why, if at all, do international undergraduate students renegotiate their understanding of the word 'home'?

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The word 'home' is something that we rarely think of in everyday situations, yet its possible meanings are diverse. After a night out, we can say that we are going to 'head home', meaning wherever we're going to sleep that night. When asked what they are planning to do for the summer break, many students say that they are 'going home', meaning the place where they were born and/or grew up. If put on the spot and asked what is actually meant by 'home', people think harder and come up with a more in-depth understanding of the word. This essay is mainly concerned with this latter meaning as it presents itself to international undergraduate students in particular; a group of people who are by definition removed from what most would call their home, and whose experiences would seem to conflict with the very understanding of a spatially located 'home'.

My investigation was carried out through semi-formal conversations, conducted in the informants' bedrooms, with the stimulus of the conversation being the particular room decorations of each student. The informants are all students studying either at the University of St Andrews or Macalester College of St Paul, Minnesota. They are international in the sense that they are studying outside their respective countries of birth and residence. They were chosen more or less at random, but I chose to speak only with friends or acquaintances of mine, partly because I already have some knowledge of their life situation, but also to ensure that a relaxed and open conversation could be possible, even in such an intimate setting as their bedrooms. In addition to the conversation, I also documented the decorations in every room, with the consent of my informants, and in this essay I use both conversations and photos to explore how they relate to the concept of 'home'.

I use my informants and my encounters with them alongside evidence drawn from literature to both generate questions and to support my argument. The interpretation of my data and my conclusions are largely couched in the discourse on personal narrative, as conceived by thinkers like Ricoeur (1980) and Crites (1971), focusing on how the informants accommodate 'home' in their personal narratives.

As in the case of all controversial words, 'home' is used in everyday conversation, as well as in academic discourse, to refer to a number of different concepts and ideas. If this were not the case, if 'home' was as clearly defined as, say, the sea, the question at hand would hardly be of any interest at all. Yet some form of understanding of these different meanings must be attempted before one can begin to decipher the discourse surrounding the term as used by anthropologists, but, more importantly, also as used by the informants.

First of all, in one sense, home is intimately associated with a spatial dimension, as noticed by, for instance, Rykwert (1991), Douglas (1991), and Hareven (1991). Douglas identifies a particular understanding of home as a strictly spatial concept, saying of home that it 'is always a localizable idea [...] It need not be a large space, but space there must be, for home starts by bringing space under control' (1991: 289). Throughout her essay, *A Kind of Space*, Douglas makes it clear that she sees a very strong connection between 'home' and household, but the essential assumption of her argument is that home is a specific place; 'The question is not "How?" nor "Who?" nor "When?" but "Where is your home?"' (1991: 289, my emphasis). Even if it could be argued that this understanding of the word 'home' is not the only possible one, one particular incident during my conversation with my informant Sarah suggests that this is a fundamental aspect of the concept, at least to her;

Interviewer (I) – So, do you actually feel like you have a home?

Sarah (S) – No. Not really.

(I) – But you said before that you felt like home was people.

(S) – Yeah, but I don't have a home as in a place.

Sarah's assumption that I meant home in the sense of a certain place of belonging suggests that this is the first and perhaps most prominent meaning that she attaches to the word. At the same time it seems clear, judging from what she had said before, that home to her is people, and the qualifying statement made in this example (4), that she is fully prepared to include a different understanding of the term.

This sense of 'home', as a private space separated from public life, roughly corresponds with that denoted by the German word '*heim*', according to Hobsbawm (1991: 66); home similar to what we would refer to when we say that we're going home after a working day. This does not make matters much easier however, for, as Hobsbawm

recognizes, there is also the meaning that we attach to the word when we say that a city or a country is home, for him represented by the German word *heimat*; an ‘essentially public’ sense of home (Hobsbawm 1991: 67). Beyond this spatial aspect of home, exemplified by *heim* and *heimat*, there are a number of different ways to use the word home. Some suggest a more flexible understanding of the concept as, for instance, ‘a routine set of practices’ (Rapport and Dawson 1998a: 7) or a certain time period, like the Tito era in the Balkans (Jansen 1998). Rather than argue that these are mutually exclusive positions from which you have to choose one, I would suggest that the word ‘home’ simply occupies an extensive semantic area, one word potentially referring to a number of different referents; hence Sarah finds no problem using the word to mean both a certain place of belonging, as in the case above, and also arguing that home is something achieved by the presence of certain people, as she did on our first encounter.

Also, Slobodan displays a similarly complex perception of the word. He is a Bosnian Serb who grew up in Banja Luka^{*}. On the wall in his room, in Macalester College, hang three different flags: of Bosnia and Herzegovina (see appendix fig. 1), Serbia (see appendix, fig. 2), and the old Yugoslavian flag (see appendix, fig. 3). His country of birth and upbringing is Bosnia, but his ethnicity is Serbian, and he feels a strong nostalgia for the old Yugoslavian federation as opposed to the violent modern day nationalism, even though he was only two years old when the war tore the federation apart in 1991. From my conversations with him, it seems clear that he identifies to some extent with all of these entities, which all represent different ideas of home; his belonging to Bosnia and Herzegovina is like belonging to a *heimat* (cf. Hobsbawm 1991); that to Serbia is akin to a nationalistic sense of home, stretching beyond state boundaries, as described by Holy (1998); finally, that to Yugoslavia is significantly similar to the very Yugoslavian nostalgia described by Jensen (1998). This is yet another example of how a number of different perceptions of ‘home’ are at work at the same time, in one single person’s discourse.

In short, the different perceptions of home evident in the discourse surrounding the term are numerous, as found both in academic literature and, more significantly for this essay, in the personal discourse of international students, and the word itself is open for personal interpretations. To give recognition to Douglas, place does seem to matter, yet it

* Banja Luka is a Serbian town in Bosnia, the second largest city in Bosnia and Herzegovina, after Sarajevo, and the regional capital of Republika Srpska.

seems that there are other ideas involved in the discourse surrounding home for these international undergraduates.

This ambiguity, so to speak, of the term is not necessarily a problem. We use terms of debateable meaning all the time without any closer reflection, like beauty, love, truth etc. If or when we do reflect on the terms, we do so without much personal investment in the outcome of that reflection. Precision of a word is not something that is required and a precise definition of most terms matters little to us. Is this discussion of home, then, just like that; a discussion of linguistic curiosity; a matter of trying to discern all the different ideas and concepts that the particular word 'home' can refer to? In a sense that is true. The ongoing process here is indeed a kind of attempt to explore the meaning of home, but it would seem that for my informants this is not an attempt of purely academic importance; rather, is an attempt to make sense of experiences and memories. For example, Svetlana (a sophomore student of Serbian origin at Macalester), when asked why her dorm room on the Macalester campus was so relatively bare of personal effects, immediately said that;

Svetlana – My room here is like a hotel room. That's why I don't decorate it. It's not home, I'm just passing through.

This is an instance exemplifying how important this matter of home is; even though she couldn't really give a spontaneous answer to what home is to everyone, Svetlana was sure what her room wasn't *to her*, and she was quite adamant in her definition. In contrast to some people saying that home is where you hang your hat, this suggests that to Svetlana the term carries much more importance. The place that 'deserves' the term must be more than just a dorm room. It seems that she is not just arguing about the definition of a word, but trying to describe a feeling of home, and what would make her achieve that.

Another similar, although seemingly different, example is Sarah's. When I first talked to her, she originally stated that, because of her moving around the world for most of her life, she felt at home in the world in general rather than one place in particular, as exemplified by the world map hanging over her bed (see appendix, fig. 4). Thus, she was making a personal connection with the concept of home; as a result of her personal life history, she identifies more with the world rather than a single household or country.

However, later during the same conversation she said that *'home is people'*, rather than an actual place, seemingly disqualifying the whole idea of the world being a home. Even later, as I have already mentioned, she simply denied that she even *had* a home. What is being negotiated here is *partly* the meaning of the word 'home' in an abstract sense, but because her perception of this concept is involved in how she defines herself and how she understands her experiences, the discussion has an immediate impact on how Sarah perceives, or makes sense, of her own life, trying to answer where or with whom she would feel at home. Unlike Svetlana, she has not settled for one set definition of the word. Instead, she seems to know exactly what home should feel like, but is unable to provide an answer as to what, where, or whom this place really is. Nevertheless, in her eagerness to *find* a definition of the term, she seemed to display, just like Svetlana, a sincere concern for the term and what it denotes.

In short, it seems clear from their preoccupation about the term that even though the discussion surrounding their understanding of home is necessarily expressed as a discussion of semantics, the significance of that discussion goes beyond mere academic interest in an ambiguous term, and influences how they make sense of themselves; the narrative they tell of themselves, if you will (cf. Crites 1971; Miller et. al. 1990).

The question yet remains on why this ambiguity is not left alone; why it is that the personal understanding of home is either phrased in conviction or inquisitiveness, never in simple acceptance or detachment? One reason has already been identified, in the word's intimate connection with the personal narrative, similar to ideas suggested by Rapport and Dawson (1998a, b). However, a second reason seems to suggest itself in the statement by Slobodan when asked to elaborate on where he felt at home;

Well, I have to say that I feel at home in Bosnia, or Banja Luka. I know it is a bit strange, considering how I have felt before, but I suppose that I have sort of given up on UWC [the high school in Italy that he attended between 2006 and 2008] after all. I don't really feel like that could be home anymore, so Bosnia is the only real place where I really belong, and I'm actually missing it.

In other words, his idea of being at home in Bosnia was challenged by his school in Italy, which seemed to be home to him even a while after he left the place. Apart from showing, again, that the concept of home is possibly linked to people and a certain period of time as well as a place, this statement clearly shows how his moving away from what he understood as home, to a place where he found a similar and possibly stronger sense of belonging, challenged his idea of home. The place that he had always assumed to be home before he left it was challenged not only by an alternative place, but also brought him to consider a group of people and a period of time as possible contestants for his feeling of home. The fact that he, in the end, felt a loss of attachment to his time in high school does not detract from the fact that his experience as an international student challenged his understanding of home, and in the end caused him to renegotiate the term to incorporate non-spatial foci.

Similarly, Sarah's quest for something to call home can be interpreted along the same lines. Although she never really had a stationary home of the kind that Bosnia was to Slobodan, it must nevertheless be understood that her experiences of travel and mobility brought her to reassess her understanding of 'home'. This can of course be seen most clearly in her projection of home onto the map of the world, which she herself, in the narrative related to me, attributed to that very experience of constant movement.

In short, beyond the central role that 'home' plays in the personal narratives of my informants, the actual movement beyond any fixed domicile has evidently challenged the informants' understanding of the word home, resulting in a renegotiation of the term. In the case of Slobodan, this renegotiation has eventually brought him back to his *heimat* in Bosnia, but the process has nevertheless brought him to consider, if only briefly, non-spatial foci as home. In the case of Sarah, the displacement that she has lived for most of her life has brought her to actively renegotiate her understanding of home, but has failed to provide her with a definitive answer, possibly because she, unlike Slobodan had no natural point to set out from.

It is worth noticing that the last time we talked, she made the comment, in passing, that she expected to find a sense of home whenever she settled down somewhere. Thus, even though she was open to see other meanings of home, perhaps that of a certain location would prove to be the most important. The point is that her situation brought her to question what was meant by home. If she had not, it seems like she would feel like there would be a gap in her personal narrative.

To conclude, it should first of all be noted that this kind of inquiry carries certain problems with it which inevitably hold the power to disqualify any too definitive statements. As has been noted by Polkinghorne, '[t]old stories are affected by the audience to whom they are communicated, whether it be research interviewers or an anticipated reader of one's autobiography' (1996: 366). What I experienced in my encounters convinces me that there is truth in this, yet I never got the feeling that the answers and the reasoning that were presented to me were forced. Hence, even though it is difficult to say with any measure of exactitude that one has accessed the very bedrock of another's self narrative, I feel that what I got was at least a glimpse.

Of those glimpses it should firstly be noted that the results and conclusions reached here cannot, of course, be seen as representative for all international students. Rather, this essay should be considered as an initial attempt to explore the narratives in a small but interesting social group. As has been suggested, the word 'home' is one that will likely, if not inevitably, become conflicted and renegotiated as a result of the experiences that are involved in the life of an international student. These experiences may not be unique; nevertheless, the way that they challenge the perception of what is 'home', which is so central to people's personal narratives, is of great import. It can be argued that the very fact that the experiences of these students are not unique, but increasingly ubiquitous, only makes them the more urgently considerable, relevant as they are to a significant portion of the world's population.

Most striking, perhaps, is that even though these students have all spent several years away from their country of birth, their idea of home remains so ultimately stable. In spite of the questions raised about national belonging, or even about 'home' as a localized concept, the conviction seemed firm that having a place to call home is important. It could be, to paraphrase Rykwert (1991: 57), that a house can only become a home proper with other people and society to make it so. It might even be the case that the real essence of home can reside in certain people, as it would seem that Sarah thought. Contemporarily it would seem, judging from the evidence that I have gathered, that the importance of a place of identification is perhaps not so easily destroyed by these conflicting forces. Instead it

would remain as something that we do indeed want, not because it is never challenged, but because it is.

Interestingly, even though informants' understanding of 'home' was put into question, none of them disqualified home from their discourse; rather, they altered their understanding of it to suit their lived situation. This leads me to suggest, as my final point and based on the given evidence, that 'home', in the terms coined by Crites', can be seen as a so called 'sacred story' (1971: 295); a kind of ubiquitous but latent theme in narratives, underlying the vastly diverse 'mundane' stories that are told, but yet remaining stable in itself, without which even 'internationals', like my informants, find it difficult to construct a coherent narrative.

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Appendix



Figure 1: Slobodan's Bosnian Flag



Figure 2: Slobodan's Serbian Flag



Figure 3: Slobodan's Yugoslavian Flag



Figure 4: Sarah's World Map