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The Ambiguities of Home: The Shifting Meanings of Learning Across Spaces, Places, and Identities

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Abstract: *This symposium explores how ‘home’ is a volatile mix of yearning and loss, of being at home or searching for it, and how it deeply affects all of us in a growingly interdependent as well as fragmented globalized world.*

Home is a social edifice that reflects the different beliefs and experiences of its builders, and it cannot be fenced in by a single definition. In the last ten years there has been a growing interest in the meaning of home as evidenced by numerous books and articles on the subject. Some writers focus primarily on the ‘Big Home’ (Magat, 1999) and describe the anguish of national relocations, of living in exile or in a diaspora, or of transnational migration. Questions relating to national, social, and individual identities are particularly prominent in these writings. Analyses of the ‘Little Home’ address the tasks and experiences associated with daily living, but they also reveal how these experiences are fully embedded in problematic normative assumptions and larger social power relations. Other writers emphasize how a physical homeplace provides safety, especially in a hostile social environment, and how “doing home” (Bowlby, Gregory, & McKie, 1997) therefore includes work that benefits the well-being of an entire community. More recent writings take an even broader sweep in revealing the many hidden social, cultural, and political connections between analyses and descriptions of the Big Home and the Little Home (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002).

By moving from the Big Home to the Little Home and back, by showing interconnections but also ruptures and discontinuities, the presenters at this symposium illustrate the multi-faceted and conflict-ridden nature of the notion of home, and how it is always present in any educational situation.

“Transnational Homeplaces”: A Case Study of Filipino Migrant Domestic Workers

Susan M. Brigham

This presentation focuses on a group of Filipino migrant workers and their perceptions and experiences of “homeplace,” and it highlights the personal-psychological as well as social and political implications of homeplace. It is based on a qualitative study that involved 28 overseas contract migrant workers, all Filipino women, who had recently returned to the Philippines after working overseas as domestic workers. Long, in-depth individual and focus group interviews were used in data collection.

Although the meaning of “homeplace” is slippery, in this study homeplace is characterized by a network of relationships between kin, in-laws and non-kin, who may be temporarily, periodically or permanently away; linked to a geographical location such as nation/land/a physical structure; connected with an idealization of place, people and activities, constituted by a collection of particular memories; and a critical place of learning. The complex nature of homeplace is further complicated by the women’s transmigrational experiences and their employment circumstances. All of the research participants lived and worked temporarily in the

homes of their employers (from one to eight years) in Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

The occupation of an overseas domestic worker (ODW) is unique to other occupations in that the ODWs are employed in the work of everyday life within the domesticity of the employers' homes, yet they are neither family members, permanent residents, nor citizens. The work of the home is genderized, casualized, and devalued. Yet when women are employed as migrant domestic workers doing reproductive work similar to what they do at home, their labour is viewed by society (including the women themselves) as paid—and therefore more like “real”—work, but the political economy of housework has rendered paid migrant domestic work ambiguous. This ambiguity has significant implications for the legal rights of the women performing this work. ODWs are denied status as workers and legal protection in most labour receiving countries (Cheng, 1999).

The dubious boundaries around the binaries of “private” and “public” spheres are reaffirmed in legislation governing the occupation of domestic work (if legislation exists at all). For example, governments are reluctant to fully apply legal rules concerning conditions of work when this work takes place in private homes. This reluctance not to interfere in the goings on of private homes in effect grants private employers control over this occupation, and over the lives of live-in domestic workers. The concept of idealized separate spheres fails to attend to the differentiating power relations of race, class, sexuality, gender and age and ignores the heterogeneity of these spheres (Hyams, 2003). The ODW experiences illustrate a blurring of the interpretive boundaries between the separate binaries of private and public spheres.

The experiences of the participants in this study highlight yet another complexity in our understanding of homeplace. Migrant domestic workers remain an integral part of their Filipino homeplace—albeit from a distance—yet must at the same time negotiate the foreign ‘homeplaces’ of their employers, living in intimate yet isolating proximity with other [Other] family-household members.*

In the Philippines, family values emphasize that all members must sacrifice for the sake of the family, yet a specific expectation for additional self-sacrificing is placed on women. This sense of obligation is one of the reasons why many of the participants migrated as ODWs.

In the homeplaces of employers, the relationship between employers and ODWs is both ‘up close and personal’ while at the same time greatly distanced - divided by artificially created boundaries premised on socially constructed differences, namely race, class, and gender. ODWs are obviously present in the home but at the same time they are made ‘invisible’ by social practices.

Despite their oppression in both the employers’ and their own homeplaces, the participants demonstrated acts of individual and collective resistance and agency in improving their situations and transforming society.

By examining the complex social, cultural and structural contexts of the Filipino ODWs’ experiences in their own and in the employers’ homeplaces, tensions and contradictions are revealed between the ideologies of gender, sexuality, race, class, and belonging. The participants’ acts of resistance and agency in the transformation of societies in both sending and receiving countries demand a reconstitution of ideological norms, which would lead to a different take on homeplace and on the personal-psychological, social, and political implications of homeplace.

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Examining the Complexities of Women's Learning Experiences

Patricia A. Gouthro

The concept of homeplace provides insights into gender differences in the development of identity, serves as a centre for relationships, and is a site of continuous labour. The homeplace exists both in our minds and our lived experiences. In this presentation I explore three ways of gaining insights into women's learning experiences utilizing the concept of the homeplace, by examining memories, everyday realities, and the ideal of home.

Memories and the Homeplace

The homeplace exists in our memories of the past. It is in family stories, photographs, and our thought processes as we negotiate current relationships. It is behind the justification some men use to demand unpaid household labour from their wives, it is revealed in expectations women place on themselves, and in goals women set in education. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's (1997) well-known study on women learners reveals that experiences in the homeplace shape women's self-esteem and confidence as learners well into adulthood.

Everyday Realities and the Homeplace

Gendered differences in adult learning experiences are frequently connected with differential expectations connected to the homeplace in everyday reality. It is exemplified by women who manage their schooling and make decisions about educational programs that accommodate the needs and demands of their families. Stalker argues that "basically, women have little desire to threaten their intimate relationships through participation in educational activities" (2001, p. 289). Women frequently struggle with lack of support from male partners for their educational aspirations. When women become more independent and assertive through continuing their education, it may destabilize male dominance in the homeplace, and "in asymmetrical power relationships, these attempts may actually be unsafe" (Stalker, 2001, p. 300). Some men will even resort to domestic violence to maintain control, although usually the means for asserting dominance are more subtle, such as ridicule or complaints about lack of attention.

The Ideal of the Home

Utilizing Weber's (1949) concept of an ideal type as a conceptual tool, the reality of the homeplace can also be explored to learn how it emulates or differentiates from the ideal. Traditionally, the homeplace has been depicted as a refuge. While this may have been true for men when they came home from work, women have always been responsible for a disproportionate amount of childcare and domestic labour, despite increasing participation in the paid workforce and formal educational settings. Even in academic households, Suitor, Mecom and Feld (2001) found that tenure-track males with children at home spent 41% more time on research than women, although women's total work week (including household labour) averaged ten hours longer.

The idealization of the homeplace has often been viewed through a privileged, white lens that is not representative of many minority women's experiences. As Johnson notes, "In the African-American experience, especially, to work for wages outside of one's home and to mother do not constitute a special case but, rather, typify a condition of living grounded in historical circumstances" (2001, p. 25). bell hooks (1990) points out that the notion of the homeplace as a refuge in African-American experience was constructed not because it was a place without labour, but rather it is a site where blacks can temporarily be shielded from the effects of racism. For African-American women in academe, the homeplace may still provide a shelter from tensions of working in a dominant white sphere.

Homeplace as a Critical Feminist Focus

These examples reveal how conceptualizing the homeplace provides a theoretical lens to explore the complexities of women's learning experiences. Frequently, there has been resistance to examining the home because of its connection to the private sphere. However, a critical feminist perspective reveals that in order to understand gendered differences in power in the public sphere one cannot overlook how these are intricately connected to power differences in the private sphere.

Battered Women and the Struggle for/with Home

Heather M. Nash

As indicated in the introduction to this symposium home is a social edifice with a powerful influence on how we learn and identify. Here I look at home in the realm of domestic violence. I will do this in light of my recent work, where I focused on identity as a learning process in White, heterosexual women who successfully left violent marriages (Nash Boxler, 2004). Identity was defined as the contextualized interplay of a sense of self; sense of social; and struggle/ cooperation with other agencies.

In the United States we have an idealized norm of home as safe, peaceful, and comfortable; it walks hand in hand with another idealized norm, that of a family as loving, caring, happy, and free of serious or open conflict (Coontz, 1992; Horsman, 2000). If we consider women living in a violent situation, home carries connotations of personal danger, anger, and low self-worth. It is refuge and prison, personal space and leased space that is characterized by struggle and paid for by suffering and obedience. When leaving a domestic violence situation, the Little Home that is defined by cohabited residence is irrevocably altered. In addition, one's space of belonging, however safe or unsafe, is compromised.

When we speak about domestic violence in this culture, we often call it "violence in the home" or "violence in the family." Both are phrases that may be readily associated with privatized, aberrant violence; in both cases it seems obvious that "home" is central to the problem. While we tend to think about domestic violence in terms of the "Little Home," both the "Big Home" and the "Little Home" contribute to and are shaped by domestic violence. It is in the ideologies of ideal families, ideal homes, roles and interactions in producing home that the Big Home becomes most visible.

Price (2002) addresses the problem of the home as a space of violence that is ideologically maintained. Home is created intersubjectively, not just between people but also by different locations and activities within the home. The difference is not in the supposed goals (peace, comfort, safety) of violent versus nonviolent homes, but in who those goals are intended to benefit and the process of producing home. One could say, for example, that part of the "comfort of home" is a particular power dynamic. For a batterer, this might be the production of peace through fear rather than cooperation. Safety and peace of home for the victim are subject to an effort to placate, as well as the whims of an impossible master.

Home involves the presence of a partner and the humdrum domesticity of physical maintenance activities for the physical lived space. Much of the violence that battered women endure, both physical and psychological, is wrapped up in the production of home. It consists of criticism...feeling like (or being made to feel like) a failure at creating an "acceptable" home – remembering that "acceptable" is cloaked in an ideology of the ideal family. The woman learns that it is her job to produce space; anticipate and meet her batterer's needs. Her job of pleasing him (under threat of violence) renders his needs not only dominant, but invisible. If the batterer taught her exactly how to produce his homespace (co-production of the space) he would also know how to violate it, and periodically reassert his dominance (Dobash & Dobash, 1998).

After having left a domestic violence situation, a survivor must seek home. She may need to establish different meanings for home than the ones she knew in childhood. Even securing a new living space (if needed) within the larger culture of the West is problematic. Among the challenges are permanence, entry, poor accommodations, and facing often-unsympathetic bureaucracies that control many women's possibilities for any living space.

Transnational Migration, Shifting Identities, and the Politics of Home

Mary Alfred

Notions of physical geography and its relationship to history and migration have become more fluid than they were in the past (Di Stefano, 2002). This fluid reconceptualization affects how we think about and experience a sense of home and belonging as immigrants on foreign lands. Similarly, Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton (1992) find that earlier conceptions of immigration and migration no longer suffice. As they note, "the word immigrant evokes images of permanent rupture, of the uprooted, the abandonment of old patterns and the painful learning of a new language and culture" (1992, p. 1). Instead, they promote the emergence of a new immigrant population composed of those whose networks, activities, and patterns of life encompass both their host and home societies. As a result, the authors argue that immigrant life cuts across national boundaries and brings two societies into a single social field. Of course, transnational migrants come to their new country with certain practices and ideologies constructed at home that shape certain identities. They then engage in complex activities across national borders that create, shape, and potentially transform their former identities. At the same time, transnational migrants struggle to hold on to the earlier concepts of home and their idealization of the birth place as "homeplace." These inner tensions of holding on, letting go, or reconciling "homeplace" will be the focus of this discussion.

Papastergiadis (1998) reminds us that the context of thinking about where we belong can no longer be defined according to purely geographical notions of place and a historical sense of connection. Our sense of who we are or where we belong has been influenced by a variety of global forces. Transnational migration, therefore, must be understood within the concepts of these global forces that influence an immigrant's sense of place and notion of belonging. According to Alvarez and Fernandez (2000), the general concept of globalization suggests that the world is becoming more singular in unity, lessening the importance of local or regional identity. Stack (1981) expanded this argument noting that transnational movements have created a situation whereby nation-states are becoming increasingly interdependent, and individuals no longer need to rely on the state for their main source of identity.

While these arguments have merit, the reality of identification still rests heavily on one's location within the nation state. Thinking of ourselves as belonging to a nation, or as having a national identity is one the most common ways of positioning ourselves in relation to others. One's sense of nation and national identity are key tools for interpreting and behaving within the social environment. For those who originate from nations of power, holding on to the national identity is, in turn, an individual source of power; that is, power over others as evidenced by the nation state's ideology and practice. On the other hand, holding on to one's national identity could also be a form of resistance, a form of self and group preservation in the midst of oppressive regimes of power. These safe spaces represent sites of resistance, a means of holding on to the old traditions in the midst of modernity.

As an example, West Indian identity in the United States is framed by the majority assessment of their presence as immigrants and their racial positioning as Blacks. As Blacks, they are located in a racialized space occupied by African Americans, a space that is generally

denigrated in US society. As foreigners, they are located in two cognitively constructed spaces (Hintzen, 2004), those of the sending and receiving countries. As a result, the external definition of West Indian identity in the United States is shaped by racism, capitalism, and modernity (Phinney, 1996). Consequently, West Indians develop a sense of self or a West Indian identity precisely from being at a distance from the Caribbean and being distanced by members of the receiving country and its oppressive regimes. As a result of this cultural politics of exclusion, this ethnic attachment to home provides a feeling of continuity with a real or imagined past, a feeling that is maintained as an essential part of one's collective continuity as a belonging member of some group (Romanucci-Ross & DeVos, 1995). Herein lie the tension and contradiction of holding on to the idealistic notion of the Caribbean as "homeplace" while at the same time, partaking in and incorporating elements of various other social spaces within the host country.

Therefore, to minimize the tension, the answers to questions such as "Who am I?" "What am I?" and "Where is home?" require a fundamental shift of our relation to space and place. Giddens (1991) has argued that one of the characteristic features of today's "homeplace" is its destruction of fixed attachment to space and that modern identity is no longer shaped by an autonomous linkage between time and space. He further suggests that the question of "What am I?" can no longer be answered by identifying our place or origin and the time of living there. Identification, therefore, is a fluid, dynamic process, that Phinney (1996) argues changes with age as attitudes and opinions about society develop, and later in life as individuals reexamine their ethnicity and other group membership.

Creating a Nomadic Home

Mechthild Hart

Thinking and reading about the fluid, multiple, shifting meanings and definitions of home engages one in nomadic journeying between disciplines, experiential perspectives, and political, social, or cultural contexts. The nomad is a political figuration that brings together two notions that negate and thus live off each other: a fixed place called home, and a space that is always somewhere else.

The nomad does not belong anywhere, to anybody. She therefore has a vantage point that makes her capable of distrusting solid, fixed identities. She is actively aware of boundaries, of territories, but she also sees them as potentially nonfixed, and as being able to be crossed intellectually and emotionally. Moreover, the nomad often turns corners to the unknown, sometimes unexpectedly, but sometimes deliberately, willfully.

The nomad navigates around the limiting, confining, and thus possibly stifling dimensions of home. The nomad is not homeless but carries home as an "essential belonging" (Braidotti, 1994), and therefore re-creates it in diverse places, anywhere. It becomes a temporary resting place, a place of inner and outer safety, a place to sit down along the road. The road has no predetermined destination, and it remains a space of possibilities.

In earlier investigations of the figure of the nomad I laid out the theoretical-political framework from the perspective of a feminist world citizen rather than of an educator (2004, 2005). There are, however, multiple pedagogical links to key themes associated with 'home' and 'nomadic journeying.' Some of them I experienced in their practical vitality when teaching in the Bridge program, a collaborative program between my home college and one of Chicago's city colleges that has a particularly high number of transnational students. In 2003 I also co-organized a one-day conference at DePaul University that gave students and faculty the opportunity to listen to the rewards and challenges of engaging in travel-courses, teaching in the

Hong Kong program, or conducting a class where many different national, cultural, and social spaces were all stacked within the same geographic space.

Mapping what I learned through these endeavors affirmed my conviction that no matter where we are located on the world map, as educators we have to unpack the multiple meanings and political-economic contexts of international or transnational migration, and of living in exile or in a diaspora, and we need to practice a nomadic intellectual, epistemological, and spiritual style.

This means that we first have to look at 'home' as "the most unsafe of all spaces" (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 574). Home is not unsafe because it is gendered and thus power-bound or a place of violently enforced captivity, but because it becomes as *nepantla*, an in-between space. Moving into the *nepantla* means becoming a traveler in transition to new ways of seeing herself, and herself in relation to others and to the world. Where home becomes the in-between-place of a bridge, and thus a place of "constant transition," it also turns into a "zone of possibility" (p. 545). This touches upon a primary educational-political endeavor: to gain new perspectives on oneself, others, and the world by re-arranging various parts of one's own reality, thus transforming its meaning and changing its direction.

As educators we need to translate what initially appear as social, epistemological, and pedagogical barriers into *nepantlas*, into possibilities. We have to become intellectual and spiritual nomads. Only when we ourselves engage in such a journey can we model the courage this process requires. In other words, we need to become "bridge persons" (Belenky, 1996) or *neplanteras* (Anzaldúa, 2002).

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