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Seeking Home

Vignettes of Homes and Homing

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ABSTRACT: The question of home is a complicated one. While home is emplaced, the notion of home does not simply point to *just* a location. This chapter thus utilizes what I call the trope of the 'vignette' to look at the concept of home in order to identify some aspects of what constitutes and/or (re)creates it for displaced individuals. It does so by performing a close reading of key moments in the film *Salt of this Sea* by Annemarie Jacir and the collection of essays *The Idea of Home* by John Hughes.

KEYWORDS: Home; Homing; Vignettes; Affect; Displacement; Displaced persons; Memory

Seeking *Home*

Vignettes of Homes and Homing

AMINA ELHALAWANI

Leaving is always
like this. Years
of hours and days
ticked off like
a body count:
what's left but
shards of memory
smoothed and hoarded,
shrapnel griefs,
a few regrets?
It should be simple
[...]
But lines etched
into skin after years
of weather
chart boundaries
we cannot cross:
[...] lines of salt¹

According to the World Migration Report 2020 of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the world saw yet another upsurge

1 Lisa Suhair Majaj, 'Departure', in Majaj, *Geographies of Light* (Washington, DC: Del Sol Press, 2009), pp. 43–44 (p. 43). Courtesy of the author.

in migration with around 272 million migrants in 2019.² For these migrants, the question of home is a complicated one, and one which needs careful examination beyond the dichotomous home and away, place of origin and place of residence, which often haunt postcolonial and diaspora studies. My endeavour in this chapter, thus, is to look at the concept of home, and attempt to identify some aspects of what constitutes and/or (re)creates it for displaced individuals, by considering how home manifests itself in two disparate projects: *Salt of this Sea*, a film by Palestinian director Annemarie Jacir and *The Idea of Home*, a collection of essays by Australian writer John Hughes.³

I begin my reflection by asking what really distinguishes home from any other space. 'Home', like any other place, is built on a two-way relationship between people and the space they inhabit, and this chapter seeks to understand what is home by examining how places shape and are in turn shaped by individuals, what Paolo Boccagni calls 'homing' (or home as a social/relational process).

As a process, homing holds a relational, appropriative and future-oriented side which should not go unnoticed. Contrary to the static and irenic subtext of the notions of home and domesticity, homing is an open-ended matter of evolving strivings, claims-making and conflicts; hence, an ultimately political matter.

While homing is played out at an individual level, it also points to a question of broader societal relevance.⁴

Making a claim on ownership and being allowed access to both the home and the homeland thus constitutes a big part of 'homing', which by default designates a bordered space whose inside is walled or bounded from the outside world, and yet whose borders remain porous as interaction with that world continues to happen on a day-to-day basis. What migration highlights is the degree of porosity or impene-

2 *World Migration Report 2020*, ed. by Marie McAuliffe and Binod Khadria (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2019), p. 2.

3 *Salt of this Sea*, dir. and written by Annemarie Jacir, performances by Suheir Hammad, Saleh Bakri, Marwan Riyad Ideis, and Sylvia Wetz (Trigon-film, 2008); John Hughes, *The Idea of Home: Autobiographical Essays* (Artarmon: Giramondo Publishing Company, 2004).

4 Paolo Boccagni, *Migration and the Search for Home: Mapping Domestic Space in Migrants' Everyday Lives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 23.

trability spaces are made to perform. The (im)mobility of individuals across borders unmask the inherent power relations within what constitutes home and its relation to the outside world. Moreover, it highlights the necessary relations between individuals and space in the production of the home structure, both literally and metaphorically.

Edward Said describes exile as '[an] unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home.'⁵ Addressing the issue of displacement and migration in general, Sara Ahmed also describes migrant journeys as involving 'a splitting of home as place of origin and home as the sensory world of everyday experience.'⁶ One way to explain this is through Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of 'deterritorialization.'⁷ When bodies which are mobile by nature move away (whether forcefully or voluntarily) from their original home this deterritorialization creates a complicated dynamic in the spatial representation of the homeland. And yet these works/narratives — themselves gestures for what lies 'beyond' like Martin Heidegger's famous invocation of the Heidelberg bridge — transpose their authors to these faraway *homes*.⁸ The words in such transnational narratives of home house a reductive though complex version of the 'home' as 'deterritorialized'.⁹ The condensation

5 Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 179.

6 Sara Ahmed, 'Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement', in Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 77–94 (p. 90).

7 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

8 Martin Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', in Heidegger, *Poetry, Language and Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), pp. 141–59. In this essay, Heidegger brings up the idea of the bridge structure to contemplate the relation between 'location' and 'space' as well as that between 'man' and 'space'. In his discussion, he explains that thoughts are able to take us to distant places: 'We do not represent distant things merely in our mind — as the textbooks have it — so that only mental representations of distant things run through our minds and heads as substitutes for the things. If all of us now think, from where we are right here, of the old bridge in Heidelberg, this thinking toward that location is not a mere experience inside the persons present here; rather, it belongs to the nature of our thinking of that bridge that in itself thinking gets through, persists through, the distance to that location. From this spot right here, we are there at the bridge — we are by no means at some representational content in our consciousness. From right here we may even be much nearer to that bridge and to what it makes room for than someone who uses it daily as an indifferent river crossing' (p. 154).

9 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

of different elements relating back to materiality, geography, memory, imagination, and affects in these works presents home as a trans-locality which traces its history back to multiple tangents of inherited and experiential points of origin beyond the materiality of its walls or spatiotemporal locality.

In other words, while home is experienced from a certain location, it bears within itself histories and affects beyond stone and mortar or even the very territory it claims. Such materiality and immateriality of the home go hand in hand, because being is an embodied practice. According to Edward Casey, 'to be in the world, to be situated at all, is to be in place.'¹⁰ To be home, to feel home, or even to make home is thus also by default to be in place. In other words, the relationship between bodies and place is at the heart of defining what home means. As such, home remains for the most part within the realm of personal experience or rather endeavour. Hence it becomes imperative to conjure home through thinking in singular cases.

In this context, the trope of the vignette — which is not restricted to literature but also borrowed by ethnographers and sociologists — becomes not only a metaphor for home writing, but also a tool which helps me (as well as the reader) to unpack the emotions, thoughts, and affects in what the text perceives as the experience of home, and as such this 'reductive' tool (or the vignette) packs/condenses what often seems ineffable, overwhelming, or impossible to express.¹¹

In a poem called 'Athens Airport', Mahmoud Darwish presents his readers with a group of people stuck in transit at Athens airport, having left their home, unable to reach another.

Where did you come from? asks the customs' official.
And we answer: *From the sea!*
Where are you going?
To the sea, we answer.
What is your address?
A woman of our group says: *My village is the bundle on my back.*¹²

10 Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. xv.

11 Boccagni starts his own book, *Migration and the Search for Home*, with vignettes from his fieldwork with migrants.

12 Mahmoud Darwish, 'Athens Airport', in Darwish, *Unfortunately, It was Paradise: Selected Poems*, trans. and ed. by Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché with Sinan Antoon and Amira El-Zein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 12; italics in the original.

The terse answer of the woman — how matter of fact her reply to the customs' official is, and how it relates to survival and ownership — raises urgent questions on the nature of 'home' beyond its territorial spatial presence. In an attempt to find dwelling elsewhere, this woman's home is reduced to a 'bundle' of whatever she could carry. To borrow Darwish's image, I choose to separate loaded moments in the texts under scrutiny, which I call vignettes of home and/or homing. And my fascination with this trope is a fascination with the double bind of *packing* and *unpacking* the encounters and experiences that these texts present, their meanings, the emotions that are attached to them and the consequences they entail.

In other words, refusing to reduce home to just a location, though understanding that comprehending the complexity of the concept can only happen through some form of reduction, I choose to perform a reductive trope not necessarily to arrive at home as a destination or trajectory by reaching a final or ultimate definition, but simply to move *homeward*, coming closer to what the concept might stand for or hold by multiplying its meanings. In this journey, certain keywords stand out: temporality, experience, embodiment, condensation, or intensification, since here the experience is somehow homing itself in time and space — both shifting, both fleeting, but also somehow fixing something at least partly in narrative.

In the following section I shall illustrate what I mean by these vignettes through discussing scenes from *Salt of this Sea* and excerpts from *The Idea of Home*.

VIGNETTE 1: SCENES FROM *SALT OF THIS SEA*¹³

Salt of this Sea is a film which poetically packages difficult questions of belonging, of home, of loss, of trauma in a series of reduced or concentrated images both beautiful and painful. Annemarie Jacir's film demonstrates the tension embedded in (re)visiting Palestine for those in the diaspora, and how one constructs an image of home, as well as how one faces a place of which one has no firsthand experience but through inherited narrative memory. Suheir Hammad, a Palestinian-

13 I'm grateful to the ICI Berlin and to my fellow colleagues for their conversations on *Salt of this Sea*, and their engagement with my research in general.

American poet, author, and political activist, plays the lead role in Jacir's film, *Soraya*, whose story in fact resembles very much Hammad's own.

The casting of Hammad in this role is significant. Hammad, who was born in Amman Jordan to Palestinian parents, travelled to Brooklyn, New York with her parents when she was five, and through the film both actress and character encounter their homeland firsthand for the first time.¹⁴ It is an encounter, though, with a place they already know!

In one scene from *Salt of this Sea*, Soraya is sitting with Emad, the Palestinian she meets and becomes friends with in Ramallah, on top of a hill, The landscape sprawls beneath them while they look all the way towards Jaffa and the sea. As Emad gestures to Soraya where Jaffa is, she in turn accurately describes the city and her grandparents' daily routine:

Soraya: My grandfather swam in that sea every morning, then he'd walk on Al Helwa Street to reach Al Tawfiqiya library, then on to Al Nuzha Street. Cars weren't allowed to pass on Al Nuzha. The orange traders — Jaffa oranges — met at Al Salahi market. My grandfather always talked about the Al Madfa Café: Umm Kulthum sang there, and Farid al-Atrash. My grandmother really loved Farid. Sometimes, my grandparents went to the cinema. The Hamra Cinema. When they were broke, they'd wait by the side door and the doorman would sneak everyone in. Have you ever been there?

Emad: Are you sure you've never been?

Soraya's narrative of Jaffa is not one of a simple fixed place but rather of a lived space, full of movement, itineraries, and experiences. It reveals a complex understanding of space in practice, as constantly produced as it is being experienced or *lived*, a space in which the real and the symbolic intertwine and which is based on a 'trialectics of being': 'spatiality', 'historicality', and 'sociality'.¹⁵ Soraya's grandfather's

14 Hammad wrote her poetry collection *breaking poems* (New York: Cypher Books) after this experience.

15 Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Spaces* (Cambridge, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), pp. 70–71. According to Henri Lefebvre, social space is made up of complex relations between three levels of experiencing it, which Soja identifies as: perceived space, conceived space, and

walks of Jaffa draw out the city, not as a concept, not from above, but as spatialized utterance. In comparing walking to speech acts, Michel de Certeau considers pedestrian activity as a three-fold 'enunciative act': 'a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian [...], it is a spatial acting-out of the place [...]; and it implies relations among differentiated positions, that is, among pragmatic "contracts" in the form of movements.'¹⁶ Within this narrative, the freedom of movement of Saraya's grandfather was not only allowed, but a certain ownership of place was practiced.

On the other hand, as Carol Fadda-Conrey points out, Soraya draws for us 'a narrative map of her grandparents' Jaffa', one that 'link[s] her life to a history that she feels she has missed' even though she has not in fact experienced it except through 'ancestral memories and stories.'¹⁷ It is exactly at that moment in the film that Emad recounts his confinement and frustration, his experience of borders creating a tension with the free uninterrupted landscape they are in. Emad is sitting on top of a hill, looking into the horizon all the way to Jaffa and the sea, and yet is unable to navigate this 'open' landscape due to the enforcement of checkpoints and restrictions based on his identity. This juxtaposition of the ability to travel through inherited memory to Jaffa (so in a way through imagination) and the inability to experience it firsthand, is an example of the characters' continuous active confrontation with the material conditions of what they consider to be home.

In this particular frame, however, the camera pans out and exposes the open landscape sprawling towards the sea, posing no real barriers, but rather positioning them at the edge, at a threshold, which, if surpassed, would reconcile them with their past and allow them to reclaim their freedom in the present, a quest they decide to subversively

lived space. Building on Lefebvre's triads, Edward Soja conceptualizes his idea of third space, as a space where '[e]verything comes together': 'subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history' (pp. 56–57).

16 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 98–99.

17 Carol Fadda-Conrey, *Contemporary Arab-American Literature: Transnational Reconfigurations of Citizenship and Belonging* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), p. 96.



Figure 1. Still from *Salt of this Sea*, dir. by Jacir, 1:00:35. Photo Credit: Philistine Films. Courtesy of the director.

undertake over the course of the film: to discover the land which they consider to be theirs but from which they are barred.

In this still frame from *Salt of this Sea* (Figure 1), the gaze of the camera through a car window, the refracted images and mirroring along with the close up on Soraya's face, bring us closer to understanding that what we are getting is a very personal, even visceral experience of the story. Soraya's face/body is made to merge with the territory it is trying to reclaim as its own. Over the course of this journey, the film plots out a map of traumas where Emad gets to visit whatever ruins are left of his village of Dawayima and Soraya gets to visit her grandparents' very house in Jaffa right by the sea.

Soraya's encounter with her ancestral home is overwhelming. The encounter is reminiscent of lines from a poem by Mahmoud Darwish dedicated to Edward Said. Set as a dialogue, the speaker, probably Darwish himself, asks Said what it was like to go back to his home in Jerusalem, while the voice of Said in the poem responds: 'I could not meet loss face | to face. I stood by the door like a beggar. | How could I ask permission from strangers sleeping in my own bed?'.¹⁸ Likewise,

18 Mahmoud Darwish, 'Edward Said: A Contrapuntal Reading', trans. by Mona Anis, *Cultural Critique*, 67 (2007), pp. 175–82 (p. 180) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.2007.0026>>.



Figure 2. Stills from *Salt of this Sea*, dir. by Jacir, 01:25:00–01:31:00.
Photo Credit: Philistine Films. Courtesy of the director.

finding her grandparents' house already inhabited by someone else makes Soraya sick. Though the current owner invites them in, Soraya cannot make peace with the fact that her grandfather was never compensated for the loss that he and his family had to endure, accusing the current owner of the house of stealing her family's home as they were forced to leave. In the following frame in the film Soraya breaks down by the sea. And while the dream of capturing home diminishes — as only memories survive in the form of waves which enact the whispers of those who lived there, of those who left, memories that are impossible to grasp because of their fluidity — the house itself and its tiled floors stand witness to its original owners. Nonetheless, the confrontation with the material structure of the house is only a confirmation of Soraya's loss of what she identified as home. The imagined is lost with the encounter of the real and the narratives of her grandfather's house are now complemented if not overwritten by her own very painful encounter with its loss.

An equally moving scene is that in which Emad and Soraya embark on a process of homemaking in Dawayima, the village that was razed to the ground, and where Emad originally comes from. In this scene, an attempt to reclaim what was lost is enacted through the simple actions of spreading a bedcover to sleep on and hanging a picture on the wall with the word home on it, almost akin to how a prop changes the

setting immediately and magically in theatre, even if for a moment.¹⁹ The contrast between the act of homemaking and the violence inherent in the image of the ruins of the village provides a moving encounter with a past that intersects so viscerally with the present only to remind the characters of their perpetual loss (Figure 2). And yet it allows for that fleeting moment of homing to occur: in this moment, the past (they light a candle for the dead), the present (they hang a picture, make a bed, put up a curtain even, and plant something in the garden), and the future (where they sit and dream of what they would do if they lived there or rather what they would have done if the present was different) set home as a notion apart from time, as a place where temporalities converge.

These moments of homing are brief, however, vignette-like, real enough, and yet elusive in contrast to the reality in which they live.

VIGNETTE 2: FROM JOHN HUGHES'S *THE IDEA OF HOME*

John Hughes is an Australian writer whose maternal grandparents travelled from Ukraine to Australia fleeing the Second World War. And while his book *The Idea of Home: Autobiographical Essays* presents itself as a set of essays, its subtitle gives away its own subjective trajectory and reveals that these essays are in fact 'autobiographical' — hence, highly personal.

The depiction of houses in Hughes's text, especially his mother's obsession with the basement, sheds light on how houses *home* people and objects rather than just 'house' them:

The basement is the memory of the house. It expands though its walls remain fixed. In truth, it makes a mockery of walls. [...] My mother has no time for walls. She refuses to allow them to get in the way.²⁰

The basement walls in Hughes's text expand to accommodate objects that Hughes's mother either keeps collecting or refuses to throw away, so that the structure of the house explodes beyond the contours of its

19 I'd like to thank Manuele Gragnolati for the interesting conversations we had about this scene in particular.

20 Hughes, *The Idea of Home*, p. 52.

designated space because of the mother's act of compulsive accumulation of objects which outgrows the storage space.

According to Casey,

Built places [...] are extensions of our bodies. They are not just places, as the Aristotelian model of place as a strict container implies, *in which* these bodies move and position themselves. Places built for residing are rather an enlargement of our already existing embodiment into *an entire life-world of dwelling*. Moreover, thanks to increasingly intimate relationships with their material structures, the longer we reside in places, the more bodylike they seem to be [...] they become places created in our own bodily image.²¹

The analogy between the basement and memory is central, thus, because it nods to a layering of narratives and a constant resurfacing of that which lies forgotten, perhaps repressed within the body of the house, which represents an extension of the bodies of its inhabitants.

For Hughes, the objects his mother hoards are a means of turning the house into a home, a means of creating belonging, a process of homing, despite having 'no interest in what she collects.'²²

Her collecting is an act of rescue: all the unwanted, unloved, broken, bargain, superseded things of the world are, if not redeemed by her keeping, at least given a home. They belong. And there can never be enough.²³

Despite the process of boxing or repressing these items to lay forgotten, on a deeper level the mother's refusal to get rid of objects from their past, their childhood, etc., as well as her compulsion to continue homing 'other people's junk', may resemble a more complex desire to both remember and forget by burying these items indiscriminately in the basement, never to be disturbed.²⁴ 'Once the object is put in the basement it need never be visited again. Forgotten, it is at peace.'²⁵

As Hughes points out, however, even though his mother never intended these objects to resemble a legacy, when she dies, someone

21 Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, p. 120.

22 Hughes, *The Idea of Home*, p. 67.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 67–68.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

will have to sort through them, *remember* them, in a way *archive* them, as Hughes himself is now recalling all the stories of his grandfather in this very book upon the knowledge of his loss. 'That is the curse of objects, and their beauty I suppose: they keep the past alive and they guarantee the future, straddling the present like a bridge.'²⁶ The boxes his mother stores in the basement and beyond, like his grandmother's recipes which he received during his PhD years in England, 'bridge' temporalities and geographies. These recipes of home cooking link Hughes's present in England with his family's present in Australia and their past in Ukraine. They take him *home*, which like the basement defies walls, borders, and geographies, and is only graspable through association and affect.

I will not dwell on that further and would like to instead look at an episode in the book in which, unlike Soraya who could sketch a narrative map of Jaffa, Hughes confesses that he knows very little of his family history, beyond what his grandfather was willing to share. According to Hughes, a continual project of forgetting haunted his grandfather's life. Erasure was actively sought to cope with the interminable process of homemaking, which manifested in his grandfather's obsession with building houses.

Hughes's grandfather continuously built houses but 'he treated them like tents.'²⁷ As soon as he finished a building project, he would start the next to the extent that the family would not need to make a trek across town to move from the old house to the new one, because the new project would be housed on the plot of land next door.²⁸ Every time he finished a building project, he would start a new one, a relentless endeavour of starting anew, of becoming, of defying fixation and walls through creating structures that are continuously denied to house memory, constantly denied to become home.

My family knew the houses themselves would last forever; knew, too, that each, for them, was just another transit camp. There could be no attachment. Before they'd even settled my grandfather would sit at the dining table drawing plans for the next move.²⁹

26 Ibid., p. 59.

27 Ibid., p. 50.

28 Ibid., pp. 49–50.

29 Ibid., p. 50.

Hughes's grandfather's building endeavour is ultimately a continuous project of homemaking and unmaking, in which the family is not allowed to settle into a state of being but is constantly forced to move, and restart the process of appropriating their dwelling place and forming new relations to it. Home becomes a continuously moving trajectory in this context.

In continual search for a feeling of home, Hughes is fascinated by his family's almost mythical journey during the Second World War in which they walked from Kiev to Naples, where they boarded a ship to Australia. In an attempt to recreate their journey, he decides to retrace their route by train but this time from Naples to Kiev, as if through retracing his family's footsteps before their exile, he would be able to conjure something of that memory which was forever lost to him. His encounter with the city of Naples, in his hands a map drawn by his grandfather which he fails to follow because it does not concord with reality, makes him realize his own fascination with the imagined over the real space: 'I preferred maps to reality and words to actions.'³⁰ His family journey could only be relived in his imagination. He writes:

When I returned to Naples the unreality of the city hit me with a force even stronger than my first experience of it. I realised then, as I should have realised two years before, that the journey could only ever be imaginary for me. My journey had nothing whatsoever to do with war, or exile, or survival. By retracing my family's steps I would erase them one by one until all I was left with would be a list of names [of cities and train stations] like the one I had outlined above.³¹

Hughes then decides to cancel his plan because '[He does not] want the past to change.'³² The only means by which he could own these places would be to not encounter them at all. Without an encounter with the reality of those cities, Hughes would be able to keep intact his imagined construction of them, which otherwise would shatter in the face of experiencing such spaces firsthand. At another occasion in the book, for example, Hughes writes of how sharing the photographs of his visit to Kiev with his grandfather 'stung in a way [Hughes]

30 Ibid., p. 169.

31 Ibid., p. 171.

32 Ibid., p. 173.

never fully realised. They destroyed Kiev (for him) [his grandfather] as effectively as the Germans did.³³ For Hughes's grandfather, those stories destroyed the possibility of affectively reconstructing a memory of the place at the time when he left. In this view, to encounter the space anew would be to destroy its memory, and thus destroy the perpetual longing for what it represented or is constructed to represent.

GRASPING HOME

Home in these narratives is constructed not only out of places or houses but in the meanings that they carry. Home may be emplaced but is not spatially bound by its very walls. Bodies home houses as much as houses home people. As such, home in both cases signals to something that lies beyond its very structure. Grasping it is made both difficult and possible because of the fact that it is itself a reduction caught up in a complicated entanglement between the past, the present, and the future, which allows it to only be captured in fragments or vignettes, be they stories, objects, or lived moments of getting close or veering towards it but never really catching it. In other words, there is always something very elusive about home, and in these two works, we can never really be home or rather reach home, we can only get *almost* there...

33 Ibid., p. 24.

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