

ANNA FLÜGGE
GIORGIA TOMMASI
Editors

Perspectives on Homelessness

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Volume 314



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ALFRED HORNING

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For Thea Diesner,
in loving memory

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Clinging Heaven by the Hems

Tucson sucks. And, with that, the marker runs dry. Pausing, taking in the shaky hand of my graffiti, failure of the verb to agree notwithstanding, I guffaw

as homophones and polysemy launch an image of the Eros-ridden sort I wrote to pay the bills back home in Austin. Back. Home. The homonymic wit now falls

flat. I'm inclined to do the same. I slide my girth along the girder to the ground, where Lizbeth, twitching, sleeps. No ride tonight, though I am thankful for the handsome man

who felt a godsent call to pull over and tender ripened oranges, five whole bucks, and, yes, this fulsome little tract, with which, atop our cardboard mat, I wield and turn

to catch the moonlight. *Catholic Charities Reducing Poverty. "In No Strange Land" by Francis Thompson.* Mom would sing this piece to me as sweetly as a lullaby

when I'd cry out with nightmares from the dark monstrosity of rank abandonment—the abject terror of a changeling lost and withered by the waywardness without.

*Does the fish soar to find the ocean,
The eagle plunge to find the air—
That we ask of the stars in motion
If they have rumour of thee there?*

*Not where the wheeling systems darken,
And our benumbed conceiving soars!—
The drift of pinions, would we hearken,
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.*

Mark Olival-Bartley

Notes

Francis Thompson (1859 – 1907) was an English poet and Catholic mystic who suffered from mental illness, opium addiction, and homelessness; he took to sleeping amid the slums of Charing Cross, where prostitutes sometimes gave him money. A married couple who had a Catholic press took him in for a time and published his poetry, of which, “The Hound of Heaven” is his most famous work of verse. “In No Strange Land”—likely the last poem written by Thompson and found among his belongings after his death (at forty-seven from tuberculosis)—is comprised of six quatrains of (rough) iambic pentameter.

Lars Eighner (1948 –), an American writer of gay erotica, is best known for his memoir of homelessness, *Travels with Lizbeth*, which documents his three years of living on the streets and hitchhiking through the southwestern United States with his dog, Lizbeth, during the late 1980s after losing his job as a nursing attendant at a state hospital in Austin, Texas. “On Dumpster Diving,” the seventh chapter of *Travels with Lizbeth*, continues to be anthologized as a stand-alone essay in composition textbooks; in it, Eighner’s gifts as a stylist are manifest: “Quite a number of people, not all of them of the bohemian type, are willing to brag that they found this or that piece in the trash. But eating from Dumpsters is what separates the dilettanti from the professionals” (112).

Recitation

A recitation by the poet can be heard at the link of this QR code.



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Eleni Garmhausen, "Plane"

Introduction

Anna Flügge and Giorgia Tommasi

Is home the place where you feel safe? What about those whose home isn't safe?

Are they homeless, or is home an ideal just out of reach, like heaven? Is home something you move toward instead of going back? Homesickness, then, would be a malaise not for a place left behind in memory, but one remembered in the future.

(Sandra Cisneros, "Chocolate and Donuts")

In the late 1970s Sandra Cisneros attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop, during which she was assigned Gaston Bachelard's 1958 *Poetics of Space*. In the book, the French philosopher romanticizes the house as a place that "shelters day-dreaming" and "protects the dreamer" (6). The house he portrays is a stable, secure place, evocative specifically of female, motherly care: "Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house" (7). Bachelard speculates about an archetypal childhood home as the "house of memories" (34) that readers may instinctively return to every time they encounter an intimate description of space on the page. The house he describes has an attic, a living room, a bedroom, a staircase, and its "nooks and corners" assure "a resting-place for daydreaming" (14-15). Years later, reflecting on her reaction upon reading these words as an aspiring writer, Cisneros remembered a striking sense of alienation and the impossibility to identify with Bachelard's description. While her workshop classmates felt quite comfortable discussing the text, Cisneros remained silent, for Bachelard's idea of home did not resonate with her childhood memories:

Attic? Were we talking about the same house? My family lived upstairs for the most part, because noise traveled down. Stairwells reeked of Pine-Sol from the Saturday scrubbing. We shared them with the tenants downstairs: public zones no one thought to clean except us. We mopped them, all right, but not without resentment for cleaning other people's filth. And as for cellars, we had a basement, but who'd want to hide in there? Base-

ments were filled with rats. Everyone was scared to go in there, including the meter reader *and* the landlord. What was this guy Bachelard talking about when he mentioned the familiar and comforting house of memory? It was obvious he'd never had to clean one or had to pay the landlord rent for one like ours. ("*The House on Mango Street's* Tenth Birthday" 275)

The metaphors used by Bachelard were foreign and unfamiliar compared to Cisneros's experience. The daughter of a Mexican father and a Chicana mother, Cisneros was born and raised in Chicago with her six siblings. Unsurprisingly, the urban, working-class, and ethnically diverse Humboldt Park neighborhood was starkly at odds with her interpretation of Bachelard's idyllic conjectures. Cisneros remembers a sense of homelessness from her time in Iowa City: "Maybe I was never more homeless than during those two years in graduate school" ("No Place Like Home" 81).

Introducing this collection of essays with Sandra Cisneros's Iowa anecdote seems appropriate because her experience is an invitation to reflect on the notion of homelessness and its connotations. While never *on the street*, as a girl and woman of color from a working-class family, *home* for Cisneros was often unstable, financially precarious, and much more public than that suggested by Bachelard. It was also mobile and transnational, since growing up Cisneros frequently traveled to Mexico every time her immigrant father was seized by "bouts of nostalgia" for his home city and uprooted the family to visit Mexico City ("Only Daughter" 204). However, a deeply existential sense of displacement—what Cisneros describes as *being* "homeless"—originated not so much from what home represented to her, but rather from confronting the "lie" of the American Dream's exclusionary narrative and the univocal idea of home it espouses ("*The House on Mango Street's* Tenth Birthday" 277). In her writing Cisneros challenges this preconceived, fictitious, and limited narrative about home as stable, fixed, and private, but also as white, single-family, and owned as property. As the epigraph above shows, she invites instead a reflection that questions accepted meanings of home and homelessness.

Similarly, Michele Lancione through his ethnographic work advocates for a more just study of homelessness that should begin by questioning its very definition. Precisely as Cisneros draws attention to Bachelard for assuming that home represents security and intimacy, Lancione argues that the word *homelessness* presupposes home as synonymous with "plenty," in opposition to the deficiency indicated by the "less" in the term (10). He suggests that thinking of home as "normal" and antithetical to

the “pathological state of homelessness” constructs the homeless person as a “deviant other” (10). A starting point for a different way of thinking requires a consideration of the broader systems and structures that allow this opposition in the first place. It is important, Lancione suggests, to acknowledge that the “lack” implied in homelessness—the “*lessness*,” as he calls it—has the potential to affect everybody to a different degree because of a system that permits “the burden of debt that results from the financialization of housing as an asset (mortgages, rent), the normalization of eviction, the precarity of living in violent households” (10). “We need to ask,” Lancione crucially suggests, “why home is something that has the potential of becoming a lack, why it has the potential of being eradicated, why it can be displaced” (10).

The existing scholarship on homelessness constitutes a vibrant scholarly field. Critical investigations of the notion and meanings of home, of its history and of the dynamics in which home appears, have soared since the spatial turn in the humanities and the social sciences has revamped the attention to matters of space and place. Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei’s foundational anthology *The Domestic Space Reader* (2012) collects interdisciplinary writings—classic and contemporary—that reveal how the discourse on home and houses is crucial not only for “a deeper understanding of the individual and the inner self, but also to question traditional perceptions of historical periods, society, the public, and national ideologies and practices” (3). Recently, scholars have rethought domestic space as ambivalent, questioning narratives that have read home as traditional and conservative. For instance, Susan Fraiman’s feminist analysis in *Extreme Domesticity: A View from the Margins* (2017), questions “received ideas about where and with whom domesticity lies, expanding our sense of its many possible forms and implications” (5), and suggests that domestic space is in fact “far more heterogeneous, unstable, and politically contradictory” than we commonly assume (7). In their collection on *Ambivalent Mobility*, Dorothee Birke and Stella Butter observe that, in the 2010s, “home is anything but a homely topic” (118), and argue that focusing on the tension between home and mobility displayed by much of the contemporary cultural production illuminates central issues of the twenty-first century such as “the current housing crises in many countries,” “migration” (118), as well as “globalization, climate change, technological advances and shifting gender roles” (119).

Inevitably, the recent scholarship on home has been accompanied by a growing consideration of homelessness and related notions that are commonly located at the opposite end of the spectrum from home: displacement, precarious forms of housing, and life at the margins. This renewed interest is present across disciplines. From a transnational perspective, home and homelessness have been investigated by considering matters of migration, border-crossing, and displacement, and by reflecting on global relations and transnational routes. Environmental humanities scholars have considered the role of place and space in relation to the natural and built environment and to being in the world. Among them, Gerard Kuperus argues in *Ecopolitical Homelessness: Defining Place in an Unsettled World* (2016) that the contemporary sense of feeling at home in the world is “a false sense of home, or homelessness” (6) driven by the forces of free market capitalism, which prevent us “from thinking philosophically and from paying attention to the actual world behind the façade of commercialized planning and architecture” (7). More recently, the raging housing crisis has triggered investigations of homelessness, real estate, and gentrification by sociologists, scholars of African American studies, and geographers. In *In Defense of Housing* (2016), David Madden and Peter Marcuse analyze the commodification of housing, the “political-economic” dimension of the housing crisis, and how it directly causes homelessness, displacement, poverty, and inequality on a global scale. The same year Matthew Desmond won the Pulitzer Prize for *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, which collects his research following several Milwaukee families as they struggled to keep their home. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor explores the intersection between racism and structural inequality in *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (2019). In *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State* (2019), Samuel Stein traces the roots of homelessness and unstable housing by revealing the nexus between politics and predatory global real estate and their destructive effects on American urban life.

As this and more recent scholarship suggests, the claim that homelessness is *the* crisis of the twenty-first century is no exaggeration. While we write this introduction, the Covid-19 pandemic keeps affecting many aspects of everyday life, and it has become evident that its consequences, social, political, and economic, will reverberate through the next decades. In the United States, the eviction wave triggered by the pandemic is

threatening the lives of millions of people who struggle with financial insecurity, as existing government aids like the eviction moratorium are unable to provide enduring relief. In September 2020, journalist and author Gabriel M. Schivone, among others, predicted that the homelessness wave following the pandemic crisis was going to be the worst “since perhaps the Great Depression.” But this only exacerbates an already dramatic housing situation that reached its peak during the crisis of 2007-2008 and that has since then spread beyond control. Researchers are warning that the homelessness and housing crises are assuming new forms. In 2017, Jessica Bruder’s *Nomadland* shed light on a relatively new phenomenon of self-defined “houseless” Americans (xiii) who drive across the country, live in their vehicles, and try to survive on seasonal jobs after having been forced to make “impossible” economic choices (xiii). Brian Goldstone wrote in 2019 in the pages of *The New Republic* that homelessness in the United States now includes rapidly increasing numbers of “working homeless,” a term that indicates individuals who, despite holding a job, are unable to pay the rent. Unsurprisingly, Goldstone reports that 40% of individuals who are experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness are African American. Homelessness in the twenty-first century is far from the stereotypical affliction that only concerns the urban poor, Julia Faisst has also recently argued (169). Instead, she claims, it has been increasingly “affecting the middle class as well,” turning home “from a financial asset to a liability” (169). And yet, as urban scholars like David Wachsmuth and Alexander Weisler have claimed, the sharing economy did manage to revitalize—for a privileged minority—the housing market with a business model based on houses as commodities, as the success of short-term rental companies like Airbnb and HomeAway indicates. The consequences for local communities and urban dwellers who are not homeowners have been devastating, and include gentrification, a growing rent gap, and rising inequality.

Speaking of homelessness as the crisis of this century must include a reflection on the climate crisis. As summer 2021 beat the tragic and irreversible record of the highest temperatures ever recorded (NOAA), the world becomes an increasingly inhabitable place. The climate crisis not only signals the ultimate homelessness that is already under way, it also causes forced migration and displacement. Scientists have called attention to the “vicious cycle nature” of the relationship between climate change and homelessness, advocating for affordable housing as “a fundamental

human right and a determinant of health and sustainable development during the climate emergency” (Kidd 1694). The climate crisis, they caution, not only increases the concrete risk of homelessness for individuals who experience housing insecurity, but also represents a health threat due to worsening weather conditions and increasingly extreme climate phenomena (Kidd 1693). And as the 2020 United Nations World Social Report shows, climate catastrophe is “exacerbating poverty and inequality,” and it is disproportionately affecting poorer areas of the world and indigenous peoples (7-8). Global migration has obvious political repercussions, since the climate migrants who find themselves displaced or homeless will depend on richer countries’ immigration policies.

The research referenced above offers crucial tools to understand homelessness in relation to historical, sociological, economic, and political contexts. But it also informs further inquiry, including the current volume, which uses a cultural studies frame of reference for the study of homelessness. To illustrate how this perspective attempts to make sense of homelessness, we would like to briefly tell the story of how this project came to life. The contributors to this volume are part of an international group of current and former members of the LMU Amerika-Institut’s doctoral colloquium supervised by Klaus Benesch. For several years and until 2020, the group had been meeting for the colloquium’s spring seminar on San Servolo, a small island in the Venetian lagoon. Each year, the group discussed an idea central to American Studies, from cultural immobility to new perspectives on reading, from Modernist architecture to the tension between freedom and restraint, and it shared and discussed various members’ research alongside that of international scholars. After the 2020 edition of the seminar was canceled due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the group decided to turn the event into a book project, aware of the topic’s importance.

This collection, therefore, does not aim to explore homelessness in all its facets and, most importantly, it does not aim to be all-encompassing or to offer solutions to a problem that is all too real, painful, and often distant from the academic environment. Quite the contrary, the book reflects the academic background of its contributors, which lies mainly in North American studies and the humanities. The essays included here approach the topic of homelessness mostly from a U.S.-American standpoint. They often do so, however, by means of a transnational perspective and by con-

sidering the global forces at play, paying particular attention to the largescale systemic dimensions of homelessness.

The present volume understands homelessness broadly, as a potentially multifaceted condition. In a literal sense, the term refers to the experience of being without shelter, of living on the street, and of being unable to access stable, long-term housing. But it also applies to the absence of home in the experience of migration, forced displacement, and exile. As it is convention in the academic tradition, the book includes reflections on the symbolic and literal meanings of homelessness, and often tries to take such meanings apart and to think about the ambivalence of the term. Inevitably then, the book not only investigates homelessness per se, but it also interrogates the significance, literal and symbolic, of the concept of home.

Even though this collection addresses homelessness also in its more metaphorical aspects, it aspires to be respectful of the experience of homelessness and to be mindful of the ethics of using homelessness as a metaphor for scholarly purposes. To do so, it aims to go beyond official narratives about home and homelessness, to connect experiences of place to the social and economic networks in which they develop, and to expose the oppressing role of capitalistic, racialized, colonial, and heteronormative forces surrounding such narratives.

The essays included here explore the nexus between homelessness and a wide range of subjects, such as housing policies, urban dispossession, race, gender, migration and displacement, architecture, capitalism, the climate crisis, public discourses, and more. To understand these connections, the authors explore how homelessness is imagined and represented in popular culture and literature, and they reflect on philosophical and theoretical discussions as well as political and cultural debates.

Part I of this collection includes reflections on the theoretical and historical dimensions of homelessness by focusing on philosophical and political debates, and by analyzing specific case studies from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Klaus Benesch's essay opens the section with a discussion about critical regionalists' celebration of the local against the backdrop of an increasingly globalized world. In "The Failing Notion of Home in a Global Age," Benesch focuses on Heidegger's and Levinas's contrasting views of home and *at-home-ness* as indicative of modern and contemporary debates about modern society, capitalism, technological change, and humans' place in the world, and he considers how recent fic-

tion suggests that it is narrative that may help us recover “a sense of home.” In “Against Home: Neanderthal Ontology, Movement, and Locative Thinking,” Bryan Banker picks up the debate between Heidegger and Levinas in his rumination on the refusal of the concept of home as rooted and as a place to return to. Inspired by anthropologists and climate scientists who study Neanderthals under immense crisis, Banker asks what a philosophical study of Neanderthal modes of being can offer contemporary humans facing comparable pressing issues of climate upheaval, migration, and mobility. His essay, therefore, invites contemporary criticism to rethink the relationship between being, mobility, and place.

The four remaining essays in this section include different analyses that range from housing and polemic discourses on housing rights, to federal architecture, to institutional work on homelessness, from the early twentieth century to the present day. Kent Hufford’s “‘This Matter of Housing’: Theoretical and Historical Observations on Its Form and Technique from the 1930s,” revisits the issue of housing through the lens of changes to the material environment as an effect of the Second Industrial Revolution. In the 1930s American authors Catherine Bauer and Lewis Mumford conceptually challenged accepted notions of housing. Due to a renewal of discourses about public housing, the broader scope within which Bauer and Mumford understood the subject is highly relevant today. An analysis of racial discourses around housing is the focus of Sakina Shakil Gröppmaier’s essay. Looking back at the politics of rebuilding New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, “Power, Polemic, and the Right to Home: Race and the Reterritorialization of Post-Katrina New Orleans” considers how the racial dimension of polemical Katrina discourses were reflected in the racial and economic inequalities at play in the reterritorialization of the city, during which the right to home of the “Katrina Diaspora” was violated, intensifying the homelessness crisis in New Orleans. The relationship to American public space and to federal buildings is the subject of Andrew Estes’s essay “Ideological and Aesthetic Homelessness: Federal Architecture in the Trump Era,” in which the author considers the Trump presidency and in particular an Executive Order called “Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture,” a stark rejection of Modernist style in favor of a return to classical architecture. Estes considers how this move represented a polarizing, moral argument about American public space and what federal architecture says about inclusion and exclusion. Milena Rinck’s essay, the final one in this section,

approaches homelessness from a transatlantic perspective, focusing on German-U.S.-American relations. The author considers a 2019 cultural program called *Worlds of Homelessness* carried out by the government-funded German institution Goethe Institut Los Angeles. In her essay “The Goethe-Institut LA’s Program Series *Worlds of Homelessness: International Perspectives on Homelessness in Germany’s Foreign Cultural Relations and Education Policy*,” Rinck considers how foreign policy efforts have targeted the homelessness crisis in Los Angeles through artistic and educational initiatives.

Section II considers representations of homelessness, migration, and displacement in literature and popular culture. In the opening essay, “‘What happens to a dream deferred?’ Home and Civil Rights in *A Raisin in the Sun*,” Amy Doherty Mohr analyzes Lorraine Hansberry’s 1959 play, which traces the trajectory of a Black family during their search for a home in the white suburbs of Chicago. Discussing the collapse of the American Dream and the threat that capitalism poses to homeownership, the author explores the precariousness of home in the play and points out a parallel with the impact of the contemporary housing crisis in Chicago on citizens of color. Kathrin Hartmann explains how homelessness as a literary trope in U.S.-American fiction has traditionally been limited to an instrumental phase preceding the protagonists’ success story, usually emphasizing the American mythology of upward mobility. By adopting Georg Lukács’s notion of “transcendental homelessness,” from his *Theory of the Novel*, the author reflects on the need for contemporary fiction to adequately represent, formally and thematically, less linear and more common experiences of homelessness in the United States. In her essay “Ethics and Poetics of American Homelessness Fiction: Georg Lukács’s Concept of ‘Transcendental Homelessness’ and David Means’s Short Story ‘Two Ruminations of a Homeless Brother,’” Hartmann analyzes how David Means’s story questions literary conventions of representing homelessness.

Reflections on homelessness, home, migration, and displacement and how these notions intertwine characterize a large part of contemporary fiction and are the focus of the four essays that follow. In “‘The City Made Us New’: Claiming Urban Space in Tommy Orange’s Novel *There There*,” Giorgia Tommasi engages with the portrayal of the contemporary urban Native experience by the Cheyenne and Arapaho author Tommy Orange in his debut novel. Examining representations of mobility and

space, she argues that *There There* constitutes an attempt to claim the American city as home for the members of the Native communities portrayed in the story, rejecting stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples as out-of-place in the city, as well as the reservation-vs.-city divide that has often characterized Native American fiction. In her essay “Of Ghosts, Gifts, and Globetrotters: Tracing Homes and Homelands in Vietnamese American Refugee Short Stories,” Carole Martin shows how short fiction about home by contemporary Vietnamese American authors counters dominant, essentializing representations of refugees. Focusing on collections of stories by Viet Thanh Nguyen and Aimee Phan, Martin discusses how the two authors negotiate ambivalent relationships to home and homeland. Michael Wutz extends the focus on homelessness and home to a reflection that encompasses concerns about migration, colonization, language, and climate change. In “Veni, Vidi, Venice! *Gun Island* and the Climate of Homelessness,” the author shows how these topics converge in the figure of the Mediterranean Sea in Amitav Ghosh’s 2019 novel *Gun Island*, which Wutz interprets as the representative of an emerging “narrative of ecological postcolonialism.” Postcolonial literature is also at the center of Loredana Filip’s analysis. Filip draws a connection between contemporary postcolonial novels and TED talks in her essay “Be-Longing in TED Talks on ‘What is home?’ and Contemporary Postcolonial Fiction.” Considering the online TED Talks playlist “What is home?” as part of the self-help genre, Filip points out the apparently similar confessional tone that emerges from both postcolonial narratives and the TED talks in their approach to the topics of home and belonging, emphasizing personal and emotional attachments over geographical ties. However, through her reading of Tayie Selasi’s novel *Ghana Must Go*, Filip reveals how fiction problematizes these issues by moving beyond TED’s individualistic impulse and by presenting belonging as ambivalent instead.

Sascha Pöhlmann’s essay closes the section with an essay that also looks at popular culture, and more precisely at videogames. “Individual and Social Failure in *CHANGE: A Homeless Survival Experience*” closely studies how homelessness is represented in the 2020 videogame *CHANGE*. Interested in the game’s strong interactivity, Pöhlmann shows how the ideas about homelessness that are conveyed to the player reveal the game’s social, cultural, and political agenda. In particular, he explores

the productive tension between the individualism of play stressed in the game and the social and structural critique the game intends to express.

The final section gathers six essays which consider modern and contemporary fiction, songs, and movies that feature notions of home as precarious, unfamiliar, and non-traditional. Patrick Geiger revisits Henry David Thoreau's alternative experiment of setting up a cabin in the woods as representative of the intellectual's view of home as alienating, uncanny, and eventually impossible. In his essay "In *Walden's* Margins: Holes, Tents, Shanties and Other Uncanny Dwellings," Geiger reads *Walden* as exemplary of the difficulty of establishing a solid or meaningful home in the United States. He then turns to contemporary American songwriters to show how the depiction of home as a dubious concept is still very much present in contemporary music.

Daniel Rees considers literary approaches to home in fictional representations of the frontier at the turn of the nineteenth century. In "Unfamiliar Places and the Search for Home," he offers a reading of John Steinbeck's novella *The Red Pony* and John Ford's film *The Searchers*, concentrating on instances of home as unstable and dangerous against the backdrop of a rapidly changing American space.

The remaining essays concentrate on literary and cinematic productions of the twenty-first century. Anna Flügge looks at two contemporary Los Angeles short stories in her essay "'Monstrous' Buildings in the Contemporary Los Angeles Short Story," and at how the tradition of Los Angeles/Hollywood literature shows a very *untraditional* idea of home and architecture. The experience of Los Angeles and its buildings that emerges in Emma Cline's and Jonathan Lethem's stories disorients the protagonists. Stephanie Berens's essay "Transing the American Road Genre: Space, Mobility, and Identity in Sara Taylor's Novel *The Lauras*" discusses a new road narrative that features queer and transgender characters, showing how it differs from more traditional ones in its conceptualization of mobility, home, and identity. Berens demonstrates that Taylor's novel challenges these notions through its plural and non-linear representations of the spaces of home and the road. And in her essay "Unsettled Dwelling in Dave Eggers's *A Hologram for the King*," Christine Faber reads the depiction of home in Eggers's novel as unattainable, always delayed, and at best a temporary possibility. The protagonist, an American who is in the process of losing his house in the United States, tries but fails to feel at home in the King Abdullah Economic City under

construction in Saudi Arabia. Ines Ghalleb's essay "Homelessness: A Search for Habitable Planets in Outer Space in *Interstellar* and *The Martian*" concludes the volume with a discussion of the meaning of home and homelessness on Earth and in outer space as represented by two recent science fiction films that deal with an increasingly uninhabitable Earth. Ghalleb takes readers to outer space and into the future to show how contemporary movies, with the help of astrobiology and astrophysics, are imagining alternative forms of habitability.

The broad spectrum of the topics covered and the approaches used in this volume, although far from exhaustive, allow for a reconsideration of homelessness. Together with our contributors, we hope to offer readers helpful contexts, compelling historical and cultural analyses, and alternative tools to think about the absence of home in its manifold expressions.

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Eleni Garmhausen, "As Above so Below"

Homelessness: History, Theory, Practice

The Failing Notion of Home in a Global Age¹

Klaus Benesch

Everything essential and everything great originated from the fact that man had a home and was rooted in tradition.
(Martin Heidegger, “Only a God Can Save Us”)

One’s implementation in a landscape, one’s attachment to Place, is the very splitting of humanity into natives and strangers.
(Emmanuel Levinas, “Heidegger, Gagarin and Us”)

In his introduction to the Sierra Club edition of *The Unsettling of America*, social activist and writer Wendell Berry emphasizes a rather telling fact of American history, namely, that Americans have often not been driven by an intention to *be* in the New World. From the start, they had no intention to settle, to *be* where they—often inadvertently—ended up being. Significantly, if also somewhat paradoxically, the settling of the New World had been undertaken by men and women in transit. “As a people,” Berry argues, “wherever we have been, we have never really intended to be” (3). Early explorers were largely interested in gold, not land, and Berry aptly notes that conquests and settlements have been incidental, not central, to this search. Even when much of the ‘unknown’ geography of America was finally mapped, the dynamics of the frontier translated, for one, into the new myth of an ever-growing industrial marketplace and, for another, into the promise of unfettered individual mobility associated with American car culture.² Both cultural forces kept Americans mobile and,

¹ The following essay is an abridged and substantially revised version of “Space, Place, Narrative: Critical Regionalism and the Idea of Home in a Global Age,” originally published in *ZAA: A Quarterly of Language, Literature and Culture*, vol. 64, no. 1, 2016, pp. 93-108.

² For the modern frontier(s) of technology, urban planning, and mobility, see Nye (*American Technological Sublime, Narratives and Spaces*). On ‘car culture’ and

more often than not, drove them *away* from where they had settled and taken roots.

Hence Americans conceived of their nation not as a place but as a continent, a vast space unified by a political geography that always already transcended the notion of cities, regions, or even a country. For the writers of the American revolution, as Cecelia Tichi points out, the nation “assumed specific geographic definition on a continental scale” (77). “This [i.e., the revolution] is not the affair of a city, a country, a province, or a kingdom,” Thomas Paine writes in his best-selling pamphlet *Common Sense*, “but of a continent—of at least one-eighth part of the habitable globe” (qtd. in Tichi 78). Hardly any of the founding texts of the revolutionary period describe the struggle for independence as merely an *American* or a *local* event. Rather, they stress the global significance of the revolution by translating concrete places into emblems of a larger transnational scheme. Even if the Puritan typological tradition of historical interpretation had prepared Americans to read the founding of the nation on such a world-historical, epoch-making scale, the disregard for places, regions, and concrete geography in American history is nevertheless striking.

Yet exceptions to America’s glaring inattentiveness to place are equally noteworthy. While critics are wont to connect the nation’s economic success to the free flow of humans and ideas across borders, resistance to an increasingly homogenous, transnational cultural space has been widespread. Just consider the persistence of regionalist movements that can be found throughout modern America. Early twentieth-century Agrarianism in the South of the United States is a case in point. In the eyes of the so-called ‘Southern Agrarians,’ a group of twelve poets and intellectuals associated with Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, who in 1930 published a fervent indictment of America’s industrial civilization, Americans had become fatally oblivious to local traditions and the history of concrete places. To remedy the nation’s rootlessness, Agrarians called for a cultural reawakening, for which the ‘old’ South would serve as the model and template. To undo the staggering alienation and cultural decline they saw at work in the world around them, the twelve Southerners wanted Americans to look “backward quite as much as they

its concomitant cultural narratives, see Flink (*The Car Culture, The Automobile Age*), and Seiler (*Republic of Drivers*).

[would] look forward” (Ransom, “Reconstructed But Unregenerate” 13; see also Ransom, “The Aesthetics of Regionalism”).

What connects the Southern Agrarians with later critical regionalists, anti-globalization activists, or faith-based conservationist writers such as Wendell Berry is a shared belief in regional values and traditions, defiantly invoked to strengthen local identities vis-à-vis an encompassing, globalized consumer culture. Though clearly at odds with modern American society, antimodern interventions such as the Southern Agrarians’ are actually vital for processes of modernization. By foregrounding tensions between tradition and progress, between a past all too easily glorified and the challenges of an unknown, malleable future, they address a number of fundamental issues ingrained in modern civilization. What is more, the Agrarians’ attack on modern America resonates with contemporary ecocritical or anti-capitalist agendas. In spite of its facile embrace of the South and its racial past, Agrarianism speaks to a widespread modern concern about the fast-changing social, economic, and technological environments of late capitalism.

A brief comment on the term ‘regionalism’: mainly used in the realm of architecture and urban planning, where it has come to denote a counter movement to the placelessness and lack of identity associated with the modernist International Style, regionalism, if understood more broadly, expresses a heightened attention to places or a particular geographic region, often accompanied by a critique of globalized capitalist consumer culture. Since regionalism assumes a special relationship between people and places, a relationship that turns on notions of either having a ‘home’ or a feeling of ‘at-homeness’ vis-à-vis one’s immediate geo-cultural environment, the shifting idea of home in an increasingly globalized age is crucial to its political agenda. Insofar as it stresses the close connection between geography and people, it often overlaps with the political ideologies of nationalism or patriotism. Critical of industrial society and its tendency to emphasize agglomerations and to transform the cultural geography of places, regionalists persistently articulated antimodern sentiments about the modern environment.³ The tension between place and space, between sedentary and vagrant forms of culture, appears to be ingrained in all processes of modernization. If the former (place) are constantly outweighed by the latter (space), thereby allowing for what we

³ For a critical assessment of the movement and its various repercussions in philosophy and the social sciences, see Canizaro, Botz-Bornstein, and Powell.

think of as progress and growth, places nevertheless matter: as sites of memory and lived traditions they remind us that to *be* for humans always also means to be *there* (as in the German *da-sein*), to be embedded in a concrete geography and its variegated cultural histories.

It is with respect to this latter function that places continue to be tremendously important. As carriers of cultural narratives, they provide an antidote to the rampant deracination and homogeneity associated with processes of globalization. It comes as no surprise, then, that with globalization in full swing, narratives of home, regions, and the local are in demand. Yet while drawing attention to the modern ‘homeless spirit,’ famously described by Hegel in his *Philosophy of History* (1837), these narratives, as I show in the concluding section of this essay, often redefine the very idea of home.⁴ To what extent and at what costs places should be allowed to define human existence has also been the issue of a controversy between the late Martin Heidegger and his former Jewish disciple Emanuel Levinas. Though both thinkers frequently invoke notions of home and dwelling as a fundamental condition of human existence, Levinas appears to be skeptical of the benefits of being rooted in a particular place or region. Their differences of how to define *at-home-ness* and to assess its larger philosophical and political implications shine a bright light on the failing notion of home under conditions of modernity. It is to these differences that I will now turn in more detail.

The Modern Dilemma

The dilemma of becoming modern has been succinctly described by the French philosopher Paul Ricœur. In a 1961 essay titled “Universal Civilization and National Cultures,” Ricœur notes a fundamental paradox faced by any modern nation subscribed to a universal ideology of historical progress and change: “There is the paradox: how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and

⁴ For Hegel the creation of modern subjectivity is a profoundly alienating experience. While man becomes aware of his intellectual independence he also feels estranged from his customary home, in fact now the world of pure thought becomes his home (see Hegel 269-70). For the notion of modernity as harbinger of a unifying transnational, global civilization at odds with local cultures and traditions, see Schäfer (301-04).

take part in universal civilization” (276). Ricœur’s analysis of what it means to be modern, namely, to shift from old to new, from the past to the future, and from the local to the universal, echoes with many of the issues addressed by regionalist movements. If regionalists believe that late capitalist modernity has engendered a conflict between local cultures and an increasingly unifying, universal consumer culture, so does Ricœur. It is thus only fitting that Kenneth Frampton’s 1983 regionalist manifesto “Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance” opens on an extended quotation from Ricœur’s earlier essay. Writing against what he calls a “Megalopolitan development” (Frampton 17) in the construction of urban spaces worldwide, that is, the preponderance of the skyscraper and the serpentine freeway, Frampton invokes Ricœur’s notion of a relentless onrush of transnational technical civilization, if only to take it even a step further. While the inexorable victory of universal civilization as described by Ricœur still appeared porous and “afforded the possibility of maintaining some general control over the shape and significance of the urban fabric” (Ricœur 17), some twenty years later the possibility of rescuing locally inflected building traditions and make them cross-fertilize with the modern has given way to an international “*burolandschaft* city-scape” (Ricœur 17). Frampton’s attack on totalizing forms of modern city planning is, to be sure, itself universalizing in that it posits “an apocalyptic thrust of modernization” that can no longer be avoided because “the ground in which the mytho-ethical nucleus of a society might take root has become eroded by the rapacity of development” (Ricœur 17). Frampton wallows in the sterile uniformity of modern architecture, using the same broad brushes as Tom Wolfe in his scathing *From Bauhaus to Our House* (1981). The contradiction between the abstraction and sparseness of modern architecture and the civilization it serves leads both writers to express their longing for more traditional, locally inflected forms of building.

The above references to ‘rootedness,’ ‘ground,’ ‘erosion,’ etc. are significant here, and so is the idea of the ‘rapacity’ of development. Frampton’s criticism of the bleak, standardized design of contemporary architecture is not at all original. Rather it echoes a long-standing concern about industrial civilization which can be traced back as far back as the Romantic era. From September 1837 to December 1838, the English art critic John Ruskin published a series of articles on architecture, known as *The Poetry of Architecture*, in which he argued that buildings should be

respectful to their immediate environment and use local building materials. Ruskin's back-to-nature aesthetics, his critique of standardization and imitation in contemporary architectural design foreshadows aspects of Frampton's critical regionalism and his call for an "architecture of resistance" (Frampton 25) that does not give way to the dictates of modern technology. Moreover, arguments regarding the rapaciousness of modern civilization have been voiced all along by cultural critics from Thoreau to Marcuse and the Frankfurt School. In one way or another, they all take issue with capitalism's disregard for local cultural traditions and its inherent tendency towards an ever greater uniformity and standardization.⁵

It should not go unnoticed that many of these critiques proffer recalcitrant, non-conformist artists, or as Ricœur calls them, 'scandalist' artists, as an antidote to the leveling power of modern cultural formations. "All great artistic creations always begin with some scandal," Ricœur writes in "Civilization and National Cultures," and it is for this reason that "the law of scandal answers the law of the 'false consciousness.' It is necessary to have scandals . . ." (Ricœur 281) Insofar as he pits the creativity of artists against the forces of standardization and cultural deracination, of what he calls—following Adorno—"false consciousness," Ricœur subscribes to the Romantic notion of art as autonomous, as being outside of the cycles of production and accumulation which make up modern civilization. Because true artistic creation cannot be commissioned or programmed, it does not comply with the mechanics of technical reasoning. Rather than being an impediment to their cultural mission, it is precisely the lack of purpose and their distance from material conditions that enable artists to become a transformative voice of their national culture. "The artist," Ricœur claims, "gives expression to his nation only if he does not intend it and if no one orders him to do it" (Ricœur 281).

Yet if art appears to be deeply invested in local cultures and their respective traditions, the obvious inertia engrained in timeworn, unchanging cultural practices also poses a serious threat to the creative resources of a nation. Ricœur acknowledges that risk by noting that any artistic creation informed by sedimented symbols and an unchanging cultural iconography runs the risk of becoming stale and trite. Unlike a set of tools or customs that merely accumulate and become integrated with the overall historical development of a region or nation, cultural tradition, as Ricœur

⁵ For a discussion of both Thoreau's and Heidegger's reconfiguration of place as well as their scathing critique of modern industrial culture, see Benesch.

takes pains to explain, “stays alive only if it constantly creates itself anew” (Ricœur 280). Like an organism that grows and continuously alters its shape, local cultures, though predicated on cultural continuity and identifiable cultural traditions, are also always subject to rejuvenation and renewal. It is this capacity of cultural tradition to constantly change and recreate itself that allows Ricœur, and the critical regionalists that followed him, to highlight the diversity of local cultures in contrast to the staggering homogeneity of transnational technical civilization.

The Homeless Spirit

In his 1966 interview with the news weekly *Der Spiegel*, titled “Only a God Can Save Us,” Heidegger famously argued that “according to our human experience and history, everything essential and everything great originated from the fact that man had a home and was rooted in tradition” (“Only a God Can Save Us” 106).⁶ Though repeatedly emphasizing that all great thinking must be rooted in the cultural traditions of a region or place, in the *Spiegel*-interview he coupled his praise of locally inflected forms of creativity with an especially harsh attack on contemporary art, and in particular modern literature.⁷ Asked by his interviewers to expand on the proper role of philosophy in the modern world, he insisted that neither philosophy nor the arts have the wherewithal to reverse the uprooting of man from the earth, as exemplified in the event of man’s landing on the moon. Neither of them is equipped to undo the power of ‘technicity’ (Heidegger’s term for the modern technosphere), the essence of which continuously escapes us and to which we have not yet responded in an appropriate way. Not only have philosophy and the arts failed “to effect any immediate change in the current state of the world” (107). With

⁶ The interview was originally recorded in 1966 yet released, on request of Heidegger, only after his death in 1976. Heidegger had agreed to discuss questions concerning his involvement with nationalist socialist politics during his time as rector of Freiburg university. Although these issues clearly dominated the interview, Heidegger used the occasion to review basic assumptions of his philosophical thinking, and in particular its relation to historical developments and modern society in general.

⁷ See, for example, his oft-quoted 1948 essay “Conversations on a Country Path about Thinking.”

regard to the Herculean task of reorienting man towards a more encompassing understanding of being as a being *in* the world, Heidegger singles out contemporary literature as vastly “inadequate” if not “largely destructive” (106).

Given the insurmountable influence of technology on modern man, Heidegger ultimately concludes that “only a god can save us.” And since we cannot ‘think’ this god, whatever form it might take, into being, the only possibility available to us is to “prepare a sort of readiness, through thinking and poetizing, for the appearance of the god, or for the absence of the god in the time of foundering [*Untergang*]; for in the face of the god who is absent, we founder” (107). Heidegger’s conspicuous silence vis-à-vis the forces of modernization is as striking as it is paradoxical. For one, he holds that neither philosophy nor poetry and literature can play a major role in bringing about any kind of turn-around. Because man is existentially challenged “by a power which manifests itself in the essence of technology, a power which man himself does not control. . . . Philosophy is at an end” (107). Yet for another, he reminds us that if “the world cannot be what it is or the way that it is through man, neither can it be without man” (107). While it is true that mankind has set free the genie of technology, a force that will eventually undo our being-in-the-world, Being in its broadest, phenomenological sense still needs man “for its revelation, preservation, and formation” (107). Though highly skeptical of their capacity to actually alter the course of history, Heidegger still sees an important path left open to thinking and poetizing: namely, to assist man in overcoming the homelessness of his modern self by conjuring up a state of renewed *at-home-ness* in the world.

The notion that thinking is intimately connected to the act of building a home, and then dwelling in it, is the topic of Heidegger’s oft-quoted essay “Building Dwelling Thinking,” published in 1951 in the wake of the housing shortage after World War II. All three activities turn on a particular relationship between human beings and the environment, and all three provide ways to become one with or at least acknowledge the environment as part and parcel of the human condition. It is important to note here that what connects thinking to building and dwelling is more than merely symbolical. Just consider the various meanings—geographical, political, cultural, and others—of a bridge. As Heidegger remarks,

the bridge, if it is a true bridge, is never first of all a mere bridge and then afterward a symbol. And just as little is the bridge in the first place exclusively a symbol, in the sense that it expresses something that strictly speaking does not belong to it. . . . The bridge is a thing and *only that*. (“Building Dwelling Thinking” 147, emphasis in the original)

Since we have long been accustomed to undervalue the nature of *things*, and to think of them as merely relative to some symbolic or practical meaning, we are no longer able to acknowledge things by and through their *thingness*. What this means is that the bridge, and by extension any building erected by an interaction of human ingenuity and the environment, is first and foremost a *presencing* or bringing into existence of what Heidegger, somewhat opaquely, calls the ‘fourfold’ (*das Geviert*). Representing the essential unity and conjunction of earth, sky, humans (mortals), and divinities (immortals), the fourfold is made visible and actuated by way of building and dwelling. Because bridges urge us to reflect on the relation of man and space, to recognize that space “is not an external object nor an inner experience” (Heidegger 156), and that “man’s relation to locations, and through locations to spaces, inheres in his dwelling” (157), bridges are space-making buildings in a double sense: they at once express the fourfold symbolically and they make room for it by way of their physical extension as built objects.

Heidegger goes to great lengths in arguing that dwelling and building are inextricably bonded together, and that “only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build” (159). In each instance there is more involved than merely the immediate purpose of creating a physical shelter and then using it as protection against an intemperate environment. Traditional Black Forest farmhouses architecturally and structurally conjoin the various elements of the fourfold by letting “earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter *in simple oneness* into things [that is, the farmhouse]” (159, emphasis in the original). Building properly and dwelling properly are mutually dependent, and both are symbolically and physically made present in the thingness of the built object. They are thus “the basic character of Being in keeping with which mortals exist” (159). Moreover, both are closely tied to thinking in that all three are ways of expressing and becoming aware of man’s implementation in the fourfold. Once we realize that “the one as much as the other comes from the workshop of long experience and incessant practice” (159-160), only then can we hope to overcome the diasporic homelessness of modern man. Obvi-

ously, Heidegger's understanding of building and dwelling, as well as of the kind of thinking it necessitates, is predicated on longstanding cultural traditions and their concretization as locally inspired buildings or 'homes.'⁸

By exposing the composite nature of places, which—when brought into contiguity by way of building—create larger, extended spaces, Heidegger turns the tables on modernity's valorization of space. He also posits that it is man's interaction with the environment in the form of building that defines our humanity. As human beings we do not inhabit preexisting spaces, rather, we construct spaces through the act of building: "building, by virtue of constructing locations, is a founding and joining of spaces" (158). His, then, is a place-bound, existential philosophy that aims at reattaching—*qua* thinking as building—the modern homeless spirit to local cultural traditions. The idea of home, of a built space rooted in and representative of the fourfold, is paramount here. Yet not all buildings fulfill this prerequisite. To provide a home for modern man, it does not suffice to simply promote the building of houses. The real plight is not that there is a housing shortage, but the real "dwelling" plight lies in that "mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they *must ever learn to dwell*" (160, emphasis in the original). If modern man is 'homeless' this is precisely because we have not only forgotten how to dwell but because we do not even think of not dwelling properly as the plight that ails us. As soon as we give thought to our homelessness, we have already made a first step towards a realization of the full potential of dwelling. How can we do this? Though Heidegger offers little in terms of practical solutions, it becomes clear that he wants us to embrace the notion of human life as fundamentally predicated on dwelling, to think of dwelling as a form of being in the world and making it a home.

Heidegger's definition of being as a form of dwelling is clearly at odds with the modern belief in human progress and the possibility of improving the conditions of life for all men. He has little to say about science and technology other than mythologizing them and blaming them for the demise of Western philosophy as he understands it. Insofar as he privileges local traditions over cultural change, concrete places over transnational spaces, and the rootedness of farm life over urban deracination and alien-

⁸ An earlier, equally 'wholistic' notion of dwelling can be found in Henry David Thoreau's transcendentalist classic *Walden: Or Life in the Woods* (1854), particularly in chapter II, "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For."

ation, his is an entirely nostalgic, antimodern stance. As the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas points out, Heidegger's skepticism as to the benefits of modern life, his denial of its liberating, utopian potential, betrays a deep-seated elitist and antidemocratic strain of thought. In a short piece called "Heidegger, Gagarin and Us," which originally appeared in 1963 as part of an extended collection of essays on Judaism, Levinas attacks Heidegger and his followers for their naïve attempts at recovering a 'natural' world that was long lost and probably never even existed. His harsh criticism of "Heideggerians" is particularly interesting in that it posits—like Heidegger—a preponderance of science and technology in the modern world, while ascribing to this condition diametrically opposed effects and consequences.

Levinas's description of the nostalgic mindset of Heideggerians is especially revealing, and thus deserves to be quoted at length:

[Heideggerians] would like man to rediscover the world. . . . To rediscover the world means to rediscover a childhood mysteriously snuggled up inside the Place, to open up to the light of great landscapes, the fascination of nature, and the delight of camping in the mountains. It means to follow a path that winds its way through fields, to feel the unity created by the bridge that links the two river banks and by the architecture of buildings, the presence of the tree, the chiaroscuro of the forests, the mystery of things The very Being of reality will reveal itself behind these privileged experiences, giving and trusting itself into man's keeping. And man, the keeper of Being, will derive from this grace his existence and his truth. (Levinas 231-32, emphasis in the original)

By connecting Heidegger's thinking to the romantic imagination of privileged adolescents where things and sites are riddled with the mysterious, the pristine, the transcendental, Levinas exposes Heidegger's world view for its utter naïveté and presumptuousness.⁹ Yet worse than the obvious infantilism and verbosity of some of Heidegger's essays is his intrinsic divisiveness, his tendency to group people into those who are place-bound and those who are dispersed and homeless, for whom there is no place to become attached to, and who therefore remain outsiders and strangers:

⁹ "The fable spoken by the first language of the world," Levinas quips, "presupposes links that are more subtle, numerous and profound" (Levinas 232).

One's implementation in a landscape, one's attachment to Place, without which the universe would become insignificant and would scarcely exist, is the very splitting of humanity into natives and strangers. And in this light technology is less dangerous than the spirits [génies] of the Place. (Levinas 232, emphasis in the original)

By dividing the world into native dwellers and nomadic outsiders, Heidegger's phenomenological approach, Levinas contends, is bound to fall prey to the specters of totalitarianism. What is more, because of its fear of technology it will never adequately account for the complexity of the modern world, including the liberating role of technology itself. If for Heidegger the attachment to places provides an antidote to the alienating forces of modernity, for Levinas it is precisely through technology that we are able to escape the prison of place: "Technology wrenches us out of the Heideggerian world and the superstitions surrounding *Place*" (Levinas 232-33, emphasis in the original). Though it remains unclear what exactly it is that makes technology such a liberating force, in providing new ways for perceiving "men outside the situation in which they are placed" (Levinas 233), it represents more of an opportunity for humanity than its inexorable downfall.

Given his Jewish background, Levinas is highly suspicious of Heidegger's celebration of rootedness and the archaic world of rural life. He prefers cities, urban spaces "in which one meets people" (Levinas 233), to the countryside. And while Heidegger stresses the connection between men and the earth, Levinas seems to foreground social interaction among people (not things). Judaism, he reminds us, has always been free of the shackles of place. It was difficult for the Jewish Diaspora to put down roots and become attached to places, and, what is more, the Talmud explicitly demands of the individual to offer food, drink, and shelter to other men. Rather than invoking our embeddedness in nature, Judaism emphasizes human relationships and solidarity. Contrary to Christianity, which integrates the local saint with a universal religious system but which remains essentially rooted in geography and place, the Jewish disregard for origins and roots allows for a more radical, liberating form of universality. Herein also lies the achievement of Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, the first human in space: "not in the sporting achievement of having gone further than the others and broken the world records for height and speed . . . what perhaps counts most of all," Levinas muses, "is that he left the Place" (Levinas 233). For Levinas, then, the modern world

is divided by two opposing worldviews: the worldview of Christianity and the Heideggarians, who continue “to give piety roots, nurturing itself on landscapes and memories culled from family, tribe and nation,” and the worldview of Judaism and the Talmud, which did not idolize saints and local cults but “demanded that they be destroyed” (Levinas 234). Like technology Judaism is a liberator and true representative of modernity: it has demystified the universe and, thereby, has freed Nature from the spell of superstitiousness and mysticism. And while Heidegger and his followers remain spellbound by an antimodern mythology of place, Gagarin and the rest of us, thus seems to be the gist of Levinas’s critique, will move on to make the world, if not the entire universe, their/our home.

What is home then, you might wonder?

Heidegger’s and Levinas’s approach to place and the influence of technology on modern civilization differ in that the former stresses the importance of roots over routes and demonizes technology as a negative influence on humans and their relationship with the natural world. Levinas, on the other hand, not only distrusts Heidegger’s phenomenology of place, which he believes to be both naïve and dangerous because it widens the gap between natives and the Other, those who are exempt from the privilege of place. He also acknowledges the liberating potential of technology, of city life, and of itinerant, nomadic lifestyles, all of which necessitate human interaction and solidarity. Both positions seem to coincide with major fault lines in political debates over the future of capitalism and modern society; both touch upon a wide range of issues, from mobility to land rights, from cultural heritage to transnational migration, from agriculture to delocalized, corporate forms of production. Above all else, however, they posit differing notions of what we might call a ‘home,’ and how our at-homeness determines our being-in-the-world.

The notion of home and what it might entail has always been a prominent topic of American literature and the arts in general. For reasons mentioned above, Americans have long struggled with the idea of founding a home. The European idea of dwelling had significantly changed when transferred to American soil. From early settlements to suburban grid homes, from gated communities to trailer parks for the ‘roving’ retirees, its meaning has remained malleable and shifting. Whether it denotes the

place ‘where you lay your head,’ according to a well-known proverb, or whether it refers to a more tribal sense of belonging that involves an extended group of people, a region, or even an entire country, much of our understanding of home is informed by narrative, by stories about both homes and the homeless. At the outset of Richard Ford’s 2006 novel *The Lay of the Land*, the narrator, a New Jersey realtor, ponders the various aspects of home only to find it an almost impossible task to define its true meaning:

What is home then, you might wonder? The place you first see daylight, or the place you choose for yourself? Or is it the someplace you just can’t keep from going back to, though the air there’s grown less breathable, the future’s over, where they really don’t want you back, and where you once left on a breeze without a rearward glance? Home? Home’s a musable concept if you’re born to one place, as I was (the syrup-aired southern coast), educated to another (the glaciated mid-continent), come full stop in a third—then spend years finding suitable ‘homes’ for others. (Ford 15-16)

There is little doubt that in a fast-changing globalized world such as today’s, the notion of home has become a slippery concept on which different people rarely agree. Where do we go from here? And how can we make the world, as both Heidegger and Levinas suggest, our home without simultaneously destroying it? How can we learn to dwell properly without succumbing to a highly problematic ideology of place that turns many of us into strangers and outsiders? How to overcome the fallacies of place and not give in to an unbridled regime of technology and its corollary, a rapidly shrinking, globally interconnected and, at the same time, socially and culturally divided world? What are the narratives that need to be told in order to regain both a sense of place and a sense of home, however volatile and fragile it might be?

Obviously, there is no easy solution to these questions. To accommodate universal mobility and constant change poses significant challenges for both writers and thinkers. Taken on their own, neither Heidegger’s phenomenological mysticism nor Levinas’s embracement of technology as an enlightening, liberating force seems likely to deal adequately with these new challenges. Against the backdrop of unfettered globalization and the imminent extinction of the planet as a home for the human species, it seems as if the notion of home and at-homeness has glaringly failed us.

Since places are at once valuable (that is, as real estate) and culturally de- or undervalued, it takes more than merely a patch of land to reconstruct a sense of home. It takes the imagination. This at least is the topic of Curtis White's narrative collage *The Idea of Home*, first published in 1992. White's fictional suburb of San Lorenzo, California, where its author grew up during the 1950s and '60s, clearly does not meet one's expectations of "a place where humans can live." Therefore, White embarks on a narrative journey to imagine that place, and make it "more desirable than the failure which we presently inhabit" (9). White knows that he is after "a real nowhere, a realizable illusion" (10) and thus relates his narrative project, in the final chapter, to the shadowy realm of artistic illusion where painted haystacks reek with the odor of the real thing, just as sweet as he remembered them when, as a child, his village was visited by hay storms. It is important to keep in mind that White's is in no way an uncritical, nostalgic enterprise; rather he stresses the fictitiousness of all memory, and, by extension, of concepts such as home, belonging, and place. As Levinas argued, to experience a sense of at-home-ness with the world may have, after all, more to do with people than with places.

This is also true of the post-apocalyptic world in Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel *The Road*. In an environment devastated by ecological disaster, places have not only lost their former magic. To recover one's identity, to reassure the self that everything is in place, it is other people, our own kin, to whom we look for guidance and support:

He sat looking at the map. The man watched him. He thought he knew what that was about. He'd poured over maps as a child, keeping one finger on the town where he lived. Just as he would look up his family in the phone directory. Themselves among others, everything in its place. Justified in the world. (McCarthy 182)

In times of crises, it is this experience of community and bonding, the creation of a shared life world inhabited by human beings that matters. Places are an integral part of that life world, yet willed into existence only by way of human imagination. The map is not the territory, as we learn from Borges, and places do not exist for and on their own.¹⁰ Places and the feeling of at-homeness we attach to them are both concepts culled

¹⁰ See Jorge Luis Borges's short story "On Exactitude in Science" (1946) where he describes a map that has the same scale as its territory.