DOING HOME LIKE THE OYSTERCATCHER

A Reflective Essay on Home, Belonging, and Movement

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Introduction

What does it mean to have a home? For many, the answer seems immediate and uncomplicated. Home is often understood as a stable place of belonging, associated with familiarity, continuity and everyday life. The concept of home is often treated as self-evident, yet it becomes increasingly difficult to define once it is examined more closely. Rather than being a fixed and stable location, home may be better understood as something that is negotiated, experienced and continuously re-formed through movements, relationships and time. One way of approaching such an idea could be by looking beyond human-centered assumptions and considering other ways of living in the world.

Where I am from, the Faroe Islands, the *oystercatcher* is a very familiar presence. *Tjaldrið* as it is called in faroese, is the national bird of the Faroe Islands, and can be seen throughout the summer months, moving along the coastline, across the open landscapes and enjoying the mountains (Faroe Islands, n.d.). Every Faroese person knows their sound, but during the winter the sound of them fades, and most of the oystercatchers migrate to Wales and some travel as far as France where they spend the winter months (Bird Migration Atlas, n.d.). When the winter is over, the oystercatcher returns. Each year on March 12th, the Faroe Islands celebrate *Grækarismessa*, marking the return of the oystercatcher (Faroe Islands, n.d.). These movements follow a rhythm shaped by seasonal expectations, where leaving and returning are not signs of displacement, but appear as meaningful responses to changing conditions.

Figure 1

Beyond human experience (linocut print, 2026)

Note. Artwork by the author.

If movement and multiplicity can coexist with a sense of home and belonging for other living beings, why is human belonging so often imagined as dependent on permanence and a fixed place? Why is home so often seen as something that must be singular, stable and geographically anchored? And what experiences are left unacknowledged when home cannot be easily located in one place? These questions do not seek to replace one definition of home with another. Rather, they give space for reflecting on home as a concept shaped through relations, temporalities, and lived experience. A reflection which I personally feel a need to explore, and maybe find a new way of perceiving home in a more nuanced and open understating. In this essay I will explore “home” as a complex and multifaceted concept through a reflexive dialogue with theory and personal experience.

Questioning home

For a long time, the meaning of home for me was not something I actively have reflected upon. For the first twenty-two years of my life, home was self-evident, I never questioned my idea of home, in some way I never had to. Home was firmly associated with the Faroe Islands, a specific place tied to family, familiarity, tradition, routines and a sense of safety. I did not imagine that it could be different, that I would ever feel a sense of home anywhere else.

It was only after moving abroad for my studies that this understanding slowly began to change. Distance did not immediately replace one definition of home with another, but as new routines, new traditions, new friends and a sense of safety in this new city came to me, I started to feel uncertainty about my feelings of home. Leaving a familiar place made me question assumptions I had previously taken for granted. Why should home be so stable and singular? And why did I experience this shift as something that needed to be resolved? These questions made me interested in going beyond personal reflection. Maybe my experience was not only individual, but connected to broader ways of understanding home.

In the text, *Theory's Teachings* by Juuso Tervo (2018), Tervo reflects on what theory actually does, he describes it as something that interrupts certainty, rather than a tool that provides clear explanations or solutions. According to Tervo, theory resists easy answers and refuses to settle questions too quickly (Tervo, 2018 p. 24). Theory creates room for hesitation, for doubt, and for thinking differently, it does not aim to confirm what we already believe (Tervo, 2018 p. 25). If we use theory in this way we allow ourselves to challenge the comfort of familiarity and normative ways of understanding the world, it keeps questions open. Someone who also can add valuable insights into this challenge of normative ways of seeing the world, is Judith Butler (2001). In Butler's essay called *What is Critique?* Butler reflects on the meaning of critique as a philosophical practice. Drawing on Foucault, Butler argues that critique is not only about rejecting ideas or replacing them with better ones (Butler, 2001 p. 2). Instead, critique is about questioning the norms and examining the underlying aspects in which certain ways of thinking start to appear natural, necessary or without question (Butler, 2001 p. 3). According to Butler we need to ask how norms shape what we consider acceptable, true or self-evident (Butler, 2001 p. 11-12).

Approaching my own idea of home through Tervo's understanding of theory, and Butler's understanding of critique, I can allow the idea of home to become less obvious. When my idea of home is that it is fixed, singular and self-evident, Tervo and Butler's ideas invite me to pause and ask why. Thinking within this framework allows me to begin to examine how this image has been shaped, and to look deeper into the tensions within my idea of home.

Pride, Guilt, and In-Betweenness

When my understanding of home began to shift, what I noticed at first was not a sense of clarity but more so a feeling of discomfort. To be more concrete I felt a feeling of guilt. Guilt for no longer feeling exclusively at home in the Faroe Islands, and as a sovereigntist I felt even more guilt about experiencing Denmark not only as a place to study and therefore temporary, but as a place that feels familiar and like home. Adding to this guilt was also the feeling of missing Denmark when returning home to the Faroe Islands. One can argue that such guilt reveals more than just my personal ambivalence, it also exposes that the normative idea of home can come with pressure. When the idea that true home is something we only have one of and is rooted in a specific geographical place, then the experience of feeling attachment elsewhere can appear as a form of disloyalty.

In a pursuit of a deeper understanding of these feelings, I turned to literature beyond the course reading and came across Juliane Brauer's review article *Heimat: Between Past and Present, Intimacy and Nightmare (*2020). In the article, Brauer discusses the German concept of *heimat*, a term that is often translated as *home*, but it carries a deep emotional and cultural meaning. According to Brauer, heimat refers to not only a physical place, but also to a sense of familiarity, memory, belonging, and closeness to people and landscape (Brauer, 2020 p. 26). Beyond this romantic meaning, Brauer also argues that the word carries a complex and sometimes problematic meaning. It can create strong expectations about where one belongs and who is considered a part of the community, which can result in exclusion and a fear of loss (Brauer, 2020 p. 38). Reading this made me realise that the guilt I feel may not only be personal. When home is understood as something deeply tied to identity and loyalty, then feeling at home in more than one place can feel unsettling. It makes me wonder if the discomfort may not necessarily come from the experience itself, but from the weight of what home is expected to mean.

Brauer illustrates this ambivalence through a discussion of Nora Krug's autobiographical work *Heimat*, where Krug reflects on her relationship to Germany while living abroad (Brauer, 2020 p. 27-28). In the article we understand Krug as an example of how one's idea of home can become very visible when being physically distant from it. According to Brauer, Krug experienced feelings of inherited "German guilt", a guilt not based on her own actions, but on the historical responsibility connected to Germany's past (Brauer, 2020 p. 29). In this case we see an inherited guilt that creates a persistent struggle with the relation to home. Although the historical background of her guilt differs significantly from my own, her experience shows how the concept of home can carry multiple tensions. Home is not only a place of comfort, it can also hold feelings of responsibility, expectation and inner conflict.

When the concept of home can carry such tensions, the question may not be how do we eliminate these feelings, but more so how can we accept and live with them. This is where I came to think of Lotte Lüscher (2012), a Danish organizational scholar known for her work on paradox theory, particularly in leadership and organizational change. Lüscher argues that paradoxes are not problems that always need a solution, but ongoing tensions that must be acknowledged and navigated (Lüscher, 2012, p. 156). Lüscher identifies three types of paradoxes; role, organizational, and belonging paradoxes (Lüscher, 2012). The two first types relate to structural tension within organizations, whereas the last one, the belonging paradox, concerns the individual's experience of conflicting identities and attachments (Lüscher, 2012, p. 141-146). The belonging paradox is particularly relevant in this context, as it frames the tensions connected to the experience of having more than one home. According to Lüscher, individuals experience tensions when navigating multiple identities and emotional attachments simultaneously (Lüscher, 2012, p. 146). Attempting to suppress them can, according to Lüscher, lead to frustration or paralysis. Lüscher therefore argues that accepting the paradox allows for continued movement and development (Lüscher, 2012, p. 156). Although Lüscher's work is focused on organizations and leadership within the organizational contexts, I do think that her point about learning to live with the paradox offers a valuable perspective on the experience of home. If home can hold both attachment and distance, pride and guilt, then the task may not be to choose one side, but to remain in the tension, accept it, maybe even embrace it in order to not get paralyzed by it.

Reimagining Home

If I think further about the idea that I do not need to resolve the tension that can come along with feeling at home in different places, but instead try to remain within it without becoming paralyzed, then maybe I need to move on from trying to find out which place is my true home. I should rather ask myself how home can be made and remade through movement, relation and return. This is where I find that the article, *A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthum,* by Rosi Braidotti (2019), can inspire a new way of thinking that can become helpful.

Braidotti challenges the traditional idea of what it means to be human. She argues that western humanism has often imagined humans as independent, rational and separate from animals, technologies and nature, placing humans at the center and above other forms of life (Braidotti, 2019 p. 32). This way of thinking is, according to Braidotti, limited and no longer sufficient for understanding our current world (Braidotti, 2019 p. 38). She instead suggests a posthuman perspective, where humans are understood as relational and interconnected with the nonhuman parts of the world. Where we do not exist separately from the world around us, but we are shaped by our relationship with other people, animals, environments and technologies (Braidotti, 2019 p. 52-53).

Braidotti's work reminded me of the oystercatcher. If humans are not separate from the world around us, then other forms of life are not simply secondary to human experience. From this perspective, we can ask ourselves, what might we learn by paying attention to the ways other beings inhabit the world. If we take the oystercatcher as an example, home does not appear to be a single, fixed point of origin, which it often is for humans, but rather something connected to movement and relations. The oystercatcher's life is structured through return and departure. It does not remain in one place throughout the year, but this does not mean that it is homeless. Belonging is for the oystercatcher not defined by permanence, but by rhythm. Home is where it returns when the season changes, where it nests, where it feeds, and where it leaves again. Movement is in this example not a break from home, but a part of how home is lived.

Taking inspiration from the oystercatcher does not imply that humans and animals share the exact same experience of the world, but it can give space to rethink how we understand home. The oystercatcher does not appear to struggle with choosing between places. Its way of

living suggests that home and belonging can be multiple without being divided. Maybe embracing this perspective, means allowing home to be understood less as possessions and more as practice. Instead of asking which place is my true home, I should ask myself how I can embrace the places I move between. Like the oystercatcher, I return, I leave, and I return again. As I think of how the oystercatcher lives, and imagine myself as taking part in that way of doing home, the guilt I feel for feeling at home in both Denmark and the Faroe Islands begins to fade. Attachment to more than one place does not have to mean divided loyalty, but instead it can reflect the relational and shifting nature of home and belonging.

Figure 2

Belonging in motion (linocut print, 2026)

Note. Artwork by the author.

Closing

This essay began with a sense of certainty, certainty about home as self-evident and rooted in one place. Through distance, uncertainty and theory, that certainty began to shift. Thinking with Tervo allowed me to pause and question what felt obvious. Butler helped me question the idea of home without needing to find one final definition. Brauer introduced me to Nora Krug's experience of guilt and tensions within home, which helped me see that guilt in relation to home is not unusual, the tensions I feel are not signs of failure, but reflections of the ambivalent aspect of home.

Through Lüscher, I began to understand that the tension in my relationship to home does not need to be a problem that I have to eliminate, but a paradox that I can learn to live with. Adding to this Braidotti invited me to look beyond a strictly human-centered understanding of home. The oystercatcher returned not as a final solution, but as a new way of looking at home, where movement and home are not necessarily opposites. Through this essay I have not gained one final definition of home, but a more open understanding of what it can be. The guilt I felt for belonging to more than one place now appears less like disloyalty and more like a natural response to living between places.

Although this essay has been helpful in my own struggles with the definition of home, it has also opened my mind to new questions. Living at Øresundskollegiet, or as I would describe it, a Faroese village made out of big concrete buildings in the middle of Copenhagen, I encounter many Faroese children who, just like me, move between Denmark and the Faroe Islands. They spend holidays with grandparents, speak multiple languages, and have to navigate routines tied to different places. I wonder how they experience home, do they experience the same tensions I do? Or does growing up in more than one home allow for a more fluid understanding of home and belonging? Do they miss particular people, practices, foods or landscapes when they move between homes? And if so, how do they deal with it?

Maybe their experience is different from mine. Maybe they struggle less, or maybe they carry their own tensions and negotiations of home and belonging. These questions remain to be explored. For now, I will remember the oystercatcher when I struggle with the feeling of being between places and remind myself that movement does not weaken belonging.

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