Nihilism, Homelessness, and Place

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Abstract

One of the ways, in which a form of nihilism might be thought to be present in contemporary life and culture, in an especially pervasive and powerful fashion, is in the phenomenon of homelessness. Since homelessness is essentially a privative phenomenon, any serious engagement with it forces us also to engage with the ideas of home, and of place and belonging, from which homelessness derives—ideas that themselves take on a problematic character in the contemporary world. The paper

addresses some of the arguments and claims that arise in relation to these ideas, and especially the critical arguments that are frequently directed at them and are taken to imply the need for their abandonment. The main claim of the paper is that such a conclusion is misconceived and misguided, and that home, place, and belonging require rethinking and retrieval rather than abandonment. The paper has three main elements: first, a brief survey of the lines of argument that are typically directed at the notions at issue here; second, an exploration of the reasons why those notions remain necessary; third, a discussion of the task of retrieval and the way the task of retrieval is itself central to the possibility of critique.

Keywords: homelessness, home, belonging, place, nihilism.

Nihilizem, brezdomnost in kraj

Povzetek

Ena od poti premisleka o tem, kako je forma nihilizma na posebej predirljiv in silovit način prisotna v sodobnem življenju in kulturi, je fenomen brezdomnosti. Ker je brezdomnost bistveno privativni pojav, nas vsako resno ukvarjanje z njo primora tudi k ukvarjanju s pojmovanji doma, kraja in pripadnosti, iz katerih brezdomnost izhaja – pojmovanji, ki so v sodobnem svetu sama po sebi postala problematična. Članek obravnava nekatere argumente in trditve, ki se pojavljajo v zvezi s temi pojmovanji, zlasti kritične argumente, ki so pogosto naravnani proti njim in implicirajo, da jih je treba opustiti. Glavna teza prispevka je, da je takšen sklep zmoten in zgrešen ter da dom, kraj in pripadnost zahtevajo ponovni premislek in vnovično vzpostavitev, ne pa opustitev. Prispevek vsebuje tri glavne elemente: prvič, kratek pretres argumentacijskih linij, ki so značilno naperjene proti obravnavanim pojmom; drugič, razmislek o razlogih, zakaj so ti pojmi še vedno potrebni; tretjič, obravnavo naloge vnovične vzpostavitve omenjenih pojmovanj in osrednje pomembnosti takšne naloge za možnost kritike.

Ključne besede: brezdomnost, dom, pripadnost, kraj, nihilizem.

1. Nihilism, homelessness, and home

One of the ways, in which a form of nihilism might be thought to be present in contemporary life and culture, in an especially pervasive and powerful fashion, is in the phenomenon of homelessness. Commonly invoked as a feature of modern and contemporary life, it is often seen as being associated with the slipping away of any sense of where and how human beings belong in the world—both in their personal lives and more generally. Frequently, it is said that human life has become estranged from its connection to the wider world and especially to the wider world of life and nature. The sense of existential and ontological homelessness that is at issue here also has its more immediate and everyday correlate in the housing crisis that seems to be now a common feature in many of the world's wealthiest countries, as well as in the horrific violence and displacement that we see being perpetrated every day in so many sites of conflict around the world. The nihilism that is part of what might be called a homelessness of the "spirit" or "soul" is thus matched by a widespread homelessness of the bodily and the lived.

Homelessness, and associated notions of alienation and estrangement, has been identified by many thinkers over the last 150 years or more as key element in the experience of modernity (an experience catalyzed and made especially salient by central events of trauma, especially the 20th century's two World Wars, as well as the horrors and catastrophes, with which they are associated). European philosophers, such as Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt, Jean Améry, Gaston Bachelard, and Martin Heidegger, have all explored, in varying ways, the importance of a sense of home, and with it of belonging, as opposed to alienation, and even, one might say, of a sense of place, to human life and existence (see, e.g.: Weil 1952; Arendt 1958; Améry 1980; Bachelard 1969; Heidegger 1975). And they have been joined by a plethora of poets, writers, and artists. Over the last fifty years, in theoretical work across the arts, humanities, and social sciences, the concern with home and homelessness (although more often the latter), and the broader set of issues, with which these connect, has been elaborated by a diverse range of thinkers at the same time as it has been accompanied by the rise of space and place as key theoretical notions. Moreover, such spatial and topological concerns, including the more specific focus on the problems of homelessness

and home, though often connected with discussions of modernity (e.g., Heynen 1999), has also extended across cultures and geographies, connecting with already existing indigenous ways of thinking, and being articulated as part of new discourses directed at the critique of colonialism and techno-capitalism. Some argue, often echoing ideas from the work of Theodor Adorno, that homelessness and alienation, as pervasive conditions of modernity, constitute the inevitable and unavoidable state of modernity (Adorno 1974). In that case, the problem is how to live with that condition or, perhaps, to find ways to ameliorate its effects. Yet, leaving aside the question as to how we respond to the phenomena at issue here, the lack of home, the absence of belonging, the loss of place nevertheless appear as *prima facie* problems for human being—all the more so, when we reflect on how these seem to be so much associated with the fragmentation of individual lives, the corrosion of community, and increasing social dislocation and social breakdown.

188   Homelessness, and, together with it, notions, such as alienation and displacement, are all *privative* in character—they take the form of a lack or loss. Yet, there is an increasing tendency (though one already evident after the Second World War) to regard that, with respect to which these are privative, namely, home, belonging, and place, as problematic also. This is true to such an extent that many regard these more basic notions as contributing to exactly the privations that would otherwise be set against them. In some quarters, the conclusion is drawn that the notions of home, belonging, place, and their variations must effectively be expunged from critical discourse. The arguments to such a conclusion are sometimes more directed at one of these notions than another—at home or belonging, for instance, rather than place—, but since all of these ideas are so closely interconnected, and since both home and belonging are indeed fundamentally tied to the idea of place and being-in-place, any criticism of one invariably tends to involve all of them, even if only implicitly. Thus, when the geographer John Wylie, for example, insists that "a landscape cannot be a homeland," he is not only refusing a certain way of understanding landscape, but his critique also encompasses the understanding of place (Wylie 2016).

    My aim here is to work through, admittedly in somewhat summary fashion (which means that there are aspects of this discussion that will inevitably be

overlooked), some of the arguments and claims that arise in relation to the issues at stake, and to set out the reasons why it seems to me that, far from abandoning these ideas, the task of their rethinking and retrieval remains an absolute necessity—a necessity even for the possibility of any critical engagement with them. Indeed, my claim is that these notions are never really abandoned (even among those who are critical of them) and that the commonplace language of abandonment has led, not only to a lack of clarity in the contemporary discussion, but also to the uncritical acceptance of more genuinely problematic forms of, or surrogates for, the notions at issue. My approach has three main elements: first, a brief survey of the lines of argument that are typically directed at the notions at issue here; second, an exploration of the reasons why ideas of home, belonging, and place remain necessary; third, a discussion of the task of the retrieval of the ideas at issue.

2. Home and the critique of place

Although different notions come to the fore in different critiques and styles of critique, and almost always these notions tend to be implicated together in some way or another, it is nevertheless place that tends be the fundamental notion. It underpins the other notions at work here, such that, typically, critiques of home or belonging, for instance, devolve into (even if this is not always made explicit) critiques of place. The issues at stake here often come to rest on the way, in which ideas of home and belonging are tied to ideas of self or community *identity* as founded in *place relatedness* or *place attachment*. Such place-based identity is said to give rise to *exclusionary*, *deterministic*, and *nostalgic* (in the sense of backward-looking) modes of thought and behavior.

If identity is tied to place, then, so the argument goes, the affirmation and preservation of identity requires the exclusion of others from that place—the defense of place against any intrusion from the outside thus becomes an imperative. Moreover, when place is taken to be determinative of identity, then identity is thereby made dependent on what is external to it and whose determining influence commands submission. For some writers—Emmanuel Levinas being one—, this is especially problematic, inasmuch as it makes the human subservient to place and so also to what stands outside of and even

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against the human (Levinas 1990, 231–234).[1] Finally, since place refers us to what is already there, already given, then if identity is tied to place, it is thereby also tied to a certain mode of temporal orientation, specifically, to an orientation that privileges the past and, in so doing, closes off any real relation to the future. In short, place-based identity is resistant to change, resistant to difference, resistant to genuine engagement.

What is centrally at issue throughout the general form of critique evident here, across many different writers, is the character of place as being tied to *boundedness*, and so to the idea of bound or boundary, whether the boundedness of oneself by place, the boundedness of the other (or their being-placed outside certain bounds), or the boundedness of the past, as already given, that is, as against the supposed unboundedness of the future, as always open. Such boundedness is taken to itself have a determinate character, sharply separating here from there, inside from outside, domestic from foreign, us from them, what is past from what is future, and is often conceptualized in terms of the sharp line that can be drawn on a map or the fence (or wall), which can be built to mark off a property or even a state. It is such boundedness that is seen to underlie the supposed character of place, and so of place-based identity, as exclusionary, deterministic, and "nostalgic" or backward-looking. And it is primarily the boundedness of place that is seen to be at work in politically reactionary, regressive, and xenophobic forms of thought and action (see, e.g., Khosravi 2010, 94–96).

Frequently absent from the critical literature, however, is any consideration as to what is genuinely at issue in the ideas at stake here—and especially what is at issue in the ideas of the boundedness that place exhibits. And this remains true despite the sometimes vehement rejection of the idea of "boundary" by some authors (e.g.: Thrift 2006; see the discussion in Malpas 2012). It is worth noting from the start that "bound" is etymologically as well as semantically distinct from the senses of "bound" as "springing forth," "heading towards,"

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1 Levinas's critique of place sits, rather oddly, alongside his emphasis elsewhere on the importance of home—see, e.g., Levinas 1969, 194–219. The inconsistency here partly derives from Levinas's own failure to think adequately through what is at issue in the ideas of the spatial and the topological that are at issue here, and, as I have argued elsewhere, his tendency to adopt what is an essentially Cartesian prioritization of the spatial—see Malpas 2021, 70–71.

or "being tied to," or "being tied by"—the latter coming from "bind."[2] To say that we are *bound* by place is thus ambiguous between senses of bounding (as associated with boundary) and binding. And even though we may see both senses as implying restriction, they are very different sorts of restriction. There is no doubt that boundedness and place are indeed tied together, and that there is a form of limitation that belongs with place also. Yet, not only is bounding distinct from binding, and so the boundedness of place is *prima facie* distinct from, for instance, the binding of the captive, but the limits of place are similarly distinct from the limits imposed by such binding. The boundedness of place is a limiting (and one may say that bounds are therefore also limits),[3] but the limiting at issue does not operate in any simply restrictive fashion, one that allows little or no movement within or beyond. On the contrary, the limiting that belongs with the boundedness of place is like the limiting that belongs with the boundedness of the horizon: it is productive of the openness that arises within, at the same time as it beckons to what lies beyond.[4] And, like the horizon, the boundedness of place has an essential *indeterminacy* (which here means that there is always an irreducible plurality in the ways, in which such boundedness shows itself). As a result, there are no sharp lines, when it comes to the boundedness of place, and while that boundedness does indeed establish difference, it also enables relation, so that here and there, inside and outside, domestic and foreign, us and them, past and future, are bound together at the same time as they are distinguished—difference is never absolute.

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2 "Bound" as it relates to "boundary" comes from the old French, *bodne*. The senses of "bound" associated with being bound to or by come from "bind," which is Germanic in derivation via the Old English *bindan*. "Bound" in the sense of being headed towards comes from Norwegian and Old Norse, *būenee, búinn*. And "bound," meaning leap, is formed by conversion (has no prior etymology), although it mirrors the French *bond*, which has the same meaning. Cf. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "bound" and "bind."

3 Sometimes "bound" and "limit" are used interchangeably, although this does not mean that there are senses, in which the two terms are distinct (and which align with different sorts of bound or limit). In Kant, for instance, "bound," in the form of the German *Grenze*, is distinguished (though not always consistently) from "limit" in the form of the German *Schranke*—see Kant 1950, 101.

4 As Heidegger puts it: "a boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing" (Heidegger 2001, 152).

The notion of boundary or bound is not something additional to the idea of place, but is already implicated with it—at least so long as we do indeed treat place as a *sui generis* notion with an irreducible content of its own. The most succinct characterization of place is thus as an openness that arises within bounds ("a bounded openness"). This is essentially what underlies the idea of place as it appears in Aristotle's account of *topos* (Aristotle 1983, 28 [212a2–6]), and can arguably be seen to be at work, though rather differently expressed, in Plato's account of *chora* (Cornford 1937, esp. 197). Much the same idea can also be seen in the work of more recent thinkers, such as Georg Simmel (1997) and, famously, Martin Heidegger (1975), whose thinking on this matter is partly indebted to Simmel (see Malpas 2021, 171–177). For all of them, place involves an openness that arises within bounds. And it is, of course, Heidegger's thinking of place, especially as it entails the idea of boundedness (e.g., Heidegger 2001, esp. 152), that is so often the target for many recent and contemporary critics of place. There can be no doubt, then, that boundedness is a basic element in place—it is, indeed, central to the difference between place and space. Consequently, the critique of boundedness and the critique of place turn out to be one and the same.

Of course, if one rejects the idea that there is any *sui generis* notion of place (or that no such notion is needed) and effectively collapses place into space— into mere spatial location or position—, then place becomes an arbitrary or contingent modification of space and its boundedness is equally arbitrary or contingent (in fact, what also occurs here is a collapsing of topological boundedness into mere spatial limitation, and the boundary is thereby reduced to something like a mark on a map or a line in the sand). Places effectively become products of the way human beings organize space; or, as is commonly held to be the case, both space and place are *produced* by human societal and political activity and structure (see Lefebvre 1991). What we are then left with, so far as place is concerned, is an emptied-out notion that is no longer seen as problematic, simply because it is no longer a notion that carries any special content of its own, and certainly need not be seen to be tied to any sense of boundedness beyond that of arbitrary convention, exclusivity, determinacy, or the past, or, indeed, to belonging or home in any way that would carry special significance. Thus, a writer, such as Doreen Massey, can argue for a

"progressive" sense of place (Massey 1993), although it turns out that the notion of place at issue in Massey is a sense of place that is little more than the idea of a contingently delimited domain (delimited by cultural, social, and other factors) within a spatially extended field.

The lines of argument at issue here regarding place as exclusionary, as determinate and determining, and as nostalgic are evident in the work of many different writers and thinkers: perhaps most notably in the work of Levinas, but also Theodor Adorno (both of whom formulate their arguments in direct opposition to Heidegger); in the work of Doreen Massey as well as David Harvey (e.g., 1989), two of the most prominent figures within geography; in architectural theory, in the work of such authors as Heynen, and also David Leach (e.g., Leach 1998) and Mark Wigley (1992); and they are likewise elaborated across other disciplinary domains in ways that draw on a variety of theoretical frames from critical theory to psychoanalysis, feminism to post-modernism, Marxism to liberalism. Such critiques have indeed become so widespread that in some fields they have become almost commonplace and often taken-for-granted.

There is another line of argument that also appears in the discussion of these notions, especially the idea of place or being-in-place, namely, that such ideas are at odds with the character of the globalized, dynamic, and interconnected contemporary world. In other words, that these notions are not only fixated on the past in problematic fashion, but that they belong to the past. This is something, to which I shall return, since what is at issue here is directly tied up with the convergence between certain key elements in the critique of place and the increasingly spatialized modes of ordering that are characteristic of the contemporary world and that, as I noted earlier, are directly connected with contemporary globalized, technological capital. However, the way these notions are supposedly tied to the past is also seen as reflected in the way contemporary reactive and reactionary politics—often fixated on the restoration of some imagined past time or taking revenge for its loss—itself seems to be fueled by, and makes appeals, to the very ideas of home, belonging, and place that are at issue.

It is certainly common, in both past and contemporary politics, to find exclusionary, and even oppressive and violent, forms of thought and action

that draw on the language of home, of belonging, and of place. Vladimir Putin's justification of the Russian invasion of Ukraine provides one such example—invoking both the need to protect the Russian homeland, but also to defend Russians elsewhere, and so to uphold their sense of home and identity, and thereby drawing on much the same playbook that Hitler had used in the 1930s to justify German annexation of the *Sudentenland* and war against Poland (both contemporary Russia and 1930s Germany presenting their aggression as an act of "liberation"). On a different scale, the rhetoric of many right-wing politicians in the United Kingdom and the United States around issues of immigration (and, in the United Kingdom, also of Brexit) provides obvious examples of how ideas of home can play an important part in reactionary politics. The startling way the language of "homeland" became part of the political vocabulary of governments across much of the English-speaking world after 9/11 (and not only in the United States) also reinforces the sense, in which "home" can readily become associated with xenophobic insecurities and repressive forms of governmental control (Becker 2002).

194   The fact that the language of home, belonging, and place can indeed function in this way tells us a great deal about the prevailing political and cultural climate that currently obtains. Yet, it tells us very little about the terms or notions that are themselves in play here. Moreover, that there may be a disjunction between the way terms and ideas are deployed and what is really at issue in those terms and ideas is itself part of the very ground for the possibility of critique. Moreover, a too narrow focus on specific uses of ideas of home, belonging, and place, especially if they occur in certain contemporary contexts, can readily obscure the ubiquitous nature of such ideas. Notions of home and belonging are no more the exclusive preserve of conservatives than notions of freedom or justice are the exclusive preserve of progressives—such ideas have been drawn upon, and continue to be drawn upon, by groups and individuals from across the political spectrum. Even in pre-Second World War Germany, often taken to be exemplary of a political milieu, in which home, belonging, and place have a central and problematic role, one can find those notions being drawn upon by both conservative and progressive figures over time and even at one and the same time. The contemporary situation is a little different. Figures from both the left and the right make appeals to the same

basic ideas, but how those ideas are deployed is very different. Both the offer of hospitality (the welcoming of the guest, even the stranger, into the home) and the refusal of hospitality (the turning away of the guest from the home) implicate the idea of home, even though they do so in different ways. Home, belonging, and place are thus employed, across the wide range of their uses, to underpin inclusion as well as exclusion.

3. The inescapability of place

The ubiquity of the language of belonging, place, and home is itself something that is worthy of attention, since it reflects how entangled these terms are with everyday language. That they are so is a direct reflection of their centrality. In this respect, belonging, place, and home are no different from other key notions, such as justice, truth, and the good, that figure prominently in social and political discourse, as well as elsewhere, in ways that spread across the entirety of the political spectrum. Because notions of home, belonging, and place are so central, they are also so frequently appealed to in a range of political contexts. And that they are central in this way is a direct consequence of the necessarily placed character of life and existence.

This brings me directly to the second part of my discussion—the centrality or even necessity of place, and so too of notions of belonging and home. Rather than being notions that we can simply pick up or put down—as if they were simply tools lying around—, the notions at issue here arise out of our existing being-in-the-world and are reflective of the character of that being. In other words, they constitute already extant phenomena, rather than merely being elements in, or artefacts of, certain ways of talking or thinking. Part of what comes into view here is a point about the very nature of philosophical reflection and the way retrieval might be part of such reflection—and this is a point, to which I shall return. But for the moment, I want to briefly explore the way ideas of place, belonging, and home connect with other key concepts, of which perhaps the most salient is that of the self.

If we treat the latter term in a purely formal sense, and without yet offering any substantive account of what it might be, then the self is that, which is referred to, in the first instance, by the first-person pronoun, "I," and which

is also, therefore, a certain locus of agency and perception, and ultimately, *of* deliberation and judgment, that also figures, to varying degrees, *in* such action, perception, deliberation, and judgment. No matter how much we might claim to be able to "deconstruct" the self, the fact remains that the self is necessarily implicated, at the most basic level, in the structure of action and perception. Without a capacity to distinguish self from environmental context, including from other agents, there can be no possibility of directed action or even of any integrated perceptual engagement with things—as well as of deliberation and judgment. In phenomenological terms, the self is part of the necessary structure of intentionality, and similarly, in terms of empirical cognitive science, the self is a necessary part of the structure that makes cognition itself possible.

The ideas of home and of belonging are both directly connected to the idea of the self—they are terms that relate to the way, in which the self is articulated in the world. This is especially the case, if one understands the self, not in terms of some underlying "substance," but rather as a nexus of action and reflection that is both internally and externally articulated—a complex and dynamic unity of attitudes and dispositions as well as comportments and behaviors. The self is, by its very nature, even when understood purely formally, a mode of differentiated existence. As such, the self is constituted through both its connectedness to the world and to others as well as by its differentiation from the world and from others. Not only, then, is there an extended and collective sense of self that is at work in the first-person plural ("we"), but even in the personal and individual sense, the self already connects to a larger structure of relatedness, connectivity, and differentiation. Home and belonging both refer to this larger structure. There are as many different forms of home and belonging—and so, also, different forms of identity—as there are different modes of articulation of the self. And these modes of articulation vary according to environmental context, historical background, and social and cultural situatedness. Such variation in context, background, and situation underpins the contingencies of the self, but that there is a self and that it has a certain structure that is realized in and through those contingencies is not contingent, but necessary.

As soon as one grasps the idea of the self as *extended* into the world—to use the language of contemporary 4E cognition as embodied, embedded,

enacted, and extended (see Newen, Gallagher, and De Bruin 2018)—, then one must recognize the self as necessarily *emplaced* also (4E cognition is actually underpinned, I would argue, by a fifth "E"—though it is one that is fundamental to all the others). This is not a point that applies only to the self, of course, but to the entire range of related phenomena: to mind, consciousness, mental content, even to agency, and sentience in general. Moreover, the idea of the emplaced character of the self and of existence that is articulated in contemporary cognitive science (as well, I might add, in earlier forms of "externalism" as developed within analytic epistemology, philosophy of language, and philosophy of mind) can be argued to have already been adumbrated in earlier work in ethology, psychology, and especially phenomenology and hermeneutics.

Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, from 1927, already sets out a form of externalism or "topologism" (if we use this as a term to capture the focus on place and being-in-place) in its idea of *Dasein* as "being-in-the-world"—which, even in 1927, Heidegger connected with the idea that has come into English as "dwelling"—*Wohnen*, *Aufhalten*—and which also has connotations of "home" and of "belonging" (especially through the notions of familiarity and habituation) (see Heidegger 1962). Although it is worth noting that, in 1927, Heidegger's account of being-in-place does not exclude its potential "uncanniness" or strangeness, its potential "unhomeliness" (*Unheimlichkeit*). It is this idea of self and existence as necessarily emplaced that is developed in more detail in Heidegger's later work (see: Malpas 2006; 2022) and in the work of a series of phenomenologically and hermeneutically oriented thinkers over the last century, including thinkers, such as Bachelard, to whom I referred earlier, and more recently, Edward Casey (1993). The centrality of place here—and of associated notions, such as home and belonging, as well as embodiment—can be seen to reflect the inescapable character of existence as always *in the world*. As such, it is worked out only in terms of specific places and spaces, through specific forms of home and belonging. Existence ("being-there-ness") is this emplacing and belonging, which is also a differentiating. Since such existence is also fundamentally active—a theme that runs through the phenomenological and hermeneutic as well as the cognitive scientific work in this area—, so the character of the

being-in-place at issue here is always itself dynamic and negotiatory, and therefore incapable of being understood in terms of any simple deterministic structure. Moreover, the boundedness of such being-in-place—which can also be understood in terms of its essential finitude—is itself a central theme. Indeed, one of the great insights of phenomenological and especially hermeneutic thinking in the 20th century, although it has its roots in the thinking of earlier centuries (notably, I would argue, in Kant—see Malpas 2016), is the idea that it is precisely boundedness, which is also to say, being-in-place, that makes possible cognition, knowledge, existence, rather than being merely restrictive of them.

Such being-in-place, such finitude, is tied to facticity—to the "always already" character of existence, and it is this that underlies the stereotypical criticism of place-oriented thinking as nostalgic or backward-looking. But the recognition of facticity is just the recognition of the historicality of existence, and so of the necessary historicality even of the future (which is not apart from place, belonging to it no less than does the past), as well as of the character of existence as always something *given to one*, rather than being that, which one somehow creates or over which one can exercise mastery (something that remains true despite the existentialist claim that "existence precedes essence"). It also involves a recognition of the inevitable character of existence as permeated by the experience of fragility and loss, and it is this that is the ground for the very real nostalgia, the *melancholia*, that belongs with the experience of being-in-place, of belonging to the world, even of being "at home." Such belonging, as it is a being given over to finitude, is also being given over to loss. To be emplaced is to find oneself in a world, to which one belongs, but which does not belong to one; to find oneself in a world, to which one is subject, but which is not subject to one; to find oneself in a world that always exceeds any particular experience or articulation of it.

Already, near the beginning of Western thinking, Plato talks of the *chora* (sometimes identified with space as well as place) as "providing a situation for all things that come into being […], [since] anything that is must needs be in some place and occupy some room, and that what is not somewhere […] is nothing" (Cornford 1937, 192 [52B]), and Aristotle reiterates much

the same point (Aristotle 1983, 20 [208a30]).[5] The Platonic and Aristotelian articulations of this idea prefigure the positive and productive sense of place and being-in-place that has emerged so strongly in areas of modern thought over the last century or so. The sense of place and being-in-place at issue here is what underpins the ideas of home and belonging, and can also be discerned, even if it is not always explicit, in contemporary analyses of cognition, of action and perception, of mental content, of memory (an especially important topic in regard to place that deserves a more extensive discussion of its own), of knowledge, and of the self in general.

In these comments I have not, of course, provided a fully worked-out argument for the necessity of place—there is not enough space for that here (although I have done so elsewhere –see Malpas 2018). And neither have I tried to show how the sort of fundamental account of being-in-place, belonging, and home that is at issue here would play out in terms of the more concrete analysis that might be undertaken from the perspective of specific disciplinary inquiries. Instead, my aim has been the more limited one of showing why it might be that ideas of belonging, home, and place cannot be abandoned, even though those notions may often be misused. And, at the same time, to indicate how those ideas are grounded in phenomenological-hermeneutic and analytic thought, as well as in the empirical investigations of the cognitive sciences, and, it might be added, in the topological-oriented thinking that is evident in many other disciplines, including sociology and history, as well as psychology. Moreover, these modern and contemporary articulations of place and being-in-place also converge with, and sometimes build upon, much older forms of understanding.

It is not all at strange, from the point of view of many indigenous cultures, that life and existence should be intertwined with place—how could things

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5 In neither Plato nor Aristotle is there a clear distinction between place and space, and although *chora* is often translated as "space" and *topos* as "place" (the two carry different connotations that provide some justification for this), each can be said to contain elements of the spatial and the topological. Nevertheless, I would argue that the Greek notions are topological, *before* they are spatial, and that space, insofar as it can be distinguished in this context, is that, which is opened by place—that, which lies within the encompassing embrace of *topos* and the sustaining openness of *chora*.

be otherwise? How could human being be shaped other than by that, from out of which it arises and in relation to which it unfolds? It is just this idea of life, existence, and also identity, as coming from place, from "country," which is articulated in Australian indigenous thinking through the idea often misleadingly rendered into English as the "Dreaming" (though the use of the term is now pervasive), but which is variously named in different ways in different indigenous languages (by the Walpiri people, for instance, as *Jukurrpa*, and the Gija or Lungga people as *Ngarrankarni*). Here, is glimpsed a complex sense of the world that combines intertwined ideas of law, being, and identity as written into or, better, sung into land and place (see, e.g.: Gammage 2011, 123–54; also Swain 1993). Wylie's claim that "a landscape cannot be a homeland" is thus rather harder to assert in-country to an indigenous audience in Australia (in the Walpiri country of the Northern territory or the Gija lands of the Kimberley), than in a university lecture hall in Brussels, London, or some other European city.

200 Belonging, home, and place name contemporary problems, not because these notions retain an illegitimate currency, but rather because of the problematic relation to place that has emerged as a key feature of the contemporary world. The homelessness and displacement, which is now such a common feature of societies around the world, and which is evident in refugee camps and border zones, is present on the streets of almost every major city, and which is a continuation of colonialism and racism, a result of war and political disruption, as well as being one of the products of globalized capital, is indeed a problem, precisely because it concerns a lack of *home* and a disruption in *place*. And this is not merely about a lack of physical *shelter*, but, as might be expected given what has been sketched so far, about the absence of the conditions that enable the flourishing of life and existence, and that also enable the sense of identity and of belonging that contributes to a sense of community—even of a pluralistic community.

Rather than the ideas of belonging, home, and place being antagonistic to plurality and difference, they provide their necessary preconditions. Indeed, the idea of a pluralistic community cannot be the idea of a community that effaces home or belonging, but rather one that gives home to a plurality of different homes and forms of belonging. Plurality presupposes difference, but

difference is precisely what is articulated through the different modes of being-in-the-world that are worked out only in and through different places, different homes, different identities and belongings. The problem is not the existence of difference, nor of the boundedness that is a necessary part of difference and the working out of difference, but rather the refusal of boundedness and the denial of the mutuality that itself belongs to differentiation. Far from being merely exclusionary, place, and so the boundary with it, opens up the possibility of inclusivity, of plurality, of difference, which is always an inclusivity, a plurality, a difference that appears in and with respect to concrete places, in and with respect to our own place and so our own relatedness to the world.

If the boundary, like place, is indeed productive, then that productiveness applies both to what is within and what is without the boundary. The boundary is that, which establishes the possibility both of differentiation but also of communication across difference (which is why the border, the bounding path or *limes*, hence the liminal, is such an important place). It is thus that every boundary connects at the same time as it disconnects—a point that is also made by Simmel.

This idea is reflected in the character of places as always entangled with other places, both within the place and without. To be emplaced is not to be merely stuck within a single enclosed space—to use an example Walter Benjamin uses (Benjamin 2002, 220–221), as if one were enclosed within a hard shell—, but rather to be embedded within a complex of places. Every place opens to other places—just as the boundary of the horizon beckons one towards other places that lie beyond—, and every place opens up to other places within it—even the most familiar place is thus capable of revealing new discoveries within it (something made very evident in Bachelard). Far from being determinate and determining, the place and so also the boundary, is what opens up to the indeterminate at the very same time as it allows a certain limited determinacy that occurs in the very *placing* of things, here, in *this* place.

4. Critique and the task of retrieval

It is because of the necessity of place that the retrieval of place—that is, its rethinking and recollection in the face of its forgetting and refusal—is such

an important task. Even the attempt to assert the need for the abandonment of place takes place from within its own place, and on the basis of an existing orientation to the world and to thinking. All thinking, all critique, begins somewhere—the question is whether it attends to where it begins, and whether it attends to the boundaries that make such critique, or the articulation of critique (leaving aside its viability), possible. One of the problems with much of the recent and contemporary critique of place is its refusal to attend to its own place—which means to attend to its own boundaries and presuppositions, its own "ground." As a result, such critique often operates through the repetition of standard topes and assumptions—like those regarding the character of place as invariably given over to exclusion, to determination, and to the problematically nostalgic—, and with little or no regard for the sort of considerations sketched earlier.

202 One of the reasons for this is tied up with the discursive insularity and internalization of much contemporary critical discourse—so much discussion remains within the circles of engagement established by familiar texts and theoretical positions. Critique thus becomes a purely textual practice rather than a genuinely reflective engagement with the issues at stake (which is not to say that the engagement with texts is unimportant, but only that one cannot remain entirely "inside" the text alone). But associated with this is a tendency for that insularity and internalization also to be reflected in a tendency to operate with respect to already assumed *ideological* or *polemical* positions, and so the critical engagement with an issue or idea becomes simply expressive of a certain politics, rather than showing how, for instance, a certain political response might emerge as a consequence of what is at stake and as appropriate to it. Directly connected with this is a tendency to refuse consideration of what might be termed the *ontological* in favor of a focus on the *affective* and *discursive* (including the textual).

Suspicion of ontology has a long history in the social sciences, especially where the ontological, usually identified with the metaphysical, is contrasted with the empirical, the variable, and the contingent. Sometimes the eschewing of ontology is defended by a sort of Rawlsian argument, concerning the plurality of conceptions of the good, but, in fact, most contemporary critique, especially inasmuch as it aligns itself with a broadly "progressivist" agenda, is

not at all agnostic in this way, but holds to very clear conceptions of the good, even if not always made explicit, as these might be played out in the domain of the political (one might argue that this is true, to some extent, even of the Rawlsian position).

Moreover, when it comes to the critique of notions like belonging, place, and home, there seems little reticence in asserting the problematic ethical and political content that is supposedly intrinsic to these notions—a claim that is itself implicitly ontological in character, a claim about the very character of those notions as such, about their fundamental character, rather than merely concerning particular instances of their deployment. If critical engagement is to be more than mere polemic—if it is to be part of a genuine attempt at thinking—, then it must involve reflection both on the phenomena at issue and the framework of the thinking, from within which those phenomena are approached. This is a familiar hermeneutic point. To paraphrase Gadamer: all critique is a form of self-critique, and all critique must take the form of a dialogue—a dialogue, in which something is at stake and in which what is at stake must be given space to appear in its own terms.

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There is an ethical imperative to critique that emerges here, which follows from the way critique is embedded in its place (and, in fact, I would argue that ethics itself is only properly understood, when it is understood as tied to place—though this is part of another discussion than the one that is to the fore here). To attend to what is at stake is also to attend to the character of that phenomenon and so to enter into what is ultimately a form of ontological inquiry—an inquiry ultimately founded in the being of things. And that, of course, is a large part of what I was earlier talking about in relation to place, identity, and self. My focus there was on the character of place and the self, on what they *are*, rather than merely what is *said* about them. The task of retrieval, understood as having this *ontological* character, is not some esoteric practice predicated on a special kind of access to an otherwise hidden "essence" to things, but is rather a matter of re-thinking what we already think we know in a way that attends to what is actually at issue and to the phenomena that draw our attention in the first place. And such retrieval is especially important, when the phenomena in question are indeed as central to life and existence as are belonging, place, and home.

The topological ideas that have been at the center of my discussion here are central to critical inquiry, as to any form of inquiry, because they are themselves part of the very structure of thought, since they belong to the structure of being-in-the-world. This is an ontological claim, of course, but one that is eminently defensible and that cannot be dismissed simply by any blanket dismissal of the ontological in general. But these ideas also have a key role in terms of the attempt to engage critically with our contemporary situation—our contemporary place. This was suggested earlier by my brief comment on the character of homelessness, in its various forms, as a worldwide problem that goes beyond, even while it includes, the problem of physical shelter. But it is not just the loss of home that makes these notions so significant.

The history of modernity as a worldwide phenomenon is a history that is itself closely tied up with topological and spatial structures and developments. One might even say that modernity has its origins in the separating-out of place from space. This has taken various forms. It appears in the history of ideas, a history well-elaborated in Edward Casey's *The Fate of Place* (1997), in the development of a notion of physical space that is not dependent on any notion of boundedness, but is instead tied to the idea of homogenous, isotropic extensionality or dimensionality, and of place as entirely secondary to this, being merely the idea of a location or area within such an extended domain. This spatialized way of understanding is tied to the quantitative and the numerical. It is evident in the character of contemporary science as predicated on quantitative and numerical analysis (those disciplines that resist such quantification run the risk of appearing irrelevant or "unscientific"); in the character of modern organizations as subject to purely "managerialist" modes of operation that are themselves centered around quantitative, numerical, and increasingly automated systems; in the transformation of social relations through systems of personalized, electronic communication and exchange, based around the computer and mobile phone, and including media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook; and through the structure of globalized corporate or oligopoly capitalism that is itself intimately entangled with the quantitative and the numerical, with the managerialist, and the technological, at the same time as it also reinforced and draws together all of these.

If we refer to this spatialized mode of world-formation, in which everything is drawn within the same all-encompassing and ultimately reductive system, as "technology," then we may perhaps recognize it as essentially the same phenomenon that is often at work in the progressivism, which we have inherited from the Enlightenment that seeks to free human being from any sense of being limited by its situation, whether historical, geographical, or ontological. The escape from place is precisely, though now in a twofold sense, the escape into the unboundedness of space. But this escape is an escape into the purely quantitative, the numerical, the manageable, the monetizable. The philosophical embodiment of this idea of escape is essentially that given in Cartesianism and its many offshoots, since what characterizes Cartesian thinking is precisely the privileging of space over place. Among many of the contemporary critics of place, one finds a similar privileging of space that also replicates the structures at the heart of contemporary managerialist, technological, globalized capitalism—structures of unbounded connectivity, of what Heidegger refers to as an unbounded enframing or positioning (Heidegger 1977; see also Malpas 2022, xx–xx). This is true, ironically enough, even of those writers, like David Harvey (1998) and even, to some extent Doreen Massey, whose work is centrally concerned with the critique of capitalism and its associated structures. It is the rejection of any *sui generis* idea of place that facilitates the critique of place that is evident in the work of such thinkers, but that rejection is also fundamental to the possibility of modernity as it is manifest in both the intellectual terms and in the terms of the socio-economic and political.

It is here that the contemporary critique of place itself turns out to converge with a form of nihilism—a nihilism that appears in terms of the seeming nihilation of place, which occurs through the privileging of space and the spatial. Nihilism, not surprisingly perhaps, can thus be seen as continuous with the spatializing tendency already present in Cartesianism, which is realized in contemporary techno-capitalism and all that accompanies it—even, ironically, in some forms of progressivist thinking that, in its attempted abolition of place, also threatens to abolish much of what progressivism aims to defend against. The problem is that what can broadly be referred to as "value" or "meaning" is itself topological. It first arises within and through the differentiating, and

gathering, the bounding and opening, that belongs to place. Individuals and communities alike first find themselves as inhabitants of a world that is opened to them, and to one another, through the richness and complexity of place, and only secondarily in terms of space. Fundamentally, space allows for the appearance neither of oppression nor freedom, neither suffering nor joy, neither life nor death. Space, as realized apart from place, nihilates all such differences just as it also nihilates any possibility of genuine "identity."

What undermines such nihilism, as it also undermines the spatialized mode of world formation, in which it is embodied, is that it remains ontologically really, no matter its claims to the contrary, in the same topology that I described earlier. The Aristotelian dictum that to be is to be emplaced remains no less true in 2024 C.E. than it was in 350 B.C.E. Consequently, the spatialized mode of engagement that characterizes contemporary thought and practice, and that is the contemporary instantiation of nihilism, is in direct conflict with the topological structure, on which it also depends—a topological structure that such spatialization, and the nihilism, with which it is associated, obscures, forgets, and denies. That there is something contradictory here is not surprising. Nihilism itself only arises based on a felt or perceived discontinuity between our placed being *in* the world and our expectations *of* the world (the latter itself arising only out of that same placed being-in). Moreover, the spatialized mode of world formation, with which nihilism is here seen to belong together, similarly arises only as a modification of a more fundamental topology. Attending to the contradictions and tensions here, and so also recovering the topological structure that is effaced by spatialization and nihilism even as they also depend upon it, is the real challenge for contemporary critique. It is essentially a task of re-membering and re-collection that can also be understood as a form of return to place, but, if so, it is a return to a place, from which we never really departed.

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