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In the Era of Climate Migration, What Will “Home” Mean?

By Madeline Ostrander Twitter
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You can cling to home as property—fight for yourself and your own financial gain. Or you can love a home and belong to it—and defend community, place, and planet.

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In modern American parlance, the meaning of “home” is entangled in real estate. In young adulthood, I learned that to be a “grown-up” was to buy your own house, even if it left you with a crippling mortgage that would devour most of your earnings. The idea lies at the core of the American Dream, that postwar fantasy that exerts a stubborn influence on our culture no matter how outdated it becomes.

But home can have another meaning altogether, one of meaning and identity, as emotional space, as a relationship with the place around you. Black essayist and scholar bell hooks has written movingly about that sense of home. Her grandmother’s home, in rural Kentucky, was full of belongings in both senses of the word, beautiful and personal objects and also a profound connection to history, meaning, and identity. “Her house is a place where I am learning to look at things, where I am learning how to belong in space,” she writes in the book *Belonging: A Culture of Place*. “In rooms full of objects, crowded with things, I am learning to recognize myself.”

As a student at Stanford University, bell hooks worked on shedding her accent: “It was a way to avoid being subjugated by the geographical hierarchies around me which deemed my native place country backwards.” At the same time, she was homesick, longing for the Appalachian countryside. “In my mind and imagination I was always returning to the Kentucky hills, to find there a way to ground my being.” But so many factors had conspired to estrange her from the land—segregation, racism, traumas both personal and collective—that for decades, hooks felt it was impossible to return.

She tried other places: Wisconsin, Connecticut, Ohio, New York. She achieved career success—which gave her the opportunity to own real estate—but she felt ungrounded, incomplete, melancholy. Then “I plundered the depths of my being to see when and where did I feel a sense of belonging, when and where did I feel at home in the universe.” The answer was to return to her origins. Thirty years after she had left, bell hooks moved back to Kentucky, to settle in the

college town of Berea, a community with a long history of progressivism where she could make a home full of meaning, like her grandmother's house. She defined for herself an ethic of place: "A culture of belonging rooted in the earth."

Reading these words, I feel a visceral longing for the kind of rootedness that hooks found. I have uprooted myself many times, and my search for a home full of meaning is long and still ongoing. But in the era of rapidly warming planet, when homes all around the world are becoming threatened and increasingly uninhabitable, is such rootedness is even still possible? Is it risky in the 21st century to love home as much as hooks did?

Is it unreasonable or stubborn to attach too much to a place when we must all be prepared to uproot ourselves? What sort of home should we seek out now?

It is often considered suspect to be too fiercely attached to or defensive of your home turf, even in service of a good cause. And that logic allegedly extends to environmental problems—our relationship to land, ecosystem, and planet. The acronym NIMBY probably first appeared around 1980, short for "not in my backyard," describing a person or group who resists some kind of change or development at home—and usually meant as an insult.

The original NIMBY was someone who opposed nuclear power or nuclear waste in their "backyard." Sources differ on who coined the term, but the man who carried NIMBYism from obscurity into our common vocabulary was a British politician named Nicholas Ridley, or Baron Ridley of Liddesdale.

With a family fortune derived from shipbuilding, coal, and steel, Ridley became a Conservative member of Parliament in 1959. He was widely known as a pit bull for the free market, an antagonist of socialism and unions. When Margaret Thatcher was elected prime minister in 1979, Ridley became a close ally. He helped her establish Thatcherism, one flavor of the larger ideology of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, which aims to starve government and the public sector to the barest of skeletons and privatize public services, "redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling," writes British columnist George Monbiot. In this schema, home is not a thing you belong to. It's a thing you buy. Not the home of meaning, but the home of possession.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, the British government was pushing for new nuclear power development. In 1981, the UK set up an entity called Nirex, funded by the nuclear industry and regulated by the Department of Environment, to search for places to dispose of radioactive waste. But much of the public was understandably apprehensive: Even so-called intermediate nuclear waste has to be isolated for several centuries before it is considered safe. Meanwhile, Pennsylvania's Three Mile Island nuclear power station had melted down in 1979, and in 1986, the Chernobyl catastrophe in what was then the Soviet Union sent shudders—and radiation—around the world. In response, environmental groups and citizen activists rose up to protest and fight proposals for nuclear waste dumps. The same year as Chernobyl, Thatcher appointed Ridley to the post of secretary of state for the environment.

Ridley accused the people who opposed the dumping of radioactive waste in their communities of being "NIMBYs," suggesting that the communities that stood in industry's way were parochial, narrow, too concerned with the local. They were selfishly impeding the global march of progress.

In some cases, the nuclear industry and its champions won their arguments, but in others, the activists couldn't easily be deterred. In 1995, Friends of the Earth revealed that Nirex had interfered with the British government's efforts to publish reports questioning the safety of nuclear waste disposal. In 1997, the group leaked a memo from a Nirex advisor cautioning that poorly designed storage might contaminate groundwater with radiation. After this revelation, the industry's handling of nuclear waste in Britain would be the subject of controversy and investigations for decades.

Meanwhile, the shorthand NIMBY stuck around. Its meaning has shifted—often the NIMBY is less of a localist and more of an elitist, someone who might object to, say, the construction of a halfway house out of concern that it would dent their property values. It has often played a role within the environmental movement: In 2011, *Time* named NIMBYism number five in its "Top 10 Green Trends." Journalist Bryan Walsh credited NIMBYism for one of the climate justice movement's most defining victories, "pushing President Obama to postpone the Keystone XL pipeline that would have brought crude from Canadian oil-sands development across the Midwest." Nebraska ranchers and Great Plains tribes were especially influential in this battle, galvanized in part by the potential for the pipeline to break or spill and foul the Ogallala Aquifer, a major water source that underlies eight states. They joined national environmental groups in a groundswell of protests in Washington, D.C., and around the country—also raising the alarm about the climate consequences of fracking vast reservoirs of Canadian tar sands oil, exporting them via pipeline, and burning them. But Walsh insisted that NIMBYism has a "dark side," also holding NIMBYs responsible for stopping some renewables development. "Environmentalists may welcome NIMBYism now—but it could bite them in the future," he concluded.

Cape Wind, a proposed offshore wind power development off the coast of Cape Cod, illustrates that warning. The project famously languished for years and eventually failed in 2017 after locals, especially wealthy and influential residents such as Robert F. Kennedy Jr., fought bitterly against it. And in many interpretations of this story, the NIMBYs were especially villainous actors—rich people whose personal aesthetics and property values were more important to them than whether the planet roasts. Kennedy insisted his primary concern was that the wind farm would damage a sensitive location and likened it to building in Yosemite National Park (though some evidence from the UK and Belgium suggests offshore turbines help create better habitats for fish). In response, a group of prominent environmentalists pleaded with him to change his position, arguing that "nothing threatens the Earth's most special places more than global warming." He did not.

But when interrogated, the whole idea of NIMBY starts to fray at the edges. For one thing, there is no clear definition of who NIMBYs are, and the term is used sloppily to describe anyone who opposes the building of anything even slightly close to home—from a chemical-weapons incinerator or an oil pipeline to a food pantry—no matter the reason. So-called NIMBYs could be motivated entirely by elitism, by a desire to separate themselves from the problems of the less

fortunate or the struggles of the world at large—or by genuine concern for their community, their neighbors, the place they live in, and their own home. The word NIMBY encourages us to dismiss or deride all such feelings, and we fail to differentiate between or understand what motivates people's objections to development or change.

After conducting a series of surveys, two University of California, Santa Barbara, researchers concluded that many opponents of wind turbines simply distrust either the industry or government authority or dislike the whole notion of wind power—and that, rather than localism, is why they object to a wind farm in their "backyard." In practice, it can be difficult to locate real people who fit a clear-cut definition of NIMBY. After the world's first major tidal energy generator—a form of renewable power that uses wave energy to produce electricity—was installed on the bay side of the Ards Peninsula in Northern Ireland in 2008, a University of Exeter researcher traveled to two nearby villages in search of NIMBYs. But he couldn't find them. Instead, he noticed that the more attached someone was to life on the peninsula, the more they loved their place, the more they supported the new energy project.

There is more than one reason to attach to a home and to resist its alteration. You can cling to home as property—fight for yourself and your own financial gain. Or you can love a home and belong to it—and defend community, place, and planet. There is the home of possession, which values mostly economics. And there is the home of meaning, which cherishes place, belonging, and togetherness.

In the long run, only the home of meaning can give us strength in an era of upheaval.

In the 21st century, both the home of possession and the home of meaning face immense threats. According to a 2021 report from the real estate company Redfin, nearly 40 percent of Utah homes are in danger of burning down, and in California, $627 billion worth of real estate is at high fire risk. Even under a relatively conservative estimate from the First Street Foundation, the United States already has $20 billion in expected real estate losses from flooding every year. In 30 years, because of sea level rise that number could rise to $34 billion.

Hundreds of millions of people will face damage, part with belongings, and in many cases, lose the safety and basic shelter of a home in the next few decades. In the face of all of these economic losses, it would be easy to overlook how the loss of social, spiritual, or cultural bonds to home and place will also affect so many of us. You might imagine it would be a liability to have a home of meaning in a time of climate change—it might lead someone to avoid making necessary changes to the way they live, or resist relocating when a threat arrives at their door.

Scholarship on the subject suggests the opposite is true. Glenn Albrecht, an Australian philosopher, came up with the term *solastalgia* to describe feelings of unease or homesickness that someone might experience when climate change, disaster, or environmental degradation mars the place they love and call home. He has also noticed that those who take action to restore or protect their home landscapes, or those with a strong sense of both community and personal empowerment, tend to overcome the sadness of witnessing environmental damage at home. He calls this phenomenon *soliphilia*, from the French *solidaire* (interdependent) and the Greek *philia* (love). "Soliphilia is manifest in the interdependent solidarity and the wholeness or unity

needed between people to overcome the alienation and disempowerment present in contemporary political decision-making," he writes. "Soliphilia introduces the notion of political commitment to the saving of loved home environments at all scales, from the local to the global."

Of course, love of home does not lead everyone to become wiser or more civic-minded. But at least some research has bolstered Albrecht's observations. A survey of families living in the Indian state of Odisha, a place at the edge of the Bay of Bengal, troubled in recent years by extreme cyclones, heat waves, flooding, and an eroding coastline, found that families with higher "place attachment" (measured through statements like "because my forefathers were staying here, this place is very important for me") were more likely to take steps to ready themselves for a disastrous flood. In other studies, in the Western United States, Canada, and Australia, people who loved the place they lived in or felt connected to their community were more likely to participate in community activities to prevent wildfires and better equipped to recover from disasters.

Hurricane Sandy, which slammed against the eastern United States in the fall of 2012, remains one of the most place-altering catastrophes this country has experienced. The storm damaged 200,000 homes and affected people in 24 states. New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut took the hardest hit. In mid-Atlantic coastal communities, many people abandoned their flood-soaked, wind-battered homes and never returned. Those who stayed struggled for years to clean up and repair.

This might have been a place-detaching disaster, one that would sever the bonds between people and home. But scholarship on the communities affected by Hurricane Sandy suggest the opposite. First, consider the people who stayed. One set of places that became important after Hurricane Sandy was a series of community gardens, many built in lower-income neighborhoods on formerly abandoned lots in New York City from the late 20th century onward. Three researchers visited these neighborhoods to find out how people had coped with Sandy. After the floods, the gardens helped some people find their way. Gardeners looked out for each other and their neighbors, especially people who were stranded with no electricity or food. As soon as the floodwaters receded, a garden in Queens became "a place where people knew that they could go…go and get warm, they had a fire going and people started bringing food. And then people started seeing it as a drop-off point," one resident told the researchers. A few dozen people ate "homemade chili over an open fire two days after…when the National Guard [couldn't] even get through yet." Even in the aftermath of one of the most punishing American disasters of all time, grabbing ahold of place and community helped survivors to steady themselves.

Then there are the people who left. Take the case of Staten Island, striped with working-class neighborhoods with a generations-long sense of local history and connectedness: "There were clambakes in the summer, and the neighborhood kids played soccer together at night under the streetlights," writes Elizabeth Rush in *Rising: Dispatches from the New American Shore*. After Sandy, many residents chose to relocate. They did so with an extraordinarily organized, collective voice. "Despite their love for the place that had long defined them," Rush explains, "residents of nine local communities began begging the state government to bulldoze their homes and allow the land to return to tidal marsh." In her reflections on her visits to one of these

places, Oakwood Beach, Rush describes neighbors gathering together to make the decision to leave, neighbors who loved this place and cared for one another. In a survey led by a psychology PhD student, residents of Oakwood Beach were slightly more likely to accept the buyout if they experienced a greater sense of "connection and caring" (answering yes to statements like "people in my community feel like they belong to the community"). A collective decision to relocate is often called "managed retreat," a controversial term that, to some, implies giving up.

But Rush sees strength in the way this community handled disaster—"an example for the rest of us to follow. They're less victims than agents."

You can love a place and community and decide to let it go. This decision may also be an act of love.

After returning to Kentucky, bell hooks bought property in the hills and in the city. Each time she purchased real estate, she also strove to create a home of meaning. Home was connected to nature but stood outside it, a place of stability: "A true home is where growth is nurtured, where there is constancy." A place of quiet reflection to "hear divine voices speak." A place of resistance and building community. A house where she could claim her right to space as a Black woman in a predominantly white neighborhood. A house with a porch looking out on the street, where she could greet others, a porch for "making contact—a place where one can be seen." All were part of hooks's effort to foster the "beloved community" that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. articulated, a community where all are cared for and safe.

I don't know what kind of "place attachment" will be appropriate for the rest of the 21st century. We may no longer be able to realize all of hooks's dreams. We live in an inconstant time, and the home of safety may be far harder to find. I don't know whether and where it will be practical to attach oneself. Some of us will inevitably have to move. We will retreat from the places we have known, in moments both managed and scattered, driven by motives that range from personal economics to self-preservation.

But in all the stories I have encountered about disaster, I am struck that so many of the leaders who emerge, the people who pull a community back up from the wreckage, are people of place. They are people who build homes of meaning and not just homes of possession. And all of them seem, consciously or unconsciously, to have a sense of the collective, the tiny unseen roots that extend from person to person to ecosystem and that allow us to draw up again from the earth and regrow—even after disaster and dislocation.

In this moment of uprooting, certain kinds of attachments could doom us—parochialism and factionalism, racism, political divisiveness, and an elitist insistence on leaving the vulnerable to face harm alone.

But love of home is a different kind of motive and emotion altogether. This kind of attachment can enlarge our sense of self, remind us that our circle of care extends far beyond the walls we live in. And I think that the home of meaning has a central role to play in this struggle about whether we fight climate change or succumb to catastrophe. I think we solve this crisis by remembering not just who we are, but where we belong, and what matters.