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Homing: a category for research on space appropriation and 'home-oriented' mobilities

Paolo Boccagni

Dipartimento di Sociologia e Ricerca Sociale, Università degli Studi di Trento, Trento, Italy

ABSTRACT

This article is a conceptual invitation to homing, to revisit the everyday social experience of home as a situated manifestation of lifelong needs and desires for space appropriation. Through acts of homing and their accumulation over space and time, people articulate a tension to 'move' towards a place or condition they construct as home, engaging in a dialectic relation between the experienced and aspired socio-material, relational and cultural features of home. Drawing on the consolidated use of homing in natural sciences, on the emergent ones in social sciences, and on my fieldwork with migrants and refugees, I outline a conceptual framework of homing for social research on (im)mobilities. I understand homing as a set of home-related routines and practices, and as an underlying existential struggle toward a good-enough state of being at home. This, empirically, is a matter of (in)capabilities and exclusivities, with the underlying structures of inequality. Homing is ultimately an invitation to reframe and approach home as becoming, rather than only as being, feeling, or making. While this conceptualization aims to speak to the ordinary experience of space attachment and appropriation, it assumes particular relevance in migration and mobility studies. Homing as a category means looking at the lived experience of home as an attempt to tread the fine line between past ascriptions and future-oriented potentialities, and as a visible manifestation of group, societal and existential inequalities.

1. Introduction

Home, in social sciences or common discourse, can take a range of meanings and perform very different functions but is definitely a noun. As this article aims to show, though, home is also experienced, and should also be theorized, as a verb: less a place, a predetermined condition or an idea, than an endeavour to tend towards any of these, and hopefully make them real. A promising concept to capture this process, which articulates what would seem to be an existential need and desire for home (regardless of its achievement), is *homing*. While the ordinary academic use of this notion indicates an instinctive or automatic return to a given point, for social science purposes homing can be reconceptualized as a range of actions and interactions—some physical, virtual or imagined mobility—whereby people orient themselves towards what they

CONTACT Paolo Boccagni ✉ paolo.boccagni@unitn.it ● Dipartimento di Sociologia e Ricerca Sociale, Universita degli Studi di Trento, Trento 38122, Italy

feel, see or claim as home, or at least as homely-enough. This can be fruitfully studied among different individuals and social groups, over time, in light of their life circumstances and of the underlying structures of opportunities. The research focus is then on the drivers and consequences of homing as a potentially lifelong process, no less than on the characteristics, accessibility, and achievability of home. Such a notion is taken here both as a special place or social setting and as a normatively positive construction of it (Boccagni 2017).

This view of homing, which stems from a metareflection on my research experience,[1] articulates some dissatisfaction with the prevalent ways of seeing the home in social sciences. Much of the relevant debate is shaped by the pre-assumption that home as a social experience already exists—even when it is de-essentialized and reframed as a matter of home*making* rather than just a location, such as the place of origin or the present dwelling. The predominant focus on what home or feeling at home *is*, or at best on what it *is not*, has made for a burgeoning research field across places, groups, and material conditions (Easthope 2004; Mallett 2004; Blunt and Dowling 2006). Yet, to look only at the meanings, dimensions, and spatial or temporal circumstances of home, or of the lack thereof, obscures a fundamental question: how, if at all, home comes into being in people's everyday lives and their life trajectories, through their own emotional, relational and material efforts. Starting from the *-ing* suffix means to investigate the historical, political, and environmental conditions that make a socio-material setting home-like, along with people's ongoing motivations and efforts towards it, and the ensuing pathways of space appropriation.

As an intransitive verb, homing highlights the processual and often incomplete constitution of home, rather than essentialising it. This paper is an invitation to appreciate its analytical potential to capture, at micro level, actions and tactics that articulate the tension towards a place, setting, or condition one sees, calls or experiences like home; at an aggregate level, the interplay between different modes of homing across locations and social groups; at an underlying, existential level, people's lifelong struggle towards being-at-home as a shifting ideal and condition. I first outline the recent debate on home and homemaking and the main uses of homing in the literature. Based on that, I propose a specific conceptualization of homing for social research. Reframing home as a matter of homing makes a significant difference to the study of space appropriation, particularly after displacement and among people with mobile or discontinuous life and housing trajectories. I will exemplify this by taking some brief excerpts from the life story of a young West African man I call Olusola, a central figure in my ethnography of asylum seekers' settlement in Italy. Like other millions of people, Olusola suddenly left the place he used to call home—and the very compound where he used to live until its destruction. After a perilous and protracted journey, and some years spent in refugee accommodations, he is now trying to make his own way home, which, as Olusola sees it now, can only be in Italy. His story is meant just as an illustration of the analytical purchase of homing into the life and housing transitions of people on the move. 'Voluntary' or 'forced' migration, in turn, is but a highly visible and politically contentious instance of ways of homing that cut across the life experience of many more people. This is not to dismiss, of course, the large inequalities within and between groups in homing capabilities and opportunities, or in the changing views, emotions, and practices associated with home.

2. A mobile understanding of home

Home, on the face of it, is hardly a noteworthy, innovative, or thought-provoking notion. Even in the academic debate, a sustained interest in it, first in environmental psychology and then across the spectrum of social sciences, can be traced back to at least four decades (Hayward 1977; Altman and Werner 1985; Benjamin and Stea 1995). Interestingly, though, interdisciplinary research on the home has disproportionately grown over the last decade, leading to a

proliferation of uses, understandings, and meanings.[2] A broad commonality across recent research lies in the emphasis on the emotional, imaginative, symbolic, and relational dimensions of home. None of these is reducible to the materiality of a place, but all of them rely on a material basis of sort. Besides this basic point, two more conceptual developments lie at the premise of this paper. The first is the need for a critical yet pragmatic approach to home. As much feminist scholarship has shown (e.g. Bowlby, Gregory, and McKie 1997), home irremediably conflates conflicting interests, power asymmetries, and inequalities along gendered lines (but also along racialized and classed ones, among others). In a nutshell, it is a dubious category of analysis, and yet one hard to replace (hooks 2001; Longhurst 2012). The normative subtext of home, which can be manipulated in many ways, is part and parcel of its societal significance (Meers 2021). Another promising development lies in the study of home from the 'margins' (Ahmed et al. 2003; Boccagni et al. 2020c): under life circumstances that lie out of ordinary domesticity, are often experienced as *un*homely and thereby illuminate, by contrast, what home(ly) means and what its ideal constructions are. Cases in point abound in research with people that are forcibly displaced (Brun and Fábos 2015) or marginalized in relation to their housing circumstances (Parsell 2012; Giorgi and Fasulo 2013), sexual orientations (Fortier 2001), or physical disability (Imrie 2004), among other factors.

As these developments suggest, the social study of home cannot be reduced to the infrastructural and material bases of a house (Coolen and Meesters 2012), nor to the insider experience and culture of a pre-existing domestic arrangement (cf. Miller 2001). While both these research areas are autonomous and well-consolidated, some recent literature tends to privilege the category of *homemaking* to explore how a sense of home is negotiated and emplaced through processual and interactive social practices (Blunt and Dowling 2006). Thus reframed, homemaking has a broader and more flexible meaning than the literal one, as a set of gendered practices of care for the house(hold). Even so, it does not say much about the subjective views, desires, or needs underlying these practices, or on their patterns over space and time.

Relative to homemaking, the proposed conceptualization of homing has a broader scope and ambition. Besides acknowledging people's need and struggle for a special place to call home, homing illuminates the influence of home-related values, aspirations, and ideals on the experience of a particular place; in short, the interplay between experienced and aspired (or good-enough) home, and the tension to bridge the distance in-between. Homing encompasses the social manifestations of the need and desire to tend towards a meaningful horizon of being at home (in terms of security and comfort, but also of recognition and self-achievement), through the experience of place. As such, it is constitutively intertwined with questions of (im)mobility.

Before discussing that, it is worth reviewing the uses of homing in the literature. In natural sciences, homing entails a form of spatial mobility. Its derivative use in social sciences has a broader remit, as an embodied orientation to a condition that is cognitively and emotionally closer to home. As such, it is fundamentally affected by one's social circumstances, including the scope for physical mobility. For millions of people around the world, including youth like Olusola, homing is articulated precisely through extended and perilous mobility efforts: from places of origin that seem to hinder all existential aspirations and are often unsafe, to some place ahead of them that should embody the promise to make, at exceptional efforts, for a rather un-exceptional home—one made of security, economic autonomy, some material wellbeing, and 'ordinary' family life.

3. Tracing back the career of a concept

3.1. On the 'home' of homing in life sciences

In zoology, homing designates the process whereby animal species can go back from a distance to an area where they live or used to live—in a sense, their home (Heinrich 2014; Barrie 2020).

What is of interest here, however, is the mobility of homing itself, as a concept or a metaphor, from natural to social sciences, and beyond the divide between academic and everyday use. In common sense, at least for English native speakers, homing evokes homing pigeons (Jerolmack 2013) and the process of making one's way (back) home. Moreover, in engineering homing designates automatic guidance devices or the technology that enables a weapon 'to guide itself to a target or to give a signal that guides people to it'.[3] This emphasizes, again, both an orientational skill and its dependency on an externally defined object, wherever located. Such definitions indicate a particular act of mobility, but also the conditions that enable it—an innate or learned ability, and a path-dependency from a technical input. They speak of a goal or a target to be reached, without saying much of what it looks like, or of whether it is reached indeed.

The bulk of scientific literature on homing falls in the areas of medicine, biochemistry, immunology, and biological sciences (Yapo and Boccagni 2020). The use of homing in social sciences and humanities, instead, is merely residual—about 3.5% of the relevant publications. All across the disciplinary spectrum, a sustained interest in homing is remarkably recent. About half of the homing literature, and almost all the social science one, has been published since 2010. A conceptual overview is in order, then, to trace the main (dis)continuities between natural and social sciences.

3.2. A typology of uses and meanings

Homing as a concept conflates distinct meanings, subtexts, and research agendas. This is no surprise for a term that comes from home and complicates further its meaning. It is enough, though, to require a heuristic typology of its usages (Table 1).

In short, *Ways to use homing* highlights the coexistence between specific and extensive usages, the latter being prevalent in humanities and social sciences. Instead, homing as an analytical perspective is hardly self-evident and requires more elaboration, as this article aims to do.

Discussing the *Subject* of homing means acknowledging who or what lies at the outset of the process, across different social worlds and realms of action: animal, human, object. A homing trajectory is invested with different meanings, expectations, or functions accordingly, on a continuum between mechanical and intentional actions. In fact, homing as an instinctive act can be purposefully cultivated, and indeed, domesticated, fancying pigeons being a case in point (Day 2019). In turn, homing as an automatic act (e.g. the trajectory of a homing missile) is nothing really 'automatic'—there is an artificial process behind, hence a variety of human subjects and interests that drive it nonetheless.

Table 1. On the key features of homing across the literature.

Ways to use homing	• Concept
	• Metaphor
	• Analytical perspective
Subject	• Animal
	• Artefact (automatic device)
	• Human being
Dimension of agency	• Instinct-based and learnt ability
	• Automatically oriented act
	• Culturally informed desire and need—existential striving
Target	• Place of origin or birth
	• Case-specific point
	• Place of desire/ideal
Spatiality	• Reaching a fixed place
	• Following a shifting target
	• Striving towards imagined (desired) place or existential condition
Temporality	• Short-term future (reaching target)
	• Recovering the past, through the future (return to ancestral roots or place of origin)
	• Long-term or undetermined future (asymptotic becoming towards being fully at home)

Whether the subject is an animal, a human being, or an artefact results in different *Dimensions of agency*, none of them being completely unconstrained. It is however among human beings that the significance of homing as a purposeful endeavour towards being at home comes to the fore. Different subjects make for different homing *Targets*, i.e. desired or expected destinations. This points to the fundamental question of what home is conceived, felt or aspired to be like—a particular location, a life condition, or some experience or memory from the past to be recovered or recreated anew. In the ordinary definition of homing in natural sciences, reaching the target entails a form of return mobility. This may, but need not be the case in social sciences.

Likewise, the *Spatiality* of homing as a technical or zoological mechanism involves the orientation towards a specific location. Instead, in people's life experiences such a location is not necessarily fixed, or actually existing. In a 'diasporic' sense, as I discuss below, homing involves a strive to reproduce emotional and sensorial connections with a home(land) grounded in the collective memories of the past. If, instead, homing is redefined as a category for people's attempts to make themselves at home over time, it has more to do with the future, and with a target that cannot be fixed once for all. In either case, the *Temporality* of homing is as diverse and stratified as its spatiality. Homing practices range from single, task-oriented acts to prolonged, potentially lifelong efforts. They may be oriented toward short- or long-term futures, as well to (re)establishing connections with the past. The same homing practices may conflate different temporal referents and scales, in ways irreducible to chronological linearity between past, present, and future.

4. Homing in social sciences and humanities

It is important, now, to reconstruct how homing has transitioned to the social sciences, hybridizing its meaning along the way. Most usages of homing in social sciences fall in mobility and migration studies, especially in qualitative research on identity, home, and belonging.[4] In return migration studies, for instance, homing may designate the affective experience of returnees striving to reconnect with an ancestral and remote homeland (King and Christou 2011; Jo 2018). Moreover, homing is sometimes used as a synonym of migrants' homemaking (Walsh 2006), or of their attempts to make themselves at home, possibly through specific material cultures (Christou and Janta 2019). In fact, it is unclear what this understanding of homing would add to homemaking, or feeling at home, within the literature on home and migration (Al-Alì and Koser 2002; Ahmed et al. 2003; Ralph and Staeheli 2011). Some conceptual hints toward homing can be found, moreover, in the recent anthropological literature on the fluidity of home 'in movement' between places and identities (Rapport and Dawson 1998, 2022; Frost and Selwyn 2018; Lenhard and Samanani 2020). Less frequent, but equally evocative, is the use of homing as a transitive verb. A case in point comes from research on political discourses and provisions that purportedly aim to make local residents feel at home—empirically speaking, a problematic stance (Duyvendak, Reinders, and Wekker 2016).

Overall, though, the most original elaborations on homing come from interdisciplinary fields such as social phenomenology, diaspora and queer studies, and mobility studies. It is worth expanding on them, on a continuum between theoretical elaboration (section 4.1) and fieldwork (section 4.3), before advancing a more consistent and systematic approach to homing.

4.1. Phenomenological approaches

An original view of homing can be inferred from the phenomenological literature on home. This tends to have a normative subtext and hardly ever employs the term homing. Yet, it makes a major analytical contribution, which resounds with emerging findings from empirical research. Central to it is a 'definition of "home as interaction" rather than the usual "home as place"'

(Madison 2006, 238). This opens up to a view of the home as a lifelong, existential becoming towards an aspired state of things.

Much of the philosophical debate on home starts from Bachelard's ([1958] 1964) account of the primary experience of the house, or revolves around the notion of dwelling, out of Heidegger's ([1951] 1971) seminal essay. However, some recent elaboration in phenomenology offers a promising argument to conceive home otherwise than as a fixed, place-bound, or past-inherited condition. For one thing, there is no necessarily overlapping—indeed, there may be a 'significant breach, whether cultural, geographical, or both'—between 'home as place of origin, home as current domicile, and home as a personal sense of belonging' (Hayes 2007, 4; cf. Brun and Fábos 2015, on refugee studies). As Jacobson (2009) points out, an ontological condition of 'being at home' is not simply a given, or a passive experience of the place we live in. It should rather be seen as an active, processual, and potentially never-ending endeavour, which is shaped by our ongoing social relationships. Home rests on everyday practices, tactics, and ways of *doing,* just like other categories (e.g. gender or family), in a symbolic interactionist perspective (Kusenbach and Paulsen 2013).

There is more to this approach than an emphasis on homemaking. More fundamentally, the point is that the normatively positive attributes of home are by no means natural. Instead, they are 'developed' and 'contingent'. Home need not overlap with a place, nor with the experience of it. Rather, each of us tries to *perform home* through a repertoire of skills and habits of our own, in a domestic setting or elsewhere, in a continuous 'work of habituation and of inhabitation':

> [T]he person draws on some familiar habit or interest *to find a way of settling herself into a surrounding* that does not belong to her. The person has carried her home, so to speak, with her. (Jacobson 2009, 369)

This bears a striking resemblance with the visualization of home in Chagall's *Erinnerung* ('Remembrance', 1917), the powerful depiction of an old man who wanders around, carrying on the shoulders a miniature of his home with, interestingly, a female figure on the doorstep (Harshav 1994; Boccagni 2017). Analytically speaking, it is an invitation to investigate the portability of home. This includes both the aspects of past homes that are carried along over space and time, and the affective functions of particular material cultures as proxies of being at home (Nowicka 2007; Andersen and Pedersen 2018).

Radicalizing this insight, we could reconceptualize our entire life course as a form of 'existential migration' (Madison 2006) or of '(be)coming home' (Hayes 2007)—in short, of homing. This entails a constant endeavour towards a state of things that may be called or felt like home. Such a process has a strong eschatological subtext (Carroll 2014), but it is by no means predetermined. There is no fixed, essential, or natural home to reach, although ideas and values abound, and vie with each other, about 'what' this should be like. What is cogent is rather the effort to tend towards it, and hopefully to co-construct it along the way. Homing may be driven by ethical responsibility, by sheer necessity, as for many people on the move, or possibly by tension to self-fulfillment:

> [T]he test of whether one feels 'at home' or not is no longer a sense of familiarity with place or even the quality of one's relationships with others, but rather is whether one feels that the way one is living is true to one's ultimate sense of purpose in life (Hayes 2007, 6; cf. Heller 1995).

Homing, in this sense, captures the most intimate and existential meaning of home (Rapport 2020). It is an asymptotic inclination towards being at home, to be turned into a meaningful field for social research. This should involve both the characteristics of the homing endeavour and those of the aspired home. While the phenomenological literature does not explicitly refer to the migrant condition, the latter is a privileged field to find out analytically, and experience existentially, how homing operates in practice (Boccagni 2017). In the case of Olusola, and of many actual or potential migrants, the interiorized expectation to achieve 'a better life' through

mobility articulates precisely, albeit elusively, a form of homing. This should rest on better dwelling and material conditions but is hardly reducible to that. Questions of perceived modernity, adultly, self-worth, and recognition are equally critical (Vigh 2009). The potential home ahead of migrants is not necessarily a fixed place wherever located. Yet, it should coalesce conditions of stability, security, and predictability—much of what is perceived as an 'ordinary life'—that can hardly be disjointed from the access to ordinary housing. For sure, the moral and emotional power of the desired destination ahead says little of the huge risks and challenges, including protracted immobility, 'waithood' and even death, that people like Olusola encounter along the way.

4.2. Homing in diaspora and queer studies

Most ways to use homing in migration studies follow its preexistent circulation in diaspora (Brah 1996) and cultural, postcolonial and queer studies (Ahmed 2000; Fortier 2001; Basi and Qureshi 2018). As long as historical displacement and dispersion are what defines a diaspora as such (Safran 1991), home is a necessary counterpoint to its existence as a concept and a shared social experience. It is by projecting a more or less essentialized home *away* in time and space (Cohen 2007) that the descendants of a displaced population pave the way to identify themselves as a diaspora.

Home, then, operates as a shared and emotionalized imaginary of an original 'elsewhere' that keeps being cultivated across countries, through common rituals, over generations. However, such a place is inherently contradictory and contested. It may, but need not, overlap with the original homeland, as a place claimed to be one's own and as a final return destination. The most oft-quoted articulation of this ambiguous stance is Brah's (2005) *homing desire.* This captures the emotional thickness of the persistent longing for (and fascination with) the diasporic home. However, it also acknowledges that the place of origin is hardly home anymore. The need to feel at home survives, instead, and is to be nourished regardless of territorial underpinnings. In this optic, homing captures an open-ended striving that illustrates the ambivalent relation between diasporic individuals and groups, and their ancestral elsewhere as home.

A homing desire is no prerogative of diasporas, though. It resounds in the lived experience of displaced or 'otherized' social groups, as 'the desire to *feel at home* achieved by physically or symbolically (re)constituting spaces which provide some kind of ontological security' (Fortier 2002). In this optic, a homing desire is an aspiration for an utterly de-essentialized home—an existential condition of full acceptance and freedom to exert one's subjectivity, protected from prejudices and discriminations. Such a condition conjoins internal identification (feeling at home) and external recognition (the right to call a place home). It resonates with the previous normative argument for (be)coming home as a future-oriented life project. Again, the emphasis is less on the inherent meanings of home than on the existential and resilient efforts to reach it. Home, concludes Fortier (2001, 409), 'is not an origin but rather a destination; there is no return, only arrival. And it is an arrival that is always deferred'. Reversing home from the past to the future does not question its 'localizability', and yet opens up an indefinite and open-ended field for homing:

> Home is some-where; it is indeed else-where, but it is also where the subject is going. Home becomes the impossibility and necessity of the subjects's future (one never gets there, but is always getting there), rather than the past that binds the subject to a given place. (Ahmed 2000, 78)

In this perspective, the expected target of homing shifts from a place rooted in the past to an ontological condition to be achieved in the future—that is, becoming home. Along with the transition, a major continuity lies in the literal or imaginary mobility on which homing rests and in the underlying tension to bridge the gap between experience and aspiration. As far as LGBT immigrant minorities are concerned, homing can be seen as an active claim for resistance to

multiple axes of discrimination (Borges 2018). However, moving literally or symbolically toward a 'chosen home' is no linear or unambiguous pathway. Whether home is a space of protection, a sympathetic subculture, or an interior condition of being-at-home with oneself (Rus 2006), the queer homing cannot dismiss the influence of the home one comes from. Nor can the latter be reduced to an oppressive burden to be dismissed. While homing does ideally aim to unconditional recognition and free expression of one's sexual orientations, this is less a transition from ascribed to achieved home than a balancing act between both (Basi and Qureshi 2018). Put differently, the complexity of the lived experience of home resists simplistic and binary understandings. The familial and heteronormative home is a more ambiguous force than the feminist trope of a site of patriarchy and privilege reproduction, to be overcome as such. While home as the origin is cognizantly criticized for being intolerant or narrow-minded, it retains some affective influence nonetheless. It is as if people had gone through a loss—psychologically speaking, from the mother's body (Rus 2006)—that still demands to be coped with. To that extent, the protracted influence of home on all scales from household to homeland, and the oscillations of one's homing desires between past and future, are a major commonality between ways of homing in diasporic and queer groups.

In short, homing in queer studies articulates a widespread imaginary and a moral urgency toward a 'fitting in' that should conflate external recognition and self-realization. However, this does not say much of the underlying social practices, in an empirical terrain. There is little scope for social research into homing, though, until this is systematically addressed.

4.3. Homing and mobilities

Another promising perspective on homing emerges from research on the feelings and practices of home among mobile individuals and families. Once most people, including relatively sedentary ones, have access to an unprecedented range of physical or virtual mobilities, the meanings and emotions associated with home go through different forms of 'uprooting' and 'regrounding' (Ahmed et al. 2003; Hannam et al. 2006). People's sense of being at home is no longer necessarily tied to one location, nor a recollection of the past. At the same time, as empirical research shows, it is unlikely to lose any connection with a material basis. While our ways of homing involve a variety of non-domestic contexts, they do need a context nonetheless; not necessarily 'a large space, but a space there must be', Douglas (1991, 289) famously wrote, 'for home starts by bringing some space under control'. Even under conditions of extended mobility, a home is unlikely to become placeless, in a sort of 'anything, anywhere, anytime paradigm' (Petersen et al. 2010, 266). Rather, there is a promise in revisiting it through the ways in which ordinary people try to make themselves at home in less-than-homely places or conditions.

This leads to an original understanding of homing as a *reflexive* verb: 'homing oneself' (Winther 2009, 58), that is, all the minute ways in which people, including those on the move, attempt to 'establish a sense of home, or tactics for feeling at home', potentially in any setting. Whenever they move away from the spaces they are used to perceiving as home, a 'necessity' may emerge for them to feel at home again. Although this is neither inevitable nor universal (Boccagni and Miranda-Nieto 2021), it does seem pervasive enough to require further elaboration. Meeting this need or desire depends on particular forms of 'homing oneself', as 'a capability of being in the world'; 'a way to use the space, not to *arrive* in a place' (Winther 2009, 66). This use of homing follows 'a Deleuzian verbalizing of nouns, where things are in the becoming, never finalized, and not bound to a specific place. […] By verbalizing home, it becomes … something being done, practiced, the becoming of home' (Petersen et al. 2010, 266). Once again, the emphasis is on homing as a process, rather than on the places it is meant to connect. Importantly, under the unprecedented circumstances of Covid-19 'enforced domesticity', new 'homing tactics' need to be devised and routinized even at home. How these micro-forms of

homing-in-immobility work out in practice, and what difference they make, is however a question that awaits more systematic research.

Generally speaking, approaching homing through fieldwork means unveiling the multisensorial 'tactics' whereby people try to 'home themselves', given the material, relational and emotional affordances available. Homing oneself entails a situated combination of two processes: *reproduction* of habits, routines, or rituals that articulate one's views, emotions, and memories of home; *readaptation* of one's new life environments, over time, in ways that should make them more personal, private, protected, and predictable. The resulting routines and practices vary by distribution, feasibility, and impact. A preliminary list (Petersen et al. 2010; Lynggaard 2011; Fallov 2013) includes *territorializing*, i.e. marking some territory as more 'own', hence different from the rest (cf. Lofland's 1998, 'home territory'); *bubbling,* that is, erecting physical or symbolic barriers to separate the self from the surrounding environment; *outboxing*, i.e. attaching a sense of home to personal belongings, gifts and other objects being carried along; and of course, *connecting,* that is, staying in touch with people over distance. Under circumstances of extended mobility, as my recent HOMInG fieldwork with migrants and refugees suggests, another homing routine is the sensory and embodied *re-evocation* of erstwhile 'home-scapes' through food, music, clothing, leisure, religion, and so forth.

However, the capability or even only the interest in homing needs to be socially situated. They are critically shaped by the material resources available and by the prospects to stay in a place. The very meaning of home, along with the emotions and infrastructures associated with it, tends to change over the life course. In this respect, the negotiation of home on the move makes only more salient the shifting meanings and functions that home takes over time even for the relatively immobile.

5. Bringing homing back into the social study of home

Following the previous overview, and to move beyond, a distinctive understanding of homing should combine multiple temporalities and levels of analysis. People's ways of homing are first of all contingent acts in the here-and-now. At the same time, they are instances of a lifelong struggle to make oneself at home. At both analytical levels, homing articulates an uneasy coexistence between home-related views, aspirations, and claims from the past and towards the future. Whenever it regards human beings (rather than animals), however, homing is by no means reducible to the past homes.

5.1. For a new conceptual development of homing

As a category for social sciences, including but not limited to migration and mobility studies, homing should stand for *individuals' cumulative ways of moving towards a state, condition, or feeling of home, given their potential and disposition to do so, in light of their resources and of the external structure of opportunities*. The empirical spectrum of homing covers the circumstances in which a sense of being at home is accomplished, but also those in which a need or desire for home is articulated without being met. Such a definition conflates significant variations between individuals and groups, also regarding the characteristics a place should have for someone to call it home or feel home therein (Chapman and Hockey 1999; Blunt and Dowling 2006). Whether people are and see themselves sufficiently close to their normative view of home is then the key empirical question.

Researching homing means to explore people's experience of place in the here-and-now, with a twofold term of reference: the main places of attachment and belonging over their life trajectories, and the ideal place(s) or conditions they would like to live in or tend towards. Empirical research into people's physical and imaginative mobilities towards home, however, rests less on

principled statements than on contextual and iterative fieldwork; less on the ideal home, than on the changing ways in which people conceive it and tend toward it through embodied sets of practices. In the case of a migrant like Olusola, homing is articulated in his ways to keep virtually connected with people and media in West Africa, but also to enact locally situated practices: cook and eat his favourite food, hang out with people who speak his own language, pray five times a day, laying down his rug in some space he can have free access for a while. None of these practices has anything exceptional. Yet, enacting them is by no means obvious—it is part and parcel of the struggle to make oneself at home, parallel with, and hardly less critical than, getting a material accommodation. Researching home as a question of homing, with young people like him, requires both ethnographical and biographical engagement, preferably with longitudinal research and participatory methods like diaries, photovoice, and 'home tours', as long as some domestic space does exist. During my fieldwork with Olusola, talking about home came only after some months of frequent visits to the asylum centre he was staying in, including his room, and of cumulative trust-building. Even then, mentioning home elicited ambiguous reactions in him. These ranged from mentioning his country of origin—what *was* home but now is no more, he added upon further reflection—to looking around the shared room he was staying in ('where I lay down my head, where I pray, where I do all my secret things'). Even in this basic sense, home was nothing granted. Talking about it would mean to look ahead, starting from the need to find another bedplace, as his period as a shelter resident would soon be over. Once our conversation had reached that stage, fancying of home would lead Olusola's imaginary to open up to future dreams, at least when he was in a good enough mood to look beyond the here-and-now (i.e. getting papers and some job). Home would then evoke, in his narrative, one little and cheap house to live in, as breadwinner, with his future wife and some children. Nothing else than an ordinary middle-class imaginary, one would say, unless for the fact that it was cultivated under a radical marginalization from it. In fact, the intimate sense of normality associated with home is more poignant whenever one dwells in conditions that are, and are perceived as, non-normal (Boccagni et al. 2020).

For sure, this is only an instant vignette. Catching up with Olusola in some years from now might produce a different imaginary of the good-enough home, and hopefully closer proximity to it. As this combination of emotional depth and longitudinal tension suggests, however, doing research in a homing optic has little to do with formulaic measures of housing satisfaction, or with approaching the complexity of home through abstract or isolated questions. Rather, it expands the study of home beyond the pitfalls that often characterize it—over-reliance on normative and 'disembodied' statements, romanticization, over-attention to the here-and-now as opposed to the recollection of homing trajectories across time (Boccagni and Kusenbach 2020).

To a certain extent, findings on how people 'home', and what the aspired home should be like, are case-specific. However, as the little quantitative research available shows, they are patterned in relation to age, education, housing condition, and immigrant background (Cuba and Lee 1993; Boccagni et al. 2021c). As important, specific research findings should be set within a dual framework: *capabilities*, i.e. the potential and opportunities accessible for people to make themselves at home, and *extensibility*, or the degree to which their ways to make a home are exclusive (i.e. rejecting or precluding others from the same experience) or not. There is an interplay between how far people are willing and able to make themselves at home and how strong the exclusivistic side of home needs to be, for them to do so. Some may base their sense of home on being alone or at most with their ingroups, as opposed to any outsiders. One's domestic space and personal belongings—more radically and intimately, one's body—mark the ordinary thresholds of exclusivistic homing. At the opposite extreme, we can envision cultural and material infrastructures for homing, such as language, art, or food, which are more easily shareable and portable. In-between, the extensibility of a sense of home to a more or less diverse arena of people and circumstances emerges as a major social and political issue.

For an immigrant newcomer like Olusola, the capability to make himself at home, which has been facilitated by his progress in legal status, employment, and language learning, is actually *interdependent* with its extensibility across the majority-minority divide. His relative success in catching up with majority people and groups is part of the reasons why, in each subsequent conversation with me, he claims that home for him is 'here'—regardless of his precarious housing and legal circumstances—rather than in the country he fled. For sure, the claim need not be accepted, let alone facilitated, by the receiving society. Nor is it articulated in equally clear and consistent ways among immigrant newcomers with less fortunate or effective adaptation pathways. Nevertheless, the claim stays there, implicitly at least, and becomes more salient and contentious whenever the perceived normality of home is disrupted and demands a sustained effort to re-establish it to some degree. While residential mobility is part of the life experience of most people, critical events, such as forced displacement and 'domicide' (Porteous and Smith 2001), are particularly revealing of the constitutive provisionality and artificiality of home.

In sum, homing as a set of everyday practices varies in reach, involving a proximate space or larger spatial and temporal scales; in relational bases, depending on a range of significant others; in material underpinnings, from particular objects and material infrastructures, like a dwelling, to online spaces. Over time, and at an aggregate level, the question is how different constellations of home-related views, emotions, and practices inform homing processes, and what structural and agential factors account for people to feel at home enough or not.

At the same time, homing as existential mobility invites us to revisit people's biographical and housing pathways as attempts to bridge the distance between the experiential and aspired home. Following the phenomenological insights discussed above, homing captures an existential transition from the initial (past) home through several 'intermediate' and provisional ones, toward a final state, place, or condition that may be acknowledged as home. Along these lines, homing has long been evoked in humanities (e.g. Gurr 1981; Dougherty 2019) and religion (e.g. in Christian theology, Martis 2002; Mitton 2012). It is like a biographical struggle to reach the 'real home', with no guarantee that it may ever be reached; unless, of course, death is constructed as its ultimate attainment (Heschel 1987). Human life itself is, metaphorically, a homing transition from birth (being forever out of the womb as primal home) to death (the grave as final home) (Barrie 2017; Mathews 2020). In any case, that human beings are bound to 'homing' regardless of the point they will reach is no mere abstraction. It does mirror the processual and biographically evolving bases of home, including the day-to-day struggles of people like Olusola, for whom home in a normatively positive sense can *only* be something ahead of them—if it is to be reached at all.

Overall, people's homing capability is critically shaped by their unequal access to infrastructural opportunities and resources, including societal recognition, to make themselves at home. Whether individuals and groups achieve homely-enough arrangements is a context-specific question that is shaped by deep-rooted hierarchies of class, race, gender, and legal status, among other factors (Boccagni and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2021). While the underlying ideational and moral struggle to reach the goal should not go unnoticed, it is critical to situate these efforts within the surrounding, unequal structures of opportunity

5.2. Homing and the temporalities of making home

Homing, as conceptualized here, is driven by future-oriented imaginaries, projections, and struggles. However, it is also informed by the experience and memories of the past homes, including their negative impingements. It is not by chance that the meaning of homing in natural sciences entails *backward* mobility. This subtext creeps across diaspora studies, whenever the 'call to home' is meant as a 'desire for reterritorialization in the homestead or homeland of past generations' (Markowitz 2004, 22).

A fundamental temporal tension operates, then, across the ways of defining and enacting homing. As an act of literal or metaphorical mobility, homing starts at present, is oriented to a future achievement or becoming, and yet is constitutively shaped by (the recovery of) the past. It follows that homing complicates a linear and sequential understanding of time. Indeed, it fully unveils the ambivalence and interdependence between different temporal scales that underpins the social experience of home (Werner, Altman, and Werner 1985; Miranda-Nieto, Massa, and Bonfanti 2020).

While past- and future-oriented dimensions of home coexist in any act of homing, prioritizing one or the other is not without consequences. In my argument, seeing homing as a primarily future-oriented process, albeit with some path-dependency with the past, is empirically correct, analytically fruitful, and practically desirable. Some hope, at least vague, about the future as a potentially better space to make oneself at home often supports people in coping with utterly inadequate living conditions at present, including for migrants like Olusola (Kleist and Jansen 2016).

As for the political subtext, homing as a return to the past opens up to an essentialized, conservative and exclusive view of the home. It also reproduces the pervasive conflation between the place of origin and home, based on a narrow sense of ascription. While such a conflation is apparently innocent, it has a very problematic subtext. It is all too obvious that a place of origin or the past says little about home in a normatively positive sense for those who suffer(ed) some form of domicide, including domestic violence and oppression (Wardhaugh 1999; Price 2002). Even in the rank-and-file of relatively 'immobile' and 'well-housed' people, ordinary biographical and household transitions are enough for their place of origin *not* to feel like home. Claiming it as such articulates a need for control and personal consistency and stability, but it does not necessarily meet it. In fact, home as a normative condition of (sufficient) security, familiarity, and control over place does not belong to the past, or the present, of many people. It does belong, instead, at least to their *potential* future. As long as homing is an effort towards such a condition, its main temporality of concern lies in the future.

The tension between past- and future-informed views of homing goes hand in hand with the dialectic mobility between experienced and aspired home(s). This is particularly salient whenever one's dwelling and living conditions are remote from any standard of homeliness. Ideals of home are then bound to shift back into the past, or ahead into the future, as much research on forced migration has shown (Kabachnik, Regulska, and Mitchneck 2010; Taylor 2013). For sure, the notion of an aspired home to tend towards involves also the material space of a dwelling (Rapoport 1969). However, it combines an expectation of good-enough housing with relational, emotional, and practical aspects, including recognition and self-achievement. If the aspired home is framed along these lines, it is no wonder that 'home is never fully achieved … even when we are in it' (Fortier 2003, 131). It is this never-full achievement, and the range of its social and societal consequences, that homing illuminates.

6. Objections, rejoinders, ways ahead

The argument advanced so far aimed to carve out a conceptual space for homing, just like homing is oriented to carve out a meaningful space for home. For sure, this analytical endeavour has still to go through several objections and re-writings, for homing to work out as 'a category for social research'. At this stage, some disputable points can be anticipated, the first of them involving precisely the status of homing. It is not self-evident whether homing operates as a concept rather than 'only' as a metaphor for home-oriented mobilities, as is often the case in social sciences. It is my argument that a more rigorous use is fully warranted to capture, and do justice to, people's needs and desires to make themselves at home. That said, homing can hardly be reduced to a single unit of analysis. Rather, it embraces analytically, and marks out empirically, all acts, practices, and patterned behaviours that are informed by a bodily, emotional, or moral disposition to move closer to

spatial, material, and relational circumstances that are worth calling home in a normatively positive sense.

For sure, this sense of being at home is only a possible development of people's relationship with the social settings in which they live. There is a risk that the use of homing may reproduce the romanticized and ideological subtext of home as something that is necessarily good and desirable, thus obliterating the dramatic diversity in the lived experience of domestic space. However, the proposed concept of homing captures a struggle to make oneself at home—not necessarily a 'positive' outcome of it. Homing is also a matter of *un*homing, as long as it ends up in an 'unhomely' outcome. In this sense, unhoming is not merely a synonym of home *un*making (Baxter and Brickell 2014): the exclusivistic side that is constitutive of homemaking, as a process that may be simultaneously a source of *un*making for someone else, including, at some point in the future, the same people who enacted it.

A more analytically productive use of unhoming points less to the opposite of homing than to two specific sets of circumstances. First, all attempts to leave, or at least deeply question, life settings and conditions that used to be home in an ascriptive, or even in a normatively positive sense, and no more operate as such. Rejecting the pre-given basis of home and trying to make one's way out of it, following a sense of 'estrangement' (Ahmed 2000), is precisely a form of *un*homing; one that may be experienced by migrants, refugees, or queer people as they exit the home to which they used to belong, on a range of scales. In another sense, *un*homing captures people's deliberate endeavours *not* to make themselves at home—not to associate the normative construct of home with the place they live in, particularly if this is sub-standard, unchosen, or provisional. This is precisely the stance of young refugees like Olusola (Boccagni and Miranda-Nieto 2021), particularly if they are 'stuck' in protracted waiting (Bendixsen and Eriksen 2018). Refugees *unhome* towards asylum infrastructures as long as they explicitly refuse to make themselves at home there, for doing so would mean to accept them as the normal or 'right' place to be (Thorshaug and Brun 2019). However, as time goes by, they may end up engaging in forms of 'reluctant homemaking' nonetheless (Gronseth and Thorshaug 2020). Unhoming, then, designates a rejection of past and present life circumstances—a way to actively reframe them as a 'non-home' to hopefully escape from. How far unhoming efforts are sustainable over time, i.e. whether they obliterate the need and desire for a 'positive' home to tend towards at some point, is however a question that calls for further research.

That said, the emerging debate on unhoming leads to yet another set of objections. These regard the risk to see homing only as an individual process, without capturing its relational bases and societal implications. Admittedly, this article has addressed homing as an individual act of mobility, for the sake of analytical clarity. In practice, different individuals and social groups articulate partially different and potentially conflicting ways of homing at all scales. Even within one and the same household, different members have unequal resources and opportunities to make themselves at home, let alone different views of what home should mean (Easthope et al. 2015). However, the issue becomes more salient in inter-group relations.

The interactive and relational side of homing needs to be taken seriously in two respects, going back to the fundamental meaning of home as a space expected to be separate from the rest, and subject to specific claims for appropriation (Douglas 1991; Boccagni et al. 2020). On one hand, people's struggle to reach a condition or a place to be called home operates also by opposition. It demands boundaries to be drawn, and protection to be achieved, against all that may jeopardize the prospective home (Duyvendak 2011; Andersen and Pedersen 2018). What we are homing towards cannot be disjointed from what we are homing *from*, or *against*. On the other hand, the tension to an ideal home articulates a claim for something that is seen and felt as *own*. How exclusive the underlying views and feelings of home are, as they expand into the public domain, is a critical question for group relations, including those between migrants or refugees and their native or sedentary counterparts.

7. Conclusion

Overall, conceptualizing home as a matter of homing means acknowledging some 'mobility' in the very meaning of home: from the ordinary view of the home *as a place* (be it even a special one), through a view of home *in the making,* toward a novel understanding of home *as becoming.* In fact, a homing optic is by no means antithetical to the previous ones—it rather aims to expand on them. Reconceptualizing home as homing is no dismissal of the social practices and infrastructural conditions that shape the experience of home in a given timespace. It rather reframes them as one step in a lifelong, existential transition towards a future 'home'—a place, a condition, a way of being—that may remain unaccomplished, and yet influences the aspirations and trajectories of those who tend towards it. There is a promise to bring this normative and phenomenological insight down to the realm of social research, as a biographical tension to move from the experienced toward the aspired forms of making, being, and feeling home.

Furthermore, homing as a concept invites us to de-essentialize home, but not to overlook the social need for some 'essence' at the core of it. Put differently, homing captures the experience of home as an open-ended endeavour that may never result in full and stable achievement, particularly for those with more fragmented life and housing trajectories. However, both my field-work and a growing ethnographic literature reveal a very critical point: the ways of homing people on the move tend to retain the ultimate imaginary of home as a tangibly situated physical place—the place to be reached, entered, and hopefully inhabited. Although this 'homecoming' may not occur, it does inform and make meaningful efforts towards it. The view of the home as a special and distinctive material place, and the aspiration to dwell in it—put otherwise: the aspiration to a stable and 'normal' life—is a social fact in itself. Indeed, it is enough to question any celebration of the fluidity, a-spatiality, and global portability of home— even only for the few cosmopolitans who can afford it. In practice, the de-territorialization of the home is no inherently positive, desirable, or emancipatory development. As research on home among the forcibly displaced shows, 'being on the move does not mean that people do not dream of or aim for a more stable life and a fixed material and territorial entity that they can call home' (Brun and Fábos 2015, 11). Dismissing this would be empirically incorrect and ethically problematic—as if, from a mainstream perspective, migrants like Olusola were by definition denied the need for a fixed place of their own, even while they do struggle to accomplish it.

At the end of the day, homing is fundamentally a category of analysis. As a word in everyday use, it makes little sense, despite its evocative subtext, unless to describe homing pigeons and the like. However, homing is also a category *for* practice, in the deep sense of an existential one. It illuminates something people find themselves to do, whether as a need or a desire (or both), with variable awareness, continuity, and success. In this sense, homing designates a specific set of social practices and can orient them further. Inviting and supporting people to be *reflexive on their own homing* may do little to solve their everyday problems, not to mention their existential concerns. It is a precondition, however, for them to escape the allure of seeing home only as their origin, or anyway as some essence of the past—to be somehow recovered—rather than as a social horizon ahead in the future. This is bound to be far more uncertain, and yet potentially more rewarding, inclusive, and socially progressive. The tension between *homecoming* and *becoming home* is ultimately what homing embodies, and invites us to sort out by *looking ahead*. It is no exaggeration, then, to see homing as an 'ontological struggle' (Andersen and Pedersen 2018) towards inclusion, recognition, and achievement of the ability to make oneself at home.

Notes

1. This article builds on, and systematizes, theoretical insights gained from HOMInG, a comparative research project on the experience of home under conditions of extended mobility and societal diversity.
2. As a Scopus search of the social science articles including "home" in the title illustrates, 52% of the relevant literature (from 1853 onwards) has been published between 2010 and 2019 (source: own elaboration).
3. Collins Online English Dictionary. collinsdictionary.com—last consulted, January 5, 2021.
4. Other metaphorical ways to use homing can be traced in research on food consumption, homelessness, memory-making, or resistance among gender minorities, not to mention the revisits of "homing desires" in fiction and cinema (Yapo and Boccagni 2020).

Acknowledgements

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