

No Place Like Home

Cosmopolitanism and the Notion of Home in *The Namesake* and the *Parable* Series

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ABSTRACT

While the traditional notion of home and the concept of cosmopolitanism would at first glance seem at odds with one another, this essay demonstrates how the two are actually closely connected, and that this understanding can afford productive new insights into transcultural literature. This essay explores the notions of home, transculturality, and cosmopolitanism as theoretical concepts, and employs these concepts to analyze three characters from Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable* series who find themselves in a transcultural situation. Through a case study of these characters, the essay demonstrates that in this postmodern, or supermodern age, a cosmopolitan attitude may be the only way to be at home in an increasingly transcultural, digital, and mobile world.

KEYWORDS

Home, Cosmopolitanism, Transculturality, Supermodernity, Migration

INTRODUCTION

The development of new and widely accessible means of communication and transport have transformed formerly inconceivable distances into minor hindrances. The Internet and mobile phones allow instant communication all over the world, and ever-cheaper and faster transport services promise innumerable possibilities for the future, bringing distant lands, and eventually even planets, within easy reach of those who can afford it. In this globalized, connected world, various forms of physical migration continue to increase rapidly, significantly changing traditional ideas of home and all that is bound up with it (United Nations 2017).



A growing body of literature deals with the experience of losing and finding one's home in this mobile world: with roots stretching back to nineteenth-century travel writing and expatriate literature, migratory experiences have been voiced over the years in genres such as migrant and exile literature (Dagnino 2013). With the (supposed) end of colonialism, the genres of postcolonial, multicultural, and diasporic literature arose, centering on previously silenced perspectives (Ibid). The most recent additions to this tradition are cosmopolitan and transcultural literature (Ibid). Today, we can even speak of a postcolonial canon, consisting of established names such as Chinua Achebe, Salman Rushdie, and J. M. Coetzee (Nyman 2008). David Morley, Professor of Communications at Goldsmiths University of London, explains that in a time where travelling has become a fact of life, the idea of home is bound to change. In *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity* (2000) he argues that:

[T]raditional ideas of home, homeland and nation have been destabilised, both by new patterns of physical mobility and migration and by new communication technologies [...] The electronic landscapes in which we now dwell are haunted by all manner of cultural anxieties which arise from this destabilising flux (3).

In an ever more developed and increasingly unstable world, notions of home take on entirely new meanings. While the idea of home, especially the search and longing for home, is integral to a broad range of fiction, it is particularly poignant in migrant fiction. In the case of refugees especially, and in diasporic writing more generally, feelings of “dislocation and liminality play a major role” (Nyman 2009, 127). Hence, this article will focus on the experience of home in transcultural novels.

The first half of this article will be devoted to establishing a theoretical framework, in which I will discuss the concepts of home, transculturality, and cosmopolitanism, and develop my own understanding and operationalization of these concepts. In the second half of this article, I will analyze Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), all classical works of transcultural fiction. These novels skillfully describe the experience that is at the core of this article: the experience of home in a changing world. In my analysis, I will demonstrate how experiences of home in these novels are shaped by the characters' ability to adopt a cosmopolitan mindset in their transcultural worlds, and how these novels may enable a deeper understanding of these concepts in contemporary times. Lahiri and Butler both demonstrate a particular affinity with transcultural literature, which challenges constructions of collective identities, centralizes experiences of border crossings, and above all disputes traditional notions of home (Helff 2009, 83). Through the lives of Ashima Ganguli, Gogol Ganguli, and Lauren Olamina, this article

will demonstrate how a cosmopolitan attitude and a new way of looking at home may be the only way to be at home at all in an increasingly transcultural, digital, and mobile world.

HOME, TRANSCULTURALITY, AND COSMOPOLITANISM

Home

Home, as a concept, invites countless definitions and associations – possibly as many as there are people on this earth, as everyone will have different experiences and connotations of what home is or should be. In this section, I will briefly outline some key aspects of home: the various geographical scales that can be applied to it – both traditionally and in Marc Augé’s supermodernity – the rhetorical boundaries that delineate it, the temporal boundaries that further affect it, and the influence of gender, ethnicity and class.

In the most general terms, home is the place where one’s closest (familial) relations reside. It is a concept that can be understood on various scales – for example, the word “home” can be used to refer more generally to one’s homeland (*OED* 2018, 5). The notion of home may be limited to a house and a family, but it might also stretch from a neighborhood to an entire country. As Benedict Anderson argues in *Imagined Communities* (1983), with the current explosion of communication and transportation technology, the feeling of belonging associated with home can stretch beyond local and even national boundaries, to construct ever larger imagined communities. The advancements in transportation technology have an additional effect – as French anthropologist Marc Augé explains, “an increasing proportion of humanity lives, at least part of the time, outside territory [in] the ‘non-places’” such as “the airport lounge, the motorway, the housing estate, the supermarket” (quoted in Morley 2000, 173). In this era of supermodernity, as Augé dubs it, the notion of home becomes increasingly suspended in transit and gathers new meanings whilst in this liminal space. As Morley explains, “home may not be so much a singular physical entity fixed in a particular place, but rather a mobile, symbolic habitat, a performative way of life and of doing things in which one makes one’s home while in movement” (47). Living on the move, home becomes a hotel room, a car, perhaps even simply a token or a certain habit.

Traditionally, however, the concept of home designates a certain physical place limited by clear boundaries, such as a house, “where one lives or was brought up, with reference to the feelings of belonging, comfort, etc., associated with it” (*OED* 2018, 2b). In this more traditional sense, the concept of home is marked by its exclusivity and rootedness – it is home only to a limited number of beings, marked by various kinds of boundaries that serve to maintain this exclusive group status. In this context, David Morley refers to the French philosopher Vincent Descombes, who sees homes and homelands as a rhetorical or virtual category rather than a

geographical or physical one – after all, the communities that shape a home(land) are much more fluid than national borders, and often pre-exist them. One well-known example of this would be the Kurdish people, spread out across parts of Turkey, Iran, and Syria. In Descombes’s definition, the range of home is marked by a person’s ability to behave freely and be understood without having to explain or repeat themselves:

The rhetorical country of a (person or) character ends where his interlocutors no longer understand the reasons he gives for his actions, the criticisms he makes, or the enthusiasms he displays. A disturbance of rhetorical communication marks the crossing of a frontier, which should of course be envisaged as a border zone, a marchland, rather than a clearly drawn line (quoted in Morley 2000, 17).

Descombes’s notion of home depends on a certain feeling of unity and stretches beyond a single, delineated physical space; it also depends on a willingness and ability to adapt to or be welcomed into new unities. Rhetorical unities need not be limited to a single language or cultural group, but a language can nonetheless function to exclude those who do not know it or only know it partially.

Bound up with the notion of home is that of “being part of a group”, and thus also the possibility of being excluded; an “us” and a “them”. As Hungarian philosopher Agnes Heller put it, “[i]n a home, one needs to be accepted, welcomed or, at least, tolerated” (quoted in Morley 2000, 17). As any migrant novel will attest, this is far from the default attitude towards newcomers, especially when they are from different ethnic or class backgrounds.

Aside from geographical and rhetorical boundaries, the temporal boundaries of home must also be recognized, as home is an inherently transitory concept. As the Argentine Canadian author Alberto Manguel puts it, our conceptions of home are “less grounded in a physical than in a phantom landscape. Home is always an imaginary place” (quoted in Dagnino 2013, 133). Even if a person were to live in the same place for a lifetime, that person, the other people in it, and the surroundings would still change and influence that person’s experience of home.

The role of gender relations within and around the home must also be considered, as the more traditional concept of home holds different meanings for different sexes. Although these gender-based patterns are slowly becoming less normative, Morley explains that even now “[t]he local is often associated with femininity and seen as the natural basis of home and community, into which an implicitly masculine global realm intrudes” (2000, 59). Extending on these blatantly sexist and heteronormative notions of femininity as passive, and masculinity as its active counterpart, women are traditionally associated with the fixed, familiar private sphere, while men are associated with the unknown, dynamic public sphere. Morley refers to

the fact that “there is a long and well-established [sic] tradition of writing on the mutual identification of the woman, the mother and the home” (63), resulting from the gendered distribution of tasks within the traditional household, where housekeeping, children and all domestic matters – all unpaid labor – are taken care of by women, while men go out to earn money to support and protect the family.

In the current article, I understand home as a necessary, albeit productively opaque concept: as a word that refers to a specific and yet ultimately unfixed space of undetermined proportions, “home” contains a rich diversity of contradictory meanings without losing its allure. It is a concept affected by boundaries of the temporal, geographical, and rhetorical kind, yet not subject to fixity, and intensely personal. These boundaries, that are vital to this idea of home, can extend in any direction depending on how it is used, making this notion of home an unexpectedly flexible concept. Home has gained a certain elasticity – it can stretch in any direction, but it is not endless.

Transculturality

Some of the more productive concepts in the context of migrant novels and ideas of home are cosmopolitanism and transculturality, but due to their closely connected nature, they are regularly mixed up. This section will briefly outline the differences and similarities between the two concepts, before moving on to a closer consideration of cosmopolitanism.

In the most general terms, both concepts refer to movements across borders, but cosmopolitanism is primarily an attitude adopted by those who move or are displaced, while transculturality is both an identity and an analytical perspective used by scholars (Dagnino 2013, 130). The latter concept originates with German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch (1999), who explains that “[t]he concept of transculturality aims for a multi-meshed and inclusive, not separatist and exclusive understanding of culture” (7). In his work on transculturality, Welsch explains that traditional understandings of cultures as homogenous, bordered domains are no longer feasible, as “[c]ultural conditions today are largely characterized by mixes and permeations” (4). The transcultural mode recognizes that the many cultures of the world are always already interconnected and interwoven, mixed and hybrid and that no culture can exist in a vacuum.

In “Shifting Perspectives: The Transcultural Novel”, Sissy Helff recognizes recent transcultural approaches to literature and develops an understanding of the transcultural novel, identifying three characteristics:

[F]irst, if the narrator and/or the narrative challenge(s) the collective identity of a particular community; second, if experiences of border crossing and transnational identities characterize the narrators' lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*); and third, if traditional notions of "home" are disputed (Helff 2009, 83).

For the purposes of this article, I employ transculturality as an analytical perspective to approach Lahiri's and Butler's transcultural novels, in order to analyze the particular cosmopolitan attitudes of the characters and to understand how this influences their notion of home. However, I have, so far, only sparingly touched on the concept of cosmopolitanism. Before embarking on my analysis, the next section will explore the concept in more detail.

Cosmopolitanism

As mentioned in the previous section, cosmopolitanism is primarily an attitude, a state of mind. The term is derived from the Greek philosopher Diogenes, who identified as a cosmopolitan, a citizen of the cosmos, rather than a citizen of the traditional Greek polis – meaning he would rather be defined by universal values than by his local origins (Nussbaum 5), or, in other words, by commonalities rather than differences. While the term cosmopolitan, as derived from the Greek *kosmopolitês*, is generally taken to mean "citizen of the world", the Greek *kosmos* actually means "universe", thus extending the term's potential meaning to "citizen of the universe" (Appiah xiv). However, in modern political philosophy, the term refers rather to the notion of a global human community (*kosmos polis*, 'global city'), in which each individual has equal moral and political rights and obligations, based on the shared human capacity for reason (cf. Brown, Buchanan). While this political understanding of cosmopolitanism claims to advocate a high degree of tolerance towards ethnic and cultural differences, its reliance on human reason as a central tenet makes it an inherently Western, humanist, and potentially imperialist notion. Immanuel Kant (1983) changed the concept further by introducing the notion of a universal right to hospitality: the right to visit and be welcome in any country, although not necessarily the right to stay. Jacques Derrida has problematized this conception of cosmopolitanism in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (2003), in the context of refugee crises, which have exposed the limits of this humanitarian turn.

However, in the current article, I intend to take the concept back to its roots and bring it into conversation with the notion of home. Cosmopolitanism, traced back to Diogenes, is an attitude that locates home on a larger scale, acknowledges differences, but focuses on commonalities – much like transculturality. In light of the more fluid understanding of home I developed in the first section, I see cosmopolitanism as an attitude that is similarly flexible, one that allows one to recognize home in places that are geographically, temporally, or rhetorically distant from

each other, by finding certain similarities, continuities, and familiarities – by perceiving the interconnected nature of various cultures.

THE NAMESAKE, PARABLE OF THE SOWER, PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

In this second part, I intend to demonstrate how the cosmopolitan attitudes of each character – Ashima and Gogol Ganguli from *The Namesake*, and Lauren Oya Olamina from the *Parable* series – influences the degree to which they feel at home in their transcultural worlds. Within the genre of transcultural literature, each has a special place: Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* may be one of the most lastingly popular migrant novels, while Octavia E. Butler is one of the most influential feminist Afrofuturist authors, expanding the idea of migrancy to the stars.

“She who is limitless, without borders”

Ashima Ganguli is the first character introduced in *The Namesake* (2003) – the story opens as she is about to give birth to her first child, Gogol, having married her husband Ashoke in the past year and moved from India to the United States. Ashima's idea of home changes dramatically over the course of the novel, and these changes can be roughly divided into three different phases according to three life-changing experiences: the first phase is marked by her marriage and first arrival in the United States; the second phase by the first house Ashoke and Ashima buy together; and the third phase by Ashoke's death.

The first phase opens in the early 1960s with Ashima in her early twenties, facing many challenges all at once: moving across the world, marriage, pregnancy, childbirth, and deplorable student living quarters. She leaves India after her arranged marriage to Ashoke, who is working on his PhD in Boston at that time. Their experiences in the United States could not be more different, which has everything to do with gender norms. While Ashoke presumably chose to move to the States for his studies, Ashima is never given a real choice – as Ashoke's wife, it is her duty to accompany him, moving from her father's home directly into her husband's home. As for their marriage, while ultimately a happy one, their two sets of parents arranged the match, and neither spouse discloses their thoughts regarding the matter. Coming from a traditional family, Ashima is expected to stay at home to cook and clean; and after Gogol's arrival, provide childcare. Even though Ashoke eventually concedes and starts helping around the house, Ashima is still the primary caregiver and not given the opportunity to be anything other than that, ultimately caught up in what Morley refers to as “the mutual identification of the woman, the mother and the home” (63). Ashima explicitly connects her gendered situation to her transcultural situation, musing that “being a foreigner ... is a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts” (49). Neither of these states – being pregnant and being a foreigner – can easily be hidden, and both

cause a certain vulnerability that continues throughout the first phase. Despite being perfectly able to speak English – having studied and even taught it in India, and thus not hindered by linguistic boundaries – she struggles with her new situation, spending most of her time isolated in Ashoke’s apartment.

After a few years, Ashoke earns enough to afford a house, and he moves the growing family – Ashima, Gogol, and his little sister Sonali – to the suburbs. While in the first phase, Ashima clung to her Indian identity – reading the same five Bengali novels over and over – she is now starting to embrace the American culture her children were born into and have begun to bring into the house: “For the sake of Gogol and Sonia they celebrate, with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati” (64). However, Ashima never relinquishes her Indian heritage and remains the most conservative member of the family. Despite this, Ashima’s home has changed, because she and Ashoke have changed: they have adapted to their new lives to such an extent that, “to a casual observer, the Gangulis ... appear no different from their neighbors” (64). They keenly realize that while they may visit their relatives and, in a sense, their former lives, these relatives “will never breathe the air of a damp New England morning” (64). In the Kantian sense of cosmopolitanism, they have the right to visit and be welcomed, but they cannot stay – America has become their home, whether they fully accept it or not.

Near the end of the book, Ashima is faced with another great upheaval: Ashoke dies while away teaching in Ohio. Even though she mourns this loss deeply, she also realizes that in Ashoke’s absence she has learned to live alone and that she is now finally free. Her children are adults, and with her husband gone, she is no longer duty-bound to anyone. She finally discovers that there is great potential for her hybrid status:

Ashima has decided to spend six months of her life in India, six months in the States ... True to the meaning of her name,⁷ she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere ... the prospect no longer terrifies her ... she is not the same Ashima who had once lived in Calcutta (275-6).

Ashima and her experience of home are no longer tied to a house or a nation; having chosen to finally adopt a hard-won cosmopolitan attitude, India (albeit changed) and America are both home to her. The two places have become interconnected and cannot be seen separately any longer, and neither can her identities. She has, in a sense, become Indian-American, the little

⁷ “[S]he who is limitless, without borders” (Ibid p. 26).

hyphen symbolic for her ability to bridge the two nationalities and tie them together (cf. Chakraborty 2018).

While physically she will still be crossing borders, to Ashima, either direction will now be a homecoming. She will not have a home of her own – she will share that of others, the people she cares about. She finds her continuity, similarity, and familiarity in her family: they may change, but they will always be her family, irrespective of where they live. Cosmopolitanism was forced on her at a young age, but now she actively chooses to cultivate a cosmopolitan attitude, to “be without borders” (Lahiri 276) and recognize the interconnected nature of her worlds.

Gogol, Nikhil, Nick

As the child of first-generation immigrants, Gogol faces many of the same difficulties as his mother did, feeling out of place for a large part of his life. While Ashima eventually adopts a cosmopolitan attitude, Gogol still has a long way to go by the end of the novel.

Unlike his family, Gogol does not feel at home either in India or in the United States. He feels split between nations, between his parents’ two homes, and fails to see them as connected or to find a home of his own. His struggle takes place on the level of his identity, and on the level of nationality, both of which only exacerbate each other. While his mother’s name reflects her eventual cosmopolitanism, Gogol’s discomfort with his many names reflects his struggle: named after a Russian author to whom he feels no connection whatsoever, he officially adopts his Indian name, Nikhil, and then allows it to be abbreviated and Americanized to Nick. Gogol grew up in the States and embraces its culture, but he still feels like a foreigner because of his Indian heritage. Additionally, he feels guilty for rejecting that heritage, believing that “his immersion [in one culture] is a betrayal of [the other]” (141). He treats the various cultural influences in his life as mutually exclusive, bordered domains, refusing to see the continuities between them, and for each domain, he has a separate identity, marked by whichever name he is known by – Gogol to his parents and in India, Nick or Nikhil to his friends in America.

In his attempts to leave his old name behind, ironically enough Gogol only comes closer to it. Ashoke decided to name his son Gogol, partly because the hospital’s administration required a name before they could take him home, but also because the author Gogol saved his life – after a traumatic train crash, a dying Ashoke gains the attention of rescue workers by dropping a crumpled page of Gogol’s story “The Overcoat”. In many ways, this was a border-crossing experience: the liminal space of the train itself, being in transit; the border between life and death; even the blankness of an institution such as a hospital adds to it. Thus, the name Gogol

becomes inevitably linked with this transitional space – suspended, with no ties to any fixed time or location. This rootlessness can be connected to the cosmopolitan attitude as it is commonly understood – a being at home everywhere and nowhere – or even the Kantian sense, being a guest everywhere and nowhere.

However, in my understanding of the concept, this rootlessness is also inextricably bound up with a specific sense of home; a certain continuity, similarity, or familiarity. In other words, the cosmopolitan may be rootless, but not home-less, as Gogol is. He spends much of his time in trains, planes, cars, and other forms of transport, suspended, a continual tourist – Marc Augé’s supermodern – from which he never really disembarks. Gogol’s choice to become an architect, to design potential homes, is somewhat ironic in light of his own home-less state. His quest for home is most likely doomed as long as Gogol does not recognize and accept the various cultural knots and entanglements in his life. By treating different parts of his identity as mutually exclusive, he can never truly be himself. Unlike his mother, Gogol maintains a highly bordered, non-cosmopolitan conception of culture, and, perhaps for that exact reason, never truly discovers home.

Lauren Oya Olamina

The protagonist of Octavia Butler’s *Parable* series handles her transcultural world in yet another way. Unlike Ashima and Gogol, Lauren is not split between nations, and she has nothing she could somehow return to: rather than migrating of her own volition, she is forced to flee. For Lauren, a cosmopolitan attitude becomes quite literally a survival strategy. Raised in a walled community, in an apocalyptic world full of dangerous, pyromanic drug addicts, she intends to migrate North, where life is rumored to be better. After her walled community is destroyed, she becomes a refugee, and her cosmopolitan aspirations become a necessity for survival.

Along the way, Lauren discovers and develops her new religion, Earthseed, which preaches that “All that you touch / You Change. / All that you Change / Changes you. / The only lasting truth / Is Change. / God / Is Change” (*Sower* 3). Through her verses, Lauren preaches transculturality on a personal level: a perspective that recognizes cultures, but also individuals “as relational webs and acknowledges the transitory, confluential, and mutually transforming nature of cultures [and individuals]” (Dagnino 2013, 130). To survive in her apocalyptic world, Lauren believes people will have to change themselves in order to meet change. Earthseed preaches a cosmopolitan mindset: a willingness to meet change and adapt to it, but most of all to retain a sense of home in, paradoxically, change.

Having recognized the dangers of boundaries that stopped her walled community from surviving, Lauren sets out to discover the alternative: bridges, connections. Her hyperempathy syndrome, which causes her to share any pain or pleasure she sees, is both a help and a hindrance here. She acknowledges it has made her better able to gauge another person's feelings, but it also leaves her extremely vulnerable – seeing pain incapacitates her, even when she herself inflicts it in self-defense. Another way in which Lauren seeks to connect is via language, in an attempt to bridge Descombes' rhetorical boundaries. Once she has established a small community in the hills of California, she opens a school where “[e]very member of Earthseed learned to read and to write ... most knew at least two languages – usually Spanish and English, since those were the two most useful” (*Talents* 24). These languages will allow them to form yet more bridges, to communicate with more rhetorical unities and perhaps accept and be accepted by these.

The members of Lauren's community have all left or lost their homes, traveled and endured much, and found Earthseed in their search for a better place. Only one Earthseed verse explicitly considers the question of home. It heads chapter seven of *Parable of the Talents*:

The child in each of us
 Knows paradise.
 Paradise is home.
 Home as it was
 Or home as it should have been.

Paradise is one's own place,
 One's own people,
 One's own world,
 Knowing and known,
 Perhaps even
 Loving and loved.

Yet every child
 Is cast from paradise –
 Into growth and destruction,
 Into solitude and new community,
 Into vast, ongoing
 Change (108).

It reflects the upheaval Lauren and her community have gone through and teaches them to find their home in change, rather than simply change their home. They may retain an idealized picture of home, but they must also recognize that it no longer exists if it ever did at all.

In the *Parable* series, Butler takes Diogenes' cosmopolitanism to its limits: “The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars” (*Sower* 77). Lauren envisions not only a community

coming from different corners of California, or even America, but one that will eventually consist of various planetary populations, thus becoming cosmopolitan in its broadest sense: a citizen of the universe. A stark contrast to Gogol's supermodernism, *Earthseed* is all about home: the many homes you will leave, both on Earth and Earth itself. For the *Earthseed* community, home is not limited to this world but is found within the cosmopolitan attitude.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have attempted to redefine the concepts of home and cosmopolitanism to show how either informs the other in this supermodern era. Recognizing the temporal, geographical and rhetorical boundaries of the traditional home, and showing how these boundaries have become increasingly flexible while remaining utterly personal, I have brought this productively opaque concept into conversation with that of cosmopolitanism. Bringing the term back to its classical roots, I have taken cosmopolitanism away from its more imperialist tendencies, and brought it closer to the concept of transculturality, acknowledging differences but focusing on similarities, continuities, and familiarities, an attitude that sees the interconnected nature of various cultures.

Through a transcultural reading of a selection of characters from *The Namesake* and the *Parable* series, I have shown that the cosmopolitan attitude as I define it has become a condition of home. In this constantly changing world, a new conception of home may be the only way to meet "the destabilising flux" of supermodernity, and to be at home anywhere at all (Morley 2000, 3). Both Lauren and Ashima recognize this, but Gogol struggles to accept it. He feels he must choose between America and India, that enjoying one culture means betraying the other, while Lauren and Ashima have realized that there is no such thing as "one" culture. Through their cosmopolitan attitudes, they have found a way to be at home in their transcultural worlds, having recognized that a different understanding of home is needed to be at home at all. In this context, cosmopolitanism has not only changed the meaning of home: it has become a condition of home.

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