

Questioning the Sacrosanct Centrality of Home vis-à-vis Richard McGuire's *Here* (1989)

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Abstract

Home, by virtue of its physicality and concreteness, is generally considered to be the locus of identity; which is probably why the narratives of displacement are propelled by an unmistakable desire for the rootedness that characterises the home. In fact, the very premise of an othered outside is based on the centrality of home; for the nature of home circumscribes the ideas of its negation, i.e., *not home*. The aim of the paper is to question this sacrosanct centrality that is assumed by the discourse of home and to displace it to the realm of the other. The paper, for this purpose, seeks the aid of Richard McGuire's revolutionary comic strip titled *Here* (1989). The focus of McGuire's comic strip is just a single corner of a living room and the same place is portrayed as inhabiting different and multiple moments in time, starting from 500 billion BC to all the way to 2033 AD. The end result is a mind-boggling juxtaposition, reminiscent of a somewhat skewed application of *mise en abîme*, of the multitudinous manifestations of a single location through the successive panels of the comic strip, which tells us not just the story of its inhabitants but also the story of their home. Throughout its six consecutive panels, the comic strip depicts time and human life in flux by creating the illusion of being anchored to the same geographic location. However, what is really interesting is the subtlety with which the comic strip dismantles the entire idea of rootedness that is characteristic of a home because the home too, like its inhabitants, becomes an object in flux. More importantly, by depicting the outside as well as the varying temporal manifestations of the home as inhabiting the home, the comic strip transforms the central figure of home into a microcosm of spatial contestations, thereby transforming the home into a heterotopia.

Key words: *Centrality, Home, Other, Heterotopia.*

Home: A Floating World

The centre has always been regarded the sacrosanct 'transcendental signified'¹ from which a structure derives its meaning. However, the existence of the immutable centre relies on the periphery of the structure, since the periphery delineates the limits of the structure and, by extension, the centre. For instance, the centre of a circle can only exist if there is a periphery to demarcate the boundary of the circle—the beginning and end

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of a structure can only be marked by its periphery; and at the same time, only the centre has the ability to attach meaning and significance to the circle and the periphery that outlines its margins—a structure cannot exist without a centre and a periphery cannot mark the border of a non-existent structure. The centre, thus, assumes and consequently subsumes the periphery.

Now, the periphery, by the virtue of its liminality also acts as the Other to the centre; it is denotative of a realm that exists beyond the locale of the centre and in tandem with the Other that exists beyond the boundary of the structure. Similarly, the physicality of home as the centre of identity—owing to the fact that the quest for an ideal home is an indelible aspect of the life of an individual—circumscribes the ideas of its negation, i.e., *not home*.² However, if, centre (and by extension, home) is a set of both what qualifies it and what does not, i.e., the periphery and the Other; then the centrality of centre and hence, of home becomes an illusion. The aim of the paper is to explore, analyse and expose, through Richard McGuire's revolutionary comic strip titled 'Here' (1989),³ how the apparently immutable physicality and illusory centrality of home by the virtue of its illimitable ability of evolution and because of its porous boundary that leads to the merging of the inside and the outside fails as the concrete locus of identity it is generally assumed to be.

Locating Home as a Sacrosanct Centre

The definition of 'home' is perhaps as varied as its physical and imaginary⁴ manifestations. This multidimensional and multi-layered space that is both abstract and concrete; real and virtual has inspired innumerable theorisation. For instance, Sarah Ahmed highlights how home is perceived as a pure and static space, with fixed boundaries, devoid of any movement or desire.⁵ However, Chapman and Hockey question this very purity of home by pointing out that the private space of 'home' while shielding us from the public gaze is seldom beyond the intrusions by the outsiders which serves to enhance the fragility of the boundary between the public and the private domains that the space of the home generally segregates.⁶ Concurrently, Clare Cooper focuses on the indelible connection between home and self through her assessment of 'home' as the symbol of the self. According to her, as we get comfortable with the static space of 'home' our sense of self segues into the designated physical space and everything within that space is encoded with messages that reveals something about

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the self both to ourselves as well as the outsiders.⁷ Conversely, Mary Douglas in her essay 'The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space' defines home as 'a kind of space,' a 'localizable idea' where only the space matters, the fixity and the quantity of space are of little consequence.⁸ John Hollander in his essay titled 'It all Depends,' while sifting through a range of literary and linguistic definitions of 'home' distinguishes between 'home' and 'house.'⁹ Instead of exclusively home, Doreen Massey in 'Double Articulation: A Place in the World' explores the idea of any 'place' as a set of social interrelations situated in a particular location and as the social interactions and processes evolve so does the nature of the place.¹⁰ She too, like Chapman and Hockey, questions the impossibility of the existence of a 'pure' place as its identity has always been in flux. Nigel Rapport and Andrew Dowson in the introductory essay to their edited collection *Migrants of Identity: Perceptions of Home in a World of Movement*, emphasise the need to broaden our understanding of home to accommodate the fluidity of the perpetual movement of the contemporary individual.¹¹ Meanwhile, focusing on the consumerist aspect of the individual, Peter Saunderson in 'The Meaning of 'Home' in Contemporary English Culture' suggests that home in the contemporary western societies is the centre of consumption—'The home is not only itself an object of consumption, but it is also the container within which much consumption takes place.'¹² Home is 'socio-spatial system,' according to Saunders and Williams.¹³ Peter Somerville foregrounds the multiple dimensions of home, both experiential as well as ideological, with respect to its key signifiers such as hearth, root, shelter, etc.¹⁴ While Aviezer Tucker's treatment of home is philosophical one—'Home is usually a multi-level structure that combines several *single-level homes*, such as an emotional home, a geographical home, a cultural home etc.'¹⁵ For Gaston Bachelard home is a 'felicitous space' having one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind.'¹⁶ Similarly, Shelley Mallett in her essay, 'Understanding Home: A Critical Review of Literature,' defines home as a place of confluence of time and space, of the self and the Other as well as of the animate and the inanimate, and more importantly of the action/interaction and the memory of it:

Home is a place but it also a space inhabited by family, people, things and belongings—a familiar, if not comfortable space where particular activities and relationships are lived...a virtual place, a repository for

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memories of the lived space.¹⁷

Nevertheless, however we choose to define 'home,' its connection to our self, our identity and our everyday existence and survival is undeniable: 'Home is a cyclical construction of us. We shape home and home shapes us.'¹⁸

Home in its most basic form is a walled refuge conducive to our existence.¹⁹ Joanne Richardson believes it to be 'the connection between people and their space'²⁰ or a 'socio-spatial system,'²¹ as referred to by Saunders and Williams. For the purpose of this paper, we will begin with the idea of home as a physical space, a walled space wherein the walled inside demarcates home and the space beyond is the outside. Interestingly, this walled space of home is not only a demarcator of inside and outside it is also a conserver of the distinction between the two, and by extension of mine/not-mine and I/not-I—home belongs to the individual while the outside does not. Home, therefore, is a place/space that is not only functional in the process of creation of one's identity; it is simultaneously a marker and reflection of an individual's identity as well.²² A similar sentiment is expressed by Vaclav Havel in his *Summer Meditations* where he perceives home as an inalienable aspect of the human identity:

All the circles of our home . . . are an inalienable part of us, and an inseparable element of our human identity. Deprived of all the aspects of his home, man would be deprived of himself, of his humanity.²³

The physical space of home has a certain concreteness associated with it because of which it is considered to be the locus of identity, which is probably why the narratives of displacement are propelled by an unmistakable desire for the rootedness that characterises the home. As the locus of identity, the rooted structure of home plays a central role in the everyday existence of an individual and this premise of the centrality of home gives rise to an Othered outside consisting of everything that is irrelevant to the existence and identity of the individual.

Spatiality of Home: Here or There?

McGuire's 'Here' narrates the history of a corner of a living room in six pages, each page consisting of six panels. As Lee Konstantinou notes:

Each panel features a dominant image of the corner of a room overlaid with smaller panels displaying other images, images of the same room in the past and the future...the panel windows jump around in time and, taken together, don't tell a unified or straightforward story...²⁴

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The living room, in this context, is the heart; a communal space where all the inhabitants as well as the occasional outsiders interact. It is also a space which is connected to all the other rooms. McGuire's choice of the living room corner as the subject of his narrative is suggestive of his intention to delve into the heart of the issue of the centrality of home and he seems to be committed to his endeavour to explore the home-outside/centre-Other dichotomy.

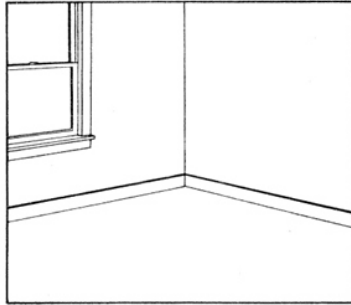


Figure 1. Panel depicting the empty corner, Richard McGuire, 'Here,' *Comic Art 8* (2006): 8

The first panel of the first page depicts an empty corner devoid of any referents that may point to a date, a time or a place—other signifieds; it represents a pure transcendental signified before it is tainted²⁵ by the presence of various referents and signifiers. The next three panels are labelled '1957' and illustrate the events preceding and succeeding the birth of a child—a boy. These panels serve to highlight how an empty space has given way to network of familial relations and human-object interconnection; and how a transcendental signified has been caught in the play of deference-*différance*.²⁶

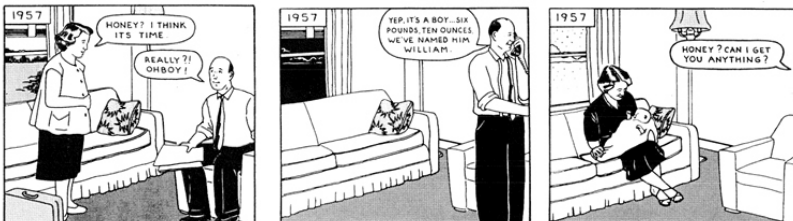


Figure 2. Panels 2, 3 and 4 depicting human relations and human-object interconnection, Richard McGuire, 'Here,' *Comic Art 8* (2006): 8

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The first of the three panels above captures a woman undergoing labour—‘Honey? I think its time...’²⁷ refers to the time of birth of the child. The view from the window makes it amply clear that it is day. Interestingly, in the next panel which announces the birth of the boy, the window overlooks a nightscape which again shifts to an early morning scenery in the subsequent panel. These three panels not only capture time in flux but also flesh out the evolving connection between a wife and a husband as they expand as a unit to include their new born boy. The empty corner has given way a carpeted corner with a sofa set and a lamp and temporally anchored to 1957. Simultaneously the dyadic wife-husband relation has given way to a triadic child-mother-father unit. Therefore, both the home and the identities of the people in it are equally in flux.

The next panel is interesting as the panel dated ‘1957’ shrinks and is enveloped by another panel dated ‘1922’ depicting a separate set of human-object-action interrelations. In the final panel of the first page the panel dated ‘1957’ shrinks further, while the larger panel labelled ‘1971’ is interrupted by yet another panel dated ‘1999’ depicting the antics of a cat. Even though the space and its location essentially remain unchanged the carpeting, the sofa and even the drapes have changed along with the people and their social connections. The pictorial juxtaposition of the condition of the corner across varying timelines perfectly captures the evolving face of home. The corner, despite being the same physical corner belonging to the same location of the very same home becomes unrecognisable across its various manifestations. This becomes even more discernible when we realise that the demand for a feeding bottle in the sub-panel dated 1957 is fulfilled by a glass of drink in the panel dated 1971— the contrasting scenarios make the same space of home seem alien to one another. Home is, thus, increasingly assuming a form much unlike it, a heterotopic space of juxtaposed incompatibilities.²⁸

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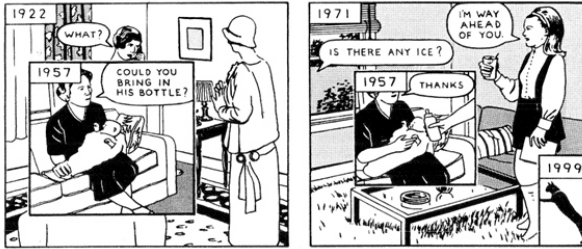


Figure 3. Increasing invasion of panels, Richard McGuire, ‘Here,’ *Comic Art* 8 (2006): 8

This collage of the multiple versions of the living-room corner across different moments in time crescendos and culminates into a mind-boggling juxtaposition, reminiscent of a somewhat skewed application of *mise en abîme*, of the multitudinous manifestations of a single location through the successive panels of the comic strip, which tells us not just the story of its inhabitants but also the story of their home:

In McGuire’s experiment, space and time together form a unified four-dimensional block, and ‘Here’ gives us interesting cross sections of that block. We may experience time as a mundane sequence of moments...but we should not forget that other times are equally real, existing *where* (if not *when*) we stand...²⁹

The first page problematizes the concept of ‘home’ by depicting the home as a perpetually changing phenomenon within the framework of an immutable space. All the versions of the original corner that have been portrayed in the comic are, therefore, simultaneously present and absent within the same living room and by association the same home. As a result, none of the corners qualify as the authentic corner belonging to an authentic home. At the same time, the home itself, due to the multiplicity of its manifestations, ends up transcending its presence by following the spectres of traces belonging to various signifiers. By depicting home as both here (a reference to the title) and not, McGuire ends up shaking the unchanging core that justifies the sacrosanct centrality of home. Once again, home as a culmination of multiple versions of itself is assuming a *heterotopic* identity encompassing the sets of relations (physical, spatial and temporal) that designate home, its traces and its absence.

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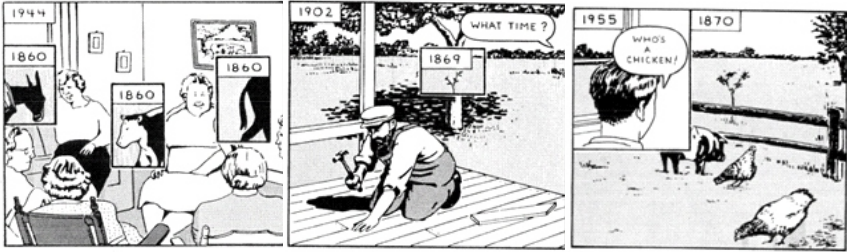


Figure 4. The merging of inside and outside, Richard McGuire, 'Here,' *Comic Art 8* (2006): 9-10

The second page consists of similar juxtapositions with the exception of the final panel. The final panel consists of sub-panels labelled '1860' containing snapshots of what seem to be a donkey and a cow. This sub-panel is one of the many onslaughts of the outside world within the realm of the home that we will come across in the subsequent panels. Other examples include panels 2 and 6 of page 3, where the second panel depicts the home during the process of its construction—a limbic space of existence and non-existence that we encounter again in the second panel of page 4 that depicts the process of demolition of the physical home—and the sixth panel depicts the space of home coexisting with the pre-existent outside that is the current locus of home.

In the first panel a human social gathering is interspersed with snaps of farm animals belonging to 1860. Humans generally belong to the realm of home while farm animals belong outside, but by juxtaposing the two within the space of home McGuire is trying to bridge the gulf between home and the outside world. Interestingly, what begins as an invasion of the outside world is later revealed to be an encroachment by the home on the outside as we get a glimpse of its construction in the second panel. This becomes obvious in the third panel where McGuire reveals that the invasive outside predates the home. The sub-panels not only depict the corner of the home in flux, they also highlight the evolving nature of the outside as made apparent through the sub-panel dated 1869 and the panel dated 1870.

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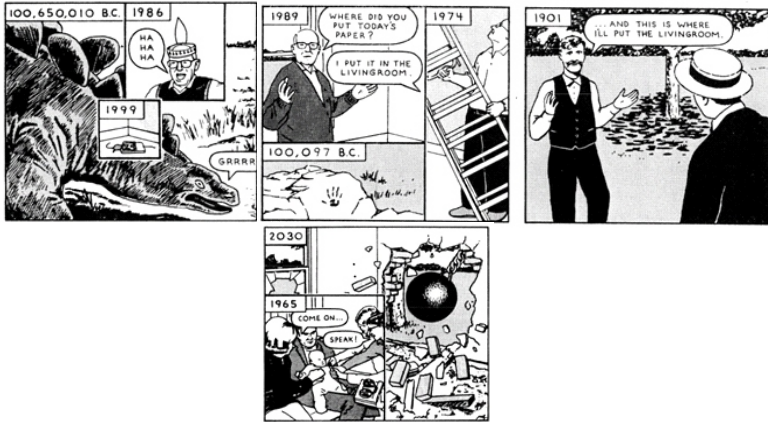


Figure 5. Evolution of home from genesis to demolition, Richard McGuire, ‘Here,’ *Comic Art 8* (2006): 11-12

In panel 4 of page 4, we time-travel back to 100,650,010 B.C. only to find the space of home as being inhabited by a dinosaur while in the fifth panel we are lurched ahead to 2032 where we encounter the space of home post-demolition. Similarly, panels 1 and 2 of page 5 take us to a time before the concrete, physical space of the home came into being, while panel 5 of page 5 brings us forward to 2033—post-demolition timeline. The panel dated 1901 is interesting as it is the only panel which portrays the outside only. The only presence of home lies in the suggestion of its possible presence through ‘...and this is where I’ll put the living room.’³⁰

In page 6, every single panel excepting panel 4 recreate the space of home as being simultaneously inhabited by the outside (both pre-construction and post-demolition). Interestingly, McGuire steadily increases the intensity of the invasion of the space of home by the outside, only to reveal (almost like a magician) that the outside has been part of the home and vice versa all along. The ‘here,’ that is home becomes a conglomeration of different spaces across different timelines co-existing within the periphery of the same place. McGuire, thus, not only presents the different versions of the same corner of the living room, but also its absence. This absence both precedes the existence of the home as well as its ultimate demolition. What McGuire seems to suggest is that home is always present even when it is absent and always absent even when it is not. More importantly, in the second panel of the fifth page, home is not only absent, the space that has been allotted to the home has been taken over

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completely by the outside. Home, therefore, essentially becomes one with its Other, the outside world—a sum total of all its manifestations and everything else that qualifies as *not home*. The sacrosanct home that is the centre of McGuire's narrative, thus, assumes the quality of a space with questionable spatiality.

The Temporality of Home: Here or Not?

There is a temporal dimension to the physicality of home, and McGuire through his comic explores how the home's presence in the realm of 'here,' implies a temporal presence as well. When we refer to something as being present 'here' we assume both its spatial and temporal presence—whatever is present 'here' exists both in the physical or spatial vicinity and within the immediate temporal purview. Throughout its thirty-six consecutive panels, the comic strip depicts time and human life in flux. The space occupied by the corner of the living room is shown to exist across varying centuries and millennia which although works in concert with the notion of home as an eternal, unvarying, unmovable *arche* can be contrasted with its perpetual mutability; thereby, making its centrality doubtful. The centre forbids transformation while the essence of McGuire's home is change. Simultaneously, the illusion of being anchored to the same geographic location heightens our awareness of the temporal fluidity that is innate to the locale of home. The central is eternal and hence, timeless. McGuire's home on the contrary is completely rooted time, and even though the focus lies on its everlasting quality, it is anything but timeless.

The first panel is undated and serves to highlight the perennial and, hence, timeless, quality of the space of home. The second panel launches into the eternal river of time *in medias res*, i.e., in 1957. Then, the first panel of the fifth page takes us as far into the future as 2033 A.D. while the final panel of the comic takes us back to the prehistoric era of 500, 957, 406, 073 B.C.

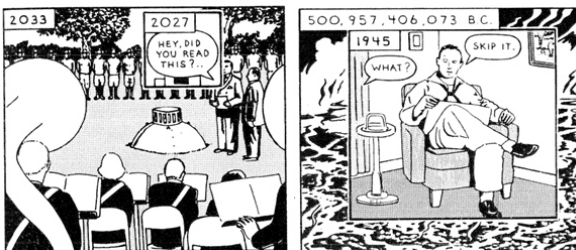


Figure 6. Travelling from 2033 A.D. to 500, 957, 406, 073 B.C., Richard McGuire, 'Here,' *ComicArt* 8 (2006):13

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Home, for McGuire, is not just a space inhabiting a specific time; it is also a culmination and combination of all its manifestations across different times. Home, thus, even while being rooted in a physical place may not be temporarily rooted. McGuire's home which begins as a space that is present or 'here' eventually inhabits multiple presents and the 'here' becomes a confluence of all the presents and the traces of presence. The comic format here is particularly useful as it allows us to envision the

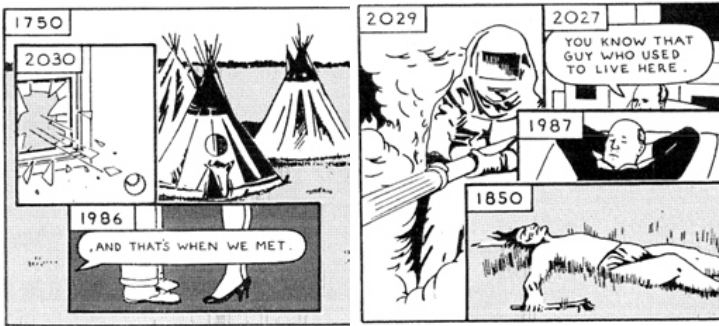


Figure 7. Panels 5 and 2 of page 6 depicting home in its various temporal manifestations, Richard McGuire, 'Here,' *Comic Art 8* (2006):6

different presents within the same space. For instance, in the final panel of the final page of the comic the two sub-panels are as temporarily distanced as any space can be—the larger panel belonging to 500, 957, 406, 073 B.C. and the smaller sub-panel belonging to 1945. Similarly, in the second panel of the same page we have four sub-panels, all belonging to different times—2029, 2027, 1987 and 1850.

The second panel of the last page of the comic is particularly fascinating. The main panel has been divided into four sub-panels with four men in four different timelines and the man from the 2027 panel asks, 'You know that guy who used to live here.'³¹ All the men are inhabiting their particular 'here,' all the 'heres' are equally present, all of them carry the traces of the presence of one another and 'that guy who used to live here'³² may refer to any of them. McGuire's home stacks multiple fleeting timelines to create the effect of accumulating time, thereby bringing together both the heterotopias of fleeting time and accumulating time.³³ This temporal fluidity of home becomes concretised by the visual depiction of its numerous realisations via the superimposed and

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juxtaposed sub-panels.

McGuire, therefore, with a deft subtlety, dismantles the entire idea of rootedness that is characteristic of a home because the home too, like its inhabitants, becomes an object in temporal flux. More importantly, by depicting the outside as well as the varying temporal manifestations of the home as inhabiting the space of home, the comic strip transforms central figure of home into a microcosm of spatial contestations, thereby transforming the home into a space that neutralises its very existence by the virtue of being its own Other. For example, in panel 5 of the final page the home belonging to both 1986 and 2030 is subsumed by the absence of it in 1750; while in panel 2 the home belonging to 1987 and 2027 cohabit the 2029 home on fire and the absence of it in 1850. McGuire's home is the centre which contains the locus of the identity of not just the physical space of the home but also of its people, an Other that constantly invades the existence of home with its non-existence. His home floats in time and yet is firmly rooted in it too, at the same time it encloses the inside only to open itself up to the illimitable possibilities of the outside and like heterotopia³⁴ that constantly suspects, neutralises and inverts a set of relations that designate, quantify and delineate home. This leads one to question how far the temporal and physical space of home can be used as a locus or marker of the evolving human identity, since the very space of home abounds in inconsistencies and mutations.

Endnotes:

¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.' *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 354.

² M. Jackson qtd. in Mallett, 'Understanding Home,' p. 70.

³ Richard McGuire, 'Here,' *Comic Art 8* (2006): 8-13.

⁴ Salman Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands,' *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Penguin Books, 1992).

⁵ S. Ahmed, 'Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement,' *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2.3 (1999): 329-347.

⁶ T. Chapman, and J. Hockey, 'The Ideal Home as it is Imagined and as it is Lived,' *Ideal homes?: Social Change and Domestic life*, eds. T. Chapman, and J. Hockey (London: Routledge, 1999): 1-13.

⁷ C. Cooper, 'The House as Symbol of the Self,' *Environmental Psychology*:

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⁸ M. Douglas, 'The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space,' *Social Research* 58.1 (1991): 287-307.

⁹ J. Hollander, 'It All Depends,' *Social Research* 58.1 (1991): 31-49.

¹⁰ D. Massey, 'A Place Called Home?' *The Question of 'Home': New Formations* 17 (1992): 3-15;— 'Double Articulation: A Place in the World' in A. Bammer ed., *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 110-121.

¹¹ N. Rapport and A. Dawson, 'The Title and the Book' in *Migrants of Identity*, pp. 3-17.

¹² P. Saunders, 'The Meaning of 'Home' in Contemporary English Culture,' *Housing Studies* 4.3 (1989): 177-192.

¹³ P. Saunders, and P. Williams, 'The Constitution of the Home: Towards a Research Agenda,' *Housing Studies*, 3.2 (1988): 81-93.

¹⁴ P. Somerville, 'Homelessness and the Meaning of Home: Rooflessness and Rootlessness?' *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 16.4 (1992): 529-539.

¹⁵ A. Tucker, 'In Search of Home,' *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 11.2 (1994): 181-187.

¹⁶ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 6.

¹⁷ Shelley Mallett, 'Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature' *Sociological Review* 52.1 (2004): 63.

¹⁸ Joanna Richardson, *Place and Identity: The Performance of Home* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 1.

¹⁹ Giddens qtd. in Mallett, 'Understanding Home,' p. 68.

²⁰ Joanna Richardson, *Place and Identity*, p. 7.

²¹ Saunders and Williams qtd. in Joanna Richardson, *Place and Identity*, p. 7.

²² Dupuis and Thorn qtd. in Mallett, 'Understanding Home,' p. 66.

²³ Vaclav Havel qtd. in A. Tucker, 'In Search of Home,' *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 11.2 (1994): 182.

²⁴ Lee Konstantinou, 'A Theory of 'Here',' *The Account: A Journal of Poetry, Prose, and Thought*, A Theory of "Here" | The Account: A Journal of Poetry, Prose, and Thought (theaccountmagazine.com). Accessed 05.08.2021.

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- ²⁵ The terms 'pure' and 'tainted' refer to S. Ahmed and D. Massey's idea of home as a pure and untainted space which erodes with time and socio-spatial interactions.
- ²⁶ Jacques Derrida, 'Différance,' *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), pp.21–27.
- ²⁷ McGuire, 'Here,' *Comic Art 8* (2006), p. 8.
- ²⁸ Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, 'Of Other Space,' *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986): 25. *JSTOR*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/464648>. Accessed 26.07.2021.
- ²⁹ Lee Konstantinou, A Theory of 'Here.'
- ³⁰ McGuire, 'Here,' p. 12.
- ³¹ McGuire, 'Here,' p. 13.
- ³² McGuire, 'Here,' p. 13.
- ³³ Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, 'Of Other Space', p. 26.
- ³⁴ Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, 'Of Other Space', pp. 22-27.