

# FEMINIST REFLECTIONS ON THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF HOME

Luna Dolezal (University of Exeter)

*Through exploring some of the foundational and structural aspects of the experience of home from a feminist perspective, this article will draw from Iris Marion Young's reflections on home, female experience and embodiment to argue that home is central to our ontological and subjective constitution. While acknowledging that home can be a problematic concept in the socio-political realm, particularly for feminist thinkers, this article contends that a feminist reading of the phenomenology of home is crucial to understanding some of the foundational features of human subjectivity. In doing so, it will explore aspects of some existing phenomenological accounts of home and dwelling which posit that home is an ontological structure, outlining a feminist phenomenology of home that explores three interwoven aspects: (1) home as forming an ontological ground of human subjectivity; (2) home as a gendered space; (3) and pregnant embodiment as the "first home."*

*Dans cet article, nous explorerons quelques aspects fondamentaux de l'expérience du « chez-soi » dans une perspective féministe, inspirée par les réflexions d'Iris Marion Young à propos du chez-soi, de l'expérience féminine et du corps vécu. Nous affirmerons que le chez-soi est au centre de notre constitution ontologique et subjective. Tout en prenant acte du caractère problématique du « chez-soi » dans le champ sociopolitique, et ce, tout particulièrement pour les philosophes féministes, nous soutiendrons qu'une approche féministe de la phénoménologie du « chez-soi » est nécessaire pour comprendre plusieurs aspects fondamentaux de la subjectivité humaine. Pour ce faire, nous présenterons d'abord quelques théories phénoménologiques existantes du chez-soi et de l'habitation [dwelling] qui considèrent le chez-soi comme une structure ontologique. Ensuite, nous insisterons sur trois aspects entrelacés d'une phénoménologie féministe du chez-soi : (1) le chez-soi comme fondation ontologique de la subjectivité humaine; (2) le chez-soi comme un espace genré; et (3) l'expérience corporelle d'être enceinte comme le « premier chez-soi ».*

## I. Introduction

In her book *The Need for Roots*, French philosopher and religious thinker Simone Weil writes: “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.” She also admits that, “it is one of the hardest to define.”<sup>1</sup> What Weil suggests is that each human being has a spiritual need for a “home.” Iris Marion Young follows Weil in emphasizing the significance of a homeplace. In her essay “House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme,” she argues that home is a “material anchor for a sense of agency and a shifting and fluid identity.”<sup>2</sup> Home, for Young, is theorized to be a necessary site of respite from which the ground of both the personal and the political becomes realized. Weil’s and Young’s reflections echo a sentiment that appears time and again in philosophy and literature: the human subject yearns and needs to be lodged in a native place, to feel as though one has come from somewhere, belongs somewhere, and has a context on which one’s being can rest and return.

However, feminist critiques have demonstrated that home is an ambivalent concept; it is far from being a neutral ground with uniform significance for all human subjects. Home, as we commonly understand it and experience it, is normally realized as a result of a level of material privilege, economic stability, and salient citizenship rights. Material homeplaces often elude the displaced, and those fleeing poverty, persecution, war, or hardship. In addition, home is a highly gendered concept, where the associations between homemaking, domesticity, and women’s social roles have an oppressive and continuing history. As Young points out, while Odysseus travels home through a series of daring adventures, Penelope preserves the home, waiting by the hearth, epitomizing one of Western culture’s enduring ideas of ideal womanhood: passively, silently, and patiently tending the home so man can emerge into the world and realize his full agency and identity. (HH, 123)

In what follows, I will explore some of the foundational and structural aspects of the *experience of home* from a feminist perspective, drawing in particular from Iris Marion Young’s reflections on home,

---

<sup>1</sup> Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties towards Mankind*, (tr.) A. Wills (London: Routledge, 2002), 43.

<sup>2</sup> Iris Marion Young, “House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme,” in *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 123–54, here 149. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as HH.

female experience, and embodiment. While acknowledging that home can be a problematic concept in the socio-political realm, particularly for feminist thinkers, I will contend that a feminist reading of the phenomenology of home is crucial to understanding some of the foundational features of human subjectivity. In doing so, I will explore aspects of some existing phenomenological accounts of home and dwelling that posit home as an ontological structure. From there I will outline a feminist phenomenology of home that explores three interwoven aspects: 1) home as forming an ontological ground of human subjectivity; 2) home as a gendered space; 3) and pregnant embodiment as the “first home.”

## II. Reflections on Home as Foundational for Subjectivity

While the imaginary of home is one of familial cohesion, existential security, and material comfort, the reality of home—especially for women and children—is often at odds with these ideals. As a result, home is a highly politicized and fraught concept in feminist philosophy. Feminist thinkers have identified the values associated with home, such as privacy, safety, and individuation, as potentially limiting to women, where dwelling in patriarchally imagined domestic spaces can lead to oppression, exclusion, and confinement.<sup>3</sup> Home can be a site of powerlessness, abuse, and psychological oppression, where the potential for the unspeakable to happen is realized in the private spaces behind closed doors. Furthermore, the sexual division of labour continues to burden women, dooming them, some argue, to drudgery and immanence, to use Simone de Beauvoir’s terms<sup>4</sup>, where the bulk of unpaid domestic work is performed by women and female caregivers. In addition, home, for some feminist thinkers, expresses “an oppressive search for certainty and attachment to privilege.” (HH, 125) In other words, the ideal of home can reinforce a privileged position of self in relation to what is “other,” where one’s safety is conditional on reinforcing an entrenched identity, often at the expense of those who are not included.<sup>5</sup>

Young, in her essay “House and Home,” argues that while feminist thinkers are right to point out that the ideal of home has, in many

---

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of some feminist reflections on home see Allison Weir, “Home and Identity: In Memory of Iris Marion Young,” *Hypatia*, vol. 23, no. 3 (2008): 4–21.

<sup>4</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (tr.) H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Weir, “Home and Identity,” 6.

respects, been problematic for women and for feminism, there are aspects of the experience of home that should be acknowledged and reclaimed in the context of feminist politics and the existential conditions of lived experience for women and others. The experience of home, Young argues, has significance for our foundations as relational subjects and for our on-going existential landscape or, in other words, the texture of our day-to-day lives. Many philosophers concur: having a home is important for the terms and quality of our lived experience. It is argued by Young and others that through having a stable home, identity can be successfully constituted, and, furthermore, this allows us to emerge into the world as relational, social, and political subjects.

The phenomenology of home is, in part, about feeling *at home*; it is about belonging: a deep and often unnoticed familiarity that binds one to kin and community. When we are “at home” we feel more grounded, safe, secure, and in tune with our surroundings. Home is the place where, as the philosopher Agnes Heller contends, “no footnotes are needed”; one can speak to others without needing to provide any background information; the body moves through space with a native ease; silence is not threatening.<sup>6</sup> Heller, for instance, sees home as an ontological state, something hardwired into our nature as human subjects, a constant pulse beating in the background no matter what the contingencies of our geography and journeying. The propensity to privilege one place over another, to have a geographical point that acts as the locus of one’s life, an unwavering centre of orientation is, Heller contends, “one of the few constants of the human condition.”<sup>7</sup> Of course we can leave home, and many of us do, whether it is out of choice or necessity, and home can become a memory, a longing, or an Odysseus-like destination, the magnetic pull from which all other travel and living derives its sense.

As a result, the “here” of home is an “anchoring point,”<sup>8</sup> to use the phenomenologist Kirsten Jacobson’s term, that constitutes a complex existential milieu, comprised of place, culture, language, customs, sociality, and tradition, among other elements that orient us in the world as subjects with identities. As Young contends: “Home enacts a specific mode of subjectivity and historicity.” (HH, 138) In other

---

<sup>6</sup> Agnes Heller, “Where Are We at Home?,” *Thesis Eleven*, no. 41 (1995): 1–18, here 6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Kirsten Jacobson, “The Experience of Home and the Space of Citizenship,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 48, no. 3 (2010): 219–45, here 223.

words, “home” provides a centre of orientation, or what might be conceived of as an “existential zero-point,” from which a meaning-giving life unfolds. As Jacobson argues, “home grounds the ‘absolute here’ of our body insofar as it allows the body a settled territory in which it finds itself—explicitly or implicitly—in its ‘here-ness.’”<sup>9</sup> In other words, home is the “here” from which everywhere else is figured as “there.” It is only when we become distanced or estranged from home, that we feel the tug of its significance. Sara Ahmed notes, “we learn what home means, or how we occupy space at home and as home, when we leave home.”<sup>10</sup> The orientation that home provides lets us know when we have “arrived” and when we have “moved away.”<sup>11</sup>

While we may become estranged from our original home through common experiences such as travel, displacement, or migration, our impulse for dwelling means that we create new home spaces wherever we are, carving out, as Jacobson argues, a “place...in which ‘our own’ is privileged and ‘the alien’ is not manifestly present.” (DN, 357) This is a place where we can close the door behind us; where the *other* can enter only with invitation; and where the space around us has a certain *mine-ness*. (see DN, 357) As human subjects engaged in our projects, work, and relationships, we find our daily refuge in this home place. It is where we go to retreat from the world, to gather ourselves, and to rest.

In fact, for most, home is where we return at the end of our day. It is a site of respite, safety, and shelter. Being “at home,” both literally and figuratively, invokes this feeling of security, ease, comfort, and privacy. Home is necessary, Young argues, for the “‘ontological security’ of the person.”<sup>12</sup> She writes: “The deprivation we call ‘homelessness’ concerns not only the dangers of death and illness that prolonged exposure to the elements brings, but also being stripped of a sense of self by not having a space for daily routine and to keep and enjoy certain meaningful things of one’s life.”<sup>13</sup> Of course, this ideal of home as a sanctuary for subjectivity may elude many of

---

<sup>9</sup> Kirsten Jacobson, “A Developed Nature: A Phenomenological Account of the Experience of Home,” *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 42, no. 3 (2009): 355–73, here 361. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as DN.

<sup>10</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Iris Marion Young, “A Room of One’s Own: Old Age, Extended Care, and Privacy,” in *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005 ), 155–70, here 159.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

us, but its possibility, Young argues, should not be discounted wholesale, especially for women who continue to experience routine oppressive objectification, as a result of their physical appearance, and the lurking threat of physical violence when they enter public spaces, along with an enduring tendency to be socialized to experience the body as a “fragile encumbrance” that may easily be injured or hurt.<sup>14</sup>

The experience of being “*looked at*,” as Young notes in her foundational essay “Throwing Like a Girl,” leads to concrete consequences in terms of the phenomenology of embodied experience. (TLG, 39) Living with a sense of heightened bodily visibility and self-consciousness, or in Young’s words, the experience of “bodily existence” as “self-referred” (TLG, 39), is the routine experience of many women when in public spaces *outside of the home*. When one maintains an observer’s or externalized perspective on one’s own body, one experiences the body simultaneously as an object (to be watched) and as a capacity (an *I can*). This division of attention, as Young notes, can alter comportment, disrupting flow and a smooth intentional relation to the world, making movements uncertain, unconfident, and limited. The “inhibited intentionality” that female subjects experience in their agency, as Young describes it (TLG, 35), results from the fact that because of certain conditions in place in patriarchal society, woman, as Straus concedes, “lives her body as *object* as well as *subject*.” (TLG, 44)<sup>15</sup> A woman moves her body, but at the same time watches and monitors herself, and sees her action as that which is “*looked at*,” so in general female bodily comportment does not achieve open, free, and unself-conscious movement. In short, women are more likely to feel under large- and small-scale surveillance when in public spaces, and this has real qualitative consequences for motility, performance, and action.

As a result, the home, for women, is not merely a possible site of rest and respite from one’s daily labour or public activities, but comes to constitute a site of refuge when considering the routine objectification that characterizes the experience of many women; as Jacobson points out: “we do not for the most part *feel* the ‘look’ of the

---

<sup>14</sup> Iris Marion Young, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility and Spatiality,” in *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005 ), 27–45, here 34. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as TLG.

<sup>15</sup> See also Erwin W. Straus, “The Upright Posture,” in *Phenomenological Psychology* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1966), 155.

other upon us in the home.”<sup>16</sup> When we are at home we can move without self-consciousness and the sense of heightened visibility is attenuated if not completely dissipated: “The home establishes a territory in which we feel ourselves and also feel left to ourselves, allowing the other to slip into the background of our experience.”<sup>17</sup> In the space of refuge that being-at-home provides, Jacobson writes, “we are freed up to engage in the most personal activities of our lives—close conversations with other people, taking care of our bodies, engaging in sexual activities, sleeping, giving full range to our emotions, playing,...and so on.”<sup>18</sup> Of course, these comments must be tempered by acknowledging that for many women home is also a site of labour, and sometimes even a site of abuse and domination. As a result, the respite from objectification that being-at-home may provide may be trumped by other oppressive forces that lead to different types of social domination. However, the point here is not to claim that all home spaces are sites of refuge and safety for women, where they are able to return to a sense of full bodily capacity and agency. Instead, it is to acknowledge, following Young, *the potential* that home spaces carry as the “site of the construction and reconstruction of one’s self.” (HH, 153)

In short, while it must be acknowledged that domestic spaces, or home spaces, are often the site of women’s oppression or of refuge, they are also a site of political potential where dignity and resistance can be constituted. Home, in this sense, is the site where one can realize oneself as a *subject*, not an object. As a result, the space that home provides can be a site of political and social resistance.

While it is clear that the experience of home is significant for the human subject’s existential, social, and political landscapes, home is also central to the foundations of subjectivity, something which philosophers and phenomenological thinkers have explored recurrently. Namely, when we return home we can rest and gather ourselves; there is not only respite from the variable demands of the world, but also time and space to reconstitute the self. As Young contends: “My things and my dwelling space support and display *who I am*.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, home is not merely foundational to subjectivity, but also has some relationship to the constitution and continuation of my subjectivity. “Who I am” is accomplished through

---

<sup>16</sup> Jacobson, “The Experience of Home,” 234.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>19</sup> Young, “A Room of One’s Own,” 157.

dwelling in a home place. It is to the idea that home forms a constitutive structure of existence that I will now turn.

### III. Home as the Ground of Being

For many, the experience of home aligns itself neatly with one's material location. Many of us are born and raised in the same place, and often within the same house. When we think of home, we cast our minds back to this physical place, the childhood home, and the experience of "being-at-home" (DN, 356) aligns with the feelings of security, familiarity, and ease that come from this initial familial homeplace. The childhood home is the site where our earliest memories are often shaped and textured. It is precisely the place where "no footnotes are needed," where one's every movement matches the affordances of the material environment and one's every action is deeply understood and accepted within the intersubjective familial milieu. For those of us who did not have the experience of a secure and constant childhood home, its idea often functions as a nostalgic cultural ideal. In fact, nostalgia is positioned at the heart of the concept of home in the Western imaginary, the term's Greek origins signifying a *longing* for the return home, an existential homesickness.<sup>20</sup> The childhood home is the place where one *would be* understood, where one *would be* accepted and where one *would be* able to return and be embraced and cared for unconditionally.

Following these intuitions, Gaston Bachelard positions the house of our infancy to have a particular phenomenological significance. Our possibility to be in the world, "how we take root, day after day," he argues, is inaugurated in the childhood home.<sup>21</sup> In his account of the phenomenology of the home space, the childhood home functions both literally and metaphorically: on the one hand, home is a material structure, a "house" where we are born and raised that provides "shelter" from the time we are infants (PS, 28); on the other hand, home is also a metaphor for the ontological ground of our subjectivity, one of the conditions of the possibility of emerging into the world via a unified and meaningful agency.

---

<sup>20</sup> As Jeff Malpas points out, the term "nostalgia" combines the Greek word *nostos*, which means "home or the return home," with *algos*, which signifies "pain." Thus "the literal meaning of [nostalgia] is the pain associated with the return home." Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place: Explorations in the Topology of Being* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 161.

<sup>21</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (tr.) M. Jolas (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), 26. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PS.

First, home is a material place, the “house” that forms the ground of lived embodied experiences; it is where we learn to walk, sleep, eat, play, communicate, work, clean, care for our belongings, and “how to secure and manage countless other bodily powers.” (DN, 363) For Bachelard, the childhood home is the site where our body schema and behavioural patterns for agency and intersubjectivity are constituted. It is where we acquire embodied skills that realize our situated motor-intentionality in the world. Bachelard writes: “the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits.” (PS, 36) When we are “at home,” both literally and figuratively, the body moves through space with a native ease, there is a “passionate liaison” (PS, 36) between one’s body and the space of one’s first home, or in other words, between one’s motor skills and the affordances of the material home environment. Young concurs: “Part of what it means to *make myself at home* is to develop this habitual bodily accommodation to the structures of spaces.”<sup>22</sup>

Second, the childhood home is also deployed in Bachelard’s account as a metaphorical structure to describe the ontological ground of existence. It is the existential zero-point, where our capacity to be subjects originates. In this way, home forms a pervasive and foundational structure of existence, where one’s subjectivity is constituted: “Before he is ‘cast into the world,’...man is laid in the cradle of the house.... Life begins...enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house.” (PS, 29) Without home, Bachelard contends, “man would be a dispersed being.” (PS, 29) Home is the unifying ground of existence. It is “the human being’s first world,” a primary foundation from which a “conscious metaphysics” can emerge. (PS, 29)

Bachelard’s claims about the significance of home are echoed in other phenomenological texts, where the home, it is contended, forms part of the ground of our being as human subjects. (DN, 356) Home is theorized as a silent “support and structure” for life that constitutes the most foundational level of our existence. (DN, 356) As Anthony Steinbock notes, for Husserl, the “lowest level” of experience is not the ego, but the “home to which the ‘ego’ belongs.”<sup>23</sup> For Heidegger, the experience of “dwelling,” which occurs in a home-place, is man’s primary mode of being.<sup>24</sup> For Emmanuel Levinas, home is central to the human condition. He writes: “The privileged

---

<sup>22</sup> Young, “A Room of One’s Own,” 158.

<sup>23</sup> Anthony J. Steinbock, *Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology after Husserl* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 188.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, (tr.) A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 141–59.

role of the home does not consist in being the end of human activity but in being its condition, and in this sense its commencement.”<sup>25</sup> Jacobson, in her phenomenological account of the experience of home, concurs: “We are beings whose experience of home is that of an *essential* and *inherent* background and foundation.” (DN, 356) Jacobson writes, with reference to Merleau-Ponty, “home grounds the ‘absolute here’ of our body insofar as it allows the body a settled territory in which it finds itself—explicitly or implicitly—in its ‘here-ness.’” (DN, 361) Home constitutes the primary site of our bodily orientation; for these phenomenological thinkers, it is thus part of the ontological ground from which the possibility of subjectivity arises.

#### IV. Home and Gender

Interestingly, while the home serves both literally and metaphorically as the anchor for phenomenological accounts of our ontological foundations, none of the above thinkers gives sustained consideration to the gendered dimension of home. And yet, as noted above, home is a highly gendered concept, where the associations between homemaking, domesticity, and women’s social roles have an oppressive and continuing history. Young explicitly draws attention to this point in her consideration of the experience of home in her essay “House and Home,” especially with respect to Heidegger’s account of dwelling. She writes pointedly: “the comforts and supports of house and home historically come at women’s expense.” (HH, 123) Traditionally it has been, and for the most part continues to be, primarily a woman’s social responsibility to sustain the home and to “serve, nurture and maintain” the infants who live there. (HH, 123)<sup>26</sup> Infants are usually socialized and taught bodily skills by their female caregivers who also literally create the material conditions (the arrangement of furniture, the décor, sustenance through preparing food, the provision of clothing, the household rules and practices, the daily routines and rhythms) from which skill acquisition and the “organic habits” of the body are constituted. In fact, the modes of “feminine” and “masculine” bodily comportment and movement that Young identifies in her analysis in “Throwing Like a Girl” originate in

---

<sup>25</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, (tr.) A. Lingus (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007), 152.

<sup>26</sup> See also Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 44–54.

the sedimented gendered assumptions in the primary home place. The “organic habits” of our bodies are by no means “natural,” as Bachelard’s language implies, but instead are overlaid with the contingent socio-cultural and gendered assumptions about men’s and women’s social roles within and outside the home.

Furthermore, the tasks of “preservation” in homemaking—activities such as cleaning, repairing, remembering, recording, protecting, which usually fall to female caregivers—Young contends, are central to the ground of subjectivity and human agency, starting from childhood. (HH, 142)<sup>27</sup> Young writes:

The work of preservation...involves teaching the children the meaning of things among which one dwells, teaching the children the stories, practices, and celebrations that keep particular meanings alive. The preservation of the things among which one dwells gives people a context for her lives, individuates their histories, gives them items to use in making new projects. (HH, 142)

If the childhood home is to be invoked as a site where subjective constitution takes place, it seems sensible, if not essential, to acknowledge the concrete role that women and their bodies play in this phenomenology, both materially and metaphorically—through their domestic labour, acts of preservation, along with relations of care, sustenance, play, education, nurturing, often preceded, of course, by pregnancy, child birth, and breastfeeding.

In fact, Bachelard’s account of the house and home is haunted by gendered imagery. He leans heavily on maternal metaphors when describing the home: “man” [sic] is “laid in the cradle of the house”; he is “enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house.” (PS, 29)<sup>28</sup> Bachelard notes that, “the poet well knows that the house holds childhood motionless ‘in its arms.’” (PS, 29) Man is then “cast into the world” from this safe home of origin. (PS, 29) For Heidegger, dwelling arises from building “in the sense of preserving and nurturing.”<sup>29</sup> Dwelling is creating a safe haven for protection, sustenance, and this is foundational to our existence. In Levinas’s ontology of dwelling in *Totality and Infinity*, the associations between habitation, home, and femininity are explicit. “The Woman,” writes Levinas, “is the condi-

---

<sup>27</sup> See also Weir, “Home and Identity.”

<sup>28</sup> In these passages, Bachelard himself admits to his invocation of the “maternal features” of the house.

<sup>29</sup> Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” 145.

tion for...the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation."<sup>30</sup> Feminine alterity, Levinas contends, opens up "the dimension of interiority,"<sup>31</sup> the dwelling place or "home," which is the condition of existence in the first place: "To exist henceforth means to dwell,"<sup>32</sup> and this dwelling (read existence) is made possible by the "feminine being," or "Woman."<sup>33</sup> For Husserl, maternity is not just alluded to, but referenced explicitly as part of the structure of home. As Steinbock's reading of Husserl contends: "home is constitutively what I am 'born into,'"<sup>34</sup> and, furthermore, "every new birth is not only a *mundane* occurrence, but also indeed a *transcendental* occurrence" which is figured into "intersubjective and world constitution."<sup>35</sup>

Despite the maternal imagery in phenomenological and ontological discussions of home and dwelling as tied to the foundations of subjectivity, and even the explicit reference to birth in Husserl's generative phenomenology, real flesh-and-blood women do not feature in these accounts, nor do they even appear in a figurative capacity. While it seems obvious that the spatial metaphors, along with the associations with preservation and nurturing, are references to our maternal origins, none of the above thinkers acknowledge the figure of the mother, nor the processes of pregnancy and gestation, as a site of original dwelling. Of course, this tendency to efface or ignore women—especially pregnant women—has a long history within philosophy<sup>36</sup>, especially when considering philosophical accounts of dwelling and hospitality.<sup>37</sup> As phenomenologist

---

<sup>30</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 155.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>33</sup> Levinas's use of the feminine in this context has, not surprisingly, been criticized by feminist scholars at length. See, for example, Diane Perpich, "From the Caress to the Word: Transcendence and the Feminine in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*, (ed.) T. Chanter (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 28–52. See also Lisa Guenther, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 58–73; Tina Chanter, *Time, Death, and the Feminine: Levinas with Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 241–62; and Stella Sandford, "Levinas, Feminism and the Feminine," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, (ed.) S. Critchley and P. Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 139–60.

<sup>34</sup> Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 193.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>36</sup> See Luce Irigaray, *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, (tr.) C. Burke and G. C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere I discuss Levinas's and Derrida's use of maternal imagery, as well as the effacement of real women in their accounts of hospitality. See my "The

Lisa Guenther notes, “to be born is, in a sense, to forget one’s birth.”<sup>38</sup> This forgetting erases the very condition of one’s existence, namely a woman who gestates and gives life through birth, and then labours invisibly for years, if not decades, in the various activities involved in domesticity and child-rearing. In fact, this forgetting of birth, maternity, and domestic labour has shaped the tendencies of Western thought to privilege the self-conscious individual (male) subject as the starting point for reflection.<sup>39</sup>

Adding new layers to this familiar critique, Young argues that the preoccupation with home by male philosophers arises from “nostalgia”: a longing to “return to a lost home” (HH, 129) that is in fact “enclosing warmth of the original union with the mother.” (HH, 128) She writes: “Man yearns nostalgically for an original union with the mother within the safe walls of warmth. In women men look nostalgically to return to their own lost home; thus they fail to face women as subjects with their own identities and need of covering.” (HH, 129) In this way, the mother’s body continually haunts philosophical accounts of subjective constitution:<sup>40</sup> the imaginary of “the home” is essentially bound up to the imaginary of “the mother.” Women, as maternal figures, are often present in phenomenological accounts of subjective constitution as an implicit or silent background, but rarely as a constituting subject.

In traditional phenomenological accounts of home, the dematerialized and idealized feminine silently creates the space and ground where subjective constitution takes place for male subjects, but the female is effaced in its creation. Young writes, with reference to Irigaray’s critique of Heidegger: “In the idea of ‘home,’ man projects onto woman the nostalgic longing for the lost wholeness of the original mother...The price she pays for supporting his subjectivity, however, is dereliction, having no self of her own.” (HH, 124) Women create, nurture, and maintain the homeplace, Young argues, “so that the bodies and souls of men and children gain confidence and expansive subjectivity to make their mark on the world. This homey role

---

Metaphors of Commercial Surrogacy,” in *New Feminist Perspectives on Embodiment*, (ed.) L. Dolezal and C. Fischer (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

<sup>38</sup> Guenther, *Gift of the Other*, 1.

<sup>39</sup> See for example, Rosalyn Diprose, *The Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment and Sexual Difference* (London: Routledge, 1994), 12.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Andrew Parker, *The Theorist’s Mother* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012). See also Irina Aristarkhova, *Hospitality of the Matrix: Philosophy, Biomedicine, and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

deprives women of support for their own identity and projects.” (HH, 123) Both literally (in many cases) and metaphorically, women serve as the silent ground from which male subjects constitute their agency and identity. If we are to then speak of home as an ontological structure, even if only metaphorically, it seems that this structure has to be inflected by these gendered dimensions. Rereading the citation of Bachelard discussed above—“Before he is ‘cast into the world,’ man is laid in the cradle of the house...Life begins...enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house” (PS, 29)—one would be forgiven for thinking that Bachelard’s discussion of the childhood “house” is in fact a protracted metaphor for the maternal body, or womb.<sup>41</sup>

To properly thematize the “first home,” or the originary ground from which human subjectivity is constituted, it seems sensible to return to a phenomenological description of the woman’s body prior to the childhood home, or any other structures we build for our dwelling. As Young points out, man theorizes home, constructs home and makes himself *at home*, “on the basis of woman as already always positioned as the enveloping nurturing presence.” (HH, 128) It is the mother’s body “from whose dark womb” man “emerges to build solid structures in the light of day.” (HH, 128) In fact, Young’s account of pregnant embodiment, gives some first clues to the constitutional role that the pregnant body plays in the originary constitution of the body schema and sociality.

## V. Pregnant Embodiment as the First Home

When considering the ontological ground of the constitution of the human subject, or the “home” from which we acquire the requisites of subjectivity, it seems inevitable, as some feminist thinkers have

---

<sup>41</sup> Bachelard makes passing reference to the maternal aspects of the childhood home in *PS*, noting that the house has “maternal features” (PS, 29), but he does not develop the line of thought that the maternal body may in fact constitute a first home, the foundation from which the childhood home comes into being. However, it should be noted that Bachelard pursues maternal themes more fully in Part II of his work *Earth and the Reveries of Will*, where various “images of refuge: house, belly and cave” are explored with explicit reference to the suggestion that they reference “the desire to reenter the womb.” Gaston Bachelard, *Earth and Reveries of the Will*, (tr.) K. Haltman (Dallas: The Dallas Institute Publications, 2002), 10.

recently contended, that “pregnant flesh [is the] original home”<sup>42</sup> or “first home.”<sup>43</sup> Of course, when we pause to reflect on the fact that every human subjectivity has been gestated in and birthed from a women’s body, this insight seems so self-evident so as to not even warrant comment. However, as noted above, there is a long-standing tendency to “forget” our maternal origins, along with a tendency within phenomenology to thematize the origins of subjectivity and intersubjectivity as beginning through encounters between self-aware, separate subjects who can recognize aspects of consciousness.<sup>44</sup> Theorizing pregnant embodiment as the “first home” means that the constitution of the body schema (or our “organic habits” to use Bachelard’s terminology), from which motor-action, agency, meaningful perception, and intersubjective relations are made possible, begins not in the childhood home but instead, both materially and metaphorically, in the womb.<sup>45</sup>

Young’s innovative essay “Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation” gives some background to pursuing this line of reasoning. She argues that in pregnancy, there is a sense of “doubling” in a woman’s experience of her body and self: the “pregnant subject...is decentered, split, or doubled.... She experiences her body as herself and not herself. Its inner movements belong to another being, yet they are not other, because her body boundaries shift.”<sup>46</sup> In experiences of pregnancy, after certain developmental stages there is a sense of inner otherness, a palpable sense of something “other” that ultimately cannot be assimilated into oneself. Young notes: “The first movements of the fetus produce this sense of the splitting

---

<sup>42</sup> Frances Gray, “Original Habitation: Pregnant Flesh as Absolute Hospitality,” in *Coming to Life: Philosophies of Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering*, (ed.) S. LaChance Adams and C. R. Lundquist (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 71–87, here 77.

<sup>43</sup> Aristarkhova, *Hospitality of the Matrix*, 44.

<sup>44</sup> I discuss this point more in other writing. See my “The Phenomenology of Self-Presentation: Describing the Structures of Intercorporeality with Erving Goffman,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2017), 237–54.

<sup>45</sup> I discuss this point at length in “Phenomenology and Intercorporeality in the Case of Commercial Surrogacy,” in *Body/Self/Other: The Phenomenology of Social Encounters*, (ed.) L. Dolezal and D. Petherbridge (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017), 311–36.

<sup>46</sup> Iris Marion Young, “Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation,” in *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 46–61, here 46. For a discussion of Young’s account of doubling in terms of bodily integrity see also Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 51–53.

subject.... I experience my insides as the space of another, yet my own body.”<sup>47</sup> Through this experience of “splitting,” there is a felt and lived sense that the foetus, especially through its movements in the later stages of pregnancy, constitutes its own “body,” somehow independent (while simultaneously wholly dependent and inseparable) from its gestational mother.

Sara Heinämaa articulates this point in contrast to Young’s account. While Young posits (as mentioned above) that the movements of the foetus “belong to another being, *yet they are not other*, Heinämaa argues that “gestation, as experienced by women who live it in the first person, includes a separation between two sensory-motor beings in a nesting relation: the pregnant self and the embryonic other.”<sup>48</sup> This is an important point: after a certain developmental stage, the foetus is not simply perceived to be a foreign entity within the mother’s body, which acts as an indifferent container or vessel, but instead through its movements, such as kicking, turning, stretching, it is experienced as a “sensory-motor being,” that is, a being with its own capacity for meaningful perception and movement. Or, in other words, a being with a body schema.<sup>49</sup>

This sense of doubling through the nesting relation occurs, as Young writes, alongside “another instance of the doubling of the pregnant subject.”<sup>50</sup> While the pregnant woman’s body changes size and shape, her body schema rearranges itself so that she can negotiate her lived environment without having to rely continuously on conscious reflection. Young contends that “the boundaries of my body are themselves in flux.... My automatic body habits become dislodged.... In pregnancy my pre-pregnant body image does not entirely leave my movements and expectations, yet it is with the pregnant body that I must move.”<sup>51</sup> It is through this doubling of the body schema that the pregnant woman is able to adjust to her changing form and incorporate the foetus that is growing inside her—an entity that, in turn, is developing its own body schema.

Jane Lymer has developed Young’s arguments regarding the “doubling” that occurs in pregnancy in her recent writing regarding the phenomenology of maternal-foetal relations to suggest that the

---

<sup>47</sup> Young, “Pregnant Embodiment,” 49.

<sup>48</sup> Sara Heinämaa, “‘An Equivocal Couple Overwhelmed by Life’: A Phenomenological Analysis of Pregnancy,” *PhiloSophia*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2014), 31–49, here 32.

<sup>49</sup> The ideas of the previous paragraph are also discussed in my “Phenomenology and Intercorporeality,” 322–24.

<sup>50</sup> Young, “Pregnant Embodiment,” 50.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

female body is the primary site of subjective constitution—or what we could consider to be the “first home” if we follow the arguments of the phenomenological thinkers above. Lymer writes:

Put simplistically, the maternal body schema incorporates the foetal body in much the same way that we incorporate artefacts into our body schemas. However, in this case, doing so elicits, moulds, and structures foetal movement into the schemas necessary for basic neurological development...it is this affectively structured embodied relation [with a mother] that guides the foetus, and possibly then the child, through the early stages of subjectivity development.<sup>52</sup>

Lymer argues that newborn infants must possess a primitive body schema, which is formed *in utero* and not outside the womb with “others.”<sup>53</sup> In fact, it is through the womb in gestation that the newborn’s, and later the child’s, capacity for meaningful movement, action, and perception is constituted. This occurs through the habituated movement patterns of the mother, the maternal heartbeat, breathing, and digestion, all of which together construct what Lymer terms an “intrauterine world” that is “not only moving but also rhythmic, regulated, and animate.”<sup>54</sup> Hence, this “support-system of maternal tissues”<sup>55</sup> is not merely a passive receptacle that contains a developing foetus, but rather a communicative and constitutive medium, or in other words, the “first home” or dwelling place that precedes Bachelard’s conception of the “large cradle of the house” as the grounds of our origins. (PS, 29)

Acknowledging the female body as the ontological ground of our being, the site where we are constituted as subjects, gives a gendered inflection to the first home, but in addition, situates home with other subjects: we are “at home” when we are with others. In other words, intersubjectivity through intercorporeality is not something that we achieve as individuated human subjects, but rather, is a foundational and constitutional part of our existence.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, home is not merely a dwelling place or geographical location, but also constitu-

---

<sup>52</sup> Jane Lymer, “Merleau-Ponty and the Affective Maternal-Foetal Relation,” *Parrhesia*, vol. 13 (2011): 126–43, here 129, 135.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>55</sup> Colwyn Trevarthen and Kenneth J. Aitken, “Infant Intersubjectivity: Research, Theory, and Clinical Applications,” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, vol. 42, no. 1 (2001): 3–48, here 3.

<sup>56</sup> See Scott L. Marratto, *The Intercorporeal Self: Merleau-Ponty on Subjectivity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012).

tive of human relations. As Frances Gray contends: “women’s pregnant flesh as the original home and ground of human sociality...[expresses] the fundamental intrinsic relatedness of all human life.”<sup>57</sup> The Western ideal of home—a house with walls as the stage of one’s childhood—is preceded by embodied caring relations that serve as the first foundation.

## VI. Conclusion

While the ontological ground of home may have its origins in the pregnant body, our experience of home as self-aware adults may have no maternal inflections whatsoever. While some may feel most at home in their mother’s embrace or the domestic space of the childhood home, many of us may not have had a mother’s upbringing or even a family to call home. As such, the manifestations of home in lived experiences are variable. Home is a shifting signifier; it can attach to a dwelling place, a person, a family, a nation state, a landscape, or a set of customs. Despite wide-ranging variations in the concrete terms of our homeplaces and home experiences, a phenomenological commonality of the “home” is its origins: we have all been birthed from a woman’s body and are constituted as situated and vulnerable subjects in relation to this primary experience. As Young writes: “Everyone is born in loss. Ejected from the dark comfort of the mother’s body, we are thrown into a world without walls, with no foundation to our fragile and open-ended existence.” (HH, 128) Our yearning for home and our impulse towards dwelling and belonging is an attempt to assuage this sense of embodied vulnerability.<sup>58</sup>

However, positioning women’s embodiment at the heart of phenomenological accounts of home as a precondition for the constitution of subjectivity, is of course a delicate matter for feminist politics. The philosophical nostalgia for home rests on what Adrienne Rich refers to as a “dangerous archetype,” namely “the Mother.”<sup>59</sup> Home as an ontological and phenomenological category can easily become bound to the idealized maternal figure, essentialising physical and social roles for women within the reproductive and domestic spheres. On the other hand, denying the gendered aspects of home,

---

<sup>57</sup> Gray, “Original Habitation,” 71.

<sup>58</sup> See my “Shame, Vulnerability and Belonging: Reconsidering Sartre’s Account of Shame,” *Human Studies* (2017): DOI 10.1007/s10746-017-9427-7.

<sup>59</sup> Rich, *Of Women Born*, 52.

as we have seen, leads to a different injustice, namely the effacement of women's constitutive role in the formation of human subjectivity, and concomitantly an amnesia regarding our embodied, relational, and vulnerable origins.<sup>60</sup> It is imperative to carefully negotiate these tensions.

The quality of the home we have emerged from, and to which we return to daily, affects the constitution and continuing expression of our embodied identities. A broken, oppressive, abusive, or destroyed home can have concrete consequences for bodily subjectivity and comportment. In fact, the experiences of "inhibited intentionality", "discontinuous unity," and "ambiguous transcendence" that Young describes in "Throwing Like A Girl" in her analysis of female bodily comportment (see TLG, 35) may be generalized to describe aspects of the experience of subjects that move through the world without the certainty or security of a stable home: the displaced, the homeless, the refugee, those fleeing persecution, poverty, war, or hardship.

Remembering our origins in embodied vulnerability and relationality is central to understanding that experiences of homelessness, exile, ostracization, or social alienation are possibilities for all subjects. In the present day, many of us are far from home, whether by choice or necessity. There are over one billion regional and international migrants globally, more than ever before in recorded history, and the exigencies of migration and transnational movement are increasing due to on-going environmental, economic, and political instability.<sup>61</sup> Being "geographically promiscuous," to use Heller's term<sup>62</sup>, is increasingly a reality for both the hyper-mobile travelling-class and for those less fortunate fleeing hardship. The varied exigencies of cosmopolitanism mean that more and more of us are entering the limbo of estrangement; the particular unresolvable melancholy of exile, the strange, sad tug of being far away from home. Understanding how home is central to our constitution and how this is essentially bound up in questions regarding embodiment and gender is increasingly important in a world where dislocation, routine immigration, and mobility are commonplace and failures of belonging are routinely credited to diverse phenomena such as social unrest, poor health, and upsurges in radicalism and terrorism.

---

<sup>60</sup> I have written elsewhere about vulnerability and belonging at the centre of our embodied origins. See my "Shame, Vulnerability and Belonging."

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>62</sup> Heller, "Where Are We at Home?"

Home is not merely a backdrop of familiarity but a site of origin that emerges from our relations with others and our embodied vulnerabilities. Having home at the centre of our subjective constitution positions us to experience subjectivity as a complex series of tensions between: inner and outer; self and other; vulnerability and security; subjectification and objectification; imminence and transcendence. When we are home, we feel *at home*: a deep, and often unnoticed, familiarity and ease, that also performs an intersubjective function, binding one to kin, place, and community.

*L.R.Dolezal@exeter.ac.uk*