

According to Merriam-Webster, home is defined as:

“the place (such as a **house** or apartment) where a person lives. : a family living together in one building, **house**, etc. : a place where something normally or naturally lives or is located.”

1. **What, if anything, is missing from this definition?** When answering this question, consider your learning from class and Zahra Ahmad’s *Journey Home*, a collection of personal essays about her identity and connection to “home.”

The dictionary definition above talks about home as a thing/location, however, it doesn’t talk about how home can actually make you feel. The dictionary definition seems to sum up home as something tied to a geographic boundary and suggests it is something constant.

2. **How do you define home?** If you are struggling to create a definition, think about when you have most felt “at home”. Did it have to do with a physical place, an aspect of your identity (e.g., culture, language, faith, etc.), etc.?

I define home as a safe, loving place filled with culture and personality.

3. In her piece *The Journey Home: The Welcome Home Committee*, journalist Zahra Ahmad’s aunt observes: "There's something deep inside your [Zahra’s] eyes. You seem lost, like you're not fulfilled. That something is missing, like you're caging yourself in. It shows that you've been through a lot and it's trapped you. **There is something weighing you down.**"

**What do you think her aunt meant when she said this? Based on your understanding of the texts we read, why did Zahra appear “lost” during her visit to Iraq? What was she struggling with?**

When her aunt said “there is something weighing you down” she meant that something was holding Zahra back. Specifically, she was weighed down by the stereotypes put on her as a Muslim and Iraqi-American after 9/11. She increasingly didn’t feel at home in the US and she began to reject her own culture in order to try and fit in. In her articles she even references the pressure she felt to ‘Americanize’ and when she went to college she felt a bit lost because she did not feel completely at ‘home’ in the U.S. Zahra returned to Iraq to try and reconnect with her culture, and as a result, she exposes some of the stereotypes she internalized here in the U.S.

4. Feeling “at home” is often tied to a sense of belonging and of feeling accepted and connected. This was certainly the case with journalist Zahra Ahmad.

**Think about a time when you felt like you did NOT belong, when you felt like an outsider and not “at home”. Why was that the case** (e.g., **perhaps you felt disconnected to an aspect of your culture**, perhaps your community was misrepresented on the news, perhaps you did not feel accepted by others or you felt judged, etc.)? **Explain.**

I did not feel at home when I was old enough to realize I was missing a part of myself. What I mean by this is that all my life I have been terrified to visit Mexico, which I attributed to my fear of getting on an airplane. Then I started to wonder if it's just that I'm scared of airplanes or if I'm more afraid of going to a place (Mexico) where I think I will be judged because I was born in the United States, or because I only know the basics to Spanish. Only being able to speak the basics of Spanish has made me feel insecure because I won't know or be able to say anything right when speaking to someone who only speaks Spanish. I myself was rejecting myself from seeing life and/or my family in Mexico. Also, I always feel out of place in the U.S. because people assume that Spanish is my first language - so I don't feel completely at home here; however, when I try to speak to family in Mexico, they are shocked I cannot speak Spanish and they sometimes joke that I am too Americanized. In that sense, I feel caught between two homes. I don't really know if I fully belong in either place.

5. Consider the example you provided above.

**How did you respond to not feeling “at home”? Did your understanding of “home” evolve or change? What have you learned from that experience?**

When I realized that I was holding myself back I didn't understand why I did so, especially if experiencing the AMAZING culture of Mexico was probably going to be life-altering. I guess I thought that I would be an outcast since I was born in the U.S. and since I mainly speak English. This made me feel disappointed and ashamed at first, but the more I reflected on it, I've realized that I've done my best to learn the language and I am actually excited to visit Mexico and practice what I have learned. Once I figured out that I didn't want to hold myself back I asked my mom if she could send me and my sister to Mexico this summer. Of course she said yes - my mom has always wanted us to go, but I was always too “scared”; but now that I'm older, I'm not as scared. After I had asked my mom I felt a sudden relief and a certain excitement! Although we can't go this year because of the pandemic, we would love to go next year as my sister's graduation present. I guess what I learned from this experience is that I can't let fear of being judged get in the way of experiencing my culture. I also realized that I get to shape what my home means for me, even if I experience external pressure to act a certain way or conform to a particular standard of what it means to be Latina - just because I am not fluent in Spanish does not make me any less Latina, nor does it make me any less proud of my Mexican heritage. It would be great to meet the rest of my family and to find out more about my indigenous culture. I think that will make me feel more ‘at home’ just like it did for Zahra.

6. Now, apply your learning from the example you provided above.

Think back to Zahra Ahmad's experience as a first-generation Iraqi- and Muslim- American, especially, the way **she felt when single stories about her community and her “home” were**

circulating across the media after 9/11. Recall the way she was treated in school and how that made her feel.

**How might you use under-reported news stories to address single stories, and in the process, create a greater sense of inclusion? How might under-reported news stories expand our understanding of “home”?**

**\* An under-reported story is a news story that doesn’t get as much attention in the news.** Zahra Ahmad’s personal essays about her return to Iraq, for example, are examples of under-reported news stories.

I think my experience as a Latina in the United States, specifically as someone who is Mexican-American but who grew up speaking Spanish is not often portrayed in the news or media. I could relate to Zahra’s experience, especially when she spoke about learning Arabic in order to better connect with her culture and communicate with her family. Often, there is this expectation that because I am a Mexican woman of color that I was born in Mexico, and by extent, that I speak Spanish. Even within my own community, friends sometimes scoff or laugh at me when they speak in Spanish and I ask for them to translate - the implication is that because I do not speak Spanish I am somehow ashamed of my background. I really didn’t have a lot of examples to turn to so for many years I was ashamed and embarrassed that I could not speak Spanish - I fed into the stereotype that was put on me and I didn’t feel at home in the U.S. (because I didn’t conform perfectly to the stereotype of the fluent Spanish speaker) nor did I feel fully at home when I was with my Mexican family, because I struggled to communicate with them.

I think if there was more coverage of these kinds of stories or at least more visibility of these stories - specifically, how the children of Mexican or Central American immigrants feel a constant pressure to assimilate and balance the home culture of our parents - I would feel a greater sense of inclusion and others would be more educated and empathetic to my experience. It would also be helpful for news to spotlight some of the more positive aspects of my culture like our historical and cultural celebrations. Often, my people are portrayed as criminals on tv and those images are internalized by people who do not encounter Mexicans or Mexican-Americans on a daily basis. If they understood more about our beautiful culture I think they would be more understanding overall and would be less inclined to judge or stereotype.

Although I still feel that I am missing a lot more information about my culture, I still try to celebrate some celebrations, festivals, or parties that are celebrated in Mexico. For example Días de los Muertos is gorgeous, especially when the marigold petals are layed down as a trail, or just the flower in general. Another example is El Cinco de Mayo. My family used to have a cookout, play music, laugh, sing, talk, and play games outside - like soccer or Hide and Seek. Me, my sister and my cousins would play Hide and Seek in the dark when we were younger and it was so much fun. During Día de la Independencia, my would family celebrate this the same way as El

Cinco de Mayo. Now, for Christmas or in Mexico Navidad, my family would get together around 6-8 pm, play music, talk, share stories and laugh. The young ones would be inside playing video games, talking, laughing, or watching a movie/show. At 12 am we would say Feliz Navidad! (Merry

Christamas) and everyone opens their presents. These celebrations that I just wrote down, are the ones that I celebrate in my home with my family. This is how I try to connect with my culture, this is also how I feel at home.

To me home is not only just a place where I sleep and eat, home is a safe and loving place that is filled with culture and personality. Although the dictionary often defines the home as tied to a geographic location, home for me is much more fluid.

As the daughter of Mexican immigrants, born in the United States, I am incredibly proud of my heritage and culture; however, I feel a constant pressure to be like a chameleon. Despite my best efforts to appear more ‘American’ or embrace my Mexican roots, it never seems good enough - I face constant criticism that leaves me feeling excluded, and often, very confused. If I am not fully ‘American’ and if I am not a perfect Mexican, then where do I belong? Where is my home?

My understanding of home is rooted in this internal struggle to find my place and balance my cultural connection to Mexico with my desire for belonging here in the United States. I did not feel at home when I was old enough to realize I was missing a part of myself. What I mean by this is that all my life I have been terrified to visit Mexico, which I attributed to my fear of getting on an airplane. Then I started to wonder if it's just that I'm scared of airplanes or if I'm more afraid of going to a place (Mexico) where I think I will be judged because I was born in the United States, or because I only know the basics to Spanish. Only being able to speak the basics of Spanish has made me feel insecure because I won't know or be able to say anything right when speaking to someone who only speaks Spanish. I

I can vividly remember the first time my abuelita, my father's mother, came to the U.S. for the first time. I remember that I was about 10 years old and she was so excited to meet me in person. She embraced me for what felt like hours - in her arms I felt both a sense of tremendous relief and perhaps even a bit of nervous apprehension - how would she communicate with me? I remember that she began by saying “Mijita, cómo estás? He estado esperando este momento para abrazarte y besarte, como lo hice cuando eras pequeña” (*My little one, how are you? I've been waiting for this moment to hold you and kiss you, just like I did when you were a little girl*). In that moment I could see her eyes beginning to water and while I did not understand what she said to me, I could literally feel her love with each word she spoke. How I longed to understand what she meant. The sense of love I felt in that moment was fleeting - it soon turned to embarrassment. My grandmother had come all the way from Mexico to see me and I couldn't even speak with her. This feeling of disconnection only worsened when my cousins came over our house. They are fluent in Spanish and they joked, laughed and played with my grandmother with ease. It felt like they were instantly connected.

This feeling of disappointment and isolation was all too familiar. I often feel out of place in the U.S. because people assume that Spanish is my first language - so I don't feel completely at home here.

At the same time, when I try to speak to family in Mexico, like my abuelita, they are shocked that I cannot speak Spanish and they sometimes joke that I am too Americanized. In that sense, I feel caught between two homes. I don't really know if I fully belong in either place. As a result, for years I've felt disconnected from my home language and culture - caught between two worlds without a clear sense

of home.

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less inclined to judge or stereotype.

Doing all of this will hopefully allow me to redefine what home means to me by integrating more of my life in D.C. with my family's Mexican heritage and culture. That's why I would love to go to

Mexico - to connect with the rest of my family, to hear stories/tales, to learn more about my indigenous side, to learn more about the culture in general, and ultimately, to then create the space to make sense of how that all shapes who I am and how I see and experience the world.

By confronting my fears I can learn more about myself, grow in the process and develop a deeper connection to my sense of home.