Homeland Insecurities: Reflections on Language and Space

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Since September 11, new words have entered our everyday lexicon as though they have always been there. Ground Zero and homeland constitute especially salient and evocative spatial metaphors, which in public discourse do not appear metaphoric at all, but as literal descriptions of actual places. I am interested in how these words frame, interpret, and produce meanings—and preclude other meanings—both for the events that have come to be known as 9/11 and for changing images of U.S. nationhood and its relation to the world outside it. In contrast to the highly charged—perhaps even sacred—spaces of Ground Zero and the homeland, there exist other key locations around the globe that have new political uses and meanings, but for which there seems to be a dearth of public discourse and language. One of these locations is Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. I look at how these three spaces are represented and what the relations among them might be. My reflections explore the relationship between language and space, how words map, blur, and reconstruct the conceptual, affective, and symbolic borders between spheres once thought of as distinctly separate—as either national or international, domestic or foreign, "at home" or "abroad."

Ground Zero

Let me start at ground zero—not with the site of carnage in lower Manhattan, but with the meaning of the words, which have a temporal as well as a spatial dimension. Like the use of 9/11, Ground Zero is a highly condensed and charged appel-

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lation that has come to represent the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC), the physical location itself, the experience of untold suffering, as well as the absence of the twin towers, the people, and the corpses to bury. We can learn something about this term before September 11, from the Merriam-Webster dictionary. First the date it entered the English language: 1946. Then (1) "the point directly above, below, or at which a nuclear explosion occurs"; (2) "the center or origin of rapid, intense, or violent activity or change." This definition, more metaphorical than the first, moves from a single point of spatial impact to the unleashing of vast repercussions over time. Definition 3: "The very beginning, square one." We often use ground zero colloquially to convey the sense of starting from scratch, a clean slate, the bottom line. This meaning resonates with the often heard claim that the world was radically altered by 9/11, that the world will never be the same, that Americans have lost their former innocence about their safety and invulnerability at home. This way of thinking might be called a narrative of historical exceptionalism, almost an antinarrative, claiming the event to be so unique and unprecedented as to transcend time and defy comparison or historical analysis. Even though it describes cataclysmic change, it also conveys a traumatic sense of time standing still, which denies the reality of change, that is, if we think of change as a process of transformation with both continuity and discontinuity to what came before and after. Furthermore, another political implication of ground zero as the point of origin is that the illimitable response to terrorism must itself start from square one, from this original perpetration of evil. The response must match the full power of this traumatic rupture, for which no prior guidance, historical limits, or wider political context seem appropriate.

As Marita Sturken has shown, this narrative of unprecedented trauma in fact has many precedents; it is an oft-told story of America's fall from innocence, one that in its repetition reaffirms a double meaning of innocence—as not guilty and as naively trusting.² (Thomas Friedman has even attributed the colossal failure of U.S. intelligence prior to September 11 to the trusting good nature of the American character that could not conceive of such evil).3 Historical exceptionalism, I would argue, is intimately related to a long-standing tradition of American exceptionalism, a story about the nation's uniqueness in time and place.

The history of the term itself, which started with the first use of the nuclear bomb, belies the historical exceptionalism implicit in the appellation Ground Zero. It was coined to describe the nuclear strikes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Yet the wholesale adoption of the name Ground Zero for the destruction in New York has not prompted any overt comparisons to Hiroshima and Nagasaki; no one likens September 11 to August 6. Instead, the analogy we hear over and over again is to Pearl Harbor, December 7, even though the experience of a sudden, horrific attack on civilians in an urban center seems, in fact, much more like the events of September 11 than the Japanese attack on a U.S. naval base. Perhaps the repeated overemphasis on the one event works to disavow the other.

The term *Ground Zero* both evokes and eclipses the prior historical reference, using it as a yardstick of terror—to claim that this was just like the horrific experience of a nuclear bomb—while at the same time consigning the prior reference to historical amnesia. I believe *Ground Zero* relies on a historical analogy that cannot be acknowledged because to do so would be to trouble the very binary oppositions and exceptionalist narratives erected on that ground—between before and after, between being "with us" or "with the terrorists," between the "American way of life" and the "axis of evil." Instead, the use of *Ground Zero* today implies that only terrorists could inflict such a level of untold suffering on a civilian population. Thus historical exceptionalism contributes to what writer Ariel Dorfman has called the exceptionalism of American suffering.

My point is not to enter a debate about the comparative measurement of immeasurable human suffering. Nor is it to offer a cause-and-effect narrative—that the terrorism of 9/11 is an indirect blowback of earlier U.S. imperial designs at the end of World War II. Rather, it wants to highlight the importance of language in giving meaning to an event that seems to defy meaning, and to suggest that the narratives and metaphors we use may bear the traces of history that our current usage disavows. In the use of *Ground Zero* to express the unprecedented nature of recent terrorist attacks, we can hear the echoes of earlier forms of terror perpetuated by the United States, which locates Americans within world history, rather than as an exception to it.

Ground Zero might be thought of as an uncanny location, and not only because of the thousands of unburied dead that haunt it. In Freud's concept, the uncanny derives its terror not from the alien and the unknown, but from "something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression." The uncanny entails the return of the repressed as something at once threatening, external, and unrecognizable, yet strangely familiar and inseparable from our own pasts. Perhaps a political sense of the uncanny might constitute a way of combating the perils of American exceptionalism, of acknowledging what W. E. B. Du Bois learned from what he called the "awful cataclysm" of World War I: "That the United States was living not to itself, but as part of the strain and stress of the world."

The Homeland

Debates about rebuilding on Ground Zero are still underway, yet one ideological edifice already under construction is the concept of homeland security. If Ground Zero implies starting anew from the point of total annihilation, homeland connotes an inexorable connection to a place deeply rooted in the past. Much ado has been made about the political efficacy of Tom Ridge and his Office of Homeland Secu-

rity and, more recently, about Bush's proposal for a new Department of Homeland Security, but little has been said about the use of the word homeland. When I first heard the word in Bush's speech of September 20, it struck a jarring note as an unfamiliar way of referring to the American nation, a term that did not seem historically a part of the traditional arsenal of patriotic idioms. Why not domestic security? Civil defense? National security? How many Americans, even at moments of fervent nationalism, think of America as a homeland? How many think of America as their country, nation, home, but think of places elsewhere as their historical, ethnic, or spiritual homeland?

Referring to the nation as a home, as a domestic space through familial metaphors, is commonplace, probably as old as the nation form itself. Yet although homeland has the ring of ancient loyalties, it is in fact a recent term in the American lexicon. Presidents before Bush never used the word to refer to the United States during periods of world crisis.⁶ In World War II, there was the home front, a metaphor that by asserting a similarity also underlined the gap between the battlefields abroad and an entire national territory unscathed by war's violence. Neither Roosevelt nor Truman referred to the United States as a homeland, but only used the term to refer to other countries under the threat of invasion (Holland, Russia, and Japan). Perhaps homeland was evocative of the German fatherland and the sinister identification of *Heimat* with fascist ideologies of racial purity, and the German home guard and homeland defense (Heimwehr, Heimatschutz). Homeland did not enter the cold war vocabulary either, despite the obsession with the communist menace within. Perhaps homeland then evoked the Russian motherland used to describe especially the sacrifices of World War II. The domestic response to nuclear threat during the cold war was called "civil defense," not homeland defense. To go back to World War I, Wilson did not refer to America as the homeland either, but many international groups attached that word to his support of self-determination for aspiring nations, popularized especially by the Zionist rhetoric of the Jewish homeland.

Why then, after September 11, has America been transformed into the homeland? (It's interesting that the usage always entails the.) What are the cultural connotations, affective meanings, and ideological implications of the word? What is its relation to security and terrorism? Many commentators have claimed that the attack on the WTC radically exposed the permeability of the national borders eroded by the forces of globalization. The administration has been going to great lengths to tighten and shore up those borders, legally, politically, and militarily. How might this reconstruction of national boundaries rely on linguistic work as well in the battle over what has been called "protected zones of language"? Does the word homeland itself do some of the cultural work of securing national borders? Might it also produce a kind of radical insecurity? Ultimately, does it indicate a transformative moment for American nationalism, even though it is being represented as a return to some fundamental notion of patriotism, love of country, and the desire to protect it?

Let me point out in general that the notion of the nation as a home, as a domestic space, relies structurally on its intimate opposition to the notion of the foreign. Domestic has a double meaning that links the space of the familial household to that of the nation, by imagining both in opposition to everything outside the geographic and conceptual border of the home. The earliest meaning of foreign, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, refers to the physical space "out of doors" or to concerns "at a distance from home." Contemporary English speakers refer to national concerns as "domestic," in explicit or implicit contrast with the foreign. The notion of domestic policy makes sense only in opposition to foreign policy, and, uncoupled from the foreign, national issues are never labeled domestic. The idea of foreign policy depends on the sense of the nation as a domestic space imbued with a sense of "at-homeness," in contrast to an external world perceived as alien and threatening. Reciprocally, a sense of the foreign is necessary to erect the boundaries that enclose the nation as home. Another question, then, is, in reimagining America as the homeland, what conceptions of the foreign are implicitly evoked? What is the opposite of homeland? Foreign lands? Exile? Diaspora? Terrorism?

The entry on homeland in the OED starts with a delightfully deadpan definition: "The land which is one's home; where one's home is." It shows that the term takes on its nationalist meanings of "one's native land" only in the late nineteenth century. Other dictionaries define homeland as "Fatherland, motherland"; "a state, region or territory that is closely identified with a particular people or ethnic group"; "a state or area set aside for a people of a particular national, cultural or racial origin."8 Homeland thus conveys a sense of native origins, of birthplace and birthright. It appeals to common bloodlines, ancient ancestry, and notions of racial and ethnic homogeneity. Though American national identity has always been linked to geography, my sense is that these meanings, bounded and self-enclosed, represent a departure from traditional images of American nationhood as boundless and mobile. In fact, the exceptionalist notion of America as the New World pits images of mobility against what might be seen as a distinctly Old World definition of homeland. A nation of immigrants, a melting pot, the western frontier, manifest destiny, a classless society—all involve metaphors of spatial mobility rather than the spatial fixedness and rootedness that *homeland* implies. *Homeland* also connotes a different relation to history, a reliance on a shared mythic past engrained in the land itself. This differs markedly from nineteenth-century notions of America as a "Nation of Futurity," throwing off the shackles of the past, or President Kennedy's rhetoric of the New Frontier. Does the homeland offer a new paradigm of national identity? Will it catch on?

Tom Ridge, the new homeland security czar, brought together these two different nationalist paradigms when he defined homeland security in his acceptance speech with George W. Bush. Ridge stated:

We will work to ensure that the essential liberty of the American people is protected, that terrorists will not take away our way of life. It's called Homeland Security. While the effort will begin here, it will require the involvement of America at every level. Everyone in the homeland must play a part. I ask the American people for their patience, their awareness and their resolve. This job calls for a national effort. We've seen it before, whether it was building the Trans-Continental Railroad, fighting World War II, or putting a man on the moon.9

All his examples involve the mobilization and expansion of state power—across the continent, across the oceans, and across outer space in the cold war. A relation exists between securing the homeland against the encroachment of foreign terrorists and enforcing national power abroad. The homeland may contract borders around a fixed space of nation and nativity, but it simultaneously also expands the capacity of the United States to move unilaterally across the borders of other nations.

Although supporting the homeland, according to Ridge, calls for a unified nation, the meaning of homeland has an exclusionary effect that underwrites a resurgent nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment and policy. Where is there room for immigrants in the space of the homeland as a site of native origins, ethnic homogeneity, and rootedness in common place and past? How could immigrants possibly find inclusion in the homeland? How many immigrants and their descendants may identify with America as their nation but locate their homelands elsewhere, as a spiritual, ethnic, or historical point of origin? Or how many go back and forth between two homes, let's say New York and the Dominican Republic? How many American citizens see Africa or Ireland, Israel or Palestine, each in very different ways, as their homeland, as a place to which they feel a spiritual or political allegiance and belonging, whether it literally constitutes a place of birth or not? Does the idea of America as the homeland make such dual identifications suspect and threatening, something akin to terrorism? Are you either a member of the homeland or with the terrorists, to paraphrase Bush? And what of the terrible irony of the United States as a homeland to Native Americans?

At a time when the Patriot Act has attacked and abrogated the rights of socalled aliens and immigrants, when the U.S. government can detain and deport them in the name of homeland security, the notion of the homeland itself contributes to making the life of immigrants terribly insecure. It plays a role in policing and shoring up the boundaries between the domestic and the foreign. Yet it does this not simply by stopping foreigners at the borders, but by continually redrawing those boundaries everywhere throughout the nation, between Americans who can somehow claim the United States as their native land, their birthright, and immigrants and those who look to homelands elsewhere, who can be rendered inexorably foreign. This distinction takes on a decidedly racialized cast through the identification of the homeland with a sense of racial purity and ethnic homogeneity, which even naturalization and citizenship cannot erase.

The cynical use of the term *homeland* by the South African regime in 1969 exemplifies another historical association of the term with racial purity, in a kind of inversion of the meaning just discussed. With the Bantu Homelands Citizenship Bill, an enforced racial segregation that relegated blacks to their supposed sites of tribal origins, the apartheid government sought to keep them out of the cities and the white South African nation.

A related implication of homeland is its folksy rural quality, which combines a German romantic notion of the folk with the heartland of America to resurrect the rural myth of American identity (perhaps reclaiming it from the domestic terrorism in Oklahoma). In what sense, though, would New Yorkers refer to their city as the homeland? Home, yes, but homeland? Not likely. Or for that matter, even in the upwelling of support for New York in the wake of 9/11, it seems hard to imagine most Americans claiming the city as part of the homeland, which has a decidedly antiurban and anticosmopolitan ring to it. As Tom Ridge put it in his homey way, "the only turf is the turf we stand on," which precludes an urban vision of America as multiple turfs with contested points of view and conflicting grounds on which to stand.

Although the fascist connotations of homeland may seem far fetched and overly alarmist, the newly appointed Texas homeland security chief, David Dewhurst, made a revealing faux pas in October 2001, when he purchased a full-color, four-page advertisement in *Texas Monthly* magazine that depicted a military officer standing in front of an unfurled American flag. The caption read, "As chairman of the Governor's Task Force on Homeland Security, David Dewhurst encourages you to support President Bush and the brave men and woman of our Armed Forces as they fight to eliminate terrorism and work to restore confidence in our economy." Controversy erupted over the ad, though, when people noticed that the officer in the photograph was not an American general, but very clearly a German Luftwaffe officer—complete with military decorations, insignias, and a name tag bearing the German flag. Dewhurst did fire his ad agency. ¹⁰

Another odd thing about the use of the term *homeland* for the United States is that it often refers to a nation not yet in full existence, but to which a people or ethnic group aspires—Palestine or Kurdistan, for example, or the Sikh, Tamil, or Basque homelands. In this usage, a people, whom others may see as an ethnic group, consider themselves a nation not yet embodied in a territory and a sovereign state. Such groups are often viewed as the underdogs whose legitimate claims to territory another state has usurped. This meaning is especially prevalent in the U.S. media at the moment, when it comments on the struggle between Palestinians and Israelis, and I wonder what connections, if any, there might be between this violence of conflicting homelands and calling the United States a homeland today.

Related to the homeland as national aspiration is its connection to the discourse of diaspora and exile, to a sense of loss, longing, and nostalgia. A place you came from—no matter how long ago—and long for but cannot ever really return to, except perhaps in the form of what Salman Rushdie has called "imaginary homelands."11 In this meaning, the homeland evokes a sense not of stability and security, but of uprootedness, deracination, and desire. What does it mean to think of America as aspiring to a lost homeland, as though terrorism has severed Americans from their own territory, from their legitimate aspirations? Does homeland embody this profound sense of nostalgia, in its Greek etymology, nostos, the return home? In this sense, the homeland is created not out of unbroken connections to a deeply rooted past, but from the trauma of severance and the threat of abandonment. A homeland is something a larger power threatens to occupy or take away, and one has to fight to regain. The word *homeland* has a kind of anxious redundancy, home and land, as though trying to pin down an uneasy connection between the two that threatens to fly apart.

Thus the idea of the homeland works by generating a profound sense of insecurity, not only because of the threat of terrorism, but because the homeland, too, proves a fundamentally uncanny place, haunted by prior and future losses, invasions, abandonment. The uncanny, after all, in Freud is a translation of unheimlich, the "unhomely." The homeland is haunted by all the unfamiliar yet strangely familiar foreign specters that threaten to turn it into its opposite.

Theorists of nationalism have reminded us that the nation-state is a modern phenomenon, even though nationalism represents itself as the opposite, the embodiment of an eternal mythical identity rooted in a premodern past. My question, then, is how does the current nostalgia for a homeland contribute to the development of new forms of state power in the post-9/11 world order?

For a hint, I turn to a British precedent. A typically condescending piece in The Guardian comments that home is an easier word for patriotic Americans than it would be for "us" (read: the sophisticated British). 12 That made me raise my eyebrows when I thought of the Home Secretary and Home Office, words that have meaning in the context of the British Empire that demarcated the space of England as home as distinct from its colonial possessions. I wonder about the current relation between the American homeland and the American empire, which many now see as the most extensive hegemon since Rome, not just a superpower, but what the French call a "hyperpower." What is the relation between contracting the borders around the territorial homeland and waging a highly mobile and deterritorialized war against terrorism by a nation, which has announced its unilateral right to launch overt and covert attacks across any sovereign borders, regardless of whose homeland or of international law?

The concept of homeland security did not emerge full-blown from ground zero, but has been around in government and military circles since the 1990s as part

of the effort to redefine the role of the Department of Defense and the armed forces in the post-cold war world (the Hardt-Rudman Commision on National Security, for example, discusses this strategy and uses this term). 13 The conception of homeland security goes hand in hand with a more flexible multifront mobile role for the armed forces abroad, as one department of a globalized police force. Advocates of homeland security argue for the need for more government, military, and intelligence coordination, for the armed forces to be involved in this country as well, and for the government through surveillance and policing to intrude into more areas of civil life at home. In the words of a homeland security policy group, "homeland security consists of those private and public actions at every level that ensure the ability of Americans to live their lives the way they wish, free from fear of organized attack."14 Although homeland security may strive to cordon off the nation as a domestic space from external foreign threats, it is actually about breaking down the boundaries between inside and outside, about seeing the homeland in a state of constant emergency from threats within and without. In these policy circles, homeland defense constitutes a subcategory of homeland security. The homeland is not like the home front, for which war is a metaphor, but homeland security depends on a radical insecurity, where the home itself serves as the battleground. If every facet of civilian life is subject to terrorist attack, if a commercial airliner can be turned into a deadly bomb, then every facet of domestic life—in the double sense of the word as private and national—must be both protected and mobilized against these threats. Homeland security calls for vast new intrusions of government, military, and intelligence forces, not just to secure the homeland from external threats, but to become an integral part of the workings of home, a home in a continual state of emergency.

I am not suggesting that policymakers have these multiple meanings in mind when they conspiratorially chose the word *homeland*. Rather, I am suggesting that the choice of the word puts into play a history of multiple meanings, connotations, and associations that work, on the one hand, to convey a sense of unity, security, and stability, but more profoundly, on the other hand, work to generate forms of radical insecurity by proliferating threats of the foreign lurking within and without national borders. The notion of the homeland draws on comforting images of a deeply rooted past to legitimate modern forms of imperial power.

Guantanamo Bay

There is a space that does not have the same currency and visibility as Ground Zero and the homeland, but one that is crucial to both—Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, where the non–prisoners of war who fought with the Taliban and al-Qaeda are being held without charges against them. The U.S. Naval Base—"gitmo" in Navy slang—seems to be used interchangeably with Guantanamo Bay, as though no distinction existed between geography and the political imposition of a military institution. I

find it significant that these purported foreign terrorists, with their threat to homeland security, are being held in a space so geographically and historically close to home. A curious silence and dearth of language surrounds this space in the press and among the public. I believe that most Americans do not even know that it is in Cuba, and they certainly are not aware that this forty-one mile base exists because of the American occupation of Cuba after the Cuban-Spanish-American War of 1898, when the United States forced the Platt Amendment on the Cuban constitution in 1903. Certainly President Bush seemed unaware of this history in his recent speech reaffirming the cold war boycott, in which he claimed that the Cuban independence movement one hundred years ago was usurped not by the U.S. intervention, but "hijacked" by Fidel Castro, whom Bush accused of "turning this beautiful island into a prison."15

Yet there is more to say about this space as a kind of uncanny return of America's repressed imperial history. The ambiguous—or nonexistent—legal status of the prisoners there has everything to do with what Gerald Newman has called the anomalous zone of this imperial location, which is neither quite foreign nor domestic.¹⁶ Cuba has no legal jurisdiction over this territory which it has leased in perpetuity to a foreign power with whom it has no diplomatic relations (that is, until both parties agree to terminate it). The United States has no legal sovereignty, even though the navy operates a self-sufficient enclave with virtual sovereignty. As an extraterritorial location, the American Constitution holds no sway there. The prisoners are alien, but in some sense not fully foreign, since they are not considered prisoners of war with rights of protection under the Geneva Conventions. Nor do not they have the constitutional rights as aliens they would have if held on U.S. territory. The precedent for this nonstatus was established by the U.S. courts when Haitian refugees trying to enter the United States in 1991 were forcibly brought to the base as a processing center and then detained for two years under horrendous conditions. This event may thus serve as another example of homeland security, breaking down the boundaries between inside and outside, where the U.S. military played the role of immigration control for the INS. In response to suits brought on the Haitians behalf, the courts first held that they had no constitutional rights in this territory outside the United States and that to appeal to the Bill of Rights was thus nonsensical.

The Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay is a lawless place, not subject to national or international law, where the United States has total power but no checks on that power by either its national constitution or by international treaties. It provides a ready-made site, in fact, for the proposed military tribunals, which also fall outside legal checks and balances. The current prisoners are being held in a legal limbo, a no-man's-land between the domestic and the foreign. They have no constitutional rights, but since the United States will not declare them prisoners of war, they have no rights under the Geneva Conventions about war either. A connection must exist between this lawless site of unchecked imperial power outside U.S. territorial boundaries and the abrogation of civil rights within the homeland. The detention of an immigrant group unwanted at home, the Haitian refugees, prepared the legal groundwork for the limbo status of the Taliban and al-Qaeda prisoners. The Haitians' plight, too, therefore, might be seen as a function of homeland security.

The current role of Guantanamo Bay (like the presence of U.S. troops in the Philippines) suggests that the routes of the American empire today follow well-worn tracks, laid not only through the Near East by the "hot" cold war fought in Afghanistan or by the long U.S. involvement with the Saudi oil kingdom, but also through locations around the globe, where the United States first emerged as a world power at the turn of the last century. We may be facing a danger today that the law-less status of Guantanamo Bay will become more of a norm rather than an anomaly, that homeland security depends not on drawing strict boundaries between home and abroad, but on these mobile, ambiguous spaces between the domestic and the foreign.

In conclusion, let me pose a question: Is the uncanny space of Guantanamo Base, as the repository of a repressed imperial history, a kind of ground zero, a new foundation on which the American homeland is being rebuilt?

Notes

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