

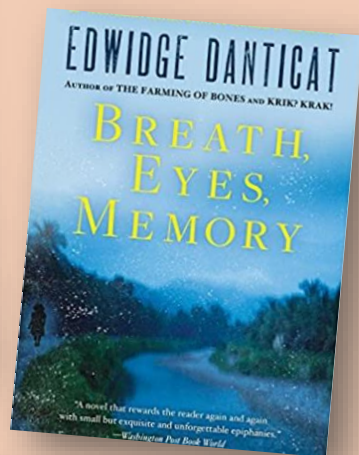
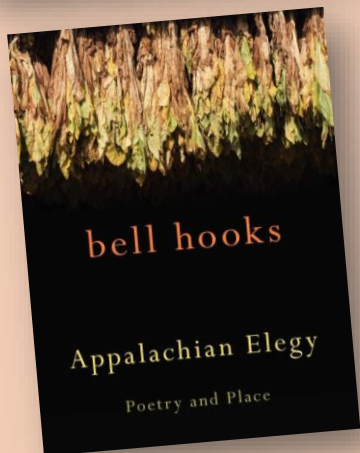


Postcards from a
Stranger
in a
Strange Land

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**Four Perspectives on Home:
Seeking, Creating, and
Sharing Our Safe Spaces**



Original Abstract

Most university students are at a transitional stage of life, many leaving home for the first time and/or uncertain where they are headed after graduation, and many English language educators are in similarly liminal positions. In this presentation, I show how I use applied cognitive linguistics, especially attention to the power of metaphor, to facilitate classroom and professional discussions in the field of English language education about shifting experiences and perceptions of home and community, with reference to cultural expressions found in film, music and poetry, particularly works by or about exiles and refugees.

On a More Personal Note...

Music and poetry are, to be honest, crutches for me. I have a very hard time expressing my feelings (hence the story some readers may have heard about my grad students calling me Margaret Thatcher, Iron Lady). Just because I cry at movies doesn't mean I cry easily. I cry at movies precisely because I can't cry when I really need to. While I'm aware of the risk of becoming too dependent on such crutches, I can't deny that I still need them. But I think I can say they have generally served as helpful temporary scaffolding to help me get in touch with my feelings, not simply to escape or endlessly defer to vicarious expression.

In retrospect, I suppose this is one reason I am so insistent on the importance of using music and art in the classroom, in the hope that it may also serve a similar need on the part of university students, and possibly professional colleagues as well.

I often play the game of metaphor spotting* in my classes, and this presentation is based on that exercise. I collected examples of works that came to mind when I thought about what home means to me, and then spotted the metaphors that appeared and explored how they express shifting experiences and perceptions of home and community.

*Yokota, G. (2020). Metaphorical Creativity for Intercultural Communication. In *Journal of Research and Pedagogy VI*, pp. 7-17. <https://www.otemae.ac.jp/english/gotemae/60/>



The first song that came to my mind was “Stranger in a Strange Land” by Leon Russell. I encountered this song as a high school student in Kentucky in the late sixties or early seventies, at the intersection of the anti-war movement and the ecology movement. In my memory, Earth Day was first established in 1970 in response in no small part to the ecocide being committed with defoliants like napalm and Agent Orange in Vietnam.

There are of course many other far more popular songs evoking images of home from that era that could have come to mind, such as Simon & Garfunkel’s “Homeward Bound” or Lynard Skynard’s “Sweet Home Alabama.” But in retrospect, I think the main reason this song came to my mind first is related to my identity as a multiracial Asian American born in Ohio and growing up in Kentucky, often treated as an outsider and called racial slurs such as “Jap,” “nip,” and “gook.”*

*Yokota, G. (2022, forthcoming). Teaching for Social Justice in Japan: A Sustainable Model. In G.P. Glasgow (ed.), *Multiculturalism, Language, and Race in English Education in Japan: Agency, Pedagogy, and Reckoning*.

1. Listen to Leon Russell (1971)

<https://youtu.be/0iL5aOJ7LR8>

How many days has it been since I was born, how many days until I die
Do I know any ways that I can make you laugh, or do I only know how to make you cry
When the baby looks around him it's such a sight to see
He shares a simple secret with the wise man

He's a stranger in a strange land

. . .

And the baby looks around him and shares his bed of hay
With the burro in the palace of the king
He's a stranger in a strange land

. . .

Well, I don't exactly know what's going on in the world today, don't know what there is to say
About the way the people are treating each other, not like brothers
Leaders take us far away from ecology with mythology and astrology

. . .

Why can't we learn to love each other
It's time to turn a new face to the whole worldwide human race
Stop the money chase, lay back, relax, get back on the human track
Stop racing toward oblivion, oh, such a sad, sad state we're in





Delving into the rhetoric of this particular song, I realize the first feature I must mention is the rhetorical roots of the phrase “stranger in a strange land”: the Book of Exodus in the Old Testament of the Judeo-Christian Bible. It is spoken by Moses when he names his firstborn son. But I must honestly say that, although I religiously attended church three times a week until I graduated from high school, I was not consciously aware of the source of the expression, although it was vaguely familiar to me. It was only in the process of preparing for this presentation that I discovered the precise source. At the time, as a teenager, the song resonated for me more on an experiential level.

2. Reference: Exodus 2:22 (KJV)

¹ And there went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi.

² And the woman conceived, and bare a son: and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months.

³ And when she could not longer hide him, she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, and put the child therein; and she laid it in the flags by the river's brink.

⁴ And his sister stood afar off, to wit what would be done to him.

⁵ And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river; and her maidens walked along by the river's side; and when she saw the ark among the flags, she sent her maid to fetch it.

⁶ And when she had opened it, she saw the child: and, behold, the babe wept. And she had compassion on him, and said, This is one of the Hebrews' children.

⁷ Then said his sister to Pharaoh's daughter, Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee?

⁸ And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, Go. And the maid went and called the child's mother.

⁹ And Pharaoh's daughter said unto her, Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages. And the women took the child, and nursed it.

¹⁰ And the child grew, and she brought him unto Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. And she called his name Moses: and she said, Because I drew him out of the water.

¹¹ And it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown, that he went out unto his brethren, and looked on their burdens: and he spied an Egyptian smiting an Hebrew, one of his brethren.

¹² And he looked this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man, he slew the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand.

¹³ And when he went out the second day, behold, two men of the Hebrews strove together: and he said to him that did the wrong, Wherefore smitest thou thy fellow?

¹⁴ And he said, Who made thee a prince and a judge over us? intendest thou to kill me, as thou killedst the Egyptian? And Moses feared, and said, Surely this thing is known.

¹⁵ Now when Pharaoh heard this thing, he sought to slay Moses. But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh, and dwelt in the land of Midian: and he sat down by a well.

¹⁶ Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters: and they came and drew water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock.

¹⁷ And the shepherds came and drove them away: but Moses stood up and helped them, and watered their flock.

¹⁸ And when they came to Reuel their father, he said, How is it that ye are come so soon to day?

¹⁹ And they said, An Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds, and also drew water enough for us, and watered the flock.

²⁰ And he said unto his daughters, And where is he? why is it that ye have left the man? call him, that he may eat bread.

²¹ And Moses was content to dwell with the man: and he gave Moses Zipporah his daughter.

²² And she bare him a son, and he called his name Gershom: for he said, I have been a stranger in a strange land.





Next, as you were reading or listening to the lyrics, you may have noticed that Russell shifts to the New Testament and the story of the birth of Jesus. Having been born and raised in a Christian home, this story was far more familiar to me than the story of Moses and the Exodus (despite having seen Charlton Heston in “The Ten Commandments”).

While scrupulously seeking to avoid any dishonest romanticization of my high school self, I recall clearly that what resonated for me most about this song was the references to class, as the child of a single mother (“the baby ... shares his bed of hay with the burro in the palace of the king”; “stop the money chase”), race (“the way the people are treating each other, not like brothers”; “why can't we learn to love each other”; “it's time to turn a new face to the whole worldwide human race”), and the environment (“leaders take us far away from ecology with mythology and astrology”).



Digression: Photo from my 1973 high school newspaper where I am allegedly a “campus radical” taking over the principal’s office. This forgotten relic was recently shared on my alumni class page as we gear up for our fiftieth anniversary next year.

I actually edited an alternative newspaper called “The Bird,” where the masthead was cleverly designed to look at first glance like our school mascot, an eagle, but upon closer inspection could be recognized as a stylized raised middle finger. I provided information such as how to register as a conscientious objector.



3. Listen to Joan Baez, “David’s Song” (1969)

<https://youtu.be/OxqrjqN3vXA>

In my heart I will wait
by the stony gate
and the little one in my arms
will sleep
Every rising of the moon
makes the years grow late
and the love in our hearts
will keep
There are friends I will make
and bonds I will break
as the seasons roll by
and we build our own sky
In my heart I will wait
by the stony gate
and the little one in my arms
will sleep

The stars in your sky
are the stars in mine
and both prisoners
of this life are we
Through the same troubled
waters we carry our time
you and the convicts
and me
There's a good thing to know
on the outside or in
to answer not where
but just who I am
Because the stars in your sky
are the stars in mine
and both prisoners
of this life are we

The hills that you know
will remain for you
and the little willow green
will stand firm
The flowers that we planted
through the seasons past
will all bloom on the day
you return
To a baby at play
all a mother can say
he'll return on the wind
to our hearts, and till then
I will sit and I'll wait
by the stony gate
and the little one 'neath the trees
will dance



The word “home” does not actually appear in this song, but it is still the next song I thought of when I meditated on what home means to me. This is a prime example of the limitations of corpus linguistics.* It would have been easy to simply Google “home metaphors” and take my lead from what popped up, but that would not have been an honest or productive way to achieve my goal here, which is to identify what works of art resonate most with me personally at a level deeper than that.

*Yokota, G. (2022). Gender and the Rhetoric of Waste: An Intersectional Approach. *GALE Journal* 14, pp. 55-67. <https://www.gale-sig.org/journal>



Why does this song say “home” to me?
Why did I choose to sing it in the school talent show?

I knew that Baez’s husband, David Harris, was a conscientious objector who was imprisoned for 15 months for his beliefs. That knowledge gave special resonance to lines such as these.

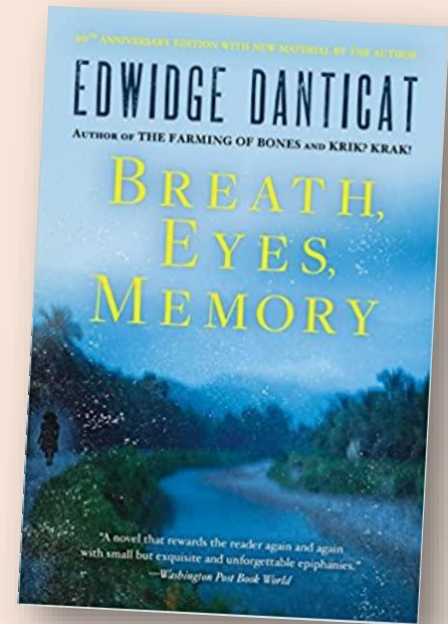
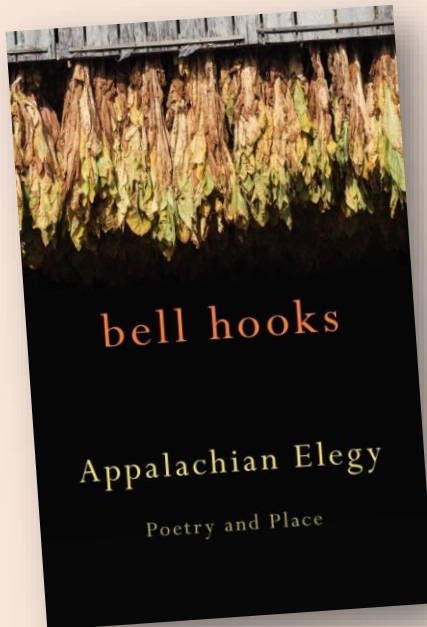
“we build our own sky”

“we carry our time”

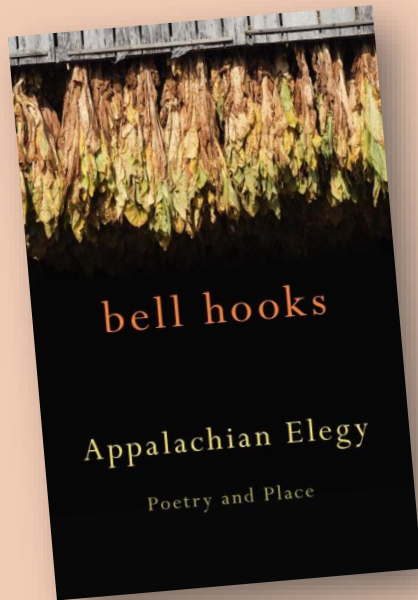
“to answer not where but just who I am”

This vision remains foundational to my sense of home.

My next selections are literary works: two poems by bell hooks and a passage from a novel by Edwidge Danticat. I had been following hooks since my grad school days, but only discovered the younger Danticat after settling down in Japan permanently.



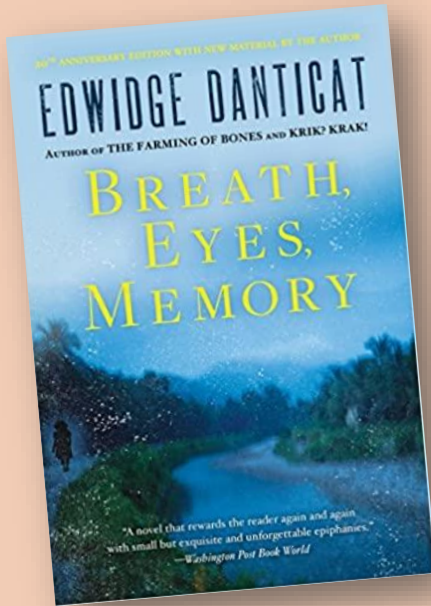
4. Two poems from bell hooks, *Appalachian Elegy* (2012)



6.
listen little sister
angels make their hope here
in these hills
follow me
I will guide you
careful now
no trespass
I will guide you
word for word
mouth for mouth
all the holy ones
embracing us
all our kin
making home here
renegade marooned
lawless fugitives
grace these mountains
we have earth to bind us
the covenant between us
can never be broken
vows to live and let live

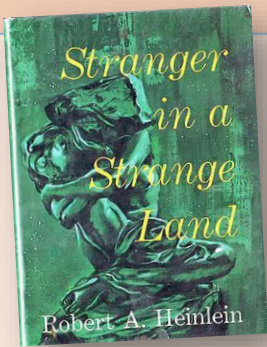
9.
autumn ending
leaves like
fallen soldiers
manmade hard hearts
fighting battles
on this once sacred ground
all killing done now
dirt upon dirt
covers all signs of death
memory tamped down
ways to not remember
the disappeared
dying faces
longing to be seen
one lone warrior lives
comes home to the hills
seeking refuge
seeking a place to surrender
the ground where hope remains
and souls surrender

5. Edwidge Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994)



“Tell this old Haitian, with his old ways, about a spiritual.”

“They’re like prayers,” Joseph said, “hymns that the slaves used to sing. Some were happy, some sad, but most had to do with freedom, going to another world. **Sometimes that other world meant home, Africa. Other times, it meant heaven, like it says in the Bible. More often it meant freedom.**”



Meditating on these three selections and why they came first to mind in connection with the theme of home, I realized they connected the idea of home with two issues dear to my heart: war and freedom.

I realized that the response of my high school self to “Stranger in a Strange Land” (the song, not the SF novel, which I only read years later) was coming not only from my Asian identity, often feeling I was being identified with the enemy, but from my sense of alienation from the ecocidal, genocidal, militaristic, misogynistic war culture that was generating that enmity and destroying the natural environment. In retrospect, I now see the alienation of my youth lacked perspective on my own complicity as an American in the war system. As a new sense of alienation is now being triggered by the war in Ukraine and the many violent conflicts raging elsewhere in the world, let us now keep that perspective firmly in mind as I introduce my last two musical selections.



On the surface, these two songs may initially sound very different rhetorically: the first more as a prayer, the second more as a question. But listening to them together, and also in the context of the excerpt from *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, I realized “Free” is not just a simple prayer. I encourage everyone to look for the questions that it also asks about the connection between freedom and home, as well as the question Lina Sleibi and my co-presenter May Kyaw Oo ask about our complicity and why conflicts in some countries get paid more attention than others.

6. Listen to John Legend, “Free” (2022)

Go down Moses, way down Moses, go down to Egypt land
Lay down soldiers, lay down those weapons, let peace rush in

Let it wash through the valley, soar to the mountains, fall in the deepest blue sea
Let it fly 'cross the sky, a banner so high, that even the rockets will see

That there is a god, and I'm just sayin' Lawd
Rain down freedom, rain down 'til we're all free

Low down broken, homeless floatin', lost and thrown to chance
Caged birds singing, break chains so we can do our holy dance

Let 'em ring through the valley, soar to the mountain, pierce to the core of the earth
Let 'em sing cross the sky, a chorus so high, that everyone will know their worth

And that there is a God, and we're just sayin' Lawd
Rain down freedom, rain down 'til we're all free

<https://youtu.be/R5OI-Dx-7Ms>



7. Listen to Lina Sleibi, “Over the Rainbow” (2018)

Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high
There's a land that I heard of once in a lullaby
Somewhere over that rainbow, skies are blue
And the dreams the you dare to dream really do come true

Someday I'll wish upon a star and wake up where the clouds are far behind me
Where troubles melt like lemon drops away above the chimney tops
That's where you'll find me

Somewhere over the rainbow
Bluebirds fly
Birds fly over the rainbow
Why then, oh, why can't I?
If happy little bluebirds fly
Beyond the rainbow
Why, oh, why can't I?

<https://youtu.be/Rr1txsDT8Hw>



Thank You!



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