

What is “home” for children of immigrants?**By Sheila Alarcon**

This critical creative piece proposes that home is an active subject; immigrants carry their experiences and knowledge beyond the borders of their native lands, and this informs new ideas of home and belonging. This work also explores my own experience of home as an Ecuadorian-American child of immigrants living in California's Bay Area. Utilizing oral history, I map the definition of home for my parents in the Bay Area, my experience visiting Ecuador, and how these experiences have helped redefine the meaning of home for myself.

I was about twelve years old when I visited my grandmother in Ecuador. If I close my eyes even for just a little bit, I can still feel the breeze that enters the open bedroom window, along with the sound of a knife banging against the washing stone that is in the middle of my grandmother's backyard, waking me up from my deep sleep. As I look down from the window of the two-story house, I see my mother prepping the once-live chicken for lunch. She carefully plucks the feathers off the chicken's wet, boiling body, making sure she gets every single one of them. As I climb on the wooden stool that is leaning against the wall of my bedroom's window, I scan the rest of the backyard, taking in the beautiful green scenery, the chants of the roosters, and the squeals of donkeys from far away.

Watching the chickens wander the yard with their chicks, I was saddened by the realization that one day their fate would be the same as the chicken my mother is preparing for lunch. In Ecuador, chickens are not backyard pets; they are lunch. The thought quickly leaves my mind when I hear my mom call out my name. “Christy!” “Mande,” I reply.

She calls me in closer to show me that the *gallina* (chicken) she was prepping had unlaidd eggs. I was fascinated by this sight, yet for my Ecuadorian cousins who were also observing, it was nothing special. In the small, dimly lit kitchen, my grandmother had a large pot with water already boiling- she was cooking for the whole family. In Ecuador, it is a custom to eat a full meal that consists of a soup, *el segundo*, and sometimes dessert. That day, we were going to eat *sopa de pollo* fresh from our own backyard. Back then, I didn’t yet understand that the exact flavors of that soup could not be replicated; they could only be found here, in my mother’s land.

Born and raised in the Bay Area, I hadn’t had trouble defining what was home for me. I was from Oakland. My family took trips to Ecuador every few years since I was an infant. As a child, my identity was my everyday life in Oakland with my family, and the Ecuadorian adventures of my childhood summers. Although my stays were short, my adventures seemed limitless. With a convenience store on every corner, my cousins and I would go buy sweets that would get our bellies full before dinner time. The salty yet sour lemon taste of the *pipas* (sunflower seeds), the frozen *chicolac* (chocolate milk in a

pouch), and the strawberry flavored *bon bon bum* (a lollipop that always stained my tongue red), have left an imprint on my childhood. Eating those same treats today reminds me of all the *travesuras* I would get into. It was a ritual to stay up until midnight playing cops and robbers or hide and seek with all the neighborhood kids. Without letting our parents know of our whereabouts, we would take off to the nearest lake and go swimming, even if “near” meant hiking two miles out.

In Oakland, my life was restricted to school, extracurricular activities such as sports, and home. As I grew older and engaged with the Ecuadorian culture, I began to form another identity that was always hidden very deep inside of me, and that is when the definition of *home* grew another layer. When my parents first immigrated to the Bay Area, one of their priorities became to find a community. This was achieved through *Ecuadorianos Unidos*, a non-profit organization, which opened new doors for me. I was exposed to traditional Ecuadorian plates at every gathering, as well as music, which wasn’t as common in my household in Oakland. Through the years, I immersed myself within the community by volunteering at each major event. I was soon appointed treasurer of the organization, giving me a profound sense of gratitude for being able to serve and contribute to my community by raising financial aid for those most in need in Ecuador. Meeting other Ecuadorians in Northern California and hearing their stories allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of my culture, have a deeper appreciation of my parent’s homeland, and helped me understand my own experiences in the diaspora.

My research and experiences tell me that defining home is not as simple as looking up the word in the dictionary. Rather “home” is a complex, nuanced, and shifting idea. I propose to think of home not as a fixed place or identity, but rather as something alive and changing. Home is the body acting as a vessel, carrying the culture and intersections that make up who we are, and that expands and shifts as we do. The different components that make up our individual vessels include but are not limited to our culture and identity, such as gender, religion, disability, race, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, social class/status, age, and our individual intersections. These different intersections are what influence, define, and shape our home, molding it and redefining it constantly. For me and my migrant community, the idea that home is not succumbed to a singular physical location becomes more apparent.

In an interview with my mother, home was understood as
 un hogar acogedor, te sientes bien... donde no te va a dar frío, donde puedes
 cerrar la puerta y puedes dormir sin estar pendiente de que algo pase. El hogar
 es donde la ciudad da acogida, tienes buenos vecinos... si estoy viviendo aquí,
 esto es lo que espero... Esta ciudad, este país es mi hogar... (Neri Alarcon,

Personal Interview, May 11, 2024

It soon became clear to me that my mother’s home was the United States– she had everything here that she longed for in Ecuador, yet Ecuador was always a place she would want to go back to. “Yo no olvido el lugar donde nací y crecí, siempre estoy en

contacto con mi familia, y siempre extraño regresar, nunca olvido el lugar, la tierra donde crecí... No he perdido el amor por el lugar donde nací y crecí.” (Neri Alarcon, Personal Interview, May 11, 2024)

At twenty-nine years old, my mother came to the United States, por tener una mejor oportunidad de vida, porque en Ecuador una mujer de 30 años ya no puede conseguir trabajo.” If given the chance to go back, she would also take it. “Ya con la experiencia de trabajo y de vida aquí sí me gustaría regresar porque acá se vive una vida muy agitada con el trabajo... Y también siempre se extraña la familia y costumbres de allá... la semana santa, la navidad, el fin de año. (Neri Alarcon, Personal Interview, May 11, 2024)

To put it simply, the Ecuadorian culture is what has kept her grounded here in the Bay Area. Important celebrations such as *el 10 de Agosto*, *Las Fiestas de Nuestro Pueblo*, y *La Caminata de la Virgen del Cisne*, are all traditions that have been alive for centuries.

Although these celebrations were not practiced in my home in Oakland, they were embodied through my mother’s storytelling. Wistfully, she would tell me stories of her childhood, when everyday activities brought those memories back to her. A memorable event was *Las Fiestas de su Pueblo*, which I had the fortune of attending for the first time in 2022. For her, these events meant enjoying a community-led itinerary that lasted four days. On Thursday, the coronation of *las reinas del pueblo* occurred, signaling out young women for leadership roles in their community. The next day, Friday, consisted of

sports such as *Ecuavoley* during the day, and a *festival de la canción*, for amateur singers. Saturday included a serenade for *La Virgen del Carmen*, as well as *una velada artística*, with short comedic skits and dances by performers of all ages. Finally, Sunday consisted of a mass for all, a small auction to raise funds for the church, and lastly, *el baile*. These days were filled with faith, laughter, and joy- the same sentiments I experienced during my time there.

La Virgen del Cisne is a highly recognized and beloved virgin who is celebrated throughout Ecuador, specifically in the major city of Loja. Every year in August, *la caminata de La Virgen del Cisne* is conducted in celebration of her glory. Faithful devotees walk across cities accompanying “*La Churonita*,” a dear name given to the Virgin. In my visit to Ecuador in 2022, I had the opportunity to walk alongside my family members for *La Virgen del Cisne*. For me, the walk lasted around seven and a half miles. Those who made a promise to the Virgin continued to the finish line, which was about another five miles. The ache in my legs wasn’t noticeable until the next day, but that didn’t change my perspective on the experience. It was like opening a door to what my mother’s faith and religion were like when she was living in Ecuador, while also restoring my faith and beliefs.

From a young age, I was introduced to religion (Roman Catholicism) by completing the Sacraments of Initiation. Aside from that, practicing my faith was rare, not because I didn’t believe in it, but because I didn’t feel connected to it. Going to

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Ecuador and experiencing *La Caminata de la Virgen* sparked that interest once more, and I began to feel identified with my faith. It was the connection to religion on a different continent, but also my family, whom I saw infrequently, that allowed me to feel close to something, and keep it dear to my heart.

Being in the United States, I find comfort in praying to *La Virgen del Cisne* whenever I have troubles or worries. I find comfort in eating my mother's chicken soup, which almost tastes exactly like the one my grandmother would cook, yet I know that it is missing that special something that will only be found in Ecuador, but it is close enough to remind me of all the memories and ease any pain away. I find comfort in listening to music produced by Ecuadorian icons and listening to stories from Ecuadorian immigrants, both of which tell the narrative of what it is like to be Ecuadorian. Immersing myself in the music, the food, the slang, and the traditions has all brought me close to a country I wasn't physically born in, but was born within me. Being in the United States, thousands of miles away from a small developing country, I find that my daily reminders of Ecuador set the stage for my identity, allowing me to call Ecuador home.