[TITLE SLIDE]

Origins of Belonging

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Collegium, Walker Center

[NOTE: On the eve of a sabbatical, I presented this overview of a proposed reframing of my dissertation into a book project for a general audience. While I was able to do research during my sabbatical, the larger book project has been sidelined during the pandemic.]

[SLIDE 2] In the current moment, anti-immigration rhetoric seems to be increasing and too commonplace. This nativist moment is not the first such example in U.S. history, of course. Similar nativist strains emerged in the early twentieth century to restrict immigration—resulting in the Immigration Act of 1924. This law used information from the 1890 census to establish quotas limited to 2% of each nationality in this census. This effectively reduced immigration from areas of Eastern and Southern Europe. Additional restrictive immigration laws, including the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, had already severely restricted immigration from China, Japan, and other countries in Asia. In these ways, the urges to use immigration law to attempt to preserve an ideal of the U.S. as a homogenous white (northern European) nation is nothing new. *[African immigration?]*

In speaking out against immigrants, critics suggest the immigrants should just "go home!" This use of the language of home should not be taken lightly. Far from a banal word, the language of home is deeply embedded in cultural ideas of belonging as well as in practices of violent exclusion. The nativist critic who tells an immigrant to "go home!" is clearly sending a message that the speaker belongs in this nation while the immigrant does not. When such hateful

rhetoric is reinforced by the law and by the force of the state, the practices of exclusion can quickly become physically violent as well as emotionally devastating.

[SLIDE 3] And yet, to many the idea of home remains a positive word warmly connoting spaces of belonging and acceptance. If you walk through any home furnishings store or a gift shop in a quaint tourist town, there is a good chance that you will come across at least one item emblazoned with the word "Home." In this way, home takes on a fetish quality—the word itself appearing to be imbued with understood qualities that merit its display on a sign, a pillow, or a t-shirt. But, what are these qualities? And how did home become a singular word to be regarded with such loving merit?

Attempting to answer these questions quickly becomes a lesson in dynamics of race, gender, and religion in U.S. history. Of course, no book can tackle all of U.S. history—or even one aspect of U.S. history—and this is not the goal of this book. Rather, my goal is to challenge us to think more critically of the language of home and about how we speak about our own belonging.

The language of home is entangled with ideas and feelings of belonging—who belongs to a particular place and group. At its best, home allows us to feel connected to others and secure that we have a place in this world. As one popular quote by Robert Frost exclaims, "Home is the place where when you go there they have to take you in." Home is where you fit and where people claim you as one of them. Such experience of inclusion and belonging feels

good. It is one reason why “home” shows up on t-shirts, necklaces, and wall dećor.

[SLIDE 4] And yet, home can also become a fortress that we feel we must violently defend from those we judge to not belong. It is the home that we attempt to keep safe with vast security apparatus at airports, borders, and ports in the name of Homeland Security. It is the home that the immigration critic believes they are protecting when they shout, “Go home” or chant in support of wall dividing “us” from “them.”

Also, for some home can feel like a prison of rigid expectations which may also be enforced with violence. Home can be a place where a person lives in fear of being found out as queer. Home can be a place of avoiding—or failing to avoid—a drunk or abusive parent or spouse. For some, home is not a haven, but a site of fear.

[SLIDE 5] So, when we speak of *home*, what do we mean? What are we trying to say when we say *home*?

There is no singular answer. Moreover, when attempting to understand what is meant when you hear or read language of home, it matters a lot who is speaking and in what context. For this reason, this book explores the language of home in multiple contexts throughout U.S. history to show how the meaning of home shifts and changes to define who belongs and on what terms.

In case it is not already clear, the language of home is not limited to personal spaces of family and private residences. Throughout U.S. history, the language of home participates in discourses about who does and does not belong in the *nation*. As I will try to show, these two core ideas of home and homeland, of family and nation intertwine again and again.

As an expression of the interwoven personal and public understandings of home, this book weaves together stories of my own familial history with U.S. history. In her book, *Making the Connections*, feminist ethicist Bev Harrison describes her use of family history in teaching. She would ask her students to write up 3-5 generations of their family and identify the occupation and education levels of their ancestors. For Harrison, her pedagogical goal was to have students consider whether or not the idea of continuous economic progress in fact holds. She challenges them to explore whether or not every generation does “get ahead” and why or why not? By using the student’s familial histories, she attempted to help students see themselves *within* the narratives (and myths) of U.S. history.

Reading Harrison’s account of her assignment resonated with me. As someone who loves epic novels that trace the story of a family from generation to generation, the idea that history shows up in our family stories makes sense to me. This is not to say that our ancestry is our destiny. Nor does it mean that not knowing one’s genealogical chart makes one incomplete. Rather, it is to say that connecting family history and U.S. history helps me to feel connected to what has come before this moment.

[SLIDE 6] The idea of genealogy in intellectual history is not new. In the discipline of cultural studies, a genealogical approach allows a scholar to describe the convergence of multiple streams that shape how particular ideas and/or practices emerge. By weaving together a genealogical study of the language of home with a genealogy of my family history, I am attempting to trace two intertwined genealogies of belonging. Because I am a descendent of a European colonial settlers, my family history entwines with the emergence and development of the U.S. nation up until today. By telling these stories together, my goal is to disrupt not only how we may speak unreflectively of home, but also to challenge us to interrogate how we think of our own origin stories and narratives of belonging.

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[Slide 7] As a descendent of European colonial settlers, my story is one of whiteness. According to DNA results, my ancestry is almost entirely Western European, except for a small percentage of Ashkenazi Jew. Given the backlash to Elizabeth Warren's DNA test, I acknowledge without hesitation that DNA tests are by no means sufficient evidence to claim belonging to any group. Until the DNA test, we were not aware of any connection to Jewish ancestry and I have no cultural identity as a Jew or plan to claim one for personal or political purposes. In citing my DNA test, I *am* making clear that I identify as white within cultural, familial, and scientific frames.

And this whiteness, as I have learned, is a large reason why for the first quarter-century of my life home only felt like a *good* word. As a child, I mostly

felt like I belonged. Raised as an evangelical Christian in Midwest towns to a married mom and dad, my two brothers and I comfortably wandered the streets of our white, suburban neighborhoods. Then, as a young woman, I married the wrong man whom I divorced after just three years. This marriage and divorce changed nearly everything for me. My sense of vulnerability. My religion. My awareness of social injustice. My understanding of home.

Until I became a divorced, single mom, I had not really experienced what it felt like to be excluded by social norms and the structures that supported them. If we have always fit the unstated expectations for belonging, it can be hard to even see that they exist. It is like the proverbial fish who does not know what water is.

This book then is an attempt to better see what I did not know. Each chapter addresses a particular use of the language of home and how it participated in shaping who belonged and why. I couple this with a story from my family history—both the story as I first was taught it as well as a critical reflection on how to rewrite this story within the larger context of U.S. history.

Chapter one explores the beginnings of the incipient nation as European settlers arrive onto the spaces Indigenous persons have called home for millenia. In this colonial period, concepts of home contribute to the conflict between colonial settlers and Indigenous persons. Into this period, I introduce the story of my family as they arrive to build an English colonial community west of Boston on Wampanoag land.

With the Revolution, the colonial identity shifts to become a new national identity. To assist in this shift, the language of **homespun** weaves together familial connections and pious devotion as well as political and economic independence. However, amidst the political and pious rhetoric of independence and rights, the institution of slavery continues to be both hidden and ubiquitous. Through the story of my partner's family, the Codman's, I explore some of how slavery was vital to the U.S. economy but persistently hidden in plain sight.

Following the Revolution, a critical role of the new government is to allocate the unsettled land which the young government now controls. Establishing the systems for this distribution marks up the land in ways that last until today. Throughout the early and mid-nineteenth century, the expansion of European colonial settlers across the U.S. plays a major role in U.S. politics. On the eve of the Civil War, President Lincoln signs the **Homestead** Act in 1862. In my own family, I grew up hearing that my ancestor was "the first white child born in Paulding County, OH." However, this story problematically celebrates whiteness and masks the violence surrounding the time of his birth.

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, a train connected the nation coast to coast and the Industrial Revolution remade the economy in parts of the nation. These changes altered ideas of gender, home, and family through ideas of gendered separate spheres of work and home. Dating to this era, the phrase "**Home, Sweet Home**" began as a poem and then became a popular song. Its

longing for a particular kind of home reinforced a certain ideal of home that many could not achieve, especially those in poverty and racial minorities. At the same time, some people explored how to use the new technologies to promote more communal ways of living—including my ancestor George Pryor in upstate New York. As the norm of gendered separate spheres continue to shape contemporary ideals of home and family, revisiting the alternatives provides both challenges and alternatives to this ideal.

The next snap shot jumps to the mid-twentieth century and the housing crises and boom of the post-World War II era. My maternal grandparents exemplify the opportunities of housing in this era with a new house in a neighborhood of families. The government played a major role in creating opportunities for **home ownership** through affordable mortgage options as well as an expansion of the highway system. However, racist practices of mortgage lending created vastly different opportunities for wealth creation and other social goods.

The social revolutions of the 1960's and 1970's sought a more racially just and gender equal world. These changes also began to shift practices of where people lived and with whom. In response, the religious right developed a campaign to promote "family values" and to disparage single parents and "**broken homes**." Growing up within this evangelical Christian world, my assumptions of family, home, and religion were forged within this context. Becoming a divorced, single parent required a reimagining of home and religion.

On September 11, 2001, the United States was attacked by terrorists. In response, President George W. Bush created the department of **Homeland Security**. However, the move towards this new framing of U.S. policy as defending the homeland was already in motion prior to these events. On the morning of the attacks, my son was in preschool. As such, the U.S. has been engaged in a war on terror for his entire memorable life. What impact will this have on a generation raised within a rhetoric of fear and the need to protect home?

Most recently, individuals raised within the U.S. have carried out violent acts against other citizens—such as the 2013 Boston Bombing. Increasingly, these persons are described as "**homegrown terrorists.**" Perhaps ironically, the moniker homegrown has become more popular in recent years as people reclaim the local after years of intense globalization and global wars. Within this context, how do we make sense of 'homegrown terrorists'? How do we understand this rhetoric of homegrown in the era of Trump and an increased fear of immigrants and the foreign?

While neither I nor my immediate family have been directly threatened by restrictive immigration policies, the anti-immigrant headlines became a bit closer to home when I received a call in the spring of 2018 from a colleague seeking support for an immigrant in detention.

I received the call because I am a minister of liberal congregation in Wayland, a suburb outside Boston. Victor, the man in detention, listed Wayland as his home and my colleague wondered if the local congregation might be able to

help. A woman in the congregation took the lead in organizing a campaign of letter-writing to the official who would be reviewing Victor's case. In one such letter, a congregant powerfully recounted his father's immigrant experience in order to appeal for the important contributions that immigrants such as Victor make to this country. Inspired by this example, I shared how my ancestors were among the 1640 founders of the church I now serve. I wrote:

> More than 375 years ago, my distant ancestor, John Bent, was among a group of immigrants who helped to found the church I now serve. Despite the distance of years, I am keenly aware that all that I know of life and ministry today began with the hopes and hard work of those distant ancestors. Today, as minister of this church began by immigrants, I will do what I can to offer support to Victor so that his own hard work and faith may contribute to our community.

In this small way, I attempted to leverage my whiteness and citizenship status to support an immigrant. (Successfully as it turned out!)

And yet, as a letter written to I.C.E., the arm of the state that (violently) enforces exclusionary ideas of the nation, there is much that remains unsaid. Of course, my 1640 ancestor was not simply an immigrant—he was a colonist seizing land that had been the 'home' of the Wampanoag. As Cherokee Scholar Clyde Grubbs has said, "immigrants" don't arrive with mercenaries to form militias. My ancestor didn't just relocate—he participated in the violent history of what today is described as settler colonialism.

This book attempts to show how this ancestor and others exemplify key moments in which language of home shaped the understanding of nation in the U.S. From the myth of empty lands in 1640 to the creation of Homeland Security in 2001, the language of home has played a significant part in determining who belongs in the U.S and on what terms. As we again live within an era of nativist anger, we need to better understand how to speak of home and how to better imagine the kind of world we want to live within. Learning to see what is at stake in how we speak of home can help disrupt violent and exclusionary narratives of belonging as well as help equip us to make more just spaces and inclusive communities.