Practices of home beyond place attachment

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Prelude

For me, place has meant home, perhaps even a yearning for home — frequent house and school moves as a child had left me feeling un-homed, out of place. During times of life change, my work as an artist and geographer always seems to come back to this feeling of displacement as a starting point from which to work. Now is one such transitional moment, a moment marked by an upcoming move from Cornwall where, for the first time, I have lived in the same house for more than three years. This house in which I have brought up my family has been our home since 2001; a settling in one place that has been life-affirming. Those who know me well are therefore surprised to hear that I am leaving West Cornwall and moving to a city. Bristol is very different from these remote cliff tops near Lands' End, four hours further west. A *house* became a *home*, only to now, once again, become a *house*.

Introduction

In this chapter, I juxtapose *home* and *house* using the practice(s) of artist, geographer, and then would-be builder to reflect on the tensions between place attachment and detachment, between being in place and then out of place; to explore some of the complex personal politics involved in the pragmatic choices and compromises I am making in order to facilitate this move from cliff top to city; and then to reflect more widely on issues of translocation amidst a geopolitical environment dominated by the othering of people deemed to be out of place. I approach this through discussion of a series of art projects: *BOShomes*, an 'estate agency' (2008); *Springs Farm*, a series of paintings worked in response to a derelict farmhouse in West Cornwall (2008 - 2011); and current work-in-progress *From home to house: VV Renovations* (working title). These art projects and their underlying politics are very much place or site-specific, deeply embedded amidst the scattered moorland settlements between Land's End and St Ives. It is to the rich but complex cultural heritage that entwines this holidayed place that I first turn, before considering the impact of this tourist economy on access to housing — the subject of *BOShomes*. The next project, *Springs Farm*, marks a shift in affective register with a more subjective exploration of place as homed, lived and material. Then as artist-builder-geographer, I use *VV Renovations* to work with the tensions between house as commodity and home as dwelling place, between being emplaced and displaced in the earlier

projects, to offer something more complex and nuanced.

The Face of West Penwith

> From Wicca to Levant the coastline emerges out of cairns and bracken and cultivated greenland, revealing on its varied faces a sea history and a land history of men within and without and a commerce of man with the weather. Here, in a small stretch of headland, cove and Atlantic adventure the most distant histories are near the surface as if the fintal convulsion of rock upheaval and cold incision setting in a violent sandwich of strata had directed the hide and seek of celtic pattern (2009: 42).

At the time of the project *BOShomes*, I was artist-in-residence with the National Trust at Bosigran in West Penwith, based on an Atlantic-facing farm nestled under Carn Galva. This wild, weathered granite, post-industrial landscape, with its long heritage of mineral extraction, is indelibly woven into the texture of place in the settlements of the far west of Cornwall. Now one of Britain's top tourist destinations, Cornwall boasts not only beaches and moorland walks and a more temperate climate, but also a range of tourist attractions cumulatively promoted as 'Cornwall's Heritage and Cultural Offer' (Hale, 2001, Haydu, 2017), which currently constitute the primary economic drivers in this remote location.

Somewhat bucking the trend of the 'internalist and essentialist construction' of place critiqued by Massey (1995: 183), place-attachment in Cornwall has a long history of interconnectedness with elsewhere (Orange, 2012). Triggering the Industrial Revolution, Cornish mining became 'a powerhouse of technical innovation and a nursery for the world's mine captains and engineers' who, taking 'those skills overseas… imagined themselves a global elite' (Kennedy and Kingcome, 1998: 47). Recognising this global impact, from Australia to the Americas, 'and all the influences which that brought' (Massey, 1995: 183), UNESCO listed the Cornwall and West Devon Mining Landscape as a World Heritage Site (WHS) in 2006. This pride in 'Cornwall's former position as an industrial world leader remains embedded within a modem sense of Cornish identity' (Orange, 2010, p. 101, Payton, 2005) extends to Cornish diasporic communities overseas. Where I live, much of this cultural pride is manifested through the miners institutes, pubs, the mining museum at Geevor and the annual St Just Feast, when descendants of the Cornish diaspora - known as *Cousin Jacks* - return from all around the world (Payton, 1984, 2005). The return *home* therefore becomes an essential part of the imaging of diaspora and the spatialisation of memory (Basu, 2007).

Contrasting with the picture-postcard image, West Cornwall is widely recognised as having deceptively high levels of deprivation. The European Union continues (for now) to allocate Cornwall more substantial regional development structural funds than any other part of the UK

(Brien, 2018). In West Cornwall, the distortion of the local housing market is severe; wages in the St Ives parliamentary constituency are only 68% of the UK weekly median weekly (Haydu, 2017). Cornwall has the third highest number of rough sleepers in the UK and a significant problem with hidden homelessness (Vergnault, 2017, Ryan, 2017, Public Health England, 2018). This deprivation is driven by in-work poverty sitting 'alongside areas of considerable wealth and affluence' with work in the tourist economy particularly low paid, seasonal and subject to the vagaries of the weather (Haydu, 2017: 8).

This ambiguity of appropriation and identification, exemplified by a tourist-focused economy - associated in the Cornish imaginary with working class labour - brings into stark relief long standing issues of ethnicity, ownership and representation (Hale, 2001), a tension summed up by Lippard (1999: 163) with reference to another deprived area:

> … if the tourist's landscape is perceived as the past, then present concerns need not interfere with superficial pleasure. Maine is a poor state, and tourists learn to avert their eyes from the less ingratiating sights, those incompatible with the invented past and our modern expectations thereof, as though only the nice old houses, shady lanes, and harbor vistas were visible; as though there were no shabby side streets, edge-of-town strips, tall old multi-family houses cowering in their tarpaper coats against the elements, no yards full of rusting cars, no toothless elders, and pale, overweight teenagers pushing strollers, no convenience stores on the corners

A few miles up the coast road lies the town of St Ives, 'a salt-encrusted barnacle of a town with a picture-book harbour, bathed in the luminous Atlantic light that has bewitched generations of painters' (Jackman). The former fisherman's cottages in the higgledy-piggledy, cobbled alleyways of *Downlong* are chock-a-block with visitors during the summer; only a couple survive as homes, compounding the effects of the slum clearances of the 1930's (despite considerable local opposition, many residents were forcibly rehoused in newly built council houses isolated on the outskirts of the town). Through the inflationary impact of second homes, year-round residents are priced out of the housing market, 'dispossessed from their immediate surroundings in a localized diaspora and removed from their livelihood and connection to place' (Laviolette and Baird, 2011; 67). Cornwall Council undertook a survey of St Ives residents in 2016 to assess support for measures mitigating the impact of the second home market on access to housing. The results, supported by eighty percent of voters - contrasting with research on attitudes of local residents to second home ownership (Perkins and Thorns, 2006, Paris, 2009, Quinn, 2004) - demonstrated a clear mandate for action. The Council, supported by a High Court judgement, now refuses planning permission for any housing development not restricted to full-time residents (Morris, 2016).

Projects

***BOShomes*, house as commodity**

Bearing in mind the effects of commodified heritage on the local housing market described above, I wanted to focus attention on the social context of second homes on the one hand and homelessness on the other, the gap between *homes* and *houses,* so I developed *BOShomes* (2009) whilst at Bosigran. The suffix *bos* is common in Cornish place-names, particularly small settlements (MAGA Cornish Language Partnership). In Kernewek (modern-day Cornish), *bos* relates *to being, becoming, or existing*; as such, within the context of place-naming it has overtones of belonging and given the size of these settlements - often just a few cottages around a farm - embodies a sense of dwelling-place or home-making.

Figure 1, *BOShomes* estate agency sign at Mill Farm, Bosigran, 2008.

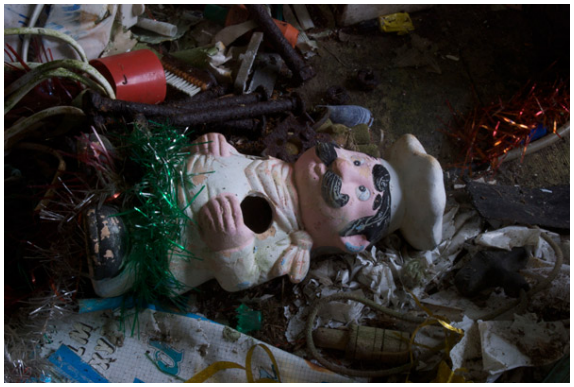
With this heritage dissonance in mind (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996), I traipsed the moor, searching for and photographing derelict 18th and 19th century cottages. The final project consisted of several elements: estate agency signs placed in the curtilage of the cottages (fig. 1), accompanying house particulars, a website boshomes.co.uk and a board-game *BOS*opoly. This latter element is a floor-sized variation on the well-known property marketing game *Monopoly* in which players go around the board purchasing derelict cottages, incrementally increasing their 'des res' value with, for example, a new bathroom or designer kitchen. Thus, as the game progresses, former homes are 'done up', to become houses commodified as investments (second homes) or

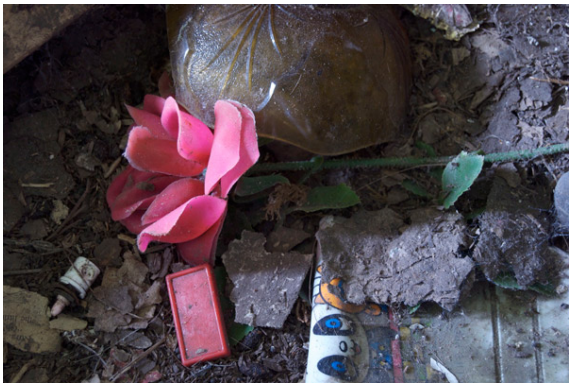
‘somewhere to escape’ (for details of these projects, see Vickery, 2019). As a National Trust warden once told me, the only way he could return to Zennor, the village in which he was raised and which he still considers *home*, was ‘in a box’.

***Springs Farm*: a derelict home, an empty and overloaded place**

One of the deserted houses I found was Springs Farm, a long deserted and now derelict farmhouse on the edges of the West Penwith moor near the former mining village of Pendeen, sited amidst the iconic engine houses of Wheal Hearle. The house does not exist in Land Registry records. As its name may suggest, apart from dereliction and tumble-down stacks, its other notable feature is cattle tramped bog.

I felt drawn to Springs Farm from my first encounter, its traces leaving an enduring and ‘indelible mark’ on my mind (Anderson, 2015: 177). The farmhouse was full of detritus left where it had fallen, abandoned by its former human residents. I found NatWest bank statements from the early 1980’s, a school photograph of two children in St Just school uniform (the local school), a Barbie doll lying on the floor nestled in Christmas tinsel amidst jumbled clothes and bric-a-brac, and an old ‘chef’ utensil pot just like the one I remember sitting in the corner of my grandparents’ kitchen. There were barn owl pellets, dead mice and rats, plastic flowers, ivy coming in through the widows, broken chairs and an old dilapidated range, bits of farm machinery and endless other dilapidated and piled up odds and ends. It was just about possible to climb the crumbling and far-from-safe stairs and negotiate the disintegrating floorboards to the main front bedroom where more personal belongings were strewn across the floor: old photos, fallen pictures, chairs waiting for someone to sit, toddler toys asking to be picked up and scooted across the boards. Feeling like an interloper, I was constantly on edge. As the building creaked precariously, the former and current residents, human and more-than-human, were still homing this eerie, disarming place. The decaying corpses reiterated the ongoing liveliness of vermin and the cattle outside and reminded me that the farmer might suddenly appear - and that here I was, out-of-bounds.





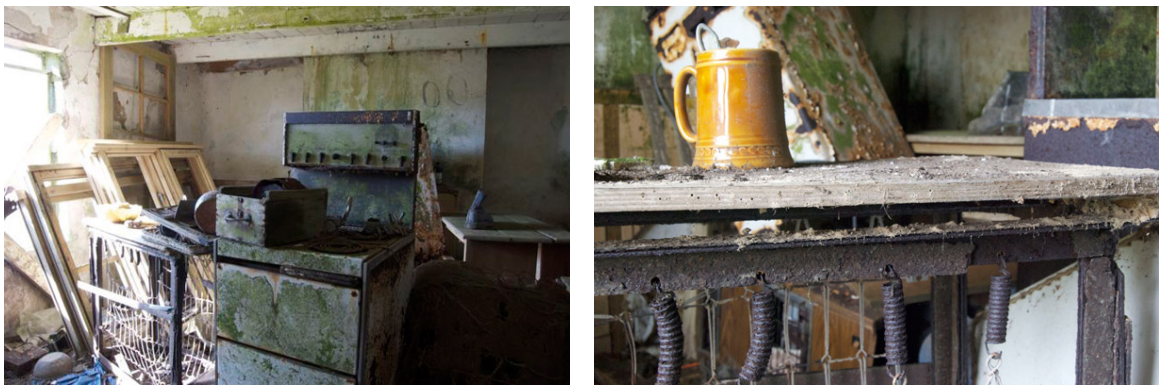


Figure 2, Photographs taken at Springs Farm, 2009.

Initially, I approached the site through photography, intending it to be part of the estate agency project (fig. 2). In an early show, I exhibited the photographs as taxonomic groups, already anticipating a refusal on my part to see images as individual objects by exploring the 'grey borderland between remembering and forgetting' (DeSilvey, 2007: 893). People found them beautiful, alluring, and commented on my skill with a camera, clearly fascinated by the images as nostalgic objects. We currently have an overwhelming impulse for the old and the forgotten; here this seemed to be the sole point of entry for the viewer and the photographs seemed unable to operate on any other terms. This gaze of photography within the context of dereliction has been described as *ruin porn* in which, through the circulation of 'seductive' images online, empty ruins provide a compelling, immersive spectacle that 'reproduce[s] the viewing subject as a consumer of dereliction, the images mediating the ruin as a theme park to be drifted through' (Cunningham, 2011: 18). Thus, it can be argued, these depopulated photographic images of ruin ignore the social devastation of localized diaspora described by Laviolette and Baird (2011) and the 'contingent constitution of place' producing instead an image of ruination that is 'fetishized as a sublime fossil, deprived of history and motion' (Lavery and Hassall, 2015: 113,114-117).

DeSilvey and Edensor (2012: 16) argue that emphasising the accelerated and highly visible, processual vital materiality of ruins might function as a way of moderating 'the overriding focus on the visual in ruin scholarship and focus attention on the ways in which the material qualities of ruins afford particular sensual and affective experiences'. This might be read as a critique of image-making processes such as painting. However, painting can operate beyond the framing power of the static image as I discuss with particular reference to landscape elsewhere (Vickery, 2015). Similarly, Lavery (2015: 12), reflecting on Lee Hassall's film *Return to Battleship Island* (2013) set amidst the dereliction of the Japanese island Hashima, makes a case for an alternative understanding 'of representation that problematize[s] the tendency of images to deny the destructive power of Time'.

The dynamic transformation of matter through the transitive process of images (their making and reception) can operate to render place (and ruin) contingent in its representations (Joselit, 2009). Lavery suggests that Hassall is not interested in the immediate representation of ruins or the production of the past in the present, but 'purposefully set[s] out to contest the tendency of ruin porn to blind us to the possibility of a future' and by so doing disrupts the gaze of ruin photography and draws attention to the politics of depopulated places (ibid: 112).

I was heading in a similar direction by turning from photography to painting to 'disrupt' this photographic gaze (Vickery, 2015). Like DeSilvey (2017: 6), 'in order to describe what is happening in these perforated places, I [found I needed] to draw on new ways of storying matter [through writing] - surfacing meaning that extends beyond cultural frames of reference', in my case by inviting in other visual forms. As a result, I used the processes intrinsic to painting to explore the temporalities, traces and material residues of this depopulated place. Painting became an exploration of the shifting relationships between time and place, of those allusive memories that one moment we can catch and the next are gone, only to re-emerge in some other shape at some other moment.

> …the house shelters day-dreaming,
> the house protects the dreamer,
> the house allows one to dream in peace (Bachelard, 1994, p. 6).

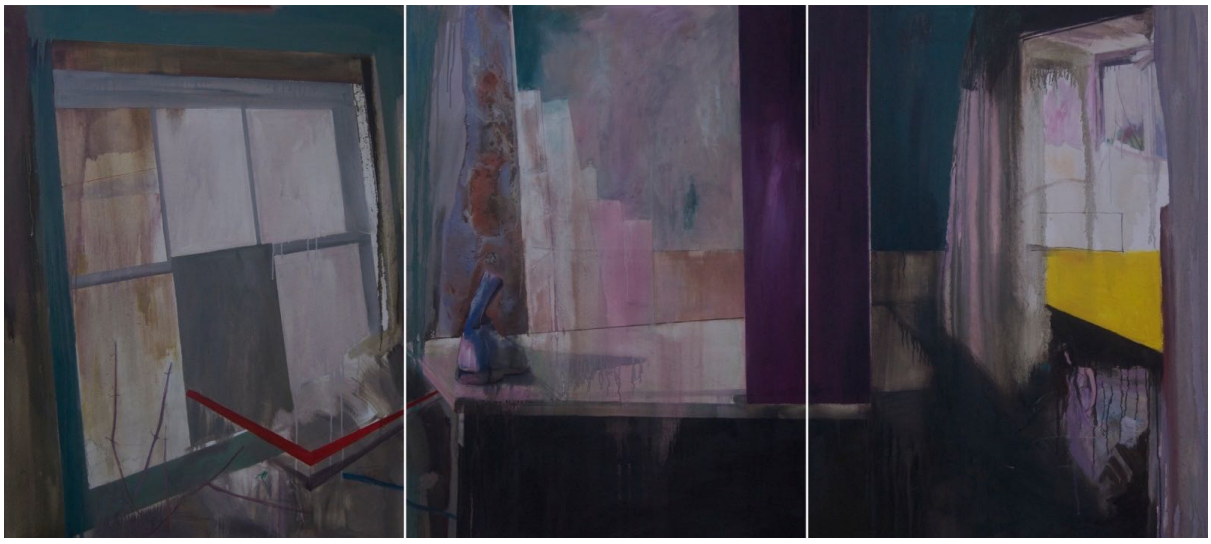


Figure 3. *A shelter for daydreaming* (oil on canvas, triptych, each panel 100 x 120 cm), 2010.

Around that time, I came across the interiors of the German painter Matthias Weischer in which the world outside appears shut off. Whilst Weishcher's paintings construct a convincing sense of

architectural space, he simultaneously uses strategies to disrupt conventional perspective and expected spatial scales to create a sense of 'detachedness', a 'being-for-themselves' that heightens the intimacy of his rooms, so that the 'viewer is alone with himself (sic) and without the world' (Pfeffer, 2004: 10). Weischer describes his paintings as an 'empty and the overloaded space' (2007: 94); rather than attempting to represent a space through a photographic eye, he uses paint to open up images/interiors in a way that acknowledges the potential for spatial conflict. Through their architectural complexity and pictorial structure laid bare on the canvas surface, and in the quietness and emptiness of direct human presence, they function as a place of imagining, projected with a kind of unsettling intimacy.

In the *Springs Farm* series of paintings (Figure 3.), I realised I was working in similar territory, the difference being that my work was situated and immersed in a very particular place. Using some of the photographs from the house as a starting point, I started to paint directly on the triptych of canvases: flat areas against perspectival depth and dense areas of paint against thin layers of glaze, all worked at larger than body-scale to demand a more performative interaction from the viewer. I worked on each component of the triptych separately and then as a whole breaking down edges, borders, boundaries and spatial logic, to avoid closure and remain 'open to inconsistencies in their systematic ordering, and to displacements that trouble the phantom of a coherent, bounded site [/ frame]' (DeSilvey, 2007: 899); to break the authority of the visual logic of interior representations and the logics of the ruin-as-image, house-as-object.

The title references Bachelard's metaphorical description of home with its potential to hold the darkness of life (cellar) through the integrating comfort of its rooms for living, to make possible a space (garret) for imagining, for hopes and dreams (Bachelard, 1994). This metaphor of house as home is a phenomenological space, one of becoming, of potential, of dwellingness - is 'a place of intimate and nurturing experiences' (Tuan, 1977: 138), a place that is past, present and future 'where every day is multiplied by all the days before it' (Stark, 1956, in Tuan, 1977: 144). Thus, home acts as an intimate reservoir of day-dreaming in which our lives co-penetrate with place. However, Bachelard (1994: 5-7) writes, when this sense of continuity is lost, 'man' (sic) then becomes 'a dispersed being'. Unsettling home again, I turn to this theme of dispersal and displacement.

VVRenovation*: how home becomes *house-as-holiday-let

Perhaps I should at this point tell you our plan. As I mentioned at the start, we are now leaving this place called home. We have a small narrowboat, *Mona*, moored on the River Avon between Bristol

and Bath which my husband, working away from home, has stayed on midweek for the last four years. We will live on her, not forever I tell myself - and now you. Bristol is a wonderfully vibrant city, with friends, work connections and opportunities, the chance to experiment with something different, to spend more time together. On many levels moving is an exciting change, but still we are leaving the place we call home and renting out the house.

Originally, we intended to let it as a home to a local family. I am afraid we will now be AirBnB-ing. I excuse myself with 'we need to use the house as home for gatherings such as Christmas (after all we can't fit an adult family the size of ours on a 30' narrowboat) … we still only have the one house… we will be able to return one day… the house needs to pay for itself… it's a means to an end…'. So, for much of the last year, my day job has been that of demolition worker, builder, carpenter, plasterer, transforming our somewhat neglected but very much-loved home into a *house-as-holiday-let*. The line of former miners' cottages to which it belongs is now 50% holiday lets and second homes, for a time ours will be yet another.

Figure 4. *VVRenovation,* 2018.

I almost needed my home to go through a period of dereliction (fig. 4), of de-homing, a process of adjustment and of letting go, ‘to understand the story of how self comes to be [and then undone] through a continual process of reexperiencing and redescribing the fragmented narratives encoded with objects’, the material culture associated with home-making enacted in the dismantling of home (Crewe, 2011: 44; Gregson et al., 2007). Now I am an artist-builder-geographer, it has become the object of a research project. I attempted to document/photograph every item going out, being kept and coming in: things, fragments, traces, receipts, catalogues - until it became overwhelming. I tried to be organised, it didn’t last long. Going through cupboards, drawers and boxes under beds, sorting into containers variously labelled ‘charity shop’, ‘free cycle’, ‘car boot’, ‘recycling/dump’, ‘keepsakes’. It all ended up in the front room while I demolished the tatty, twenty years old chain-store kitchen, knocked off Artex, plaster and decades of layered ‘bodging’, demolished the porch and then bit-by-bespoke-bit rebuilt, with the organised boxes of packed up things disrupted as more and more surplus, or stuff we just didn’t quite know what to do with, ending up in the now inaccessible front room. At the time of writing we are emptying that room in time for Christmas and transforming the *house* to a returning, newly multi-generational family *home-in-transition* - quite an undertaking.

At an affective level, these changes have created a feeling of ‘severance’ echoing previous experience of housing precarity as a mother with young children (Brickell, 2011); over the years I have become personally embedded in Cornwall, a place-attachment has run through my personal life, jobs, practice and research. This leads me to the question ‘Does being-in-place necessitate locational presence?’ Or might there be mileage in thinking location in terms of vulnerability and difference (Rose, 1993; Haraway, 1988)? Broadly, geographical thought has shifted from emphasising place attachment and identity - the coproduction of embodied space and self through the intimacies of localised place-presence (see Tuan, 1977) - to a networked and fluid sense of place and identity underpinned by ‘power-geometries of time-space compression’ and ‘unequal distribution’ (Massey, 1991). With the globalised heritage of Cornwall as an example, I reject arguments that a loss of mobility and rootedness to a particular place ‘across lifelines and generations of families’ has led to ‘the decline of locally based customs and practices, of those local walls that created the particularity of one place and distinguished it from others’ (McDowell, 2018, p. 3); the historical picture is far more complex, politically poly-scalar and speaks directly to contemporary experience. People always have been of here, and of there.

I am still not sure if it is possible or even ethical to try to reconcile my own complicity in power geometries of holiday let and homelessness within the context of AIRbnb-ing our house. Perhaps

my task is to do something else with it. Responding to the historical and contemporary violence associated with mass destructions of home, Brickell (2011: 229) reports that a recent concern of geographers

> has been a concern to show how the intimate and personal spaces of home — and their loss – are closely bound up with, rather than separate from, wider power relations. The two clearest expressions of this are, first, the entangled relationships between home and poly-scalar politics and, second, experiences of homelessness.

Not long ago, I was moored on the narrowboat under the former railway bridge that is now a cycle path when a couple of cyclists yelled down at me, 'pikey'. Despite years of working in community development, such overt and personally directed abuse took me aback. Perhaps this writing constitutes a small 'moment of resistance' (Brickell, 2011: 238), a refusal of a romanticised representation of home as necessarily singular, intimate, place-bound, secure; and in turn, a redefining of my sense of self and enactment of home beyond place-bound attachment. My 'house' is going to be minimal and afloat, with tenuous rights, but it is still going to be at least part of my experience of homing.

Final thoughts

This chapter has outlined three art projects, *BOShomes*, *Springs Farm* and *VVRenovation* that encompass painting, digital and located practice, and juxtapose house as commodified object with the intimacies and discontinuities of home. In so doing, I have storied a personal journey from house to homing, and then a 'doing up' or transition from home into house again. In a few final reflections, I return firstly to the original aim in writing this chapter: to think-through-practice as an artist and geographer about my shifting relationship to a particular place, to house and homing and to my anxiety involved in leaving. However, this writing has also led me somewhere slightly different, to consider firstly my positionality within this situated, intimate geography of change (Simandan, 2018), and secondly, how this practice might resonate with wider geographies and politics of place and dis-placement.

Renovating, documenting, thinking, writing over the past months has helped bring more nuance to how I think *home* and therefore my shifting relationship to Cornwall. Whilst mindful of the trap of romanticising place attachment in terms of a somewhat privileged being out of place - in contrast to the destitution experienced by so many - it helps me to have arrived at a place in which my way of living home becomes multiple, fluid, translocational: place-attachment does not necessarily involve place-presence. I have extensively decluttered rather than cleared our home in Cornwall, retaining some of its material culture. Accordingly, I have avoided any sense of finality, and therefore of

profound loss of the materialised memories that are so much part of an identity that has become enmeshed with this home. I might be moving to Bristol but I have not left Cornwall.

Thinking-with the long, drawn out process of un-homing and of moving (into the somewhat unknown) has challenged and surprised me on an affective level to accommodate change as something fluid, and in so doing to 'reinvent who and what' I am. This resonates with Simandan's (2018: 12-13) recent work on surprise and personal change in which she describes the 'process of becoming' through change as being productive of geographical space and produced by it. Still work-in-progress, the archival gathering process of moving and its enactment, necessarily threaded through with inconsistencies of practice, auto-ethnographic uncertainties and partialities of positioning, provides material for developing and thinking-with practice in the months ahead.

I offer these thoughts and work-in-progress very much aware of the dangers of discussing the politics of location and translocation, of place and displacement, from the particularity of my own situation. I argue, in line with feminist approaches (Brickell, 2011: 238), that it is imperative in today's climate of open hostility towards those perceived to be out of place (as notably signified by current British Government hostility towards migrants and refugees) that we reflect on what attachment to place and related practices of homing and un-homing mean to us as individuals and as a basis to inform our research (Wylie, 2016). I contend that thinking-with our own intimate, autobiographical stories can be a powerful way to hold up a mirror to the bigger picture without minimising the dehumanising experiences of others at the sharp end of globalised politics of place. As Massey (2013: 19) writes, 'by understanding that we as individuals move between/across margins and centers, we can destabilize unexamined dualisms and boundaries as we begin to see the inherent connections between inside/outside, center/margins, same/other'; this is a politically productive positioning that art can bring to the fore and contribute to critical geographies of the home and place (Brickell, 2011). How I will creatively work with this material within the context of my move to Bristol and the city's undercurrent of activism is a challenge for the future. Without this reflection on our own experiences of place and practices of homing, how can we be in a position to contribute narratives with the potential to contribute any incremental adjustment to wider societal relations? How, with regard to those who experience destitution, displacement, disenfranchisement, or are held to be in the wrong place, can we challenge the insidious implication of politicised calls for people to be returned to (put in) 'their place'?

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