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Writing Home: an exploration of the writing of *Jack and Bet* (a novel) and a consideration of what the novel – as a space and a practice – offers to our understanding of the concept of home, and what a consideration of home offers to our understanding of the novel.

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Abstract

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This creative-critical thesis consists of a novel, *Jack and Bet*, and a supporting critical commentary. *Jack and Bet* tells the story of two octogenarians living in Elephant and Castle, South London, as the Heygate Estate (their former home) is demolished. The critical commentary brings together theories from literary criticism, geography, anthropology and urban studies to explore how the practice of writing and the space of the novel intersect with ideas of home.

Written in the third person, the novel switches between Jack, Bet, and a young Romanian student, Marinela. These voices interweave to tell the story of Jack and Bet's struggle to maintain their independence and stay in their own home as they age; Marinela's attempts to create a new home in a foreign city; and how the friendship between the three unearths long-buried secrets which jeopardise Jack and Bet's marriage and their relationship with their son.

Beginning with an overview of theories of home and the home-spaces of the novel, the commentary explores home as an active process and a physical site. It considers *Jack and Bet*, with additional analysis of novels by Ann Patchett and Anne Tyler, in relation to the verbs to leave, to stay, to return and to settle, alongside themes of loss, nostalgia and recuperation, and the idea of writing itself as a home.

Written at a time of gentrification and rising house prices, *Jack and Bet* contributes to a growing body of research about home, gentrification and how we inhabit cities. Published just before the first Covid-lockdown of 2020, it is also a pertinent exploration of home and the value of our older population. Together the novel and the commentary argue for a more expansive idea of domestic fiction, and a richer, more interdisciplinary approach to home and the novel.

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¹ McDowell, 'Home, Place and Identity', p. 71.

Chapter 1: Why Home? A personal journey to a theme

Rossendale Way

A bit grown-up, buying a place, and a house at that. We paid a man to cut down the trees we reluctantly admitted were too big for the front garden. The woman who'd died left a lamp shaped like a hippo, and a sticker in the bathroom reminding us to save water, when, as it turned out, there were other things we'd have been wise to pay attention to. So many choices to make: colours, tiles, floorboards, women. By the time we were done you wouldn't have recognised the place, the same way we don't recognise each other these days.²

In 2005 I bought a small terraced house in Camden, North London, with my then partner. It was the first house I had ever owned. We spent two years refurbishing it – weekends in B&Q, evenings spent painting skirting boards, tiling the bathroom, choosing furniture and kitchen cabinets. By the time we had finished I knew every square centimetre of that house – an intimate relationship born out of time and attention and care. By the time we had finished, our relationship was on the rocks and the revelation of an affair (on his part) precipitated my hasty departure. The break-up was messy and painful, but I remember being surprised by how I sometimes missed the house more than I missed my ex-partner. Perhaps some of that was displacement, but I felt wrenched from this home – this first, proper, adult home – the neighbours I had made relationships with, the walls I had painted, the carpets I had chosen. Whilst I had no desire to inhabit that space again (which I saw as a physical manifestation of a relationship that had proved flawed and insubstantial) I couldn't stop thinking about it.

I left my home. I lost my home. I packed what I needed into my bike panniers and ricocheted around London, from friend's sofa to friend's sofa. A couple of weeks into this new

² Butler, '5 Places I've Called Home'.

nomadic life I wrote a short story where a young woman walks home from work to discover that her house no longer exists:

There wasn't a hole where it used to be. There wasn't a fire-ravaged skeleton, like she'd seen on the news – people's intimate lives exposed to public view. There was simply nothing in between numbers 38 and 42 to suggest there ever had been a number 40.³

Looking back, it is evident that the story came from my own experience of abruptly losing a home, but at the time, it felt like a story that had appeared, demanding to be written, rather than a conscious means by which I might try to manage and even mitigate the loss of my own home.

A month or so later, I got a rejection letter about another story I had written several months earlier (later published by Route in *The Route Book at Bedtime*). I re-read the story, which is about a woman leaving her home and her relationship, and being overwhelmed by the physicality and weight of her belongings, and was struck by its uncanny mirroring of my then current situation. I also noticed how the protagonist yearned for freedom, from space, from belongings – something I felt in the wake of my breakup: a desire to just pick up a bag and go, leave everything behind; and an underlying sense of lightness and possibility in amongst the heartache.

She knew it would go – this buoyancy, the sensation of tiny wings attached to her ankles – once she saw her boxed-up life again, closed another front door behind her and listened to the silence of her new flat. But right now, in this stretch of time when her belongings had no place and she had no set of keys in her pocket, she felt like flying.⁴

Four months after my break-up I attended an Arvon advanced fiction course led by writers Maggie Gee and Jacob Ross. On the first day, I sat with the other students around a table

³ Butler, 'Number 40', p. 41.

⁴ Butler, 'Leaving', p. 137.

in a converted barn, talking about the novels we were working on. As I sat there, a new novel appeared in my mind's eye in a way I have never experienced before or since. The plot, characters and setting fell into place both quickly and easily. It felt as though the novel somehow already existed and my job was simply to turn up at my computer and bring it into being. Of course, the novel's themes and story must have been brewing in my subconscious for months, as I processed a difficult situation in my life; it took the space and quiet of that Arvon course for me to be able to give those ideas form. The story is about Daniel, an older, homeless man who walks around London looking for the daughter he has never met; and Alice, a young woman who has never settled, forced to return to the family home where her father is dying.

The novel was published by Picador in 2013 as *Ten Things I've Learnt About Love*. It is about home and belonging, about love and loss and grief; it is about how we might have a physical home but not feel at home there, and how we might lack four walls and a roof but make a home for ourselves in the city. As I wrote it, I was not really conscious of how much I was playing out my own losses and developing my own understanding of home within the novel. I was aware though, that this novel felt something like a home to me – the act of writing created a safe space, a creative space, a space that I was in control of (as much as any writer is in control of their writing); that I could choose to enter and in doing so find a sense of peace within the process; that I could leave and know it was there for me to come back to. All this in contrast to my personal life, where I was fighting about financial compensation for the house I had bought with my partner and moving from temporary place to temporary place. In fact, 'finding' *Ten Things I've Learnt About Love* precipitated my decision not to go to court with my ex-partner over the Camden house, but to take a compromise deal and invest my time and energy into writing the novel: making a new home, rather than fighting over one already lost. In an added twist, when the novel finally sold in the UK it also sold in fourteen international territories, and I used the advance payments to put down a deposit on a new house, with a new partner, in the city I grew up in.

I come from a stable home; both emotionally – my parents are still married – and physically – they still live in the house I grew up in. Having rented for years I actively invested in the Camden house, its fabric and the social structures around it, in a way I hadn't before. I deliberately made it into a home, and so its abrupt loss was a shock to me. It changed my

understanding of home from that of a safe secure place that I had control over, into something that could be a place of betrayal and grief, something that could be lost. And yet, as time passed, I also came to understand home as something that could be re-found and re-made (though with the knowledge that it might not last, and that the re-finding and re-making would have to continue over time). I understood home not as a given place, but as a made one; a place where I could work to become myself more fully. The experience of losing my home also consolidated my sense of writing both as a place to explore ideas of home and as a kind of home-space itself.

My developing awareness of home as a key concept in my writing also connects to my long-standing interest in place, space, boundaries and urban environments. This interest was most probably sparked by living with a town planner father and growing up in the city of Manchester as it sought to re-find itself as a post-industrial city in the 1980s and 1990s. I am drawn to how ideas of place interact with those of identity, territorialism and prejudice: how we draw lines – both physical and ideological – in order to try and establish our identities, and how these lines act to exclude others, whilst at the same time forming uncomfortable connections between ‘us’ and ‘them’⁵. The concept of home is where these political and geographical ideas of place and space intersect most directly with the personal and the intimate. As such, home offers a rich seam of exploration for a novelist such as myself, who is driven by characters and the nuanced relationships between them, and has an interest in broader politics – in my own case, urban regeneration and inequality. A novel that takes home as its central theme is able to explore the macro politics of the city/region/country/world through the micro lived experience of individuals. As Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling note: homes are ‘politically, socially and culturally constructed, but lived and experienced in personal ways’.⁶

I remember being struck by a statement of Zadie Smith’s about how writers are interested in the individual, and therefore couldn’t make the kind of decisions a politician has to:

Any artist who aligns themselves with a politician is making a category error [...] because what politicians do is not on a human scale, it is on a geopolitical scale. Individual humans are being killed by anonymous planes in the air, and artists

⁵ As Michel de Certeau writes: ‘created by contacts, the points of differentiation between two bodies are also their common points.’ *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 127.

⁶ Blunt and Dowling, *Home*, p. 32.

should be interested in individual humans. I would no more give support to Obama than I would to David Cameron — the decisions they have to make are not conceivable to me.⁷

The writer writes about people, individuals, they interrogate the minutiae of their lives, and yet this does not make writing apolitical; instead we look to understand the political through the personal. And what is more personal than our relationship with the idea of home?

When I lost my Camden home, I moved to a flat in Elephant and Castle. It was 2007, the year that the residents of the Heygate estate (destined for demolition) were being ‘decanted’, moved far and wide across South London and beyond, their ties to place and community abruptly severed. As I pieced my life back together, this site, just down the road from my flat, was in the process of being emptied.

Over the following years I worked on three projects, which circled the idea of home, belonging and urban change in Elephant and Castle in collaboration with photographer Eva Sajovic. The first, *Home From Home*, is a collection of photos of Heygate residents in their Heygate flats, in the process of moving, and in their new homes. I wrote accompanying texts, through a process of interviews and curated transcriptions, which elucidated people’s experience of the estate and the local area as home.

The second project, *Collecting Home*, involved pairing museum objects with temporarily donated objects from local people, which said something about their relationship with home. These objects became the focus for conversations about home and the changes happening locally.

The third project, *Unearthing Elephant*, was a film about Elephant and Castle shopping centre. The project came from a desire to document and reveal the intricate web of connections that make Elephant and Castle shopping centre – also destined for demolition, and finally closed in 2020 – a unique and valuable place. It combines a poetic text, written by myself, with interviews with traders and shopping centre visitors.⁸

⁷ Godwin, ‘The World According to Zadie Smith’.

⁸ The film is a collaboration with Eva Sajovic, artist Rebecca Davies and film maker Shona Davies, which won best doctoral film at the 2017 AHRC Film as Research Awards.

This place-specific, community-orientated work came from my desire to connect with the new part of London I had arrived in; from my anger at the way the regeneration projects in Elephant and Castle prioritised money and developers' needs over local communities; and – I think – as a way of exploring loss. Each project was driven by the desire to record something about to be lost, and a desire to assign and recognise value in places and people that had been written off by developers, politicians and the media.

Jack and Bet, my thesis novel, which this commentary focuses on, is in many ways a continuation of *Home from Home*, *Collecting Home* and *Unearthing Elephant*, as well as building thematically from my previous two novels. Sole-authored rather than a collaboration with other artists and local residents, *Jack and Bet* became a space for me to play out my understanding of Elephant and Castle's history, and the sense of loss, anger and powerlessness I felt in the face of the break-up of communities and community spaces in the area. In the same way as the projects, the novel looks to reveal and celebrate these denigrated spaces as homes that people made and cared about. It tries to challenge – even undo – some of the violence of the language used in regeneration, and it considers how we might make homes in the context of rapid and problematic urban change. Many critics who write about the house and the novel, and indeed many novelists, focus on the homes of the upper and middle classes. I wanted to focus instead on social housing as an equally valid – and perhaps richer – site for the exploration of what it means to make a home.

Writing *Jack and Bet* connects to my own relationship with home in another, less evident, way. Jack and Bet are of the same generation as my grandparents, who I was extremely close to, and whose house was very much a 'second home'. When my grandmother died – three years after my grandfather, and just as I was buying my own home in Manchester – we didn't sell their house. My brother and sister-in-law moved in. A relief, not to lose it. Except there are other ways to lose. Any transition involves loss as well as gain, and as this home turned into another home, I grieved through the material changes. Even now, I still look for a mirror in the hallway, which is no longer there; even now I glance towards the clock that used to be on the mantelpiece in the living room when I want to know the time. Writing *Jack and Bet* became a way to reconnect with the grandparents I had lost, and to re-find the sense of home and connection that was lost with them.

Home is complicated – even with my stable childhood experience of home I always knew that. Growing up, I loved my home and wanted to leave it; I always had a sense of restlessness and desire for adventure, held in tension with a desire to nest and stay still. This is the richness of home as an idea. It holds a tension between comfort and boredom; between a desire for stasis and a desire to leave. It is something assumed and yet something that requires work and effort. It is a place of drama, conflict, love, security, secrets and danger.

Home is a theme I explore – more and more consciously – through my writing, and particularly through the novel form, which I suggest is uniquely placed to explore home on both the macro and the micro level. Ideas of home inform my characters and their actions, my storylines and subject matters.

I often consider novels themselves as potential homes: places I can step into as a reader and inhabit as and when and how I choose; places which both nurture and challenge me. For me, novels are also an important part of my physical home space. When I met my current partner, I didn't have a home, and it wasn't until I had finally rented a flat, assembled cheap shelving units and filled them with my books that I felt, finally, he could see me.

When, six years later, I bought a house in Manchester with that same partner, I spent several months making bookshelves for my study. I learnt to use a circular saw. I measured and cut and painted and assembled and then I filled the lot with books. Floor to ceiling, wall to wall. One of those shelves holds my own books, in English and translated into fourteen languages, none of which I can read. And yet I made them, from my imagination and my fingertips, my time and my energy. And now they line up to say something about who I am and where I am. They make me feel at home.

When my first novel was published, I went to the factory in Kent to see it come off the printing press. I wanted to see the material reality of this thing I had made from my imagination, from years of sitting at a keyboard, 'attempt[ing] to make one word stay put after another,'⁹ and then choosing which of them to keep and which to get rid of. This was a place of machines, of rolls of paper bigger than I was. Everything was fast, noisy, immediate, material. And there was my book. Pages, cover, dustjacket. An object to hold onto.

⁹ Calvino, *The Literature Machine*, p. 15.

The idea of home as a place/idea – which is made through effort, which holds both safety and danger, comfort and discomfort – also closely mirrors my understanding of the process of writing, itself a constant interplay between control and chaos, comfort and discomfort. Writing for me is a long, looping, often non-linear process of making and remaking, losing and finding, and eventually – sometimes reluctantly – settling. It is a process in which, and through which I feel at home.

Chapter 2: 'One of the most loaded words in the English language'¹⁰: an overview of the concept of home

Home is a complex and contested term, which has garnered much debate over the last twenty years or so amongst feminist scholars, geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, literary critics and others. The breadth of this discourse demonstrates the richness of the term as a site of engagement. As Buchli, Clarke and Upton (talking about home and domesticity) argue:

There we are able to understand diverse and essential aspects of human existence from the self, gender, the nature of individuality, family and social relations, to the wider spheres of architectural space, public and private boundaries, labor distinctions, the nature of the city and the elemental terms of social life in general.¹¹

Whether we have or don't have one; whether we are happy in ours or yearn to escape; whether we are sick for one we have lost or dream of a future one, we all have a deep and complex relationship with the concept of home. It is a term that holds a wealth of ideas in fruitful tension: comfort and boredom, security and danger, stasis and movement. It is something that we invest with our identities and dreams. And at the same time it acts upon us, physically and emotionally. It is where the political is played out in our personal lives, and where our intimate, personal selves are made and remade over and again.

I have been working on this commentary throughout 2020, as the world has been thrown into chaos by the Covid-19 pandemic. One of the many impacts the pandemic and the measures we have had to take to try and contain it, has been a growing conversation about home and our relationship to it. The crisis is ongoing as I write, and it will be fascinating to see how this conversation continues to develop. Our relationship with home has undoubtedly been thrown into stark relief and more of us now recognise the very idea of home as more complex and contested than perhaps we had previously thought.

¹⁰ McDowell, 'Home, Place and Identity', p. 71.

¹¹ Buchli, Clarke, and Upton, 'Editorial', p. 2.

Home has traditionally been seen as a safe, uncomplicated space, a retreat from the public world of work and politics. Ruskin described it as ‘a place of Peace: the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt and division.’¹² Feminist and queer scholars have repeatedly challenged this, revealing home as a site of potential exclusion, oppression and violence, particularly for women and the LGBTQI community¹³. It is also a place of (under- or indeed unvalued) labour, to be understood through the prism of gender, class and race.¹⁴ And it is a space that, if shared, must be negotiated with others. The less space there is, the more conflict this can create – again something which has been thrown into relief by the Covid-19 pandemic.

As well as highlighting the potential dangers and exclusions found in many homes, scholars have challenged the binary opposition between home as an intimate, private, domestic space and the outside world of public political life; an opposition constructed when the industrial revolution brought about the separation of the domestic (female) sphere from the world of (male) ‘work’.¹⁵ Home is, in fact, deeply political. Blunt and Dowling have long argued that home is inherently porous, implicated in and affected by larger political and geopolitical forces: ‘familial and intimate experiences of dwelling are always infused with direct or indirect actions of the state’.¹⁶ And as Buchli, Clarke and Upton argue, ‘the domestic sphere is probably one of the least appreciated yet single most important arenas of political action.’¹⁷ Home is political: political issues and decisions are played out through personal actions and relationships within the home, and political and economic forces shape the ways in which we are able to inhabit our domestic spaces. This has never been more evident than during the (current at time of writing) Covid-19 pandemic, when people are being asked to stay at home and not see friends or family members,

¹² Cited in, Gillis, ‘No Place Like Home’, p. 116.

¹³ E.g. McDowell, ‘Place and Space’, p. 15; Pearce, ‘Introduction: Devolution and the Politics of Re/Location’, p. 20; Bammer, ‘Editorial: Question of Home’, p. xi; Varley, ‘A Place Like This’, p. 49.

¹⁴ E.g. McDowell, ‘Place and Space’, p. 28; Hunt, ‘Gender and the Construction of Home Life’, p. 81. Pratt, ‘Geographies of Identity and Difference’, p. 152.

¹⁵ Flanders, *The Making of Home*, p. 50.

¹⁶ Blunt and Dowling, p. 255.

¹⁷ Buchli, Clarke, and Upton, p. 3.

when the inequalities and the potential dangers of home are being starkly revealed despite the government public information assurances that ‘for staying safe, there's no place like home’.¹⁸

Home then, is neither necessarily safe, nor apolitical. It is also, many have argued, unhelpful to maintain a strict correlation between the house as a physical object and the idea of home. Henriette Steiner and Kristen Veel question the way that ‘home is often approached through a trite private/public dichotomy, emphasizing the walls of the dwelling as a dividing line.’¹⁹ The borders we might like to draw around our dwelling places are in fact permeable. As Doreen Massey writes, home is ‘open; constructed out of movement, communication, social relations which always stretched beyond it.’²⁰ This, then, is a more inclusive and fluid concept of home, one that reaches past the four walls of a house and involves movement, change and unpredictability.

And it is perhaps productive to further interrogate this dichotomy by thinking not only of the (domesticised) home as political, but of public (politicised) space as domestic. Regan Koch and Alan Latham suggest that we might use the concept of public space as domestic as: ‘a productive way to attend to the processes by which people come to inhabit public spaces and make a sort of home in the city.’²¹ Indeed, for Koch and Latham, it is useful to move beyond ideas of ‘public and private’ and think about what Mimi Sheller and John Urry describe as the ‘complex and fluid hybridizing of public-and-private life.’²²

The ways in which we understand and create our sense of home can happen as meaningfully within the streets of a city as between the four walls of a house. Rowan Moore, considering the work of John Berger, cites Berger’s argument that

dwelling does not perfectly correspond with the physical object of a home, its walls or its boundaries, but may also consist of patterns of behaviour, or appearance, and may take place in a city or a landscape.²³

¹⁸ Gye, *Government Launches String of Bizarre Coronavirus Ads*.

¹⁹ Steiner and Veel, ‘Negotiating the Boundaries of the Home: The Making and Breaking of Lived and Imagined Walls’, p. 1.

²⁰ Cited in Blunt and Dowling, p. 25.

²¹ Koch and Latham, ‘On the Hard Work of Domesticating a Public Space’, p. 7.

²² Cited in Koch and Latham, p. 14.

²³ Moore, *Why We Build*, p. 55.

David Morley also explores Berger's ideas of home and his suggestion that home can be found in language and culture: 'a mobile, symbolic habitat, a performative way of life'²⁴ rather than in a physical container. Home then, is not as fixed and bounded as we might think, or indeed desire, but can be recognised, made and negotiated through our cities, landscapes, bodies, cultures and everyday actions.

The overarching view of many writers is that home should be viewed as a state of mind, an active process, as well as a site. Blunt and Dowling write: 'Home is *both* a place/physical location *and* a set of feelings',²⁵ a 'spatial imaginary'.²⁶ Judith Flanders describes home as 'both a place and an attitude'.²⁷ And Roberta Rubenstein sees home as '[n]ot merely a physical structure or a geographical location but always an emotional space'.²⁸ Building from these ideas I suggest that we might think of home as both a verb and a noun, an action as well as a place. It is both physically experienced and psychologically constructed; a dynamic process in which we are actively involved as home 'makers', negotiating a route between our own identities and desires and political, social and familial constraints. It is fluid, unbound, something that reaches across space and time, that holds both succour and danger, that keeps moving, that won't be fixed.

And yet, for all this scholarly unpicking of home, for all this nuance, it is striking to note how much we humans still yearn for a fixed and stable home. As Hazel Easthope notes, quoting Massey: 'We live "in an increasingly unstable and uncertain world" ... and as a result, more and more people cling strongly to notions of place as secure and stable.'²⁹ In her study of inner-city domestic space, Kathy Burrell highlights her interviewees' (usually unsuccessful) attempts at 'physically keeping outside forces out of the home'.³⁰ She notes a seemingly inherent desire to fortify our urban homes against the cities they exist within, writing that this is 'one of the

²⁴ Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity*, p. 47.

²⁵ Blunt and Dowling, p. 22.

²⁶ Blunt and Dowling, p. 2.

²⁷ Flanders, p. 3.

²⁸ Rubenstein, *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women's Fiction*, p. 1.

²⁹ Easthope, 'A Place Called Home', p. 129.

³⁰ Burrell, 'Spilling over from the Street: Contextualising Domestic Space in an Inner-City Neighbourhood', p. 152.

fundamental contradictions of place; the inherent openness of localities versus the desire to keep them closed and stable'.³¹ The Covid-19 pandemic has perhaps made our desire for a clear and impermeable distinction between our home and everything outside of it, even more strongly felt, though it is also notable that our homes themselves have become places of potential infection from family members.

Home can be dangerous, oppressive, permeable, uncertain, and yet we still talk about it in idealised terms, still search for a bounded, safe, comfortable version of it. Perhaps some of this urge for a fixed and stable home is tied up with the connections we make between our homes and our identities, identities which we wish to be fixed and stable also, but which are instead fluid, contested and endlessly negotiated. Home is often seen as the place where we can most be ourselves, and we consciously imbue our homes with our sense of self, through material culture, social relations, imaginations and stories. Yet homes often house more than one person and so the physical site of most homes are places of negotiation and compromise rather than pure self-expression. And our homes themselves become active players in the creation and expression of these identities.³²

Even so, many of us hold onto the idea that home is what Iris Marion Young calls 'the materialisation of identity', a materialisation which doesn't fix identity, 'but anchors it in physical being that makes a continuity between past and present. Without such anchoring of ourselves in things, we are, literally, lost'.³³ Home then, as a physical anchor for the self, an insurance against the loss of ourselves. And yet, while we might like to think of our homes as permanent fixtures, they most often are not: threatened by climate, geography, politics, regeneration, personal relationships and finances.

It is a challenge to find an understanding of home which holds this sense of fixity and support for our identities alongside an appreciation of the fluid, contested, often temporary nature of home. As Lynne Pearce, discussing the writing of Rosemary Marangoly George, states: 'it is important that in our efforts to problematize the notion of "home" as a "point of origin" [...]

³¹ Burrell, p. 162.

³² Madigan and Munro, "'House Beautiful': Style and Consumption in the Home', pp. 41-57; Rose, 'Family Photographs and Domestic Spacings: A Case Study', pp. 5-18; Makovicky, 'Closet and Cabinet: Clutter as Cosmology', pp. 287-309; Turan, 'Material Objects as Facilitating Environments: The Palestinian Diaspora', pp. 43-56.

³³ Young, 'House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme', p. 151.

we do not overlook its significance (and reconceptualising potential) as "a point of arrival". She argues against embracing the idea of nomadism/movement/transience to the extent that we 'wholly dispense with the idea of home as a 'fixed point''³⁴. It can be tempting to deconstruct home to the point that it almost doesn't exist anymore, or perhaps exists everywhere and so loses its value as a critical concept. Thinking about arrival rather than origin allows us to hold the idea of movement and change alongside that of fixity. I am also interested in Geraldine Pratt's highlighting of Morris's idea of home 'as a moment in a three-point process, both as a way of drawing boundaries around an uncertain identity, and as a place from which to venture'.³⁵ Pratt then turns to Massey's idea that 'home [...] is the ground upon which I venture into the world, not an enclosure but a way of going outside'.³⁶ Home here becomes a place of departure rather than arrival, but again this is a way of understanding home that encompasses movement and change.

Can home also be a place to stop for a moment? In her editorial on home in *New Formations* Angelika Bammer writes that what emerges throughout the volume 'is a sense of home as always existing in the virtual space between loss and recuperation. Home, then, we might say, is the imaginary point where here and there – where we are and where we come from – are momentarily grounded.'³⁷ The idea of a momentary grounding appeals to me – a space where we might rest and breathe and make connections across time and space which allow us to understand – and indeed to be – ourselves more fully, even if only fleetingly.

Home is not fixed, but perhaps our (endless) project is to try to fix it, to try to find connections between past, present and future homes, to try to create a momentary grounding, a place we can arrive at or depart from, or perhaps a place where we can rest and recoup. One way of doing this – a way that has an obvious attraction for me as a writer – is through narrative; narrative that brings together past, present and future, that encompasses fixity and movement, certainty and uncertainty.

³⁴ Pearce, 'Introduction: Devolution and the Politics of Re/Location', p. 23.

³⁵ Pratt, 'Geographies of Identity and Difference: Marking Boundaries', p. 159.

³⁶ Cited in Pratt, p. 159.

³⁷ Bammer, 'Editorial: Question of Home', p. xi.

In Anne Varley's discussion of identity as a narrative project, she suggests that in order to address the problems created by conceiving of identity as entirely fragmentary and fluid we might 'pay more attention to temporality', and think about identity not as Banhabib writes, "sameness in time" but rather the capacity to generate meaning over time so as to hold past, present, and future together'.³⁸ Bringing a similar idea to the concept of home, Blunt and Dowling write that 'ideas of home are relational across space and time' – shaped by memories of past homes and dreams of future ones.³⁹ This concept of identity, and home, is discursive, but also coherent, reflecting a process of storytelling that makes connections and continuities across time. We are narrative creatures, creating our sense of ourselves, and our sense of home, through acts of narration. As Easthope writes, citing Gieryn's explanation (with reference to Soja): 'places are doubly constructed: most are built or in some way physically carved out. They are also interpreted, narrated, perceived, felt, understood, and imagined'.⁴⁰ Both a site and a process, a spatial imaginary, an emotional space, it is productive – particularly when considering home in relation to the novel as a form and a practice – to think about home as a narrative process; a place or idea where we seek a continuity of story and identity, performed through our tellings and retellings of our spaces, the objects within them, the social relations around them, our experiences of them in the past and our aspirations for them in the future. These stories, as Bammer indicates, have 'the power to create the "we" who are engaged in telling them',⁴¹ and through the telling create 'the discursive right to a space'.⁴²

³⁸ Varley, 'A Place like This? Stories of Dementia, Home, and the Self', p. 55.

³⁹ Blunt and Dowling, p. 198.

⁴⁰ Easthope, p. 129.

⁴¹ Bammer, p. ix.

⁴² Bammer, p. x.

Chapter 3: Home-spaces in *Jack and Bet*

This commentary is a consideration of my thesis novel, *Jack and Bet*, a story which interrogates how – and why – we make, lose and remake home(s). It is a written work, and the homes within it are, of course, represented through language; a double narration, firstly by myself, the author writing the text, and then, within the world of the novel, through the characters' words and thoughts.

Whilst *Jack and Bet* references the idea of home as nation or country, in this commentary my focus is on the domestic, built home (with a recognition that this does not strictly correlate with four walls and a roof). I will continue my consideration of home as a site and an activity that is made through our actions, our words and our imaginations, by considering the many home-spaces that feature in the novel. Some do so fleetingly, some are key spaces of action and change. As I introduce them, I will think particularly about how these homes exist within the text of the novel.

The Heygate Estate

They were just Jack and Bet who lived in a place that didn't exist any more. When their block came down, [Jack had] stood on Elephant Road with his back to the station [...]. He'd stared at where the flat used to be, but he couldn't pinpoint exactly where that was. There was nothing but air, nothing but sky and a view up the Walworth Road⁴³

Jack and Bet's flat on the Heygate Estate is the home in which they felt most free and most settled: 'King and Queen of London. Nothing between them and the sky' (143) Bet remembers. The flat, and the estate itself (never explicitly named as the Heygate, though its identity is evident from its location) are both present and absent in the novel. While the sounds of the estate's demolition permeate the narrative, both Jack and Bet narrate the flat and the estate to themselves, to each other, and to Harry, who interviews Jack and Bet for a university project: 'I'm studying the estate. Its story' (55) he tells them.

⁴³ Butler, *Jack and Bet*, p. 58. Further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text.

The Heygate's story is an all too real, and all too common, one, repeated across London and beyond: a place (usually a social housing estate), home to many, rewritten as worthless in order to justify demolition. There is a double loss, and a double violence involved in this story – the 'decanting' (itself a brutal euphemism worthy of George Orwell's wrath⁴⁴) where people were forced to leave their homes, and then – seven years later – the physical destruction of the estate.

I remember walking past the demolition site and being moved by the brutality of broken concrete and smashed glass, and the brutality of the language that accompanied it. On the hoardings were benign promises of a new green heart for Elephant and Castle, a place where 'everyone' would 'belong'. A newsletter trapped behind a plastic casing talked with pride about how many 'units' had been demolished and how much concrete had been removed from the site. These 'units' were people's homes, commodified into real estate, valued for their square meterage and location over any homely or comfortable qualities. As Douglas Porteous and Sandra Smith note: 'encouraged by bureaucratic thinking, dwellings are regarded as 'shelter' or 'housing'. Encouraged by capitalist thinking, dwellings become commodities to be traded'.⁴⁵

When Jack walks past one of these hoardings, which declares the new development as 'an inspiring place to call home':

he stared at it. Sometimes he had a sense of another version of himself: a person who would get angry at a sentence like that, written just there. A person who would march to the site office, knock on the door and ask how dare they? (108)

For all Jack's measured responses, he is angry about what has happened to his former home, as am I, writing Jack. The loss of this home, and the stresses involved in that process, permeate Jack and Bet's present day lives.

Language is important here. The estate has been written off – by people like the journalist Jack and Bet had talked to in the past – and the regeneration of the area involves not only physical but linguistic violence; former homes rebranded as 'units' and future homes presented

⁴⁴ Orwell, 'George Orwell Politics and the English Language'.

⁴⁵ Porteous and Smith, *Domicide: The Global Destruction Of Home*, p. 107.

as being for ‘everyone,’ when the truth is just the opposite. However, Jack and Bet narrate the flat and the estate in an intimate, even romantic language, imbued with their personal experience of it as a happy home:

‘Do you remember the bathroom?’ Jack said. ‘Hot water. You filled the bath so high it nearly came over the edge.’

They’d clapped their hands into the bubbles so they shot up in the air. God, they’d laughed. (143)

While I have been cautious, throughout, not to over-romanticise an estate which undeniably had its problems, this intimate language felt like a necessity to counteract the brutality of the language of the regeneration and urban development processes visited upon the estate.

Jack and Bet’s Present-day flat

From the very beginning of the novel, we learn that although Jack and Bet have lived in their current flat for almost five years, ‘both still called it new’ (6). It is dark and damp, with an awkward hallway that makes welcoming guests problematic: ‘Whenever Tommy came round there was an awkward shuffle, Jack having to open the door and then back away so that Tommy could get inside’ (29). It is as though the couple’s difficult relationship with their son is embodied and exacerbated by their physical domestic space, which also seems to ‘tur[n] against’ (128) Bet after Jack’s accident.

Both Jack and Bet see this home as temporary, uncomfortable and not particularly homely. And yet at the same time they fight to stay there.

‘You don’t even like this flat, Mum. You never have. You’ve never even unpacked properly,’ Tommy said.

[...]

‘This is our home.’ Bet folded her arms. ‘We got chucked off the estate. We’re

not getting chucked out of here.’(34)

The flat – for all its problems, and despite the fact they choose to narrate it as a temporary space – becomes a symbol of Jack and Bet’s independence and agency; something to argue for and hold onto in the face of the changing area and their changing bodies and lives.

Care home(s)

Much of the early drama of *Jack and Bet* centres around Tommy’s desire for his parents to move into a care home: ‘a clean safe place to live’(32) (a statement that suddenly feels even more problematic, writing this in mid-2020, given the huge death toll in care homes during the Covid-19 pandemic). Both Jack and Bet fight against the idea. Bet describes it to Marinela as: ‘a *home* home. An old people’s home. Overcooked vegetables and incontinence. Bingo and quizzes. That kind of a home’ (48). It is the threat of such a home that precipitates Bet’s decision to offer Marinela the flat in Islington she has been pretending doesn’t exist, a decision which drives the story forward.

When Jack is in hospital, Bet reluctantly agrees to visit some care homes with her son. It is in the first, a place she immediately detests, that she and Tommy have a rare moment of connection, and after the second visit Bet thinks ‘maybe they would move – a little flat with white walls and double-glazing, dinner over in the main house if they couldn’t be bothered cooking. [...] Maybe they’d be happy there – her and Jack’ (156).

By this point in the novel, Bet is beginning to realize that her true home lies with Jack, rather than in any particular physical place, she is prepared to go against her convictions and consider a different narrative of home if it means she can be with him.

The Islington flat

The Islington flat, left to Bet in Kit's will is a potent symbol of Bet's betrayal of Jack. A key narrative driver, it brings the past into the present in a very physical way. Bet's decision to offer the flat to Marinela is on one level a matter of self (and home) preservation. On another it represents an opportunity for her to face the past with more honesty.

'Ever since Kit's letter she'd tried so hard to pretend it wasn't there that she sometimes wondered if it might have vanished somehow – bricks and mortar dissolved into air' (83). The flat is narrated in a different way by each character. For Bet it is both a problem and a solution. She is happy to give Marinela the freedom created by living in it rent free, but at the same time she struggles with what the flat symbolises and the hurt its existence may create for Jack and indeed her relationship with Tommy. 'It's not going to go away, Mum' he tells her, and she thinks, 'If only it would. If only she could wish hard enough so the damn place wouldn't exist anymore' (133).

For Tommy, the flat's very existence is a shock, and Bet's offer to let Marinela live there rent-free an outrage.

'It's not her home,' Tommy said.

'She lives there.'

'Not the same thing.' (95-96)

Tommy thinks of the flat as property, worth huge sums of money in London's hyper-inflated housing market, and as proof of his mother's infidelity.

Jack is the most sanguine of the characters about the flat. Having learned of its existence when Bet first inherited it he had simply asked her to give it back. Discovering she still has it, he realises it has no power over him or their relationship any more: 'It doesn't matter, none of it matters' (120). Jack strips the flat of its significance; focusing instead on the present and the wife he has always loved.

The flat very quickly becomes a home for Marinela, a place where she can start to settle and put down roots in a new city that has so far provided little sense of home for her. She starts to buy a

few home furnishings, and makes plans to convert the smallest room into a darkroom. And yet, this home she is building is in constant jeopardy. She tells herself as much from the start, but when Tommy arrives at her front door to throw her out she ‘glanced behind her at the dim hallway. She loved it, with a sudden and disproportionate passion [...] It was pointless getting attached to places – she should have learnt that by now’ (171). Even so, when Bet offers to give her the flat, Marinela eventually refuses, choosing to make her ‘own way’ (193) in the world and shake off the weight of this problematic home.

Marinela’s rented flats

Marinela has two other homes in the novel, before and after moving into the Islington flat. The first is barely a home for her: a shared, unloved house where the tenants throw endless parties and Marinela hides in her room to escape from the chaos. The second is also a shared rented place – a new flat built on the footprint of Jack and Bet’s old estate, the building work visible from her bedroom window. Despite the troubled and toxic story of the site, this final move is a positive one for Marinela. Her flatmates are quiet and respectful and she spends time happily in the space, grounding herself by arranging her belongings; taking photos, of ‘[t]he light changing through the day’ (190). When she tells Harry about turning down Bet’s offer and renting this new flat he describes her as ‘Homed. Weightless’ (193), acknowledging the freedom she has allowed herself with her decision, and helping her start to create a new narrative for her new home.

Jack’s parents’ house and Marinela’s grandmother’s house

The novel features two homes – those of Jack’s parents and Marinela’s grandmother – which have been physically destroyed, in different ways. Their destruction works as a refraction and

intensification of the demolition of the Heygate estate, which permeates the action of the novel.

On the day of Jack's funeral, Bet remembers his parents' house, where she and Jack lived in the early days of their marriage, hit by a V1 during World War Two:

It wasn't there. The room at the back, with the narrow bed and the wardrobe with Bet's clothes inside, the table where she had arranged her photos [...]. The dark kitchen where she'd bathed in the tin tub in front of the fire. Gone. (165)

This is an abrupt and violent loss, which leads not only to the 'death' of the house, but also Jack's parents. In her memory of the event, Bet focuses on the small details, a blue dress in the rubble, the carriage clock with its 'face cracked' (165), the intimate details of this couple's life laid bare to the world, mirroring how the interiors of the Heygate flats were exposed during their demolition.

Marinela's grandmother's house works as a foil to the other urban homes of the novel. It is a rural bungalow in a small village outside Marinela's home city of Galați. The house holds symbolic power for Marinela as a place she felt at home. Just as Jack and Bet's flat is lost (through their forced leaving) and then lost again (through its demolition), Marinela's grandmother's house is lost first through her death and then the family's subsequent emptying of the property:

'After she died, we emptied it out.' Marinela shook her head. 'I hated that. It was like we were killing her, like we were pretending she'd never been there. All those things she'd cared about. And then no one would buy it, and it started falling apart. (105)

Another personal, intimate life 'exposed' to view. Marinela reflects that '[h]er grandmother – a quiet, private woman – would be horrified' (105). This is a home with huge emotional value – a place where Marinela felt at home, a place which housed the grandmother she adored – but it has no monetary value. As such it stands in direct contrast to the Heygate estate, where the estate's value as a home has been overtaken by its commercial land value.

Larcom Street

Jack and Bet's first flat, after the destruction of his parents' house, is remembered throughout the novel as a 'dark, cramped' (56) place. Bet tells Marinela it 'was so dark and dirty. I cleaned, I cleaned the whole time, but it never seemed to make any difference' (46). It is the flat they lived in when Bet had her affair, and her inability to get the place clean echoes her betrayal – an action which cannot be undone and which continues to act upon Bet throughout her life. However, this is also the place in which Bet decided not to leave Jack and Tommy for Kit:

[She] sat on the old brown velveteen sofa in the attic room in Larcom Street [...] holding her breath as the flight time neared and then passed, that other potential life dropping back into the past, turning into a thing that never happened. (40)

A new home, a new start

The house that Tommy and Bet buy together at the end of the novel symbolises a new start. An opportunity for Bet and her son to remake their troubled relationship and create a new home together, a provisional, compromised home, yes, but a home all the same. For Bet the move involves

leaving the last bit of Jack – the smell of him, the memory of him walking from one room to another, brewing tea, falling asleep in front of the television. [...] He wouldn't be moving with her. (189)

And yet the move feels like a positive step forward, one that Jack would have approved of. 'Her and Tommy, together and apart [...] there were days she found herself almost looking forward to it' (198).

London

Taking the idea of home out of the confines of four walls and a roof, the final home-space I want to introduce is London itself. The city offers a version of home to each of the novel's characters, who find their own ways of making and re-making their sense of home within it.

It is Jack who engages with the city in the most sustained way in the novel, walking the same route every day from the flat to the shopping centre, to have coffee in the same café. The city is changing around him and he has no power or agency to stop that. But he chooses a route that takes him past his and Bet's old estate in order to bear witness to its destruction. He acknowledges the impact of the estate's demolition on his sense of home whilst also persisting with his rituals of walking, sitting and drinking, rituals which continue to re-inscribe his sense of home in this often hostile urban environment.

Through his daily interaction with the city, Jack also becomes part of it. Bet contemplates how his continued presence might offer comfort to others: 'The shopkeepers must know him. Maybe they looked out for him every morning. [...] Maybe it comforted them to see him' (35).

Marinela's performance of home within the city is realised through the act of taking photographs – another kind of narrative-making. As she tries to explain to Jack,

'I take them to try and know where I am,' she said. '[...] it is to look properly. I look when I take the photos, and then I use the darkroom to make the pictures and I look again. And then somehow I know more.' (11)

For Marinela, taking photographs is an act of connection and comprehension. And yet her right to make the images is not uncontested. Taking photographs of the half-demolished Heygate estate she is challenged by a local woman:

'It's not a fucking freak show,' she shouted. 'People lived here.'

Marinela stared at her, frozen. She wanted to say, I know, I know someone who lived here. I know that.

'Go on. Piss off.' The woman waved her hands at Marinela [...]. 'I've had

enough of you lot.’ (28)

Who gets to make their home where and how within the city is not simple – it is a matter of negotiation, a matter of often-conflicting stories.

For Bet, with her limited mobility, London serves more as a symbolic and remembered home rather than one she inhabits on a daily basis. ‘Bet had been desperate to move to London. She could still remember the feeling, as though London was a magnet and she was a tiny bit of metal stranded in Yorkshire, being pulled towards it’ (18). To Bet, London is freedom and energy, the city of her younger self:

She loved the thrill of it – walking across the city, sitting on the top deck of a bus, her hat in her lap, lifting her hand for a taxi in the early hours of the morning. There was nothing but a shimmer of excitement reaching from her stomach to her throat. (38)

In the present action of the novel, Bet spends most of her time indoors, but London occupies a strong presence in her memory and her sense and story of herself. She bothers herself less with the old estate and its demolition and thinks more of her younger years, working in Soho, feeling as though the city was hers to explore and own.

The novel ends with Bet visiting Jack’s favourite café in Elephant and Castle shopping centre. She feels perfectly at home here, able to close her eyes and take a nap if she so wished: ‘That’s what she’d always loved about London – you could do what you liked and most of the time people were too busy, too caught up with their own lives, to pay you much attention’ (200). The invisibility offered by the city suits her. For her it isn’t an invisibility brought about by age, but an anonymity that offers freedom and comfort.

Chapter 4: To leave | to stay | to return | to settle

Having introduced the home-spaces of *Jack and Bet*, I want to move on to consider some of the home-related themes I address in my writing, beginning with four key verbs: to leave, to stay, to return, to settle.

Leave - verb

1 [with object] Go away from

2 [with object] allow or cause to remain⁴⁶

The primary dictionary definition of *leave* holds within it a tension between departing and remaining, which feels crucial to my own relationship with home and how it plays out in my writing. In *Ten Things I've Learnt About Love*, Alice is always about to leave, or thinking about doing so, flying off to foreign places to somehow fix or solve her accumulated problems of home and belonging. At the same time she yearns for a stable home – she plants seeds, she paints walls, she sits outside her old flat and imagines herself back inside. In *Before the Fire*, Stick is desperate to leave his mum's home and the estate he grew up on, and yet he too has a strong pull to stay, to invest, to remain, despite himself. I continue to consider this tension between staying and leaving in *Jack and Bet*, from Marinela's repeated departures – from Romania, from her rented house, from the Islington flat – through to Jack's small-scale daily departures and returns.

Moore, considering the work of John Berger, writes: 'he eloquently describes the nature of dwelling: that it aspires to rootedness, but also includes transience and mobility.'⁴⁷ Perhaps this is the nature of home: that we want to rest and we want to move. And perhaps this mobility is not always running away in a negative sense, but a way of growing, developing and discovering; a way of being at home, which is as valid and meaningful as physically staying in one place.

Bammer, in her consideration of the term home, also conjures up the idea of movement, of leaving, returning, arriving:

⁴⁶ *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁴⁷ Moore, p. 55.

Semantically, ‘home’ has always occupied a particularly indeterminate space: it can mean, almost simultaneously, both the place I have left and the place I am going to, the place I have lost and the new place I have taken up, even if only temporarily.⁴⁸

Home itself, then, is a mobile concept, not fixed to a single physical place, but able to shift and change as we shift and change both geographically and within our internal selves.

As a young child I remember telling my parents I would never ever leave home. As a teenager, I had an absolute conviction that I would leave both my family home and the city I grew up in as soon as I reached eighteen (which I did). I made a home in Leicester for three years, then Norwich for a year, and then reluctantly moved to London – a city I had never been keen on – in order to be with my then partner. I was a Northerner, what was I doing in London? I would leave, I told myself, when the time was right. When the relationship ended and I lost the house we had bought and refurbished together, my first thought was to return to Manchester. Yet I didn’t – I realised that, despite my insistence on London being a temporary blip in my life, it had in fact become home, and I felt myself held by the city and the friendships I had made there, at a very difficult time. And so I stayed – moving from rented place to rented place before eventually moving in with a new partner. We lived in a one bed flat; we were thinking of starting a family; we decided to move to Manchester. It was both a departure and a return. I described it as going ‘home’, and yet when we arrived, I realised that London was my home and Manchester was simply the city I had grown up in. I remember sitting in our rented flat in the city centre and feeling a desperate urge to leave, not to go anywhere specific, but just to go somewhere else. It took several years (and the act of writing a novel set in Manchester) before I managed to put down roots and find a new, re-made home in the city.

This is the broad brushstroke view – the fact is that I have also consciously made each and every house and flat I have lived in as an adult (all twelve of them) into a home. I have arranged objects, put up pictures, painted walls, got to know my neighbours, invited people for dinner. I have learnt that I am someone who needs to feel physically at home, comforted by and settled in the place I inhabit. And yet, of course, sometimes these comforts feel like traps;

⁴⁸ Bammer, p. vii.

sometimes these objects feel burdensome; sometimes I would rather take off on my bike with a tent and stove in my panniers and see where the road takes me.

Perhaps this lived tension between the desire to leave and the desire to stay is one of the reasons I am so drawn to the work of Anne Tyler. As Janis Stout writes, Tyler has a ‘fixation on plots that develop what John Updike refers to as the ‘fundamental American tension...between stasis and movement, between home and escape’.⁴⁹ Tyler’s work contains numerous departures, and many returns, oftentimes to the same home that was initially left. Each time, the character comes back changed, with a different relationship to themselves and to the place they left behind; with a new understanding of home and their place within it. Leaving sets up the possibility of return, and oftentimes allows the characters ultimately to stay, and settle in a place they call home.

I will consider these four verbs – to leave, to stay, to return, to settle – in relation to *Jack and Bet* and to two of Anne Tyler’s novels: *Ladder of Years* – which tells the story of Delia Grinstead who walks away from her family on their summer holiday and sets up a new life in an unfamiliar town – and *Earthly Possessions* – which tells the story of Charlotte, a woman always planning to leave her husband but never quite doing it, until the day she is taken hostage during a bank robbery and forced to accompany the hapless robber on a road trip to Florida.

Leaving

Ladder of Years is filled with women who leave. The main character, Delia Grinstead, has lived in the family home her whole life: ‘Delia had never lived anywhere else. Neither had her father, for that matter.’⁵⁰ She feels the weight of this ‘motionless’ (181) life and is drawn to stories of women who leave. The departures of the glamorous wife of the man she almost has an affair with, and the wife of the man she ends up keeping house for after her own departure, are ‘alluring’ (51) to her. Her own leaving is in many ways a passive, almost unintentional one, a series of actions and chances that add up to her departure; as she says of herself after the event,

⁴⁹ Stout, ‘Escaping the House: Anne Tyler’s Fictions of (Leaving) Home’, p. 106.

⁵⁰ Tyler, *Ladder of Years*, p. 15. Further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text.

‘She resembled those runaway children who never, no matter how far they travel, truly mean to leave home’ (126).

Delia’s driving desire is to become ‘unentangled’ (80) from the complications of her home, her family, her everyday life. She delights in the sparse, unhomeliness of her newly rented room: ‘She could look around the room and detect not the slightest hint that anybody lived there’ (97), and celebrates the blankness of her boring, underpaid job.

And yet, she ends up creating a new home in Bay Borough, despite her best efforts not to. ‘Funny how life contrived to build up layers of *things* around a person’ (100). She acquires belongings, she makes friends, she builds relationships, she gets a cat who begins to ‘feel at home’ (144). People start relying on her. She becomes entangled again. Nor can she shake off her old home: she is always conscious of the children she sees and hears in her new town, and is struck by ‘a settling-in sensation’ when she attends a doctor’s surgery (she used to work in her husband’s surgery before she left), a feeling that she is in her ‘rightful place’ (231).

Delia ends up with two homes, pulled in two directions. Poignantly unsure how to return to her original home, she takes the invite to her daughter’s wedding with her just ‘in case there was any question’ (267). Her final return home then, is another departure, from the life and connections and home she had made – quite unintentionally – in Bay Borough.

In *Jack and Bet*, Marinela is the character who most consistently and determinedly leaves. She leaves Romania, her home country, to escape a failed affair and the knowledge that the man she loves will never leave his wife for her. This departure is an escape, driven by a desire to get away, to untangle herself from the choices she has made, and start again. Throughout the novel she dreams and thinks about Romania, sometimes taken by surprise by the intensity of her feelings: ‘Marinela felt a sudden surge of homesickness. A physical sensation: an ache right there in her heart’ (47). But she is reluctant to miss her home country, reluctant to think about returning. She doesn’t go back for Christmas, citing the expense, and tries to sidestep her mother’s sadness at her absence. When Stefan tells her ‘I want to take you home,’ her first thought is that she ‘couldn’t say where home was right now. Galați. Bucharest. Islington.’ (148). She has left her home country, and is still in the process of working out where her new home might be.

Marinela’s second departure is also an escape, this time from noisy inconsiderate

housemates, and a house she is struggling to find any sense of home or peace within. While she looks for connections in the city – taking photographs and talking to strangers – she resists making herself at home between the four walls of her rented room, or the flat she leaves it for. When he visits, Stefan tells her: ‘It is too empty. Like you just moved in, or you are just leaving.’ (122) Like Delia in *Ladder of Years*, Marinela is trying to keep her situation temporary, to avoid settling down, yet, like Delia, she starts to accumulate *things*, and in the Islington flat, she finally starts to feel at home.

However, she leaves that flat too; her final departure of the novel and one that, unlike her earlier departures, is a positive act of self-assertion, a decision to ‘make [her] own way’ (193) in the world. But it is also a decision that brings with it uncertainty and maintains her temporariness; had she taken Bet’s offer of having the flat ‘[s]he could have her own place. A place that no one could tell her to leave’ (183). Yet in this new flat, she feels more at peace, more at home than anywhere else to date; she arranges her things, and decides ‘it helped to have things around the place, it kept your feet on the ground.’ (190) It is Harry who articulates the freedom of renting as opposed to owning, who confirms the sense of her decision to turn down the offer of a flat that represented so much pain and betrayal for Bet’s family: “So there you are. Homed. Weightless.” Harry raised his glass. “Let’s drink to that.” (193-194). Marinela’s final departure is also, in some ways a return: the flat she rents is built on the footprint of Jack and Bet’s old estate. It represents the violence and loss the area’s regeneration has created, but Marinela’s move there also affirms the possibility of the creation of new homes and new communities, however contested and problematic that might be.

Leaving, for Tyler’s characters, is a form of home-making, a way of insisting that ‘houses [...] have open doors and windows, permeable walls.’⁵¹ In many ways leaving becomes a way of understanding where home is. It is the only method through which Tyler’s characters become able to find or re-find their sense of home, and then to stay there. While Marinela does not return to a previous home in *Jack and Bet*, each departure brings her closer to her own sense of home.

⁵¹ Stout, p. 114.

Staying

[T]here are few writers who recur with greater insistence than Tyler to the act of departure. The need to depart is locked, however, in persistent conflict with the urge to inhabit, or more precisely to the urge to retreat to the house and remain there.⁵²

Early on in *Earthly Possessions*, Charlotte remembers that her twin fears as a child were that she would be 'sent away' and simultaneously that she would never 'escape to the outside world.'⁵³ She is someone who has always felt trapped. She tries to go to college but has to return home to care for her parents. She marries, thinking she will leave her home town with her husband only for him to find his calling as a preacher in his home church. She tries to leave her husband early on in their marriage, but the bus isn't running that day and she concludes, 'This place just wouldn't let go of me' (104).

The idea of leaving fills Charlotte with joy. Remembering her attempt to leave Saul she says, 'I believe that was the clearest, happiest moment of all my life' (104). And yet, as Amos (Saul's brother, who she has an affair with) concludes when it becomes clear she is not going to leave with him: 'You stay where you're put' (184). Like Delia Grinstead, Charlotte wants a 'clean start' (176) and yet she can't seem to break free: 'I'm so tangled with other people here. More connected than I'd thought. [...] How can I ever begin to get loose?' (184). She continues to dream of leaving; considering herself 'only a transient' (113), she throws away furniture and belongings 'stripping for the journey' (37); she even 'discarded people' (186), and yet she stays, and recognises, late in the narrative, 'Oh, I'd never had the knack of knowing I was happy right while the happiness was going on' (198).

⁵² Stout, p. 106.

⁵³ Tyler, *Earthly Possessions*, p. 15. Further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text.

We are unsure whether Charlotte would have gone through with the departure she was planning before the robbery happened. Describing her preparations she says: 'But once you start an action, it tends to bear you along. All I could hope for was to be snagged somewhere.' (189-190). Instead of being snagged, she is propelled into the outside world, and it is this journey, which she has dreamt of in another form for so long, that allows her to go back home and stay there.

Bet is another woman who dreams of a different, less dreary, less entangled life. As a young woman, she is desperate to leave Yorkshire for London and her marriage to Jack makes that a reality. Even the drabness of the post-war city hadn't 'got in the way of her excitement, her sense of being at the start of something new' (18).

A few years in, she takes a job as a nightclub hostess in a bar that offers a romanticised, escapist version of home: 'Bertie's was what a home should be like, without the wife and the kids and the things that were broken, and the smells of cooking, and the bills and the neighbours fighting next door' (117). It is here, in this unrealistic, imaginary home-space, that she meets Kit. Their affair is a type of departure – an emotional abandoning of Jack and her life with him. However, despite planning to leave Jack and move to America with Kit, Bet stays. Her staying is in many ways an almost involuntary act rather than a conscious decision, she simply stays sitting on the sofa instead of taking a taxi to the airport, 'that other potential life dropping back into the past, turning into a thing that never happened' (40).

This is no moment of revelation, and Bet experiences no sudden onset of contentment, indeed she spends years wondering if she has made 'the biggest mistake of her life' (40). She still struggles with finding peace in her marriage and her home life, always fighting a sense that she might get up and go, walk into a different life, try again and do better. And yet she stays, and she makes do, she compromises, and despite herself she finds a home, both in the flats she lives in with Jack, but most importantly in Jack himself.

Just as Charlotte in *Earthly Possessions* did not realise she was happy 'while the happiness was going on' (198), Bet does not realise that she has found a home in Jack, until Jack has gone. Her loss of Jack, her true home, is mirrored in her perception of the flat turning against her, the physicality of her home-space become alien and hostile. It is as though Jack and the flat are inextricably linked, the one containing the other. So much so that after Jack's death, she still

feels his presence in the objects, sounds and smells of their home.

In the present day action of the novel, Bet is barely mobile – ‘Her eyes going and her legs not much better’ (14). She spends her days in the flat, with its awkward hallway and still-unpacked boxes. She no longer has the capacity, or indeed the inclination to leave. Instead she finds a new sense of meaning and energy in her friendship with Marinela – a friendship which leads her to unpack those boxes, and ultimately to feel more at home in the flat that has seemed temporary to date.

In *Uprootings/Regroundings*, Sara Ahmed et al. challenge the presumption that ‘movement involves freedom from grounds, or that grounded homes are not sites of change.’⁵⁴ Staying does not necessarily correlate with stagnation and boredom, just as leaving does not inevitably mean freedom and adventure. As Charlotte tells Saul at the end of *Earthly Possessions*, when she has returned home and no longer has any desire to leave: ‘We have been traveling for years, traveled all our lives, we are traveling still. We couldn’t stay in one place if we tried’ (200).

Returning

Ladder of Years and *Earthly Possessions* both end with the return of the female protagonist to the family home they had previously felt so trapped in. Both returns are portrayed as rather undramatic events. Delia’s return is almost a failure to leave, and we do not in fact see Charlotte’s return, only get a short, page-long, chapter summing up her life an unspecified length of time after her return. However, both returns represent the profound changes wrought in each woman over the course of the narrative. Both women have a different perspective on themselves and on their homes and the spaces and relationships that make those homes. Both novels end with these insights, summed up by the protagonist. For Charlotte it is her realisation that she and Saul have been travelling, moving, changing, all along, despite her previous belief that they had been trapped and stagnating. For Delia it is a revelation about her children growing up and leaving her; the beginning of an acceptance of her changing life and its impact on her home.

⁵⁴ Ahmed et al., ‘Introduction: Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration’, p. 1.

Jack and Bet does not mirror Anne Tyler's overarching narratives of departure and return, but there are a series of small scale departures and returns that punctuate the novel. Jack leaves the flat daily for his morning walk to Elephant and Castle shopping centre. He leaves a pot of tea for Bet while he is gone, and then he returns to make her lunch.

He understands this daily leaving and returning as an act of survival, both for his physical health, and his ability to keep functioning as an agent within the busy, changing, urban landscape he lives within. He is an old man, slow to cross the road, prone to get in people's way, and yet he insists on this ritual of walking from home to the centre and back again each day. And he does it for Bet, his wife, who is home for him, above and beyond any physical space in the novel. His departures and his returns are sustaining acts of home-making.

Except of course, one day, Jack does not return. He falls on the street and is taken to hospital. The upheaval of that not-returning is profound for both him and Bet, and it precipitates both the most honest exchange between the couple in the novel and perhaps their lives, and Bet's belated realisation that it is in Jack that she finds her sense of home.

Settling

The verb to settle contains both the comforting sense of settling down, of coming to rest, of finding a place, of making a decision, and the less comfortable sense of making do, of compromising, of giving up on bigger ambitions and ideals. Robert Goodin celebrates settling (down, in, up, for, on) as a positive force, in his treatise *On Settling*. He sees settling as an intervention which puts an end to that which is unsettled. He suggests that settling for certain things (be that people, places, ideas) allows us to 'move on', to 'craft narrative identities and live up to them'.⁵⁵ Settling, he argues 'is a quest for "fixity"⁵⁶ and fixity – though never 'forever' – allows us the freedom to strive and develop.

Delia and Charlotte are both characters who start their narratives with a drive to change their lives by leaving their homes. They both end those narratives having returned home and either

⁵⁵ Goodin, *On Settling*, p.25.

⁵⁶ Goodin, p.8.

settled (in Charlotte's case), or begun to settle (in Delia's). They have both begun to understand their homes as places they can make and remake over time, places that are provisional, negotiated, subject to change. 'Tyler's characteristic affirmation, then, is not of home as a given but (to borrow a phrase from James Fenimore Cooper) of home as found, a redefined or reconstituted home, a home chosen on one's own terms.'⁵⁷ These settlings are not simply matters of compromise or even resignation (Goodin argues that settling is 'distinct in important ways' from compromise, resignation and conservatism⁵⁸), they are rather what Goodin describes as 'a commitment to stick with it for a time',⁵⁹ a commitment which offers these two women the freedom to grow and find happiness after years of being unsettled.

The emptying out and eventual demolition of the Heygate estate creates a prolonged unsettled period for Jack and Bet. Their home is taken from them, and they – particularly Bet – struggle to settle in their new flat. Then the loss of Jack unsettles Bet even further. The novel ends with Bet's imminent departure for a new house with Tommy. This is a departure but also a return – to living with her son; and a new beginning, offering her the opportunity to remake both her sense of home and her relationship with Tommy. It is a departure that allows for the possibility of change and redemption, that suggests that Bet, perhaps for the first time for many years, might be able to settle.

For Marinela too, her move to a new rented flat seems to offer her the chance to settle. Having taken photographs out in the urban environment as a way of trying to 'know where I am,' (11) she begins to take photographs inside, '[h]er room mostly. The light changing through the day' (190). She arranges her belongings, she starts new projects, she reconnects with Harry. She begins to find some agency in her adopted city. As Goodin suggests, settling in – as Marinela is starting to do at the end of the novel – is in part 'a matter of adjusting yourself to your new place. In part it is a matter of adjusting the place to you.'⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Stout, p. 114.

⁵⁸ Goodin, p.37.

⁵⁹ Goodin, p.23.

⁶⁰ Goodin, p.17.

Leaving, staying with, returning to and settling for the writing of the novel

Can our dissection of the meaning of these four verbs, and our discussion of them in relation to *Jack and Bet*, *Ladder of Years* and *Earthly Possessions*, throw light on the novel as a form, and how it is written?

Writing a novel is (in my experience) a process that requires the ability and determination to stay. To keep sitting at a desk and making sentences. To hold your nerve and keep going with something that so often feels messy and uncontrollable and just plain bad. It takes (me at least) years to write a book. The novel, perhaps more than any other written form, demands considerable time and focus from the writer.

Of course, the writing process also involves leaving. To have lunch, to sleep, to do all the other things life demands of a writer. We constantly leave and then return to our manuscripts, sometimes frustrated by the interruption, sometimes energised by it. Most writers would echo the common advice to put your novel in a drawer for a period of time and then come back to it, knowing that this return – after a departure – offers a perspective hard to achieve when you are immersed in the novel on a daily basis. Just as Delia and Charlotte return to their homes and see them in a new way, writers return to their stories with clear(er) eyes and minds, able to see what is working and what isn't, and emboldened to make the changes needed.

I find that as I write, as I make big decisions – plot points, narrators, tense, point of view – I settle into a book. Goodin argues that settling and striving are interrelated: first we must settle on what to strive for; and secondly we must settle on some things in order to free up resources with which to strive.⁶¹ This resonates with my own experience of writing. We settle on things as we go, and while, as Goodin notes, 'nothing is forever',⁶² and we may revisit and change our decisions, making those decisions in the first place allows us to focus, to pursue our ends. And of course, eventually, we must settle in a more permanent way. We must make our compromises, honour our decisions, decide that this is the last edit, the last change; we must stop. This final settling requires a letting go, a willingness to let our novels leave us, just as Delia realises that she has to say goodbye to her children, and let them go out into the world.

⁶¹ Goodin, p. 44.

⁶² Goodin, p. 23.

For Tyler's characters, leaving is often seen as synonymous with travelling. Stout cites an interview where Tyler states: 'Probably I would be schizophrenic – and six times divorced – if I weren't writing. I would decide that I want to run off and join the circus and I would do. I hate to travel, but writing a novel is like taking a long trip.'⁶³ For Tyler writing is both a distraction from an actual physical leaving and a type of departure in and of itself. It is, undeniably an adventure, a journey, one that changes the writer, just as Tyler's characters are changed by their departures. Perhaps the finished novel is the home the writer ends up with, or offers to their reader, at the end of the journey, or perhaps the journey itself is a kind of home.

Both writing and reading novels change those involved. As readers, we are (hopefully) changed by the time spent with a novel. We leave it, and return to our lives with our perspective altered, with new voices and new experiences to accommodate into our own understanding of the world. Some books, indeed, become alternative homes – escapes from our own lives, places to 'try on and play out roles and relationships of both belonging and foreignness.'⁶⁴

Writers change and are changed over the long periods it takes to create a novel. The process itself offers a home for the writer's imagination, a place to play, experiment, explore, discover. Kathleen Jamie writes beautifully about the disorientation that occurs when a writer finishes a book, an experience she describes as comparable to 'very slowly falling out of a tree'. Jamie is a poet and essayist, but I find that her metaphors work just as well for the process of writing a novel. She suggests that on finishing a book, 'the self you acquired to write it strolls off site' – this is a self, accrued over years, which has become 'like a home', 'a place to dwell', and so its loss is, of course, disorientating, perhaps devastating for a time. Before we can start a new book, Jamie argues, we must 'construct a new self', find a new home from which to journey.⁶⁵

⁶³ Stout, p. 144.

⁶⁴ Bammer, p. ix.

⁶⁵ Jamie, 'Kathleen Jamie on Writing a Book'.

Chapter 5: Loss and recuperation

Loss is a theme that permeates my writing – the loss of loved people and loved places, and the losses involved in the process of ageing. My two earlier novels each feature characters that are absent – Alice’s mother in the first, Stick’s sister and his best friend in the second. In *Jack and Bet* the equivalent of this character is the Heygate estate, which is being demolished over the course of the novel’s action.

The loss of home is, of course, related to leaving home, but has its own set of resonances, not least that it potentially excludes the possibility of return. Porteous and Smith write that we believe, or at least that we want to believe, that 'our dwellings, neighbourhoods, landscapes and valleys have inherent permanence. They are bigger than us; they are centres of stability in a rapidly changing world.'⁶⁶ And yet homes, neighbourhoods and landscapes can of course be lost. As Andre Aciman, an exile living in New York, says, writing about a changing park in the city: 'even if I don't disappear from a place, places disappear from me.'⁶⁷ He goes on to say: 'If part of the city goes, part of us dies as well.'⁶⁸ Peter Read would agree: 'Let us not underestimate the effect which the loss of dead and dying places has on our own self-identity, mental well-being and sense of belonging.'⁶⁹ The loss of a home has a huge impact on our sense of self and sets up a particular dynamic between the object and moment of loss and our present lives and identities.

One of the most poignant and engaging explorations I have come across of the story and impact of a lost home is Ann Patchett’s *The Dutch House*. In the following chapter I will consider this novel alongside *Jack and Bet*; first thinking about the nature of loss itself, then turning to the idea of nostalgia as a way of negotiating that loss and its impact on the present day and indeed our ideas of the future, and finally exploring how narrative might act as a means of recuperation.

Lost homes

⁶⁶ Porteous and Smith, p. 192.

⁶⁷ Aciman (ed.), *Letters of Transit*, p. 21.

⁶⁸ Aciman, p. 31.

⁶⁹ Read, *Returning to Nothing: The Meaning of Lost Places*, p. xii.

We invest homes and places with our stories, memories and dreams, and so their destruction or loss can have a huge impact on our sense of self. Porteous and Smith coined the term ‘domicide’ in 2001, meaning ‘the murder of home’ – the deliberate planned destruction of homes, often done in the name of the ‘common good’, which involves the suffering of those who lose their homes. They write: ‘The wilful destruction of a loved home can thus be one of the deepest wounds to one’s identity and self-esteem, for both of these props to sanity reside in part in objects and structures that we cherish.’⁷⁰ It is a useful and powerful concept, though other writers have criticised Porteous and Smith’s insistence on both the physicality and the stability and sanctity of home. Mel Nowicki suggests we consider domicile ‘beyond the physical homespace’, writing: ‘The home does not consist solely of bricks and mortar and can be dismantled and destroyed in a variety of forms’.⁷¹ And Richard Baxter and Katherine Brickell talk about home ‘unmaking’ – a ‘more varied and expansive’ idea than domicile, which encompasses burglary, leaving home, death, and so on.⁷² The destruction of home, whatever form that destruction takes, is a significant and often traumatic loss.

The Dutch House centres on the expulsion of the narrator, Danny, and his sister Maeve, from their home by their stepmother, and the earlier departure (and therefore loss) of their mother, the reason for which is cited as her inability to live in the grand house her husband had so enthusiastically bought for her. These two losses saturate the novel, impacting nearly every decision and action taken in the present.

Danny and Maeve return again and again to sit in Maeve’s car on the street outside the house: ‘like swallows, like salmon, we were the helpless captives of our migratory patterns. We pretended that what we had lost was the house, not our mother, not our father.’⁷³ The house, and its loss, becomes the symbol of all the losses that led up to Danny and Maeve’s expulsion (namely the departure of their mother and death of their father). The past becomes lodged in the physical space of the house. And yet the narrative makes it clear that they do manage to find new homes. The very ritual of sitting outside the house and talking creates a new home: ‘We had

⁷⁰ Porteous and Smith, p. 5.

⁷¹ Nowicki, ‘Rethinking Domicide: Towards an Expanded Critical Geography of Home’, p. 789.

⁷² Baxter and Brickell, ‘For Home UnMaking’, p. 134.

⁷³ Patchett, *The Dutch House*, p. 74. Further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text.

changed at whatever point the old homestead had become the car', Danny realises (235). Later, Danny says he is 'at home on a building site' (78), and recognises his need to own a building 'in order to be who I was meant to be' (147). When he finally owns the place he lives in, he describes how it 'plugged up a hole that had been whistling in me for years' (191).

However, Danny and Maeve's identities are still intricately linked to their relationship with the Dutch House. At one point Danny notes: 'I was still at a point in my life when the house was the hero of every story, our lost and beloved country' (177). When they eventually return to the house, with their mother, Danny and Maeve are both struck by the fact it looks as good as new. 'I always imagined the house would die without us. I don't know, I thought it would crumple up. Do houses ever die of grief?' (315) Danny says to his sister. They had expected it to wither, like the house in the Larkin poem Maeve and Celeste recite on their first meeting. And yet the house has been a home to their stepmother Andrea, it has been cherished in their absence. They have been, to a large extent, formed by their loss and the fact that they, as Danny eventually realises, 'had made a fetish out of our misfortune, fallen in love with it.' (255). Their identities and lives have grown around the loss of their home (and their parents), keeping that loss at the centre of everything, while the house itself has just continued being a house – a home for someone else.

The central lost home in *Jack and Bet* is the protagonists' flat on the Heygate estate, and indeed the estate itself. Early on, we see Bet standing at her front door 'listening to the grumble of machines pulling the old estate down block by block, flat by flat, concrete wall by concrete wall.' (42) This is a double loss – the second (this time physical) destruction of the home Jack and Bet had been forced to leave five years earlier. As Nowicki, and Baxter and Brickell suggest, Jack and Bet's loss is wider and deeper than the loss of four walls and a roof. They – along with their neighbours – have lost a sense of community; their sense of their neighbourhood; their place in the city. And the city, arguably, has lost too, from this financially-driven move, which decimates the local community and reneges on the council's early promises:

'They said we'd be able to move back,' Jack said. 'They promised us. Sat there in meetings and promised us.'

‘They called it the footprint,’ Bet cut in. ‘Isn’t that right, Jack? We all signed this form – right-to-return.’ She laughed. ‘That was two years before we left and it lasted seven years, so there’s no risk of us going back now, is there?’ (57)

London is surging ahead on a wave of regeneration and gentrification. The Heygate, its community, and the utopic idea behind its construction – that architecture could create positive inner city communities – is in the process of being lost forever.

While the loss of Jack and Bet’s Heygate flat is not as central to the narrative as the loss of the Dutch House for Danny and Maeve, it has a continuing impact on Jack and Bet’s lives.

Jack’s daily walk is, in many ways, his response to the loss. He bears witness to the estate’s destruction through this quiet, personal, daily practice. He pays attention and in doing so both recognises the value of the place being lost and reasserts his own relationship to it. The city, or at least this neighbourhood, is part of his identity, and so he works to find ways to sustain his sense of self within the rapidly changing landscape.

As a couple, though, their sense of home is profoundly affected. Their enforced move exhausts them:

They’d been too old to move. And it felt as though the whole process – the bidding for flats and waiting for phone calls and having to decide what to take with them and what to get rid of – had put another handful of years onto each of them. (34)

They don’t unpack properly after the move and maintain a level of discomfort in their own home. And yet at the same time, they fight to stay there. The novel circles the potential loss of Jack and Bet’s current flat. Tommy wants them to move into residential care; *a* home rather than *their* home. They are getting old, struggling to cope, and this ageing poses a direct threat to their ability to stay in their own home. Tommy argues, ‘You should be taking it easy, getting looked after’ (33), but Jack and Bet insist on maintaining their independence, resisting yet another loss of place, control and identity.

The two other lost homes in *Jack and Bet* – Marinela’s grandmother’s house and Jack’s parents’ house – are also irrecoverable. They represent physical and well as emotional losses. On a narrative level, they also serve to mirror and intensify the loss of the Heygate estate. Jack

compares the estate's demolition to a 'bombsite' (7), echoing the destruction of his family home in the Second World War. Marinela's grandmother's house stands in contrast to the urban flats, which form the focus of the novel's action. Its dereliction and lack of value is something that couldn't happen in the hyper-globalised, hyper-pressurised contexts of Elephant and Castle and Islington in London, yet its loss is still poignant and personal.

'You think houses last for ever, don't you? [...] We all think that' (105). Harry says to Marinela when she tells him about her grandmother's house. This statement is central to the novel – the realisation that home, which we so often construct as safe, permanent, inviolable, is in fact uncertain and impermanent, something that can be lost.

Nostalgia

The word nostalgia comes from the greek *nostos* – to return to the native land, and *algia* – suffering or longing. However the word was actually coined by Swiss student, Johannes Hofer in his medical dissertation in 1688 as a medical term for the symptoms – irregular heartbeat, weeping, insomnia, disturbed eating, even suicide – of young Swiss mercenaries fighting away from home, who exhibited extreme longing for home.⁷⁴

Svetlana Boym sees nostalgia as something that masquerades as a longing for place, but is in fact 'a yearning for a different time'; the nostalgic wants to 'revisit time like space'. And so nostalgia attempts to deny time by seeing it as something that can be travelled to, that can be regained.⁷⁵ We not only want to go home, we want to go back to a home preserved the way it used to be, but which, of course – as Massey points out – 'will have moved on just as you yourself will have changed.'⁷⁶

The Dutch House can be read as a study in nostalgia. Danny and Maeve cannot let go of the home they lost. They park outside, tell stories about the past and speculate about Andrea and her children still living inside. Danny studies medicine purely in order to exhaust the trust fund set

⁷⁴ Sullivan, 'Historical Keyword: Nostalgia', p. 585.

⁷⁵ Boym, 'Nostalgia and Its Discontents', p. 8.

⁷⁶ Massey, *For Space*, p. 124.

up for the education of him and Andrea's two daughters. Neither are able to extricate themselves from the place for many years.

For Dennis Walder, '[e]xploring nostalgia can and should open up a negotiation between the present and the past, leading to a fuller understanding of the past and how it has shaped the present, for good and bad, and how it has shaped the self in connection with others'.⁷⁷ At the heart of *The Dutch House* is exactly this conversation about the relationship between the past and the present. It is a conversation played out in the novel's very form – Danny narrates the story from some point in the future, and Patchett uses prolepsis to great effect, switching from the moment of the story being told, to knowledge of how things turned out, and then back again. The characters themselves are at times sharply aware of the impact of their past on their present. Danny and Maeve's car-bound conversations often circle the subject:

'I see the past as it actually was,' Maeve said. [...]

'But we overlay the present onto the past. We look back through the lens of what we know now, so we're not seeing it as the people we were, we're seeing it as the people we are, and that means the past has been radically altered.' (45)

In Danny's view, not only does the past affect the present, the present also affects how the past is remembered, understood and retold.

The word nostalgia crops up at two points in the novel. The first is when Danny is relating his journey to New York with his father, who takes him to see the apartment block he used to live in. Danny speculates that the journey back to the city where his father and his first wife were from, 'prompted a wave of nostalgia in [his father]' (61). Later in the book, Danny describes his and Maeve's returns to the Dutch House as 'really just an act of nostalgia, not for the people we'd been when we lived in the house, but for the people we'd been when we parked on VanHoebook Street for hours' (234). These direct engagements with the idea of nostalgia are linked to both place and time, they are moments in which the characters miss their former selves, above any specific place.

⁷⁷ Walder, *Postcolonial Nostalgias: Writing, Representation and Memory*, p. 9.

Jack and Bet is also a novel that engages with the relationship between past and present, with how the past gets lodged in symbols and objects, which exist in and have an impact on the present. How the past is remembered and forgotten. How it re-emerges and is submerged again. How it is packaged and retold to different audiences.

The relationship between the past and the present is concentrated in two of the novel's home-spaces: Bet's Islington flat, and the Heygate estate (and the wider area of London it represents).

The Islington flat, given to Bet by her American lover, is the home-space that demonstrates the most complex negotiation between the past and the present. It occupies an ambiguous position: never a home, but an escape from home, and yet at the same time it looked and perhaps started to feel like a home for the two of them. As Bet tells Marinela: 'This was our place. It was his idea. I was furious at first. I liked the hotels – they felt less, I don't know, less real' (47).

For Bet, the flat is difficult to think about; her nostalgia instead rests in the idea of herself at that time in her life, stepping 'out onto the street with perfect hair, perfect stockings, perfect face' (38); visiting Claridge's with her lover; working as a hostess in a Soho nightclub – itself a place seeped in nostalgia: 'I loved it. It was like living on a film set: everything brighter and more beautiful than it was in real life' (117).

For Marinela, the Islington flat is a space she inhabits in the present; the first place in London where she starts to feel she might settle. She buys crockery and a rug, she makes plans to set up a dark room. She starts to treat it as a home. And yet the flat's past, and its symbolic resonance as the place of Bet's betrayal, keeps re-emerging in the present, making the flat ultimately uninhabitable for Marinela. The flat does, however, eventually facilitate Tommy and Bet's decision to buy a house with a 'granny flat' and make a new (and for Bet, perhaps final) attempt at building a home together.

Jack and Bet's memories of their Heygate home are suffused with light. It is a place of connection and hope and its loss seeps through the novel, with each of Jack and Bet's homes before and after remembered or experienced as dark and cramped in contrast. I have been wary about romanticising a place which certainly had its problems, but these positive memories are intentional, an assertion of the value and importance of a place that has been written off by politicians and the media.

Nostalgia is often dismissed as indulgent and romantic,⁷⁸ and yet it can also be 'a potent source of meaning,'⁷⁹ an act which strengthens our sense of 'social connectedness.'⁸⁰ Writers such as Boym have looked to reclaim the term as politically important. Boym distinguishes between restorative and reflective nostalgia, the former dressing itself up as truth and tradition, driven by the desire to restore the lost homeland; the latter a much more contradictory, complex attitude to the loss of home, which revels in the distance and is 'ironic, inconclusive, and fragmentary.'⁸¹ This is the nostalgia she sees as having the most political potential:

Nostalgics of the second type are aware of the gap between identity and resemblance; the home is in ruins or, on the contrary, has just been renovated and gentrified beyond recognition. It is precisely this defamiliarization and sense of distance *that drives them to tell their story, to narrate the relationship between past, present, and future.* Through that longing, they discover that the past is not that which no longer exists, but, to quote Bergson, the past is something that 'might act, and will act by inserting itself into a present sensation from which it borrows the vitality.' (my italics)⁸²

The past can weigh us down; it can facilitate exclusion and violence ('make America great again'); but it is also important, and has the potential to affect positive change.

In *The Dutch House*, it is the return of Danny and Maeve's mother – whose loss fuelled their obsession with the house – that precipitates their return to the house. 'Look at the three of us, undone by a house. It's insane' (305) their mother says, leading them to the front door, to set off an unexpected train of events that leads, via trauma and Maeve's death, to the narrator's eventual reconciliation with both the house (loved and bought by his film star daughter) and the past.

⁷⁸ Walder, p. 9.

⁷⁹ Routledge and others, 'Nostalgia as a Resource for Psychological Health and Well-Being: Nostalgia and Psychological Health', p. 812.

⁸⁰ Zhou and others, 'Nostalgia: The Gift That Keeps on Giving: Figure A1.', p. 40.

⁸¹ Boym, p. 15.

⁸² Boym, pp. 15–16.

Nostalgia leads them there, and in doing so it propels the characters forwards, offering new ways for them to negotiate their relationship with the past.

In the context of the urban regeneration of areas such as Elephant and Castle, the past is something that ‘might act’; might stand ‘against the tendency of modern urbanism to create so many *tabulae rasae* for the building of cities without memory.’⁸³ Urban regeneration schemes relentlessly evoke a greener, brighter, happier future, often either obliterating the past of a site, or selecting a few key aspects and rewriting them to their financial advantage. In the case of the Heygate estate, renamed Elephant Park, the developers evoke the trees and green spaces of the former estate and project them into the future, conveniently forgetting the people who had lived amongst them.

Jack is acutely aware of this violent erasure of the past. Seeing the hoardings with their promise of '*an inspiring place to call home*' angers him, but he feels powerless to act: 'He was Jack. He took things as they came. He did not look back. He knew when he was beat.' (108) And yet he has power within the novel, as one of its protagonists and narrators. He can tell his story and be listened to.

Narrative as recuperation

Boym sees reflective nostalgia as a driver of narrative; the motivation to tell a story, which brings past present and future together. Loss can create the need to tell stories, and those stories can be a means to remake a sense of home. Rubenstein also writes about nostalgia and narrative – how through narrative we are able to negotiate loss and reclaim past homes:

Several writers evoke nostalgia or the longing for home to enable their characters (and imaginatively their readers) to confront, mourn, and figuratively revise their relation to something that has been lost, whether in the world or in themselves. [...] Even though

⁸³ Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, p. xiii.

one cannot literally go home again (at least, not to the home of childhood that has been embellished over time by imagination), it may be recoverable in narrative terms.⁸⁴

The Dutch House is filled with characters narrating lost homes. Danny and Maeve sit outside the house and smoke, telling each other stories about their time living inside. Through this storytelling they sustain their relationship with this lost home. Danny later recognises this 'fetish' as unhealthy, and yet this repeated act of narration also builds a new home, in the ritual of their words and actions, and in their relationship with each other.

Fluffy, Jocelyn and Sandy (former staff at the house who reappear throughout the narrative) also contribute to this endless telling and retelling, an act that both recreates and re-imagines the past and also strengthens the connections of the characters to each other in the present.

When Danny and Maeve's mother returns, she and Maeve spend hours talking about the house they lived in before the Dutch House, telling stories about their lives there, 'catalog[ing] the contents of the little house with great affection' (280). They are, to use Rubenstein's phrase, 'imaginatively recover[ing]'⁸⁵ their former home, and through doing so they are remaking their relationship.

The loss of the Dutch House and the intense nostalgia that invoked in Danny and Maeve, is intimately tied up with the loss of their mother. It is only when their mother returns that they are able to diffuse the loss of the house, and indeed regain and remake it as a positive, joyful space.

My writing of *Jack and Bet* has been driven by two losses. The first is personal – the loss of my grandparents, both dear friends whose home was a second home to me. They are of the same generation as Jack and Bet, my grandfather fought in Burma, as Jack did; my visual imagination of Bet when she arrived in London is close to photos I have seen of my grandmother as a young woman. I wrote *Jack and Bet* in part to feel closer to them, to recover them, and the sense of home I connect with them.

⁸⁴ Rubenstein, p. 6.

⁸⁵ Rubenstein, p. 7.

The second loss is less personal and more political: the loss of the Heygate estate, which happened when I was living in Elephant and Castle. Writing about the Heygate was a political act of recovery, an attempt to reclaim both the estate itself, and more particularly, the sense of home and community it facilitated. Rubenstein writes about ‘the lost landscape of home and its imaginative recovery in fiction,’⁸⁶ and it is this imaginative recovery which I hope *Jack and Bet* achieves. It is a recovery instigated through the act of writing, but also realised through the multiple readings of the novel post-publication – for each reader will conjure the Heygate in their minds, re-making it as a place and a home.

⁸⁶ Rubenstein, p. 7.

Chapter 6: Writing home

Home is both site and process, both physical place and imagined space; it is made, un-made, made again; left, returned to, left again. It is intimately connected to who we are and who we aspire to be. It is a story we tell and retell, embellish and edit. Home is a narrative project; something that happens over time as well as space; a process that looks to hold past, present and future together, and through doing so generate meaning and connection. As Ahmed et al write: ‘Making home is about *creating* both pasts and futures through inhabiting the grounds of the present.’⁸⁷ We tell our homes, to ourselves and to each other, and through this act of telling we create and fashion homes, we make and re-make them, we lose and we find them again.

The narrated home, and the idea of the story itself as a home is hugely important for diaspora communities, those who have left or lost their homes and use story as a way to retain their connection with that lost home and indeed to create new homes. My focus here, and within *Jack and Bet*, however, is on a more personal, domestic narration of home.

In *Jack and Bet*, I narrate a series of home spaces and ideas of home through the prose of the novel. And within the story, the characters narrate different homes to each other: Bet and Jack narrate their Heygate home to Harry, trusting that he ‘won’t write nonsense about the place breeding criminals’ (53). Bet narrates the Islington flat to Marinela; Marinela narrates her grandmother’s house to Harry; and Harry narrates his dysfunctional home back in Liverpool to Marinela. These moments of narration express, reinforce and create the characters’ relationship with their (sometimes plural) homes.

I want to turn now to the idea of writing and home: writing about and from the home, and creating a home through the process of writing and within the text itself.

The Domestic Novel

The development of the novel as a form has been linked to the concurrent development of the idea of home as an interior, private space. With the onset of the industrial revolution, the spheres of home and work separated (at least in theory); the first becoming the realm of women, the

⁸⁷ Ahmed et al., p. 9.

second that of men.⁸⁸ The house, as Witold Rybczynski argues, became a closed-off space, an interior which held the hopes and dreams as well as the everyday actions of the individual and their family. Around the same time, the novel as a literary form developed as the perfect vehicle to explore the inner psychology of its characters.⁸⁹

Rybczynski, in his consideration of the evolution of the idea of domestic comfort, suggests that the concept needs to be understood in the context of ‘the emergence of something new in the human consciousness: the appearance of the internal world of the individual, of the self, and of the family.’⁹⁰ Comfort is ‘more than a simple search for physical well-being; it begins in the appreciation of the house as a setting for an emerging interior life.’⁹¹ While Rybczynski is concerned with the relationship between this awareness of human interiority and the house as a site of comfort and homeliness, Kathy Mezei and Chiara Briganti take the idea into the realm of the literary, discussing the relationship between the rise of the novel (which they call ‘invincibly domestic’) and the age of the English house: ‘The comparatively recent notion of privacy resonates in this new literary form that explores intimate, private spaces of the mind and society often set within a middle-class household and home.’⁹²

Just as home became associated with women, and work with men, so the domestic novel was seen as the realm of women – both as writers and readers. Novel reading, wrote Mrs Anna Laetitia Barbauld, editor of the fifty volume collection of ‘The British Novelists’ (1810), ‘is the cheapest of pleasures: it is a domestic pleasure.’⁹³ The form was seen as light and undemanding, a world away from the important business of politics and work. ‘Serious men novelists like Bulwer and Disraeli drew their material from high society and political life or from history’ writes Vineta Colby, whilst many female novelists took domestic life as their subject and so, as she argues, ‘its practitioners were inevitably looked down upon.’⁹⁴

⁸⁸ Flanders, p. 100.

⁸⁹ Rybczynski, *Home: A Short History of an Idea*.

⁹⁰ Rybczynski, p. 35.

⁹¹ Rybczynski, p. 36.

⁹² Mezei and Briganti, ‘Reading the House: A Literary Perspective’, p. 838.

⁹³ Cited in Colby, *Yesterday’s Women: Domestic Realism in the English Novel*, p. 30.

⁹⁴ Colby, p. 32.

Colby goes on to describe the gradual rise of ‘domestic realism’ and how by the 1840s, with male writers such as Dickens, Thackeray and Bulwer, turning to writing about ‘domestic subjects’, the domestic novel had ‘reached its full stature as literature’.⁹⁵ However, she suggests that ‘domestic literature as the early Victorians practiced it’⁹⁶ became redundant by the mid twentieth century, post World War Two and in the light of ‘disruptive influences of modern technology, urbanisation, and scientific materialism’.⁹⁷ She writes that ‘painters began to see broken images through reflected light, and novelists of artistic integrity, still concerned with ‘truth’ could no longer find their subjects in the enclosed unit of the home, the family, or the small community.’⁹⁸ Whilst not denying or condemning the rise of postmodern, experimental novels in which writers attempted to grapple with the huge trauma of war and changes in technology and society, I take issue with the idea that considerations of home and family had become redundant. As discussed in chapter two, home is inherently political, ‘one of the least appreciated yet single most important arenas of political action.’⁹⁹ To suggest that the domestic realm stopped being relevant to writers with ‘artistic integrity’ is to misunderstand the very nature of home and how it works as a microcosm of, indeed a mirror to, the larger, global, political world.

I do, however, agree that the perception – of publishers, critics, and possibly, or possibly not, readers – is that domestic fiction – at least that written by women (that by men is still often seen as profound and universal, and is rarely called ‘domestic’) – is an apolitical, quiet, marginal form of literature. It is as though we have returned to where Colby begins her story of domestic fiction in the mid to late eighteenth century. As Kirsty Gunn writes: ‘it’s too quiet, this life at home.’¹⁰⁰ Gunn launches a plea for more novels which take ‘life at home as a subject entire’¹⁰¹:

what goes on behind the closed doors of domestic life, the housework and child rearing, does not have a voice economically or politically; we should therefore hardly be

⁹⁵ Colby, p. 32.

⁹⁶ Colby, p. 40.

⁹⁷ Colby, p. 259.

⁹⁸ Colby, p. 40.

⁹⁹ Buchli, Clarke, and Upton, p. 3.

¹⁰⁰ Gunn, *44 Things: A Year of Life at Home*, p. 73.

¹⁰¹ Gunn, p. 81.

surprised that it does not make itself any more publicly known in the grand halls that contain ‘big novels’.

And yet, for many of us, this is where we live [...] Can we not transform that reality into a way of seeing instead of denying its existence? Recognise that this life, the life at home, may be as wondrous as the grand romance or tumbling narrative.¹⁰²

Perhaps this might be set to change however. Writing this as the UK, and indeed most of the world, is in lockdown during the Covid-19 crisis, we are at a point in history when our experience of home and our understanding of our relationship with home has been suddenly and dramatically intensified. This is ‘where we live’, but now it is also where the majority of us are being asked to work, provide childcare, and only leave for essential reasons. Lockdown has thrown into acute relief the inequalities in housing and social economic circumstances across the globe; and it has revealed just how much home is interconnected with the global and the political.

Most conversations about home during the Covid-19 crisis have aligned home with housing, rather than understanding it as something much broader and encompassing. Similarly, Colby and Gunn both align the term domestic fiction very closely with the physical space of the house. In the light of contemporary debate about home as a politically engaged process that stretches far beyond any set of walls and a roof, I wonder if we might develop a more expansive and inclusionary idea of the domestic novel; one that explores and investigates how and why and where we search for a sense of home; one that recognises how much home and the domestic is imbued with, and itself affects, the wider political environment.

The novel as a home

Home is a rich, political, dramatic subject for the novelist to explore, perhaps now more than ever. But might we also consider the novel, as a form, to be in itself a home?

¹⁰² Gunn, pp. 35–36.

The metaphor of the novel as a *house* has been used by writers such as Henry James, Akiko Busch and Mezei and Briganti. Busch writes about:

... the essential connection between arranging words and designing places. Both of these are about finding the logical order of things, about assembling these aggregates of experience in a way that makes sense. A room, like a page, offers us the space to do this. Sometimes that sense of order comes with the way words are arranged on the page. Other times it may come with the way objects have been assembled in a room. Both are ways of finding those arrangements with which we can live.

I am certain that the process of design, very much like the process of writing, is about finding this sense of order to things.¹⁰³

For Busch, text is spatial; the way the words are arranged on the page creates meaning and connection, ‘arrangements with which we can live’. This can seem more immediately pertinent to poetry than the novel; poems are inherently spatial, with their line breaks and spacing, with all that white space around the words; indeed the word stanza comes from the Italian *stanza*, meaning room. Some novelists engage more than others with the spatiality of the novel – Jonathan Safran Foer with *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Zadie Smith with *N-W*, to name just two – but even the most conventional novel is a space, with its margins, its paragraphs, its chapters, its title pages and covers.

For James, the metaphor of the house is broader and more fantastical. The house of fiction is a (pretty unrecognisable) house encompassing all fiction, this ‘vast front[ed]’ house has millions of windows, both existing and potential. The windows are works of literature, each looking out at the ‘human scene’ in its own unique way, determined by the individual consciousness of the artist standing at each window.¹⁰⁴ James Wood picks up on the analogy and suggests that ‘The house of fiction has many windows, but only two or three doors’, those doors being first, second or third person narration.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Busch, *Geography of Home: Writings on Where We Live*, p. 25.

¹⁰⁴ James, ‘Preface to “The Portrait Of A Lady”’, p. 46.

¹⁰⁵ Wood, *How Fiction Works*, p. 5.

There are other writers who have developed this metaphor of the text as (domestic) space. Alice Munro, on the act of reading:

A story is not like a road to follow ... it's more like a house. You go inside and stay there for a while, wandering back and forth and settling where you like and discovering how the room and corridors relate to each other, how the world outside is altered by being viewed from these windows. And you, the visitor, the reader are altered as well by being in this enclosed space, whether it is ample and easy or full of crooked turns, or sparsely or opulently furnished. You can go back again and again, and the house, the story always contains more than you saw the last time. It also has a sturdy sense of itself of being built out of its own necessity, not just to shelter or beguile you.¹⁰⁶

This is an image echoed by the writer, Andrew Cowan, talking about his writing practice: 'If you create a scene it's a bit like you create a room and the reader can enter it, imaginatively sit down, relax, take in what's going on.'¹⁰⁷

As writers, we are making spaces for the reader to enter, to inhabit, to explore, to leave again. Laura Tanner, writing about Marilynne Robinson's novel *Home*, talks about the 'literary text function[ing] both as a theoretical platform for representation and as a lived space.'¹⁰⁸ Her interest is in the gendered politics of the novel and the way the narrative works to unsettle the reader, to make them uncomfortable and 'expose the unworkable fixtures of domestic life and the forced conventions of narrative upon which that story depends.'¹⁰⁹ *Home* explores domesticity and discomfort in both its content and its form, the one echoing and intensifying the other. The experience of reading becomes both an emotional and a physical one.

Gaston Bachelard has written extensively on the relationship between writing and space. He emphasises the verticality of the house as a dreamed space – the clarity and creativity of the

¹⁰⁶ Munro, 'Alice Munro in Her Own Words'.

¹⁰⁷ Cited in Anderson and Neale, *Writing Fiction*, pp. 180–81.

¹⁰⁸ Tanner, 'Uncomfortable Furniture: Inhabiting Domestic and Narrative Space in Marilynne Robinson's *Home*', p. 36.

¹⁰⁹ Tanner, p. 37.

attic and the subconsciousness of the cellar – and suggests that we might ‘write a room’ and ‘read a house’.¹¹⁰ His idea of home is problematically ‘safe’ and overly romanticised. However, at one point in his *Poetics of Space* he writes about ‘weightless houses,’¹¹¹ ‘immense dwellings the walls of which are on vacation,’¹¹² the idea of a house that ‘breathes’, that is open: ‘A house that is as dynamic as this allows the poet to inhabit the universe. Or, to put it differently, the universe comes to inhabit his house.’¹¹³ This aligns with Tyler’s ‘permeable walls’;¹¹⁴ a more open, fluid sense of the house that feels closer to the idea of home as a ‘spatial imaginary’,¹¹⁵ something spatially anchored but neither fixed nor stable.

The idea of the novel as house is a dynamic and productive metaphor: the page is a room, the words are arranged as furniture and objects are, there are ways of entering and exiting. I am fascinated by these ideas about the spatial nature of the novel, but I am also keen to push the idea of the novel as house towards the idea of the novel as home: not simply a physical site but a continual process of making (or, indeed, settling) by both writer and reader.

Mezei and Briganti do begin to consider the relationship between the novel and the home, though they conflate home and house, focusing on home as solely a physical space.

Our imagination, our consciousness, needs to locate itself in a particular space, to find a home, to articulate its homelessness, its longing for home, its sickness for home (nostalgia). Thus, novels *and* houses furnish a dwelling place – a spatial construct – that invites the exploration and expression of private and intimate relations and thoughts.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ Bachelard and Jolas, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 14.

¹¹¹ Bachelard and Jolas, p. 54.

¹¹² Bachelard and Jolas, p. 52.

¹¹³ Bachelard and Jolas, p. 51.

¹¹⁴ Stout, p. 114.

¹¹⁵ Blunt and Dowling, p. 2.

¹¹⁶ Mezei and Briganti, p. 839.

For them, the novel and the home or the house is an interior space, intimately linked to our own interiors, our psychologies and identities. This ‘exploration and expression’ though, does feel more akin to the idea of home as a process, something that is created through relationships, stories, the imagination.

When the reader picks up a novel and starts to read, they create their own worlds, their own interpretations, their own routes through the text. As Eric Bulson argues, readers don’t simply consume the space made by the novel they also ‘*produce* space’ through the act of reading.¹¹⁷ And Michel de Certeau compares the walker walking the city to the reader navigating the text:

the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers. In the same way, an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text.¹¹⁸

The novel is a ‘lived space’ and the reader both produces and inhabits that space; an intimate experience that can be deeply political.

So the novel might be a home rather than (or as well as) a house: it is something we have to make, and make again, and make again, it is something that shifts and changes according to the people who come into its space, it is something in which we (both writer and reader) seek order, stasis and comfort, and it both satisfies and eludes those desires.

However, to really interrogate the idea of home as a process in relation to the novel, perhaps we need to turn from the novel as a form to the practice of writing itself, and consider how this might be understood as an act of home-making.

Writing as home-making

¹¹⁷ Bulson, *Novels, Maps, Modernity: The Spatial Imagination 1850-2000*, p. 20.

¹¹⁸ de Certeau, p. 117.

George Lukacs writes that ‘The form of the novel is, like no other one, an expression of transcendental homelessness.’¹¹⁹ It is a theme picked up by Andrew Gurr: ‘In varying degree, the normal role of the modern creative writer is to be an exile.’¹²⁰ And Mary Morris writes: ‘Goethe once wrote that all writers are homesick, that all writers are really searching for home. Being a writer is being on a constant search for where you belong.’¹²¹ The idea of the writer as a misfit, without an emotional home, is perhaps a little too romanticised for my liking. However, this idea of homesickness or homelessness chimes with my earlier discussion about loss and nostalgia as a driver for narrative. And it approaches the idea of home as something broader and more emotional than just a physical house, opening up the possibility of writing itself being a means of home-making – a mobile, transitory, negotiated space and process; Anne Tyler’s ‘long trip’.¹²²

Andre Aciman in his introduction to *Letters of Transit* – a collection of writing by people in exile – describes how each writer in the collection ‘uses the written word as a way of fashioning a new home elsewhere.’¹²³ It is an idea returned to again and again in *A Place Called Home* – an anthology of essays by women writers writing about home. Carole Maso writes: ‘I who live everywhere and nowhere have built a home of language. [...] All along I have found it necessary to live with a home that can be conjured within.’¹²⁴ And Sylvia Watanabe muses that: ‘perhaps too, home can be a place on a page, made out of words.’¹²⁵ By writing we are making spaces – physically on the page, emotionally and intellectually in our minds and in the minds of our readers, we are creating one of Berger’s ‘mobile, symbolic habitat[s].’¹²⁶

Kathryn Harrison echoes this idea of a home made from words: ‘It was in school that I began to create another home – abstract and lacking in material dimension but utterly manipulatable by me – on the page.’ But she is also aware that a home does not always equal freedom: ‘Must I remain vigilant to make sure that what I’ve built inside myself continues to be

¹¹⁹ Cited in Neubauer, ‘Bakhtin versus Lukács: Inscriptions of Homelessness in Theories of the Novel’, p. 531.

¹²⁰ Cited in Porteous and Smith, p. 58.

¹²¹ Morris, ‘Looking For Home’, p. 29.

¹²² Stout, p. 144.

¹²³ Aciman, p. 10.

¹²⁴ Maso, ‘The Shelter of The Alphabet: Home’, p. 182.

¹²⁵ Watanabe, ‘Knowing Your Place’, p. 234.

¹²⁶ Morley, p. 47.

a home and not a trap? Or is it safe to assume that if words can make a wall, they can also make a door, the passage out, or, for readers, in?’¹²⁷ Home, as she recognises, is permeable and changeable, a place of potential danger, which we might want to reach out from as well as stay within.

Writing a novel is a long, often lonely, process, but it is a process that offers succour and escape as well as pain and difficulty. Writing creates a space in which we can learn, grow, experiment, explore, and discover – all the things a home also (ideally) creates space for. Writing a novel involves a level of both physical withdrawal from, *and* emotional engagement with, the outside world. It forces us to delve deep into our interiors, our psyches. It is a temporary, negotiated, uncertain process, which demands that we do not fix it down too soon, do not try to force the words into a shape and a space they do not fit. As writers we often yearn for stability, for some kind of stasis, but instead we must embrace movement and change; we must sit with the contradictions and the complexities until the process leads us to a form that works, to an arrangement with which we can live, to a sense of home.

¹²⁷ Harrison, ‘Outside In’, p. 58.

Reflections and Refractions: a conclusion

The starting point for this commentary has been to consider what the novel – and *Jack and Bet* in particular – might offer to our understanding of the concept of home; and what, conversely, a consideration of home, in all its theoretical and lived complexity, might offer to our understanding of *Jack and Bet*, and to the novel in general.

I have called this final section reflections and refractions because I have been struck by how, throughout my exploration of this question, the ideas of the novel and of home have sometimes seemed to mirror each other and sometimes offered a new slant or lens through which to see the other.

What a consideration of the novel offers our understanding of home

Home is something we create and narrate, and so fiction and poetry are perhaps uniquely placed to both enrich those narrations and help us understand their construction and impact. Porteous and Smith would agree, suggesting that personal histories/stories of home ‘together with fictional accounts [...] would richly augment the study of the meaning of home’.¹²⁸ And as Lynne Pearce writes in her introduction to a collection of essays, which take works of fiction and poetry as ‘springboards’ for feminist considerations of home and belonging:

As several critics and theorists before me have noted, one of the reasons why fiction and poetry are so useful and important in this particular political context is that both ‘homes’ and ‘nations’ – despite being defined in very precise territorial terms – nevertheless exist, first and foremostly, as ‘acts of the imagination’¹²⁹

Fiction, and the novel in particular, has a powerful and pertinent role to play in understanding how we experience, imagine and understand home. Exploring the idea of home through the novel allows us – as demonstrated throughout this commentary – to interrogate the proliferation of theories of home through the novel’s particular form and practice.

¹²⁸ Porteous and Smith, p. 29.

¹²⁹ Pearce, p. 3.

The novel developed as a form with a unique ability to delve into the thoughts and interiority of its characters, and has been associated with the (English, middle/upper class) home at a time when the private (feminised) sphere of the home separated from the public, political (masculinised) sphere of work and public space. And yet novels which focus on the home also have the potential to be deeply political. They are spaces where home's position as political is played out intimately, both in terms of the novel's story and access to the interior lives and thoughts of its characters, and the intimacy of how the novel is experienced: often read at home, usually silently and alone. The novel offers a particularly rewarding lens through which to explore home because of this intimacy and the form's ability to simultaneously address political, domestic and global issues.

The novel offers more to the idea of home than just the content and thematic concerns of particular stories, however. The novel is a space in and of itself, and a lived space at that, one that is inhabited, and indeed co-created, by its readers, and as such offers an intriguing refraction of the way home is lived, made and experienced by those who inhabit it.

The writing of any novel is also a process, which has something to add to our understanding of home. It is a process which in many ways mirrors contemporary ideas of home: a complex, often fraught, series of departures and returns, of compromises and negotiations, of discomforts as well as pleasures. It is, indeed, another means by which we might make a home.

During the (ongoing as I write) Covid-19 crisis, we have perhaps all come to understand home as a political space. Of course, there are no novels yet, reflecting on the experience of the pandemic and how lockdown has changed our relationship with home. However, it has been noted that book sales surged in the early weeks of lockdown;¹³⁰ uptake of online writing courses and activities has increased¹³¹; and organisations such as the BBC have opened up specific opportunities for people creating narratives about isolation and lockdown.¹³² It seems that not only has Covid-19 thrown our national, and global, relationship with home into relief, the distancing and isolation that has come with our attempts to curb the pandemic have led people to

¹³⁰ Flood, 'Book Sales Surge as Self-Isolating Readers Stock up on "Bucket List" Novels'.

¹³¹ I spoke to staff at The Open University, Curtis Brown Creative and Write and Shine, all of whom reported increased uptake of online courses and said that they had increased and extended their offer since the outbreak began.

¹³² 'InterConnected'

turn to writing and reading to find alternative home spaces in these strange and troubling times, and in their sometimes strange and troubling physical homes.

Considering home through the prism of the novel, and writing more broadly, also invites us to pay particular attention to the language of home. To return to the quote from Porteous and Smith: ‘encouraged by bureaucratic thinking, dwellings are regarded as ‘shelter’ or ‘housing’. Encouraged by capitalist thinking, dwellings become commodities to be traded.’¹³³ The language we use about home matters, revealing our assumptions, our agendas, our politics. Home – as Covid-19 has clarified to many – is not created or experienced equally. We must pay attention then, to how it is described, how it is evoked, and to what end.

Paying particular attention to language also offers new ways to think about theories of home. Many scholars from geography and sociology have discussed home as ‘*both* a place/physical location *and* a set of feelings,’¹³⁴ as both a site and a practice. I would like to offer the idea of home as both a verb and a noun, as a way perhaps to deepen this understanding of the dual nature of home as both a place – an ‘object’ – and an active process.

Jack and Bet is a novel with ideas of home at its heart, and a consideration of this particular novel – and indeed the novels by Anne Tyler and Ann Patchett which I have explored in this commentary – allows us to recognise how a novel might engage with political ideas through an intimate, domestic lens. Throughout *Jack and Bet*, the reader is acutely aware of the destruction of the Heygate estate, formerly home to Jack and Bet, and thousands of others. Its destruction is ‘domicide’, the juggernaut of regeneration rendering people’s homes an inconvenience to be knocked down and reimaged for a different type of people. The novel asserts the estate’s value, not as ‘housing’ or ‘commodity’ but as home – with all the complexity that entails. In doing so it argues for the value of those who lived there, those excluded from the developer’s promise of a place where ‘everyone’ can ‘belong’. It offers a voice to those people who have been ‘decanted’ (a word that offers another reason to pay heed to the language of home and indeed regeneration); people, like Jack, who recognise that ‘there was nothing people like them could do in the face of all that money’ (7).

¹³³ Porteous and Smith, p. 107.

¹³⁴ Blunt and Dowling, p. 22.

Jack and Bet also offers a way to think through the idea that our understanding and experience of home both encompasses and moves beyond the archetypal four walls, a roof and a closed door; both spatially and emotionally reaching into the wider world. Throughout the novel, we see how Jack engages with the rapidly changing urban space of Elephant and Castle through his daily ‘pilgrimage’ (198) to the shopping centre. Through this daily walk (one of Berger’s ‘patterns of behaviour’¹³⁵) he is creating and maintaining his sense of home in the city he lives in. As Moore writes in his consideration of Berger's ideas: ‘To find a new centre and preserve their identity, city dwellers have to resort to actions rather than physical form’; and citing Berger: ‘The displaced preserve their identity and improvise a shelter. Built of what? Of habits, I think, of the raw material of repetition, turned into a shelter’.¹³⁶ Marinela too, creates a home, and a sense of connection, through her photography, using it as a way of knowing, of understanding and connecting to her environment. Perhaps above all, though, the novel explores how our sense of home might rest with specific people and relationships, rather than places or actions. The most profound realization within the novel is Bet’s – in many ways too late – understanding that Jack is, in fact, her home, more than any flat or city street.

What a consideration of home offers our understanding of the novel

Any interdisciplinary enterprise – in this case bringing theories from geography, anthropology and urban studies together with literature and creative writing – should have the ambition that both (or all) disciplines will impact on each other, rather than the understandings and insights happening in one direction. As Jane Rendell writes, differentiating between multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary work:

Multidisciplinary research tends to describe a way of working where a number of disciplines are present, but maintain their own distinct identities and ways of doing things; whereas in interdisciplinary research individuals operate at the edge and in between disciplines and in so doing question the ways in which they usually work.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Cited in Moore, p. 55.

¹³⁶ Moore, p. 54.

¹³⁷ Rendell, ‘Architectural Research and Disciplinarity’, p. 145

Thinking about the novel through theories of home offers some key shifts in thinking. First, the idea of home as being both site and practice encourages us to apply this thinking to the novel itself. So we might begin to consider the novel as both a site, a space, an object, and as a practice, encompassing both writing and reading.

The novel has dimensions, edges, margins, chapter divisions. It is something we can pick up and carry around. It is spatial. As George Perec states in *Species of Spaces*:

Before, there was nothing, or almost nothing; afterwards, there isn't much, a few signs, but which are enough for there to be a top and a bottom, a beginning and an end, a right and a left, a recto and a verso.¹³⁸

A handful of writers, such as Eric Bulson, Jane Rendell, and Mezei and Briganti,¹³⁹ have written about the spatiality of writing – sometimes tackling the novel, sometimes writing more generally – but it is a sphere of criticism that remains relatively underdeveloped.

Not just a site, but also a practice; as Laura Tanner, writing in relation to Marilynne Robinson's *Home*, says, the novel is a 'lived space', one occupied and co-created by its readers. Reading produces the space of the text, just as homes are produced and created by those who inhabit them.

The idea of practice can be applied to both the reading and the writing of the novel. The correlations between writing and home-making are rich and numerous: both hold within them a tension between stasis and movement, between comfort and discomfort, between safety and danger. Writing can create an alternative home, at least for a while, for those who practice it – a home for the imagination, Rubenstein's 'emotional space',¹⁴⁰ Blunt and Dowling's 'spatial imaginary'.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Perec, 'Species of Spaces', p. 10.

¹³⁹ Bulson; Mezei and Briganti; Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism*.

¹⁴⁰ Rubenstein, p. 1.

¹⁴¹ Blunt and Dowling, p. 2.

The second shift offered by this bringing together of the novel and theories of home is the potential development of a more expansive concept of the domestic novel, and a further development of the relationship between the novel and the house.

The metaphor of the novel as a house has been explored by writers such as Alice Munro, who suggests that a story is like the ‘enclosed space’ of a house, which a reader can walk around;¹⁴² Jane Rendell, who cites S. Germain: ‘She entered the pages of the book as a vagrant steals into an empty house, or a deserted garden’;¹⁴³ and Henry James with his house of fiction. However, the idea of home as not just the physical site of the abode, but something broader and more expansive, incorporating actions as well as spaces allows us to further develop this idea of novel as house into that of novel as home – a more nuanced and perhaps richer connection that incorporates the complexities of home and understands it as something created and recreated over time. Narrated. Negotiated. Imagined. Made. Anchored but not fixed.

How we understand and represent home is political. Broadening and deepening our idea of the domestic novel – recognising it as a form and practice that can bring together the intimacy of the personal and the private with larger political and global concerns – seems more pertinent and pressing than ever in the light of the Covid-19 crisis. It also challenges the long-standing dismissive attitude to the domestic novel, one that sees it as sited in the realm of women and therefore less worthy of critical attention. I have not delved deeply into the gendered aspect of the home in this commentary, but I write as a woman and with an awareness of the gender bias in publishing, reviewing and prize-giving in the UK and beyond. Arguing for the value of writing by women that deals directly with ideas of home is close to my heart.

I want to end with a consideration of how an engagement with theories of home has impacted and changed my understanding of my own writing practice, and my thesis novel, *Jack and Bet*.

Considering *Jack and Bet* in relation to theories of home has heightened my understanding of my own relationship with home, and how that enriches and informs my writing. It is a theme that has permeated my previous novels and I am sure will continue to develop in my future writing. Examining my relationship to lost homes – specifically the first home I bought and refurbished – and to my lived experience of the tension between wanting to leave home and

¹⁴² Munro.

¹⁴³ Rendell, ‘Doing It, (Un)Doing It, (Over)Doing It Yourself: Rhetorics of Architectural Abuse’, p. 139.

wanting to stay, has been fruitful in understanding how home works within my writing. It is a way of exploring belonging and connection; it is a way of writing about place, which has people and their relationships, dreams and imaginations at its heart; it is a way of writing about grief and loss and yearning; it is a way of writing about identity and how we try to create and control it; it is a way of writing about regeneration and urban change.

I have realised that all the homes in *Jack and Bet* are temporary and contested, from the Islington flat with its immense monetary value and huge personal and emotional weight, through to Marinela's final rented flat, built on the footprint of the contested site of the Heygate estate – both a home and a historical travesty in terms of the local community and the wider development of London. Focussing on home has allowed me to root my exploration of love and betrayal in specific sites and think about how home is experienced differently by different people living in the same space. It has also allowed me to hold the contradictions that urban change and regeneration create in tension, and write about the political in a personal and intimate way. The recognition that a focus on home does not preclude a novel being political has been particularly helpful and heartening.

An expanded view of home, which argues that home is a broader and more inclusive concept than simply four walls and a roof, has clarified my thinking about the way I write about belonging; how I explore how we might make and feel at home within urban spaces; and how home can be found in people, relationships, actions and rituals as well as specific physical sites.

The relationship between loss and home, between longing and belonging is something I will continue to explore. I have been particularly intrigued by the idea of loss as a driver of narrative, how by telling stories we might be attempting to reclaim lost homes, and feel that this has scope for continued research.

Finally, it has been fruitful to consider my own writing process through the lens of home; considering the extent to which loss and my own relationship with home has informed my desire to write; and thinking about the writing experience itself – the comfort and discomfort of it, the uncertainty, the endless shifting space it creates. I have started to understand how writing a novel might itself make a dwelling place, for me, the writer – albeit a temporary and contested one, one that perhaps must also be left in order to continue to grow and develop as a writer.

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