

## The Abstraction of Home

Jo Langton

*It is the dynamism of the sonorous life itself which by engulfing and appropriating everything it finds in its path, fills the slice of space, or better, the slice of the world that it assigns itself by its movement, making it reverberate, breathing into it its own life.*

—Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

Drawing on my short experience as a volunteer in the Calais migrant camp, the Jungle, I have created a soundscape that explores the notion of the *abstraction of home* amongst displaced people.<sup>1</sup> I arrived at Calais when it was in a state of turmoil following the bulldozing of the southern part of the camp and the imminent bulldozing of the northern part which highlighted the ephemerality of the place.

I made several recordings of my time spent in and around the Calais camps and have taken excerpts from news clips. I have manipulated these electronically to create a sonic landscape that morphs into abstract textures, divorced from their original meaning and context, as a reflection on the way that displaced people's expectations of home are abstracted from the norms of their culture. I use these sound recordings to explore Gaston Bachelard's idea that sound has a dynamic life of its own and influences everything in the space around it (Bachelard xvii). Moving between these part-representational, part-abstract textures, listeners are invited to imagine their own narrative. It is a piece of musical sound in three movements that relate to cycles of transience in home-seeking: travel, arrival and forced departure.

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**Jo Langton** spends her life researching, recording and experimenting with sound and music. Having trained as a musician then sound engineer, she is interested in the point of convergence between music and sound technology. She has worked as a recording engineer for radio and music since 2000. She is also a composer/sound designer of experimental music and sound art and her work has been shown at the Museum of London, Tower Bridge exhibition centre, Tate Modern, and played on BBC Radio 3, Channel 4 and Resonance FM. She is currently researching a PhD on the work of electroacoustic experimental composers Beatriz Ferreyra, Eliane Radigue, Delia Derbyshire and Teresa Rampazzi, which focusses on their methods for creating new electronic sound material in the pre-digital analogue studios of the 1960s and early 1970s.

<sup>1</sup> listen to *Boat to Bulldozer: The Abstraction of Home* at [liminalities.net/16-2/home/home.mp3](http://liminalities.net/16-2/home/home.mp3)

The piece contemplates a new kind of space occupied in increasingly large numbers by migrant communities. Mass movement on this scale is a relatively new phenomenon. The many lists of space types highlighted by Henri Lefebvre (8) include topological, transformational, configured, abstract, geographical, economic, political, Euclidean and non-Euclidean spaces - but not transient space. For Lefebvre, space exists only in relation to whatever goes on within it. He explains,

When we evoke space, we must immediately indicate what occupies that space and how it does so... Space considered in isolation is an empty abstraction; likewise energy and time'(12).

The language we use to discuss space tends to refer to social activities. Lefebvre observes that social facilities for leisure, work, public transport are all referred to in terms of the space they occupy (8). These facilities define the history and culture of a place, along with its buildings and physical infrastructure. According to Lefebvre, 'Peasant houses and villages speak' (165). Yet the temporary nature of everything in the Calais Jungle, the periodic destruction of tent-homes, schools, meeting places leaving no trace, and the absence of historical, cultural artefacts leads to the abstraction of home.

Where Marxian theories represent social space as a dialectic between forces of production (and the division of labour) and social relations of production, (Claval 87-90), domestic space is more nuanced and personal. Bachelard contrasts the physical construction of measurable angles and boundaries with the harder to measure concept of home as lived experience. He states, 'A house is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space' (Bachelard 48).

My sound piece invites the listener to reflect upon the instant home-making skills of transient people compared with the privilege of domestic permanence and safety. It draws on Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* in which he explores the notion of home as a topophilic experience, an emotional relationship between people and place (151). Bachelard foregrounds home as a centre of refuge against the elements, of human energy and social behaviour. The home provides a space for refuge and repose, in which to imagine, to formulate and reflect upon one's ideas and to oneirism, which is central to human being (Bachelard 13, 25, 226). Principles of stasis, safety, containment and protection are as essential to nomadic peoples as a fortified castle is to wealthy settled people, yet compromised for the Calais migrants. The home as refuge becomes a distant and abstract concept for refugees.

The naming of the Calais 'Jungle' corroborates the relationship of both residents and volunteers to the space around them. Anne Buttimer (1-33) explores themes of territorialisation, association and the importance to human behaviour of the naming of a place. Jessica Reinisch (520) shows that, once named, a place develops a sense of community that serves to relieve hardship in poor physical conditions and inspires emotional connection to a place. Naming a place enhances

a sense of belonging and a collective desire to defend. Reinisch shows that this strength drawn from group identification with the name of a place can also be perceived as threatening to neighbouring communities leading to conflict.

I bring this sense of community into the sound piece through recordings of the sounds of human interaction, in speech, play or activity. David Harvey outlined a kind of socialist urban space that acknowledges a tripartite hierarchy of social space based on need, which is non-constant and transforms in relation to social change; the common good, which notes the effect of favouring one territory over another in resource distribution; and merit, dependent on immediate needs through disaster or tragedy (Harvey 107). Harvey's perspectives of need, the common good and merit become confused and undermined by pressures particular to transient communities of conflicting states of vulnerability and aggression, victimisation and violence. Harvey observes that efficiency in the Marxian context of a capitalist urban environment depends on restriction of movement within a space, where social motivation and co-operation is centred around a common means of production (Harvey 97). This is not the case in a refugee camp such as Calais, where the opportunities for collective productivity are minimised and therefore it exists on the periphery of the capitalist model. Harvey also shows that where social justice is compromised for efficiency, the system breaks down and leads to inefficiency through anti-social behaviour. In Calais, the perceived needs for efficiency and the common good of the city compromise social justice for those living at the periphery in the refugee camp.

My soundscape *Boat to Bulldozer: The Abstraction of Home* explores a transient space with flexible boundaries occupied by people on the move. Even where physical boundaries are imposed to temporarily define a space such as a refugee camp, it is occupied by people who, on the one hand need to formulate certain systems for basic needs and social structures for survival and on the other hand share a common need not to belong to it, coming from one place in search of another on a temporarily-thwarted journey to somewhere else. The established boundaries of space and time are compromised in this situation of the *abstraction of home*.

The idea of *abstraction of home* is in part inspired by E.C. Relph (618) who explores notions of *insiderness* and *outsiderness*, where the experience of being inside a home or community tends to lead to feeling safe rather than threatened, enclosed rather than exposed and at ease rather than stressed (Seaman and Sowers 45). In contrast, being on the outside or periphery of a place leads to feelings of separateness, alienation, marginalisation, defensiveness, a lived experience of being divided from the rest of the world and an unhealthy homesickness.

Using sound as core material, I explore Relph's ideas of *insiderness* and *outsiderness* as well as his notions of *Place* and *Placelessness* in relation to the internal/external properties of the component parts of complex sounds. I also draw upon theories of early composers of experimental electronic music and sound art. All sounds have both intrinsic and extrinsic spatial qualities where intrinsic relates to a

sound's internal composition, its spectral and temporal space, and extrinsic relates to its audible diffusion in an environment. Composer Beatriz Ferreyra shows that a recorded sound always brings with it its inherent sense of place from the original reverberant space around it and it is the composer's challenge to manipulate and transform the sound into something new, abstracted from its original meaning (Ferreyra 2012, 103-111). In 1968 Ferreyra contributed to early research into sound recording for electronic music and the musical properties of any recorded sound. Her topological research, *objets construits*, (*constructed objects* 1968; published in-house at GRM studios, Paris, Ferreyra's own copy) treats sounds as temporal spatial objects. It analyses the individual inner components of a complex sound object and the way they interrelate within a perceived whole sound. She explores the effects of imposing technological processes upon a sound, to transform it by filtering out or boosting certain frequencies within a complex or varying sound, by reversing, dissecting or changing the intensity of each component to reveal new sounds (Ferreyra 2011, 136-139). I have treated the recordings of the boat, footsteps, spoken words, shouts, cries and the final bulldozer recording, according to Ferreyra's analysis of sounds and her theories concerning *objets construits*.

Using recorded snippets of conversation about the refugee crisis, I explore how language and communication through words as well as other vocal sounds drives the creation of place and the establishment of community. Through recordings of children playing and from a group of Syrian women talking in Arabic about their men having left them to pursue 'jihad', I find that words tend to have an emotional meaning and a musicality which is conveyed in their sound, regardless of whether the listener understands the language they are spoken in. The impact of humanity on place, and the need for language in order for people to work together to build and maintain notions of home is addressed by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan. He states,

Human presence, feelings and communication add to the warmth and aliveness of a place... or drain it. ... Homes are 'cold' without people and come alive with them. (684).

One of the recorded sounds is that of a young girl playing football in a family group, as she tilts her head back and shouts to the wind with an almost feral screeching joy. This sound exemplifies a dialectic of emotional disturbance filtering through the joyful act of play, evident in a single recorded sound as one person's expression of the Calais refugee camp experience.

These are some of my observations during the act of recording and listening whilst at the Calais Jungle refugee camp. This work is both incomplete and already out of date because of the transient nature of its content and because the characters in my recordings have been evicted and dispersed, almost as soon as they formed a community at Calais. It is an on-going project that aims to reflect on the relevance of past theories to the state of flux of abstracted social space and

to contribute to the emerging conversation about the ever-changing landscape of all aspects of homelessness.

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