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Domestic genealogies: how people relate to those who once lived in their homes.

Caron Lipman and Catherine Nash

Abstract:

This paper explores the how people consider their relationships to the previous inhabitants of their homes. While homes are conventionally imagined in terms of an ideal of exclusive ownership and residence, privacy and familial intimacy, the sense of the home as a shared with strangers who once lived there often has to be negotiated in the everyday senses of home. Drawing on qualitative case studies undertaken in England with those whose interest in the past of their home ranged from active research to more everyday reflections, this paper explores the varied ways in which people reflect on and experience pre-inhabitation in terms of senses of dwelling, selfhood and relatedness to those who once lived in their homes. Our engagement with the practices of making relations with distance and recent residents, imaginatively and through more direct social interactions, is framed by a combined focus on domestic dwelling and geographies of relatedness. We argue that understandings of home and home making can be enriched through a focus the genealogical imaginaries and idioms that are mobilised and negotiated in how people define themselves and make home relationally.

Key words: Home, domestic genealogies, making relations, house histories, dwelling

When the records of the 1901 census of the United Kingdom became available online in January 2002 the website of the Public Record Office crashed in response to 1.2 million hits per hour and had to be withdrawn for months. By 2009 extra servers were in place to deal with the intense interest in the first digital release of the 1911 census records.[1] Much of this interest is genealogical, reflecting the popularity of family history. Yet, many of those accessing the records were also doing so to find out about the former occupants of their homes. This interest in house histories has recently become a distinctive strand of wider popular historical practice, undertaken alongside, or independently of, local, community or family history research. In the UK this is reflected in and stimulated by television

programmes such as *The House Detectives* and *A House Through Time* and served by published guides and professional house historians.[2] This is also a significant dimension of what the American Association for State and Local History call 'History Nearby'.[3] Guides for current occupants on researching the history of their home advise on how to undertake this systematically through documentary sources. Yet for many, the question of who once lived in their home may be more a matter of curiosity, speculation and imagination rather than sustained research; an interest in and sense of the past may not be tied to any active pursuit of more empirical details beyond what is, perhaps sketchily, known.

This paper explores how people reflect on and experience their homes as places that were once home to previous residents in terms of senses of dwelling and relatedness to past inhabitants. In the UK most people live in homes in which at least one other person has lived before, as they are bought, sold or rented out over decades or centuries. We bring together our interests in the domestic home as a material and affective space of the unfamiliar and uncanny,[4] and genealogical imaginations and the practice of kinship,[5] to consider a significant but largely overlooked dimension of everyday domestic experience. In line with recent research on domestic restoration we consider the home as a site of historical awareness, investigation, and imagination.[6] In doing so, we extend scholarly engagement with public historical knowledge and practice, including local and family history, to the domestic home.[7] It is a place where the past is felt and explored.[8]

In their work on residential historic preservation, Jennifer Kitson and Kevin McHugh consider accounts of past residents as part of the varied ways in which people narrate and curate the 'pastness'[9] of their home. In this paper, we foreground the question of how people *relate* to their home's former occupants. This entails attending to the temporal dimensions of people's sense of connection to or difference from former residents, and addressing the idioms through which people articulate their sense of relatedness to those who lived in their homes in the past. People construct personal narratives about their residential histories in relational ways, with those they live with as well as non-resident family.[10] At the same time, as we explore here, people also construct senses of themselves and their homes in relational ways through their home's story of past inhabitants. As we address here through our attention to the home as a material and locally embedded site, and develop more fully elsewhere, this is entangled with peoples' approaches to domestic objects.[11] Our particular focus here is on how ideas of familial relatedness, family trees, and lineage are mobilised in the ways people figure their relationship to former residents, as a significant dimension of

how homemaking is practiced in relation to lived, material and imagined pasts and futures. The first section of this paper outlines our analytical and methodological approach to exploring imaginative and practiced relations between current and former residents, before turning to address the themes of temporality and materiality through the experiences and perspectives of those who engage with the formerly inhabited nature of their homes.

Domestic genealogies

Historical research focused on individual houses in popular, fictional and increasingly academic writing and museum culture has recently been framed through a biographical model. The history of a locality and wider historical change is explored and vividly conveyed through the lives of the sequence of residents in one dwelling.[12] However, unlike house biographies in which the house is figured as the central and continuous character in its life story, many popular guides to researching one's own home play on the idea of a 'family tree' of previous inhabitants. One describes this process as 'tracing the genealogy of your home'.[13] Another suggests: 'In many respects, [house history research] is similar to tracing your family tree. Your home has a lineage and during its history it has been home to any number of families. You may own your home, but perhaps it would be more accurate to view yourself as having a time share in history'.[14] The lineage being referred to here is a site-specific sequence of residence rather than of conventional genealogical connections. Our focus here is on how people mobilise and negotiate this genealogical model of house histories, or what we call, domestic genealogies. This is not an effort to supplant the approach of house biographies, but to suggest that a focus on domestic genealogies can also offer a distinctive and fruitful way of engaging with questions about the nature and practice of home and relatedness.

Firstly, a focus on domestic genealogies foregrounds themes of compromised privacy, the limits of exclusivity and the experience of imaginative co-presence and co-habitation in domestic space. Unlike house biographies which reconstruct largely unrelated sequences of inhabitants, domestic genealogies engage with how people consider their relation to previous inhabitants in the process of 'constituting and performing selfhood' at and through home.[15] The culturally specific and traditional ideal of the home as a place of exclusive belonging, privacy, familial intimacy, and ownership does not reflect the diverse realities of domestic and other homes.[16] We seek to further extend understandings of the complex

nature and meaning of home by addressing how people negotiate this ideal through the relationalities of co-habitation between residents across time. Co-habitation might include experiences of ghostly others, where uncanny events remind inhabitants that the home has had, and continues to accumulate, other lives. [17] In such homes, uncanny events are often assumed to be caused by previous inhabitants maintaining a continuing sense of belonging, the home becoming a 'collection of spaces within which different agents coalesce, engage and accumulate … a cauldron of encounters' between current and former residents.[18] But, as we will explore here, the sense of previous dwellers does not depend on uncanny reminders of pre-habitation.

In the culture and economies of property ownership pre-habitation features as either problematic recent presence or as enriching heritage depending on the distance in time between current and previous inhabitants. In the UK, estate agents (realtors), mediate between buyers and sellers not only to maintain the legal formality of the process but also to prevent social contact complicating the emotional and practical process for both parties. More widely, making a place one's own is generally thought of as a process of more or less radically erasing the evidence of the most recent previous residents. This sense of the intrusiveness of the past is echoed in some academic accounts. Daniel Miller argues that people's sense of the problematic 'discrepancy between the longevity of homes and the relative transience of their occupants', means that 'feelings of alienation' arise 'between the occupants and both their homes and their possessions'.[19] Yet, knowledge of residents beyond the recent decades of households can also be figured as enhancing both the economic and personal value of a property. A link to someone 'out of the ordinary' or an interesting and untroubled story of former owners can be used to increase its market value. Similarly, in popular house history guides a sense of shared belonging with previous inhabitants is only ever rendered as a positive outcome of research and these connections between strangers are often made homely in genealogical terms.[20] Yet, these contrasting models of 'alienation' or 'enrichment' do not adequately capture the complex and varied ways in which people consider their relation to past residents. Both fail to differentiate between the recent and more distant pasts in considering how people imagine and relate to former occupants. This temporality is an important consideration. Former residents may be deceased; others are still living. While those no longer living can still be considered active agents in the making of relations, among the living and between the living and the dead, as

we will explore here, the agency of those alive inflects the making of relations in particular ways.[21]

Secondly, our focus on domestic genealogies includes our attention to people's reflections on questions of social and material difference between themselves and former residents. This entails considering both the conventional genealogical reckoning of close and distant relatedness and the ways in which those undertaking genealogical (and other forms) of popular historical research deal with the issue of differences between the social, cultural and economic contexts of their lives and those of people in the past. Conventional genealogies reckon closeness of relatedness in two ways. One is through the degree to which a genealogical connection is immediate (as in parent-child link or siblingship), proximate (as in aunts or cousins) or further removed (as in great uncles or second cousins and so on). The other is generational distance along a lineage through time (as in great-, great-great-grandparents). Both relational and temporal closeness define genealogical closeness in a conventional family tree. House genealogies share the temporal linearity of direct line relatedness since they are defined through a sequence of residents in a dwelling over time. However, they are intensely localised since they are defined through the dwelling in contrast to the potentially complex and extended geographies of a family tree. But just as family trees are schemas of genealogical relatedness that do not describe the practiced nature and quality of family relations, temporal closeness within a house genealogy, as we will show here, does not necessarily correlate with how contemporary residents consider their relationships to those who once lived in their homes.

Many other factors shape senses of affinity and difference. In practice both conventional genealogy and research on former occupants is often a process of imagining, exploring and negotiating what is different in terms of the context of people's lives including social and cultural norms.[22] Recent studies of the way people consider past lives suggest a 'paradoxical' desire to both experience them as different and to assume similarities.[23] Rather than viewing this as paradoxical we see people's considerations of difference and similarity as integral to the on-going making of relational selves through a range of emotional responses to those who preceded them in their home. Fennella Cannell has recently challenged the idea that popular genealogy is a solipsistic practice and instead explored the 'moral possibilities' of the democratized genealogy of the twentieth century as a form of care of and tribute to the 'ordinary' dead.[24] Here we consider domestic genealogy as similarly a

practice and form of knowledge in which the self is made in relation to others and to the past.

Thirdly, exploring house histories as domestic genealogies allows us to consider pre-given connections in a lineage defined through a sequence of dwelling in terms of practices of making relations. Conventional genealogy is shaped by what Marilyn Strathern describes as a 'Euro-American' culture of giving positive value to connections, including social connections.[25] The figuring of house histories is similarly based on a broadly shared value system in which having a connection to someone, in this case a former resident through a domestic lineage, has intrinsic value. A connection implies some shared basis for affinity whether that is imagined genealogically or, in this case, through shared experience of living in the same space, but also has to be made to matter. Conventional genealogy can be understood not just as a record of genealogical relations but as a practice through which relations are made within and beyond the family. Kinship is both given and made in both conventional and domestic genealogies.[26] One key practice of defining, affirming and differentiating family and wider relations is that of inheritance: the bequeathing of capital, property and objects after death to the living. Homes often contain objects that are inadvertently inherited – things left behind by living as well as deceased former residents – sometimes generously with the new occupants in mind, sometimes to maintain a sense of control over the home's future, or as part of the process of leaving it behind.[27] This process substantiates relations of different kinds as recipients negotiate the obligations of inheritance.[28] A focus on domestic genealogies thus open up questions of what is understood to be the basis of meaningful social relations between current and former residents and how ideas of inheritance and obligation, exclusivity and inclusiveness shape senses of home.

We use this analytical framework to explore qualitative interview material from 35 self-selected household case studies gathered to address the ways in which people are conscious of, imagine, or seek out knowledge of their home's pasts in the UK context. Since we were interested in the everyday ways in which a consciousness of the past might be part of people's experiences of their homes, we did not exclusively target those who were undertaking concerted house history projects. A few of our participants could be considered 'enthusiasts' but most engaged with the histories of their homes in a range of ways that were part of their senses of their home even if not necessarily linked to active research.[29] A central method for recruiting participants was to display printed postcards on public notice boards,

mainly in cafes, community centres, supermarkets, libraries, archives and local history centres across Greater London and England. This approach supplemented more traditional methods of recruitment (including a dedicated website, press releases, workshops and public talks) and had been used successfully in recruitment for a previous project.[30] It offered the benefit of opening up possibilities for engaging with a wide range of people – particularly useful as the project was not designed to target a particular interest or identity group. The criteria was simply for participants to have an interest in their home's history, however they interpreted this, alongside a willingness and ability to allow us access to their homes for interviews and guided tours. [31] The recruitment notice was thus designed to have broad appeal. It asked: 'Have you ever wondered about the history of your home? Who lived there before you? Or the way the past has left its imprint in different ways?'

This recruitment technique required a degree of emotional stamina, as responses were not guaranteed and took time to emerge despite the time and effort involved, and we were continuously concerned about what constituted thorough coverage in terms, for example, of numbers of notices, their geographical range, and how they might best reach a diversity of people in order to capture a variety of experiences. Although the aim was not to represent all possible experiences, care was taken to reach as far as possible, including seeking out community centres for particular ethnic and cultural groups, and ensuring coverage in areas with different socio-economic profiles and degrees of diversity. Despite these efforts, the participants were mostly white British people but ranged in terms of age, gender, class, experience and relationship to 'home'. A few participants who had not lived in England for very long reflected on differences in attitudes towards the past and homemaking practices in their countries of origin, but the majority of participants had lived in their homes for some years (although all had a sense of coming from – and sometimes having a stronger attachment to – elsewhere). The case studies also represented a range of tenures, house types, and locations. Two thirds of participants were home owners and a third social or private tenants. Most homes were located in urban or suburban neighbourhoods, with a few in small market towns, villages and one in a remote rural hamlet. The age of homes ranged from over 300 years old to a 1980s council apartment. For some, the broader local neighbourhood became important to understand the home's historical context, but for most the focus was on the domestic interior.

In what follows we consider people's reflections on living in previously inhabited homes and their perspectives on previous inhabitants. We examine how intimate and

embodied experiences and relationships at times interweave with broader socio-economic understandings of change, ideas of similarity and difference, and interactions with the materiality of the home itself. The first section focuses on people's engagements with earlier previous inhabitants and the second turns to those with more recent residents.

Earlier residents: shared domesticity and negotiating difference

A repeated motif of participants' engagements with the earlier social histories of their homes concerns an interest in imagining the past material spaces of the domestic interior, especially in relation to how previous lives were lived and the embodied practices of homemaking. Feelings of relatedness tend to be felt during the familiar, mundane practices of home life, focusing on an imagined sharing of repeated domestic routines. Through these, participants imaginatively reconstruct the domestic past – the tantalising connections between both 'us and them' and 'now and then' momentarily stripping away (and thereby also reinforcing) senses of otherness. One participant, Christine, described her sense of the original owners, who she knew had lived in her north London suburban house, built in 1938, for over 30 years:

> In the winter, I come downstairs and make a cup of tea, take it back up upstairs for us to have in bed. And when I walk up the stairs, and it's dark, there's a very… I have this sense that – it would almost certainly be the woman of the house – she probably did the same in the mornings … I just have this feeling that she was doing the same. And I've had that sense, you know, for a long time. But it doesn't happen in the summer [laughs]. It's something about the dark.

Christine's sense of the woman is so vivid that it is *as if* she is actually walking up and down the stairs, and like a ghost, the presence is only felt in the dark, during the winter months. The darkness triggers her imagination, conjuring the ordinary act – making tea to take back up to bed – into an uncanny repetition. The story is about a particular resident, but it is embodied as an act, not as a presence. The imagined woman is the walker of the stairs, the carrier of the tea who stands for the embodied acts of domestic intimacy.

For some, the experience of home conjures a broader sense of linear reiterations of lives over time. Peggy in south London, for example, reflected on the slow, ever-moving 'conveyor belt' of families who had lived in her home:

> Those layers of experiences that must have happened – you know. Because the schools here are old schools … The people who lived here all had families and brought up their children … It's like a little conveyor belt almost, but like a really slow conveyer belt isn't it? Of people. You do all your things, bring up your family, and someone else is going to come in this house in the future and bring up their family.

This sense of repetition over time is harnessed to the 'small details' of the home and homemaking practices. Peter, living in a London suburb, described how:

> It's about that ordinariness and mundanity and about the small details about domesticity which is just fascinating in a house like this … you know, the mirror images of people's lives that were here … What were they doing at almost the same time?

Here, the imagined scenarios of previous lives in the home are triggered in particular by contact with permanent or original features – the banisters up to the first floor, a brass door knob on the back door. These enhance a sense of past presence, becoming an anchor for the imagination. It is through finding, seeing, touching and photographing the older elements of the home – where these survive – that inhabitants seek connection with earlier residents, and this sense of sharing space triggers broader speculations about the similarities and differences of past lives in relation, for example, to degrees of cleanliness and comfort, economic differences, changes in technologies, fashion, and local demographics.

In some homes, people pointed to the configuration of their bedroom's doors, windows and walls, speculating that there was only one place for the bed and surmising that inhabitants would always have slept in the same location and orientation in the room. One woman found useful confirmation of this when a photograph surfaced showing a former resident, an Edwardian woman sitting up in bed, reading a book. The bed was positioned in the same space as her own bed, next to the door; the woman, as she discovered, had spent most of her later years in bed with an unspecified illness, receiving visitors in the room.

Thus the resonance of lives lived in the same space become patterns of daily life filtered through the particularity of repeated moments. For Peter in south London, imagined domestic activities happening at 'almost the same time' interweave everyday events with those of national significance:

> So what would they have been doing on a – summer's day? Would they have enjoyed the garden, or not enjoy the garden? You know. Who planted the trees? There are quite a few old trees in there. So, no, they are very much part of the house … What were they doing when the bombs dropped? What were they doing, you know … of an evening? Would they go down the local pub, or not? What games did they play?

People's reflections on the apparent continuities of objects, spaces and homemaking practices suggest a desire to *seek* connections; indeed for some participants, the sharing of space with previous inhabitants transforms them from unknown strangers to *almost like* relatives – a playful extension of the category 'family'. Linda, a woman in her thirties, living in a semi-detached Victorian house in a London suburb, expressed this quasi-familial sense of connection:

> They're relatives because they shared this house. They are almost like your extended family because – they shared this space. They *are* like a family in a way.

Whereas for some an interest in their home's history is tempered by an assumption that family history research – the search for past *blood* relatives – is a more personal endeavour, the home becomes important as a place people have consciously *chosen* to live rather than inherited as an accident of birth. Sarah, who lives with her young family in a Victorian terraced house in north London, suggests that the key point of connection is that everyone who has lived in the house has chosen to make it their home:

> Me and my husband own it. It's very much ours … You know, we came to this house. We chose it… And these are kind of … almost like relatives to marry into [laughs]. You know, I chose my husband … So it feels like I've chosen these people in a way … I feel like we have a connection because they chose this house too … We all, at some point, said: 'Yes, this is where we are signing up to live. This will do us thank you' … Yeah, they are accidental connections, like in-laws are.

Here this comparison between residents and relatives suggests a form of relatedness through coincidence and choice, of home 'affines' rather than the conventional givens of birth and parentage. But in other instances, for those estranged from or lacking their own families, their home's history acts as a substitute form of family belonging, expressing a desire to stretch the definition of family to create an intimate relatedness through the shared temporary belonging to home. Peggy, living in a detached Edwardian villa in south London,

explained that her initial interest in the history of her home was a response to her fraught relationship with her own family. Brought up on a council estate, she hadn't seen her parents for many years:

> I come from a very dysfunctional family … It was violent, it wasn't a very nice family to grow up in … I just severed all contact. I had to move myself away … So it would be difficult to start doing any family history. My family are here, the family I've made. The connection with [previous inhabitants] is that they've lived where I'm living now.

A desire for familial and local belonging can also be entangled. For Pam, living in a remote Yorkshire farmhouse, her interest in her home's history related to her desire for rootedness:

> I was brought up as a nomad as a child. And I've lost count of how many times I've moved in my life … And I don't really come from anywhere, so I don't have a geographical connection. And the only time in my life I've really felt one is now.

She is conscious of the contrast between this sense of anchoring identity through home and what she considers the more authentic genealogical depth of local families who, she noted, 'not only have a connection to family, but a connection to place that goes that far back in history'.

However, whether through senses of extended familial belonging or a focus on the shared spaces of home, the imagined intimacies between present and past residents can become intense, even invasive. Sarah, in a Victorian inner city terrace, imagined previous inhabitants going about their daily lives in the house. Like many participants, she reflected in particular on the previous women of the house though her sense of the traditional gendering of domestic labour:

> Like standing in the kitchen. Like, 'where was their cooker?' That probably a lot of these women stood in that kitchen like I do – trying to keep the children entertained whilst not burning them [laughs]. Trying to get a meal on the table. Doing the same thing in almost exactly the same spot … Because they were physically – they were here.

The idea of space unaffected by time conjures a scene of simultaneous sharing; the home is experienced as a place crowded with accumulations of residents. For Sarah:

> Three dimensionally, they did it exactly in the same – they physically, you know, had a long day with the children, sat down here in front of the fire, did their sewing. And I did

> that – do that too. Feels like almost – you know, if you took out time … we'd all be sat on each other's laps. You know [laughs]. Which I guess is a concept of ghosts ... invading – from another time.

Without the barrier of time, the sense of claustrophobic co-habitation with metaphorical ghosts of the past becomes palpable; such presences are invasive. Sarah dramatizes this via a focus on the messy, 'really physical' bodily processes and events taking place in her 'personal space':

> It's almost a bit gross. Presumably some of these children were born in our bedroom … which is slightly gross, but quite fascinating … Just the whole kind of [pause] -- very *physical and personal* thing that's happening in our – space. That's kind of – of nice. But a bit weird. Don't know. It feels like ghosts.

This uneasy intimacy with previous inhabitants through sharing intimate space leads to, for some, a desire *not* to know too much about them, to avoid detailed research lest this conjures past inhabitants more vividly in the imagination. Lillian, who is otherwise fascinated by her home's social history, explained:

> This is my space. The space has changed. Just as it was their space for a period of time, now it's my space. So I don't really want to be – kind of inviting in too much speculation about, you know, who was here. Or starting to imagine them. Really. It just doesn't feel … it would feel like an unwanted, um, kind of thing, really … That was then. And it's passed. And I don't want to get into imagining these imaginary people, because that's all I know about them [pause] – in this space now.

The past for Lillian has to be kept *in* the past to contain the unwanted invasion of previous inhabitants; sharing space requires strategies of distance rather than the celebration of connection. Lillian might emphasise that these are not real ghosts ('imagining these imaginary people'), but appears to express uncertainty about the boundary between what is deemed real and imagined. A desire not to 'invite in too much speculation' hints at a belief in the incantationary power of articulation; merely voicing such ideas might offer the ghosts hospitality.[32]

Lillian's home had previously been gutted by builders in an extensive process of modernisation which left few traces of the past. The strength of her response to the lives of past residents is not contingent upon any inherited material remains to act as visceral

triggers. Thus, for some participants, a sense of relatedness to past residents is dictated more by imagination, narrative and belief than by contact with any material remains or clues about past lives. In such cases, however, the agency of the home itself appears to take precedent, its external walls and permanent physical presence a container of the sequence of lives within.

Beyond more-than-rational senses of presence, further unease is expressed about the consciousness of socioeconomic difference between past and present residents. Pam in the Yorkshire hamlet described herself as a relatively affluent 'incomer', compared to the large, poor working families who previously lived in her modernised and extended farmhouse. Her 'desire to share in [the locals'] sense of belonging' was tempered by her awareness of the dynamics of rural gentrification, her 'consciousness of a discomfort that I'm one of those people that is contributing to the fact that the actual people who do come from here can't afford to carry on living here'. Elsewhere, a common response – particularly in London where property prices are currently unaffordable for many – was to note how their homes had originally housed large working families in cramped conditions. This reinforced feelings of privilege and a belief in the discomforts of past experiences of domesticity.

Recent residents: negotiating belonging and obligation

If imagined earlier lives within the home create senses of extended relatedness, of shared domestic routines and spaces as both something celebratory and the cause of unease, contact with the most recent residents creates a distinctive range of responses. Such members of a shared domestic genealogy can become known indirectly, through accounts of them by others, their actions, and what they leave behind, can remain unknowable (perhaps by name alone) or may be encountered in person. In particular, the process of transfer of ownership or occupation, contained by unspoken rules of appropriate behaviour and etiquette, is often crucial in shaping how the former residents are deemed part of a sense of home for new owner. Interactions during the transfer process shape how those leaving are judged, and this is either confirmed or qualified by perspectives on whether the dwelling has been inadequately cleaned, been neglected or fitted out in poor taste, and affect people's sense of their psychic as well as material trace. Peter in South London, for example, described the 'shoddy' and 'unloved' furnishings, fixtures and layout of his house when he

first purchased it, and decides that this suggests that they were ‘quite odd people’. Colin was also judgemental about the poor state of his Bristol terraced house, and this was reinforced by the vendor’s behaviour: ‘She was really aggressive and nasty and unfriendly … She lived here for 30 years and she allowed the house to be damaged.’ The vendor’s hostility led to an incomplete sense of ownership, requiring Colin to seek strategies to ‘expel’ the vendor’s continuing felt presence, through rituals to ‘clear the air’. Whereas most participants personalised their homes through making physical changes, Colin did not have the funds to do this. Instead, as he put it, he resorted to a ‘milder version’ of ‘exorcism’ through the physical effort of deep cleaning and painting:

> I mean I’ve repainted throughout … I’ve cleaned so many times. I mean there was 40 years of filth, and the walls were just sort of, I don’t know, grey, cream, whatever … It was thick with grease … Cleaning and painting … What do people do? Like exorcising. I think they run around with little bells or something [laughs] … This is a sort of milder version, just painting it … That’s the first thing I did, was clear out. And I vacuumed and vacuumed and vacuumed and vacuumed. I don’t want any of her anything there so I vacuumed everything.

But these cleansing and purging rituals did not complete the transformation. John was considering a further strategy, given his belief that inherited affects can be ‘rubbed out by subsequent residents’:

> I think it would be quite good for me to go away for a bit and just – because it was such an unpleasant experience, buying the house and moving in, that one of the reasons I’m thinking of renting is just to have another presence in and have some happiness in-between. You know. Which completely disconnects me from the previous owner.

Having a different set of people in the house – to remove the negative influence and bring ‘some happiness in-between’ – might act as an emotional buffer, ‘rub out’ the toxic inheritance. It would also create a new presence in the house: ‘I mean you tend to stamp your own presence … If you don’t particularly like the previous owner for whatever reason you’ve got a long way to go to overcome it’. Renting out the house is a means of breaking a direct link and inserting a degree of welcome distance in this domestic genealogy.

The exchange of contracts between strangers and the process of moving in and out of a property requires delicate handling. It reflects an important, if short-lived, form of

exchange and passing on that has the power to transfer blessings and curses. Creating or maintaining contact with prior or future residents can also help navigate the emotional transition to or from a home. Leaving behind details of how the home works technically, its hidden features and physical quirks, can help people settle in or those leaving to either emotionally let go or hold on to the home when moving out. In some cases, consciously cultivating a connection with new owners or tenants can extend the relationship with a home, offering an excuse to revisit. But most often, feelings of emotional or cultural affinity between those involved allow for a reassuring sense of familiarity, smoothing the transition from one home to the next. The most satisfying scenario is to feel the recent residents are 'like-minded'. Anna, in a North London flat, recalls noticing books on the shelves that chimed with her own interest in esoteric religion. She described her meeting with the seller as mutual affinity: 'He and I immediately had a rapport, immediately as I walked in … I just shook hands with him and he said, "Yes, you will live here." There's nothing flaky about that. It just was.' For Philippa and Ben, in a Victorian flat in East London, discovering that the previous resident, who had rented the flat, had run a book business from the living room, 'encouraged us to buy the flat':

> The guy who sold us this flat told us that it had been full of books. And the one thing we have inordinate amounts of is books. So there was a feeling that this was the kind of place that, you know, that will have a kind of – sympathetic atmosphere. [Pause] And that we know the floor will stand up to the books [laughter].

The reassurance of familiarity becomes important when testing for feelings of 'homeliness' when viewing an unfamiliar space owned by strangers, in these cases, the presence of books. For the vendor, there is the reassurance that a home is being left in trusted hands. In both cases, this involved reinforcing similarities of experience and interest, based on class and cultural affinity, rather than dwelling on differences.

Pam, in the remote Yorkshire farmhouse, felt equally reassured by the response of a party of local people who visited her: 'The family kept chickens here when it was a ruin, but they said they really like what I have done to the house. That gave me great satisfaction.' She reflected:

> The root of that is the fact that if they were born here, they have a legitimacy that I feel I lack. And that they approve, that they like what I've done, means I can borrow some of

> their legitimacy. And it also … [means] that I've created something that the people with legitimacy feel is appropriate.

She interpreted their response as a way to witness and approve her contribution to the valley, conferring some of their 'legitimacy' to her.

If the moment of exchange is important in transferring not only legal contracts of ownership but also senses of belonging, relationships between current and previous residents can have a more protracted life, including repeated material reminders of past lives, such as the continued receipt of their mail for example, as well as the actual return of past residents. In one example, Alice, a retired teacher living in East London, set about removing shrubs inherited from the previous owner only to find that one plant kept growing back every year. This unwelcome presence was judged as a rude intrusion, a reminder of a fraught exchange with those she felt were badly behaved vendors. The stubbornness of the plant's resurrection reflected not only their assumed character but also the failure to be rid of their memory. Alice made light of this with a joke: 'Oh that's the Jones's plant come back to haunt us'.

Furthermore, unlike engagements with the 'otherness' of earlier residents, which are always disembodied even where material traces remain, encounters with more recent residents can enrich a sense of the connections to past residents, but also trouble senses of ownership or privacy more directly. In some instances, current residents benefit from direct insights about the previous layout and social history of their home, particularly when older previous inhabitants are discovered and invited to visit.

Such encounters have their individual dynamics shaped not only by those involved but by the local geography of wider social and economic processes. In a Georgian house in central London, Carol and Alan described how one day a man turned up at their door, a retired train driver who lived in the house as a child. He said: 'I'm sorry to trouble you but I used to live in this house'. The man told them how his parents had run a brothel two doors away during the 1950s. They had sent him to live with an aunt in Ireland, but he came back during the school holidays ('his grandmother was living in this very room'). The area had since been gentrified; the socio-economic differences between the 1950s and 2010s was stark. The couple considered him useful for filling gaps of knowledge about the house they could not find elsewhere, but also expressed mixed feelings. Fascinated by the events and

characters he recalled, they also felt uneasy about his repeated, unexpected and often inconvenient visits. Although feeling a degree of empathy with the man and acknowledging the impact of his childhood memories, these visits seemed to breach a cultural norms of propriety of respect for privacy.

Such visits might offer access to the past – a scenario described in the house history how-to books as enhancing positive senses of connection to home – but clearly the relationship can be more complex. Carol and Alan played down the visits as a curiosity, if at times a nuisance. But Carol also seemed self-conscious that the man would have noticed the contrast between the house as he knew it and the house it had become, with its restored features bypassing the more recent past to evoke its original Georgian elegance. He was a dispatch from a time when the area was poor; they represented gentrification. Like those encountering census records of earlier residents, he reminded the couple of their privileged socioeconomic status.

Even when feelings towards a previous inhabitant are positive, there is often a need to maintain distance; relatedness between former and current residents is preferred as symbolic and imagined rather than fleshed out encounter. A former resident's suggested house swap, for example, troubles the pleasure of maintaining a connection. But elsewhere familiar relationships can persist when previous residents continue to live in the same neighbourhood. This was the case in the small market town of Lewes, where a large centrally-located house had for many years been made up of apartments and shops before being returned to a family home. For owner Jackie, the idea of engaging with the home's history – in particular the recent history where previous residents can still be traced – suggested less the possibility of collecting knowledge about the home's past, and more using such knowledge as a basis for something that could be shared, the home becoming a 'meeting place' for collective sociability and openness to strangers. She said:

> I really want to gather together in this house as many of the people who we know who have lived in the house – and the neighbours – as possible. In a 'friends and neighbours' sort of way … To give the other people the chance to see the house, and to see the other people who have lived in it, and to – to talk about the house and their lives and anything else they want to talk about … Just to see what would happen. Just to see what it was like ... [The house is] a sort of forum. It's a meeting place. It's a meeting place at

all sorts of levels. It is literally, physically, a meeting place. But it is also a meeting place of things, of feelings.

While a sense of affinity between new and recent residents may be understood to make for a positive beginning to home making, this can also work in exclusionary ways if a lack of cultural affinity, through ethnic, class and racialised ideas of difference, symbolically if not actually thwarts the smooth process of transfer. In contrast, Jackie's openness to the experience of meeting past residents – merely to 'see what it was like' without any fixed agenda or expectations of commonality – offers different possibilities for an extended domestic genealogy. It is an invitation which can be offered more confidently where the past residents are not ghosts, imagined or otherwise, and where there is an acknowledgement that the process of exchange is never fully completed.

Conclusion

Understandings of home and home making, we argue, can be enriched through a focus on the genealogical imaginaries and idioms that clearly pervade the way in which people consider past inhabitants and by attending to ideas and practices of relatedness to former occupants. In this paper we have brought together our interests in domestic dwelling and homemaking and genealogical imaginaries and relatedness to address this overlooked but significant dimension of home life. It is the focus on *relatedness* to past residents in addition to their place in wider entanglements of objects, stories, imaginations, senses of the past at home, that makes this approach distinctive. It radically expands what social relations might be considered as among those that shape senses of home and identity, imaginatively and in practice. Past inhabitants are not family in a conventional sense, nor friends, nor defined through paid labour, but in different ways considered as connected to present residents through the shared, but not contemporaneous, experience of a particular domestic place.

At the same time, a focus on the home as the locus of a site specific domestic genealogy, contributes to wider cultural-geographical engagement with the potency of genealogical models of relatedness. Describing relationships to previous residents as familial evokes the potency of its associations of intimacy, intensity, depth and natural connection while at the same time extending what counts as a relative. Accounts of past residents as family or as constituting a domestic genealogy both play on and challenge conventional

understandings of family. Furthermore, understanding kinship as a practice in which those connections that matter are made to matter (or not matter) through social action, provides an analytical lens for considering how kinship with former residents, living or dead, is selectively practiced and what shapes the range of ways a former resident becomes or does not become a meaningful relation within a domestic genealogy. The term house biography usefully evokes an idea of a multitude of largely unconnected lives that share a period of residence in an individual dwelling. Here we have demonstrated that a focus on domestic genealogies, which uses relatedness as an analytical lens, foregrounds the hitherto neglected but important imaginaries and practices involved in wondering about, getting to know, identifying with or distancing oneself from previous residents. Just as people's personal narratives about their residential histories are constructed in relation to those they live with as well as non-resident family,[33] senses of home and identity are also shaped by the imaginative and practical making of relations, of different kinds, including foreclosing or limiting social relationships, with former residents.

People's sense of distance or connection with previous residents is not, as we have shown, a direct function of temporal distance or closeness. Those distant in time may be felt to be a significant part of how people consider their homes, or not, depending on the contingencies which shape this: personal situations, the content and degree of knowledge of previous residents, social and cultural inclinations, and people's wider historical interests. Like family history, interests in the past residents of a home involve different degrees of engagement in wider issues of material, social, cultural, political and economic continuity and change, of what people share across time and what has changed, and people's inclinations and interests in particular stories and historical periods. In this way, domestic genealogies are similar to the selective imaginative process of shaping a sense of personal heritage in conventional genealogies. Like the richly imaginative, emotional and sensual pleasures of 'pastness' in restoring historic homes, senses of connection also defy 'historic linear logic'.[34] At the same time relationships with recent residents can involve the social practice of selectively making, negotiating or rejecting relatedness more directly. The evidence of previous residents can be immediate, in dirt, décor or details of the refuse collection times left behind. People can meet or communicate creating possibilities of making connections based on assumed affinities, that may work for some but exclude others. Such relationships can be triggered through material, imagined or embodied encounters. They may inhibit or enhance senses of belonging to home. They are bound up with how the

home is figured and experienced as exclusive or shared. Senses of relatedness with recent and earlier residents have their own particular dynamics. However both suggest that the desire to create an exclusive sense of domestic belonging and privacy is sometimes in tension with the encounters with difference that home making can entail *and* with the appeal of making connections.

Like familial kinship, relatedness though shared habitation is as much about imagination and practice as it is about the empirical facts of the sequence of residents. It can involve identification and distancing, cultivation of and cutting connection. When engaging with more recent inhabitants or those from past eras, there can be a desire to maintain boundaries, either in space or time, of imagined or actual presences as well as desire for a family-like sense of belonging through knowing the home – its material spaces and the domestic routines within them – in terms of past residents. Such a negotiation of boundaries suggests a need to contain previous residents' claims to continuing senses of attachment to or authority over the home that trouble the senses of ownership and privacy of current residents. At the same time, there is often a desire for the intense emotionality of connections which enhance senses of shared belonging. The understanding of home as shared across time does not always result in defensive gestures but rather, at times, ones of sociality, care and support. The sharing of home can give residents a senses of responsibility their homes' temporary custodians. Engaging with previous residents reminds them that they are not the first and are unlikely to be the last to pass through the space; living in a home creates, for some, new forms of obligation to strangers. These are not paradoxical positions. Instead they reflect the making of relational selves through a range of emotional responses to former residents – alienation, empathy, interest, unease, awkwardness, affinity – that shift and co-exist. Relations are both defined through the empirical facts of past residence and made through the interweaving of imaginative, social and material practices. To different degrees and in different ways, these imaginaries and practices are part of what shapes how home feels and what home means.

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Author biographies

Caron Lipman is an honorary research fellow at Queen Mary University of London. Her research interests span contemporary engagements with the past, geographies of belief, non-rational experience and folklore, and intimate geographies of belonging, identity and home.

Catherine Nash is Professor of Human Geography at Queen Mary University of London. Her work focus on geographies of relatedness and belonging in terms of genealogical practices and imaginaries, the science and culture of ancestral origins, the making of relations, and kinship of different kinds.

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[32] Lipman, *Co-habiting with Ghosts*.

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