

Tenuous Guests

Couch surfing through homelessness in the lives of
Australian youth

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ABSTRACT

This thesis critically informs current research concerned with youth homelessness in Australia. Drawing upon interview accounts and discussions with young people and youth workers, I examine couch surfing as a prevalent practice in young people's experiences of dislocation. I conceptualise this practice as both a means and outcome of relying on temporary living arrangements with local households. These living arrangements are distinctive in that young people source them from their own social connections, in the face of having nowhere else to go. Through a grounded, interpretive engagement with the interview accounts, and a social constructionist epistemology, I examine the relational processes that shape and produce couch surfing. In doing so, I map out how couch surfers are drawn into a series of highly tenuous relationships with the households they turn to; relationships that I argue render living arrangements vulnerable to collapse.

Focusing on the production of these tenuous relations, I argue in this thesis that couch surfing practices are both an immediately accessible *tactic* for young people attempting to (re)negotiate home; and a set of embodied, practical actions for navigating dislocation. By approaching couch surfing in this way, I importantly indicate how young people's experiences of homelessness are continuous with a broader context of social exclusion, patterning the life chances of Australian youth. Through this perspective, I am interested in how young people who couch surf navigate and contend with a marginalised social space; and, how their experiences shape identities, belonging, and ontological security.

In mapping these dimensions of couch surfing, I contend that many young people in Australia are negotiating dislocation differently. Their experiences invite a crucial re-

thinking of how we presently frame youth homelessness in research, in policy, and in practice. In particular, I propose that couch surfing unsettles the mainstream focus on problems of rooflessness and the purely structural aspects of disadvantage. In arguing this, I indicate the important role of ideological and political processes in young people's struggles for social citizenship. Ultimately, my aim here is to highlight the alternative readings of homelessness that young people's perspectives have offered in this research. The findings of this thesis will add to a critical imagining of the sorts of spaces and communities that young people can more properly call home.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- ABS: Australian Bureau of Statistics
- HREOC: Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (now known as Australian Human Rights Commission)
- FaHCSIA: Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
- NGO: Non-government organisation
- NYC: National Youth Commission
- NYCH: National Youth Coalition for Housing
- SAAP: Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (now known as Specialist Homelessness Services)
- SYC: Service to Youth Council
- TAP: Trace-A-Place service

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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PAULINE McLOUGHLIN

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Finally, to my dearest grandfather, D.J. McLoughlin, I dedicate this thesis to your memory.

PREFACE

Tracing the path

In a spirit of acknowledgement, I preface this thesis with a story. I speak of this story as a means of indicating those essential themes explored in this thesis: Those of home, belonging and dislocation.

This story begins with a question...

To trace the moment when I first became interested in couch surfing, I must first trace the beginnings of a question:

How long will I have to make a home of the next place?

A few years ago, a young woman named Jane moved house for the thirteenth time in twenty-three years of life. This day marked her first housing move without family (she was leaving home for a share house near the city). It was hardly, however, her first experience of shifting house. Nor would it be her last.

On that day of leaving home, Jane can remember standing out on the front lawn, helping to lift belongings from the 'old' house. To Jane, old was five years. In her lifetime, five years is still the longest time she can count having lived in any one house. Five years in a rented house by the sea, where she had lived with her mother and brother since her first year of university.

Physically, what Jane left behind that day were the bones of a stripped down, empty bedroom. By this point: just four pale blue walls; dancing balls of dust and debris that had

collected in buried corners; a bare space of polished floorboards, and a blankly gazing window unveiled of its curtains. Her home now was in the old cardboard packing boxes that passed from doorway to truck. Boxes with labels that someone had scribbled on a few too many times. Boxes that were covered in large blue marker capitals, with the words BEDROOM STUFF written on the side. And one box (the very oldest of them all) that still wore its original title: KIDS TOYS, written without the apostrophe after kid. Jane thought to herself, *how amazing that box has survived so long!* It must have been over fifteen years old. She carried it carefully, passing it up to her mother, who – taking charge of the removal truck, as she was wont to do – wedged it between a bed head and a dressing table. To this day, Jane still wonders if her mum had somehow known to keep those boxes in reserve, anticipating the next time.

In the four years since leaving that thirteenth abode, the movements continued. The young woman's brother shifted through three share houses; moved back temporarily with their mother and on into another share house, before moving into a rented flat by himself, where he could have peace and quiet and get on with his work and his life. Most recently, he has been living in a rented house in the heart of the city, where he has commenced undergraduate studies in architecture. Jane's mum, meanwhile, has been living a happily retired *grey nomad* life with her partner of four years. Together they have been cruising slowly up and down Australia in their thirty-five foot motorhome aptly named *Second Wind*. Compared to the years she had spent as a single, working mum, her standard of living has dramatically transformed. Jane's father, on the other hand, sadly died at the age of sixty, having faced life-long struggles with alcoholism and depression. Although he died without having seen Jane and her brother grow up, he did leave to his children the only home he had ever felt at ease within: A vintage 1960s wooden yacht, which had been his

home for the last few years of his life. The thirteenth house itself was sold off by the landlord, purchased by a neighbour, demolished and has subsequently given way to the construction of a set of single storey units.

Not more than six months after leaving that thirteenth house, Jane herself moved again (for the fourteenth time in her life) into a rented flat, where she began a cohabitating relationship with a former housemate. For the next three and a half years, Jane endured what gradually became a destabilising, intensely stressful situation with her partner; a situation that periodically rendered their shared home a disquieting and unsafe place to be. In the wake of an especially distressing experience within this relationship, Jane moved (at first temporarily and almost overnight) into the spare room of her brother's rented house, having nowhere else to go where she felt safe. At the time of being forced to relocate, she had already amassed fifteen housing moves over twenty-seven years. For Jane, almost all of these housing moves had been unbidden and unwanted. Now, in the process of going on to deconstruct and rebuild her life from a difficult situation, her notion of home had once again been called into question.

From childhood to the point of living independently, Jane had moved house on average every 1.8 years with her single mother and younger brother. The moves first began with the struggles of Jane's dad with alcohol misuse, the ensuing divorce, and the selling up of the family home. From that point until Jane started high school, the family's financial mainstay was the variety of cleaning jobs that her mother was able to take on. Making ends meet was a struggle for much of this time, although for the sake of the family, Jane's mum worked hard to conceal from her children the enormous stresses she laboured under.

Even as a child however, Jane was aware that each of their housing shifts were reluctant, necessary or in some cases simply beyond their control. Ever since her parents' divorce, the call to move was a matter of necessity. In other cases, their housing moves were part of a decision that Jane's mum had made to seek out better opportunities for them all. This centred especially on her search for financial security and adequate employment; but was also sometimes a way of escaping problematic or failed *de facto* relationships. Decisions to move also came about from Jane's mother wanting to be geographically closer to the support of a disparate extended family, spread out across three states. And, at many other points, a movement happened because of the tenuous nature of the private rental market. This included times when a landlord sold the house they were living in; or when facing a rent increase the family could not afford. Together, these calls to movement took them across the borders of three states, and into temporary stays in the backyard caravans or spare bedrooms of friends and family, while transitioning into other places. Such movement also ushered the young woman's passage through the gates of four primary and three public high schools.

Jane often said that her mother placed a great deal of emphasis on resisting the negative labelling attached to the single mum. This had always been evident in how she had furnished and cared for every one of their rented houses throughout the years; always with a great deal of pride and creativity. Not long after they moved into any given house, for example, Jane's mum had set to work etching out and maintaining an entire landscape around them. In doing so, she would utterly transform a rabble of neglected weeds or a stretch of dead grass and dirt into abundant gardens. Traces of these landscapes and their former beauty remain today in some of their old houses around the country. These, Jane had always felt, were her mother's indelible and devoted marks upon a shifting stage.

And so it was as they went along: Each move beginning the zealous task of remaking territories and habits. Of creating and nurturing gardens, of choosing and maintaining spaces, arranging and inhabiting bedrooms, working out a new and unfamiliar neighbourhood; and becoming the much dreaded new kid at school. All of this had to be done, of course, without dwelling too much on the thought that maybe, just a year or two from now, they would have to do the same thing all over again in some other place. Because, of course, there never *was* any way of knowing if or when the next shift might happen, or for what reason (for all this family knew and hoped, their current place was going to last).

So it was that each house, piece by piece, became another sewn in part of an untidy, itinerant patchwork;
the traces of their lives time and again dissembled...
reassembled...clung to,
thrown out and lost in transit.

* * *

Like an existential passenger, this state of tenuous dwelling seems (at times out of choice and at other times, out of necessity) to have followed Jane and her brother into the patterning of their own separate adult lives. At the same time, it is a structuring (or de-structuring) aspect of their life worlds that reaches to the essence of what I examine here. At its heart, the questioning of home is what drives this thesis. Like Jane's story, my aim here is to speak of the impact of dislocation, and of young people's practices for navigating a marginal social space. Living under a roof but remaining out of place at the same time, ~~w~~without secure housing elsewhere" (Uhr 2004: 5), young people who couch surf occupy spaces where the meaning of home, homelessness and belonging is anything but a taken-

for-granted aspect of everyday life. Upon this threshold, where “home is no longer just one place” but rather “locations” (hooks 1984: 148), I argue in this thesis that such meanings are broken, negotiated, contested and made anew. In this sense, the story of couch surfing is also the story of a search for belonging – somewhere, beyond the limits of tenuousness.