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Photovoice accounts of borders and home

Asylum seeker and refugee perspectives

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Abstract

The UK continues to see increasingly restrictive and repressive immigration policies aiming to secure the imagined nation and its citizens, who can claim a genuine right to belong. Underpinning these policies and modes of bordering is a statist framework of governance where relational encounters underpinning belonging and home are ordered hierarchically. The presumption is that legal, temporal and spatial forms of belonging take priority over other emotional and intimate forms of attachment. This article presents findings from a photovoice project carried out in collaboration with people from the asylum seeker and refugee population in the North West of England, and focuses on two themes drawn out of the photographs: bordering and home. The visual methodology was valuable because the photographs made visible often invisible borders such as racism. It was also valuable because participants represented their subjective experiences of the border and relationships with home and belonging, which highlighted the fluid, messy, multiple and contested nature of these relationships. Moreover, it was not possible to order their relationships with different 'homes'/places hierarchically. Therefore, participants' self-representations undermine the limited way statist approaches to bordering understand belonging and home.

Keywords: Belonging; Bordering; Home; Photovoice; Sovereign

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Introduction

> 'I have siblings back home but I feel like I do not belong because of the violent situation with my family there' (Sylvia, from Ghana)
>
> 'Because when I show the people that this is my flag, I feel proud, proud to belong to this flag, we are African, not Arab' (Faiz, from Sudan)

In these examples, Sylvia and Faiz express what we might understand to be contested, complex and multiple relationships with home and belonging. However, as will be explored within this article, this approach to home and a sense of belonging is not reflected in government responses to asylum and immigration, in particular, its bordering practices. Underpinning much of the UK's approach to the 'management of migration' is a sovereign framework, which orders relational encounters of belonging and home hierarchically. Statist accounts of home and belonging, in relation to bordering, prioritise legal, temporal and physical relationships with place, with lesser attention paid to other forms of intimate, emotional, or ideological attachments to people and place (Ní Mhurchú, 2019). Whilst some forms of emotional attachments such as loyalty are recognised by statist ideologies, they are still used in such a way that hierarchical imaginations of a territorialised nation prevail. Belonging in the form of emotional attachments, such as loyalty, is presumed to continue to locate belonging primarily in one specific territory (Fortier, 2007).

The UK's immigration system developed directly out of the collapse of the Empire, and reflects a drive to control the movement of racialised and dispossessed diaspora from the colonies (El-Enany, 2020). Thus, importantly, these assumptions about belonging have a racial element. Britain is constructed

as a white homogenous space, and hierarchies of belonging construct non-white people in the UK, migrant or non-migrant, as the anti-citizen, unable to make 'authentic' and legitimate claims to belong (May et al., 2020, p.1056). Anti-immigration discourses and immigration policy use 'home' as a geopolitical marker of belonging and create a narrative of clearly defined 'us'/ 'them' categories. People are assigned to these groups based on different forms of racialised belonging through a framework of either/or (that is, legitimate claims to belong to the territorial home, or illegitimate claims). However, scholars from critical border studies and the study of home and belonging highlight that migrant experiences do not always reflect the ability to so clearly define belonging in this manner (Moskal, 2015; Boccagini, 2017; Belloni, 2018; Ní Mhurchú, 2019), as also highlighted in the two quotes at the top of this section.

Drawing on a photovoice project where participants took photographs to represent their experiences of place, belonging and citizenship, this article focuses on two themes which participants drew out of the photographs: bordering and home. As borderwork transcends the line around a territorial state, borders are increasingly difficult to identify and visualise. Kuszmaitė and Pauwels (2020) have argued that, despite visual studies becoming a vast, multidisciplinary field, its application to the study of borders remains limited. Visual studies have the potential to make diverse borders more tangible and there is an emerging body of visual research on border manifestations and experiences (see, for example, Moya et al., 2017; Lobo and Barry, 2019; Augustová, 2021). Kudžmaitė and Pauwels (2020, p. 27) have argued that

> [A] visual approach to borders gives us tools to recognise and to expose the overpowering worldviews. At the same time, it provides an opportunity to bridge the existing boundaries and to look from the angle of the underrepresented.

The current article contributes to this understanding of the role of visual methods in exploring borders. It does so by making two key arguments. Firstly, that participants' photographs made visible the way invisible borders and bordering techniques, underpinned by assumptions about the territorial 'home' and belonging, play out in real people's lives. Secondly, that through self-representing their realities and experiences, participants undermined statist hierarchical assumptions about belonging and home by creating an alternative

representation of belonging and home to the dominant one found within statist policies and discourses (cf. Erel et al., 2018; O'Neill, 2018). They did so by representing their various forms of attachments to people and place that were fluid, messy, multiple and contested.

This article is set out as follows. The following section provides detail of the study and methodology the article draws on. This is followed by a discussion of the way that borders are enacted by constructing belonging in specific ways, and participants' visualisations of various bordering techniques. Following this is a reflection on the way migrants' own experience of belonging is vastly different to the limited constructions of belonging and 'home' available in policy responses and borderwork.

Photovoice: visualising borders and home

The data drawn on within this article was produced using photovoice (Wang and Burris, 1997), a participatory method where participants use photography to document their experiences. The fieldwork also incorporated a number of walking interviews to compliment the photovoice data. Fieldwork was carried out in the North West- UK, from January-September 2019. The data drawn on in this article is part of a wider three-year funded project that aimed to explore asylum-seeking and refugee communities' experiences of the categories of place, belonging and citizenship, and the ways in which their own forms of representation may contrast with dominant constructions and narratives relating to these categories. Ethical approval was obtained from the University's ethics committee. The participants were all either currently seeking asylum, or had a refugee background. Participants were recruited via three charities. Thirty participants, aged between 20 and 50, both male and female originally from a range of countries, took part. Participants were all given pseudonyms.

Participants volunteered to take part in the research and attended a session where the aims of the research were discussed; basic camera training was given and the ethics of visual methods were discussed. Participants then took photographs using a disposable camera over a two-week period following the brief: 'take photos of things that represent your experience of place, belonging and citizenship'. Participants took roughly ten-to-twenty photographs each. I

had participants' photographs developed and printed. Following this, participants engaged in individual interviews and group dialogue sessions. The location of these varied—many were carried out in charity drop-in spaces and others were carried out outside in places such as Manchester's Piccadilly Gardens. The interview venue was chosen by the participant and was often a place that the participant had photographed. Therefore, the space surrounding the interview and group dialogue sessions allowed for a more embodied, inter-corporeal and sensuous understanding of participants' experiences and subjectivities (O'Neill and Hubbard, 2010).

An approach termed 'auto-driven photo elicitation' (Pauwels, 2015) was used during individual interviews, whereby the participants' photographs were used to elicit interview responses. I asked the participants about the location of the photograph; its content; its composition (was it purposeful and why?); what it represented; why they took that photograph and how the photograph related to their experiences of place, belonging and citizenship. Participants also grouped their photographs into different themes and these themes were discussed. Following the individual discussions, participants were invited to attend group dialogue sessions.

Photographs are better understood in a dialectical relationship involving the photographer and viewers, as the meaning of the photograph does not belong to the literal content of the photograph, but is assigned by those who discuss it (Rania et al. 2015). In photovoice the different meanings that can be assigned by viewers and shared interpretations of experiences is where meaning is embedded and co-produced (Libenberg, 2018). During group dialogue sessions participants were asked to share and discuss their photos with other group members. Group dialogue sessions produced a 'dialogic space', where the exchange of ideas and experiences were explored through the photographs taken, as well as storytelling, debate and discussions (Tolia-Kelly, 2007).

The photographs, interviews and group dialogue sessions co-produced a number of key themes amongst the photographs and this article focuses specifically on the themes of 'borders' and constructions of 'home'. It is important to recognise the potential for common visual narratives, which seep

into ideals of how things should look and be presented, to influence the outcome of carrying out asylum research (Lobo and Barry, 2019). Haaken and O'Neill (2014, p. 83) have also warned of the potential for asylum researchers to reproduce the issues they aim to address by seeking out tragic stories of immense suffering through the 'most evocative […] visible effects of immigration policies'. Thus, the role of photovoice in this project needs to be understood as more than just a methodological tool. It allowed participants to engage in creative self-representation. The photographs and this article are not a 'reflexive object of the skilled researcher' (Kaptani et al., 2021, p. 71) but rather the photographs directly reflect the way that participants relate to and represent the concepts of place, belonging and citizenship. Borders and home were themes co-produced by participants when thinking about how to represent these categories. Furthermore, as Erel et al. (2018) and O'Neill (2018) have argued, the use of arts-based participatory methods with marginalised groups, where participants engage in a creative process of self-representation, can produce art which contests dominant narratives associated with that group. As will be explored, participants' self-representations of home and belonging do not reflect dominant narratives and hierarchies of belonging associated with this group.

Experiences of Borderwork

Home as a geopolitical tool

Benedict Anderson (1991), in his seminal work on nationalism, described the nation as an 'imagined community […] because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, […] yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 1991, p. 6). Nations are imagined as inherently sovereign and limited (Anderson, 1991). Thus, the act of bordering is reliant on a process of situated knowledge and imagination (Yuval-Davis, 2013). Part of this is the sovereign right to exclude and this is embedded in UK immigration law, discourses and race relations policies, which make distinctions between in-groups and out-groups based on normative assumptions about belonging (O'Neill, 2018).

In the UK and much of the Western world, the 'issue' and 'management' of

immigration has taken on a symbolic status that moves beyond any specific policy outcome, and to a performance of specific bordering practices which establish and reiterate sovereign power (Jones et al., 2017). Scholars from critical border studies have highlighted the way that the border can no longer be viewed as a simple line surrounding the nation-state. Parker and Vaughan-Williams (2012) argue that because the border has now encroached within territorial lines, as opposed to being on its edges, borders should be viewed through the lens of performance, and as being in a constant state of becoming. Here, we can draw on what Rumford (2012) has termed 'borderwork'. This is where the border and control over mobility is performed either intentionally or unintentionally, on a day-to-day basis and carried out by state actors as well as non-state actors. Focusing on the border as a performance draws attention to the 'little things' which are crucial to how the geopolitical is translated into being (Thrift, 2008); in other words, how we see the reinforcement of political and sovereign power through boundaries and borders.

Borderwork, in the form of state immigration policy agendas, are constructed through a nationalist rhetoric of 'us' and 'them'. 'Them' can include 'migrants, ethnic and religious minorities, foreign people and states, sexual minorities to liberals—as a threat to the nation' (May et al., 2020, p. 1056). Joe Turner (2020) has pointed out the category of citizen and migrant is not particularly helpful in understanding borders and bordering in a post-colonial world, as many subjects with citizenship remain the anti-citizen. Specifically, in the UK black, Asian and post-colonial diaspora continue to be viewed as migrants and as problematic (ibid. 2020). An example of this is the UK Home Office's 'Hostile Environment', a policy with a specific focus on 'illegal immigration' involving administrative and legislative measures designed in the hope that those without leave to remain would voluntarily return, and those thinking of coming to the UK 'illegally' would not. On the ground, this policy disproportionally affected and discriminated against racialised people and communities (Liberty, 2018).

In 2013, under this Hostile Environment policy, 'Operation Vaken' was enacted. This involved vans with the message 'Go Home' being driven through some of the most ethnically diverse boroughs of London, as well as adverts in newspapers, shops and charity and faith buildings used by ethnic minorities

(Jones et al., 2017). Research carried out by Jones et al. (2017) found that people in these communities felt that they belonged less as a result of the 'Go Home' campaign. The vans were interpreted by ethnically minoritised and migrant communities as racist due to their association with immigration enforcement officers who are known to 'grab' people off the street based on the colour of their skin rather than any knowledge of their legal status. This led to even those with a legal 'leave to remain' status feeling anxious that they could be 'grabbed' (Jones et al., 2017). This demonstrates how the Hostile Environment policies resulted in racial profiling. Examples such as this shed light on instances where the performance of the border is carried out in such a way that it also reproduces ethnically minoritized comunities as 'illegal migrant' subjects.

The Hostile Environment and its racially targeted policies and acts that divided those who 'belong' and do not 'belong' were also a significant antecedent to the Windrush scandal which began to surface in 2017. The Windrush scandal involves questioning the citizenship rights of Commonwealth citizens and their children, who were threatened with deportation or in some cases were wrongfully deported. This was despite many of these people either never having visited, or having left as a very small child, the country which the government were threatening to, or did, deport them to (Gentleman, 2019).

Enacting the border in such a way is based on, and relies on an imagination of the nation as an inherently sovereign and limited community that exclusion can be centred around (Anderson, 1991). Conceptually, this can be traced to imperialism, which was made possible through the justification of territorial conquest in the name of 'homeland' (Dalby, 2008). This territorialised view of nation-states has led to a conceptualisation of home and belonging to a sovereign state as an essentialised aspect of identity and furthermore, to an idea of nation-states being homogenous entities (Brun, 2001). Thus, the concept of home becomes a geopolitical tool to mark the limits and boundaries of membership to a national community (Boccagini, 2017). People are assigned to these groups based on different forms of racialised belonging through a framework of either/or that prioritises legal, spatial and temporal forms of belonging within a particular territorial space, over other more intimate, emotional, or ideological forms of attachment and belonging.

Examples of this can be seen from the previously discussed 'Go Home' vans, which as a policy, but also as a discourse, prioritised legal forms of belonging over other forms of attachments to people and place and used this to define 'home'. Similarly, what emerged from the Windrush scandal was a disregard for any familial, emotional and even temporal attachments and forms of belonging, in pursuit of legality (wrongly, as many of these people did have 'legal' rights to be in the UK). Again, legality is used here to question the authenticity of ethnically and racially minoritised people's claims to belong. The assumption is that 'legal' forms of belonging trump all others in the definition of home, regardless of personal and emotional relationships with, and attachments to, place.

Most people seeking asylum in the UK are of colour and many are from former colonies–therefore asylum policies disproportionality affect black and brown bodies (NELMA, 2017; Liberty, 2018; Mayblin and Turner, 2020). Importantly, what these policies do is work to make the presence of racialised people illegal. This can also be seen with the recent passing of the Nationality and Borders Bill (2021) in the UK, which allows individuals to be stripped of citizenship and aims to discriminate against people's asylum cases based on whether they arrived in the UK 'legally' or 'illegally', despite this breaking international law (Walsh, 2021). There are additional asylum policies, as modes of bordering, that can also provide examples of the prioritisation of certain forms of belonging over others, such as the 'Deport First, Appeal Later' scheme applied to all migrants as part of the Immigration Act 2016. This involves deporting a person to a spatial territory outside of the UK, before allowing them to appeal a decision that may or may not result in an outcome of a 'legal' entitlement to stay in the UK. A further example is the 'Safe Return Review' policy introduced in 2016. This policy involves reviewing the cases of those granted indefinite leave to remain after five years and then retracting that indefinite leave to remain if the review assesses their country of origin to be 'safe'. When these schemes are unpacked, the prioritisation of spatial and temporal ties becomes evident. The place where a person was born and the place where they have spent large amounts of their lives living are being prioritised at the expense of any emotional ties which they have developed to a place where they have spent less time.

Other policies, whilst not overtly prioritising certain types of belonging, still serve to reinforce a hierarchy of belonging and distinctions between those who belong to the territorial home and the racialised Other who does not. For example, the dispersal policy, which involves moving people seeking asylum to specific accommodation in dispersal areas, and the No Recourse to Public Funds which, it has been argued, disproportionately impacts racialised migrants (O'Neill et al., 2019).

The concepts of state, sovereignty and territory are socially constructed (Biersteker, 2013) and imagined (Anderson, 1991). The border is not only enacted and experienced by migrants who are 'illegal' or 'legal' but the imagination of an inherently limited, homogeneous nation, as well as a sovereign nation, results in intersecting modes of exclusion (Yuval-Davis, 2007). As Tyler (2013, p. 80) has pointed out, those who are excluded from Britain's territorial space have 'long been classified and hierarchised along class and racial lines according to the prevailing ideological climate of the time'. The data produced by participants in the current project visualized some of these bordering techniques. This data is explored in the following section.

Participants' experiences of everyday racialised bordering

During a group dialogue session, the following photograph sparked discussion amongst a group of women.

Figure 1

Photograph taken by Duaa of a playing field fence.

This is a fence which I took to represent so many of the boundaries we face. We have limited freedom. (Duaa from Pakistan)

Duaa's photograph of a fence is what we might understand to be normative in the visualisation of a sovereign border, with a clear inside and outside. However, her photograph is not of a sovereign border, her photograph is of a playing field fence which she uses to visualise the often-invisible borderwork experienced within state lines for people seeking asylum. During this group dialogue session, Ashley, from Namibia with two young children, who had been granted refugee status, also used this photograph to point out where state control over their lives meant that their home life was continually disrupted once they were granted status—as explained in her own words below. This highlighted where legal status did not result in feelings of belonging; rather, Ashley continued to experience modes of bordering:

> Problems don't just stop when you have papers though, now I have to go to job centre, I haven't got my BRP [Biometric Residency Permit] card yet and I can't get money from the job centre without it. You have to move all the time and you don't have choice but it's not good for the kids. I don't want to move him schools, so I travel every day to take him to school. (Ashley from Namibia)
>
> I am the same I took this photograph of near the school because it is so important for the children. (Duaa, from Pakistan)
>
> [This photograph has not been included to ensure the anonymity of participants, their children and the school]

Sylvia from Ghana, who is still seeking asylum after over ten years in the UK, with a young daughter born in the UK, added to this conversation:

> Even my daughter she kept asking me 'mummy why are we going again?' and even when she noticed that I am packing, she became ill. She will keep asking you 'why here? Why there? Why always changing friends?' (Sylvia, from Ghana)

In this conversation, participants reflect on the way that the everyday performance of the border is lived through attachments to their children. Ashley highlights where an embodied everyday activity, such as physically travelling a longer distance than necessary to ensure her son does not have to change school again, reflects her place in the world as being constructed by the politics of belonging. Despite her legal 'refugee leave to remain' status her life is still somewhat dictated by the politics of belonging. Ashley describes a common

experience of many people seeking asylum in the UK: once granted refugee status people are given 28 days before their asylum support stops and they must vacate their accommodation. Those seeking asylum often arrive with little or no money and are not allowed to work during their asylum claim. Delays by the Home Office in distributing Biometric Residency Permit BRP cards, along with limited availability of social housing, can leave those with newly granted refugee status in extremely precarious positions once their twenty-eight days are up.

Despite different forms of 'status', there are parallels in these two women's experiences. Sylvia is still seeking asylum, Ashley has been given a form of legal status; however, their experiences of the border in this example are very similar. They both experienced the disruption of everyday homelife by the state, as a performance of the border, through intimate attachments and emotions involving their children. This geopolitical control came into being through several, seemingly apolitical acts. Ashley performs this every day when she travels far with her son. Sylvia describes the way she physically must pack up her house while her child asks questions, and sometimes even becomes physically ill, at the thought of moving again. The visual methodology meant that this type of borderwork could be visualised and therefore reflected on. By doing so it has drawn attention to the ways in which state bordering practices are performed in ways that are not clear cut. These women have different forms of legal status; however, they experience similar forms of control and exclusion from what may be considered 'normal' everyday life. This highlights that, although statist policies often profess that it is only those who are here illegally that should/would see the UK as a place of hostility, when personal experiences are focused on we see how in practice bordering is experienced beyond this categorisation.

This group also visualised and expressed their experiences of racism:

> I have experienced racism here quite a lot, sometimes where I lived boys have shouted things and spat on the floor. (Duaa, from Pakistan)

Figure 2

Photograph taken by Sylvia of a trolley in an alley-way

> I have experienced these things too. This is where I lived before. I took this because this is where I used to live and there is a gate but you can't even lock the gate and people would dump things, people do drugs and we've got children, even the neighbour he has a dog and he lets it poo and wee right in front of your door, he doesn't clean it, he is expecting us to clean it. (Sylvia, from Ghana)

In these examples we see racism explicitly emerge as a bordering technique. Both participants describe dehumanising acts of violence experienced within their everyday lives. I suggest that these racist acts are bordering acts because, as Turner (2020) has argued, dominant discussions of citizenship are not necessarily about a distinction between 'migrants' and 'citizens' per se, but between desirable, valuable citizens and undesirable, 'anti-citizens'. Thus, acts of racism are conflated with bordering techniques as a way to draw distinctions between those who belong to the territorial home, and racialised Others who do not and are therefore subjected to these forms of bordering.

The experiences of bordering looked at above are intersectional, that go beyond the legal status of Ashley, Sylvia and Duaa, and are situated within the wider social context of the exclusion and marginalisation of racialised migrants

and ethnic minorities in the UK, as was pointed to earlier in the article. As mothers, they wished for their children to be able to form 'normal' social and place attachments; however, intersecting social categories (gender, as mothers, race and legal status) result in multiple forms of exclusion and performances of the border beyond legal status.

The following photograph and discussion of Piccadilly Gardens points to another example of the performance of the border, which goes beyond legal status by highlighting the performance of racialised stereotypes by non-state actors.

Figure 3

Photograph taken by Faiz of Piccadilly Gardens, Manchester.

> Piccadilly Gardens, when I came, for 6 months every day I have been there, from here [Salford] sometimes maybe 3 times a day. But, a funny thing happened, after 6 months, I met a Sudanese man and he had lived here since maybe 1949. He said to me, "do not go to that place". I have Afro hair and you know my skin. I asked him why? And he said "are you smoking weed"? And I said no. He said "are you selling?" And I said no. And he said "well don't go there" so now I don't really go. (Faiz from Sudan)

Faiz has been in the UK for four years and is still waiting for a decision on his asylum application. Faiz describes that he enjoyed Piccadilly Gardens until his encounter with the man he mentions in the above story. Faiz's encounter highlights a few interesting points to consider. Firstly, it demonstrates a performance of the border that moves beyond legal status. The man he describes explicitly stated that Faiz should not go to Piccadilly Gardens unless he wants to be viewed as a drug dealer, or someone who takes drugs. Faiz points out that he has afro hair and dark skin, he is aware that he is a racialised person and that this is visible in public spaces. His legal status as a person seeking asylum is not visible, unlike his skin and hair. Through racialised stereotyping unofficial distinctions are made between types of citizens. An imagination of a homogenous territorial space, constructed by the project of Empire, means racialised people fall into the category of undesirable citizens (Mayblin and Turner, 2021). I want to further draw attention here to where borders are dynamic and in a constant state of becoming. Faiz engages in border performance by no longer attending a place he once frequented and enjoyed visiting daily. The photograph is taken from the outskirts of Piccadilly Gardens as opposed to within it reflecting that Faiz did not cross the 'border' and go into Piccadilly Gardens to take his photograph. Thus, this photograph is a visual representation of borders and borderwork. One might ask whether he would still enjoy Piccadilly Gardens if he had never been informed of this border in his encounter. For Faiz, this border 'became', through his conversation.

Secondly, in the experience he describes, the border is being performed by a non-state actor, with a migration background, highlighting that the border is not only performed by the state but can be unintentionally performed by non-state actors (Rumford, 2012). This also demonstrates where migrants can begin to adopt and perform the racial hierarchies for which they themselves may have been on the receiving end. Faiz's story has highlighted the way that the border is intimately bound up with the identity-making activities of the nation-state (Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2012); his encounter had little to do with his legal status but was about racialised subject positions.

The photovoice method meant that everyday, personal experiences of the border could be visualised and explored from the perspective of a group of

asylum seekers and refugees. The photographs discussed within this section have worked to make visual the often invisible, dynamic ways that borders are performed within state lines. As racialised migrants they continue to be constructed as the Other, lacking in 'authentic' (May et al., 2020, p. 1056) claims to belong to the territorial home and thus subject to various forms of borderwork. Their experiences reflect the state's prioritisation of certain forms of belonging which are materialised in various forms of bordering, but also the dominance of this perspective, as participants also experienced bordering by non-state actors.

This section has discussed the politics of belonging underpinning immigration policies. In these policies there is an assumption that forms of belonging can be/should be ordered hierarchically. Such hierarchies construct racialised migrants as belonging to territories elsewhere, unable to claim an authentic belonging in the UK. Participants' photographs visualised some of these modes of bordering, through their everyday experiences with people and place. Importantly, the ways in which participants self-represented their experiences of bordering techniques emphasises that arts-based participatory methods can be a vehicle where subjugated knowledges and collective stories surrounding issues that are often rendered unspeakable, such as racism, are articulated (Erel et al. 2017; Kaptani, 2021). But, as Kuszmaitė and Pauwels (2020) argued, using visual methods to study borders can also produce something that undermines these dominant worldviews. Thus, the next section explores participants' visual constructions of their complex and intimate relationships with belonging and home that did not align with statist hierarchical notions of belonging and home and thus can be argued to undermine the dominance of these perspectives.

Migrant experience of place, home and belonging

Home is an 'intensely political' site (Blunt and Dowling, 2006, p. 33); as has been demonstrated in the above section, 'home' and constructions of who is home and who is not are the basis of managing and bordering the nation: the politics of belonging. However, the literature on migrants' own sense of place and home, often contradicts territorialised views of human relationships with place and 'homelands'. For example, Doreen Massey (1992) argues that the

concepts people associate with local place and home are often interwoven with various other attachments to different places, in complex ways, and on temporal and spatial scales. From this perspective belonging and home-making practices are not fixed, but rather are in a constant state of becoming, developing from relationships between place and mobility (Moskal, 2015). Therefore, mobility and belonging should not necessarily be seen as mutually exclusive (Gustafson 2009; Fallov et al., 2013).

Boccagini (2017, p. 4) argues that home should be viewed as 'a special kind of relationship with place' and that home can be portable and reproducible across space. Leaving a physical site does not automatically mean home is 'lost'; home can be carried, reproduced, re-made and adapted, through attachments with places and others. A further consideration are the ways in which over time home can be 'un-made'. Belloni (2018) explores young immobile Eritreans' processes of home un-making through estrangement. They argue that estrangement is a subtle cognitive and existential process, whereby a person is no longer able to make sense of something that used to be familiar and intimate. People may feel disconnected from everyday circumstances and unable to observe a future within said place. For many migrants, a place that was once a site of familiarity and intimacy may no longer be that.

Mobility results in evolving relationships with places near and far. The statist framework, whilst acknowledging that people can have more than one home, argues that these can be ordered hierarchically where the legal 'home' is viewed through primacy (Ní Mhurchú, 2019). Ní Mhurchú (2019) explored migrants' numerous, co-produced attachments with people and place (for example emotional and familial attachments) that resulted in multiple homes, co-produced and mutually constitutive, existing on multiple levels, as opposed to being in opposition to one another (cf. Barabantseva et al. 2019, p. 5). Ní Mhurchú (2019) argues that when closer attention is given to intimate, emotional attachments with places and people, hierarchical notions of belonging and narrowness of political communities, are not reflected within the realities of migrants' lives.

The subjectivities of home and belonging, which are co-produced by multiple intimate and emotional experiences and attachments with and to place, which

would be difficult to order hierarchically, are not considered within immigration policies in the UK. 'Operation Vaken'; the 'Safe to Return Review' policy or the 'Deport First, Appeal Later' scheme all disregard other forms of intimate, emotional attachments to people and place that a person may have. Furthermore, they ignore the subjectivities of people's own sense of what and where home is—relying instead on supposedly 'objective' information about whether a place is 'safe' or 'unsafe' to decide who should or should not be able to go back to the place they were born or have spent most of their lives. What home means and a desire to reside somewhere is a subjective experience based on a multitude of feelings, attachments, experiences, emotions, relationships, desires, aspirations and more. Policy responses such as Operation Vaken, which are based on an ideology that presumes 'home' for migrant communities is a different territorial space, are undermined by arguments that the production of home and belonging are a result of multiple interweaving temporal and spatial attachments to places near and far and experiences of mobility.

The participants in this project highlighted where relationships to former countries were still, in some ways, part of their identity and intertwined with their relationship with new places. They demonstrated multiple belongings and represented home as, at times, a contradictory concept. The interweaving of multiple attachments and belongings showed how, when those who are actually experiencing mobility and migration represent their experiences, it was difficult to order different senses of belongings in the way that statist accounts of home and belonging do.

Participants' constructions of home as fluid, messy, multiple and contested

Figures 4 and 5 are taken by Fahad, a man who came to the UK as a refugee 12 years ago with his wife and two older sons. They all now have permanent residency in the UK. The photographs show a body of water with a pathway running next to it, houses can be seen in the distance, Fahad explained that his house is one of those houses.

Figure 4

Photograph taken by Fahad of a tow path and river

> My residency is just over there and I walk here with my dog and I feel very much that this is my home now. When I was in my country I was taking a walk daily. I feel like this is exactly the same as when I was walking in my country so it is a great feeling, but it is also emotional in terms of my memories. (Fahad from Pakistan)

Although Fahad has photographed a physical place, his reasons why this represents his sense of belonging are more than the fact that it is close to his current physical residence. It relates to an activity he does here, walking his dog, which he used to also do in Pakistan. Fahad demonstrates the reproducibility of home through reproducing some traits of another home (Boccagni, 2017). He also explores multiple senses of belonging and perhaps, homes. He refers to Pakistan as 'my country'. Taking ownership of Pakistan suggests a form of identity and belonging. However, he also states that the place photographed is 'my home now'. Fahad's relationship with Pakistan and his construction of home appear to be a complex interflow of local and transnational memberships. On a local level, this place in the photograph is

what he describes as his home 'now', which implies that a place that was once home has been replaced, in a way, with the home here in the UK. However, whilst he may not imagine a day-to-day sense of home any longer in Pakistan, his sense of transnational membership appears intact. He also notes that because the walk is a reproduction of home, it is emotional, thus drawing attention to home as a deeply intimate and personal relationship. Later in the conversation he discusses Figure 5.

Figure 5

Photograph taken by Fahad of cycle 'stop' lane barriers

> In our country, we do not have this type of barrier so I thought I would take this photo and I wanted to keep it and send it back to my country. It is really great because if you are walking by yourself or with your dog, people on their bike will have to slow down. (Fahad from Pakistan)

Fahad had taken this photograph for his family in Pakistan, to show the difference between the two areas and potentially influence the local area,

where his family live, to improve it by building similar infrastructure. Here we can see the way that photovoice is not just a methodological tool but is a process by which participants engage with activities related to belonging; for example, by taking a photograph to share with their transnational family. Through transnational familial attachments, Fahad maintained a connection to Pakistan, and even showed investment in improving the local area, despite now seeing a new place in the UK as his current home. Fahad's photographs highlight where migrant belonging and home-making is a continuing and contextual process, developed from the relationships between places and mobility (Fallov et al., 2013; Gustafson, 2009). He reproduces aspects of his home in Pakistan through everyday activities, whilst maintaining a relationship and sense of belonging, on a transnational level, through familial attachments and through links which he draws between activities carried out by him in Pakistan and in the UK—such as walking his dog. Engaging in the process of photography produced visual manifestations of ways in which Fahad's subjective and intimate experiences of home and belonging invokes a sense of both/and, that are mutually constitutive and co-produced, rather than either/or where his attachments can be ordered hierarchically. For Fahad, a sense of home is not clearly defined in either the UK or Pakistan, rather his concept of home involves a relationship with both places as well as his experience of mobility.

Figure 6
Photograph taken by Sylvia of a street.

> I took this photo of my road to compare with my country, even though it is my country when I am walking I do not feel safe, but I feel like when I am walking here I am safe, so that makes me feel that I belong. (Sylvia from Ghana)

Sylvia explains how the photograph represents safety and the way that safety is an important part of her subjective and intimate relationship with home. She discussed how she felt that she did not have a place in her village in Ghana, due to the anticipation and immediate threat of violence:

> I have cried myself too much, because of things I have been going through since I was born. I have siblings back home but I feel like I do not belong because of the violent situation with my family there. (Sylvia)

Sylvia's photograph, and subsequent conversations with her, reveal the, at times, contradictory nature of home and belonging. In the first quote, Sylvia refers to Ghana as 'my country'. In the second quote, she uses the word home to describe Ghana and indicates familial attachments are part of what constitutes Ghana as being home. However, her relationship with Ghana is contradictory; she also explicitly states that she does not belong in Ghana due to fear of violence. Feminist scholarship has explored the impact domestic violence within private space has on people's relationships with space and place. Rachel Pain, for example, argues that home and private spaces are socially constructed into being perceived as 'safe' spaces but, for sufferers of domestic violence, the home is anything but safe and rather a source of violence and danger (see for example Pain, 1997 and Pain et al., 2020). Similarly, for Sylvia, a place she refers to as home was a place where she feared violence. Statist approaches to belonging, prioritising physical presence or legal forms of belonging and temporal relationships to place, are not sufficient in understanding these types of experiences of belonging and home—because they often focus on safety in public rather than private spaces through the designation of countries as 'safe' and 'unsafe', in so-called 'safe lists'.

Sylvia's description of Ghana demonstrates how home and belonging are entangled in a multifaceted relationship and how home can be un-made (Belloni, 2018). Her use of the words 'my country' and 'home' to describe Ghana suggest that at some point her relationship was familiar. However, through fear of violence, she no longer sees it as a place where she belongs.

Furthermore, her photograph shows that a sense of belonging can be re-made in a new physical site through contrasting feelings and emotions with a former place. This reflects an argument made by Sarah Allen (2008) that the home-making strategies of migrants are often critically affected by the possibility of retaining the relational base of a past home experience. Sylvia's sense of belonging in the UK, through safety, is critically affected by her intimate past experiences of violence and the resulting sense of non-belonging because of lack of feeling safe.

The following photographs further explore where participants expressed their relationship to home as fluid, messy and at times contradictory; these were taken by men in their twenties from Sudan. The following extract comes from a group dialogue session with six Sudanese men: some with refugee status, some still seeking asylum and one with naturalised British citizenship. During the fieldwork (January 2019-August 2019), the political situation in Sudan became extremely volatile. Many people in Sudan were protesting on the streets every day and a large majority of the photos taken by Sudanese participants in this research project were of the protests they engaged in here in the UK, in solidarity with the people of Sudan.

Figure 7 and 8

Photographs taken by a friend for Faiz, of Faiz and others at a protest against the political situation in Sudan, Manchester.

> Faiz: yeah, the flag means a lot of things. I do not belong for this flag [Figure 8] as much as this flag [Figure 7]. You know when we get the government, they change it, because we need to become Arab.
>
> Adam: you know it is similar for Palestine and Iraq, Syria, they create this to belong to Arab [Figure 7]. But this one is for Africa! [Figure 7]
>
> Jo: So you said that you think you belong to this flag more than this flag? Why is that?
>
> Mohammad: because this is the original flag
>
> Faiz: because when I show the people that this is my flag, I feel proud, proud to belong to this flag, we are African not Arab.

These photographs highlight photovoice as a process of engagement with the research topics, rather than being simply a methodological tool. Faiz had a friend take these photographs so that he can place himself within the photograph. Faiz explained that placing himself as a subject within the

photograph represents his membership to the group. It is important to note here that Figure 7. is taken in Piccadilly Gardens despite Faiz's earlier discussion that he no longer visited Piccadilly Gardens. When asked about this Faiz explained that he felt more comfortable in a group whilst they were protesting as their purpose was very clear; that is, he was not a lone, black male who may be viewed as a drug dealer. This statement brings into focus the ways within which borders and their sites are in a constant state of contestation and (re)definition in everyday lives (Rumford, 2012).

The participants discussed the difference between the old and the new flag of Sudan, claiming that they 'belong more' to the old flag than they do to the new one. They discussed their contested identity as becoming an Arab nation. After Britain and Egypt's condominium colonisation of Sudan ended in 1953, the Sudanese flag was blue, yellow and green striped, pictured predominantly in figure 7. The participants discuss, how this flag represents the 'real' Sudan and not only their Sudanese identity but their identity as African. In 1960 an Arab nationalist regime took over Sudan and a new flag for the country was hoisted in 1970, combining the four pan-Arab colours [Figure 8]. This draws attention to the way the nation is (re)imagined, constructed and temporal. During the group dialogue sessions, they also discussed the hundreds of different tribes that make up Sudan, all with different dialects and languages. They mentioned that, when they were in Sudan, they may have belonged to tribes that were feuding with each other, however, once out of Sudan, they were just 'Sudanese'. Group membership, belonging and identity were all temporally and spatially affected.

These participants were very passionate in their contempt for being Arab and their stance that their true identity was African. However, when analysing the photographs, it became apparent that their contempt for their forced Arab identity was complex. In Figure 8, and wrapped around the shoulders of a man in Figure 7, is the Arab flag that they discuss with such contempt. When asked about this potential contradiction, Mohammad replied: "because this is the flag now and we need people to know why we are in the streets". The use of the Arab flag allows them to be visible as Sudanese, and for their political message about Sudan to be heard and viewed from the outside. When it comes to protesting the political situation within Sudan, it appears both flags can be used

to signify solidarity with the Sudanese people. This highlights the complex nature in which belonging is (re)imagined and articulated on the ground in the everyday lives of migrants who are engaged in the politics of the countries they have moved from/ fled, which they articulate as central to the ways in which they are making new forms of belonging in the UK.

The multiple and, at times, contradictory layers to the men's identity, undermines the dichotomy of either/or when thinking about belonging and home. The men appear to have a number of homes that did not easily present themselves hierarchically. Where does the 'home', that the 'Operation Vaken' van refers to, lie for these men? The men's photographs show that their concept of home is not a straightforward location but is rather a complex, messy and contradictory combination of Africa, a territory ruled under the original Sudanese flag, Sudan under an Arab regime, their local tribe and the UK. These findings highlight the richness of the data produced when experiences are told/showed from the perspective of those who are experiencing mobility and migration, contrary to the limited way statist policies understand belonging.

All of the photographs discussed within this section help us understand the situated nature of peoples' intimate relationships with home, which are at times contradictory and related to processes of home un-making and re-making. Boccagini (2017) argues that home-making has a relational, appropriative and future-orientated side to it. Participants' photographs represented the way that these people assert their voices about how they experience home as multiple, contradictory, unmade and remade. Furthermore, participants' subjectivities revealed how the 'home' left behind can play a vital role in the way migrants forge new forms of belonging and homes in the UK.

Conclusion

The article has drawn on research that used photovoice to explore asylum seeking and refugee communities' self-represented experiences of place, belonging and citizenship. Kudžmaitė and Pauwels (2020, p. 27) point out that a visual approach to borders provides a tool to 'recognise and expose the overpowering worldviews', whilst at the same time to 'look from the angle of the underrepresented'. Aligning with this argument, in this project photography

emerged as an innovative and novel way for participants to communicate insight into their lives and experiences of borders, but this article has demonstrated that it was also much more than a methodological tool.

The research has demonstrated some of the complexities in how bordering is experienced by those constructed as belonging to a territory outside of the UK. Participants highlighted where legal status does not result necessarily in a personal feeling of belonging. Statist policies often claim to be in the name of legality, however participants' experiences of racism highlight where dominant constructions of who can claim belonging work through the categories of race in the UK, despite varying forms of legal status. Dominant constructions of who does and does not belong mean that intersecting trajectories of legal status, race and gender result in experiences of borderwork, and these were lived through everyday experiences with people and place. The research also found the way migrants may also, over time, adopt these bordering practices which they may have been on the receiving end of themselves. Whilst it is not new to the study of bordering and geopolitics, that borders are experienced by those constructed as racialised Others and performed through everyday interactions, what was novel here was that photography meant that participants produced visualisations of often invisible and unspeakable (Erel et al., 2017) borders, such as racism.

The second half of the article focused on the way in which participants' photographic representations of home move away from the statist binary logic of either/or, which underpins hierarchical ordering of belonging. The richness of the participants' photographs and discussions of belonging and home brings in an appreciation of in-between and a both/and framework of belonging, which helps us better understand the processes at play in regard to mobility, home and belonging. Their representations of home, through photography and subsequent discussion, were revealing of the complex relationships with belonging to local and transnational 'homes', that were mutually constitutive and relational rather than opposing each other in ways that can be ordered hierarchically. Furthermore, their sense of belonging and constructions of home and identity were at times contradictory. Whilst a form of belonging and identification with their 'homeland' was still valued and nurtured, there was a sense of estrangement through an inability to see it as offering a plausible

future, or as a safe space. Relationships with former places were often the relational basis for the making of 'home' and a sense of belonging here in the UK. Thus, their photography did not reflect territorialised notions of one fixed site of home. This article's work builds upon earlier work on the reality of migrants' constructions of home that finds home to be a complex relationship (Moskal, 2015; Boccagini, 2017; Belloni, 2018; Ní Mhurchú, 2019).

By performing borders, the state makes certain claims about the politics of belonging. When participants took their photographs and engaged in discussions about them, they made their own performance of and/or about borders and, in doing so, questioned the validity of claims the state makes when enacting borders. This article has highlighted that visual methods represent an important way to visualise increasingly difficult to identify/visualise borders, but also the richness of gaining perspectives from people who are actually experiencing mobility and migration. The complexities of how borders, bordering, belonging and home are experienced were unpacked by participants revealing fluidity and messiness, beyond what is allowed for in dominant statist narratives of borders, belonging and home.

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Ethics statement

This fieldwork discussed in this article was approved by the University of Manchester's ethics committee on the 14th December 2018. Participants signed two consent forms, one which indicated their consent to take part in the photovoice project and a second which consented to photographs being reproduced and published outside of the project, including in academic journal articles.

List of figures

Figure 1: Photograph taken by Duaa of playing field fense.
Figure 2: Photograph taken by Sylvia of a trolly in an alley-way.
Figure 3: Photograph taken by Faiz of Piccadilly Gardens, Manchester.
Figure 4: Photograph taken by Fahad of tow path and river.
Figure 5: Photograph taken by Fahad of cycle 'stop' lane barriers..
Figure 6: Photograph taken by Sylvia of a street
Figure 7 and 8: Photographs taken by a friend for Faiz, of Faiz and others at a protest against the political situation in Sudan, Manchester.

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