10. (In)conclusions: Leaping into the Abyss

The more I try to clarify what home is, the less I know anything about it. It slips through my fingers like the air I breathe. It is at once the most familiar, the most common, and the most elusive subject I can think of; utterly concrete and wholly invisible. What I have been trying to understand and discuss through this thesis is how our philosophies—our concepts—of self, shape our politics of ‘us’ and ‘them’, like I have been witnessing them doing in the asylum politics and Willkommenskultur of Germany. Confounded by the depths of the fearful political discourse, and inspired by the fascinating moment of identity-formation or transformation that I am a part of in my ‘integration’ work, I saw a moment for a fundamental questioning of our political homes and for re-imagining belonging from a place of embodied empathy. In these pages I have explored how our conceptions of who and what we are—how separate, how bounded, how individual, how rooted, how impermeable, how constant—are projected on social bodies and nations as metaphors for home that very concretely affect the breathing bodies of people all over the world. The consequences of closed borders, travel bans, walls and deportation are enormous. They deny the reality of our already being bound up in one another.

So, as my own conception of my body and its borders shifted through my somatic training, and as I felt the way this shift changed my presence, thinking and actions in the world around me, I began to wonder how this wisdom could be useful in our tormented political times as both new metaphors on the macro-political level and as lived practice for micro-political, transpersonal transformation—at the grass roots.

I began my research into these political questions with philosophy, which is what I studied in college, and often the way I think. Yet, I realized while trying to explore modern and postmodern philosophy of self and being and their relationship to political constructions of home, was what Audre Lorde said long ago: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”. Philosophy can only go so far in re-imagining the core of itself. Heidegger’s phenomenology de-stabilized the foundations of metaphysics, opening the Grund (ground) of truth into an Abgrund (abyss), but in doing so also shook up the foundations of our irrevocable responsibility to one another.

Levinas and Butler tried to think through this dangerous problem, deriving an ethics from our human encounter with our vulnerable Other. Levinas tried to de-center and deconstruct the Self, its bounded body with the centrality and pre-originality of the Other and Butler takes this further in recognizing our own embodiment and the terrifying vulnerability of it. She sees this as the opening into a ‘sensate democracy’, a community built on inter-relationality through the awareness of our shared fragile embodiment—our ability to be hurt, to lose and to die.

Yet, though I think this points in a deeply transformative direction, there is a moment when discourse falls apart, when the body can no more be thought but must be felt, when theory only re-asserts what it wishes to deconstruct in its very written and thought form, and experience must fill the void. The research begs to be continued with more than the rational brain. For these reasons I tried to make the leaps that I did between philosophy, political history, somatics, embodied spirituality and peace work on the ground.

What guided my work were the shifts in understanding of the bodymind that I personally experienced through my somatic work, and that now also guide my political thinking about home. Very different from the metaphors of the body I explore in “The Body Politic” chapter, with feet as peasants and heads as princes, with a God outside determining
the inner working of the parts, the absolute body of the monarchy, or the perfect body-machine of the Nazis, my experiential observations lead me to an image of the body-as-home that is more of an unending process than a map to a clearly defined social hierarchy or an end to be achieved.

My observations have been: My body is a constantly transforming process; My skin is a dynamically permeable, breathing, growing landscape of intelligent communication; My insides and outsides are intertwined and become one another; My secure and rooted feet are what enables my flexible movement; My body is shaped by its communication with the living world; and as a Soma— I am not a thing, but a phenomenon, a multiplicity, a system made up of systems, and a system within a system of systems, all beautifully, endlessly interlocked.

The breath, that which is with me from the moment I leave my mother’s womb until I die, is the most and the least constant aspect of my body and my self. It infuses me with life—is my spirit, my inspiration—and it connects me to all other living beings—it is not mine. Like Gaia’s atmosphere, it is the invisible connection between us all. It runs through me, never an organ but always forming and transforming me. Thich Nhat Hanh reminded me that, by bringing my awareness to my breath, I can come home. If home is in the breath, then home is not a stable thing, for nothing is less thing-like than breath—a flow in and out that transforms through its perpetual movement. So, what can we learn from the paradoxical wisdom of our breathing bodies? How do they inspire new imaginations of home?

I must admit, I still do not know what such a politics would look like. I have visions of permeable borders, dynamic, micro communities, engaging with each other and the land, connected to and supporting other local communities across the world. I have visions of complete overhauls of educational and health systems to reflect our interdependence and train our awareness of our multiple, transforming bodyminds. In fact, I am moving back to the United States to create just such a model with my beloved partner, Stephen Bradford, on his family’s organic vegetable farm outside of Washington DC. But what we aim to create is not an answer but a space for sharing in the question. For, I do not believe I will think my way into visions of new shapes of belonging, especially not alone. Such an enormous societal transformation is a practice and a process—a collaborative creation. When there is an opening in society, a rupture in borders, when norms and daily life are unsettled, there is an opportunity to consciously go about the creative project of crafting the contours of belonging—the home we co-inhabit whether we like it or not.

I see it as my art work and my peace work to facilitate these collective spaces for asking, embodying and imagining belonging. It is not about creating new strong truths, answers or homes to replace the old, but to engage in the process of sharing these unanswerable questions with one another and risking the creative process of delving into the unknown. This is what I attempted to do with this book and why yoUtopia, and my other community-based projects have been and continue to be so important to me. There we practice these politics, redefining ourselves with our others.

My wish for this work moving forward is that I take its foundational questions as a theoretical framework to do more involved, community-based, qualitative research to go deeper into the connection between these philosophical queries and lived realities, as well as share these practices with broader and more diverse groups. The crisis of belonging that people in Germany, and increasingly in the US, are experiencing about the arrival of refugees, and the displacement of their centrality in the country and the world is not going away. It can neither be dismissed as narcissistic, nor ignored, because it has very real consequences. Both this psychological displacement and the very material displacement of more than 60 million people worldwide opens up questions that we need to grapple with, and with each moment, each relationship, and each breath we have the opportunity to do so.

Yesterday I met with a group of twelve youth for the first day of my last project in Berlin. In Mir Zuhause was extended for an additional year, and many of the youth from our last group are back to continue the work with us. Since we met in December, Jamal, whose