



*Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures*

# **DOMESTIC INTERSECTIONS IN CONTEMPORARY MIGRATION FICTION**

**HOMING THE METROPOLE**

Lucinda Newns

ROUTLEDGE



“In this politically sensitive and timely book, Lucinda Newns challenges critical orthodoxies in order to revise the correlation of domestic space with insularity, normativity, and stasis. By showing how migrant fiction evokes alternative practices of homemaking, her intersectional readings offer a multifaceted contribution to the study of belonging in postcolonial, feminist, and queer studies.”

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“In this era of homelessness and displacement, home is not automatically a safe space. Lucinda Newns shows that for migrants, LGBTQI people, women, and refugees, home is a process striated by violence and enforced uprooting. Her important new book updates postcolonial discussions of home for this complex and fraught twenty-first century era.”

—*Claire Chambers*, University of York



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# Domestic Intersections in Contemporary Migration Fiction

*Domestic Intersections in Contemporary Migration Fiction* responds to the need for a more materialist perspective on migration by reorienting the focus on domesticity and the everyday practices of homemaking and away from a celebratory and aestheticized reading of displacement. Centering on Britain as the location of arrival, its readings of canonical and underexplored works of diasporic fiction emanating from Africa, South Asia and the Caribbean foreground the significance of discourses of domesticity in supporting as well as resisting colonialism, racism and xenophobia. Applying an intersectional feminist approach, this book challenges the tendency to view the private sphere as a static, apolitical and uncreative space. Rather, News argues, we should regard the domestic home as a key site for contesting the terms of belonging within larger spaces and collectivities, such as the city and the nation. Ultimately, by demonstrating the material importance of homely spaces for non-privileged migrants like women, refugees and LGBTQ+ people, *Domestic Intersections* problematizes the critical suspicion towards home and placement in feminist, postcolonial and queer theory.

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# Domestic Intersections in Contemporary Migration Fiction

Homing the Metropole

Lucinda Newns

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**For My Parents**





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# 1 Introduction

## Homing in on Migration

What is there worth saving and holding on to between the extremes of exile on the one hand, and the often bloody-minded affirmations of nationalism on the other?

Edward Said<sup>1</sup>

Begin with the material. Pick up again the long struggle against lofty and privileged abstraction.

Adrienne Rich<sup>2</sup>

Down terrace after terrace, hundreds of bay windows glow. These were once desirable suburban addresses: on Henley, Windsor and Hampton Road. But today these are where you find the immigrant share rooms. The ones they advertise on Polish websites, or in little cards stuck in grubby windows of the Pakistani newsagents. This is where England begins. And today the white British population of these dingy streets south of Ilford station is around 10 per cent.

Ben Judah, *This is London*<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, our televisions and computer screens have been filled with images of people whose lives are marked by transience – those whose sense of home has been destroyed by mortar bombs, hazardous crossings, the permanent impermanence of desert camps and the bureaucratic tedium of asylum legislation. If, as Edward Said contends in an essay written decades before the recent “refugee crisis”, “our age [...] is the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration” (2001, 137–138), then “home” seems to be ever more tenuous and fleeting, though certainly for some more than others. Many of those who make it through such barriers to arrive on Britain’s shores and the many more who come via legal channels of EU free movement from countries in Eastern Europe (though with Brexit looming as I write, such pathways may soon be closed) will find themselves in one of these “immigrant share rooms” in a neighborhood like the one described in *This is London*, Ben Judah’s 2016 foray into the underbelly of the global

## 2 Introduction: Homing in on Migration

metropolis. As he rightly says, for those who come without money or connections, “this is where England begins”. These terraces in East London, he goes on to say,

carry the sad names of the other, richer London – Richmond, Kingston or Eton Road. And they turn and turn, mutating between Pakistani homes and Eastern European tenements. But those net curtains, they are always the giveaways. These were left up when landlords turned this pebbledash house into a tenement, as the English pulled out or died. You can always tell a slum house, where four Polish builders crash in bunk beds behind that chipped bay window, by those very same old and floral singed curtains.

(2016, 360)

In this description, once familiar spaces are marked out and othered through their association with immigrant arrivals. Desirable neighborhoods are turned into “dingy streets” and terraced homes become “tenements” and “slum houses”. Here, Judah seems to lament, is where the aspirations of white middle-class domesticity have all but disappeared, save for the remnants of faded net curtains hanging in the windows.

This book is about these immigrant home spaces and their representation in fiction. It is driven by the seemingly contradictory task of foregrounding processes of settling, of staying put, in literary narratives that are so explicitly about movement and journeying. In speaking about “home”, however, this book is concerned with material, domestic spaces and the everyday activities that go on there. It is about resisting the tendency to collapse the material into the figurative, in which “home” must always stand for something grander – often, the nation – in order to be considered interesting. Indeed, the domestic home and its attendant activities are not typically seen as warranting critical attention. Henri Lefebvre, in his *Critique of Everyday Life* (1991/1947), expressed frustration at scholars’ readiness to dismiss everyday culture as banal and unworthy of enquiry, describing it as the “residue” left over once specialist, structured activities have been singled out by academic analysts. The domestic space has been further devalued through its association with women in the enduring logic of separation between public/masculine and private/feminine “spheres”. Even “home” itself has come to be divided between these two domains in which the domestic remains subordinate. As Rosemary Marangoly George articulates,

While the issue of “homelands” or “home-countries” is raised primarily in the discourse on nationalism and other so-called masculine, public, arenas, the issue of “home” and the private sphere is usually embedded in discourses on women. [...] The association of

home and the female has served to present them as mutual handicaps, mutually disempowering.

(1996, 19)

Due to their association with the “banal”, the “residual” and the feminized, domestic spaces are also not readily thought about in relation to creativity or writing. In her *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed presents the image of a writing table which she encounters in the opening of the work of phenomenological philosopher Edmund Husserl. She notes that the writing table is one of the objects “that gather around the writer”, whereas “the family home provides [...] the background against which an object (the writing table) appears in the present” (2006, 29, 30):

[B]eing orientated toward the writing table might ensure that you inhabit certain rooms and not others, and that you do some things rather than others. [...] Being orientated toward the writing table not only relegates other rooms in the house to the background, but also might depend on the work done to keep the desk clear. The desk that is clear is one that is ready for writing. One might even consider the domestic work that must have taken place for Husserl to turn to the writing table, and to be writing on the table, and to keep that table as the object of his attention.

(2006, 30)

In other words, “[w]hat is behind Husserl’s back, what he does not face, might be the back of the house—the feminine space dedicated to the work of care, cleaning, and reproduction” (2006, 31). Here, as Ahmed demonstrates, the space of the writer is typically seen as antithetical to that of the home – to be orientated towards writing is to eschew the domestic activities that would otherwise be a distraction, holding the mind back into a world of “ordinariness” that is not conducive to creative thought. However, as suggested by the pioneering Kitchen Table Press,<sup>4</sup> feminist writing, particularly by women of color, has had a long tradition of resisting such easy separations.

The texts discussed in this book are precisely those that do not relegate the domestic to the background of their works. Rather, home spaces and the activities that take place there – such as cleaning, cooking, eating, dressing, decorating and caring – are central to their representations of migration and settling and their interventions into wider colonial, racist and xenophobic discourses. Again, the domestic is not the obvious place to look for such political resistance. The model of separate spheres has earmarked the public space as the world of politics, leaving the private as an apolitical realm. However, as suggested by the descriptions of migrant homes in *This is London* above, such spaces are as much bound



#### 4 *Introduction: Homing in on Migration*

up with the processes of othering that go on in the public sphere. Such representations form part of a long history of racist and gendered tropes, frequently operating together, that paint certain bodies as illegitimate or inadequate homemakers. There is a continuing tendency for the homes of migrant and diasporic communities to be seen as sources of social dysfunction and neighborhood degeneration (as seen above) or as breeding grounds for oppressive traditions and radical beliefs, without regard for the material and psychic support that such spaces might provide in the face of a potentially hostile world outside. At the same time, this book is not about returning to an idealized version of the private sphere and women's place within it, but is interested in how domesticity might function as a form of resistance against "the perpetual construction of economic and social structures that deprive many folks of the means to make homeplace" (hooks 1991, 46).

As Sara Ahmed elsewhere contends, we tend to associate home with

stasis, boundaries, identity and fixity. Home is implicitly constructed as a purified space of belonging in which the subject is too comfortable to question the limits or borders of her or his experience, indeed, where the subject is so at ease that she or he does not think. (2000, 87)

When such ideas come to rest on the lives of immigrants or their descendants, any attachment to home spaces can be figured as embracing insularity and segregation and a resistance to integration or cultural syncretism. The works considered in this book engage with and disrupt such readings of the homes of racial others as pathological or regressive spaces that must be policed or escaped from in order for their inhabitants to properly integrate into the metropolitan nation. In doing so, these texts complicate narratives of home that assume a space that is "pure, which is uncontaminated by movement, desire or difference" (Ahmed 2000, 88). Instead, they offer complex interior geographies that remap the metropolitan domestic space, reframing the home as an important carrier of meaning but one that is undergoing the same processes of hybridity and transculturation that we more readily associate with the public sphere. Indeed, important work has been done on how migrant and diasporic writers and artists have transformed narratives of British national<sup>5</sup> and city spaces<sup>6</sup> so it seems only appropriate to consider how such literary texts intervene at the domestic scale as well.

In my readings of these literary narratives of migration, I am interested in how making a home can be construed as a political act. We can start by thinking of that now official term "home-maker", put forward as a more neutral replacement for the gendered label housewife. Although still largely associated with women, it makes an attempt to transform the spatial stasis of that older label into one of productive

action. This book therefore begins with the question of what it means to “make” a home when that home is in a foreign country and culture, with different codes and kinds of spaces within which to carry out this work? Also, to what extent can we think of homemaking as meaningful work, in spite of its frequently gendered associations with the banal and the everyday? In what contexts can the practices of homemaking become subversive and when are they hegemonic? Finally, how are processes that take place within the domestic space entangled with discourses regarding integration, assimilation, segregation, nationalism, national security and multiculturalism that are more readily associated with the public sphere? In reactionary discourses to migration, for example, the house frequently comes to stand as a metaphor for the nation, with its accompanying binaries of resident/guest (or more often resident/intruder), family/stranger and its tropes of open doors and bolted locks.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, material homes are also frequently brought into such debates through territorial contestations over the “character” of residential neighborhoods, the allocation of government housing and access to social care.

## **Domestic Intersections**

In orienting this project around home and, in particular, domestic spaces, I come up against a persistent suspicion of home/placement and corresponding celebration of movement/dislocation in postcolonial, feminist and queer studies – bodies of work that are otherwise central to framing my textual readings in the chapters that follow. The dynamics of placement and displacement have been central issues for postcolonial studies since its inception, as seen in the work of founding postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha (2004/1994). His groundbreaking ideas on hybridity, ambivalence and mimicry recast conditions of unfixity and in-betweenness as positions resistant to the essentializing work of colonial discourse and nationalist rhetoric. Equally, investments in home/placement have come to be associated with homogenization and exclusion. As Partha Chatterjee puts it, “[Home is] not a complementary but rather the original site on which the hegemonic project of nationalism was launched” (1993, 147). In its most extreme guise, the question of who is and is not at home in a particular geographic space has fostered a violent reactionary politics, as seen in the partition of India after independence, the expulsion of Asians from Idi Amin’s Uganda, the rise in racist attacks in the wake of Enoch Powell’s notorious “Rivers of Blood” speech or, more recently, the vote on Brexit.

As crucial as it has been to critique such positions as part of the colonial project, this has left some enduring blind spots when it comes to postcolonial readings of material experiences of migration, which have tended toward the celebratory. In Salman Rushdie’s highly influential

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essay, "Imaginary Homelands", we see the mark of this positive reading of displacement. Speaking of the Indian writer in the West, he says,

Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy.

(1992, 15)

While acknowledging that migration produces a break from the past that can never be fully recovered in its entirety, he mobilizes the migrant position as one that transcends the parochialism of ethnic and national boundaries, arguing that "falling between two stools" is not a limitation but rather a source of creativity for the writer. While not disputing that this may often be the case, the problem occurs when the migrant, the displaced person, is detached from historical circumstances and made to stand as the resistant figure *par excellence*. We see this slippage in Rushdie's contention that migrants are "the only species of human being free of the shackles of nationalism", who "root themselves in ideas rather than places" (1992, 124).

The notion of rooting oneself in ideas rather than places, though seemingly progressive and liberatory, has the effect of eliding material differences between migrants. In expressing the drive to shirk off place, this theoretical move first assumes a stable material position from which do so. As Sara Ahmed expresses,

The subject who has chosen to be homeless, rather than is homeless due to the contingency of "external" circumstances, is certainly a subject who is privileged, and for whom having or not having a home does not affect its ability to occupy a given space. Is the subject who chooses homelessness and a nomadic lifestyle, or a nomadic way of thinking, one that can do so, *because the world is already constituted as its home?*

(2000, 83, emphasis in original)

In other words, to be able to "root oneself in ideas rather than places" is actually to articulate a position of relative privilege. Indeed, Benita Parry has called postcolonial critics out for drawing on their own experiences of elite migration in constructing this intellectual paradigm:

[A]s if extrapolating from their own situations [that of the "third world" intellectual elite], advocates of the unhomey condition have proleptically proposed a multitudinous category of the dispossessed who will/must come to desire and attain deliverance from the shackles of nation and place.

(2004, 10)

Hardt and Negri (2000) have argued that imperial power in an age of supra-states and multinational corporations now frequently operates through the very discursive tools of hybridity, fragmentation and deterritorialization that postcolonial studies has relied upon to combat colonial hierarchies (144–145). Likewise, in a time of global economic exploitation, environmental destruction and forced migration of various degrees, an uncritical investment in tropes of homelessness can serve to bolster these new ills rather than resist them. We can see the discursive violence of a gesture in which “the experiences of migration, which can involve trauma and violence, become exoticized and idealized as the basis of an ethics of transgression” (Ahmed 2000, 82). As Revathi Krishnaswamy (1995) has urged, we must confront this “mythology of migrancy” and undergo a “systematic examination of the material conditions and ideological contexts within which migrancy has emerged as the privileged paradigmatic trope of postcolonialism in the metropolis” (130). Like the idea of home, we need to resist the impulse to abstract migrancy into a figure and address the material differences between a variety of migratory experiences that are separated by class, gender, sexuality and circumstances of departure. Otherwise, we subsume, and therefore erase, less privileged forms of migration into a celebratory paradigm.

In a variety of ways, the works considered in this book trouble the notion of “homelessness” as a liberatory position. Rather, *Domestic Intersections* rereads the domestic home as a potential unsung site of anti-colonial and anti-racist resistance. In doing so, it contributes to a re-centring of locatedness in postcolonial studies as a whole.<sup>8</sup> While underpinned by postcolonial preoccupations with colonialism and its enduring hierarchies of race, religion and culture, the book is concerned with exploring texts that engage with multiple and intersecting axes of power. It is built around works that depict the kinds of migrant subjects that trouble the postcolonial celebration of displacement: they are variously female, working-class, non-secular, non-heteronormative and involuntary. When class and circumstances of departure are considered alongside race, for example, the call to reject attachments to home become less tenable. Paraphrasing Iris Marion Young, it is precisely because home is a privilege that it should be democratized rather than rejected (1997, 157). The book is driven by a concern with the way deterritorialized tropes can serve to liberate the centered “at home” subject at the expense of those who are materially displaced. This is not about returning to exclusionary narratives of home, but instead argues for the importance of material practices of homemaking as modes of belonging that do not reinscribe nationalist or other essentialist claims to place.

Advocating for the value of domestic homes and practices, however, also necessitates grappling with the misgivings about place/home in feminist and queer scholarship. As mentioned above, women’s association