

Review Article

***Homelandings: Postcolonial Diasporas and Transatlantic Belongings* (2016) by Rahul Gairola**

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I

We all discover over and over again the kind of strange and violent stranglehold history has over us. We deploy histories to explain our pasts, identify the present, and orient us to the future. As Rahul K. Gairola shows in *Homelandings: Postcolonial Diasporas and Transatlantic Belongings*, the multiple currents of history have dictated our methods for establishing our home-sites: who belongs and who does not belong in any given place. Our “at-home” practices, one dimension of “the double-bind of history as home...” (2016, xvi), have a deep and lasting impact on how we move about and participate in the world-at-large.

Homelandings provides a timely intervention into the theoretical discourse on the “home-site” as the outcome of a “home-economics” that continually reenacts the persistent racism, classicism, sexism, and queerphobia of a neoliberal bio-political governmentality of the Anglosphere (Bennet’s term, cited in Gairola, 18). The project offers “homelandings,” Gairola’s neologism, as the process of resistance to and reappropriation of “home-sites”: “producing new homes in which alternative modes of community and belonging flourish and reproduce” (17). *Homelandings*—with “landings” as the demarcator of that which is in motion, always about to happen—then act as a series of transversal disruptors of the neoliberal sphere. In this way, these resistances provide a conceptual and practical apparatus for the emergence of domestic orientations, relations, and spaces, even if these are often provisional.

Writing now in the wake of the emergence of COVID 19 as a health, social, and economic crisis—as well as the world-wide *Black Lives Matters* (BLM) Movement—a critical re-theorization of home across the multiple registers of race, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, class, and disability—is more urgently needed than ever. In his introduction, Gairola explains:

[T]he obliteration of certain lives, conspicuously brown and black, is tacitly coded in the rituals, codes, practices, and structures of daily life in the interlinked chains of space that racialized bodies inhabit in neoliberal domiciles. Conceptualizations of home are so deeply imbricated in institutions that they fashion it as an organizing concept that surfaces in everyday aphorisms that we utter like mantras. Yet we seldom reckon critically with the immense gravity that home casts on our daily lives, possibly *because* it pivots upon quick and sharp exclusions even as it promises inclusive hospitality (xv).

The “rituals, codes, practices, and structures of daily life” provide the context for overt and covert forms of communal acceptance of what is considered as “home.” Yet, as we deal with the waves of

COVID 19 in whatever “home” we find ourselves in, home-as-we-might-know-it is being radically distorted and vacated of its meaning. In the case of COVID 19, we currently face the unsettling, and, in many cases the complete stoppage of transnational migratory flows.

International travel is non-existent or highly restricted; countries are requiring that its citizens live under various forms of lockdown; and citizens of one country are trapped in another, unable to return home. The devastating economic impact has been leading to massive unemployment and homelessness; and in countries such as India, massive displacement has occurred as urban migrants are forced to flee to back to rural areas, since there is no longer sufficient work available in the cities.

At the same time, the BLM Movement—founded in 2013 in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer—has led to world-wide protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, precipitating widespread demands for an end to the ways in which “domestic genocide” (16) occurs at the hands of law enforcement officials. We have been thrust into a new series of “dividing moments” as these historical fractures continue to manifest themselves and as regions across the world grapple with the short-term impact and long-term implications of each phenomenon.

II

Gairola’s project takes up a range of works from Michelle Cliff’s novel *Abeng* (1984); Hanif Kuerishi’s and Stephan Frears’s films *My Beautiful Launderette* (1985) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987); Jessica Hagedorn’s novel *Dogeaters* (1990); Jackie Kay’s novel *Trumpet* (1998); and Cheryl Dunye’s cable television film *Stranger Inside* (2001), in each case tracking variations of the racialized heteronormative instantiations of home and their implications. As Gairola historicizes the geographical location of each case study from across Jamaica, Britain, the Philippines, England/Scotland, and the US, we find that the complex histories of what a home is have been formed by an intractable web of both colonial and neo-colonial forms of political, economic, and domestic surveillance and policing. In these contexts, the ensuing resistances and re-makings of home—as types of “homelandings” for “queer diasporic agents of colour” (15)—can reveal “supplementary knowledge formations” (15). Gairola’s work provides a provisional genealogy of the neoliberal history of “homes” and the potential for alternatives in the context of “postcolonial diasporas and transatlantic belongings.”

In Chapter 2, “Between Homes: Western Education and Transgressions of Disciplinary Knowledge in Michelle Cliff’s *Abeng*,” Gairola, for example, addresses the complexities and contradictions of a post-World War II postcolonial Jamaica that aims to rebuild itself as a paradise for white, particularly American, tourists. Set in a 1958 Jamaica, *Abeng*, a semi-autobiographical novel, revolves around the experiences of Clare Savage, a 12-year-old light-skinned bi-racial girl, who grapples with her family history and her place in modern day Jamaica. Her father, Boy Savage, is a descendent of an English Earl, and, in contrast, Kitty, Clare’s mother, comes from a mixed family. Clare’s coming-of-age story, as she deals with her racial background and attraction for girls, unfolds across the backdrop of a series of revelations of the impact of the historical repression of British imperialism in Jamaica, the loss of Jamaican culture, and the ways in which the characters are unaware of their histories.

Various forms of schooling reinforce the valorization of the ideal home, one which requires a neo-colonial performance of the heteronormative “lady-like-ness.” These exemplars include the story of Doreen’s expulsion from St. Catherine’s School because of her “medical disability and

skin colour” (50); the story about Uncle Robert as “funny” because his “dearest friend” is an African American sailor; and, finally, the ways that Mrs. Phillips, with her allegiances to the neo-colonial values of the British empire, made her the ideal teacher who turns Clare into a “lady.” Nevertheless, Clare’s encounters with “socially transgressive characters like Zoe (‘queer darkie’), Minnie Bogle (the domestic servant), and Mrs. Stevens (the non-feminine lunatic) are pivotal because they serve as living examples of alternative modes of living and embodiments of home” (19). Even while Clare’s encounters with these three characters disrupt the standardized “racial and heteronormative ideals” (19), Clare’s embodiment of teachings of Mrs. Phillips result, finally, in an internalization of class privilege. However, the ongoing potential for the eruption of alternative spaces of home is re-valORIZED through Cliff’s inclusion of a glossary in the novel. Gairola notes that “the ruptures in the ‘official’ history with a patois glossary at the back of the novel...disrupt the linguistic hegemony of the ‘anglosphere’” (20).

Subsequent chapters of *Homelandings* reveal other histories of postcolonial queer diasporas that highlight the problematics of the neoliberal home-site, the need for subversions of the status quo, and methods for generating other types of homelandings. Chapter Three examines, for example, Hanif Kuerishi’s and Stephan Frears’s *My Beautiful Launderette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* and the impact of Thatcherite England on the diasporic South Asian community in London. In *My Beautiful Launderette*, white Brit Johnny and Pakistani Omar—unexpectedly reunited after a clash between a group of racist punks (led by Johnny)—take over and renovate a rundown launderette in South London which serves as an economic and social counterpoint to the heteronormative upscale North London. In *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, Rosie leaves her Pakistani husband to have an affair with a “drifter who calls himself ‘Victoria,’” and they refashion a “squatter’s trailer park camp beneath a motorway into a “home” (20). These films depict the ways in which an alternative “erotic economy” (20) of homelandings manifests inside of Thatcherite England.

In Chapter 4, “Homesick for Future Revolution: Heteronormative Lifestyles and Queer Heterotopias in Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters*” addresses how Hagedorn’s novel critiques the violent impact of neoliberal capitalism on post WW II Philippines, a former US colony. *Dogeaters* tells the story of several families which reveals the extreme disparities between the rich—invested in a consumer capitalism—and the poor. The President and the First Lady enact their obsessions with power, beauty, and the West on multiple levels. In one incident, for example, the First Lady, who oversees the construction of a Cultural Center for a film festival, gives orders that concrete be poured over the workers who have died on site in order to hurry up and finish the construction.

Two characters embody forms of resistance to the heteronormative neoliberalism of the Philippines. Joey Sands, a queer mestizo prostitute, works as a DJ at CocoRico, a gay bar. Daisy Avila is the daughter of a Senator and reigning Miss Philippines beauty pageant queen. After her father’s assassination and her own rape, Daisy rejects her title and moves to the forest where the communist guerillas train. Joey, an eyewitness to the assassination, also leaves Manila for the forest. Gairola writes: “In the frame of re-making an inclusive abode in the jungle that is not homesick for Manila’s flashy lifestyle, struggle trumps sexual gratification that is deferred rather than diminished in the rural reconstruction of this vastly different space of comfort and care” (164).

Chapter 5, “Home is Where the Heart Writes: Race, Media, Masculinity, and the Market in Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet*,” addresses the ways in which *The Trumpet* acts as a tale about resistance to heteronormative homes. When the novel opens in 1997, Joss Moody, a famous jazz musician who is half-West Indian and half British, has died, and the public learns that he had had the

parts of a woman, and had passed as man his whole life. Joss had been married to Millie, a white woman. An interracial, queer couple, they had adopted an interracial boy, Colman. Sophie Stones, a tabloid writer “hot in pursuit of a profitable freak show” (182), wants to pen an expose about Joss. Initially Colman, who has only learned that his father is transgender after his death, agrees to help her, and then later retracts his agreement to help her. It is important, as Gairola notes: “As a black cultural form charged with diasporic experiences, jazz affords Joss a means of belonging to the United Kingdom that is self-generated and experienced as an art form” (195). As a jazz musician, Joss was able to “get down,” which “suggests a cathartic shedding of three major indexes of Joss’s transgressions: sex, race, and memory” (195).

In the book’s epilogue, “Broken Homes and Insecure Homelands,” Gairola examines Cheryl Dunye’s *Stranger Inside*, the story of Treasure Lee, the black, queer protagonist, who, because of an infraction, moves from the Youth Authority Department of Corrections to the state’s maximum-security women’s penitentiary. Once Treasure learns that her mother, Margaret Lee, is doing life there, she asserts “I am going home” (quoted in Gairola: 209). Despite the multiple scales of management and spatial demarcation in a penal setting, we learn that inside regulatory spaces can be coopted for new forms of belonging, with Brownie (Margaret Lee) as the head matriarch. In the context of this “nuanced imaginary” (210), the relations between Brownie and her prison daughters, including Treasure, are both enacted and contested.

We encounter, on the one hand, the ways that the “pathologized blackness behind bars which resembles a plantation house within a cage ruled by a white, male overseer (Nelson)” (215). On the other, we find out that as the result of a series of fights, Treasure turns Nelson (who has been running an insider drug business with Margaret Lee) in so that she can transfer prisons, which leads to a type of “homelanding of the prison industrial complex” (216) for Treasure.

These chapters of *Homelandings* tackle various sites through which neoliberal surveillance, management, and policing takes hold across multiple economies that result in the institutionalization of education (and related forms of schooling), sex, politics, family, and the prison. The homelandings across queer diaspora of colour form a set of contrapuntal indices for alternative home-sites and with them incipient forms of revisionist histories.

As the text rounds towards its finish, Gairola brings us “up to date,” as it were, observing that as “subsequent leaders push forward...new forms of the same agenda” (23), we need to become aware of how the home-site is further regulated through the “transdigital” “through sophisticated, even frightening, digital technologies that imbricate virtuality into daily life...” (218). Such transdigital oppressions have emerged in the context of global mobilities that require more and more sophisticated methods for tracking through transnational forms of “online mobilization” (219). Drawing from Bart Simons, Gairola notes: “mark a shift from focus on the body to its digital representation to a focus on ‘dataveillance’ and ‘biometrics’” (205). In the post- 9/11 world, this coordinated transatlantic (and beyond) response to threat began policing movement across national borders through a range of virtual surveillance and tracking systems with increasing rapidity and far-reaching effect.

Gairola, however, also notes that “spaces of transdigital agency emerge as the most tenable way to galvanize movements around the globe” (219). Social media movements, such as BLM, have become global movements, largely because of the ways in which such activisms have taken up distributed forms of social mobilization through the use of online media.

III

Homelandings provides an index for how interventions in the regulation of the neoliberal home offers countervailing practices and narratives, ways of rewiring our relations and communities, and initiating new socio-cultural linkages of belonging in a transnational context. In her *Intimacies of Four Continents*, Lisa Lowe, working along an analogous path but focused on a “calculus” of *intimacy*, notes the need for a new understanding of intimacy that “may unsettle the ‘dominant’ notion of intimacy as the possession of the individual, if we consider both the ‘residual’ and ‘emergent’ forms of intimacies on which that dominance depends. This involves considering scenes of close connection in relation to a global geography that one more often conceives of in terms of vast spatial distances” (2015, 18).

Lowe draws from Raymond Williams and Antonio Gramsci to reiterate “the incomplete, still unfolding meanings, practices, and relationships associated with the emergence of elements in a new social and cultural formulation” (2015, 19). Borrowing from Lowe—and adding to Gairola’s own references to her work (2016, 219-220)—*homelandings*, embedded in local and transnational socio-cultural histories, can act, at the same time, as an important register for charting new processes of in the ongoing dynamic of the residual and the emergent across the *transdigital*.

In the face of COVID and BLM Movement—which signal the dividing moments in which we now find ourselves—we need to articulate methods that will lead to ever-expanding forms of *homelandings*. As these alternative knowledge formations supplant the normative socio-political orders and prepare us for the re-ordering that is decidedly afoot, more vibrant transversal imaginaries are activated in which building new forms of connections—or proximities of relations—across regional or national boundaries further intervenes in dominant ideologies.

In the context of COVID, part of that process will require that we re-calibrate our sense of bodies, relations, and spaces as we respond to the pandemic and the very real threat to all of us. At any point as any one of us could become ill—while those with pre-existing conditions are particularly susceptible—and we must seek new ways to orient ourselves across the transnational and the *transdigital*. These changes require more conscientious approaches to how we encounter *vulnerability* and *belongingness*. Because of the exigencies of COVID, we are now engaged in evolving formulations of virtual communities and work sites which require new sensitivities to how we might most justly and creatively participate in the emerging socio-cultural order.

Expanding the scope of Gairola’s work, one additional step is the folding in of a critical disability studies discourse. Gairola’s project, quite legitimately, is decidedly *not* about disability, but about queer diasporic subjects of color. Yet such references to Doreen, the student who is expelled from St. Catherine’s School, or to Sophie Stone’s interest in Moody Joss as the potential topic of a “profitable freak show,” do raise questions about how the queer diaspora and disability communities intersect.

In *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, Robert McRuer asks: “What might result from comprehending global bodies . . . in relation to disability”, when it is clear we are “inescapably haunted by the disability to come” (207). Able-bodied heteronormativity—which is always a phantasm under siege, at risk of dissolving, since it is a category that can never be fully sustained or achieved—is gained through the dissolution of the material presence (reminder) of the disabled queer. McRuer writes that “Queering disability studies or claiming disability in and around queer theory, however, helps create critically disabled spaces overlapping with critically queer spaces that activists and scholars have shaped during recent decades, in which we can identify and challenge the ongoing consolidation of heterosexual, able-bodied hegemony” (19).

In relation to the issues foregrounded by the BLM Movement, a growing conversation articulates the impact that the police violence has on black disabled lives. In “Black, Disabled and at Risk: The Overlooked Problem of Police Violence Against Americans with Disabilities,” Abigail Abrams notes that “studies show that the numbers are substantial—likely between one-third and one-half of total police killings.” Abrams explains that “[a]dvocates for both racial justice and disability rights say Black Americans are especially at risk. Due to a host of social, economic and environmental factors, Black people are more likely than white people to have chronic health conditions, more likely to struggle when accessing mental-health care and less likely to receive formal diagnoses for a range of disabilities” (2020). Given these patterns, we can see how vast numbers of people face different forms of brutality and oppression and the ways in which the trauma of ordinary living can supplant a sense of hope.

As the neoliberal regime continues to morph into the transdigital, with its dangers and its opportunities, we urgently need new critical methods for reading the evolving methods and practices of inclusion and exclusion. Transdigital agency that counteracts transdigital oppression can be furthered through generating online spaces of collectively generated archives, collaboration, co-creation, and digital scholarship that are at the same time accessible technologies with the potential to reach wide audiences. Such activism further the work of building new spaces of homelandings across the digital commons.

These approaches help chart the incipient politics of intimacy along, with, and through the virtual dramatization of new homelandings and would articulate how ableism along with racism, classism, sexism, and queerphobia, take form and can be disrupted, hopefully becoming an impetus for new configurations of relations.

Gairola’s *Homelandings* gestures toward alternative spaces of hope, the ways in which “new migratory traces are forged and new homelandings established” (220). It offers a series of critical and transversal spaces for us to begin to engage with a politics of practiced intimacy that can lead to new states of belonging-within-and-across-differences. These approaches “cut across” locations, cultures, and histories, and at the same time they also “cut into” local cultural histories in order to provide new perspectives on current social conditions and issues.

The transections of the cut, so to speak, enable a generativity of homelandings and its multi-sited receptions that can accomplish very pragmatic cultural work as the local and the global, the at-home and the nomadic, are both borne along unexpected pathways. An emerging transdigital performativity is serving to resist and morph, the continuing forms of neoliberal transdigital oppressions as we—those of us who choose to—strive to articulate a differently generative politics of intimacy and a differently construed series of homelandings.

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