

Book Review

Gairola, Rahul K. *Homelandings: Postcolonial Diasporas and Transatlantic Belonging*. London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2016. 255 pages. ISBN 9781783489732. 24.95 GBP/ 39.95 USD.

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It would be nice and simple if we were all pure. If we all came from where our parents, grandparents and beyond came from. If we all just took on our forefathers' culture. Wouldn't it be nice if we could say that all Africans are Black and all English are white?

(Andrea Levy, "This is my England", *The Guardian* (February 19, 2000), p.72.
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/feb/19/society> 1

It is evident that Levy's purist version of home does not address the complexities of what exactly home and belonging constitute in the postcolonial world.

Then what is home? A simplistic answer would be 'Home is where the heart(h) is.' However, if the heart belongs to more than one place/ hearth, then which one is considered home would be a moot point. Diasporic homes are complicated by feelings (or what Raymond Williams calls "structures of feeling") of belonging and exclusion whether in the country of origin and/ or the host country to which they immigrate. *Homelandings: Postcolonial Diasporas and Transatlantic Belonging* critically interrogates and theorizes the concept of home with its multicultural and multinational ramifications in the postcolonial era which

inaugurated, rather carried forward, the movement of migration forcibly or voluntarily. Rahul K. Gairola yields a particular “home economics” with a blend of Michel Foucault’s notions of “biopolitics and governmentality” (8) to portray the intersectionality of these concepts on “home”. This potent concoction helps in political governance and hegemonic control over the populace through identificatory violence, both physical and mental. He clarifies that the aim of the book is to “critically examine similarities and differences between these regimes [like western imperialism and global neoliberalism] and the ‘homes’ they produce in literary and visual texts” (5). Hence, the first chapter titled “Home, Queer Home” underscores social exclusion as an ironic reversal of and challenge to the inclusive idea of “Home, Sweet Home.”

Homelandings draws on the work of the late Rosemary Marangoly George to unearth the monolithic concept of home that is fed by the U.K. and U.S. to their populace as a normative site of pleasure and privilege. Neoliberalism and its attendant nationalist impulses define the home as “a material site buttressed by home economics at the domestic level, and one that is characterized by offshore service and leisure that is designed to offer a ‘home away from home’ for nationals who are idealistically normative in terms of race, gender, and sexuality.” (18) Hence, the discourse of home operates on principles that sharply demarcate inclusion and exclusion. Readers may be fascinated to note and analyse how those marked as other/ queer/ diasporic subjects negotiate and reappropriate the discourse of exclusive home in resistance to “national metanarratives” (17) of home. Gairola nimbly deploys the term “homelanding” as an action word (verb) to signify the process of resistance and reappropriation, and to, thus unearth how this process not only challenges conservative structures but also constructs new paradigms of home and belonging. To this end, Gairola examines the works of five writers/ film makers of color – Michelle Cliff, Hanif Kureishi, Jessica Hagedorn, Jackie Kay, and Cheryl Dunye. He does so in order to evaluate critically how their cultural representations challenge domestic and national life and, in the process, create “alternate modes of living and embodiments of home” (19).

The second chapter, “Between Homes,” focuses on the aftermath of the British colonial rule which gave way to a subtle kind of hegemony or new imperialism (promoted by the U.S. and U.K.). This hegemonic enterprise takes the form of a new liberal capitalist economy. The author directs his attention to the Jamaican-born author Michelle Cliff and her novel *Abeng* in order to contextualize the rise of “exploitative American tourism” (19) in Jamaica against the backdrop of the rise in neoliberalism. Cliff’s novel traces the awakening of same-sex/homosocial desires in the protagonist Clare, and also foregrounds the marketing of the exploitative tourist industry in Jamaica that privileges race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Rich westerners turn to Jamaica as a “home away from home,” and as an effective

site of exploitative, bourgeois leisure, while Jamaicans are seen as colonial-era coolies who will continue to stand and serve them. Neoliberal values determine and impose the western concept of home for both the wealthy westerners and Jamaicans, and largely marginalize/ reject the homes of non-compliant citizens who do not conform to their views, notwithstanding the national rhetoric of multiculturalism, diversity, and inclusiveness.

Even the Jamaican currency bears both the figures of an Arawak Indian subordinate to the white conqueror, thereby acknowledging the racist ideology and class distinctions underlying the imported neoliberalism that are emblazoned into currency itself. However, the experiences of the protagonist in *Abeng*, teach her to unlearn what she has been conditioned to believe as normative and civilized. She (Clare, the protagonist) refuses to subscribe to such principles and her resistance sets up a “synergy of resistance” (68) against them. The novel does not end with a resolution, easy or otherwise. Instead, it hints at the possibility of re-visioning heteronormative ideals of neoliberal homes. While some critics doubt Cliff’s ‘authenticity’ as a Jamaican writer and dismiss her from the pantheon of Caribbean writers, Gairola tries to validate her “authenticity” by closely reading *Abeng*. He highlights Cliff’s shuttling “between homes” in Jamaica and the US, and the “divergent subject positions that those sites have compelled her to occupy.” (31) Cliff as a queer author from Jamaica defies the state sponsored heteronormative “sanitized versions of ‘authentic’ Jamaican homes” which contain a loyal class of “reproducing, heterosexual citizens” (32).

While *Abeng* is situated in Jamaica, Hanif Kureishi’s films, *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rose Get Laid* are located in the UK. In the films, the protagonists’ “non-heteronormative sexual practices” (111) engage in “homelanding” by rejecting the neoliberal image of the domestic home and the nation-as-home, and constructing alternative sites for home and belonging. They (the films) are extremely critical of Thatcher’s neoliberal capitalism and its exclusionary discourse of ‘home.’ The protagonists of the films either set up a third home front (as in *My Beautiful Laundrette*) or reappropriate their homes on their own terms (as in *Sammy and Rosie get Laid*). In Gairola’s analysis, Pakistani diasporic subjects in London straddle tough identities as recipients of Thatcherite “meritocrat” ethos and acute racism. Caught between the contradictions between the motherland’s religious norms and expectations of arranged marriage, the queer characters find themselves migrating in and out of traumatic situations in which they are either embraced by their Pakistani family and British society, rejected by both, or a combination of both. Gairola’s close readings of both films are particularly detailed, and engage translated passages. As such, the author upsets the dominance of English literature as cultural literacy and engages in image and language analysis that enriches his textual critiques.

Gairola turns to a Filipina-American writer to delineate the effects of the US policy of neoliberalism in a country which happens to be an ally. If there is a sense of déjà vu, it is quickly dispelled by the excellent history of the Philippines under President Ferdinand Marcos and his beautiful wife Imelda provided by Gairola. Indeed, it becomes at this point clear that the forte of each chapter is the relevant historical account that precedes his examination of cultural texts. He analyzes Jessica Hagedorn's novel *Dogeaters*, which utilizes surreal elements, dreamscapes, and cinematic techniques to satirize "US cultural imperialism through queer sexuality in ways that contradict and challenge the very pinions that drive heteronormative multiculturalism as the bedrock of neoliberal capitalism" (132). The neoliberalism that the Marcoses adopt from the US has probably caused more damage to the Filipino psyche than Spanish colonialism as the former sought to wield power through the manipulation of education, religion and cultural supremacy.

What is especially commendable in this chapter is Gairola's exposé of the carefully-constructed myth of the "beauty" of whiteness conjoined with heterosexual normative gender roles. This "beauty" is mediated through American cultural imperialism (reinforced by Hollywood images), and interiorised as an indigenous concept by the Filipinos. It is also linked to love and God to bestow authenticity. It then becomes the hegemonic version of home and national belonging along with its attendant privileging of race, class and gender. The objectification and commodification of beauty which regrettably continues even today, is rejected by Daisy Avila who seeks to subvert the heteronormative ideals of beauty by denouncing beauty pageants on TV and refusing to provide the "exclusive, inside look at 'her life, loves, and wardrobe' - all elements that constitute heteronormative domesticity" (149).

In the next chapter, Gairola embarks upon a close reading of Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (1998) that concentrates on "institutional racism, that surfaces in and through the multicultural celebration of diversity, on one hand, while decimating the material resources to sustain black lives, on the other" (176). Here, the protagonist is a black female (Josephine) based on Billy Tipton's life who goes through life dressed as a male (Joss) and is a successful jazz singer. He has a wife (Millie) and an adopted biracial son (Colman). From the very beginning, Joss's decision to dress as a male despite his female body parts, breaks down the rigid contours of conventional sexuality and gendered positions. Joss's and Millie's home is an example of harmonious, queer domesticity which provides a big blow to the neoliberal heteronormative ideals of contemporary Britain. Joss's death confounds the agents of the state like the doctor, registrar, and funeral director, who read the corpse as a female, even in death, thereby erasing his life as a male while privileging private body parts as the sole determinants of gender. Sophie Stones the tabloid journalist is only too ready to commercialize queerness, and Gairola critiques her impulses to serve the ideals of the nation-state by exploiting Joss's biography as a tabloid feature story.

The fifth text under consideration is Cheryl Dunye's HBO film *Stranger Inside* (2001), in which there is a perceptible shift from the rise in neoliberalism towards the creation of "transdigital home[s]" (22). The film explores an "inclusive exclusion of home sites behind bars" (209) which consists of black women yearning to create new forms of kinship and intimacy in a federal prison. This reminds me of another film, *The Shawshank Redemption*, which revolves around a male prison whose inmates feel more at 'home' within it than in the world outside. The internal surveillance measures reflect the rigid policing, data collection, prevalence of biometrics and systemic violence outside, especially of queer and/ or colored people across the threshold of the new millennium and the dawning of global disciplinary surveillance in the wake of September 11th. Cumulatively, these queer homes have wrestled to build a transgressive space where race, gender, sexuality, and class no longer seem to matter; where neoliberal values of home are subverted; and where resistance, however small, becomes a force to reckon with. As such, the "homelandings" that Gairola recognizes, become acts of resistance and healing against the exclusivity of heteronormative homes. At times, the profuse use of academic jargon may put off the lay reader, and the book could also have done with more careful proofreading. However, the succinct account of historical facts that precedes each chapter is a welcome encapsulation as it reinforces the critical analyses of the cultural texts at hand.

The insightful, comparative readings of postcolonial fiction and films in *Homelandings* expose how elements of racism, class distinctions, sexism, and queerphobia are built into the neoliberal ideology of home economics and biopolitical governmentality. Gairola's brilliant analysis of the strategies of resistance provides an alternative to state-sponsored heteronormative assumptions/ principles regarding home and belonging. His timely choice of texts dating from 1984 to 2001 is, it appears, a deliberate genealogy. They provide a historical and ideological road map of how we have gone from the rise of the neoliberal values of Thatcherism and Reaganomics to the global crisis of Brexit and Trumpism today. Truly, Gairola's book warrants accolades for bringing searing, fresh insights and transnational breadth to postcolonial, migration, and queer studies. I wonder if the ancient Indian adage "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (from the *Maha Upanishad*), which means that the world is one family, could be relevant here. To accept the motley world as family is an instance of an inclusive home which requires the tolerance and acknowledgement of diversity, of "the unfamiliar or disquieting" (32), that mediates against exclusion and allows us to forge the most unlikely alliances through difference.

Note: All page numbers in parenthesis are from this edition of the book.