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The Familiar Made Strange: The Relationship between the Home and Identity in Andrea Levy's Fiction

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Abstract

Angela Levy's novels are rich in atmospheric detail and construct powerful characters that are placed within everyday contexts, contexts which change and develop alongside the characters. This paper examines the importance that the environment and spatial relations have to play in delivering pertinent commentary on events or characters as well as the politics of certain social or familial situations. Specifically, in *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994) and *Never Far from Nowhere* (1996), Levy focuses on the lifestyles and experiences of second-generation inhabitants residing in the 'Mother Country.' In these works, she sketches out environments through simple design, attention to small details and poignant events, and a focus on the mundanity of domestic life, especially in the context of council housing. Levy's subtle yet sophisticated formal methods draw attention to the starkness of the surroundings, the implications of the unsupportive environment, and ultimately the spatial meaning of home. Drawing on spatial and postcolonial theories, including those from Edward Soja, Jonathan Raban, Yi-fu Tuan, John McLeod, John Clement Ball, and Sara Upstone, this article shows that the relationship between spatial characteristics, changes in spatial dynamics and the central personalities of the characters are involved in a complex network of mutual exchange and transformation. Personalities are ascribed to the spaces themselves as they are developed so cordially as central tenets of the novels. Feelings of transience, disassociation, and defamiliarisation—all products of racial, social, and political exclusion—are represented through a comparison between materiality and perception in Levy's novels. Thus, home emerges as an ambivalent and precarious space of becoming, whether in reference to the domestic sphere or a sense of belonging and being at home in Britain.

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Jo Pready

You will love again the stranger who was your self.

Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you [...]

—"Love After Love" by Derek Walcott¹

"All the familiarities made everything more strange."

—Andrea Levy, *Fruit of the Lemon*²

Place is central to the structure and plot of any novel. David James observes that "every novel has to be set somewhere," adding that "[a]ll fictional worlds surely depend upon some indication of locality, named or anonymous."³ Furthermore, James argues that "characters' decisions and their pivotal consequences are often intensified by the demands and opportunities of where they take place."⁴ The "somewhere" that James describes is of prime importance to Levy's novels as the space of the home takes a particularly dominant role in informing the reader of the central concerns of the novel; identity, racial identity, the role of the family, work, education, and opportunity are all characterised through key events that are carefully placed or inscribed within the home, often through its everyday features. Levy's approach to space, as I will show, places emphasis on connections between the individual experiencing the space and the space itself, a phenomenon Julian Wolfreys has described as "the taking place of a process between the materiality of location and the immateriality of the perceiving mind."⁵ Specifically, I will focus on Andrea Levy's early novels, *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994) and *Never Far from Nowhere* (1996), which are united by style, content, formal characteristics, and an exploration of the spatial meaning of home.

My reading will focus on the negotiation of space, identity, and relationships in postcolonial Britain. Henri Lefebvre asserts that understanding a space means breaking down its "image of immobility," transforming it into a "nexus of in and out conduits."⁶ As will be seen, Levy's spaces are malleable and rely on subjective interpretations; a large part of this theory is influenced by Jonathan Raban's work on soft spaces,⁷ a philosophy which demonstrates how spaces become flexible when subjected to scrutiny or interpretation. Yet, in Levy's fiction there is never a continuous sense of fluidity because there are breakages and disruptions in thought and meaning throughout her texts. This rupture occurs in both the interiority of the characters, and within their perception of the space around them. Each of her novels are concerned with a journey, a process of self-discovery and a dialogue between different parts of the self. As Walcott's poem, "Love

after Love,” reflects there are moments when you can “greet yourself arriving,” “smile” and “peel your image from the mirror,” regaining ownership of a sense of self.⁸ Levy’s novels focus on moments of completion between self and space as well as within competing aspects of space: moments of ‘arrival’ are anticipated throughout her novels. Her fractured spatial networks might be read in dialogue with Edward Soja’s concept of “thirdspace”: “thirdspace is a purposefully tentative and flexible term that attempts to capture what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances, and meanings.”⁹ Soja observes:

Thirthing introduces a critical ‘other-than’ choice that speaks and critiques through its otherness. That is to say, it does not derive simply from an additive combination of its binary antecedents but rather from a disordering, deconstruction, and tentative reconstitution of their presumed totalization producing an open alternative that is both similar and strikingly different.¹⁰

This “three-way dialectic”¹¹ among space as lived, perceived, and conceived has become a prominent mode for trying to equate everyday experience with abstract theory, particularly in the advent of deconstructive techniques, such as Yi-fu Tuan’s “mediating third”¹² and Derrida’s “threshold.”¹³ As I will show, Levy models, deconstructs, and explores the meaning of space in her fiction. I begin my discussion by considering the differences between first-and second-generation migrant experiences and relations to space. Then, drawing on Jonathan Raban’s distinction between hard and soft spaces, I show how the second-generation migrant experience of home as a place of dislocation and belonging produces a fluid but nonetheless disjunctive sense of British spatiality.

Second-Generation Migrant Fiction: The Enigma of Belonging

Postcolonial narratives are often imbued with a need for homeliness that is challenged by a complex array of issues related to migration, roots, and belonging. Dislocation or estrangement from spaces frequently serves as a source of primordial anxiety:

A major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being, the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place.¹⁴

Within the home this “post-colonial crisis of identity” becomes condensed, and localised as the intimate space of the home becomes perhaps the prime locator for the ‘recovery’ of self in postcolonial literature.¹⁵ Home is a contested space in which multi-faceted discourses of race, gender, class, and nationhood converge and infiltrate the framework of the visible structure. The immediacy of a dialogic relationship between a character and surrounding space brings issues of identity to the fore as if the space itself is a mirror as well as an arbitrator of feelings and desires. Notably, James Procter and John McLeod explore the meaning of domestic space in post-Windrush fiction. In *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis*, McLeod focuses his discussion on sites and experiences of community as resistance to alienation and the changing milieu of city living. He offers a critical analysis of the ways in which first-generation migrants have represented their

experience of a “new place, which, by their very presence, has itself been made new.”¹⁶ Proctor confronts traditional locations of black post-war writing—basements, bedsits, streets, cafés, and suburbs—and analyses these material sites in relation to the imaginative geography both circumscribed within them and written across them. Like McLeod, Proctor examines the transient nature of spatial relationships and situates the literary location in relation to the reality of the shifting British landscape.

I aim to extend this kind of spatial analysis by examining the relationship in terms of the formation of self and a sense of interiority in the lives of second-generation, female migrants to Britain. Levy turns to the *Bildungsroman* and renegotiates a traditional coming-of-age novel, with its psychological and moral shaping of the individual, alongside a kind of spatial initiation, which entails explorations of relations among inside/outside spaces, relations to family, and (re)constructions of self. Levy’s two novels, *Every Light in the House Burnin’* and *Never far from Nowhere*, employ a teenage voice, either in the present moment or through a nostalgic return, to prioritise issues of ‘home’ and belonging through an innocent sense of awakening to the adult, political world. This private account of development is made parabolic as Levy links individual experiences to a wider depiction of the communality of racial identity.

Notions of nationhood, belonging, and family ideals—embodied by the ‘Mother Country’—are thematised in the war-time narrative of Levy’s *Small Island* (2004). At the same time, Levy’s novel calls attention to the realities of a place (Britain) that is much less accommodating or nurturing than has been imagined by a whole group of Caribbean migrants. These narrative preoccupations are perhaps somewhat diluted in her earlier novels, which focus on the lives of the children of Windrush migrants: young British citizens trying to making sense of their own country, their parents’ beliefs, constructions of race, and opportunities in a country where they belong even if they do not always feel a sense of belonging. For these children, who are born and come of age in Britain, the dislocations of empire are played out anew within contemporary Britain. The result is a more intimate scrutiny of home and a sense of belonging in *Every Light in the House Burnin’* and *Never Far from Nowhere*, compared to the grand-scale narrative of *Small Island*. John Clement Ball’s conclusion that “the city’s manifold appearances in postcolonial literature reflect the varied experiences of colonised peoples”¹⁷ is true of all of Levy’s novels. Just as the “imaginably distant”¹⁸ realm of the ‘Mother Country’ is idealised in *Small Island*, the “imaginably distant” better life in England is of importance to the protagonists of both *Every Light in the House Burnin’* and *Never Far from Nowhere*.

The intimacy of Derek Walcott’s poem, used as an epigraph to this paper, places the individual at a moment of ‘arriving’ in a space in which they have felt apprehension, but which now represents a complicitous relationship between different parts of the self. Therefore, the moment of arrival—either literally within a space or metaphorically as a moment of realisation—is crucial to the stability of identity. Levy’s concentrated analyses of the home space through moments of arrival or realisation, or conversely, ambiguity or disruption, are driven by an awareness of the importance of self, and an identification with the ‘other’ self as Walcott highlights: a recognition of the distance between who you are and what you want to be.

In many postcolonial British novels, the imagined distance between people and places becomes a tangible and concrete barrier to harmony. For instance, in his reading of the spaces of Buchi Emecheta, Chinua Achebe, and M. G. Vassanji, John Clement Ball observes that generality becomes a discernible reality:

the London of such texts is largely unseen: known indirectly and by reputation. A distant, mythologized object of dream and desire, a signifier of Britain's claims to political authority, cultural quality and centrality *vis-à-vis* the colonial periphery, it is constructed from impressionistic, repetitiously circulated images.¹⁹

The locations in Levy's first two novels testify to this; the majority of events take place inside the home or on the stairwells and streets within close proximity. The other spaces described—schools, pubs, shops—are generalised and become merely names of spaces rather than three-dimensional conceived spaces. Therefore, these spaces become displaced and a true conception or relationship with those spaces becomes improbable. It is not London that is being encountered, but the idea of London. Levy focuses on the intimate details of spaces, down to the position of furniture, the clothes that are worn on a daily basis and the goods that are bought from particular shops, and yet this kind of detail is displaced by its simplicity and universality. The question of London remains out of reach because of this generalising tendency: the characters are at once entangled in the politics of the home and divorced from the wider space outside. In the space of the council house and its perimeters, questions of self develop, but they lack context in the outside world. Therefore, Levy's characters fail to understand why they fail to feel settled or reach the sense of completion suggested by Walcott's discourse of 'arrival.' Maria Helena Lima offers a useful perspective on this question of belonging and domestic spaces: "As in other Caribbean novels, the house stands for the nation, the migrant is only superficially, and seemingly temporarily, allowed to occupy thanks to the 'charity' of the mother country."²⁰ The temporary and superficial nature of council housing is clearly linked to postcolonial concerns on a wider scale. Yet, as I will show, Levy's layered narratives suggest something more ambiguous: a postcolonial reading that simply equates the house with the nation is not the only available reading.

Navigating a Place in Britain: The Space of Home

John Agnew's analysis of people-place relations calls attention to a power within space, a geographical consciousness that arises through subjectivity. His three-tiered approach considers the location or situation of a building—the street, district, or country is of importance here (and of course to the post-colonial novel, the consideration of nation, immigration, and roots)—the physical attributes of the space itself, and the imagined and affective relations to space. Agnew observes that a space must have a "sense of place": the physical connection or attachment that *people* have with a place or the "subjective orientation that can be engendered by living in a place."²¹ In Levy's novels, as I will demonstrate, the sense of 'living' in an ambivalent space, which entails both a sense of attachment as well as a sense of dislocation or detachment, becomes central to *how* the characters act.

Consistently Levy presents and deconstructs images of the home-space in her novels. There are two ways this disruption occurs: firstly, the role of the home is disrupted by philosophical questions, the nature of which often centre around a real/imaginary dichotomy, or, conversely, memory and nostalgia for other spaces that have been left behind. Secondly, a sense of home is disrupted by other spaces with which the characters come into contact, spaces such as streets, pubs, dole offices, hospitals, shops, hairdressers, youth clubs, schools, and other homes. Spaces outside the home are often scenes of extreme violence: Carl and the rest of the family are bullied in the yard outside their house in *Every Light in the House Burnin'*; Olive is sexually abused by a man she meets in a bar while Gary gets a glass smashed in his face in a pub in *Never far from Nowhere*; Faith witnesses racial violence towards a shop owner in *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999). Yet, despite this focus on fear outside the space of the home, the interior of the homes never seem to offer the protection they superficially exude. Olive sums this up when her mother fears for her safety outside the home: "she worried about me she said, it wasn't safe outside. Well it wasn't safe inside either."²² The lack of safety provided by all familiar spaces, highlighted by this juxtaposition of interior and exterior spaces, creates a porous network of spaces that equates to a constant feeling of escape and return making attachment almost impossible.

Never Far from Nowhere has a unique narrative framework, juxtaposing the viewpoints of Vivien and her sister, Olive. The references to home begin on the first page with the description of the "marks on the door-frame that led into the living room."²³ These marks are classified simply as "Olive's and mine," and this is in essence what the story is about: Olive and Vivien and the home in which they grew up. These marks on the door introduce a simple but effective method for establishing a sense of place, a sense of belonging, and nostalgia. The sisters' lives and development are visually coded by these marks that stay forever and attach them to the space.²⁴ The focus on development—initiated by the description of the marks on the wall—is continued by the almost rhythmic fluctuations between the two first-person narrators who offer a kind of split subjectivity. The stories are undeniably united, but show subtle and interesting differences. The sisters go to the same school, have the same parents, and live in the same space, but their very distinctive and often contrasting experiences create a dramatic feeling of separation between the girls.

Shared spaces are experienced differently in these twinned tales of the coming-of-age experience in Britain. Vivien is in awe of her older sister, but their relationship fails to generate a real sense of closeness because of their age difference: "three years meant Olive in the juniors with me one of the baby new girls in the infants. Her at secondary school in a smart new uniform, me in the juniors with scuffed knees and marbles."²⁵ In tracing their development at different stages, the novel has an almost lilting effect due to the constantly switching narrative point-of-view from one sister to the other. Significantly, Vivien's feelings towards her older, taller, darker sister are set against Olive's feelings of inadequacy due to Vivien's apparently easier assimilation into the (racist) school environment: "me and Vivien went to the same school. But I always thought of it as Vivien's school, not mine, even though I went there long before she did."²⁶ Olive offers a

sustained comparison of her experiences of suffering and her sister Vivien's opportunities in life. As a result, the sisters' relations to place and space are dramatically different in later life: while Vivien moves to a picturesque and fairly luxurious student house, Olive, who becomes pregnant as a teen, comes to live in a council house. A deep sense of fatalism, connected to racism and racial hierarchies in Britain, pervades these dramatically different lives that begin from the same space, the same parents, and the same roots. Levy highlights the interplay between race/class in Britain through the contrasting life stories and spatial experiences of lighter and darker skinned sisters.

The entanglements of race, class, and a sense of spatial belonging culminate at the end of *Never Far From Nowhere* as both sisters, who are becoming distanced from one another, partly on account of their diverging social positions and prospects, return to the house in which they grew up. During this meeting, it becomes apparent that significant issues concerning home and belonging remain problematic and largely unresolved. Olive is considering a move back to Jamaica, a place in which she feels she may belong even though she has never before visited it. Vivien's feelings about space are equally conflicted. She no longer feels at home in the space of the council flat where she grew up: "I remembered moving in [to the council flat], and how I thought it was like living at a holiday camp. But now the camp was filthy, with rubbish blowing along every balcony."²⁷ The university has also failed to provide her with a sense of home and belonging. When she returns 'home,' hoping for a little stability despite her sense of alienation from this space, she immediately feels "nervous. Jumpy. Like a lost tourist."²⁸ Thus, despite their very different experiences and prospects for life in Britain, the sisters share a sense of dislocation and unbelonging.

Levy shows us that the impossibility of restoring the idealised image of local or intimate spaces causes both sisters to question their current position. When the question of Jamaica arises in *Never Far from Nowhere*, their mother asks Vivien to tell Olive where it is that they all belong. Her response is dramatically timorous:

I looked at the old photograph of Olive and me on the wall. Two little girls with identical yellow bows in our hair and happy, smiling chubby cheeks. But now Olive's arms were folded on the world. She was angry with everything, with everyone. And I had grown too big for our council flat, but not sure where else I would fit. Where did we belong? I answered my mum the only way I could. I said, 'I don't know.'²⁹

This extract highlights many of the interrelated themes of the novel. The photograph elicits a sense of nostalgia for a more innocent sense of unity, which runs counter to the views of these two characters in the present moment. In the photo, the similarity between the girls as young children is visually apparent, suggesting a common identity, but this image is undermined by the readily apparent differences between the sisters in the present: the abrasive quality of Olive's opinions about the world as a young adult and Vivien's anxieties about her failure to assimilate. Ironically, Vivien's feelings of inadequacy serve to alleviate some of the tension between the sisters as Vivien observes: "Olive smiled at me for the first time."³⁰ However, her mother has a very different reaction: "my mum's face drained of expression as she said, 'Oh Vivien,' and the

disappointment in her sigh drifted round and round the room.”³¹ The room becomes magnified as a response to these feelings and the words “I don’t know” are left echoing in the vacuum of emptiness created by this admission. The fatalism of the repetitious phrase, circulating round and round the room, leaves the novel hanging in a moment of suspension. The representation of space—through the blank emptiness of the room—reflects Vivien’s and Olive’s misgivings about home and a sense of belonging. The apparently simple (some might say simplistic) style of Levy’s narrative gives ways to a richly layered array of responses to space and its meanings: to home and a sense of (un)belonging.

The Dislocations of Family and Home

On a more functional level, the home is a space where mundane tasks take place and where the quotidian activities of eating, sleeping, and watching television take on more significant proportions due to the implication of philosophical questions about identity, race, adulthood, family, and relationships. In terms of narrative structure, *Every Light in the House Burnin’* is divided into simple vignettes or discrete moments; every sub-heading is given a minimalist title that begins with a section on Angela’s family: “my dad,” “my mum,” “my brother,” “my sister,” and even “the cat.” She then moves onto certain aspects of the house, either physical or material aspects, or titles that relate to memorable events, such as “the telly,” “the dream,” “the meatballs,” “the yard,” and “the holiday,” to offer a few examples. Through this formal technique Levy manages to separate and categorise but also simultaneously draw together different aspects of Angela’s life, including her home, its material features, her family, and their relationships. Her memory flits between spatial features and personal relationships. The titles are stagnant, everyday features that offer a framework for or outline of Angela’s life. This outline is filled in and complicated through the novel’s interior stories, which weave together to create an impressionistic view of a child coming to terms with her identity.

Levy’s spatial descriptions are contingent on action and focal details. She pays more attention to the interior details of spaces, which she fills with surplus features. The interiors afford the opportunity for personalised, familial, and subjective accounts while the exterior is a common, institutionalised, state-owned space, which serves to repeat the dynamic of domestic order. We do gain insight into what the houses look like from the outside, but these descriptions are often repetitive and featureless as they detail the rows of tall, angular buildings, the “concrete”³² worlds that make up the landscape of the estate. In Levy’s novels, the attention to furniture, and specifically the over-accumulation of furniture, is managed in a simplistic fashion, but her repeated attention to these details, reveals an underlying motif. For Sara Upstone, this motif consigns importance to colonial rule: she argues that attention to orderliness within the home represents an artificial attempt at gaining independence that merely re-aligns power with colonial ideologies as “domestic order was, in the colonies themselves, rigorously enforced” due to a “desire to present a vision of natural order,”³³ and instalment of moral virtue. Lives in these homes are not repetitious narratives of past histories. Instead, as Kathy Mezei and Chiara Briganti have pointed out in another context, I view the repetition of mundane tasks

associated with domestication in Levy's early novels as more than a mere ritual. For Levy, the systematic ordering of home becomes a way of self discovery, a means of evaluating or controlling psychological disturbances.³⁴

Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guittari, Upstone refers to this process of spatial negotiation as one of "deterritorialisation" or "post-space" as it signifies "the removal of fixed boundaries and the renewal of the abstract."³⁵ In *Every Light in the House Burnin'* an overpowering sense of claustrophobia occludes the attention to how the space is filled:

Our front room was packed with furniture. Every bit of wall space had something pressed against it. There was a green three-piece suite with a long settee that could double up as a bed should we have any guests—which we never did [...] There was also a dining-table with a flap that could be put up, if we ever felt like eating at it—but we never did.³⁶

Their inability to use the furniture for the correct purpose creates an overwhelming impression of dissatisfaction and the overabundance visualises this form of deterritorialisation. This is evident in Angela's discussion of the repeated possibilities of moving that she remembers through her life:

Moving had been something that we were always going to do. When I was little, we were moving to America [...] But we didn't go. When I was in my teens we were moving to Harlow, to start a new life in a new town. But we didn't go. We stayed in the flat in Highbury, settled but waiting to move.³⁷

The repetition here is inherent to this sense of futility. In the first example, the repeated statement, "but we never did," is replaced here by "but we didn't go." Both instances represent this entrenched fatalistic tone that saturates the novel. The statement "settled but waiting to move" could be an epigram for all of Levy's characters, particularly Faith's parents and their obsession with collecting empty boxes in *Fruit of the Lemon*.

Concepts and issues concerning both space and identity are not neatly drawn or adequately fused together. Instead they present a complex assortment of competing tensions which allows deconstruction to occur. When Angela introduces her father in *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, the descriptions are limited by the child's lack of knowledge, which creates a sense of spatial distancing. The father's physical persona, work life and upbringing are all distant from Angela's view of herself. We are told, simply, "my dad was a man;"³⁸ his work life remains secretive: "I couldn't tell you what he did or who he did it with."³⁹ She describes his move to London from Jamaica, but can offer no other information about his early life as "he seemed only to exist in one plane of time—the present."⁴⁰ Despite this one-sided approach to his character, framed by the shared post-migration life of the father and child, Angela goes on to describe different aspects of his personality: his work, the hours he spends in front of the mirror, the time he spends lying on the couch and the bloated, terminally ill man she comes to know at the end. All of these aspects are drawn together to create a composite human being, one that she can never know entirely: "my dad was all these men and many more."⁴¹ For bell hooks, and the postcolonial novel in general, this attention to a singularity of life is a way of dealing

with “the multiple voices within;” it is “not just who I am in the present, but where I am coming from.”⁴² Maria Helena Lima makes a similar point when she states: “it seems as if a return to the past is required for her protagonists to be able to move on.”⁴³ Angela requires an understanding of her father’s past to be able to understand her own identity. Therefore, Angela’s father’s dismissal of his past is a blockage to her own identity. Fundamentally, the narrative dramatises the need to look beyond the present time, and move outside of the present space, to reclaim a more expansive story concerning the wider family legacy. The child lives in symbolic exile as issues concerning race, migration and assimilation become imbued into readings of second-generation identity, despite their lack of first-hand experience and the disjunction that is created by not fully experiencing parents’ changing relations to place.

Lima observes that it is unusual for a female Caribbean novelist to focus on father/daughter relationships as the “central presence” is usually the mother or “mother substitute” as part of the Jamaica/mother country allegory previously mentioned.⁴⁴ In distancing herself from the trope of mother-daughter relations, Levy raises new questions about the relationship between space and postcolonial identity. Angela’s need to understand her father takes the form of a quest throughout this postcolonial *Bildungsroman*, which shifts from the maternal space of empire to the masculine space of arrival and hope so often associated with Windrush migration and the prospects of settling into Britain. Initially, she represents her father as an enigmatic and secretive adult, but the later descriptions focus on his childlike status as a result of his illness. At the end her father just becomes a “pathetic man in a red dressing-gown sitting in a chair in the corner.”⁴⁵ He is reduced to a fixed position in the home. While Angela’s father exists in one plane, her sisters “lived in a world of their own, which was their bedroom.”⁴⁶ The small, enclosed space of the council flat is metaphorically widened by their lack of emotional understanding. The sisters’ bedroom is impossible to penetrate as is their father’s past. The brother’s reaction to life in this space is to disappear or escape. He exists in a space outside the home, a space that Angela describes as “unspecified.”⁴⁷ When asked where he is going his reply is often simply “anywhere.”⁴⁸ Again, postcolonial concerns are filtered down through the generations, and those primarily male migrants of the Windrush generation are now facing a loss of vitality through the disappointments experienced in the new life, whilst those related to the first-generation migrants experience a more diluted version of the same dispiritedness. The father and his children encounter feelings of loss, separation and a genuine lack of purpose resulting in either fixed or unchangeable uses of space or vague ‘unspecified’ and ultimately forlorn spatial arrangements.

Journeys and trips replay the spatial dynamic of the Windrush journey and the fated hopes of the disappointed traveller to the new country. Fundamentally the home is a place of safety and permanency, whilst the holiday is a moment of extravagance and excitement; here, in Levy’s novels the divide between home and holiday is not so easily configured and disappointment occasionally occurs whilst away. During Angela’s first trip to Pontin’s at the age of eleven, each member of the family asks for a different item of food, from “fish and chips” to “cake and cola.” However, they receive bread rolls, a

mundane staple food, and feel let down: “it was us and him.”⁴⁹ The bread rolls come to signify misplaced feelings through a kind of ritual that centres on food; in a similar method to the over-abundance of furniture these everyday articles represent misguided desires and needs that cannot be met. The father, as the care-giver and also the significant figure who controls the experience of the holiday, disappoints the children and fails to meet their expectations, distancing them from him in the same way as he was distanced from the ‘Mother Country.’

When they reach the chalet the tone changes to one of excitement due to the luxury of the “palace”⁵⁰ in which they are staying. Levy sets up the space as one of grandiose proportions, and yet there is a real melancholia attached to this excitement, again due to the simplicity of the materials described. This is elucidated by the image of the whole family clustered in the doorway of her brother’s room while they “wondered at the sight”⁵¹ of the wash-basin in his room. This bathroom “was just a room dedicated to your cleanliness.”⁵² The pure functionality of the room and the lack of unnecessary detail is what elicits pleasure: there were “no old TVs waiting for repair” and no “crumbs in the cutlery tray.”⁵³ Levy brings this narrative focus to a climax with the revelation that “our excitement at our new temporary home was hard to contain.”⁵⁴ The fact that the holiday home is the epitome of temporary living aligns it with life in a council house, both of which exudes transience and highlights a certain lack within their real life environment and their unsettled existence at ‘home’ in Britain.

The Dream Home and the Space of Dreams

The most pertinent excursion the family goes on is their routine ‘dream’ trips to the Ideal Home Exhibition. This section of the narrative is highly poetic, more sensory, and less staccato than any other section of the novel. The detail Angela gives to the journey—the tube, the connections, the bustling crowds, and shuffling queue—gives this section of the narrative a faster pace than the rest of the novel. The emphasis on the journey to a new place heightens the sense that the visit to the Home Exhibition represents an idealised, dream-like experience that is somehow separate from the real world of lived spatial relations. Each family member has their own specific sections of interest: “six individuals all wanted to see different things, have different experiences.”⁵⁵ Angela likes the bendy toys; her brother likes models and kits; her mum likes the pressure cookers; her dad likes the gadgets. Each interest responds finitely to their age, sex, personality, and domestication rituals. Their experiences and interests are united, however, when it comes to the ‘village’ of ideal houses. Because “there were actual houses built there”⁵⁶ the physical structure causes the dream to become more like reality. As Rob Shields elucidates, “place myths are always subject to being amended by the uneven experience of reality.”⁵⁷ The same might be said for the construction of identity, which undergoes a transformation through shifting and uneven relations to place and space. This shifting sensibility is especially evident as the dream tone abruptly changes reverts to a realistic mode, characterised by anxieties and tensions about spatial relations, when the family returns home:

[...] then we went into our flats. Red brick with long open balconies built round a grey, concreted yard [...] we went inside our little council home, choked full of furniture [...] in need of decoration, in need of being ten times the size, in need of a staircase. And the row started again.⁵⁸

The focus on temporality—the reversion to family rows—foregrounds the shift from the promise of life in a better home to the realities of life in the council home. Through shifting spatial relations—the depiction of hopes, desires, and disappointments—Levy offers a rich depiction of how family life and character are shaped through the disconnections between people, place, time, and reality.

Moreover, this trip is linked to a discussion of a real space that approximates a domestic ideal when Angela visits her teacher's house. She offers the following account of the journey:

I watched the road where I live go by. I watched the boarded-up shops and old houses with peeling paint and rubbish piled high in the front garden go by. Finsbury Park. Then the landscape began to change.⁵⁹

The total separation between the houses of her estate and the leafy middle-class area she is entering is represented by the tone change and the fact that “Finsbury Park” is set apart from the rest of the description. Finsbury Park, and therefore the space that she knows, is totally disengaged from the space she is encountering and becomes categorised as ‘other’ to the space she is visiting. When she goes into the house, “I stepped into another world. A world from the Ideal Home Exhibition, only someone's real world, not make-believe.”⁶⁰ The space widens once again and Angela moves through the house describing “another room” and then “another room.”⁶¹ Despite the obvious luxury of the space there is also a return to normality as she describes plants, cushions and magazines. Angela has had no access to this world before, for her it only exists in dreams. When visiting her teacher's house she realises how normal this existence is for *other* people and this realization securely places her within her own category as she becomes even more firmly inscribed in her marginalised position within “Finsbury Park.”

Olive's dream section in *Never Far from Nowhere* also explores the relationship between lived (realistic), conceived (ideal), and dreamed (perceived) spaces. Olive dreams of a painting, an unfinished work which becomes a metaphor for her own development. She cannot remember what it is she is painting, but it is something just out of reach, “just out of the window.”⁶² The moment of completion is not available to her and as she lifts the brush to the canvas her development reverts and the paint lifts off “until it was beginning to look unfinished again.”⁶³ She describes her dreams as moments not of fear but frustration, repetitive dreams of “trying to get somewhere but I can't get my clothes on – everything's too tight or falling to bits. Or the bus breaks down. Or I end up in the wrong country.”⁶⁴ Here we gain a highly intimate insight into Olive's personality, which is often opaquely rendered or difficult to decipher despite her first-person narration. Her fears or frustrations reflect anxieties about her self-image, a sense of belonging, feelings about nationhood, and the possibilities for fulfillment and achievement. Just as Angela's dream-like account of the ideal home tells us something about her aspirations, which are far removed from the concrete details and realities of the council house existence, Olive's

dream of a space that she cannot fully render suggests the disconnect between ideal and real spaces of belonging. Both dreams about a lack of fulfillment in domestic space attest to anxieties about the a sense of belonging, ranging from the local neighbourhood space of Finsbury Park to the country itself, namely Britain.

Alongside the repetitive and comparative descriptions of the spaces encountered, there are abrupt alterations in thoughts and feelings which create ruptures in developmental progress. In *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, Angela's father changes throughout his life and descends into a childlike state of dependency due to his illness. Paradoxically, in *Never Far from Nowhere*, Olive's ascent into womanhood—her motherhood and marriage—is linked to a reversion to childhood. Both of these situations highlight the quest for a nurturing space. Olive watches her daughter, Amy, sleeping peacefully in her cot and observes "I wished it was me in there."⁶⁵ Olive's consideration of marriage at a young age, on account of her pregnancy, causes Vivien to feel disengaged from her sister; it was "as if she was going to be born again in a different form."⁶⁶ The difference between the sisters and their life choices is apparent and it is Olive who seems to be making the most powerful step. However, it is Olive who in fact becomes disconnected: "I used to watch them. I'd sit on the settee feeding Amy and see them running in front of me, speeded up, like they were in one of those silent films."⁶⁷ These dramatic life choices, inscribed upon the spaces which contain them, serve to reinforce ideological issues concerning acceptance, separation, loneliness, and fear inherent to this second-generation community. Another dream sequence appears soon after; instead of frustration, the dream now represents complete desolation:

I dreamt I was a jelly baby. A little black sugar-coated jelly baby that had been thrown away. I wasn't in a packet, I was on my own on the floor—on the pavement. And I couldn't move my arms and legs because jelly babies can't, they're solid. People started walking down the pavement, and because I was only the size of a jelly baby, their feet were enormous.⁶⁸

There is none of the excitement or hope of the first dream. The displacement of herself into a child's sweet corroborates this idea of her reversion into a child-like state, as does the enormous feet of the people who constantly pass her by. In relation to spatial theory, the balance between the hard and soft spaces and the connection between stability and fluidity is represented here by her uneasiness due to her inability to move. Lefebvre's claim that fluidity is necessary to assimilation is responded to by Olive's increasing feeling of immobility and peril. Olive has always required stability: a husband, nice home, and enough money are all that she requires, but this stability has always evaded her. Now she is totally "solid" and the futility of her situation reaches us in the potency of this one word as well as her total disconnection of what she has from what she always hoped for: a nurturing space.

Dwelling Places Beyond the Home

Thwarted hopes and desires are highlighted further by the question of education. The focus on education and opportunity ranges from Vivien's decision to go to art college to

Angela's mum's need to read and write for her degree whilst sitting on her bed because "the room was too small to hold a desk and a chair."⁶⁹ The spaces and activities of education are placed in direct opposition to the central image of the home. When Vivien leaves for college she becomes totally disengaged from her present life in her mother's home: "I kept looking round my bedroom waiting to feel nostalgic, waiting to remember all the fun times. But none came. I was sure I must have smiled and laughed and sang in there, but I couldn't remember."⁷⁰ Her transition to university fails to equate with what she has already experienced in her home; the two parts of her life become compartmentalised, producing a blockage in her identity, which is both represented by and experienced through spatial dislocation. Ultimately, this is the reason for her failure to find support in her family home when she returns at the end. Vivien's new flatmate, Victoria, is negative about the "dump" they will be living in while Vivien is astounded by the beauty of the place.⁷¹ Again the description of the interior focuses on small, functional details, which attest to a very new and different kind of life for Vivien: the lamp on the table "that you could push up and down to the right height,"⁷² the writing desk with "lots of little drawers"⁷³ and the "window-seat with a pink cushion."⁷⁴ Her appreciation of this space causes her to reject her old way of life and relationships including her boyfriend, Eddie, who fails to fit into the context of her new environment. This problem faces her immediately as there is a letter waiting for her the first time she arrives at her new home. Her reaction is clear and instantaneous: "it was nice of him to write, I wanted to think. I love him, I wanted to think. I'm looking forward to seeing him, I wanted to think."⁷⁵ Her immediate recognition that this response is merely what she *wanted* to think rather than what she *actually* thinks clarifies this rejection of her old life. The changes in her spatial dynamics here clearly reflect and parallel the changes in circumstances and identity and serve to make the break more complete.

Other characters face similar concerns when they move onto new stages of their lives, which are typically embodied by changing relations to place and space. When Faith's brother visits her in *Fruit of the Lemon* she sees him through the eyes of her new housemates: "I saw him as a stranger" as he was "out of context."⁷⁶ Specific times in these characters lives are compartmentalised and when traces of previous spaces infiltrate the present moment a process of disengagement occurs. For Levy, identity is fractured and spaces become a way of allocating desires, wishes and feelings through a process of development throughout space. Engaging questions about life, family, education and illness are assigned to specific spaces: the hospital, the school, the workplace and spaces of leisure draw together these fundamental questions which Levy manages to highlight through a consistent return to everyday features. The details highlight the rudimentary nature of existing in a space and how interpretations of spaces and identities are constantly evolving, fluid or elastic and in a continual process of breaking down boundaries, considering 'other-than' opportunities until nothing is "settled but waiting to move."

In summary, there is a dialectical relationship between the space and the individual in Levy's early novels. According to Relph, "[a]ll places and landscapes are individually experienced, for we alone see them through the lens of our attitudes, experiences and

intentions, and from our unique circumstances.”⁷⁷ Levy’s narratives depict the unique circumstances of each individual, creating a highly personal account of what *living* in a space actually entails. Idealization of space versus the reality of existing is constantly in conflict. As Atkinson et al. have argued, “it is important to move beyond the idealisation of an objective analysis of space to strive for a more human-centred and empathetic understanding of the lived experience of place.”⁷⁸ Levy’s characters constantly strive for human-centred relations to space, but the tensions between real and ideal spaces ultimately lead individuals to experience a sense of spatial disruption as well as to disengage from both the spaces and the people around them. *Every Light in the House Burnin’* and *Never Far from Nowhere* develop through layered narrative techniques, which constantly switch between time and place, memory and future hopes, until each character is unsure of who they are and where they belong. Simple but highly effective formal methods, such as divided first-person narration and unconnected chapters, join together different characters in space and time. However, these unifying textual strategies are disconnected from the content of the stories, which represent characters who experience fragmented, disconnected relations and responses to common spaces.

As Sara Upstone observes, “to consider postcolonial spatiality is not to reject postcolonial history.”⁷⁹ Levy’s work highlights the disruption of identity, whether that is through the displacement of young, second-generation immigrants or through the representation of their divided relations to space, which often leave them disconnected from their habitats. Identity is a process and is constantly *in process*. At the end of *Never Far from Nowhere*, we leave Vivien on a bus returning to university, an image of circularity that sees her constantly in a state of transition. She is left with feelings of loss, but she has gained a new understanding that a completely stable identity is not possible: “true permanence is never static, it is an eternal process of becoming, susceptible to dialogue with otherness.”⁸⁰ This ‘dialogue’ between each character and potential sources of conflict is enriched by the manipulations between space and identity in Levy’s novels.

Endnotes

- 1 Derek Walcott, "Love after Love," *Collected Poems 1948-1984*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992, 328.
- 2 Andrea Levy, *Fruit of the Lemon*. London: Review, 2000, 101.
- 3 David James, *Contemporary British Fiction and the Artistry of Space: Style, Landscape, Perception*. London: Continuum, 2008, 1.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Julian Wolfreys, *Writing London: Inventions of the City*, vol. III. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 43.
- 6 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 1974, 93.
- 7 Jonathan Raban, *Soft City*. London: Pan Macmillan, 2008.
- 8 Walcott, *Collected Poems*, 328.
- 9 Edward Soja, *Thirdspace*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 1996, 2.
- 10 Ibid., 61.
- 11 David Atkinson, Peter Jackson, David Sibley and Neil Washbourne, *Cultural Geography: A Critical Dictionary of Key Concepts*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2005, 42.
- 12 Yi-fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974, 18.
- 13 John Knechtel, *Alphabet City 6: Open City*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1998, 12.
- 14 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*. London: Routledge, 2002, 8.
- 15 The discussion of space in postcolonial literature diverges into discrete and tangential enquiries. For example, feminist appraisals of postcolonial spaces have been studied by: Hena Zafar Ahmed, *Postnational Feminism in Third World Women's Literature*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998; Himani Bannerji, ed., *Returning the Gaze*. Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1993; and Allison Blunt and Gillian Rose, eds., *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies*. New York: Guilford Press, 1994. Spaces are discussed as an allegory to nation in Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 and Gerhard Stilz, ed., *Territorial Terrors: Contested Spaces in Colonial and Postcolonial Writing*. Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2007. Other writers consider interior spaces in relation to internal psychologies, diversifying the work of Gaston Bachelard. This is particularly resonant in Homi K. Bhabha, "The World and the Home," *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ellen Shohat, eds., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997 and G. B. Nalbantoglu and C. T. Wong, eds., *Postcolonial Space(s)*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997. There is a large body of work which circumscribes nationhood and race within a politics of both the home and the body as well as considers the body as a site of resistance: Ketu H. Katrak, *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolonial Women Writers of the Third World*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006 and Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005.
- 16 John McLeod, *Postcolonial London, Rewriting the Metropolis*. Oxford: Routledge, 2004, 3.
- 17 John Clement Ball, *Imagining London—Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004, 5.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid., 6.

- 20 Maria Helena Lima, "'Pivoting the Centre': The Fiction of Andrea Levy," *Write Black, Write British. From Postcolonial to Black British Literature*. Kadija Sesay, ed., Hertford: Hansib Publications Limited, 2005, 60.
- 21 John Agnew, *Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987, 6.
- 22 Andrea Levy, *Never Far From Nowhere*. London: Headline Book Publishing, 2004, 39. Sara Upstone equates this lack of safety to a colonial bypass where the "home forms a microcosm of colonial tabulation of space. Acquisition of territory, and its association with violence, is replaced with the establishment of home, and—rather than violence—as association with the natural and timeless processes of settlement" (Sara Upstone, *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009, 117).
- 23 Ibid., 1.
- 24 Elsewhere, Levy presents a dichotomous representation of space in Britain for migrants and their children who are torn between feelings of belonging and an entrenched feeling of transience. For example, in *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, a novel which continuously returns to the council home in which the family lives for twenty-one years, we witness a repetitive thread concerning the desire to move. Sadly, this does not occur until the late stages of the novel when, after the children have grown up and moved on, the parents are facing old age and terminal illness. Ironically, the attainment of a desired space, a family home, is no longer necessary because the children have already moved out of the home.
- 25 Levy, *Never Far From Nowhere*, 1.
- 26 Ibid., 24.
- 27 Ibid., 226.
- 28 Ibid., 274.
- 29 Ibid., 281.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid., 3.
- 33 Upstone, *Spatial Politics*, 117.
- 34 Kathy Mezei and Chiara Briganti, "Reading the House: A Literary Perspective," *Signs* 27:3 (Spring 2002): 837-846.
- 35 Upstone, *Spatial Politics*, 131.
- 36 Andrea Levy, *Every Light in the House Burnin'*. London: Headline Book Publishing, 1995, 30.
- 37 Ibid., 217.
- 38 Ibid., 2.
- 39 Ibid., 3.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid., 4.
- 42 bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as Space of Radical Openness," *Framework* 36 (1989): 16.
- 43 Lima, "Pivoting the centre," 57.
- 44 Ibid., 60.
- 45 Levy, *Every Light*, 199.
- 46 Ibid., 20.
- 47 Ibid., 30.
- 48 Ibid.

- 49 Ibid., 1.
- 50 Ibid., 70.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Ibid.
- 55 Ibid., 39.
- 56 Ibid., 41.
- 57 Rob Shields, *Place of the Margin: Alternate Geographies of Modernity*. London: Routledge, 1991, 32.
- 58 Levy, *Every Light*, 42.
- 59 Ibid., 184.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Ibid., 185.
- 62 Levy, *Never Far From Nowhere*, 6.
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 Ibid., 112.
- 66 Ibid., 77.
- 67 Ibid., 101.
- 68 Ibid., 220.
- 69 Levy, *Every Light*, 8.
- 70 Levy, *Never Far from Nowhere*, 237.
- 71 Ibid., 252
- 72 Ibid.
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 Ibid.
- 75 Ibid., 253.
- 76 Levy, *Fruit of the Lemon*, 53.
- 77 Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion Ltd., 1976, 36.
- 78 Atkinson et al., eds., *Cultural Geography*, 42.
- 79 Ibid., 3.
- 80 Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford, "Fossil and Psyche," *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., London and New York: Routledge, 1995, 188.