Leave to Remain: Bedsits, B&Bs and Borders in Contemporary Fictions of Asylum

Introduction

Forms of temporary accommodation – including lodging houses, boarding houses and bedsits – have played an important role in the lived experience of immigrants to Britain and in narratives of migration since the nineteenth century. As a number of critics have outlined, the sociology, autobiography and fiction documenting mid-twentieth-century immigration to the UK from the Caribbean, South Asia and the African continent, frequently makes reference to these types of lodgings and their internal modes of 'living with strangers' (Webster 1998: 173-82; Procter 2003; Ball 2011; Cuming 2016: 102-22). According to Frank Mort, the social and anthropological inflections underpinning racial discourse in the mid-twentieth century (in which temporary accommodation featured prominently) led to a 'spatialization of race'. As an example, he cites the anthropologist Kenneth Little's observation on Cardiff's dock areas in 1947 that linked transitory housing and immigrant populations: 'it was in the "rooming house quarters" where the great metropolitan centers had their "racial colonies"' (Mort 2006: 128). Likewise, many literary accounts of migration, from the novels of Sam Selvon, Colin MacInnes and Buchi Emecheta, to Bernardine Evaristo's contemporary epic-in-verse *Lara* (2009), notably feature the newly arrived immigrant's attempt to secure rooms in temporary accommodation as a recognisable narrative rite of passage. Debates about immigration at the start of the twenty-first century have had to take account of the urgent situation of forced migration, including the global movements of asylum seekers and refugees displaced by war, poverty and environmental disaster. Thus my chapter aims to expand upon the social and literary portrayal of the post-war 'rooming house' culture of migration by addressing the significance of living with strangers in this new context. I begin by thinking about language and definitions in order to trace the way in which the everyday or non-exceptional spaces of 'home' are inflected in a number of political ways within the context of asylum and forced

migration. My essay then examines specific depictions of shared accommodation within this context through fiction and film of the late-twentieth and twenty-first century, tracing a set of emerging tropes that relate to the cohabitation of strangers and the sharing of intimate space in precarious circumstances. In doing so, I propose that the more marginal and peripheral domestic sites of the bedsit, B&B and shared house are a significant locus within cultural depictions of asylum, at once revealing the socio-economic circumstances that attend asylum seekers in the UK, but also providing a narrative basis for the exploration of a complex mode of hospitality in domestic settings that are defined by transience and the presence of strangers.

i. The new bedsits: locating definitions

In her astute readings of millennial asylum narratives, including novels, plays and film that dramatise the situation of forced migration, Agnes Woolley argues that these texts 'reveal the ways in which asylum seeking – as both legally precarious and persistently indeterminate – is distinct from the traditional narratives of diasporic accommodation that have historically shaped discourses of migration' (2014: 3). Jopi Nyman, too, has noted how forced displacement results in identities that are defined by being in constant transit, without the attendant creative or political freedoms associated with the older figure of the exile or émigré (2009: 128-33). In line with these assessments, my readings acknowledge the distinctiveness of home, dwelling place and indeed the figure of the 'stranger' in asylum fiction. At the same time, however, I insist that it is imperative to understand how these narrative representations of the accommodation of asylum seekers are also a part of a wider national story that includes, for example, the housing crisis, migration to urban areas, the low-wage economy and the decline of coastal towns. In this way my chapter, positioned as it is at the end of a collection about English life and literature, extends the argument implicit to earlier critical accounts of boarding house and bedsit environments, showing that far from being marginal or peripheral

to contemporary questions, these everyday housing forms are in fact bound up with some of the most pressing political and social issues of the day.

As widely noted, there has been a tendency in postcolonial thought to aestheticise the migrant, including the refugee or asylum seeker, as one whose loss of home has a powerfully symbolic status, and thus to position this figure as embodying an 'almost paradigmatic status as the outsider par excellence – the rightless, speechless emissary of political and ethical demands upon the nation' (Darling 2009: 649). In this respect, in his key study of the black British dwelling place in the postwar period, James Procter argues that it is important to resist the tendency to situate narratives of migration and diaspora within a theoretical paradigm of ontological 'homelessness'. According to Procter, the writings of the Windrush generation, for example, are often about a more localised and collective attempt to establish a dwelling, involving a 'desperate territorial struggle *for* home within the context of housing shortages and the overtly racialized "colour bar" surrounding domestic space' (2003: 4). Far from being a transcendental trope, he notes, the space of home in postwar discourse emerged as a site of solidarity and resistance in which a 'black communal politics were to take shape' (Procter 2003: 30). The need to attend to the material and everyday aspects of housing is also clearly relevant in the contemporary context of asylum and forced migration, in which the very notion of 'home' is resolutely political. For the asylum seeker, who is defined by a loss of home, the domestic dwelling in the country offering sanctuary is often a precarious and temporary place, defined by necessity rather than choice, and bound up in significant ways with the state and forms of national discourse. It is, after all, the significantly-titled Home Office that has the power to grant refugee status or leave to remain to asylum seekers, while the analogy of the nation itself as a 'self-contained private house' has meant that the language of home and hospitality often serve a political agenda (Rosello 2001: 33). And, of course, it is the pragmatics of housing that are central to migrants' ability to integrate into the local community, to stave

off social isolation and destitution and to lead healthy lives. Within the media too, the dwelling place of the refugee and asylum seeker has often been the flashpoint for marked expressions of hostility and racism – as highlighted in reports at the start of 2016 of a series of painted red doors that appeared to indicate the homes of asylum seekers housed by G4S in Middlesborough and Stockton (the role of private subcontractors, including security firms, commissioned to provide emergency accommodation on behalf of the state is another complex strand of this story).[i]

In the context of this collection, the turn to questions of asylum, refuge and forced migration presents an important extension of the significant sociological and cultural role of boarding houses and bedsits in English life and literature, not least because it shows how the contours of this recognisable setting become blurred and less defined in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century. While it might be possible to trace the transformation of nineteenth-century lodging houses into boarding houses, guest houses and bedsits in the twentieth century, it is clear that in the 1990s and new millennium these categories have fractured into looser and more opaque taxonomies of temporary and shared accommodation which span the private and social housing sectors. Yet this unsettling of the social narrative of the boarding house/bedsit story, in the context of migration, is significant in and of itself. For asylum seekers and refugees today are faced with a plethora of housing provisions that signal the complex formal and informal ways in which they are accommodated within the UK. For migrants with no resource to public funds, the 'options' include local authority houses converted to multi-occupancy establishments, hostel accommodation, bed and breakfast accommodation, and occasionally block bookings of hotels by local authorities.[ii] Such accommodation, asylum seekers are informed, is provided 'on a no choice basis that explicitly must not take account of the applicant's wishes but only of their needs' (Hutton and Lukes 2013: 12).[iii] A common factor among these disparate housing forms is the necessity of being required to live not in a single

family household, but with others in forms of Housing in Multiple Occupancy (HMOs) – also known as a 'house share'. But even the definition of a HMO is unclear. According to the Residential Landlords Association (RLA), this property type involves the 'sharing of a toilet, washing facilities or cooking facilities by three or more unrelated people in two or more separate households', while its governing premise is the idea of 'common access' to the place of residence and its amenities. But by this account, HMOs may be bedsits, shared houses, lodgings, hostels, individual shared self-contained flats/cluster flats and asylum seeker/migrant accommodation (the last of which occupies a category of its own throughout the RLA Housing Act Guide document).[iv]

The slipperiness of categories also extends to Bed and Breakfasts, a deceptively homely term that, since the last decade of the twentieth century, has been increasingly used to describe temporary social accommodation. A Joseph Rowntree Foundation study of this particular lodging form in the 1990s, for example, notes that 'there is no national standard for defining B&B', but that 'many people continue to rely on B&B as a last resort … the only housing option which remains open to them' (Carter 1997). 'B&B', a term which supposedly reflects the service it provides, is misleading in the context of emergency accommodation, where the HMO 'breakfast' can consist of local authority food parcels or food vouchers. But it also has a punitive literalism to its name, since many of these kinds of B&Bs are closed during daytime hours (after 'breakfast'), resulting in what is effectively a form of daily eviction for tenants.[v] Indeed the strangeness surrounding the opaque rules and imprecise nomenclature related to temporary accommodation is highlighted in Benjamin Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy* (2001). In this novel, the fourteen-year-old Ethiopian-Eritrean protagonist, Alem Kelo, living in foster care with an English family, is baffled to find that his newly-arrived father, who is also seeking asylum, has been housed in a hotel on the Romford Road in East London that has no reception, no room numbers, nor does it rent out rooms. This is effectively a version of that strange and

seemingly impossible form – the 'asylum hotel' (Gibson 2003: 368) – providing temporary shelter for 'people from everywhere' (Zephaniah 2001: 250) and lying beyond the parameters of either the private rental sector and the commercial hospitality industry. While the space does not make sense to the outside visitor, the hotel operates on the basis of a clear economic logic; as Alem is informed, it is a business that 'only [takes] refugees and homeless people who the council send – regular money, you see' (Zephaniah 2001: 252). Yet it is also worth noting that the blurred and slippery definitions relating to temporary accommodation are hardly untypical within the social history of lodgings. As noted by Leonore Davidoff in her illuminating study of landladies and lodgers, 'ambiguities, which might appear to be a methodological disaster, especially when using statistical sources such as the census, may point to important historical insights' (1979: 76). Thus the difficulty in defining what constituted a boarding or a lodging house in the Victorian period, for example, signalled key developments relating to definitions of the family, taxes, the franchise, as well as property and tenancy rights (Davidoff 1979: 74-8).[vi] More broadly, the euphemisms, elisions and bywords applied to particular types of housing – especially in the context of rented rooms – can be seen as telling forms: often powerfully indicative of social anxieties relating to class, sexuality, race and economics.

The title of this collection – 'living with strangers' – takes on a distinctive resonance in the context of migration and asylum seeking. Not least because the notion of the 'stranger' today is significantly different from its associations in the modernist period with the figure of exile, existential alienation or a type of cosmopolitan mobility. In addition, from the post-war period of immigration through to the incendiary pre- and post-Brexit climate, the construction of the 'stranger' – defined not only by perceived racial difference but by a xenophobic identification of perceived national and cultural otherness – continues to have charged and pernicious undertones.[vii] Drawing on Sara Ahmed's work on the figure of the stranger, Sarah Gibson presciently notes: 'It is important to define and delimit the figure of the stranger, for

not all strangers are strange in the same way' (2003: 368). The asylum seeker, she argues, is often posited as the 'uninvited' stranger, defined by perceived difference and closely bound up in the national imaginary with matters of home, housing and living space. As Gibson observes:

> The arrival in Britain of immigrants and asylum seekers raises the question of accommodation for the strangers to the nation. The accommodating of asylum seekers in prisons, detention centers, hostels, hotels or asylums poses problems for the 'host nation'. It is this question of accommodation that poses in the most acute, literal, and direct way the question of 'hospitality' for the nation (2003: 371).

As she goes on to outline, incidents in which asylum seekers and refugees have been accommodated in hotels as an emergency temporary measure have presented the right-wing press with a symbolic and provocative scenario, the implication being that individuals are not just living off the state, but benefitting at the same time from a hotel stay by the sea.[viii] 'The loaded notion of "asylum"', Gibson concludes, 'is brought into crisis when asylum seekers are put up in a hotel, a hospitable space traditionally reserved for paying guests, such as tourists' (2003: 372).[ix] But while postcolonial discussions of hospitality have tended to centre on the ethical relations between the 'host' nation and the migrant 'guest', this essay proposes a different way of thinking about living with strangers, one that focuses on acts of hospitality (or indeed hostility, to extend the Derridean paradigm) between asylum seekers and forced migrants living at close quarters who are in fact themselves often 'strangers' to each other.[x] A recognition of the internal negotiations, ways of seeing and forms of kinship that forced migrants are reliant on in order to get by – beyond paradigms that position them as a 'stranger' in the national landscape – can help to shift the terms of the debate and bring to light new tropes and narrative trajectories that emerge through the cultural and fictional forms that give expression to this historical experience.

ii. Structures of feeling: living with strangers in contemporary fictions of asylum

Described as a 'novel of London immigration from what we might call the post-postwar period' (Ball 2011: 236) Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1998) famously uses a free-wheeling, polyphonic style and magic realist devices to explore the condition of migration from the Indian subcontinent in the wake of the more realist literary tendencies of the novels of the 'Windrush' generation of writers such as Sam Selvon, George Lamming and V. S. Naipaul. In the novel, Saladin Chamcha is propelled headlong through a fantastical descent into London, taking refuge at one point in the Shaandaar Café, owned by Muhammad Sufyan who also acts as landlord of the attached four-storeyed terraced rooming house and offers accommodation to 'variegated, transient and particoloured inhabitants' (Rushdie 1998: 243). In its loosely defined way – a telling marker of this type of accommodation – the Shaandaar rooming house is a reminder of how there have always been profits to be made from housing the vulnerable. According to the narrator, it was 'categorized as a Bed and Breakfast establishment, of the type that borough councils were using more and more owing to the crisis in public housing, lodging five-person families in single rooms, turning blind eyes to health and safety regulations, and claiming "temporary accommodation" allowances from the central government' (Rushdie 1998: 263-4). Hind Sufyan, Muhammad's wife, along with her enterprising daughters, accordingly charges the undocumented migrants living in the rooms rents that are as high as those in the private rental sector. Thus while the undocumented migrants living in the B&B are rendered destitute and socially invisible at the Shaandaar ('glorious') house, the B&B is a business model that thrives and capitalises precisely on the 'temporary' status of others: 'And behind six doors that opened a crack every time Chamcha went to make a phone call or use the toilet, maybe thirty temporary human beings, with little hope of being declared permanent. The real world' (Rushdie 1998: 264).

The Shaandaar Bed and Breakfast maintains an invisible world in which the 'eyes of impermanent women and children gleamed through barely opened doors' (Rushdie 1998: 265); the migrants are a silent huddled group within the narrative who occupy no role or place within the broader spaces of the city. It is also a 'satanic' space of ambiguous transformation; the devilish horns of Saladin Chamcha grow several inches during his mutating stay in the attic room of the Shaandaar B&B. Indeed, it is there that Chamcha develops a reputation as an 'illegal migrant, outlaw king', one who has become 'loud, stenchy, hideous, outsize, grotesque, inhuman, powerful' (Rushdie 1998: 288, 289). As Chamcha comments, in a line that could be seen to nod to the generic transformations of the novel of migration, 'the grotesque has me, as before the quotidian had me, in its thrall' (Rushdie 1998: 260). The B&B itself will eventually combust in a fiery blaze following the novel's 'Brickhall' riots. Yet while the inferno amplifies the satanic imagery of the novel, it also invokes a real-life incident recorded by Rushdie in his collection of essays, *Imaginary Homelands* (1991): an accidental fire that killed a Bangladeshi woman and her two children occupying a Camden Council-let single top-floor bedsit in which the cooker was located disastrously next to the bed. For Rushdie, this case seemed to emblematise the problem of insanitary and hazardous temporary accommodation that was disproportionately tenanted by black people in the 1980s. 'Nothing spectacular', Rushdie notes sardonically of this overlooked incident: 'just a cheap bed-and-breakfast establishment going up in flames' (1991: 139).

Rushdie's portrayal of the shared house of undocumented immigrants as a place of instability, shape-shifting and surreal nightmare inaugurates a trope which is extended in Brian Chikwava's recent London novel, *Harare North* (2010). In this tale of migration and transformation, which also centres on conceptions of schizophrenic identity and doublings, the nameless protagonist recounts his arrival in London from Zimbabwe, where he served as a member of the pro-Mugabe 'Green Bombers' youth organisation (and from which he has

subsequently fled on a murder charge). After staying for a while with acquaintances, he rejoins his childhood friend, Shingi, who has apparently had his asylum claim approved quickly, sharing a rented room in a house inhabited by other Zimbabweans in South London. The shared house, a type of twenty-first-century version of the migrant rooming house, is later revealed to be a squat, for which the narrator and his fellow housemate discover they are paying an excessive amount of rent. The symbolism of the 'squat' itself is underscored by descriptions of the wretched and illicit living conditions of the tenants who are living 'a reptile kind of life': as the narrator comments, 'I can sniff sniff them natives' lives squatting under the low damp ceiling like thieves that have just been catch' (Chikwava 2010: 2, 30).

In contrast to the literature of post-war migration, which often portrays shared housing, including the boarding house and rooming houses, as sites of sociability, solidarity and agency, as well as places that could potentially offer shelter from the racism and hostility of the public spaces of the city, the house in *Harare North* is an oppressive and paranoid space that pits its febrile tenants against one another. In addition to being dilapidated and run-down, the house operates as a nightmarish manifestation of the hidden life of its inhabitants who, as the narrator puts it, 'do the asylum style' while living in Brixton (Chikwava 2010: 72). Permeated by the tenants' secrets, hidden pasts and their involvement in the underground economy, the house seems to be governed by unstable rules, an unbalanced temporality and frightening mood shifts: 'Shadows shiver, become long, become short and disappear; days scatter away like birds flying off the wire. I stop sleeping' (Chikwava 2010: 216). The squat expresses something of its residents' deep-seated suspicion of one another and the nameless narrator's sense of culpability about his past; navigating its domestic space appears to require constant alertness, subterfuge and well-executed tactics. Indeed, the house is subject to progressive deterioration as the novel goes on:

> The kitchen-sink bowl is nearly overflow with things floating on water. There is no movement down the sink drain, and stench is starting to become hard to live with. The cupboard door below the sink have long fall off hinges, and after being toss about, soak with spilt water, and trampled on, it have lost its colour and have expand, warp and crack (Chikwava 2010: 214).

But as this unreliable narrator makes clear, all is not what it seems in the imaginary landscape of Brixton's Harare North (an ironic reference to Zimbabwe's capital Harare). For as critics have noted, the narrator's versions of events suggest that his past as a Green Bomber, as well as what appears to be his contraction of HIV, may well lend a different interpretation to the existence of the enigmatic room-mate Shingi – who is tellingly refracted through various forms of broken reflective images. The shared room and house take on a metaphorical aspect as it emerges that the narrator and Shingi are perhaps one and the same person. In this way, the house functions as a psychological projection for the state of mind of the former child soldier:

> It look like one heap of bricks that stand out from other houses because of its grey brick. That's the house where Shingi live. It have two top windows that have red brick arch. That make the windows look like big sad eyes. Below them sad eyes there is one large bay window that stick out like nose. When I look at the nose, the eyes and black parapet wall – this is Shingi straight and square. But you don't tell anyone that they head look like house if you still want to be friends.
>
> So, Shingi live inside this head? (Chikwava 2010: 29).

If the rooming house in *The Satanic Verses* finally explodes into flames, the interior of the house in *Harare North* is dismantled as the narrator's mental composure begins to fall apart. As fungi spreads on the walls and icicles appear in this temporary urban house of horrors, the protagonist starts to hack away at the four walls, ripping up cupboards and kitchen skirting-

boards with a clawhammer, an act which is simultaneously a dismantling of the shared squat and, by implication a form of self-immolation. Thus in these examples from the novels of Rushdie and Chikwava, 'temporary beings', in Rushdie's phrase, are housed and represented through fragile structures that eventually disintegrate. The shared house functions as a place of symbolic import, dramatising the precarious lives of the asylum seekers who inhabit a hidden world at the very heart of the metropolis, through forms that forcefully disrupt realist accounts of urban migration.

The trope of an unsettling migrant domesticity is also to be found in texts that depict migrants and refugees living with strangers in spaces beyond the capital city. Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001) is the story of the entwined lives of two Zanzibari men, Latif Mahmud and Saleh Omar, an elderly former antique-dealer who has fled a military coup and now finds himself living 'the half-life of a stranger' as an asylum seeker in England. As he waits on his support worker to find him a flat, he is temporarily housed in a B&B in a nameless English seaside town on the south coast where demonstrations have taken place against asylum seekers (Gurnah 2001: 2). While it is the case that cities – and London in particular – have formed a familiar spatial backdrop to many narratives of the migrant experience in post-war literature, a growing number of narrative texts take peripheral and coastal spaces as the central and signifying location. This geographical shift is partly political: a response to government policies of dispersal that have sought to house asylum seekers away from London and the South East. According to Gareth Millington, 'as many inner cities undergo state-endorsed gentrification, suburbs, deindustrialised towns, and deserted seaside resorts increasingly provide an alternative entry-point into Britain for immigrants, a trend intensified by dispersal strategies designed to prevent concentrations of asylum-seekers in London' (2010: 362). In fact it is the type of characteristic housing in these places that explains why seaside towns have been delegated as expedient places of accommodation for asylum seekers. The occurrence of

a high number of HMOs stems directly from 'the availability for rent of former seaside holiday accommodation arising from the closure of hotels and boarding houses' (Beatty and Fothergill 2003: 12). Thus a surplus stock of housing in these areas lends itself to the accommodation of recipients of housing benefits, including asylum seekers and refugees who are subject to dispersal orders; the new bedsits, in other words, crop up in what used to be seaside boarding houses and guest houses. While this conversion of housing tenure, and the population shifts it engenders, are the consequence of many complex economic factors – including the well-documented decline of British seaside towns, changing patterns of tourism and spiralling rents in London and the South East – what appears on the surface to be simply the multiplication of run-down HMOs can often tell a more misleading story of social 'decline'. As Millington observes in a chapter entitled '*Bedsit-land*: Southend-on-Sea and London', many locals of this particular coastal town negatively observed what they perceived as the degeneration of grand Victorian hotels and respectable boarding houses into a proliferation of unsightly HMOs tenanted by non-English speaking populations such that the deprived electoral ward, Milton, came to be known locally as 'bedsit-land' (2011: 134-58). Reminiscent of post-war complaints about changing property types and the 'character' of neighbourhoods marked by transient or impermanent homes, the unassuming bedsit has once again become a synecdoche for a set of complex social problems and relations.

Gurnah's *By the Sea* reflects on the place of the asylum seeker in the coastal town, but notably from the subjective viewpoint of the novel's protagonist – Saleh himself. Thus it is Saleh who articulates the sense that, as a man living in exile, he is aligned through circumstance to a mystifying and residual architectural landscape: 'Sometimes I think it is my fate to live in the wreckage and confusion of crumbling houses' (Gurnah 2001: 1). Seen from the inside in this way – and in a manner which bears similarity to the disillusioned viewpoint of some of the narrators of post-war diasporic literature – the educated and cosmopolitan asylum seeker casts

a critical eye on the contracted horizons and disappointing greyness of the British town or city. As Saleh comments of his environs: 'I had imagined more bustle and rush, and that somehow things would look newer and brighter. Something in the streets reminded me of Celia's house, faded and grubby and cramped …' (Gurnah 2001: 63). Celia's house, a B&B that lodges a number of migrant guests, is defined by a sense of residuality and marginality: 'The bed and breakfast was an old dark house in a quiet street off a main road. … The entrance hall was small and gloomy, the floor covered with a worn rug in which fragments of red were still visible in the threadbare grey' (Gurnah 2001: 49). While media images have frequently and notoriously depicted asylum seekers in terms of abjection (Tyler 2006: 191-2) in Saleh's view, the grim B&B is not representative of his condition but of the stagnation of little England. Indeed, the place is characterised by its abject qualities, evoking repugnance in its tenant and a sense that this temporary home is literally residual, harbouring all kinds of things that have been cast aside: 'upholstery that had soaked fluid detritus over decades, faded and worn rugs that clung to tangles of human hair and animal fur and crumbs and seeds, the reek of old fires and soot, the stale miasma that the bundles of cloth and bags in corners of the room gave off' (Gurnah 2001: 49). But in literary terms too, there is something rather residual about Gurnah's depiction of this B&B by the sea. The owners, Celia and Mick, are reminiscent of an earlier mode – a rather care-worn caricature of the seaside landlady and her subdued husband who bears the 'appearance of kindly decrepitude' (Gurnah 2001: 52), while a rather anachronistically-termed 'servant', Susan, is said to take charge of the cooking and cleaning. Celia, in particular, re-invokes the deep-seated cultural caricature of the landlady in post-war texts: a domestic businesswoman who is simultaneously maternal, seductive and threatening to her guests.

Saleh is introduced within the establishment as the 'new guest', but his relations with the other inmates are characterised by instant hostility and suspicion rather than any form of

solidarity or identification. On greeting his fellow boarders, the Balkan refugees Ibrahim and Georgy, the narrator notes:

> They both waved casually, and I saw in their eyes what I had not seen in either Celia's or Mick's, a wariness, a bit of swagger, a flash of malice. I would have known without being told, they were strangers here. … Young men on the make, greedy, too obvious in their hungers, desperate, perhaps merciless, I didn't know, but I was wary' (Gurnah 2001: 50).

Thus while Saleh recognises them instantly as 'strangers' – the term serving here as an apparent euphemism for fellow asylum seekers – underpinning this recognition is the sense that they are all playing some sort of role. For Saleh himself is constrained by the fact that he is pretending not to speak or understand English, a strategy which he believes will help to bolster his asylum claim. This plot of suspicion and paranoia among boarders who are strangers to each other in more ways than one (a framework that also underpins *Harare North*) is an extension of a narrative mode common to earlier twentieth-century boarding-house or lodging tales, and is given a new inflection here in the context of asylum and the pursuit of legitimate 'status'. The B&B in *By the Sea* thus emerges not as a site of immigrant solidarity, but as a paranoid and even surreal space of dislocation; at one point it is described in Saleh's eyes as a 'dungeon with its twisting stairways and its eccentric bawabs from whom I sensed danger and neglect' (Gurnah 2001: 59). Gurnah touches on the salient topic of the asylum seeker's place (or lack of place) in the ailing English seaside town, but the space of shared accommodation with strangers in the novel can only ever be a site of surveillance, suspicion and hostility.

The setting of the ailing British seaside town as a symbolic location for the dispersal of asylum seekers away from the metropolis is also exemplified in Pawel Pawlikowski's film *Last Resort* (2000). Here the fictional location of Stonehaven – recognisable as Margate in Kent –

appears as a distressed Victorian seaside town characterised by boarded-up shops, looming tower blocks, and queues of nameless asylum seekers who have been made virtual prisoners in a holiday resort turned 'last resort', operating as a 'designated holding area' for those waiting for their claims to be processed (Pawlikowski 2000). The liveliest social areas in Stonehaven appear to be the amusement arcade, where asylum seekers buy knock-off goods, and a bingo hall, where elderly people place their bets in another kind of hopeless lottery. The film's protagonist, the Russian Tanya, along with her young son Artiom, has inadvertently filed a bogus claim for asylum after her fiancé fails to join her at Gatwick airport; she subsequently finds herself dispersed to Stonehaven where she occupies a small flat in a tower block designated for asylum seekers (in fact the distinctive brutalist high-rise, Arlington House, built in 1964 as a so-called 'village in the sky'). Like Stephen Frears's film, *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002), *Last Resort* appears at first to be a social realist drama, but its dystopian and unreal elements become progressively more apparent. With shots of boarded up and desolate Victorian seafront houses, the film presents the resort as a redundant tourist town, which is precisely why it has become a holding area for those who have been defined by their uncertain legal status.[xi] The sign featured over the defunct amusement park announcing 'Dreamland Welcomes You' thus proclaims a darkly ironic version of the politics of welcome.

The representation of Margate as a holding-ground for those who are excluded from national space is further borne out in Penny Woolcock's later film *Exodus* (2007), in which a now-militarised Home Office armed squad turf out the refugee residents of Victorian homes and put them in an encampment in 'Dreamland' – a process described by one character as 'a twenty-first century solution to age-old problems' (Woolcock 2007). Both films present a world of surveillance, in which the coastal town has become an expedient holding ground away from more central forms of national space; the asylum seekers are at once out of sight and yet subject to the gaze of the state and the camera – as Woolley puts it, 'the faces of the asylum

seekers in [*Last Resort*] are decontextualized and inscrutable; seen rather than seeing' (2014: 76). Yet underlying both Gurnah's novel and Pawlikowski's film, there is a further poignancy and suggestiveness inherent to the settings of 'bedsit-land' by the sea. For those who have crossed borders in search of a home or a form of sanctuary, the natural and common border of the sea – a place that is a part of national space and yet constitutive of its very margins – is both the medium by which some migrants have arrived and a constant reminder of the threat of expulsion.

iii. Everyday hospitality: Bruce Goodison's *Leave to Remain*

I turn finally to consider portrayals of forced migrants living together as strangers in Bruce Goodison's recent film *Leave to Remain* (2013), a narrative which details the life of a group of teenage asylum seekers housed in sheltered accommodation in London's East End. Goodison developed the film on a low budget through drama workshops with refugees, many of whom would go on to take leading roles in the final production. The advantages and problems associated with ideas of authenticity and asylum accounts have been addressed elsewhere. But leaving aside the issue of calling on 'real' refugees to act in the film, what makes Goodison's film an important contribution is his distinctive portrayal of the idea of cohabitation, centred on forms of friendship and fictive kin among strangers, and his dedication to capturing the sensibilities of the adolescent life of teenagers. The place of temporary accommodation for refugees and asylum seekers in this film is not portrayed as one of Agamben's 'spaces of exception', nor is it defined by the kinds of abject qualities that define Chikwava and Gurnah's visions of the temporary home. Fittingly, for a film about young people who find themselves sharing a home, the form and sound of the film attempts to capture something of the energy and rhythm of teenage life, underscored by the commissioned soundtrack by the Mercury-winning band Alt-J. *Leave to Remain* explores the process of living with strangers by navigating the characters' attempts to deal with trauma and separation, but it

also weaves a story that touches on friendship, humour and mutual care. The young asylum seekers are represented as teenagers: they dress up and go out, listen to music, make confessions and tell lies, forge friendships and fall out. In a simple shift of emphasis, Goodison shows a world of young people recording each other on their own camera phones, rather than the visual trope of the state's punitive gaze capturing silent crowds of nameless migrants in the films of Pawlikowski and Woolcock. Indeed the depiction of the shared lives of teenagers *as* teenagers is a subtle and consequential intervention in itself, particularly in the context of a procedural system in which the threshold of adolescence is determinedly politicised. This point is exemplified in the film when the young Afghani boy Abdul has to prove that he is fifteen – through the indeterminate bodily markers of puberty – in order to process his asylum claim as an unaccompanied minor (thus lending the generic term 'coming-of-age' an ironic twist).

Offering a poetic and collective coming-of-age tale, rather than the representational form of the dystopian nightmare, Goodison's film attempts to highlight the possibility of conveying the quotidian and humane quality of the lives of asylum seekers in Britain. As Procter has noted, postcolonial studies, the lens through which asylum fiction is primarily read and interpreted, 'is essentially more at home with difference than indifference, ambivalence than routine; the extraordinary as opposed to the mundane; resistance rather than boredom' (2006: 62).[xii] Reflecting on this 'departure from the everyday', Procter insists that 'the habitual, the mundane and the taken-for-granted are all performing, or capable of performing, important cultural tasks after empire' (2006: 62, 64). In this way, a consideration of the meanings of HMOs, shared houses or bedsits – rather than the refugee camp or the detention centre – can contribute to this shift in qualitative emphasis. And this is why Goodison's portrayal of the teenagers' self-representation, both in the development of the film as well as the narrative's presentation of the asylum seeker's point of view, is a potentially radical gesture, given the tendency in fictions of asylum to portray characters through tropes of abjection, dystopia and

marginality. A film about unaccompanied minors, most of whom live in the shared house or in foster-based care, the narrative points to the practices of hospitality and complicity that operate between asylum seekers, in particular among the male members of the 'household', and in the maternal bond formed between Zizidi and the youngest member of the group, Abdul. 'You are now my family', he assures Zizidi, when she undergoes her own personal crisis.

Fittingly, the film does not end on a catastrophic note; the shared house does not burn down, or fall apart; it does not unleash demonic forms of possession, nor is it raided by immigration officers. Instead, Goodison shows it as a place where damp runs down the walls, privacy is at a premium and the furniture is worn, but the inhabitants are not reduced either physically or figuratively to their domestic surroundings or confined within representational modes of marginality and exclusion. Thus in the closing shot the snow falls on the East End house, just as it might in a Richard Curtis romantic comedy, as the teenagers rush out through the frame of the window into their front garden, bridging the shared domestic interior with the space of the residential street outside. The film offers a sentimentalised ending, certainly, but in doing so it locates its story of teenage asylum seekers within mainstream and populist modes of cultural representation. For it is not estrangement that is displayed by the closure of the film and the English scene of snow falling on a terraced house, but deep familiarity – even cultural cliché. Yet to use tropes of familiarity in this way can serve as an effective and indeed potentially political means of re-imagining the asylum seeker or refugee away from historical and media portrayals of the 'stranger'.

Conclusion

A lot has been written on the concept of home and hospitality in the context of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, and much of it centres on the ethical relations between the

'host' nation and the migrant 'guest'. Shifting away from this primary relationship, my essay has ended by proposing a slightly different way of thinking about living with strangers, one that is heightened by the focus of this collection on the history of getting by with strangers in forms of temporary accommodation such as bedsits and boarding houses. Ahmed's work on the stranger in the context of migration is useful here, particularly as she resists a universalising and fetishising 'ontology of the stranger as given in and to the world', a figure of homelessness and contemporary dislocation. As she puts it:

> To talk of the migrant as the stranger is not sufficient. It cannot deal with the complexities of the histories, not only of the displacement of peoples, but the demarcation of places and spaces of belonging (Ahmed 2000: 79).

Rejecting a universalising notion of estrangement as something that 'we' have in common, Ahmed points to work in which migrant communities create 'gestures of identification' in specific spatial and temporal frameworks: 'it is through an *uncommon estrangement* that the possibility of such a migrant community comes to be lived'. Thus she comments on processes by which spaces are reinhabited 'through gestures of friendship with others who are already recognised as strangers' (Ahmed 2000: 93). Like the support system formed between an undocumented Nigerian immigrant, Okwe, and Senay, a Turkish asylum seeker, in Frears's *Dirty Pretty Things*, who have a box-and-cox sleeping arrangement by which each takes it in turn to sleep in shifts in Senay's small flat, or the Chinese migrant cocklers who forge friendships and support each other in the unlikely setting of suburban migrant workers' homes in Nick Broomfield's powerful and intimate telling of the Morecombe Bay tragedy *Ghosts* (2006), it is possible to see the re-emergence of the migrant shared house – in all its diverse forms – as a place which stages modes of complicity, potential resistance and a degree of solace. In their depiction of the everyday communal life of strangers who become a little less strange to each other as they share space, secrets and strategies for survival, films like *Leave*

to Remain and *Ghosts* demonstrate how the 'exceptional' state of migration is also bound up with routine and even banal, but no less important, forms of cohabitation: getting along with others (or not), acts of informal translation, the vital sharing of knowledge and resources. In this way, hospitality – that enduring subject of philosophical and postcolonial thought – can re-emerge as an empowering, everyday and common practice of living with strangers.

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[i] For more details concerning the apparent colour-coding of the homes of asylum seekers, which rendered the residents targets of abuse and vandalism, see Perkins (2016).

[ii] A good summary highlighting the complexity of the definitions and politics surrounding these forms of accommodation can be found in Hutton and Lukes (2015) and in a section entitled 'Hotels and similar establishments (Item 1d): homeless people and asylum seekers': https://www.gov.uk/hmrc-internal-manuals/vat-land-and-property/vatlp11400.

[iii] Official government advice on the 'Asylum Support' section of the gov.uk website states categorically: 'You can't choose where you live. It's unlikely you'll get to live in London or south-east England': https://www.gov.uk/asylum-support/what-youll-get

[iv] See 'Housing Act Guide', Residential Landlords Association: http://www.rla.org.uk/landlord/guides/housing_act/docs/all/what_is_an_hmo.shtml

[v] For the way in which B&Bs have become an umbrella term for HMOs and hostels accommodating asylum seekers and the homeless, see Gentleman (2012).

[vi] See also Macdonald's discussion of the nuanced variations in terminology relating to lodging, including the perceived social differences of such terms as 'hotel', 'chambers', 'lodgings' and 'rooms' (2011).

[vii] For a discussion of the deployment of the word 'stranger' from the period of postwar immigration to the contemporary representations of asylum, see Gibson (2003: 368-70).

[viii] A simple Google search using key terms will throw up a number of articles, many of which appear in the *Daily Mail*, reporting on the apparent lodging of asylum seekers in large commercial hotels.

[ix] See also Grillo (2005) for an account of protests taking place in 2002-2003 against the proposed housing of asylum seekers in Saltdean, a seaside resort in Brighton and Hove.

[x] As Tyler argues, 'as things stand, the theoretical turn to the figure of the refugee or asylum-seeker within disciplines such as philosophy and cultural studies risks becoming a means of not hearing asylum-seekers' (2006: 199).

[xi] As Tyler notes: 'In contrast to the term refugee, which names a (legal) status arrived at, "asylum-seeker" invokes the non-status of a person who has not been recognized as a refugee. Asylum-seekers are literally pending recognition' (2006: 189).

[xii] See also Farrier's stimulating engagement with Procter's work on the 'postcolonial everyday'; he notes that 'successive acts of legislation have curtailed asylum seekers' capacity to act as social reproducers: living without the right to work, and for some with the daily threat of removal, makes it near impossible to experience the everydayness of the everyday' (2012: 431).

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