

Chapter 4

Welcome upon Conditions: On Visiting a Multigenerational Immigrant House(hold)



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Un acte d'hospitalité ne peut être que poétique,
J. Derrida (in Michaud, 2020: 387)

4.1 Introduction

The quote reported above extends Derrida's much cited work on 'hospitality' (2000), term which the author coined to reflect on the shared etymology of host/ing and hostility, which, he argues, need not be taken as antonymic but should instead be seen as intrinsically mutual. While the French philosopher's considerations have been popularized to address migration and integration by alluding to state sovereignty and the recognition of Others (Faist, 2009), his original musings emerge from the youth spent in Algeria with his family, and from the lived experience of Bedouin hospitality.

Anthropologists have written extensively on the cultural rules of hospitality in different times and contexts, reserving great attention to the Mediterranean and the Middle East with a comparative purview (Pitt-Rivers, 2012 [1977]). Before entering the tool-box of political theory, and becoming the beacon of tourism studies, in the wake of social functionalism anthropology convincingly maintained that hospitality serves to establish a relationship (between individuals or groups) or promote an already established one. As Selwyn (2000: 19) captured: "Acts of hospitality achieve this in the course of exchanges of goods and services, both material and symbolic, between those who give hospitality (host) and those who receive it (guest)". Between the dancing partners of offer and acceptance, there is always the possibility that such exchange goes astray, due to some faultiness from either party (or both). "Hospitality is a stance toward strangers", writes Michael Herzfeld, toward beings

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who can become “useful, dangerous, or irritating” (1993: 173). Returning to Derrida then, hospitality cannot be other than an elaborate communication ritual, whose promises and perils can be as extreme as turning the stranger into a friend or a foe.

This chapter engages with the generative potential intrinsic to the interaction between the ethnographer as guest and the informants as hosts, as seen and exercised from within their homes. Taking South Asian diasporas in Britain as research partners, the fieldwork starts in the private domestic space and proceeds from there to consider the neighborhood and the socio-spatial relations that are there imbued. As a result, continuous entanglements of local and temporal dynamics, which bear traces of other locations and migratory processes, will affect and reflect the modes and depth of ethnographic engagement. First, the chapter will review the literature on diaspora studies, with reference to South Asian transnational migration flows as the British Empire withdrew from newly formed independent states but leaving a conditional access to the former mother country (Brown, 2006; Harper & Constantine, 2010; Lal & Jacobsen, 2015). While I will not expand on the structural injustice that sustained the colonialist enterprise throughout (deep-seated in the lives of South Asian diasporas, for better or worse), the luring imaginary of a Commonwealth of Nations (and the aspiration to actively taking one’s place in it) persisted among many population strata in the Indian Subcontinent. As this chapter is built on “domestic ethnography” (Bonfanti, 2016, 2018, 2020), a methodology section will follow to explain in detail how home visits, narrative exchanges and walks-along in the borough took place. Besides, a critical look at the suburban scale elucidates what it means to do fieldwork in BME (Black-and Minority-Ethnic) locations.

Three case studies are presented, which give evidence to the internal diversity of the British Asian diaspora, with regard to countries of origin, religion and age of migration. While embedded in peculiar districts with certain demographics and immigration trends (Newham, Wembley, and Ealing), the analysis follows the experience of the ethnographer-and-guest in making sense of the domestic lives of her hosts-and-informants. Then, with an attempt to look at those three home studies side by side, a comparative discussion will follow. This zooms on three topics, seeing how these emerge from the empirical material: a. the positionality of the guest-and-ethnographer within the homes of her hosts-and-participants; b. the double perspective on seeing how each house is held from within, and how far the external social context contributes to it; c. the flickering experience that South Asian diaspora subjects in London live, with a range of homeland orientations and translocal connections. As the case-studies proposed appear irreducibly diverse, bringing the discussion back to hospitality as a discourse, lived practice and method will provide further insights. Last, a provisional conclusion will recap the main arguments, insisting on the potential and limits of the hos(ti)pitality paradigm for understanding social reality, and on the open-endedness of domestic ethnography.

4.2 Diaspora Studies and British Asian Ages of Migration: A Literature Review

Since the 1980s, scholars from the humanities and religious studies (Baumann, 2000; Knott & McLoughlin, 2010) contributed to the re-invention of “diaspora” as a notion (beyond the historical displacement of the Jews from Palestine in Biblical times), posing the question “what is at stake in contemporary *invocations* of diaspora?” (Clifford, 1989: 302). Given its political pliability, as an analytical tool diaspora built into the semantics of “expatriate minority communities” and travelled across disciplines. Against the erratic course of diaspora studies, a few works eased my understanding of South Asian diasporas and enhanced my communication with their members in Britain.

Notably, Vertovec (1997) stressed the continuity of diasporas with transnational communities, considering “three modes of diaspora” among South Asian religions as “a social form, a type of consciousness, and a mode of cultural production”. Recognizing the triadic relation between dispersal, homeland and new emplacement, he also signaled the tensions between diasporic multiple *loyalties* and the economic connections among their many *locations*. The “place which is diaspora” was further probed by Werbner (2002), whose contribution in untying the knot between chaos and order, elusive centers and multiplying peripheries of the South Asian diaspora will come fruitful for discussing the three case-studies further presented. Similarly, Lal & Jacobsen (2015) observed that, although the Indian diaspora is plural and divided in its aspiration, this univocal label emerged in the last three decades (when neoliberalism began to dictate global labor flows) after having existed for the past two centuries (literally *bonded* to British Imperialism). Diasporas are not given communities. Rather, they belong to Anderson’s (1991) “imagined communities”, fecund of narratives and discourses that sustain relevant frames for self-identification and collective action. In his overview, Cohen (2008), once transcended the Jewish benchmark, typified four diasporas based on their empirical manifestations (victim, imperial, trade and imaginative). Indian diasporas altogether would fall under the imperial or (post)colonial category, while the Sikh one would stand aside, embodying the lure for a home that never came concrete on the maps.

While acknowledging these influential readings, my person-centered research called for a more nuanced view in order to grasp the lived reality of those who made the British Asian diaspora, its diasporans. Commenting on Brah’s work, Hall (2015: 27) observed that diaspora is also “an interpretive form to face the perplexing interfaces between the social and the psychic”. This stance is shared by Tölölyan (1991, 2018), who reasoned over the “construction of home and belonging” in diaspora conditions by overcoming the binary between loss and link, exilic nationalism and diasporic transnationalism. As my ethnography unfolded, it became clear that South Asian diasporans construe their existence on the move (even when migration has

turned into settlement) with no clear cut between home and away, *desh/pardesh*¹ (Ballard, 1994). Following Bhabha (1994: 312), “[T]he nonsynchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space – a third space – where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences”. People’s sense of belonging in diasporic contexts is always in progress and emerges in constant interplay with ‘host’ cultures, as Brah’s seminal work on diasporas reminds us:

What is *home*? On the one hand, ‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of return, even if it is impossible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’. On the other hand, home is also a lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day... all this, as *mediated by the historically specific of everyday social relations*. (Brah, 1996: 192)

Diaspora studies contributed many insights which then informed our *homing* approach to study migrant homemaking. Transforming our conceptualization of home from a static noun to a gerundive verb, we infused movement across times and spaces to understand people’s experience of home under conditions of mobility. In particular, we conceived of home as a complex notion which is always socio-culturally unpired and can comprise a specific idea, location, set of practices, relations, and emotions (Mallett, 2004). Following Boccagni (2017), we put to test the definition of home as a situated attempt to emplace ‘safety, familiarity, and comfort’, through ethnographic investigation. Doing so, we recognised how a plurality of spaces and times conflated in the experience of migrant home-making (Boccagni & Brighenti, 2017). We thus considered the domestic space as being both multiscalar (shifting from dwelling place to neighbourhood, city and nation) and processual, embedded within plural temporalities (across one’s life-course, household cycle and historical time).

An ethnographer myself, I stepped into the field of South Asian diasporas aware that my research subjects made, (re)produced and circulated their homes on a trans-local ground, with practices and within social fields which are as local as global (Brickell & Datta, 2011). As a result, I tried to look sideways, within the interstices situated between the household and the outer society, considering kinship dynamics as well as race relations as they are framed in British public discourse. Furthermore, carrying out ‘domestic ethnography’ requires paying extra attention to how the materiality of one’s home affects and reflects (Bonfanti, 2020) the stories that are there emplaced and rendered. This applies whether we consider the recollection of one’s home-places in migrant biographies (and family oral histories; Bonfanti & Pérez Murcia, 2023), or we read through the domestic vignettes that the ethnographer writes with their informants, as they share food and words *ad libitum* or *ad interim*. Acts of hospitality and moments of conviviality take place in anyone’s home upon specific conditions, whose agreeability and duration go largely

¹While this notion of ‘home in awayness’ is given in hindi-urdu-punjabi, and as such recognised across South Asia, it is equivalent to the dynamic *desh/bidesh* as expressed in Bangla. The sense of homemaking upon migration is aptly captured within that indissoluble knot of experience.

unanticipated but depend on the internal social hierarchy of the household and get done as the guest-host relationship evolves (Bonfanti et al., 2019). This chapter maintains that homemaking in the diaspora can be fruitfully explored from within the home and bottom-up, while reasoning on the progressive and always conditional welcome that the researcher (guest) ultimately receives from the researched (hosts).

4.3 Methodology in Context

Compared to my intensive fieldwork with Punjabi diasporas in Italy (engaged in domestic ethnography with only four partner households), when I started collaboration in a large-scale project such as HOMInG it took me months to overcome my skepticism of ‘quick and dirt’ fieldwork (cf. Vindrola-Padros, 2021). Let aside research preferences, I learnt to conduct shorter but more various fieldtrips and reconsidered the value of shallower engagement in the lives of informants. A new appreciation of methods and results came out of those home visits which seemed less demanding to a *momentary* guest-and-ethnographer. Turning up at the doorstep of my hosts (and hostesses), presenting my business card as if it was a lock-pick, paved the way for anticipating light-hearted *moments* of hospitality from both parties.

Once acknowledged the overall research project’s aims and design, and drawn my own plan within, I laid open a London GMap and spent days pre-visualising my fieldtrips. It was a matter of imagination and cognition: which areas would better fit my research, which districts did host a conspicuous number of people with a South Asian background? After all I had adopted the same process for successfully constructing the field in Brescia, Italy (the city with the highest concentration of Punjabi migrants in the country). I was not aware yet that “London is *Brown* to the core”. So said one of my first respondents in the East end: a white middle-age woman who managed a public library where most posters, books and activities on display were advertised in Hindi, Urdu and Bangla. Newham, Wembley and Ealing were the three districts I took into consideration. According to the Census data, each of those suburban areas of London (respectively East, North and West) is demographically diverse beyond the median range of a global capital. In particular, their connotation as BME areas implicates the existence of specific policies whose implementation should foster inter-group communication and promote equality for the disadvantaged one (Goulbourne, 1998). While my ethnography relied on home visits and stays, informal conversations,² and walks-along, the importance of the home-at-large and of the temporal dimension(s) of migration there inscribed could never go underestimated. On the contrary, as a guest-and-ethnographer, but also a foreign visitor to London, my hosts-and-informants did not disdain to take on the role of

²This is one the reasons why few verbatim quotations appear in this chapter. In such exploratory home visits/stays I preferred not to use the vocal recorder, which might disrupt the progressive development of a ‘sense of familiarity’ I was after (unless a formal life interview was arranged).

‘city experts’ and be my chaperons as time and life constraints allowed them. Giving practical travelling suggestions, they often made poignant critiques of the public space they inhabited.

A peculiar feature of this strand of my research in the UK was the impromptu method adopted to recruit interlocutors. Apart from some snowballing (i.e. being referred to their relatives by South Asians in Italy), finding a British Asian host/ess was a shortcut to visit their homes and stay over for a while. For three years (2017–2020) I took nine fieldtrips to the UK of several weeks at a time, I met and mingled with dozen South Asians in London and Birmingham, had hundreds of informal conversations and recorded 42 interviews focused on their experience of home and migration (14 of which took the form of life-history and were administered in more than one session). Ethnographic (and interviewing) settings were as diverse as home places as well as houses of worship, occasionally work places and sometimes public spaces like parks or restaurants. Concerning the ethics of research, while I did comply with the standard requirements imposed by the ERC project and with my university Ethical Board (in terms of informed consent and anonymization procedures), each and every home I visited opened up specific challenges for framing my ethnographic stay and even for naming those who were my hosts-and-research ‘interlocutors-informants-partners’. It is on the basis of this research collaboration that I selected the three cases hereafter discussed (under as many pseudonyms).

Differently from the Italian Punjabi homes where I was a regular attendant (Bonfanti, 2016, 2018), my positionality with(in) British Asian households was easier to manage although not lighter to consider. On the one hand, not being a native British I was spared requests of help. I wouldn’t have been able to fill in the paperwork of my hosts-and-informants on issues such as tax payments, school enrolments, medical care registries (a know-how which came useful in transacting reciprocity with migrants in Italy). On the other hand, as a European national abroad for work-study reasons (it’s always hard to frame a precarious anthropologist as someone doing a proper job), I was perceived as a migrant myself, who shared some of the same frailties which my interlocutors admitted (not the least speaking English with a foreign accent), but with the privilege of Whiteness. While many South Asians joked on the cultural likeness between their ‘food and family-oriented’ mindset and the Mediterranean one, being an Italian young woman did arise different responses from my research partners: from curiosity to protectiveness, from mild advances to slight reproaches (how could I leave my two young kids at home and stay away for weeks... for such little money?). Positionality is a matter of entangled (self)representations (Salzman, 2002), where reflexivity on gender and age identity remains crucial in shaping the ethnographic rapport (Bonfanti et al., 2018), and dis/allowing access to the homes of informants.

While the idea of liminal space and the potential for passing domestic thresholds (Miranda-Nieto et al., 2020) is the prime focus of this volume, the contributions proposed show an endless variety of such experience. The intensity of the transition from the street to the house (from one room to another, and all the way back, once and again) provides the coordinates for drawing in-depth maps of how migrant lives

are emplaced. This multiple process of ‘thresholding’ (crossing socio-spatial borders that define in/out spaces and people, between welcome and proscription) is key to observe how Asian diasporas hold their houses in Britain without losing sight of their contexts of origin (Cohen, 2008; see also Bonfanti and Bertolani, Chap. 10). Without iterating the quaint metaphor of ‘roots and routes’ (Clifford, 1994), the diaspora houses which happened to host me were the ‘cultural sites’ (Fog Olwig, 1997) where the irreducible simultaneity of translocal belonging took place. That does not mean that such domestic environments functioned as memorializing private spaces (although people could recreate specific and emotionally-laden corners for remembrance of personal or collective events³ – cf. Pérez Murcia, Chap. 11). Rather, in the selective process of retention of *other* practices and of objects coming from *afar*, diaspora homes were co-agent in shaping their residents’ subjectivity and life worlds, creating a scenography on which roles and performances were played out between continuity and change.

Between due respect for South Asian cultural mores and values, and vernacular ‘cosmopolitan attitudes’ (both mine and of my interlocutors), domestic ethnography was a tremendous exercise in human sociability. Following Da Col (2019: 42), hospitality could be the prime field for investigating the productivity of uncertainty at the heart of human sociality: “At stake in this process is the role of anticipatory cognition and imagination, which find their ideal testing ground in a hospitality setting”. In this chapter, migrant domestic spaces functioned as exceptionally productive sites (or poetic, in the sense given by Derrida), where to exercise the mundane and yet complex rituals of hospitality.

4.4 Visiting Diasporic Homes in London: Three Case Studies

As I conducted domestic ethnography throughout my fieldwork in London, I felt spoilt for choice: which homes shall I consider for ‘lateral comparison’ (Bonfanti et al., 2019), putting each case side by side, giving evidence to their peculiarities, allowing for broader reflections? The three households selected responded to the criteria of categorical diversities, as they belonged to different diaspora groups with reference to nationality and religion, as well as age of migration. They were also part of the local ‘ethnic majority’ in the BME districts considered. In fact, these homes could provide a lived view of that simultaneous chaos and order which the diaspora is (Werbnér, 2002). Paraphrasing Jackson (2000), how could my hosts-and-informants make themselves at home in the diaspora, amid multiple loyalties

³In many South Asian diaspora houses I visited, mundane artefacts which evoked the crippling memories of critical events (such as the Partition, 1984 persecution of the Sikhs, civil riots against the Muslims in the Nineties) were often treasured and passed on from the generation who had lived the experience to those who were absent or not born yet. Such material anchors (Turkle, 2011) serve both as cognitive triggers for the memories of places left behind, and as scaffolds for certain affective states related to them.

(co-ethnics or co-religionists, but also professional bodies or peers) and personal positions within multiscale locations (their transnational family, city, homeland and host-land)?

Regarding *class-cum-caste*, which remains a crucial social marker in South Asia, I did not ascribe such tags to those three households, partly because of their faltering middle-class ambitions, partly because the discourse on *varna-jati*⁴ sounded unsolicited to my hosts. As I wrote elsewhere (Bonfanti, 2016), ‘caste’ was often a taboo argument with South Asian migrants, whose fringe was easier to breach with those who recognized themselves as lower placed in the ranking and were not shy with showing their anger.

Each of these case studies follows an argumentative outline that considers, first, my ethnographic access, and then four substantive questions: (1) the interplay between the house and the home, with regard to the material culture and domestic practices we shared in a setting of multigenerational house-holding; (2) the hospitality performances which we played out, and the imperfect reciprocity of giving-taking in visiting someone’s home or even temporarily staying there; (3) the oral (his)stories that inhabit those dwelling places in the diaspora (i.e. biographical memories and family tales, as embedded in migration trajectories); (4) the everyday experience of hanging out in the neighborhood with its residents, commenting on race relations and social difference as these unfold in the public space.

Diaspora homes are the repository of uncountable stories and the setting where a ‘global sense of migrant place’ is always rearranged (Gielis, 2009), upholding the need for a geographical lens in looking at transnational social networks. The richness of empirical ethnographic data that I harnessed from within and bottom-up the house(hold)s visited was often puzzling and open-ended. Faced with the serendipity of fieldwork, the vignettes and commentaries that follow are as provisional as the hospitality dynamics into which I took part.

4.4.1 How Poplar Became Popular: The Domestic Space of Saeed

It’s my second fieldtrip to London since I started collaborating in the HOMInG project. Tracking my reference groups from the Subcontinent, I drifted towards West Ham, where I was advised that different cohorts of Indo-Pakistani communities lived (Dench et al., 2006). I got off at Upton Park and enjoyed mingling with the

⁴The *varna-jati* system (lit. colour-birth group) should be understood as a graded social stratification, where the contemporary dissociation between caste and traditional occupations brought about a reshuffling of the deck and increasing protests (Jaffrelot, 2010). The latent persistence of caste discrimination in diaspora contexts started to be re-coded as class difference, while bearing the marks of a colonial mindset for understanding intra-ethnic difference (Dirks, 2011).

crowds who were shopping after worktime in ‘Desi⁵ stores’, in and out of warehouse and convenience stocks. Eventually, I rang the doorbell of the terraced house where I was supposed to sleep over, after concluding via email a private b & b arrangement. My host was the ‘brother’s cousin⁶’ of an Italo-Punjabi man who had ‘migrated onward’ to Manchester in search of greener pastures (Della Puppa & King, 2019).

Through the windowsill I caught a glimpse of shoes neatly lined up, and of a woman peeping at me behind a lace curtain, before she sent two young girls to greet me. Within minutes, their teenage brother came rushing from the street: sorry as he was, there was no room for me to stay at their home. Their father, who had agreed online to host me, had left for Pakistan six weeks earlier; their connection had been interrupted since, and his phone rang a dead call. In his new role of paterfamilias in charge, the guy apologized regretfully: they would not host a stranger in their home. Stranded in Newham, passers-by diverted me to Rumford Road, where a stripe of cheap guesthouses stood, with quite unappealing welcome signposts. I picked the first inn that seemed decent enough and found a flock of men at the reception desk who kept blinking amused, as I explained my unexpected turning up (in a Brit-Pakistani hostel) after being turned down (from a Brit-Pakistani family). Between a faded green and white flag and a torn portrait of Elisabeth II, my fieldtrips to London started. There I met by chance the other guests: Punjabi men of all walks of life, recently moved to London and seeking for work and accommodation. Wrapped in a black *dupatta* (shawl), the cleaning lady who came to tidy my room took pity on me, and gave me the contact of a couple who might provide me lodging for a cheap rent.

Saeed and Zoya made a remarkable British-Bangla duo: undecidedly partners or flat-mates. A young man born in London from Bangladeshi parents, he managed the reservation but was rarely at home, busy with miscellaneous trade in Brick Lane at a market stall inherited by his father. A third generation Bangla young woman, she worked as a divorce specialist in Canary Wharf, defending Muslim women involved in ‘sham marriages’ (Qureshi et al., 2014). Mentally exhausted after work, Zoya changed her clothes and her veil, for a lighter fabric that could better attune with the lightness of being at home (Dwyer, 1999). As we sat at their dining table from Chittagong, unwrapping Cadbury’s bites among a paraphernalia of domestic appliances (Fig. 4.1), we talked about the place. Explicit references to Bangladesh as their homeland were almost nonexistent, little of the material dialectics between the London flat and the Sylheti *bari* (homestead) as recounted by Zeitlyn (2012). My hosts were both “too modern (and) British” to remember the livelihoods of their Bengali ancestors.

Their house bore the effort of making its guests feel at home: gross pictures and plaques exalting homeliness were almost excessive. Besides, in every single room (except for the bathroom), landlord Saeed had mounted a small camera to keep

⁵Lit. *home stores* in the South Asian way to reframe anything which is part and parcel of the diaspora everyday life.

⁶That is to say a ‘loose relative’, in the Punjabi habit of disguising vague commercial relations under the shield of kinship, like Baumann (1995) recorded.



Fig. 4.1 Translocal laundry in the East End. (Author's picture)

surveillance and people's safety. As I voiced my uneasiness, Zoya explained that they took that measure after burglars had broken in, ruining the house, in spite of CCTV systems being installed all over their residential slot, which was signposted *neighborhood watch zone*. The room where I slept, planned as a lounge, had been converted from prayer area into a dorm for occasional guests. A crimson carpet stood in a corner pointing southward, where I guessed the owners kneeled at Salah times when the room was vacant.

To gain extra income by putting on rent a portion of one's home is an activity many long-term immigrants have taken up (evermore since AirBnb made this business easier). Bangladeshis did the same throughout East London, starting from their historical neighborhood in Tower Jorges. They bought City Council estates, improved them, and began letting places to newcomers; a chain of sub owners and letters have come next (cf. Miranda-Nieto, Chap. 5), some with opaque dealing and misdeeds (Alexander, 2011). My guest-and-informant concludes that London owes to the Bangladeshi home-business (trading at the docks or rehousing the working class) to have made Poplar a popular area for tourists. The borough takes its name after the tree native to its marshes (bot. *Populus*), but its 'popularity' rose in the early twentieth century when it gained a reputation for political radicalism.

When a Saturday night Ashraf (Saeed's cousin, a student at LSE) took me out for a marathon through British pubs in Brick Lane, we rode across Whitechapel and run into their uncle Nadeer. The old man was about to deliver his ritual alms to one of

the banks which had sprung up around the East London Mosque: the modern infrastructure of *zakat*. That noon though, it was not the *adhan* we heard, calling Muslim worshippers to pray, but a young busker attracting people to Altab Ali memorial park. Named after a Bangla textile worker who fell victim of a racist murder in Brick Lane in 1978, Altab Ali Park is the most politicised of all (semi)public spaces in Tower Jorges: a site for the local community to gather for political events and informal rallies (Eade, 1989). How the Bengali residents use and conceive of this iconic park is revealing of different patterns of emplacement. 70ys-old Nadeer explained that London Bengalis meet there to celebrate International Mother Tongue day every year at the Shahid Minar, which is a replica of the national monument⁷ in Dhaka. 28ys-old Ashraf emphasized: “Altab Ali Park is the only park in Tower Jorges that has been re-named after a local Bengali resident. [...] It is a park which many people can enjoy and I am proud of its history”. For a British Bangla young man the murder of Altab Ali sounded hagiographic but fundamental to vindicate one’s right to the city as a minority ethnic.⁸ Altab Ali memorial is disseminated with photographs: ‘Here to stay, here to fight’, one placard read. The militant response to Altab Ali’s murder, led by Bengali youth movements, was a turning point for local co-ethnics first, for all BME communities then (Statham, 1999). Newer generations of British Bangladeshis, who were born in the diaspora or joined it (or even “fell into it”, like Ashraf said of himself) are taken to the Park by their elders as if it were a pilgrimage site of British-Bangla political consciousness. This reveals a dual notion of home and belonging, kinship and the nation blended into each other (Gardner & Mand, 2012). British Bangladeshi identity is built (and transmitted) on its racialized diaspora status and on a wider ethics of antiracism (Hoque, 2019). Although, even within the same migrant family, personal trajectories take different turns, the political background of being a minority settles in the homes of 2nd generations (Zeitlyn, 2015). Saeed might not share the same radical arguments as his scholarly cousin Ashraf, but a copy of *The Battle of Brick Lane* took place on his book shelves, a free reading to any tenants or temporary guests.

4.4.2 *Faking Elitism in Wembley: The Domestic Space of Padmini*

I am sipping a golden smoothie in a North-London café, invited out by the pioneer scholar in South Asian diaspora studies, and my personal heroine. The professor laments she would have taken me home if not for the plumbers that were deranging her apartment, but she quickly makes up for it recommending ‘a reliable host in the

⁷The monument commemorates those killed during the Bengali Language Movement demonstrations of 1952 in what was then East Pakistan.

⁸On 4 May 1978, election day, the young Bangladeshi man was stabbed by three teenagers supporting the far-right National Front. Later at the trial they declared having attacked Ali because he was a ‘Paki’.

area'. After two-hours conversation, she hands over to me a piece of paper where she scribbles down the name of a dear friend who is keen on taking up 'responsible guest students' at her place.

Padmini's house sits on the verge of two districts, where Brent turns into Wembley.⁹ As the city expanded after WWII, so the numbers of former colonized immigrants soared. North-west London became a pinnacle for the Indian communities from Gujrat since the late 50s. Westminster College, which graduated the first Hindu elites in Britain, was the traction force behind the development of Harrow and its ultimate Neasden Temple, "the largest *mandir* outside India". Padmini and her husband were just a young couple in the 70s when they left Sri Lanka, or the island of Ceylon as she often refers to her homeland inadvertently, as if the country was still a Dominion ruled by the British. With a degree in accounting and a lump of savings, setting up a new household in London was an option that many educated Sri Lankan Sinhala ventured in the 70s, before the civil war broke out, and another flow of Tamils sought refuge in Britain (David, 2012). The couple followed after Padmini's elder sister and brother-in-law, who had already moved to Greenhill and opened a restaurant catering for the local South Asian palates. Although their families had come from the Buddhist Theravada tradition, interreligious conviviality had never been an issue for them, at least with the Hindus with whom memories of trade between South India and Sri Lanka were vivid.

The spouses moved houses a few times, going up the social ladder from outer to inner north London, from council flats to a terraced house, and finally in Willesden. When I rang the doorbell, their white-washed and timber-wooden semi-detached property did not seem any different from the bourgeois buildings running up on that hilly avenue. A woman in her sixties, sporting a tracksuit and a soft smile, opened the door and let me in, greeting me with a proper *Namaste* and gently *rubbing*¹⁰ her warm hands over mine. October afternoons were for yoga and tea, and by the time I dropped my bags Padmini had already brewed one cup for her 'guest student'. We took our time to know each other in her sitting room, accompanied by the rhythmic sound of a pendulum clock brought from Sri Lanka ages ago: a carved and painted jungle-fowl (bird endemic to the island and national icon) beat all the conversations we held since, whether small or intense.

The muffled stomps on the carpeted staircase that went up the three floors were the next sound coming to my mind when I think of the days and nights spent at her place. While I was reserved a small self-unit extension in the garden (quiet and bright, with a toilet en-suite, but terribly cold at night with no heating other than a

⁹The district was chosen to host the British Empire Exhibition in 1924, resulting in the development of landmarks like the Empire Stadium, later known as Wembley and still regarded as the iconic soccer field.

¹⁰As Monaghan (2006) writes, fieldwork is always embodied. Bodily encounters make the fabric of ethnographic knowledge. Evermore in the case of domestic ethnography, where the home-field is relatively small and enforces physical closeness among its dwellers, bodily contacts would deserve an important consideration (also in regard of kinship rules for gendered codes of behaviour and intimacy), which does not feature in this chapter for lack of space.

portable electric stove), Padmini's elder son, his Polish young bride and their toddler lived in the attic room. Her youngest son slept in a room on the first floor, sharing the bathroom and kitchenette with a couple of MBA students freshly arrived from Gujrat. Provided they did not misbehave, rent-paying boarding guests made a nice addition to Padmini's livelihood, especially since her husband had left the family about ten years earlier, early retiring and going back to the highlands of Sri Lanka.

As I returned time and again to find solace in Padmini's place, our tea times evolved into 'authentic' Sri Lankan-style suppers. She grilled the veggies I bought from the local Sainsbury's, we added the mixed chutneys homemade by her sister, and washed it all down with coconut water. Our mutual trust leavened until reciprocal secrets were not more meant to be kept (Coleman, 2013). Among the others, I learnt that her husband had not returned to the homeland for nostalgia or for curing his arthrosis in the tropical climate. Following his involvement in a fatal car accident, the man took to heavy drinking, frequenting the local pubs (run by a sizeable Irish community) instead of showing up at work. In fact, as we walked downtown for errands, Padmini quickened the pace and rolled her eyes when we passed by those *public houses* of perdition. Neither medical rehab nor spiritual healing provided by the local Bodhisattva restored Reman's wellbeing. Shoved to resign from his job, hounded with guilt, he agreed with his wife to take a long vacation in their home village. That time out stretched into months and then years, until Padmini and Reman fell out of their marriage. Divorce was filed from abroad and the woman, well into her fifties with two sons at college, felt the bangers of loneliness and the sharp taste of "not being an achiever anymore". Her gendered form of mobility had lost its bite (Sheller, 2008).

While the Ceylonese Women's Association in the UK was founded in 1959 to coordinate social activities for their members upon new arrivals in the country (and eventually morphed into an enterprise for British Sri Lankan professionals; Jazeel, 2006), middle-age called Padmini back to the Buddhist Theravada society, where her sons had once learnt writing Sinhala (Deegalle, 2004). In refurbishing the place, worn-out desks were given away for free, and my hostess had put one in the bedroom where I slept. When I stayed up late writing on my PC, I could see the traces of other alphabets, indecipherable but supple graphs, inscribed on the wooden table which was now one of her 'home possessions' (Miller, 2001).

One day, walking into my room and finding that I had carelessly placed one of her books on Buddhism next to a copy of the Quran, my hostess unexpectedly complained that Islam had taken over the city, turning pre-existing churches into mosques. When I objected that the conversion of Christian churches into other places of worship was a recurrent urban realignment everywhere in London (Dwyer et al., 2015), she sighed with disbelief. Although a *graffiti* right in front of her house heralded interreligious conviviality in the borough (Fig. 4.2), Padmini's depreciative remarks did not spare any creed: the Hindu temple in Neasden was a mirror for larks, and the nearby Buddhist shrine, run by Americanized monks, could not compete with the *ashram* in the countryside where she promised to take me.

One Sunday we rise before dawn to meet her Bhadanta, Buddhist monk and spiritual master. He drives us in his electric car to the monastery where the practice



Fig. 4.2 Multifaith Suburbia in Brent. (Author's picture)

of meditation has gathered twelve people irrespective of religion that day. Prolonged cross-leg sitting, purred chants and one-day fast make me feel dizzy: only the intermittent sound of chimes breaks the hypnotic spell. It's dusk when we get home, and I am taken by surprise in hearing that a similar chain dangles down the entrance to Padmini's place. My hostess responds to my awe that the item has always been there. She can't even remember who brought it to the house. Her son Surya will then recount that the piece was as a gift from his sweetheart on a return visit to Sri Lanka. As the memories faded away and he entered into another love relationship, he just moved it down from his bedroom to the entrance door. Sensory and material encounters with objects in migrants' houses, as Ratnam (2018) argued, awaken remembrances and identifications with home(lands). However, they can also signal a progressive detachment from that lost experience, as in this case (Turkle, 2011). Surya offers to take me to a nearby shop where similar artifacts are sold. While the family-store is run by Indians, seashell wind chains do come from Ceylon, according to the vendor who is trying to make a good deal with a curious white foreigner. My chaperon giggles and concludes the payment on my behalf, so that his naïve guest is not being served an overpriced article.

I stayed countless times at Padmini's over three years, each time re-packing my bags with a food gift from her kitchen. At every return visit, my hostess cut down on the rent she used to ask from me, until she went beyond my expectations on her last birthday. Elated with the bunch of flowers I got for her, as I had become a *miturā*

(lit. friend in Sinhala) by then, my short visits would always be welcome. No charges applied.

4.4.3 *Rituals of Home Screening in Southall: The Domestic Space of Bachan*

As I contended earlier, migrants' objects within or across their domestic spaces connote deeper experiences and larger issues, as "a *synecdoche* of home and mobility, a part which is made to represent the whole" (Bonfanti, 2020: 43). Recollecting how I literally sat 'on a round of sofas' in my exercise of domestic ethnography within diaspora houses, I emphasized how domestic material culture provides the chance to speculatively travel across space and time along a household's migratory rhythms. My fascination with stories of *diwan* (Hindi-Urdu for the English 'sofa') sits well in the ethnographic relationship I developed with Bachan's family, and cultivated across Punjab and Britain.

Travelling back to the Indian Punjab a few years ago, I would sit every night on a brand-new *diwan*, a buttoned leather chesterfield set still wrapped in cling folds, which my Sikh host had positioned right in the middle of his son's remittance house in a remote countryside village. A widower in his sixties, the man lived alone in a new flat downtown, close to other younger relations, but he drove back and forth every week to oversee that house much dreamed by his emigrated offspring. As Taylor (2014) reminds us, Punjabi transnationalism is engraved in complex 'home-to-home' dynamics from the homeland to the host-land and back. When I suggested stripping off that sticky top (stained with varnish and smears caused by casual guests dripping their teas), my host looked at me in dismay. Only his son, or his grandson, would be entitled to do that, but neither had been able to return since the house had been completed. The sitting room, which was designed to offer comfort for family intimacy, was then open to welcome dear neighbours for socialising. On long winter nights, when the village was almost deserted after many of its young residents had moved overseas, that *diwan* was the fulcrum of hospitality for those left behind and those on rare return visits. Dozen neighbours dropped in during my visit and crowded it with *chai*-chats. Among the neighbours of my host in Punjab, I happened to mingle with another Sikh family on a return visit, which had since relocated to London Southall, the epicentre of Sikh resettlements in the UK since the 1950s (Baumann, 1995). Little did I know at the time that I would meet them again there, following their diaspora trails along my ethnographic vagaries.

Bachan, Jasbinder and their two young children soon became my easiest-to-go acquaintances during those weeks in the north Punjab. Not only did they speak excellent English, compared to the strain for understanding/interpreting most of my Punjabi-speaking informants onsite. The kids, who were used at being cultural-brokers as native British Sikhs, were happy to take me around the *pind* (village), scouting for wild animals, or inviting me over to their remittance house, which was

still under construction but promised to become even ‘larger and grander’ than the ‘nice one’ where I was currently staying. After all, their family was highly reputed in the village, not just in class-cum-caste terms (they were Jatt landowners), but also because in their property under renovation lived the oldest woman in the district, who was believed to have reached her 90th birthday. In accordance with Punjabi patri-lineage, and addressed as *Nani Ji*, the lady was Bachan’s paternal grandmother; a great-grandmother to Kaur and Singh, or *paradadi*, as the kids explained. To me, pining for my own children left at home, spending leisure time with Kaur and Singh (then 8 and 4) was extremely heart-warming. Receiving a daily blessing from Nani Ji’s bedside was equally reassuring. Bachan and Jasbinder were overtly kind and generous with me, at times remarking our common condition as Europeans going on home visits through India. Of course, I was a guest-and-ethnographer, they were (temporarily) returning migrants (Brettell, 2006). Both husband and wife though were busy managing their affairs. He spent the day with his sharecroppers in the fields, she was often on the phone or reading from an e-book device. I learnt then that she was preparing for a competition notice as she worked in the London Met Police. Years went by, and I only heard from Bachan on occasions, when he would repost on FB pictures of our meeting in Punjab.

By the time I met again that Brit-Sikh family in the UK, he had become the head of a fitted furniture company. Paying a visit to their showroom in West London, crowded by generations of British Punjabi buyers, sofas abounded, just like on his commercial webpage. When I quizzed Bachan about which furnishing was more essential in a home, he cut it short: “Well, on a bed you crush and get a good sleep. On a couch you can have someone else to crush, not just for sleep.” His sibylline words spoke of the countless social relations that a *diwan* could host, in private and public spaces, from family intimacies to political dealings (Dibbitts, 2009; Savas, 2010). In Bachan’s view, as a producer and seller of quality sofas in Ealing, these articles seemed to make home a more amenable place, open to welcome those *others* who could be – selectively - admitted to enter and be entertained at one’s home-space. The sofa set which his wife had chosen to complement their sitting room was a case in point (Fig. 4.3): a piece that blended in the functions of ethnic symbol, affluence and fashionability.

Doing fieldwork in a variety of domestic spaces with South Asians, homeland and in the diaspora, private or semi-public (like houses of worship – Bonfanti and Bertolani, Chap. 10), the *diwan* literally backed my participant observation and many conversations with informants. As a key element in furnishing a sitting room and structuring the domestic space as to allow practices of hospitality, a *diwan* could not be missing from Bachan’s family home in Southall. My friends’ house stood in the newer area of town, just off the Green shopping boulevard. Differently from most of my local British-Asian participants, for whom patrilocality remained the norm in setting up a new household, when Jasbinder and Bachan got married (after a not-so-combined first date at a friend’s event), the wife imposed her provisos for buying a property in a specific suburban location where she already felt at home. As a second-generation British Sikh herself, born to a couple who had fled Tanzania in the late Sixties (“twice migrants” – Bhachu, 1984), that lateral street nearby the



Fig. 4.3 Inviting sofa from Southall – Chota Punjab. (Author’s picture)

Ramgharia gurdwara spoke of her infancy in Southall’s urban Kaleidoscope (Nasser, 2004). One generation later, her children also attended the next door Ramgharia community hall. The fluent Punjabi they could speak at home was more the outcome of that weekly community education than an everyday family habit. English and Punjabi were both spoken in their house, with a slight preference for the first; at least this was my perception upon reiterated home visits. Despite our long-time connection and mutual trust, I never slept over at Bachan and Jasbinder’s. Declining their initial invitation, I thought it unpractical and rude to over-impose my presence, as their terraced house had four-bedrooms but all were occupied at the time. Although there was a large, black-tanned leather 6-seater sofa in my friends’ sitting room, neither I nor they would ever think of it as a place for ‘couch-surfing’. Not even Kaur’s girlfriends were allowed to sleep there during pyjama-parties, since the family *diwan* functioned as a relational and ostensive piece which embedded normative ideas of house-holding and micro-politics. A sofa in the home thus acts as a *liminal* object: the threshold between common and private, hosts and guests, possibly reinstating male and female spatial segregation. The license of couches for joining or separating is an interesting dynamic. It reveals the agency that subjects themselves exert on the space they occupy through the mediation of furnishings (Bonfanti, 2020).

Upon yet another home visit to my friends’ in Southall, I was invited to celebrate, together with Jasbinder’s aged parents, the first anniversary since their

remittance house in Punjab had been completed. I came along with a box of fine Indian pastries bought on the Green and we all lined up on the sofa (young Singh sitting on the carpet). As if at a home-cinema screening, on their 50' inch flat TV the show started. For about 90' minutes the film that Bhachan had made professionally recorded took us back to the *pind*. Their *khoti* (remittance house) was being inaugurated with a throng of villagers celebrating, and even the Guru Grant Sahib (the Sikh holy book) was brought on his throne to visit the house. Sadly, Nani Ji had passed away. However, Kaur said, her great-grandmother would have been proud to see her family villa accomplished. It is hard to foresee who will ever go and live in that fabulous house in the Punjabi countryside. Its owners are solidly emplaced in London, and even their accent sounds more British day after day. By now, the story of this South Asian diaspora household (mixed in ages and homelands of migration) is seen and told on that *diwan*, and a feeling of homesickness for a house which we all cherished in our memories with different affective intensities (Ratnam, 2018) overwhelms me too.

4.5 Discussion: The Mirroring Game of Hos(ti)pitality

As my periodical visits to the UK run consistently for three years (after which the pandemic enforced remote follow-ups), but were ephemeral if compared to my sustained ethnographic practice with Punjabi families in Italy, the kind of observation and participation I was able to conduct and reflect upon in British Asian homes were more in tune with a less engaged and more detached co-presence (Hall, 2014). While this ethnographic position as a fleeting guest might have spared me some emotional distress that comes with being actively involved in the lives and homes of informants, it did afford me to consider that 'third space' evoked by Homi Bhabha (1994) in a possibly neater lens.

Domestic ethnography within diaspora homes allowed moments for intimacy and discussion, material sharing and cognitive elaboration. These proceeded rapidly as the ethnographic relation between the host(s) and their guest evolved, one threshold at a time, notwithstanding misinterpretations or missteps. On one side, intimacy invokes emotion and the senses. Home visits in migrant domestic spaces pick up on the 'sensuous re-turn' in anthropology and involve contextual and reflexive, ethnological and ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation and thick description (Pink, 2004; Stoller, 2010). Narrative, memory, ways of dealing with migration and social change, the construction of identities in a globalising and unequal world are just some of the objects that the researcher can observe, and the topics on which s/he can engage their informants in debate. On another side, if anthropology as a discipline has recognized different levels of engagement and collaboration between ethnographers and their informants (Low & Merry, 2010), the sort of domestic ethnography I conducted with my research partners in the UK felt like at a crossroad between pure research and public anthropology. Albeit restricted within their homes, the main purpose of knowledge production turned into the possibility of exercising

social critique in our informal conversations (Susser, 2010), discussing what it meant to be at home in the diaspora and what it took to (possibly) get there.

My focus, however, is not on houses per se but on the multiple entanglements that houses illuminate between the lives and relations that are enacted within them and the historically inflected social and political contexts in which they are situated. Houses are not only embedded in the biographies of their inhabitants and vice versa, they embody the interconnections between individual trajectories, kinship and the state. (Carsten, 2018: 103)

Looking from within (and without) South Asian diaspora house(hold)s, situated in certain BME neighborhoods, called for an appreciation of cultural formations such as the Punjabi *parivaar* (the nuclear unit) and *biraderi* (the extended family), but also the binarism between *ghar* and *makan*, respectively (affective) home and (material) house. Being the domestic space symbolic and physical at once, morally and politically oriented, an awareness of hierarchies and intersectionality within the household is equally central. At the end of the day, “*domopolitics* starts in the home, proceeds from there, and often comes home” (Bonfanti, 2020: 119).

Having said that, micro-politics at home influences whether and how acts of hospitality are enacted. While the practice of hosting presumes the idea of a stranger who is turned into a guest, the prescriptive manner in which this transformative social process take place is a defining element of the household (Roy, 1994). As a crucial unit within which production, distribution, and consumption are organised, and individuals are differentially socialised, the household can maintain its order insofar as it enters in a distributive network with others, enabling some to enter its precincts by providing essential aid such as food and shelter, as well as wider social support (and at the same time excluding others from the same courtesies).

In looking comparatively at the three home-studies detailed above, one needs to consider not only their categorical diversity (nationality, religion, age of migration, and urban location), but also the different ways of house-holding that each of my informants (and their co-living kin or non-kin) pursued. Their homemaking projects did take many forms: from the efforts of a Bangla couple to defend their racialized community in Newham, to the multiscale nostalgia of a Ceylonese woman getting old in Wembley, to the translocal connections of a mixed Sikh family in Ealing. Easy conclusions cannot be drawn, but overarching comments allow.

Upon reiterated home visits, spending a considerable amount of time in a longitudinal manner with the households recruited for research gave me a chance to investigate daily life and the negotiation of urban diversity from below, as continuously reenacted by different actors. Furthermore, stepping out and going about the neighborhood where my hosts resided meant to learn their awareness of local policies and the role of state actors in managing diversity from above, in a global city where certain migrant groups have been settled for long in the aftermath of decolonization. Since the establishment of South Asian diasporas in Britain has occurred over decades with a constant intake from different regions, their immigration has affected the process of postcolonial urbanization. As a result, to situate their dwelling places in a lived-mapping of London, walking the streets along with my informants, allowed me to grasp some socio-economic and political dimensions of

British Asian homemaking beyond the dwelling space (Dwyer et al., 2015; Blunt & Sheringham, 2019; Butcher, 2019). This chapter thus makes a contribution to the emergent discourse on ‘radical cartography’ that urban ethnographers have raised in the UK (Duggan & Cohen, 2021). This is with the aim to see, beneath the surface of maps, which actual territories exist and how these are experienced and transformed by their inhabitants as they attempt at constructing already existing boroughs into home places.

Looking at how space is (re)territorialized by its residents, and especially by mounting migrant groups different for backgrounds and cohorts, means not only to focus on place-making frictions and developments. Spatial practices of homemaking also incorporate those flickering moments that diaspora subjects experience here and now, with (un)predictable reference to other times, places and network: what Hage (2021) defines a “lenticular” form of being-in-the-world. Based on his long-term (auto)ethnography with Lebanese worldwide, the author maintained the salience of singular locations in studying migrant transnationalism, and conceptualized “the diasporic condition” as being simultaneously actant upon one’s place of settlement, and embedded in ‘a (not so imaginary) community’ with whom social, economic and political relations remain vibrant (Hage, 2005).

As being and feeling at home in the diaspora is situational, based on multiple social interactions and cultural processes of hybridization (Appadurai, 1996), a focus on locality and location was also fruitful in developing a critical perspective, beyond a generic recognition of internal differences based on religion, nationality, language and so forth (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Thus, in the same way that breaking through the category of British Asian-ness produces a confusion of the possibility of both terms, so, too, attempting a domestic ethnography with South Asian Londoners has provided with a window to look inside the house and out onto the street, flickering understandings of *desh/pardesh*. There I stood in the threshold which is the South Asian diaspora: amid their multiple places and temporalities, whose irresolvable simultaneity pulsed in the acts of hospitality that my hosts conceded in postcolonial Britain. Doing a domestic ethnography with South Asians in London reveals that the idea and practice of home, in its multiscale realization, is crucial to understand the conditions on which rules of hospitality are deployed: be they the regimes of mobility and multicultural policies allowed in postcolonial Britain (Harper & Constantine, 2010; Meer & Modood, 2009) or the domestic habits which my hosts/esses and I shared, out of the mutual familiarity we were able to reach case by case, day after day (Herzfeld, 2016; Bonfanti, 2019, 2020).

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I considered the possible forms of *homing*, i.e. homemaking under conditions of mobility, that three South Asian diaspora households experienced in the capital city of their former colonizing power. London remains a target destination for new South Asian migrations (or for swelling the ranks of those

long-established; Hoque, 2019). It is also the most revealing place of their internal diversity and peculiar accommodation in the country since the early twentieth-century (Peach, 2006). Londoners with an Asian heritage have been at the forefront of the political scene for decades, shaping the policies and attitudes to migration and multiethnic relations. Public figures as pole-apart as Sadiq Khan, Mayor from the Labor Party, or Priti Patel, former Home Secretary and Conservative MP (respectively second generation Pakistani and second generation Indian) are the most recent examples. While their deeds sit at the opposite ends of political hos(t)ipitality, between cosmopolitan conviviality and immigration restrictions, both characters have been repeatedly brought up in conversation by my research partners. Belonging to the South Asian diaspora does not equate with homogenous political stances. On the contrary, it seems to fuel harsh disputes,¹¹ based on different affiliations and life experiences. The families whose homes I visited and whose stories I reported here make just a tiny patchwork of such prime British Asian canvas. These three cases give evidence to the peculiarity of home experiences under the one tag of being British-Asian. From my position of guest-and-ethnographer, I went through the home lives of my hosts-and-informants and made sense of their diaspora houses as ‘biographical objects’, which embody the interconnection between individual trajectories, kinship and the state (Carsten, 2018; Gardner, 2002). This ultimately reveals the close interdependence between domestic and urban ethnography (cf. Boccagni and Bonfanti, Introduction). Taking the homes of British-Asian diaspora informants as a safe base and starting point (notwithstanding their many frictions barely concealed to my eyes), I ventured out with them in the neighborhoods to understand how a sense of belonging to the place one inhabits can be claimed for, contested and ultimately (re)produced and transformed (Brah, 1999; McLoughlin et al., 2014).

Although an ethnographer remains an outsider, as close to the lived experience of their research subjects as s/he may come to, I can still recall each and every scent of all my home addresses in London. As much as I treasure vibrant memories of them all, the hospitality I received had its own penchants and neglects. How I did (or did not) gain a progressive intimacy within the dwelling spaces of research participants was a matter of reciprocal perceptions, intensity of sharing and happenstances. Reasoning on the potential but also on the limits of hospitality in doing ethnographic home visits means to recognize how a key set of practices for mutual recognition between dweller and stranger depends on categories of identification as much as on the social relations within and without the house that literally hold it.

The project funding this research work has since ended, but, as explorative as my visits were, many of the diaspora homes I attended explicitly remain ‘open’ to possible return visits from their guest-ethnographer. If anything, instant messages on social media maintain hospitality a reachable horizon. The multigenerational

¹¹As the ‘Nationality and Borders Bill’ was being discussed in the House of Common in autumn 2021, upon my casual enquiries about their opinion, I received messages from former British-Asian research participants which ranged from rage to support, also and consistently in tune with the migration history of the subjects concerned.

house(hold)s of my former participants may have already changed and likely will change their course. Seasoned ethnographers contend that the fieldwork is never really done. I would add that ‘domestic ethnography’ is possibly even more engrossing for an anthropologist with a flair for it.

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