
Shabna Begum
School of Geography
Queen Mary University London

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
November 2021
Statement of originality

I, Shabna Begum, confirm that the research included within this thesis is my own work or that where it has been carried out in collaboration with, or supported by others, that this is duly acknowledged below and my contribution indicated. I attest that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original and does not to the best of my knowledge break any UK law, infringe any third party’s copyright or other Intellectual Property Right, or contain any confidential material. I accept that the College has the right to use plagiarism detection software to check the electronic version of the thesis. I confirm that this thesis has not been previously submitted for the award of a degree by this or any other university. The copyright of this thesis rests with the author and no quotation from it or information derived from it may be published without the prior written consent of the author.

Signed:
Shabna Begum

Date:
1st November 2021
# Table of Contents

Statement of originality .................................................................................................................. 2

Abstract........................................................................................................................................ 7

Acknowledgements......................................................................................................................... 8

Chapter 1......................................................................................................................................... 9
  1.1 Number 12 Deal Street.............................................................................................................. 9
  1.2 Research Questions.................................................................................................................... 13
  1.3 Key research arguments............................................................................................................ 14
  1.4 Thesis structure ........................................................................................................................ 17

Chapter 2: Understanding Bengali migrant squatters in 1970s London: Exploring scholarship around postcolonial and transnational understandings of Bengali migration, migrant homemaking and squatting ................................................................. 21
  2.1 Introduction............................................................................................................................... 21
  2.2 Bengali migrants in 1970s London: an invitation for postcolonial and transnational dialogue.......................................................................................................................... 23
  2.3 Exploring migrant homemaking .............................................................................................. 34
  2.4 Geographies of squatting ......................................................................................................... 50
  2.5 Conclusion: .............................................................................................................................. 61

Chapter 3: Methodology .................................................................................................................... 62
  3.1 Introduction............................................................................................................................... 62
  3.2 Fieldwork ................................................................................................................................ 65
  3.3 Recruitment of participants: .................................................................................................... 72
  3.4 Conducting the oral history interviews: .................................................................................... 75
  3.5 Positionality.............................................................................................................................. 78
  3.6 Research analysis: .................................................................................................................... 81
  3.7 Sharing knowledge, shifting the gaze and community engagement ......................................... 89
  3.8 Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 91

Chapter 4: Exploring the Bengali migrant squatted home and homemaking practices in 1970s East London ........................................................................................................................................ 93
  4.1 Introduction............................................................................................................................... 93
  4.2 Front of house as a space of claiming home, un-homing and collective resistance ............... 95
  4.3 Front of house as a space of cultural conciliation and transnational continuity ..................... 123
  4.4 Conclusion ............................................................................................................................... 133

Chapter 5: Bengali migrant homemaking in the 1970s East London para ........................................ 135
  5.1 Introduction............................................................................................................................... 135
5.2 Domesticating the urban ........................................................................................................137
5.3 Creating a safe home in the city: .........................................................................................152
5.4 Conclusion: .............................................................................................................................163

Chapter 6: Exploring the Bengali migrant squatted home, then and now .........................165
6.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................................165
6.2 The political inheritances of the 1971 civil war .................................................................167
6.3 Desh as home – remittances and family attachments in the ‘uncle type’ generation ........178
6.4 The role of maternal authority in the finalised homemaking decisions of Bengali migrant families .................................................................196
6.5 Conclusion: .............................................................................................................................205

Chapter 7: Conclusion ...............................................................................................................207
7.1 Key conceptual contributions: ............................................................................................208
7.2 Squatted home and front of house thresholds .................................................................210
7.3 Squatting and the homemaking in the para .................................................................212
7.4 Squatting and the transnational home stretched across time and space .......................213
7.5 Methodology as responsibility .......................................................................................215
7.6 Final thoughts .....................................................................................................................220

Appendix 1 ...............................................................................................................................221
Bibliography ..............................................................................................................................226
List of documentary sources: ................................................................................................254

List of Figures

Chapter 1
1.1 Family photograph showing my parents and myself (taken in 1976)

1.2 Map of the area https://maps.nls.uk/geo/explore/#zoom=19&lat=51.52041&lon=-0.06876&layers=170&b=1

Chapter 3
3.1 David Hoffman photograph http://gallery46.co.uk/product/david-hoffman-squatters/

3.2 Front cover of Race Today Journal (1976, JOU/1/1/84)

3.3 Diagram showing recruitment of participants

3.4 Bengali and English recruitment posters that were distributed across Tower Hamlets and social media
3.5 A petition to save the squatted East End Community School THLHLA reference: I/SPP/4/5/2/1 East End Community School

Chapter 4

4.1 Photograph of Abdul Kadir, taken in August 2020
4.2 Screenshot of Abdul Kadir pictured here in ‘A Safe Place to Be’ (BFI Archives)
4.3 Photograph of Sufia Begum taken in August 2020
4.4 Screenshot of a scene in Credo (1978) in the BFI archives
4.5 Personal family photograph taken in 1975, showing Guljahan and Rasna before they migrated to London.
4.6 Race Today Journal cover (1974, JOU/1/1/63)
4.7 Photograph of Khosru featured holding Mala Sen’s left arm on an anti-racist demonstration, in Race Today (1976, JOU/1/1/84)
4.8 Photograph of Khosru Miah February 2019 (photo taken by me)
4.9 Screenshot of Pelham Buildings from ‘A safe place to be’ BFI archives (1980)

Chapter 5

5.1 Mashuk Miah’s first passport photograph – taken from a family album
5.2, Photograph of Luqman Uddin on the right, with his mother Komla Bibi, late father and younger brother circa 1978, personal photograph.

Chapter 6

6.1 Photograph of Husnara Matin, taken August 2020
6.2: Screenshot of Anwara Begum at the East End Community School, Defending a way of Life, (1980) BFI archives
6.3 Photograph of Number 12 Varden Street where Ashfaq’s family squatted in 1974, his house is the one furthest left (http://re-photo.co.uk/?tag=graffiti)
6.4 Photograph of Abdul Masabbir with a village attiyo who he stayed with in Kings Cross, London, from a family album
6.5: Photograph of Abdul’s village home in Chaatak, Sylhet
6.6: Photograph of Masabbir and his wife Guljahan’s basha in Sylhet town – from a family album

Chapter 7
7.1 Photograph of a Save Brick Lane campaign demonstration on Brick Lane on 12th September 2021

7.2 Photograph showing the filming of Dhokol in August 2020

7.3 Intergenerational interview between Khosru Miah and Saadiya filmed at Toynbee Hall by Nalini BBC Asian Network, July 2021

7.4 BBC news item front page, screenshot taken from 16th October 2021
Abstract

From Sylhet to Spitalfields: Exploring Bengali migrant homemaking in the context of a squatters’ movement, in 1970s East London

This research explores Bengali migrant homemaking in the context of a squatters’ movement in 1970s East London, addressing the virtual erasure of Bengali squatters in academic scholarship, popular literature and public histories. It focuses on the migrant squatted home as a multi-scalar, material and affective space that stretches from the dwelling, through to the neighbourhood and para, to transnational connections between Sylhet and Spitalfields. Drawing on oral history interviews with 39 squatters and squatter activists, archival analysis and ethnographic fieldwork in two elder day care centres, my research offers nuance to an otherwise monochromatic empirical landscape that has generally diminished the significance of these events.

The conceptual framework I employ invites dialogue between postcolonial and transnational approaches; I draw attention to the significance of the colonial/postcolonial to the events and experiences, yet I also seek to disrupt the tendency to privilege the metropole in these discussions. I highlight the significance of the transnational presence in the way that Bengali migrants navigated their homemaking experiences in a racialised and hostile 1970s London. This approach stretches into how I think about ‘home’ and ‘homemaking’ and how these conceptual frameworks may be disrupted by directing attention to homemaking spaces that might be incongruous to the Western understandings of home. I focus on the doors and windows of squatted homes, as a relational space of contested belonging. I trace the interaction between this and wider squatter vigilantism in the space of a hostile neighbourhood or para. Finally, I attend to the evolving transnational attachments that pivoted how migrant squatters nurtured homemaking imaginaries both at the time, and now, some four decades later.

Thinking about responsible geographical practice, I also explore the importance of community engagement and generating research outputs outside the academy, conversing with the wider community of research, on terms that are meaningful and accessible to them.
Acknowledgements

Thanks first and foremost to my supervisors, Kavita Datta, Olivia Sheringham and Alastair Owens. The three of you have been incredible in the support you have offered me. I completed this doctoral journey at a time when the world was tipped upside down, and when each of us faced personal and professional challenges that we simply could not have imagined or predicted. Despite those upheavals, your support and encouragement were always offered in abundance. Kavita – I wanted to thank you especially, for responding to my tentative email all those years ago. You opened a door for me at a time, when others did not, I will always be grateful for your support and kindness. Thanks also to QMUL for the Principal’s Award that funded my studies.

I am grateful for all I learnt from the wonderful PhD students I met during my time at QMUL and also the wider postgraduate administration team, your support has been invaluable throughout. Shereen and Vincent – thank you especially for your friendship; your belief in my research has carried me through in moments of doubt.

Thanks, are also due to my friends who have patiently allowed me to drop out of their lives for this period, always with the reassurance that you will have me back, when I am ready. You have put up with my absences whilst extending so much love, support and solidarity. Thank you to Stoke Newington School, my lovely friends, colleagues and students there; you have given me distraction and inspiration whenever I have waivered. There are also the new friends I have collected during the wider course of my research; people that I met at seminars, walks and events. There are too many of you to name here individually, but your time and insights have enriched my work.

Of course, this research would never have happened without the generosity and goodwill of my research participants. The stories that were shared and the experiences relived are at the heart of this thesis. The extraordinary courage and resilience related in those stories will always stay with me, and for that, I am, and will always be, grateful.

But it is my family that I have to thank the most, my dad and mum, Abdul Masabbir and Guljahan who never had an opportunity to pursue an education for themselves – but whose story inspired this doctorate and thesis. This is your achievement, just as much as it is mine. To all my sisters and brothers, Rasna, Shamie, Abdul Hafez, Zinath, Ayesha, Abdul Salam, and my niece Suraiya; you have always been my beloved advocates – I would never have started or lasted this journey without your love and encouragement.

And finally, thanks to Anisah and Ihsan, Subhan-Allah, you are the greatest gifts of my life and I hope when you are both older, you will appreciate the journey we took together. You allowed me to grow myself at the same time that I was responsible for growing you. It might not have felt like it – but in so many ways, this was always for you both.
Chapter 1

1.1 Number 12 Deal Street

The photograph shows Abdul Masabbir and Guljahan Begum, their three-year-old daughter Rasna, and me, as a 7- or 8-month-old baby. The photograph was taken in late 1976, just after my migrant parents left their ‘accidental squat’ a few minutes’ walk from Brick Lane. Unlike other Bengali migrants they had not deliberately squatted – they had paid a significant sum of money to obtain a rent book from a man who had posed as a landlord of a small, cottage-style house, at number 12 Deal Street, E1. Dilapidated, damp and with mould strewn walls, the house was still an improvement to living in a third-floor attic room above a restaurant, where the bathroom facilities were in the basement and shared with other Bengali occupants, the restaurant staff, and the customers. I was born within weeks of them having settled into

---

1 Throughout this thesis I refer to participants as ‘Bengali’ (even though specifically this term would also include people from West Bengal in India) as this is how they, and much of the literature, has generally described them. Sometimes, I also use the term ‘Sylheti’ as this is the north-eastern region from which many of my participants migrated. Occasionally I also use the term ‘Bangladeshi’, generally where the literature or participants have explicitly used that term.
their newly rented property, and they were devastated when they found out that the council in fact owned the house. There was a ‘closing order’ on it, meaning it was due to be demolished and rebuilt. Council officials came and served them notice to leave, but my parents had paid a small fortune for the ‘rent book’, and they had nowhere else to go. So, they stayed on as accidental squatters despite harassment from the council and the ‘rogue landlord’ who continued to demand rent and threatened them when they refused to pay,

In the photograph, my mother is wearing one of the sarees my father had bought for her from Bobonita – one of the new Asian saree shops that had opened on Brick Lane, and my father is wearing his best suit. Both my sister and I are wearing new outfits, bought especially for this studio photo. It had been a year and a half since my mother had arrived in London, and amongst the letters requesting remittances for debts owed and siblings’ marriages, there were also loving requests for photographs so that those left behind could feast their eyes on their bideshi\(^2\) family. The photograph would have been shared with all their extended kin and villagers – a testament to a highly valued Londoni\(^3\) connection. The picture, like many others, showcased the dream of bideshi prosperity and material transformation. In fact, life was hard for the young family. Both my father and mother worked long hours: my father in restaurant kitchens and my mother on a sewing machine at home doing ‘piece work’ – the proximity to the factories of Brick Lane had been one of the attractions of the property. Apart from the special outfits worn for the studio photograph, most clothes were bought from the second-hand market, and it is said that I suffered a permanent wheeze throughout my childhood; an affliction put down to the damp and broken windows of the squatted house. My parents did not repair the windows, because apart from the precarious nature of their residence, the incidence of racist violence – especially the throwing of stones at ‘Paki houses’ – was all too common, rendering any repair useless.

My parents, unlike others, left Tower Hamlets and did not connect to the wider squatter movement – although they look back on this with some regret as their housing journey took a long and winding route, which involved many more shared spaces and sleeping on hard floors. However, despite their brief and unsuccessful encounter as inadvertent squatters, they would occasionally speak of this time of great

\(^2\) The term bideshi broadly means ‘abroad’ but it has become linked with ideas about migration, material prosperity and ‘where one’s life is transformed’ (Gardner 2002, 23).
\(^3\) A term used to describe someone who is based in the UK, but also has deep connotations about wealth and high status.
hardship and challenge; and it is from the seeds of those conversations, that 45 years later this thesis has emerged.

My research builds on the experiences of my parents and engages with a much wider migrant squatter movement that has received very little academic attention (Dench et al., 2006, Glynn 2014). Hundreds of Bengali migrant families in 1970s London were united by their common experience of confronting an institutionally racist housing system and the ferocious rise of National Front violence. With the support of *Race Today* activists (Field et al., 2019), they organised into a loosely knit squatters’ organisation. They began to challenge the local Tower Hamlets council, and the Greater London Council (GLC), for fairer housing options for the community (Forman 1989, Glynn 2014). Until this point, the migrant community had been mainly single Bengali migrant men, some commuting for decades between Sylhet and London, working in low paid jobs and living in shared accommodation – sometimes in beds that men used in double and triple shifts (Ballard 1994).

However, by the mid-1970s and with increased racialised restrictions on Commonwealth migration (Bhambra in Outhwaite 2017, Eade 2000, El-Enany 2020), these men had begun to bring their families over to the UK, worried that they might be permanently separated if they did not act quickly. With newly arrived families, the hostel-style accommodation for single men was no longer a tolerable model of housing. However, housing waiting list ‘rules’ inhibited their ability to qualify for council properties and many families found themselves trapped in dreadful, overcrowded flats as they tried to navigate a system that systematically discriminated against them. Where some families were fortunate to secure a tenancy, they were often given tenancies in the worst accommodation. These were usually the flats and houses from which existing white tenants had been decanted and also in parts of the borough where they were isolated and victim to racist attacks (Glynn 2014, 121). Struggling Bengali families, inspired by white squatters in the area, took direct action and began squatting empty properties around Spitalfields and Whitechapel (see Figure 1.2 which shows the broad area of Bengali squatters) as a solution to their housing deprivation.
Initially, squatting began in small numbers with families desperate to secure accommodation for themselves – often assisted by white squatters. Over the decade, these numbers swelled to hundreds of families and by spring 1976, the Bengali Housing Action Group or BHAG which means ‘share’ or ‘tiger’ in Bengali, was created. The largely informal organisation worked to secure squats for Bengali families in need, protect them against eviction and defend them against racist attacks. Some of the younger male squatters organised wider vigilante patrols against racist attacks which added to the more well-known anti-racist mobilisations of the late 1970s, following the racist murder of Altab Ali in 1978. But whilst the men may have been active on the streets, it was Bengali women who were guardians of their squatted homes, confronting hostile estate managers and neighbours as they resisted eviction and harassment. By 1977, the GLC, overwhelmed by the widespread nature of squatting, announced an amnesty and invited all squatters to register and secure a formal tenancy. BHAG managed to negotiate tenancies within a defined and agreeable area, and Bengali families were either given tenancies in the places they had occupied, or in new accommodation.
There was an urgency to conducting this research that came from the natural demise of the generation of Bengali migrants who had been involved in the squatter movements, many of whom have died or are now elderly. The marginalisation of the radical history of this generation is only now emerging. It is interesting to hear younger Bengali activists involved in contemporary local campaigns against gentrification as part of the ‘Save Brick Lane’ campaign recognising that their efforts are not protective engagements to safeguard their parents’ and grandparents’ generation from outside encroachment. In fact, it is quite the opposite; these younger activists may have a great deal to learn from them. In a recent online article (Ali 2021), published just before Tower Hamlets council voted to permit a planning application of a controversial development of the Truman Brewery site in Brick Lane, one Bengali campaigner stated:

For a lot of people, there’s this deep sense of loss and sadness around the fact that the city isn’t just encroaching – the city is doing, in a way, through legislation and bureaucracy, what average people were doing to them in the streets in the 1970s. Corporations are just able to manage their racism, their sexism, their Islamophobia under the guise of legislation.

With a nod to the housing struggles of the Bengali migrant community he goes on to say, ‘It falls on all of us that want to be involved in raising that awareness with our communities to remind them of these struggles. We need to revive those histories.’ This research is a contribution to that effort.

1.2 Research Questions

The empirical research undertaken, has been guided by three central questions:

1) What can we learn about transnational migrant home and homemaking practices in the context of a Bengali squatter movement?

2) In what ways did migrant squatting interact with homemaking in the wider racially hostile space of 1970s post-colonial London?

3) How did the squatted home interact with migrant men and women’s gendered and generational transnational connections and attachments, and how have these shifted over the life course?

Each of these questions evolved over the course of my research. They emerged from the intellectual interaction between the diverse bodies of scholarship I drew upon, and the fieldwork that I conducted. The questions revolve around the interactions between migrant home and homemaking and the wider
squatter movement. The next section outlines the arguments that were developed from these strands of research.

1.3 Key research arguments

My thesis makes a significant empirical contribution by exploring the Bengali squatters’ movement from the squatters’ perspectives. Despite being able to construct some overview from the fractured and sparse accounts that do exist, none of the existing academic nor popular accounts register the events from the view of the Bengali migrants themselves. This is telling of the wider diminution of their role and significance, so my thesis offers some disruption to that. In developing this empirical contribution, I am mindful that Bengali migrants are not a homogenous group. I show how there is a delineation of intersectional experiences around generation and gender. I argue that these were connected to the transnational attachments and inheritance that older/younger, men/women migrants, carried with them, revealing themselves as significant markers of experience. I outline these not simply to note the plurality offered by paying attention to these nuances (Bhambra 2014), but also because they help to develop some of the broader conceptual arguments I make through this work.

One of these is the benefit of developing closer links between postcolonial and transnational approaches and considering how these lenses may work in critical dialogue. I understand the postcolonial lens as one that highlights the ongoing and uneven relations that persist between colonising and colonised countries, rejecting the dominance and universalistic assertion of western knowledge systems (Mayblin & Turner 2020, 30). I argue that this optic is particularly useful in understanding the racialised Othering that Bengali migrants in post-colonial London, in the 1970s, experienced. I suggest that the way in which the Bengali community was deprived of social housing and the state and street racism it confronted, was based on racialised tropes about Bengali effeminacy and inferiority, and narratives of Empire and colonial power. In turn, the virtual erasure of Bengali squatter resistance in academic accounts, is also a reflection of the way that ideas about squatting are steeped in Eurocentric universalism. These accounts have marginalised migrant squatter experiences because their actions are deemed to be rooted in housing deprivation and thereby vacated of political significance (Pruijt 2013).

4 I use the term post-colonial, with a hyphen, only when I am referring to the political, legal and immigration landscape that developed in the aftermath of independence and the collapse of the British empire.
However, where postcolonialism insists on seeing the connections between colonial centres and metropoles, it can sometimes become preoccupied with the colonial residues that endure in an experience and ‘fix’ the colonial as the singular, overriding reference point for what are complex experiences (Perera 1998). I suggest this is ameliorated by finding connections with transnational approaches that highlight the persistence of relationships and ties between here and there. This is directly relevant in my research because I argue that Bengali migrants were not just actors navigating a colonially scripted migration encounter – they carried and sustained inheritances from there, consequently shaping their understanding of home and resistance, here. Conterminously, I argue that the sometimes-neutralised registers of here and there within transnational research, are enhanced by actively foregrounding the colonial power imbrications that generally shape and curtail those relationships. My research shows that bringing these optics together can enable us to observe how Bengali migrants confronted and resisted state and street racism in 1970s London, in ways that were underpinned by the colonial and transnational inheritances of this time. The critical dialogue enabled by this approach helps not just to reveal the events and experiences differently but also supports thinking innovatively about other key conceptual anchors that underpin this research.

This applies, for instance, to the way that I think about migrant home and homemaking. My research desists from universalised western-based conceptualisations. I explore migrant home and home-making in line with critical geographies that note the multi-scalar and affective dimensions of home (Blunt and Dowling 2005). However, I go further by registering that South Asian understandings of home can be both physically more expansive in terms of reaching out from a dwelling into the para and also highly gendered and family relational (Gardner 1995, Ghafur 2002, Ghosh 2014, Lahiri 2011, Zeitlyn 2012). In my research, this means that I explore homemaking in a way that pays attention to how Sylheti rural homemaking experiences and expectations were negotiated in 1970s London. I highlight the importance of thresholds in the migrant homemaking experience and move through inter-related scales that look directly at the front of house space as a site of contested belonging, through to the neighbourhood and into the transnational connections migrants maintained. I note how windows and doors of Bengali squatted homes were sites of racist attack and I focus on the un-homing violence that was inflicted in those spaces either by the rocks that shattered windows or the council officials who persisted with serving eviction notices. I think about how gendered understandings of para as home were instructive to the way that young Bengali migrant men became involved in wider squatter vigilantism as resistance to this racism.
I also trace how enduring transnational attachments for older migrants meant that their homemaking efforts were intimately tied to the remittance home and transnational family commitments in desh\textsuperscript{5}, inhibiting their wider squatter activism. The generational differentiation was a variable that emerged as a strong marker of experience and revealed how transnational homemaking attachments interacted with the extent to which migrants became involved in the broader activism of the squatter movement. Also, while pursuing the idea of gendered homemaking, and with the benefit of a research lens that was able to span some 45 years, I highlight the way that homemaking has shifted in the life-course of Bengali migrants. I also consider how homemaking decisions that were once directed by male migrant priorities, were later increasingly dominated by the maternal and grandmaternal authority of older, Bengali women.

In conceptualising home in this expansive way, the transnational and postcolonial lens in their intersecting use, help to attend both to the way that here and there interact and to see the colonial activity in how ‘home’ may be conceptually limited, if we reproduce it in a universalist fashion. I highlight how the homemaking experiences of Bengali migrants in 1970s London was not just choreographed by the post-colonial state and street racism they encountered and resisted, but also shaped by the transnational experiences of Sylheti home and the post 1971 civil war landscape, that was so important at the time.

Similarly, I highlight how academic understandings of what is ‘politically significant’ squatting in the Global North have been narrow and exclusivist. I argue that the academic predilection for ‘autonomous’ squatter movements that challenge dominant norms of private property distribution and that are overtly counter-cultural, have ignored the significance of Bengali squatters (Vasuedvan 2017). The well-used typology that has tended to differentiate between ‘deprivation’ and ‘political’ squatting has in its application tended to privilege white, counter-cultural squatters and, in so doing, deprived migrant squatters whose starting point is housing deprivation, of any ability to have political argument in their appropriation and occupation of social housing (Pruijt 2013). In this, I highlight how a postcolonial lens helps critique such understandings and argue for a view that can recognise that housing deprivation and political motivation are not mutually exclusive typologies, but absolutely intertwined in this instance. I also suggest that squatter activism that is generally understood with an urban centred focus and is narrated in line with ‘right to the city’ discourses, may be understood differently when that activism is located within a transnational migrant homemaking effort, where the para is not an urban space as understood in the western sense, but an extension of the gendered Sylheti home. I argue that the collaboration of these

\textsuperscript{5} A Bengali word broadly meaning homeland, sometimes used to refer to Bangladesh generally or Sylhet and village locations, specifically.
approaches highlights deficiencies in the dominant modes of thinking about migrant squatting and reveals how we might think about these experiences differently, with the connections made (Mayblin and Turner 2020).

In terms of methodology, my thesis is the culmination of an effort to engage with responsible postcolonial research practice (Jazeel 2019). I aimed to counter the diminution of the Bengali squatters’ movement described above, by placing their experiences, collected through oral history interviews conducted in both Bengali and English, at the heart of my research. I conducted almost one year of qualitative research (interrupted by COVID-19 restrictions). Basing myself in two community centre sites that serve the older Bengali community, I interviewed and collected oral history interviews from 39 Bengali squatters and squatter activists, including my parents. I also conducted archival research alongside these efforts, intending to understand the formal and official accounts of the events. In undertaking this collage approach to my research, I was guided by a postcolonial concern to think about voice and representation (Jazeel 2019). This concern stemmed not only from the marginalisation of this social history but also in the highly gendered and racialised tropes that presented, and continue to present, the Bengali community as one of the most passive and submissive of minoritised ethnic communities in Britain today. I was committed to ensuring that community engagement was integral to my research practice and that my research outputs were not exclusively siphoned off for an academic audience but also became part of a community conversation that helped to reframe and give value to these experiences. Amongst other contributions, I worked collaboratively on a dual language film called দখল or ‘Occupy’ featuring 8 of my participants, and I expect to be showcasing this in conversation with the Bengali community in early 2022. This is as much an effort to leave a changed archival landscape as well as to contribute more widely to discussions about how academic research might interact with communities of research in a more collaborative and engaged manner.

1.4 Thesis structure

This thesis is developed across six chapters. Chapter 2 begins by exploring the diverse bodies of academic scholarship that feed into my research. I review research that has explored the Bengali community in East London, selecting and evaluating various threads of scholarship that have been animated by transnational, diasporic and postcolonial research approaches. I also consider the literature on migrant home and homemaking both in the context of Bengali migration and more broadly, exploring the different ways that scholars have tried to understand the ways that migrants make home materially, affectively and across
space and time. Finally, I evaluate work that has explored squatting and squatter movements and theorised about their role and significance in shaping places and communities. Though generally disparate bodies of work, this chapter brings them together and highlights how this coalescence may enhance key understandings in each. In doing so, I was concerned to think about, for instance, how does what we know about *migrant homemaking* interact with what we know about *migrant squatting*? How were key ideas and practices of *belonging*, which may be common migrant homemaking priorities, performed in the context of a *squatter movement*? How did Bengali *migrant homemaking* in 1970s London interact with the *colonial erasure* that denied home to this Othered community?

*Chapter 3* outlines the methodological approach I undertook to explore the research questions that emerged. The questions that I used to frame the research were derived from the limitations and gaps that I observed in the existing scholarship and responded to the priorities that emerged in my early fieldwork. This meant a shift from a wider social movements approach to a focus on squatting and migrant homemaking, exploring these through a series of questions that pivoted around interrelated scales of home. The fieldwork was undertaken between September 2019 and September 2020, involved oral history interviews and a wide range of archival interviews. This chapter also outlines how my research practice contributes to developing stronger commitment to community engagement as an integral part of the research ethics process.

In the three core analytical chapters, I develop the main arguments of my research. In *Chapter 4*, I argue that existing research around migrant home and homemaking is usefully advanced by considering the threshold spaces of the migrant home as liminal spaces of encounter and homemaking experience. I make this argument by highlighting how the doors and windows of the squatted home became sites of interaction between the Bengali squatter and the state and street racism they encountered. It was in these encounters that participants recalled a contest for space and legitimacy, either in the conversations with estate managers who functioned to implement the state’s racist housing policy or in the violent intrusion of street racism that would regularly breach the doors and windows. In addition, I explore how the exterior furnishings of the home, namely curtains, also became a space of cultural liminality (Bhabha 1994) where Bengali migrants and the wider hostile society would read and represent symbols of cultural conciliation or incompatibility, based on the aesthetic arrangement of these spaces.

In *Chapter 5*, I further argue that exploring the migrant home in terms that are sensitive to how home is understood outside of a Western public/private dwelling model, is important. I look at how Sylheti, rural understandings of home tend to have concentric dimension, where home reaches out into wider *uthaan*
(courtyard) and *para* (neighbourhood) spaces and seek to understand how this interacted with homemaking practices of Bengali migrants in 1970s London. I examine how domestic functions of bathing and cooking were pushed outside of the dwelling into the wider neighbourhood, arguing that this had a differential impact on Bengali migrants, whose experience of extended home-spaces was highly gendered. I also look at how the experience of street racism impacted on Bengali men and argue that there was a generational intersection in the resistance which was based around wider home-making attachments between Sylhet and Spitalfields.

In the third analysis chapter, *Chapter 6*, I examine this transnational connection more fully, investigating the lines of connection between the homes migrant squatters made *here*, and those they imagined they would return to *there*. In this relationship, I explore generational intersections further, linking these back to the political inheritance of the 1971 civil war, suggesting that homemaking attachments were influenced by the nature of their relationship to this conflict. I also argue that the Bengali home is imagined not just around dwellings and place, but also deeply nourished by the family relationships that sustain the affective attachments that migrants had. The strength of these connections was important in differing homemaking attachments. In establishing the contours of these relationships, I look at life-course and return to gender and generation as critical nodes around which experiences of homemaking were formed.

Chapter 7 revisits the core research questions that were the primary motivation for the research and draws out the broad conceptual contributions that can be gleaned from bringing these threads together. In summary, this revolves around the benefits of bringing the transnational and postcolonial lenses together to make more integrative links. This also involves thinking about migrant homemaking in ways that register ‘home’ as culturally nuanced. Finally, it challenges typologies of squatting that have diminished the role and significance of housing deprived, migrant squatters. This chapter concludes by indicating the ways that this research might be extended and developed.

**Concluding thoughts**

This thesis may have started life as a story of one Bengali migrant family struggling in 1970s London, but it has evolved into a much wider project. I navigated and corralled diverse bodies of work about migrant homes and squatting that tend to meet incidentally or peripherally and scripted them in a way that I argue is sensitive to the concerns and motivations of the people involved. By exploring the Bengali squatters’ movement in 1970s London through the integrative lens that marries the postcolonial and transnational approaches and by registering the multi-scalar nature of homemaking, I hope to have contributed to the
broad scholarship in these diverse bodies of work and demonstrated the benefit of bringing them together in some form of critical dialogue. In doing so, I also hope that this research will recover this period of radical history and correct the absence of stories like those of my parents and hundreds of other Bengali migrant squatters.
Chapter 2: Understanding Bengali migrant squatters in 1970s London: Exploring scholarship around postcolonial and transnational understandings of Bengali migration, migrant homemaking and squatting

2.1 Introduction

I was watching this on the news, this woman in the North, er, saying to the TV - the street reporter, saying they've taken your jobs, they've taken our street… How stupid people are! In a way, where did white people come from? They were also migrants or refugees, whether they came from Ireland or from Germany or from France, because they have a different colour of skin they think they own this country! No one owns this country, look at the royal family... look at... Phillip - where does he come from? Is he English? They think, if you're black it's easy to point fingers at you, the houses we were asking for, we had a right as taxpayers, my dad - my dad was here to earn and they were earning and paying...so I think, it’s not about us taking homes away from people, it was those homes… we contributed to building those homes...So we clustered together because the other issue was the racial attacks…we were living in a challenging time, the good thing is things have moved on, Tower Hamlets is a different place, and we fought for it, our forefathers have fought for it… and I am still here, it is my home. (Helal Abbas).

Helal was an 11-year-old boy when he arrived in London in 1972, a year after the independence of Bangladesh, following a bloody civil war. He came with his mother and one other brother. His older siblings were denied entry because immigration rules dictated that only dependants under 18 were allowed to join the British citizen who had applied. This citizen was Helal’s father, who had been in the UK for nearly two decades by this time, having ‘jumped ship’ in the 1950s and stayed on, working in factories in the East End. The family could not secure any accommodation, so they stayed in a 3-bedroom flat on Chicksand Street, squeezed in beside four other families. By 1974, the situation had become intolerable, and with no hope of acquiring a council property, the family broke into and squatted in an empty house on Nelson Street, where Helal and his brother stayed for about six years. His parents retired ‘back home’ re-uniting with the children they had left behind, while Helal and his older brother remained in London. By the late 1970s, Helal became Secretary of the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG), helping other families to squat and advocating on their behalf with Tower Hamlets council and the GLC.
Helal’s story epitomises key areas of debate that are central to my thesis; the interaction between postcolonial and transnational approaches to understanding Bengali migration to the East End, wider conceptual discussions around migrant homemaking and finally, squatting as social movements. The central part of this chapter explores these diverse bodies of work and identifies how my empirical and conceptual approach might bring these into conversation with each other and contribute to this scholarship.

The Bengali community in the East End has inspired a vast body of research. In this chapter, I select and explore some of the different approaches taken and argue that there is benefit from thinking about the potential for more integrated approaches. For example, a great deal of research has adopted a transnational lens which helps trace connections between Sylhet and London but which arguably relegates the colonial context to the peripheries and can appear to overemphasise neutralised registers of here and there. On the other hand, postcolonial inspired work on migration, has the advantage of foregrounding colonial inheritances in the present but in so doing can risk overemphasising the colonial centre and diminishing the importance of enduring attachments and inheritances migrants carry in their journeys. I am also critical of scholarship that engages with neither, highlighting the erasures manifested in these approaches. Ultimately, my work invites attention to the bounties of bringing postcolonial and transnational frameworks into dialogue.

This critical and integrative approach is pivotal to my second key argument, in which I engage with and critique, the broader literatures around migrant homemaking. I explore the myriad ways that migrant homemaking has been studied and embrace as relevant those that recognise the multi-scalar nature of home. I show how homes as physical dwellings, neighbourhoods, city and nation are expansive and transnational spaces. This is particularly important in the context of exploring Bengali migrant homemaking in 1970s London. I identify that there is scarce attention to the gendered and generational intersection with how this homemaking in the neighbourhood might be mediated, and how this might relate to transnational understandings and attachments. At each of these scales, I highlight how an integrated analytical framework that embeds a postcolonial and transnational lens can push for conceptual understanding about the dwelling, neighbourhood and family in ways that challenge Eurocentrically inspired margins, and retain attention to how there is significant to here.

The third argument developed in this chapter considers the rich body of work that explores squatting. I am interested in finding the lines of interaction with the literature on ‘squatting as social movement’ and that which sees squatting as an interjection into debates about those who are deserving and entitled to
housing, and those who are otherwise excluded. The literature, mainly that focused on the Global North, is skewed towards understanding squatting as a claim to forms of *urban citizenship* and scales the act of collective squatting as disruption to the property and housing distribution norms that are qualified and sanctioned by the state. I argue this view is overly restrictive and that attention to the *homemaking* claims iterated in squatter action can reveal wider motivations and nuance. I also highlight the problematic nature of traditional configurations that distinguish and categorise squatting to privilege certain types of squatting - almost invariably white squatter communities, as ‘political’ and worthy of research interest.

I argue that the Bengali squatters’ movement in 1970s London is best understood by bringing these bodies of scholarship into conversation with each other.

**2.2 Bengali migrants in 1970s London: an invitation for postcolonial and transnational dialogue**

*Sylhet to Spitalfields: a long relationship*

London and Sylhet are closely linked; the temporal, spatial and imaginative connections mean that these two geographically distant places are deeply steeped in one another, and Bengali migration and the squatting movement can only be understood in the context of these entanglements. 2011 Census data records that nearly 450,000 people identified as British Bangladeshi, making up 0.8% of the population in England and Wales, with 51% of that population living in Greater London, and around 65,000 people in Tower Hamlets. In the 1970s whilst those figures were significantly smaller, with a recorded number of 3,500 people born in Pakistan in 1971, increasing to 9,800 people in 1981 (Dench et al., 2006, 50-51), the East End was still the site of a concentrated Bengali migrant community and was the place where hundreds of Bengali families squatted.

Notably, it was the economic and material aspects of Britain’s precolonial and colonial relationship that scored the route between these two spatially distant places. Over the eighteenth and nineteenth century, a steady stream of Bengali men were employed initially as ship workers and servants by the East India Company, and then on English imperial naval and commercial vessels (Adams 1987, Balachandran 2012, Visram 2002), bringing them into the docks near Canning Town. As most existing studies have noted, ‘there is no simple answer’ as to why the lascar community came to be dominated by Sylheti men (Gardner 6).

---

1995, 40), however, once established, the lascar connection to Sylhet, this north-eastern district of then India endured. These lascar seamen were generally employed on inferior articles and were directed to the most arduous and hazardous labour on board the ships, used as ‘engine room crews’ where they were exposed to ‘high temperatures and ... appalling heat’ (Adams 1987, 22). Right from the beginning, Adams (1987) notes that the interactions between white sailors and Bengali lascars reveal something of the way that colonialism racialised the body of the Other. The East India Company justified a brutal division of labour on the basis that brown bodies were better adjusted to the high temperatures that stoking the furnaces in extreme temperature conditions involved. However, as Adams flatly observes, ‘[t]he truth of the matter probably was that the superior ability of the Indian firemen to withstand heat was simply a matter of his inferior economic position’ (1987, 22).

Indian seamen also served as significant and vital labourers in the British maritime labour force in both the First and Second world wars and by the mid twentieth century ‘there existed a complex but familiar set of institutions and networks’ (Visram 2002, 256) that enabled Sylheti Bengali men to ‘master the geography of their environment’ in and around east London (ibid, 258). The main centre of that east London community was close to the Docks but following the devastation of that area in the Blitz, there was further movement towards Spitalfields because of its ample supply of cheap, privately rented accommodation (Glynn 2014, 13). However, it was not until the post-war period in the 1950s and 1960s that the invitation to New Commonwealth citizens to migrate and work in Britain led to a steadier stream of single Bengali men arriving to take up positions in the garment factories along Brick Lane as well as low paid positions in hotels and catering (Adams 1987, Ballard 1994). Gardner described those single migrant men as ‘transnationals par excellence’ (2009, 235) who had ‘every intention of returning to the homeland once enough money had been accrued’ (Ahmed 2016, 10). However, by the late 1960s and 1970s, anxious legislative measures to restrict migration from the non-white Commonwealth (Bhambra in Outhwaite ed 2017, 93, El-Enany 2020, 4) had the reverse effect, and led to a sharp rise in women and children migrating, in what is often referred to as second wave ‘family reunification’ migration (Ahmed 2016, 10).

The cheap labour Bengali migrant men provided from the beginning was critical to the relationship Bengali migrants have with east London. Bengali migration, like many of the migration journeys from the Global South to the Global North ‘occur[ed] as a response to differential access to opportunities and resources’ (Koh 2015, 439). As racialised migrants, they quickly became a ‘type of underclass, undertaking tasks which the white British shun[ned]’ (Panayi 2020, 57). By the 1970s, some Sylheti migrants would have witnessed multiple citizenship changes and challenges, some arriving as Indian citizens, later becoming
Pakistani nationals, finally moving to Bangladeshi citizenship, changes that were rooted in the conflict and tension that occurred in the aftermath of Empire and partition (see Khan 2017). These changes occurred alongside navigating consistent and enduring racialised hostility from the British state system from which many claimed British citizenship. While many Bengali migrants did move to northern cities in the UK during this time (Alexander et al., 2016, 118), the majority navigated their migrant networks and employment prospects to stay in and around East London.

_A transnational lens_

Transnationalism with its emphasis on enduring _relationships_ instead of _rupture_ (Glick-Schiller et al., 1992) has been a popular way to frame and consider migration patterns in a ‘globalised’ world in general, and in scholarship on Bengali migrants in London (Ahmed 2016, Gardner 1995, 1999, 2002). Resisting the economic determinism of globalisation, the transnational lens identified and restored agency to the migrant and various ‘diasporic networks’: formal and informal, economic and social (Smith 2001). The affective qualities of loyalty and attachment across countries, speaks to what has become known as ‘transnational belonging’ (Glick-Schiller et al., 1992, Levitt 2001) and has usefully highlighted the deep attachments that migrants attach and nourish with multiple places. This transnational approach has been carefully crafted in Gardner’s extensive body of work on the Bengali community over a period of some three decades. Her research provides rich insights underpinned by keen attention to the interaction between _desh_ and _bidesh_ (1993, 2002). She pays attention to life-course and gender as critical nodes shaping transnational Bengali migrant experience (2002) while also identifying various markers by which to trace and evaluate those enduring connections, including remittances (2008) and broader discussion around emotional attachments and happiness (2016). Similarly, Ahmed (2016) uses a longitudinal lens to highlight how gender, family relationships and religion are interactive markers that have shaped the transnational migrant experience of older Bengali women. This scholarship clearly registers the intimate connections between _here_ and _there_, highlighting how both people and place are changed, materially, socially and spiritually by access to the _bidesh_ (Gardner 1993), and the impact on those who do not share that access (Gardner 2006). Some of Gardner’s (2009) work has involved ethnographic research in rural Sylhet, in villages where she analyses the impact of migration not only on those who leave, but also on those who stay put. Additionally, others like Zeitlyn (2012) have compared and connected experiences of urban and rural space between London and Sylhet. The place of departure is not just a peripheral concern but a valued and important site for understanding migration to London.
Much of this work reveals the tension in the transnational relationship. Bengali migrants especially in the 1970s, were usually from a relatively affluent rural background, and they often confronted considerable deterioration in their living and working standards, experiencing ‘British poverty’, whilst at the same time disguising those realities with the ‘economic advancement’ they showcased back home (Gardner 1993, 10). Gardner uses the term Londoni to highlight the unequal remittance relationship between migrants and non-migrants and, whilst noting the mutual but differentiated benefit experienced by people in these relationships – the material benefit for non-migrants, and the social/emotional benefits for the migrant giver. She also acknowledges that the ‘long-term viability’ of those relationships is subject to restrictions imposed by the ‘British state and its immigration laws’ (2008, 491-2). With fewer migrants to build anew those transnational remittance relationships, the ‘geography of power’ suggests that the Bengali community in London, some now in their fourth/fifth generation, are more and more removed from those early migrant responsibilities and rewards, and that this has ominous implications for the remittance recipients in Sylhet (ibid).

The transnational relationships traced here are all reliably contextualised with reference to ‘the historically deep-rooted relationship between East London and Sylhet’ (Gardner & Mand 2012, 970), or the ‘the ‘unequal power relations between London and Sylhet’ (Zeitlyn 2012, 318). However, overall, the approach remains committed to highlighting the interactive and constitutive nature of transnational relationships between here and there. Whilst I draw on this rich body of work, I am also mindful that there is more to be gleaned by shifting what is contextual in transnational approaches to the forefront. Like Mayblin and Turner (2020) I argue that there is a need to ‘take seriously the centring of colonialism in researching migration’ (14). It is not tangential that at the same time as this hard-earned remittance income derived from low paid labour was flowing back to Sylhet, the British state was busy in 1970s London, divorcing the ‘global wealth disparity and inequality in income and land distribution in former colonies’ from Britain’s colonial exploits (El-Enany 2020, 2). It is also important to understand that the Othering of the Bengali migrant was rooted in British immigration policy and law that set about narrating a ‘territorially distinct Britain and a concept of citizenship that made Britishness commensurate with whiteness’ making it clear ‘that Britain, the landmass and everything within it belongs to Britons, conceived intrinsically as white’ (ibid, 4). Equally, it is not incidental that Bengali migrants in the 1970s were tracing routes that had been scored by centuries of unequal labour relations whilst the popular knowledge and memory of these routes were actively being erased by the dominant legislative and policy agenda. A transnational approach that relies on emphasising the multi-directional and ‘simultaneity of relations’ (Mains et al., 2013, 134) risks neglecting the dialectics of this relationship. This is especially
important in the context of the Bengali squatters’ movement because I argue that whilst the inheritances of there were critical in terms of how migrants imagined and materialised home, how they were Othered and their contestation for housing resources, were choreographed around discourses of colonial erasure and investment.

A postcolonial optic

‘Centring colonialism’ as Mayblin and Turner (2020) put it, is about recognising that the colonial inheritance is an indelible historical landscape, but just as significantly, that it is also actively involved in scripting power relationships now. Postcolonialism as a field of work has a lineage in literary criticism from the 1970s. Still, beyond that there are very few simple ways to categorise and define the diverse body of scholarship that has evolved. Crush (1994) attempts to delineate what it might mean for geography stating, the objectives of a specifically postcolonial geography, to be:

...the unveiling of geographical complicity in colonial dominion over space; the character of geographical representation in colonial discourse; the de-linking of local geographical enterprise from metropolitan theory and its totalizing systems of representation; and the recovery of those hidden spaces occupied, and invested with their own meaning, by the colonial underclass. (336-7)

Given geography’s well acknowledged complicity with the imperial project (Jacobs 1996, 163) these aims are ambitious. But as Jazeel (2019) argues, the magnitude of the task in no way diminishes its importance or urgency. He defends the ‘notoriously difficult task’ of defining postcolonialism arguing ‘it must remain a radically open and heterogenous intellectual space, always inclined towards the new, the unthought, the not-yet-categorized’ because by its very essence, it cannot pretend to know or neatly define the terms of knowledge or indeed knowledge production (Jazeel 2019, 2). That injunction represents both what is difficult, but also what is appealing about the approach; for postcolonialism is an invitation to radically unsettle what it is we think we know, and how we come to know it, framed always by the abundant history and continued presence of colonialism. It is this temporal and analytical weight that I argue is a useful partner to transnationalism’s attention to here and there, to recognise that they are defined by their unequal colonial inheritance and the manifestations of those relationships in the present day.

One of the most interesting, relevant and engaging examples of an explicitly postcolonial approach to exploring the Bengali migrant experience in East London can be found in Jacobs’ (1996) work. Jacobs illustrates the ‘diversity and adaptive realignments of imperialism’ and looks at four specific city sites,
including Spitalfields to think about how ‘places mark a geography in which centre and margin, Self and Other, here and there, are in uneasy negotiation – where there is displacement, interaction and contest’ (Jacobs 1996, 11). She traces the contours of this struggle through a late 1980s and early 1990s contest, relating to the interactions between ‘mega-scale developers’, ‘homemaking gentrifiers’ and Bengali settlers (ibid, 72). Highlighting the role of identity politics and claims to home that revolved around mobilisations of what Spitalfields as a neighbourhood stood for, Jacobs argues that rather than straightforward articulations of inclusion and exclusion, the Bengali community were utilised ‘to authenticate’ a narrative by the local Left, who campaigning against large scale development of the area, mobilised a narrative which cast them as ‘paternal protectors’ of Spitalfields, including within that a confined and domesticated notion of a Bengali community (ibid, 95-96). However, in this ‘reinvention’ she notes how the Bengali community, the Bengali business entrepreneurs, were not simply incognizant actors, but who in pushing the ‘Banglatown’ part of the redevelopment agenda were prepared to make currency from an ‘essentialised notion of their culture’ (ibid 100). Jacobs’ contribution reveals how the “‘imagined community’ of Spitalfields...creates spaces within which the proximate Other might be ordered, sometimes harnessed, at other times domesticated”, all framed within the lingering shadow of imperialism” (101-102). This attention to Othering as a persistent yet shifting discourse, is also important to understanding the unhoming that Bengali migrants experienced in 1970s London.

Another example of scholarship guided by a postcolonial understanding, can be found in Wemyss’ work (2006, 2009). Her work is underpinned by the concept of ‘Invisible Empire’ exploring ‘dominant white discourse’ identifying in it the assertion of ‘positive narratives about Britain’s colonial past and obscuring contesting histories, including those of white violence.’ She states, ‘[t]he dominant discourse includes histories that work to legitimise the dominant group, whilst marginalising subordinate groups’ claims to share local or national space’ (2009, 12). Her scholarship is useful in analysing the way that dominant discourses acted to erase and obscure the long relationship between Sylhet and the East End during a period of local political unrest in the 1990s, and which serviced to ‘put them low down the hierarchy of belonging’ (2006, 232). Her work sits ‘Britain and Bengal ... as an analytic whole’ (2009, 163) and critiques dominant discursive representations of the Bengali community which bury the connected histories and diminish their competing claims for belonging. This concern with power and representation is also explored by Alexander (2011) who investigates the protests that took place in 2006 around the launch of the film Brick Lane. She rejects the ‘essentialising and pathologizing accounts of ethnic communities and racialized spaces’ (201) and highlights how dominant narratives depicted the Brick Lane protests in ways
that Othered the Bengali community and fundamentally ‘erased, assumed or ventriloquized’ Bengali voices, denying the ‘agency and subjectivity of individuals and groups within those spaces’ (217-8).

The reference to ventriloquism refers back to one of the key tenets of postcolonial approaches, which relates to representation and the construction of the ‘Other’. Said’s Orientalism (1978/2003), influenced by Foucauldian understandings of the mutually nourishing relationship between power and knowledge, explores how the academy with its roots in the colonial project could only produce knowledge tainted by that experience (Said 2003, 11). Said argued that the representations of the Other served to define those that were strange and reinforce the ‘we’ that was familiar. Indeed, he goes on to argue that ‘each age and society re-creates its ‘Others’ in ways that are ‘bound up with the disposition of power and powerlessness in each society’ (ibid 332). It is worth noting that the East End itself has been Othered ‘as a sort of surrogate and underground self’ to ‘a mythological English middle-class self-image’ (Newland 2008, 26) and that the idea of the Other has been articulated in many guises. These considerations are critical to my own thesis and are developed in the context of how 1970s Bengali migrants were Othered in ways that entrenched them as ‘inferior’ and ‘alien’ (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982/2004, 73) and which erased the long imperial connections on which they articulated claims of belonging and entitlement to social housing (El-Enany 2020).

My research develops these ideas about representation, by exploring the racialised and gendered tropes that defined Bengali migrants as submissive and passive and thereby inferior and Other. I argue that attention to the Bengali squatters’ movement reveals the importance of how colonially inspired tropes about Bengali men and women were used to Other the community in both the state and street racism they confronted. The construction of the ‘third world woman’ (Mohanty 1988) and the discourse of the passive Asian female, docile and submissive, in the 1970s London context, has been previously explored in other contexts. A good example is in the scholarship of McDowell et al., (2012, 2012a). In their work on the Grunwick strikes, in north-west London, in 1976, they attend to the construction of two key essentialising representations: the first, an ‘image of powerless South Asian women, submitting to patriarchal relations’ McDowell 2012a, 139) and the second, which notes ‘the dominant emphasis on these women’s clothes is used to position them as exotic Others’ (ibid 140). Referring to the Gate Gourmet strikes in 2005, the authors compare the media representation of the striking workers and note that though these disputes were separated by almost 30 years, ‘the media and other commentators persisted in constructing these women as an exotic ‘Other’ and/or wives and mothers, rather than workers engaged in industrial action against what they perceived as exploitative working conditions’ (ibid 134). Bengali
migrant men also confronted racialised and gendered tropes that revolved around colonially inspired ideas of their ‘effeminacy’ and which made them subject to brutally violent attacks (Sinha 2017). This attention to representation and the specific tropes about South Asian men and women is useful because it highlights the ‘ongoing effects that colonial encounter, dispossession and power have in shaping the social, spatial and political structures’ (Jazeel 2019, 5).

However, one of the problems with a postcolonial emphasis on excavating the here for its colonial skeletons is that we risk re-centring the West, dispossessing there of its constitutive significance in migration experiences, by becoming mono-focused in our attention. As Loomba (2005) puts it ‘[c]olonialism did not inscribe itself on a clean slate, and it cannot therefore account for everything that exists in ‘postcolonial’ societies’ (21). Jacobs’ (1996) drawing on McClintock (1992) recognises this ‘trouble’ too, arguing, postcolonialism can be problematic for it ‘generalises diverse histories and links them once again, even if in counter flow, to the European core’ (Jacobs 1996, 25). In this sense, a postcolonial lens benefits from interaction with a transnational optic because whilst the here and there are not neutral registers of place and interaction, ignoring there or more likely, diminishing its role and importance, can be just as affirmative of colonially inspired hierarchies, as imperial geographies.

A transnational and postcolonial conversation

Wilson’s scholarship (1978) illustrates that bringing these optics together is not an unachievable balance; she highlights the role of colonial legacies and racist immigration rules as the trigger for many Asian women’s migration in the 1970s but in a way that retains attention to the wider experiences and attachments women retained to there. For example, in her work, she quotes a Bengali woman:

In these lonely hours, sitting in Brick Lane in the East End or Lumb Lane in Bradford, vivid memories come flooding in from the past, from the life before this semi-existence. Our house is open, as most houses in Sylhet are. It is made of earth and bamboo but it is beautiful. A straw thatch covers the main part, then there are verandahs and a courtyard. On moonlight nights, we, the women, used to sit there and talk or sing and prepare and eat pan [betel leaf] (17).

For the women in Wilson’s collection, their concern was not solely their racialised experience here, but how these disrupted and inhibited the gendered expectations of domestic and family life which they brought from there. In turn, her research highlights how women reached out to one another to create ‘fictive kinship’ networks to ease that rupture and to recreate something of those of caring relationships in their hostile new home. Exploring the coloniality of the migrant experience is enhanced when there is
also explicitly and consistently calibrated into the analyses. This is important to my research because I argue that the coloniality of the Othering and exclusion that Bengali migrants confronted in their housing struggle, were rooted in colonial legacies of inferiority and deliberative erasure. However, I also argue that the ways in which Bengali migrants understood and resisted those deprivations relied on understandings about home, family and belonging that were fertilised by their inheritances of there.

This careful balance is also achieved in Alexander’s considerable scholarship on Bengali diasporic communities in East London (2011, 2013, 2019). In her research on struggles over Bangladeshi identity, Alexander’s (2013) research places emphasis on what she describes as the ‘more local (hi)story’ and the ‘struggles against racism’ in contemporary placemaking struggles in East London whilst retaining attention to the ‘transnational-Bangladeshi dimensions’ which she argues ‘provide constitutive and competing frameworks for signification...for Bangladeshi diaspora identities in Britain’ (593). In exploring the role of the Shahid Minar structure in Altab Ali park and Ekushe celebrations, for example, Alexander recognises it as a ‘marking of territory’ (600) which speaks to the ‘long historical linkages binding Bengal to Britain’ and also to the ‘more local history, local struggles and, indeed, local martyrs’ (602). Both the Shahid Minar structure and the Ekushe events are public commemoration of the 1952 Language movement in East Pakistan which led to the wider calls for independence. This analysis is important because it pays attention to how ‘issues of time and space, history and the present, homeland and homecoming are, indeed, intertwined and mutually constituted in complex and ambiguous ways’ (2013, 608). Her attention to Bengali diaspora balances both the transnational inheritance and the colonial connections that are active in the ways that this community has struggled to narrate a Bangladeshi identity in East London. Her work on both the Mela and the Shahid Minar structure is a reminder of how important ‘ties to the homeland’ are in the constitution of Bengali diasporic identities (2019, 230) but also makes a case for ‘the need to build questions of history and power back into our understanding of diaspora’ (ibid 243). This is also a welcome reminder that diasporic and transnational identities are not oppositional identities but can be usefully framed together and is something I return to in the next section on migrant homemaking (Osaghae and Cooney 2020).

I suggest that Alexander’s interdisciplinary analyses - which does not make a claim to the simplified duality to which I draw attention here, does nonetheless highlight that research understandings that can navigate both here/there and create energy with the ‘larger Imperial and post-Imperial story’ are instrumental in understanding the Bengali migrant experience in East London (2011, 209). This sits in stark contrast with research that fails to consider either lens. For example, Dench et al., (2006) offer an analysis of the
changing East End in the 1990s and use poorly defined conceptual language about ‘settlement by outsiders’ and ‘loss of local control’ (48 emphasis added) to set up a series of native/outsider inspired binary conclusions, about welfare dependency and ‘entitlement culture’ (227). Looking back to the East End in the 1970s, Dench et al., critique what they present as changes to the welfare system that demoted ‘claims based on membership of – and service to – the community’ (226). And yet there is no critical attention given to the nature of the ‘claims’, or who might be a member or indeed what ‘service to the community’ was being registered. Their approach is what McClintock might describe as the ‘entourage of binaries’ (1992, 85) setting up bounded and fixed ideas about ‘belonging’ to the East End. The absence of the transnational and postcolonial perspective allows the Bengali community to be vacated of rightful claim, and their services to the British state in colonial and post-colonial times to be erased as insignificant to the overriding claims of the ‘member’ (translated as white), community.

Another important, though limited contribution to the study of the Bengali community in the East End, is made by Glynn (2014). Her approach also sits outside the transnational/postcolonial examples explored above, and I suggest that the absence of these lenses diminishes her analysis. Glynn takes a Marxist materialist perspective, foregrounding class as the instructive basis for her analysis of the settlement of the Bengali community in 1970s East London (2014, 5). Whilst she offers a rich archival analysis, I would argue that inattention to the colonial inheritance means that Glynn overstates the role of class and fails to interrogate the interaction between colonialism, gender and race in the Bengali migrant experience (Mayblin & Turner 2020). Her research acknowledges that ‘the great majority of first-generation immigrants were proletarianized in Britain’ and that many of this community ‘still held plots of land’ in Sylhet. Yet, despite acknowledging this liminal position between landholders and ‘working-class’ status, she insists on imposing a Western-based class analysis on their experiences – one which is incongruent to how Bengali participants understood themselves (2014, 96). Furthermore, the exclusive focus on formal local council level politics, robs Bengali migrant women of their role and significance and betrays a masculinist understanding of politics and activism (Staeheli et al., 2004), where women are seen as incidental actors ‘playing only an auxiliary role’ (Ahmed 2016, 2) and are ‘pushed to the margins of history’ (Alexander et al., 2016, 134).

Extending the class analysis, Glynn argues that ‘those who prioritise ‘racial’ difference ... reinforce the racialisation of society while ignoring and drawing attention away from the socio-economic structures that created racialized distinctions and that continue to thrive through dividing potential working-class resistance’ (2014, 254). I argue that the case for working-class solidarity in 1970s East London is however
overplayed (McDowell et al., 2010, 409). First and foremost, as stated previously, the application of ‘working-class’ to the Bengali community in 1970s London puts these migrants into a framework that was developed outside of their specific economic and migration experiences. This relates to Koh’s (2015) injunction that a postcolonial approach ‘means critically questioning whether concepts that have been derived from the Anglo-Western experience – such as liberal citizenship, categorisation of migrants, particular forms of migration movements are appropriate and meaningful for people in Asia’ (435). This is not to diminish class as an important category, and certainly for Bengali migrants the economic crisis of the 1970s, de-industrialisation and high unemployment were formative factors (Alexander et al., 2016, 110). However, I would contend that working class as a universalised term that has no reference to race is unhelpful (Bhattacharya 2018). Secondly, to centre the racism that scarred the 1970s Bengali community experience, is not to ‘reinforce the racialisation’ as is suggested (Glynn 2014, 254), but recognition of the fundamental and nuanced nature of colonially-inspired racialised violence that afflicted Bengali migrants at the time. For instance, when Glynn describes an episode of racist violence, she draws on Daniel et al., (1972) to recollect a particularly horrific episode, but she fails to acknowledge that the racist gang involved were made up of white and West Indian, young, working-class men, and that this racially mixed group proudly targeted Bengali men specifically, for their assumed passivity. I argue the absence of a postcolonial lens misses “that colonialism is not ‘past’ but that it is lived ‘in the experiences of gendered systems of domination and violence” (Mayblin & Turner 2020, 196), and in this case reached back to colonially inspired tropes about Bengali effeminacy (Dimeo 2002, Sinha 2017). In addition, as Gardner (2009, 236) contends, the absence of a transnational lens means that there is little attention to the significance of the transnational status of Bengali migrants as Londonis and how this might have interacted with their ‘rejection of working-class identity’ (Glynn 2014, 96). Both these omissions compromise Glynn’s analysis.

One key area that my research does not explore, is how religious identity intersected in the Othering of Bengali migrants. This is because although the establishment of the East London Mosque in 1940 and Brick Lane Mosque in 1976 were important developments in the community’s placemaking, religious worship and identity did not emerge as a contentious point of discussion in my fieldwork (Alexander et al., 2016, 109, Kershen 2004, 80). This is in contrast to more recent research which has highlighted the ‘increasing significance of a globalised Islamic identity’ (Alexander 2019, 243) and which has noted the way that Bengali diasporic identity in the 1990s, centred around Brick Lane, has increasingly struggled over various cultural, secular and religious characterisations (Alexander 2011, 2019, Eade & Garbin 2006) and how narratives of exclusion now increasingly revolve around religion-based Othering (Labenksi 2019).
Interestingly one of the key discussion points about religion that did emerge, returns us to representation – in particular, several female participants were willing to share photographs of themselves taken in the 1970s. However, they were also very clear they should not be shared in community spaces that might feature their Bengali peers – this was because they were invariably clothed in short sleeve blouses and did not have their hair covered. All of these women now wear both the hijab and burqa which ensures they are ‘modestly’ covered. In this way, female Bengali participants were concerned to control how they as older women might be (mis)represented by these photographs and the reactions it might solicit – acknowledging that as Muslim women their dress and outward appearance was critical to their codes of ‘honour’ (Ahmed 2016, 175, see also Begum, 2008, and Dwyer 1999, 2000). However, though the Islamic aspect of Bengali diasporic identity has shifted and, in many ways, become amplified and contested in the decades since the 1970s (Alexander 2019, 2011, Eade 1994, Eade 1998, Eade & Garbin 2006, Riaz 2013) it was not something that emerged as a prominent feature of discussions.

In summary, the wealth of research about the Bengali migrant community in East London has navigated a range of priorities. The scholarship reviewed here has revealed much about the nature of enduring transnational relationships as well as the coloniality of their experiences in London. I have suggested that those examples that manage to straddle both these lenses and bring them into some measure of analytic whole, are best able to trace the complexities of the Bengali migrant experience. My research on the Bengali squatters’ movement seeks to contribute to this body of work by bringing the transnational here/there relationship, into explicit conversation with the temporal and analytical rigour enabled by a postcolonial lens. The ambition is to give transnationalism a colonial inflection, and for postcolonialism to absorb something of the multi-directionality of the transnational approach. I argue that the Bengali squatters’ movement provides a generous empirical basis in which to take that forward.

2.3 Exploring migrant homemaking

The complexity involved in defining home has long exercised both academic and popular imagination, Georgiou (2006, 160) neatly summarises the indefinite contours of the term and how very subjective discussions can be:

‘Home’ can be the domestic natural space, the immediate family, a private home, the refuge from the outside world. It can be the local space where everyday life evolves – the place to which people always return. It can also be the country of origin, the symbolic home, the source, or the
highly symbolic and mediated transnational context, which shelters diaspora against exclusionary national spaces. More than any one of these, it tends to be all of the above.

What this contribution highlights is that home need not necessarily be a single nor a fixed physical space. Humanistic geographers (Cresswell 2014, Relph 1976, Tuan 1977) have sought to understand home from this subjective position, where their aim is to understand the activity of making ‘home’, as an affective process. This tradition draws on classic studies like Bachelard (1964) and Tuan (1977), who draw out the uniqueness of home, not necessarily as a single physical location but a place that evokes a sense of safety and attachment. Ahmed (1999) also highlights this affective quality and links it to ‘a space of belonging (home is where the heart is)’ and goes on to talk about ‘desire’, ‘origin’ and the sensual experience of ‘being at home’ (341).

Critical geographers like Blunt and Dowling (2006) argue that the humanistic tradition is incongruent with home sometimes being a place of danger, fear and oppression. They develop a ‘critical geography of home’ which, whilst connecting back to the humanistic definition, by retaining attention to ‘feelings and attachments’, at the same time recognizes that feeling ‘at home’ and habitation of a house do not necessarily go hand in hand (10). They note, for example, that one can live in a house and experience that space as ‘oppressive and alienating’ (ibid). My research draws considerably on this critical framing of home, particularly their definition of ‘home as simultaneously material and imaginative; the nexus between home, power and identity; and home as multi-scalar’ (ibid 22).

The reference to the connection between the material and imaginative home is useful when considering migrant homemaking in a diasporic and transnational context. Brah (1996) states: ‘the concept of diaspora signals these processes of multilocationality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries’ (194, original emphasis) referencing an idea that diasporic home may be deterritorialized and reflect a ‘homing desire’, rather than attachment to a physical home. Significant contributions to the work on Bengali migrants to the UK demonstrate that at least in the early stages of migration, they understood this ‘multilocationality’ as a temporary phase, and that they themselves were ‘sojourners’ rather than settlers in London (Ballard 1994). It is argued that Bengali migrants displayed a strong transnational identity which returns us to the importance of transnational approaches. This time exploring migrant homemaking, as it highlights the enduring emotional attachment to home(s) in a ‘homeland’ whilst retaining a physical commitment to home in another.
The connection between here and there, relates to the ‘multi-scalarity’ of home and is a prominent theme in research on migrant homemaking. Attention to material culture has been a particularly fruitful lens for those explorations (Ahmed 2010, Baldasser 2008, Burrell 2008, Christou & Janta 2018, Dudley 2011, Povranovic Frykman & Humbracht 2013). Tolia-Kelly (2004a) argues that domestic artefacts and visual cultures are critical points which help to anchor British South Asian migrant women, in the post-colonial spaces they occupy. Domestic materiality becomes the crucial stage upon with the past and present is refracted and ‘domestic artefacts’ become ‘stores of cultural narratives’ (315). The domestic objects that her participants refer to form “a collage of connective landscapes, cultural iconologies and symbols of the communal experience of displacement from a sense of belonging and ‘home’” (327). The value of the objects can only be understood through the process of migration and movement – that is the value is amplified in the new ‘cultural landscape of the home in England’ (325). She argues it is the ‘re-memory’, the ‘social history, not directly experienced, but which form part of the cultural identity narratives’ that help to understand how home landscapes can be important sites for exploring the ‘social geographies of migrant communities, which shape and reshape the social, cultural and political landscape in Britain’ (327). This is important to how I engage with the idea of home in my own research; Tolia-Kelly’s scholarship highlights how ‘[v]isual and material cultures in the home signify identifications with landscapes outside of Britain but are valued relationally to their sighting and situation in Britain. South Asian identity is figured through being and living in the British landscapes of exclusionary and marginalising national culture’ (Tolia-Kelly 2004b, 678). Whilst my work is not connected to artefacts in the home, I am similarly concerned with how the wider homemaking practices of Bengali migrant squatters were contextualized by the transnational and diasporic identities they straddled, as well as how these accrued ‘heightened significance’ (Tolia-Kelly 2004a, 325) in light of the state and street racism they faced in East London.

In a similar vein, McMillan (2009) explores the West Indian Front Room, and describes the importance of the material curation of that space in terms of ‘how postwar settlers struggled to acquire a front room’ in the first place, and then, how much it meant as a space for developing a ‘tactical identity’ of what he describes as ‘tropicality’ and which offered ‘pleasure as a counter to the harsh realities of the external world’ (145). He explores the curation of that space as ‘contradictory’ (137), because of its excavation to an English stylised ‘Victorian parlour’, but also fundamentally a space with its attention to a ‘close material arrangement’ that acted as ‘a metaphor that expresses their desires for the extended family and community to be close’ (ibid 153). Similar to Brah’s (1996) rejection of ideas about fixed and bounded origins, McMillan describes the space as a ‘transcultural contact zone’ which acts as ‘creolization’ of
aesthetics and practices (2009, 145). This idea that objects and material possessions can act as a buffer in migrant homes is highlighted in research on highly mobile UN staff professionals (Nowicka 2007) and in consumption and gift-giving as a homemaking practice for Moroccan migrant women living in Rome (Salih 2001).

These case studies demonstrate how migrant homemaking can be usefully explored through attention to the material objects with which migrants curate and emotively connect homes in different locations; objects forming ‘an archive of memories and desires’ (Blunt and Sheringham 2019, 819). However, despite the connections, affective desires and fulfilment that are revealed by this attention to the material artefacts, it is a limited approach for the study of migrant homes that are temporally distant and were, at the time, highly transitory. Tolia-Kelly notes, ‘material foundations are sometimes transient, ephemeral things, which in turn fade, tear, fragment, dissolve and break’ (2004a, 315-16). For many Bengali squatters, at least in that early period of migration, they had arrived with and accumulated little of these important domestic objects. Bengali migrant squatters although from relatively affluent Sylheti backgrounds, tended to be of modest material means in London, living in highly precarious squatted dwellings, oftentimes committed to significant remittance responsibilities (Gardner 1993, 4). As such, the material lens in this case, is enhanced by widening beyond consumption-based material homemaking to think more broadly about the structural materialities of the home and threshold spaces.

Migrant homemaking in threshold spaces

Returning to Koh’s (2015) injunction to interrogate concepts that universalise Western experiences, I argue that experiences of home, in particular ‘the public–private dichotomy as it relates to the West cannot be superimposed on to Indian cities’ (Lahiri 2011, 864). Boccagni et al., (2020), also note that the word ‘home’ in English, ‘evokes the functional differentiation of the domestic place as a private and personal space in its own right’ and the ‘bricks and mortars ... materialize this distinction’ (8). However, most Bengali migrants came from rural Sylhet, where home was referenced around utility and social interaction rather than aesthetic consumption or strong demarcations of internal/external boundaries. Ahmed (2006), for instance, talks about the ghar, which is the primary dwelling, the uthan, which is the courtyard directly outside, the ghat or phokoir which are the freshwater ponds sometimes located at the front and/or back of the main ghar, as well as a range of ancillary buildings, all of which form part of the wider homestead (9-10). He also notes how the warmer climate means that the outdoor area and the courtyard, are an extension of the homestead and that ideas about indoors/outdoors are, though highly gendered, less distinct than we might find in Western understandings of home. Ghafur (2002) similarly
notes the concentric zonal nature of how the dwelling, courtyard, and broader neighbourhood space in rural Bangladesh interact and how these are temporally regulated, gendered spaces that perform home functions. Understandings of what constitutes threshold spaces are therefore culturally and temporally variable.

The importance of the multi-scalar home has been well explored (Blunt and Bonnerjee 2013, Blunt and Dowling 2006) and is highlighted in Lahiri’s (2011) work where her Brahmo participants lamented the loss of ‘strolling’, or the ‘freedom to walk’ once they had migrated to London from Kolkata. Although considerably different to Bengali migrant squatters, her high status and affluent Hindu migrant participants talked nostalgically about the loss of para or neighbourhood that had anchored their sense of belonging, and which ‘dematerialise[s]’ how home may be experienced (865). In London, this diasporic south Asian community, prioritised ‘sensory memories, rather than possessions found in the home environment’ and those memories were underpinned by interaction with the neighbourhood (ibid). In addition to noting this more expansive understanding of home, it is also critical to my work that the way these spaces were gendered in rural Sylhet, is recognised. As Gardner (1995) highlights, the idea of biyre or outside, regarded as male-space, and bitore or inside, generally considered as female-space, are important to the familial and social relationships choreographed around them (206). Ghafur (2002) also reiterates this point and argues that the concentric zones of the Bengali home become progressively more masculine as they expand outwards to the edges that interact with wider urban space (41, see also Alam et al., 2020, 1587). Attention to this culturally nuanced way of considering home, has significant interaction with Koh’s (2015) postcolonial invitation to explore conceptual language, outside the Western context.

Given that inside/outside spaces are concentrically configured and highly gendered, I am attentive to the material home as traced in these edge spaces. I make a case for centring ‘thresholds’ in exploring migrant homemaking. Thresholds are analysed by Boccagni and Brighenti (2017). They reject the ‘typically Western middle-class experience’ that tends to shape research on home and makes ‘sharp distinction’ between the ‘private domain of home’ and the ‘public domain of urban space’ (3). Thresholds are instead understood as ‘zones of passage’ or ‘peculiar boundary formations’ (ibid 4). The argument is that a focus on thresholds recognises that homes have permeable and relational boundaries. Focusing on them gives an opportunity to see home as ‘crafted, enacted, negotiated, and if necessary, struggled upon’ (ibid).

Therefore, the idea of thresholds is critical to my overall approach as it sees home and homemaking as configured by connected spaces of inside and outside. In postcolonial terms it constitutes a liminal space
of creative potential. This relates to Bhabha’s (1994) work, exploring liminality, where he states ‘[t]he recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’ most intricate invasions’ and ‘the borders of home and world become confused’ ((9). Drawing on Fanon, Bhabha identifies tension in the spaces of interaction between the coloniser and colonised; in those moments ‘when the colonial subjects cease to be spoken for by the (former) colonizer, and instead bring themselves into representation’ (ibid, 11). Bhabha’s rejection of the binary is complemented with the idea of ‘hybridity’; this ‘Third space’ which ‘constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity’ (ibid, 37). Bhabha’s work around liminality and ‘Third Space’ are useful to my research as it draws attention to the dynamism of interactions in what I identify as the liminal spaces of the squatted home. By focussing on the squatted home, I suggest that the spaces of interaction/confrontation that emerged in threshold spaces, reveal interesting and important negotiations around identity and belonging, manifesting in many ways, what Massey called ‘meeting places’ (2013, 171).

My attention focuses on the immediate thresholds of the door and window spaces. Van der Horst and Messing (2006) in work on a Dutch multi-ethnic neighbourhood describe the window space of the home as a ‘scene’, one in which the curation and material attention is seen to express identification with the neighbourhood or an attempt to block it out. Similarly, Hirsch and Smith (2018) look at how windows emerge as a ‘significant material and symbolic object’ in a study about class and racialisation in a Glasgow neighbourhood. Drawing on Simmel (1994/1909) Hirsch and Smith explore how the door and window emerge as a borderline, where the ‘intimate touches on the exterior, or which render the border between our domestic and public lives transparent’ (225). Their study concluded that racialised judgements about belonging were embedded in otherwise seemingly neutral statements about ‘taste’ and ‘style’ (239).

In contrast to these approaches that trace animosities that are concealed in these threshold spaces, my study refers to Bengali squatters in a highly explicit and racialised contest for housing and I highlight state and street racism as twin forces that visited these thresholds in active and overt ways. Like Burrell (2014) who looks at ‘the high levels of porosity’ between inside and outside and coming back to the idea that home is a relational, liminal space, I draw on research that develops the idea of home unmaking (Brickell and Baxter 2014). Porteous and Smith (2001) use the term ‘domicide’ to describe the ‘deliberate destruction of home against the will of the home-dweller’ (3). They focus on home destruction and displacement sanctioned by ‘government fiat’ or some other institutional plan and underwritten by so called ‘public interest’ (ibid). Their definition resonates with the Bengali squatters who were deliberately
harassed in attempts to evict them from their squatted homes. Brickell and Baxter (2014) offer a more ‘varied and expansive’ exploration of ‘home unmaking’ which they define as ‘the precarious process by which material and/or imaginary components of home are unintentionally or deliberately, temporarily or permanently, divested, damaged or even destroyed’ (134). Elliott-Cooper et al., (2019) look at the ‘violence of un-homing’ in the context of urban gentrification and define it as ‘a form of violence that removes the sense of belonging to a particular community or home-space’ (503). This relates to Anderson’s (2013) idea of the ‘community of value’ where borders are both legal and imagined and where ‘citizens and migrants define each other’ through relations that are underpinned by ideas of status and legitimacy (2013, 2). The interventions here are a valuable way of thinking about how migrant homemaking is not simply about curating materials inside, but that homemaking is ‘understood through its connections to, and interactions with, the ‘outside world’ (Brickell and Baxter 2014, 136).

I argue therefore that it is appropriate to understand state and street racism as un-homing interactions at the doors and windows, thus exploring the Bengali migrant squatted home in the front of house threshold spaces reveals how home making and unmaking are intertwined processes. This relates to Brah’s (1996) concept of diaspora space, which ‘is the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of ‘us’ and ‘them’, are contested’ (208) and there is congruence also with Tolia-Kelly’s argument too that diasporic identities have to be contextualised within the ‘exclusionary and marginalising’ experience of British landscapes (2004b, 678). This is important because it acknowledges that the ability of a migrant family to feel ‘at home’ relies on not solely, or even mainly, on their own endeavours and that the front of house threshold can be considered a material space of involuntary relationality. Thinking about thresholds and borders in this sense links to research on ‘everyday bordering’ understood as ‘practices’ and ‘performances’ which are ‘at the heart of contemporary political agendas’ and are ‘closely related to different constructions of identity, belonging and citizenship’ (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018, 230).

Humphris (2017, 2019) explores this bordering as it is iterated in what she calls ‘home-encounters’ between the state and Roma migrants as the state surpasses these home-borders (2017, 1). She looks at how child welfare and access to child benefits open the Roma home to conversations about ‘appropriate mothering’ (6) and ‘provide occasions for the interference in mothers’ intimate lives’ (5). Humphris notes the ‘constellations of gendered deservingness’ that are enacted in the home-encounters and argues that the home becomes a ‘site of bordering processes’ (11) as what she calls the ‘post welfare’ frontline workers are sanctioned entry inside, to make decisions about whether to extend support or sanction to
these mothers. She observes the home-encounter as a liminal space where Roma mothers actively perform what they recognise as ‘good motherhood’ (ibid), in order to navigate those interactions and achieve an agreeable outcome. Drawing on Humphris, it is clear that home thresholds can act as junctions of interaction, loaded with broader iterations of state power, belonging and the performance of unhomimg. Similarly, my work highlights the gendered nature of the interactions in the threshold spaces and notes how Bengali women were often the guardians of the squatted properties. I suggest that whilst it is accepted that this generation of women ‘spent much of their time at home raising their children’ (Ahmed 2016, 165), the performance of this gender role, and their new role as economic migrant, dictated that Bengali women would often be at the forefront of those unhoming interactions at the doors and window spaces. This is thus a divergence from the conventional idea of women as defenders of ‘culture’ and tradition in the ‘private home’ to one where women were directly involved in the contestations for belonging (ibid 166, see also Alexander et al., 2016, 134–136).

My work therefore, suggests that as opposed to understanding migrant home through a material gaze that focuses on consumption and material curation, a shift in focus that pays attention to the material edges of the home – the thresholds, how they are understood, engaged and intrinsically a relational space – permit a more relevant lens through which to study a temporally distant, artefactually limited and wholly contested squatted home. Moreover, this focus aligns with the discussion about transnational and postcolonial approaches that underpin my work. There is attention to how the homemaking experience is rooted in the cultural norms inherited from there and how they were reworked in a racially hostile neighbourhood here.

*Migrant homemaking and the para*

Referring back to the idea of *para* (Lahiri 2011) and the rejection of the sharp distinction between inside and outside spaces of the home, this section explores the importance of the *neighbourhood* as a home space for a migrant community. The link between the borderline spaces of the home and homemaking at the scale of the city has been usefully explored by Blunt and Sheringham (2019, 1). They review previous efforts that seek to examine the ‘porosity of the boundaries between interior and exterior’ (ibid, 8) and argue that these are inhibited by the tendency to take either the home or the city as the starting point, thereby failing to appreciate the ‘mutually constitutive’ nature of both (ibid, 12). Instead, they propose a home-city geographies approach that takes both home and the city as co-equal starting points. This effort to take seriously ‘the interconnectedness of domestic and urban realms’ (ibid, 13), is progressed in Burrell’s (2014, 162) study. She draws on the role of doors and windows as ‘domestic thresholds’
highlighting the ‘high levels of porosity of domestic space’ and that ‘inside the home cannot be understood without reference to both the immediate contexts of the street and wider structural economic forces’ (145). Blunt and Sheringham (2019) suggest a gaze that dissects across the space of home and city, offering a lens that maps the home, the street and the neighbourhood as connected and relational spaces. This is an approach that sits more comfortably with the south Asian concentric, zonal understanding that I adopt in my work.

There is a generous body of empirical work that I draw upon to explore ‘the threshold-crossing capacity of home’ and its ‘accordion-like quality’ which refers to both the expansive reach and the more intimate locales, at which home and city interact (Ralph and Staeheli 2011, 518). Blunt and Bonnerjee’s (2013) work on Anglo-Indian and Chinese Calcuttans identify how participants ‘narrate[d] the feeling of being at home specifically through the city ... the city assumes an important and located sense of belonging’ (228). Ghosh’s (2014) study of Bengali migrants in the city of Toronto looks at the performative processes through which inhospitable spaces, or ‘unhomely’ high rise buildings, designed for ‘private’ residence rather than to facilitate communal engagement, were transformed by the migrants into a para. The study reveals how despite rigorous surveillance and regimentation, the Bengali migrants worked collectively to transform space in their high-rise buildings. They transformed these into communal interaction areas, allowing the residents to meet and engage in cultural activities, creating home in an ‘unhomely’ high rise. In doing so, Ghosh’s work demonstrates the connection between the material and affective labour that is applied outside the confines of the dwelling which then resembles something of home and para, a sanctuary from the wider city of Toronto where Bengali migrants are ‘racially marginalized and alienated’ (2014). Similarly, Cancellieri (2017) in his work on migrants in the city of Porto Recanati, in Italy concludes, “migrants produce ‘home’ both by imbuing domestic spaces with their own memory and meaning and by creating public and collective spaces characterised by ‘homely relations’” in this case residents of a condominium, created an Islamic prayer room on the ground floor (58). Crucially however, Cancellieri notes how that space is unequally experienced, and that women, especially young women were generally excluded. Therefore ‘home-making practices at the ground floor do not have a single, clear and fixed meaning for everybody’ (56).

Hondagneu-Sotelo (2017a) examines these ideas further, exploring an example of migrant homemaking extending beyond the proximity evident in both previous examples. She investigates migrant homemaking as it actively reaches into the wider city, in what she terms ‘third space’. Examining the role of urban community gardens in Los Angeles and the Latina/o migrants that nourish them, she explores how spaces
beyond the physical site of dwelling are not just made more culturally ‘homely’ but can be cultivated to resist wider discourses of exclusion and offer ‘oases of home and belonging’ (26). Like Ghosh’s ‘para’, the migrants in Hondagneu-Sotelo’s work are engaged in a collective enterprise, in ‘third space[s]’ which ‘serve as hybrid-domestic places, as alternative homes’ (ibid, 16). However, they also have an affective purpose. The ‘urban community gardeners are cultivating an alternative domestic sphere, one that helps remedy and compensate the many losses inflicted on them by poverty, racial discrimination, unjust immigration policies, and economic marginalization’ (ibid). There are clear links here back to the work on diaspora and how space, in these cases, the city, is navigated to create ‘home’ or ‘home-like’ spaces that mediate the displacement that comes with mobility and migration.

Particularly significant is Hondagneu-Sotelo’s attention to gender. With reference to male migrants, she notes how ‘homosocial leisure’ (2017b, 112) in community gardens is a restorative antidote to the tension they experience between culturally ascribed ‘masculine privilege and social marginality’. She notes that in the practices and relationships that are nurtured in these spaces, ‘they are cultivating...‘at home’ feelings’ (ibid 123-124). Likewise, she investigates how women in these spaces were, through the act of growing food, not simply nourishing nostalgic memories of home, but iterating a practice ‘of setting root and making home’ (2017a, 24). Though Hondagneu-Sotelo notes that these are ‘not purely Edenic sites’, she does highlight that they serve as important hybrid-domestic places and offers a reminder that ideas about home and their extension beyond the domestic dwelling are culturally and temporally specific, and crucially, evolutionary (2017a, 26).

This is critical given that the ‘separate spheres’ idea about private home and public space is one that does not map across to South Asian zonal understandings of home and which has gendered nuances that differ from those that prevail in the Western European tradition (Ghafur 2002, 34, see also Alam et al., 2020, Gardner 1995). In my work, I take these ideas and consider them in the context of squatter vigilantism that reached out into the wider space of the neighbourhood. I argue that masculine ideas about home in the Sylheti context expanded into the para where male mobility and spatial liberty (Zeitlyn 2012, 321) were part of the traditional experience of home. This also relates to and has an important intersection with placemaking. Alexander (2011) who focuses on the various Bengali community protests to the film Brick Lane in 2006, explores the complex and contested process of ‘claiming’ and ‘making’ space in East London” (201) and distils the ‘social production of space’ (217) as essentially ‘a story of making home’ (218). Daou et al., (2015) make a similar point about Latino homemaking where instead of home being ‘contracted to merely the physical aspect’ of a dwelling (152) homemaking is defined as ‘an organic form
of territorialisation’ (162) and represents a placemaking practice. My attention to the squatted home and the accompanying vigilantism takes this stretched view of the home and its wider thresholds, as a central feature of understanding how Bengali squatters thought about and engaged in homemaking. In turn, I also highlight how these interactions and attachments were configured by generation arguing that homemaking that reached out into the para through vigilantism was mainly a younger male practice and rooted in differing attachments to diasporic home here, rather than transnational home there.

Desh/Bidesh – transnational homemaking

Undoubtedly the stretching of home for migrants goes beyond both the dwelling and the wider neighbourhood, reaching into transnational space. My work is interested in considering how the home(s) of here and there are intertwined both materially through the investment in remittance houses and through the family relationships that are nurtured in those exchanges (Lopez 2010). This section turns to how remittance houses and family relationships have played an important anchoring role in migrant homemaking attachments, acting as markers of ‘embeddedness in home communities’ (Boccagni 2014, 278). It has been argued that attachment to there means that migrants display ‘a lesser priority to their housing needs’ in the place they have migrated – often a place regarded as nothing more than ‘a functional requirement’ (ibid 282-283). There is what Kabachnik et al., (2010, 317) describe as a ‘distinct temporalization of home, as the home of the past and the future usurps the focus on the home of the present’ (see also Ahmed 1999). This is important to my research as Bengali migrants in the 1970s were often tied to a return home, where past and future home imaginaries were entangled, even though they often saw themselves as sojourners (Ballard 1994) during their squatting period. However, like Al-Ali and Koser (2003, 5), my work also shows how these transnational attachments were contoured by gender and generation.

The remittance house has been the focus of considerable academic attention (Boccagni & Brighenti 2017, Boccagni & Erdal 2020, Boccagni & Murcia 2021, Lopez 2010, 2015). In this work there has been attention to the way that remittance houses iterate a claim for membership (Melly 2010, Freeman 2013, Mata-Codesal 2014). Some have argued that they are architectural monuments to a migrant’s ‘absent presence’ (Boccagni & Murcia 2021, 52), or a manifestation of a ‘homing’ desire and the ambition for a return home at some point (Boccagni & Brighenti 2017), others highlight their symbolism as the physical representation of the transnational relationship reflecting a ‘hybridisation’ of interior and exterior home styles of here and there (Pellow 2003, Klaufus 2011). My research is interested in how the remittance house is
intertwined with family relationships and is imagined and materialised as home based on the affective ties that are bound up with it.

The entanglement of family ties and the remittance house have been well explored in several contexts. Boccagni (2014) clarifies that belonging is often ‘circumscribed by migrants’ social relationships, no less than by the material buildings that host them’ (279). Ahmed (1999) also recognises ‘where one’s family lives’ as one of the registers that defines home (341). Lopez (2010) describes the extravagant Mexican remittance house built for a mother by her migrant sons, which is barely used as she confines herself to the old rooms, that existed before the refurbishment. The investment funded by ‘humiliating’ and treacherous border crossings and punishing work in Los Angeles funds a dwindled family ‘back home’ (47). This relates back to my own research exploring how homemaking is directed not only by physical home, but as intimately connected to the transnational family relationships that underpin those attachments (Baldasser 2007). Boccagni (2014) makes this point well in response to his own question, ‘what’s in a (migrant) house?’ as he establishes them as material spaces that are filled with affective hopes and loyalties. He states, ‘[h]aving these houses built … is not only a matter of investing savings, nor of prestige or of social status maintenance …[they] also stand as a very tangible demonstration of their dedication to the family members left behind’ (288). Returning to temporality, remittance houses ‘materialise migrants’ constructions of the future and display, over time, the (dis)alignments between such construction and the actual development in their personal and family histories’ (Boccagni & Erdal 2021, 1073). Here the life course approach is helpful in tracing how migrants may interact with that material and affective home, as a shifting engagement. The affective attachments to family members mean that extended family often who become the ‘proxy presence’ (Dalakaloglu 2010), and the remittance house keeps the connection between ‘migrants and their stayer counterparts’ (Boccagni & Erdal 2021, 1075).

The role of remittances and the remittance house are also a significant thread in the duality of desh/bidesh in the Sylheti context. Gardner (1993) describes the ‘pucca buildings’ as reflecting the economic power wielded by those that receive remittances. As noted by King (1999), these buildings have become ‘a near universal symbol of status’ (26). As Gardner (2008) further explains:

...the use of remittances tended to follow a particular pattern. After paying off any debts that the original migration incurred and covering household subsistence needs, foreign earnings tended to be invested in land, the arbiter of wealth, power, and security. After this, they were generally used to build new pucca (stone) houses, an important asset in an environment liable to cyclonic storms and flooding. Remittances were also invested in further migration, funding the movement...
of close kin to the Middle East, as well as business enterprises and property in Britain. What was taking place was a process in which successful Londonis and their immediate families were making themselves as secure as possible, both by accumulating land in the village and by laying down strong connections with Britain and other sources of foreign earning (482-3).

Gardner, like Boccagni, lays out the importance of the material and affective dimensions of remittances. The remittance house was almost always the immediate priority once debts and land acquisition had been settled. For some Bengali squatters, squatting allowed them to enhance their remittance capability there by relieving them of a rent burden here. But then, there were the related obligations to family, both to their security and to enhancing their migration potential and opportunities. However, Gardner shows that most of these remittance houses remain empty, and she notes that these empty structures are ‘monuments’ to the migrant, ‘that serve to remind all and sundry not only of their family’s success, but also of their existence’ (2008, 489).

In Sylhet, the remittance house is intertwined with the post-colonial economic context which has made migration, a price worth paying, no matter the punishing costs and downward mobility experienced in London. The material affluence brought about by the global inequality between desh and bidesh has created and nourished not just this material housing advantage, but also fed into much more complex relationships with local politics and state delivery of development services. Hoque (2020) for example talks about ‘Londoni hegemony’ (231) and how the remittance monies that come from ‘private purses’ has skewed the way that development interests are prioritised and pursued (233). The generation that migrated and built remittance homes, may have unexpectedly created ‘house skeletons’ (Boccagni 2014, 290), and yet still, their influence in the lives and homes of those that remain in Sylhet are remarkably significant, nonetheless.

It is also interesting to observe that squatting in Sylhet is in some measure the consequence of the remittance economy funded by Londoni migration. The localised boom has led to internal migration where migrants from poorer areas have moved to deliver the ‘demand for goods, as well as in industries which service return migrants and their spending power: food outlets, minibuses and taxis, mobile phone shops, and so on’ (Gardner 2009, 237). These internal migrants in many areas find themselves residing in bastee (squatter) settlements (Rahman 2001) just outside the booming remittance town. Again, as stated previously, this link between squatters in Sylhet and those in London, are only revealed when we look at the transnational and postcolonial while also considering the context of here and there and the global political economy that renews and relies on these unequal relationships.
However, the remittance home is not just about the physical building that was either redeveloped or built anew. As suggested here, the physical space was also intimately connected to the family relations that were encumbered there and the next section goes on to explore those social and affective ties that are also animated in home attachments, more directly.

**Family as home**

The notion of ‘home as family’ is essential to my work, and I turn to looking at how these stretched family relationships have been understood (Blunt and Dowling 2005, 211). Gardner (2002) argues, ‘[t]o understand the meanings and implications of transnationalism for ordinary people … we need also to consider activities and relationships within households and families’ (191). Similarly, Baldasser et al., (2007), look at the ‘transnational family’ and emphasise the importance of ‘the growing awareness that members of families retain their sense of collectivity and kinship in spite of being spread across multiple nations’ (13). Like Kou et al., (2017) who argue that ‘[l]iterature related to family migration tends to be largely West oriented…and does not discuss the role of parents and the extended family’ (2791), my research highlights the importance of obligations to parents, siblings and wider kin. I explore how in the early years, older migrant tolerance for low status, dilapidated housing as squatters, was linked to a transnational homemaking imaginary, as London was only intended to be a transitory home.

Al-Ali & Koser (2002) argue that ‘the acts of imagining, creating, unmaking, changing, losing and moving ‘homes’ are ‘dynamic processes’ ideas about ‘here’ and ‘there’, home as dwelling and home as family have all been ‘unsettled’ by transnational migration (6). Rindfuss et al., (2012) talk about the ‘web of family obligations’ (87) and argue that over the life-course, there tends to emerge ‘competing obligations’ that come about when ‘migrants are in transition from family of orientation to family of procreation’ (ibid 89). They refer to the consequences of these evolving relationships in terms of remittance obligations, but the principle is arguably applicable to home attachments, as well.

I agree that the family as home was a significant consideration in home attachments of migrants. Like Gardner (2002, 24-25) who rejects the simplistic and over generalising nature of, functionalist assertions about the ‘break-up of the extended family’ (See Cohen 1998), I highlight the importance of the extended family in Bengali cultural terms and how attachments and remittance responsibilities towards parents and siblings that had been left behind, formed the affective basis for a transitory lifestyle for older migrants, in 1970s London. These migrants were ‘still heavily involved in social networks of kinship and village community’ (2002, 192) and determined on returning ‘home’, but with the post-colonial immigration
landscape shifted and restrictions increasingly imposed, families were increasingly defined by ‘the stereotypical British model’ and ‘as the laws [became] increasingly draconian, this definition... squeezed out more and more people’ (Gardner 1995, 115). The impact of a racialised immigration system on the ability to sustain nourishment of extended family relationships was, I argue significant.

*Generation and gender*

However, my research also notes that there was a generational differentiation in these transnational attachments. Developing Gardner’s work on the stretched nature of kinship relationships in *desh*, I argue that this did not necessarily apply uniformly across generations. In fact, I suggest that those migrant men who arrived as adolescents, the so called 1.5 generation (Rumbaut 2004) are perhaps better described in terms of a *diasporic identity*, who whilst retaining transnational relationships, were more adaptive to settlement in London. Walter (2001) describes diaspora as ‘...feeling “at home” in the area of settlement while retaining significant identification outside it’ (206). Additionally, I argue that registering this shifted emphasis from a commitment to *there* and more attention to *here*, was a significant animating factor in how the different Bengali migrant generations understood squatting. For example, for older migrants, squatting was a means through which to achieve accommodation for their transitory stay in London, whilst for the 1.5 generation, it was about accommodation *and* appropriating a home to which they felt they were entitled. In that sense, this generational differentiation also links back to the previous section, where home as *para*, was, I argue, more actively fought for by the younger migrant squatters who were more likely to engage in vigilantism to protect their diasporic identity and attachment to *here* and weaker transnational ties to *there*.

In addition, I also argue that Gardner’s work underplays the authority gained by Bengali migrant women as they became older. Although she recognises that women acquired culturally ascribed ‘older woman status’ (Gardner 1995, 214) which over the life course gives them greater power compared to as early migrant women, where they ‘rarely [had] much say in the matter’ (2002, 20). I, however, argue that the significance of that power is underestimated. Like Alexander et al., (2016), I challenge the ‘victimhood and powerlessness...that deny the role of women migrants as active agents’ (136). This links back to the previous section, and the comparison to Humphris idea of ‘home-encounters’ (2017, 2019) and the gendered encounters of Roma mothers in ‘home-visits’. These political encounters are there and the women’s role in them is there to be researched, if only the research optic is nimble enough to register them.
Attention to the differing family responsibilities assumed by Bengali men and women, compared to western models, is something that is well argued by Ahmed (2016). She also highlights the importance of ageing on how those roles evolve. Focusing on first-generation female Bengali migrants, she acknowledges that there is a spectrum of responses as women either ‘hold on to cultural norms of ageing in diaspora’ (ibid, 2), while others find this interrupted by migration and the culturally unusual demands made. She also critiques the ‘western inflection’ in theoretical discussions about ageing and rejects the universalistic application of ‘standardised measures and surveys’ on minoritised communities (ibid, 4).

Arguing that the ‘conceptualization of old age does not transfer across cultures’ she suggests that where in western culture ageing is often associated with ‘decline’ while in the Bengali community it can often signify ‘power and prestige’ (ibid, 6). My research takes up Ahmed’s attention to older Bengali women and finds coalescence with the ‘matriarchal authority’ that she highlights in her study of first-generation Bengali migrant women. She notes though these women make substantial compromise in family arrangements with the additional restrictions placed on multi-generational living, both by housing conditions and second-generation divergence from traditional norms, Bengali older women acquired and asserted significant maternal authority in their families.

Highlighting the importance of ‘power and agency within maternal identities’, Pustulka & Trabka’s work (2018, 669) uses the ‘Mother-Pole’ idea to argue that Polish mothers have significant responsibility for cultural and social reproduction and acquire significant ‘maternal agency and transformative power’ (683). I link this maternal power to the final homemaking outcomes for Bengali migrant families and suggest that unlike Gardner, who concludes that it is the ‘reluctance of children’ (218) and reliance on healthcare (see also Ahmed 2016) that has dictated a shift in the imaginaries and affective desires for a return home, it is the Bengali mothers and grandmothers who are ‘tied to the UK through their children’ (Ahmed 2016, 148), utilising their maternal agency to settle homemaking decisions and often blocked their husband’s desire to ‘return home’.

In summary, my research is interested in how multi-scalar migrant homemaking is understood in the context of the squatters’ movement. This ranges from the immediate threshold spaces and the encounters experienced and managed in those liminal spaces, to the interaction with the wider para and neighbourhood, and then the transnational material and family commitments that animate homemaking imaginaries and practices. I argue for more nuanced attention to generational and gendered understandings and how this may evolve over the life-course. By always centring a postcolonial analytical
position, my research is guided by a commitment to understanding home and family outside of Western-inspired traditions and maintaining attention to differentially experienced and influential, here.

2.4 Geographies of squatting

*Squatting and its relationship to urban space*

‘Squatting is usually recognized as an action of occupying a piece of land, a building or an apartment without legal property rights’, and is at the heart of my research (Mudu and Chattophadyay 2018, 7). This focus distinguishes my work from other efforts to explore the Bengali community in East London. In this section, I consider how squatting has been explored in terms that reference belonging both at an urban scale in terms of ‘right to the city’ discourses, and at the national scale, in terms of citizenship. The attention here focuses on urban space and explores how squatting manifests as resistance to the dominant hegemonies of property and housing. Within this body of work, I critique the tendency to centre Global North squatters, who are deemed to be ‘political’ (Pruijt 2013) because they are seen to possess an ‘anti-systemic political motive’ and who are therefore distinguished ‘sharply from the logic of other configurations’ (20). Furthermore, I consider how the focus on the urban and political interacts with how I approach my own research, especially that which looks explicitly at squatting in 1970s London. In particular, I refer to the limited but rich material, which takes a closer look at the more intimate experience of home, how squatters navigated domestic spaces and return to the idea of thresholds that I picked out in the previous section.

There is an marked separation between scholarly attention to squatting in the Global South and North. Still, in both strands of work, there has been a strong focus on the urban. Squatters’ movements have been linked to ‘right to the city’ discourses and focus on how different groups have tried to imagine the city in ways that may challenge the dominant economic, political and social hegemony and make a claim to their right to belong in that space. Social theorist Lefebvre ([1967] in Kofman and Lebas 1996) proposed that the ‘urban inhabitant’ may have the potential for social transformation that Marx had previously associated with the industrial class (Madden and Marcuse 2016, 7). Whilst many have lamented that Lefebvre ‘was more provocative than careful in its usage’ (Marcuse 2009,189), the right to the city has come to be accepted as proposing ‘the right to participation and the right to appropriation’ (Purcell 2002,102). The idea has been applied to questions around housing shortage and has been identified in social movements that seek to challenge normative housing distribution and appropriation patterns.
My work does not dwell on the distinctions between social movements, housing movements and mobilisations, nor on the micro and meso level of interactions, or the temporality that may qualify these definitions (Mitlin & Bebbington 2006, Daehnhardt in Kraft and Wilkinson 2020, Snow et al 2004). However, like Reeve (2009) and Vasudevan (2017), I think about squatter movements as close to other types of social movements that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, in the sense that these often operated a ‘fluid, directly participatory structure which was informal’ (Reeve 2009, 5). However, they were also marked as being ‘[o]utside of well-established activist communities’ (Vasudevan 2017, 8) and, like social movements, they were ‘complex social entities with vague and shifting boundaries’ (Rucht in Snow et al 2004, 198). The Bengali squatters involved in my research had differing views and attachments to squatting – some had very little knowledge or understanding of the broader nature of their occupation, meanwhile others were actively involved in recruiting, supporting and dealing with institutional structures in negotiations. The latter is in line with the ‘grass roots’ and ‘loosely federated associations’ that Reeve describes (Reeve 2009, 5). With this in mind and noting the generous application of the term ‘squatter movement’ in a wide range of different contexts (Vasudevan 2017, 10), I refer to Bengali squatters and BHAG as a **squatter movement**, because regardless of the varied levels and regularity of engagement, all the squatters were unified by the direct-action nature of their housing appropriation and found solidarity and comfort in the collective nature of their actions (Reeve, 2009, 5).

Squatter movements are widely studied often with an embedded question of belonging; who has the right to the city? The answer to this question is seen to be at the heart of squatter movements, who by their presence and occupation take up space they are otherwise denied. In the literature on the Global South, squatting has most often taken the form of informal housing, self-built, makeshift accommodation on the edges of cities where there is no other option of residence (Davis 2006). Squatters are usually economically poor and politically marginalised, and their belonging to the city is precarious. Bhan’s (2009) work on the Pushta settlement in Delhi explores the dynamics of the relationship between the state and the city’s squatters. Tracing development over a period of two decades, he explores ‘the larger political, economic and aesthetic transformations’ that were ‘re-configuring the politics of public interest in Indian cities’ (127). These changes, he argues, initiated a radically changed legal attitude towards slum dwellers, moving from an empathetic interest in ‘the welfare of pavement dwellers’, noting their ‘humble but honourable’ status and directed the state to provide alternative accommodation (K. Chandru vs. State of Tamil Nadu 1985, quoted in Bhan 2009, 134-5), to one where slum dwellers became ‘encroachers’ and state protection was likened to rewarding a ‘pickpocket for stealing’ (Almitra Patel vs. the Union of India 2000 quoted in Bhan 2009, 135). Bhan concludes that this shift was only made possible by the ‘erosion of
the claim of the poor to be legitimate urban citizens’ (141), supported by a general discourse that successfully located priority to the aestheticization of the ‘world class city’ where the ‘ideal citizen’ can enjoy the leisure of that space and in doing so, relied on the denigration of the constitutional and legal rights of the so called ‘improper’ citizen (139).

A similar discussion can be found in Holston’s work (2008) in Brazil. This time, however, citizenship is mobilised in a form of ‘subaltern urbanism’ where squatting became a challenge to ‘the entrenched regimes of citizen inequality’ (245) and the hegemonic ascriptions of what it meant to be a citizen. Linking this back to Anderson’s ‘community of value’ and the internal bordering that is enacted with the idea of ‘non-citizen’ and ‘failed citizen’, Holston claims that Sao Paolo’s industrial working classes, pushed to the peripheries of the city by ‘nationalising elites’, have through their physical effort to build and make home, forged themselves a reinvigorated claim to ‘insurgent citizenship’. He concludes that the material organisation of squatted housing, is not just about the appropriation of shelter but ‘in the process of building and defending their residential spaces...[squatters] propose a city with a different order of citizenship’ (Holston 2008, 246).

The urban focus has also been defined at smaller scales; McFarlane (2011) for instance looks at how informal settlements in Mumbai are actually created from the city’s waste: ‘Building materials might be gathered from local construction debris, riverbeds, manufacturing waste or patches of tree cover; the city is both mined and recycled’ (216). He expands further and discusses how ‘a range of mundane materials featured as agents of urban activism’ (ibid), suggesting that the city is not the passive canvas of squatter resistance and urban activism, but an abundant resource; part of the resistance for imagining and materialising a different urban life. McFarlane’s optimism at the possibilities generated in these informal housing settlements and how they can contribute to critiquing the inequities of urban life contrasts to some of the gloomier ‘dystopian narratives’ of the megacity which paint bleak apocalyptic visions of slum dwellers as the hopeless dispossessed (Davis, 2006). They are similar also to Mayne’s (2017) work which admonishes the misrepresentation of ‘complex realities of urban social inequality’ through the ‘deceitful construct’ of the slum (8).

I argue that the ‘urban activism’ noted here, might be better understood as homemaking practices – as waste materials are rescued and redirected to improve the home. This urban activism position has also been criticised for being dangerously close to a romanticisation of slum dwellers. From a postcolonial perspective, Roy (2011) who welcomes ‘subaltern urbanism’ as a ‘correction to the silences of urban historiography and theory... that has repeatedly ignored the urbanism that is the life and livelihood of
much of the world’s humanity’, draws on Spivak’s concern that ‘challenges us to study how the subaltern is constituted as an object of representation and knowledge’ and appeals for a more nuanced theorisation, than either the heroizing or dispossessional narratives provide (229).

Broadening out, in an effort to find lines of connection between squatting in the Global South and in the Global North, Vasudevan (2015a) develops what he calls a ‘global geography of squatting’. Whilst he acknowledges the significant difference between informal housing in the South and notably the smaller scale of squatting in the Global North, he argues ‘[t]he disagreeable materialities of dispossession and displacement are not ... limited to the rapidly expanding cities of the Global South. They also extend to the ever-splintering urbanisms of the Global North’ (341). He explains how, ‘[i]n each case, life for a growing number of city-dwellers has been reduced to a permanent state of emergency characterized by an inadequate supply of basic resources and/or absence of discernible infrastructures and institutions’ (ibid). The city and the urban scale are seen both as a ‘site of endurance and social transformation’ and the actions of squatters are described as resistance to the ‘destruction’ of the neo-liberal city (355).

In his work on the ‘autonomous city’ Vasudevan (2017) offers a series of insightful case studies of European and North American cityscapes changed by squatter struggles. In these he ‘highlights how the actions of squatters, from the spaces they occupied to the terms they used, reimagined the city as a space of necessity and refuge, experimentation and resistance’ (9). The city is centred in all these accounts as a place where squatters imagine an ‘alternative vision’ and substantive weight is given to the ‘autonomous’ nature of these movements where he argues ‘[A]utonomy represented far more...than an expression of dissatisfaction or obstinacy, freedom or rebellion. It offered an opportunity to become a squatter, to explore new identities and different intimacies, to experience and share feelings and to organise and live collectively’ (10, original emphasis). That idea of an ‘autonomous’ framework is consistent across other case studies (Mudu and Chattopadhyay 2017, Steen et al., 2014, Vasudevan 2015b) and describes a kind of radical politics, based on alternative, occupation-based activism: ‘those spaces where people desire to constitute non-capitalist, egalitarian, and solidaristic forms of political, social, and economic organization through a combination of resistance and creation’ (Pickerill and Chatterton 2006, 730).

However, despite devoting a chapter to post-war London, called ‘Who are the squatters? London’s Hidden History,’ Vasudevan offers only three sentences to refer to the Bengali squatters in East London, and in that, only to note the role of the East London Big Flame (ELBF), a group of feminist and leftist squatters, as supporters of Bengali squatters: ‘ELBF members were also linked to the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG) who were installing families in properties on the Stephen and Matilda Estate near Tower Bridge.
in the mid-1970s’ (2017, 56). This, and one additional sentence referring to how Race Today members ‘played an important role in the BHAG’ (ibid 58) are the totality of their mention. Interestingly, in my fieldwork, I never came across anyone who had interaction with the ELBF. However, more importantly, the erasure of the Bengali squatters experience reveals something of the deficiency of the ‘autonomous lens’. In uncovering London’s hidden history, I would argue that Vasudevan with his emphasis on those squatters who were engaged in ‘establish[ing] some form of alternative living’ (ibid 55) and those who were experimenting in ‘counterculture’ (57), fails to recognise the significance of the Bengali squatters’ movement. In fact, his description of the ELBF ‘installing’ Bengali families in squats betrays a view of Bengali squatters as entirely passive in their squatting experience.

The politics of squatting

This distinction in the literature has had insidious consequences in how housing deprived migrant squatters are understood. Jazeel (2019) insists on ‘working against blithe generalisations’ (20) and in this vein, I would argue that Vasudevan’s erasure arguably rests upon a problematic distinction that is often made in the literature on squatting: the idea that there is a qualitative and vital difference between immediate necessity – ‘deprivation-based squatters’, people who are motivated by housing need, and ‘political squatters’ who act with some ideological agenda that they seek to advance (Pruijt 2013, Cattaneo and Martinez 2014, Ward 2002). Pruijt (2013) suggests that the second category of squatter has an overtly political mission that is directed to undermining and de-stabilising the state. Returning to the dominant autonomous framework that guides this understanding, it is described as a ‘progressive politics’, ‘that experiments in non-hierarchical organization and consensus-based decision making’ and crucially, attends to the idea of ‘doing it yourself’ (McKay 1998); specifically, autonomous geographies are those that maintain ‘critical distance from the state’. Deprivation-based squatters on the other hand, are said to be less concerned with achieving structural change and more immediately motivated to resolve their self-interested housing need, and critically, they often engage with the state to achieve some form of housing settlement (Bouillon in Mudu & Chattopadhyay, 2017). The distinction purports to mark the difference between, for instance, the ELBF and BHAG and is why perhaps Vasudevan cannot register the significance of Bengali squatters.

However, Milligan (2016) persuasively presents the argument that ‘politics is best understood as a confrontation between opposing forces’ (16) and goes on to argue that ‘the act of choosing to re-house oneself actively rather than passively waiting for council housing to be assigned is political’ (19). Bouillon (Bouillon in Mudu & Chattopadhyay, 2017) also argues that this configuration is ‘far too restrictive’ and
that ‘squats used for housing purposes, which are mainly inhabited by migrants in France, pose a number of essential political questions to the societies in which they are located’ (67). In her work on French cities and North African and sub-Saharan African migrants, she argues powerfully that the experience of these migrants as they shift around in poor accommodation, is linked directly to ‘public housing policies and migration policies’ (71). She goes on to argue that the act of appropriating housing, the direct action undertaken to requisition a property that one is otherwise denied is fundamentally a ‘way of proclaiming one’s very existence directly, physically and materially in order to become visible and gain a hearing, i.e., to take part in the life of the city’ (72). The city remains an important scale here, but the housing of deprived squatters is registered as political because theirs is a clash not just with the immediate housing deprivation they confronted but with their wider position within French society, as unwelcome migrants.

This intersection between squatting and migration is meticulously examined by Mudu and Chattopadhyay (2017). They argue that investigating migrant squatter activity involves exploration of how migrants have resisted powerful discourses that render them ‘powerless victims’ or ‘dangerous security threats’ and impose upon them a fundamental subordination (2):

The intersection of migrants, radical struggles and squatting reveal an incredible set of multiscalar mechanisms that call into question the manufactured consensus of “who belongs where” as well as the prevailing configuration of housing and cultural rights. Questioning belonging mechanisms aims at building explicit politics of scale to contest and reconfigure the particular differentiations and hierarchies that shape citizenship and prevent the intersection of migrants and squatters’ (9).

Their point echoes ideas that connect housing deprivation and inequality to wider political experiences of exclusion and un/belonging, framing squatting as critical opposition to those inflictions. In one example, Nur and Sethman (in Mudu and Chattopadhyay, 2017) see migrant squatters in Rome’s Right to Inhabit movement ‘as a concrete expression of the struggle for the right to the city’ (78). They conclude that migrants who have been hardest hit by the housing emergency of the 1990s, became involved in the movement not simply as a way of resolving their housing precarity, but ‘also to access a citizenship that was denied to them in the national political space’ (83). Nur and Sethman are clear that the practice of squatting represents resistance to that dominant state discourse that seeks to deny them even the fundamental right ‘to be present’ (90). These later discussions nourish my own approach. I find it unhelpful that Vasudevan’s chapter on London’s ‘hidden history’ omits any serious reference to Bengali squatters and is thereby complicit with discourses that deprive racialised communities of their voice and political significance.
It is also important to note that the omission highlighted here is also detectable in some of the grassroots community’s efforts at recording its social and political history in the East End. Eversley and Ullah (2010), for instance, researched and published a Heritage lottery funded community publication in which a chapter titled ‘A roof over their heads’ skips from the multiple-occupancy shared housing of single migrant men in the lascar and post-war period to the creation of community-based housing associations in the 1980s thus completely omitting the squatter period. This is difficult to explain. Perhaps like Vasudevan, the authors did not recognise the significance of the squatter movement. It is also important to consider the possibility that there was some sense of shorom or shame about Bengali migrant’s squatting, relating to the dialectical quality of being a Londoni and possessing that ‘eulogised’ status whilst simultaneously experiencing a level of housing deprivation that could not be spoken of back home (Gardner 1993, 9). Being a squatter, living in distinctly poor housing would have been one of the notable ‘contradictions’ (ibid 2) Londonis experienced. Although it was not a common response in my research, there were occasions when I asked people about squatting they would hastily close the conversation. It was apparent that they did not want to discuss what they may have experienced as a painful and even shameful level of housing deprivation. Whatever the reason for Eversley and Ullah’s omission, the outcome remains the same in terms of a distinct absence of Bengali squatters from the academic and popular record.

Drawing on the postcolonial and feminist invitation to reflect on academic conceptualisations critically, I argue that the way the literature on squatting uses the term ‘political’, needs to be challenged (hooks 1992, 45, Jazeel 2019, 178) and that if politics at its most basic is the conversation about the distribution of power and social resources, then squatting, whether motivated by immediate need or overtly ideological autonomous politics, is inherently political. I reject the ‘hegemonic conventions’ of interpretation exhibited here (Tolia-Kelly 2004b, 676), and my research approach recognises that all those who squat, in the Global South and Global North, in self-built accommodation or existing property, pragmatically or ideologically driven, are engaging in a form of politics that raises fundamental questions about property and power, and ultimately, who belongs. Bengali migrant squatters taking homes for themselves in 1970s east London is political. Yet, as I outline in the next section, it was also, in many cases, an intimate act of making a home for themselves and their families. Moreover, I argue that these processes are not mutually exclusive.

**Squatter homes**

Whilst the focus in the bulk of the literature has been on squatting and the urban interface, I suggest a pivot on the perspectives outlined. Drawing on insights from work on critical homemaking, I argue for a
closer exploration of the experience of the actual squatted home and suggest we observe a different set of dynamics and priorities from this perspective. For the reasons that Bengali squatters have ostensibly been marginalised in these other accounts of London’s squatter history – that they were motivated by housing deprivation – is precisely what makes the direct action taken to claim it so important. The preoccupation with politics as manifested in autonomous movements and the attention to right to the city risks missing the point that this was a migrant community claiming home, at a time when as a racialised community, they were denied it by both the state and street racism they confronted. This approach does not exclude the urban - the urban scale is essential, particularly as I have already noted that understandings of ‘private’ home and ‘public’ urban space are culturally mobile. However, I argue that for Bengali migrant squatters, their squatter activism and interaction with the wider neighbourhood did not necessarily coincide with ‘right to the city’ discourses, and indeed I argue, those interactions may be better understood as a culturally and gendered iteration of homemaking.

There is, however, a scarcity of work that offers a lens into the squatted home. Datta’s (2012) case study of Lakshmipuri camp in Delhi analyses the way the squatted home is the conduit for a number of distinct and interrelated systems of power and argues that the squatted home has been ‘brutally pathologized’, and that its legal precarity means it ‘has often been forced open with its contents laid bare for scrutiny by the state and its agents’ (161). Datta observes a connection between the ‘violence of law’ which inflicts deep anxiety about uncertain removal or resettlement that might be imposed at any time, and levels of domestic violence that are inflicted on the female, gendered body in the squatted home. The patriarchal violence is understood by the women themselves as a ‘legitimate form of domesticity’, as a perverse retaliation against the state which makes an effort to inscribe ‘gender equalizing’ policies on an otherwise neglected community (164-5).

Datta brings the research gaze to the scale of the actual physical dwelling and in doing so begins to analyse how wider power relations – in particular, the reach of the state – impact on the relationships that navigate that space. In her work on Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, Sanyal (2011) investigates the materiality of the squatted space, revealing the ‘clandestine building operation which takes on very unique gendered forms’, and the use of everyday objects like tins cans flattened out to sheets that are used to build surreptitious structures so that ‘from the outside, all that could be seen was the tent, yet on the inside there was a solid structure being constructed’ (883). In building these illegitimate structures, out of sight of the authorities, she concludes that Palestinians were engaging in act of: ‘...escaping the penetrating, colonizing gaze of the Lebanese state. Thus, the Palestinians engaged in an equally
paradoxical making and unmaking of self and space, by camouflaging their resistance and rescripting their identity in response to state power’ (ibid). The analytic gaze in both examples reveals something about the micro-politics of the squatted space and how the state impinges both on the human and material interactions of the squat. It also relates back to the interactions occurring in the liminal threshold spaces as they engage the inside/outside of the home. By looking at the squatted domestic space, we are not averting our eyes from the ‘big’ politics about how squatters related to and were impacted by the state. Nonetheless, we can trace its contours in a more intimate and meaningful way. This relates back to my earlier point that in many ways Bengali migrant women have been erased from the accounts of squatting because the significance of their role in the internal and relational spaces of the squat, as explored here, have previously been deemed unimportant. This resonates with hooks’ criticism of the ‘devaluation of the role of black women...in constructing for us homeplaces that are the site for resistance’ (1992, 45).

An example of engagement with a migrant squatted home comes in Giorgi and Fasulo's study (2013) which suggests that interaction between the material squat and the affective dimension of migrant home making are crucial. Following the female members of one Moroccan family in Rome, they relate how the search for furnishings and the transformation of a disused space become part of an ‘identity project’ for the inhabitants (129). In particular, they suggest that home is not necessarily ‘a permanent and stable achievement; rather, it is a work in progress that accompanies changes and different versions of identity through time’ (ibid). Apart from acknowledging the processual and temporal nature of migrant homemaking, the importance of their contribution is that they identify the interaction between the squatted home as a collaborative project and that sense of ‘powerful togetherness’ (125) that is nurtured by collective endeavour. This is achieved alongside the deeply ‘syncretic cultural processes’ through which the home is furnished and styled to maintain and reproduce ‘cultural assets’. The squatted home becomes both an assertion of belonging in the new environment as well as space that can reaffirm ‘cultural belonging’ (129).

In other work on the squatted home in 1970s London, the home focus has been less on the external penetration by the state and more on the possibilities offered by the squatted accommodation. Cook (2013) uses interviews to reflect on a gay squat in 1970s Brixton and engages with the ‘everyday life’ of the squat. One of his interviewees recalls: ‘we’d do things like paint the ceilings, talk, make endless cups of tea, put graffiti on the walls – which was good. It was actually part of the breaking from old ideas’ (91). Here there is reference to how garden fences were demolished and replaced by one enlarged communal garden, but also disappointment because the small, terraced-house squats developed ‘insufficient
challenge to normalized domestic arrangements’ (92). Wall (2017) similarly offers a close analysis of ‘sisterhood and squatting’ in 1970s Hackney and attends to how the material space of the squats, was integral to the alternative living arrangements they experimented with. In this she talks about how the experience of squatting enabled women to develop building and electrical wiring skills and create shared spaces in gardens by removing fencing panels.

*Bengali squatters*

Of the few sources that evidence that Bengali migrants were part of this squatter landscape, Charlie Forman’s (1989) contribution is one of the most sensitive and insightful. Forman was a Housing Rights worker who arrived in Tower Hamlets in the early 1980s and worked with the Spitalfields Housing and Planning Rights Service (SHAPRS) for over a decade. He offers a lucid account of the housing hardships experienced by the community, talking about the ‘rampant rats’, cockroaches and shocking levels of overcrowding that he says, were not dissimilar to the slum tenements described in Charles Booth’s, *Life and Labour of the London Poor* written in the 1890s (56). He also gives an overview of the events that led to the creation of BHAG in 1976 and, notably, refers to the way housing rules operated to deprive Bengali families of fair chance to access council housing, stating, ‘[t]he Bingo Ballot was a way of giving white working-class families who weren’t in the slums, an equal chance of housing. This meant that Bengalis living in desperate, overcrowded conditions were being told this gave them no priority for council housing. So they had to take it for themselves’ (80-81). Forman also acknowledges the active role Bengali people played in the squatter movement: ‘Now for the first time, the British state was being asked to pay back some of what it had taken from these people – through 20 years of taxation and before that through 200 years of imperial presence in Bengal. It did not do so willingly’ (36). In this way, Forman is distinct in his analysis by both recognising the agency of Bengali migrant squatters and in tracing the active residues of colonialism in the housing struggle.

Glynn’s (2014) work draws on Forman’s descriptions and addresses housing as one of the issues faced by the Bengali community in the ‘political history’ of their relationship with the East End. She notes the inbuilt discrimination in how the housing allocation system worked and how on the ground, housing officers sympathized with white families who felt that they ‘had the right to keep their estates white’, and that this legitimated popular, community reaction on the ground as Bengali families experienced hostile ‘reception committee[s] of racist neighbours’ (121). Glynn attends to the role of *Race Today* in considerable detail and it is indisputable that her research reveals a great deal about the broader housing
deprivation experienced as well as the events that led to the creation of and eventually the dissolution of BHAG, more so than any other account of the period.

However, as stated previously, not only does her work insist on a Marxist, class analysis that has questionable fit to the experiences of her participants, her work also diminishes the role of Bengali squatters and instead centres the role of Terry Fitzpatrick a white squatter activist, along with Farrukh Dhondy and Mala Sen who were both Race Today activists. She is also highly sceptical about the impact of Race Today’s political agenda on ordinary Bengali squatters. She argues that involvement for Bengali squatters was based on the ‘pragmatic’ benefit they could secure, rather than an ‘ideological’ alliance of views (120). She interviews Helal Abbas, the participant who featured at the beginning of this chapter, but his is the only voice that speaks from the hundreds of families of Bengali squatters that are spoken about in their absence. Ultimately, this is problematic as it comes back to my concern about voice and representation; the ‘struggle of memory’, the idea that it is not simply the struggle that is important, but the struggle to remember it, that can be just as elusive (hooks 1992). Though a major contribution in recording the events of the Bengali squatters’ movement, Glynn’s work on squatting is undermined by the absence of Bengali voices – both men and women. Furthermore, her preoccupation with ‘big’ class-based politics is similar to Vasudevan’s attention to squatters who practice the autonomous politics which he regards as most significant. These observed limitations align with my postcolonial approach; highlighting the need to recognise the colonially inspired racialisation that was active in the struggle for housing, the concern for nuanced representation, and finally, the interrogation of conceptual frameworks that universalise or obscure experiences from marginalised perspectives.

Centring the migrant squatted home is not a retreat from urban space or critically engaging the wider political context that deprives squatters of housing. Instead, the suggestion is that the examples described above demonstrate how a postcolonial approach requires not just an engagement with mapping the lines of connection between ‘here’ and ‘there,’ but also comes back to question the conceptual apparatus employed in the analysis. I suggest that attention to the squatted home as a starting point is a valuable way to explore how squatting can be rooted in homemaking rather than city-making. This need not be an admission of political insignificance. My work contributes an intimate and personal exploration of the Bengali squatters’ movement from the migrants’ perspective. Their contributions highlight how the conditions of housing deprivation and the context of a hostile city impacted their squatting choices and outcomes. In so doing, they suggest that the urban, autonomous focus can be deficient in gauging the full nuances of a migrant squatter community.
2.5 Conclusion:

At the beginning of this chapter, Helal Abbas spoke about his sense of being entitled to a home in 1970s East London. He recognised his family and the Bengali community’s longer colonial and labour connection to East London and derived in it a sense of entitlement to stay and make home. His father, a long-time transnational migrant and his mother both retired back home to Sylhet before the end of the decade. Helal described his mother’s inability to cope with having left most of her children who did not qualify as ‘dependants’, as the primary reason for her return. The racialised immigration system split their family and the postcolonial context of 1970s state and street racism was also active in depriving him of adequate housing. In securing a squat he and his older brother created a safe space for themselves. As a teenager, Helal went on to become Secretary of BHAG, supporting hundreds of Bengali families who had likewise taken what the local council and GLC were unwilling to provide. These squatter families negotiated their position and articulated a right to home that navigated both this more extended history and what they claimed as their rightful place in East London.

Exploring the Bengali squatters’ movement from the 1970s provides an important opportunity to consider how an integrative approach to postcolonial and transnational approaches to migration, migrant homemaking and squatting, may usefully interact to tell us more about homemaking in racially hostile conditions. I argue that the experience and significance of Bengali squatters are brought into a clearer view by finding the lines of interaction and moments of tension between these bodies of scholarship. My own research and thinking are indebted to the substantial inheritance these bodies of work offer and the invitation to push the margins even further. The methodology and empirical chapters that follow aim to continue the conversation with this literature and consider how my research practice and empirical work supports, develops, and, at times, challenges these bodies of work.
Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

‘It was our generation’s job to fight the struggle, it is your generation’s job to make sure the history stays.’ Luqman Uddin

These words, spoken by Luqman Uddin, is representative of a sentiment that was repeated in many interviews: that there was an episode of Bengali community history that had been long been marginalized and deserved rescuing and recording before it was too late. As stated in Chapter 1, I came to conduct this PhD as something of a personal journey. I wanted to find out more about my family’s history and specifically my parents’ migration stories. It was in the partial references, oblique glimpses and absences that I encountered, that the seeds were sown for a doctoral journey that I had previously never considered.

My earlier research had snatched little intimations about Bengali squatters in a collection about 1970s squatter history (Wates & Wolmer 1980) and through acclaimed photographs by David Hoffman7. Hoffman himself was a squatter in 1970s East London and his album about squatting has been exhibited both in London and internationally. Photographs with unnamed Bengali children, seen playing in the streets outside Fieldgate Mansions have brought acclaim and fame to the white, male photographer, yet the stories of the Bengali figures captured in those images, remain hidden. The Bengali migrant squatters are only peripherally visible, they are the ‘exotic Other’ that offer curiosity and intrigue to his collection of images, which otherwise show white squatters inside and outside of their homes, engaged in friendly interaction, sometimes posing, other times relaxed, living their lives (see Figure 3.1). I contacted him as part of my doctoral research and he was very generous with his photographs and gave permission to use them in my work. At the same time, he apologised profusely because although the white squatters were his friends and fellow squatters whom he could talk about at length, he had not taken details of the Bengali people featured and was unable to provide any information about them.

7 A selection of photographs can be viewed here: https://www.hoffmanphotos.com/-/galleries/portfolios/fieldgate-mansions
I came to ask lots of questions, to enquire why is it that some stories are told and listened to? Why are some accounts of historical movements at once so equivocal in detail, and censorious of others? And more fundamentally, how does the erasure of certain historical geographies actively contribute to the construction of geographies of exclusion and marginalisation, now? In posing these questions, I was mindful of the point raised in the previous chapter, made by bell hooks (1992): 'our struggle is [also] a struggle of memory against forgetting', where she distinguishes remembering as ‘nostalgia’, to a ‘remembering that serves to illuminate and transform the present’ (147). It is the partial presence represented in Hoffman’s squatter album and the other forms of popular and archival record (see below), that my research seeks to challenge. The squatter histories that I came across in my initial research either completely omitted or superficially glossed over the Bengali squatters (Vasudevan 2017). I argue that ‘by focusing on a particular profile of white squatter activist, the historical texts present a misleading and distorted view’ of the housing struggles of this period and Bengali migrants’ role in resisting racialised exclusion in 1970s London (Kadir 2014, 32). Bengali migrant squatters were there, but thus far they have been represented as exotic accessories to romanticised images of white squatters; not as active agents, producers of space, or the homemakers that they were.

My commitment to ‘world picturing’ outside the narratives of the dominant, ethnocentric and masculinist academy, requires commensurate attention to the kinds of methods that might help advance postcolonial research (Sidaway 2000, 606). Jazeel (2019) stretches the debate around postcolonialism to argue that
‘postcolonial geography should be conceived as methodology’ (3). He suggests that postcolonialism is not intellectual theory but a ‘cluster of methodological resources for thinking against the grain of colonial power’s lingering and subjugating effects’, and in doing so he prioritises practice over theoretical introspection (16). In my fieldwork, I attempted to integrate three key commitments as methodological reference points for my work.

Firstly, and connected to the partial and diminutive archive that I found when beginning my research, I was concerned with the representation of marginalised communities. Jazeel (2019) argues that one of the fundamental characteristics of postcolonial research must be to reveal how hegemonic colonial systems of knowledge production have represented or ‘spoken for’ the Other and created ‘accepted historical narratives’ that service power (18). He goes on to mandate ‘responsibility’ as a necessary outcome of this counsel; this is the requirement to be ‘accountable’ and ‘answerable’ for our knowledge production, but which he declines to proscribe, based on the very rejection of universalising knowledge production, that the position urges (see also Madge et al., 2009). Drawing on Derrida (1995) he argues that ‘responsibility’s texture and content must always be situated, emergent and contingent’ (200), a position reflected in the way he consciously situates himself and his family history, as an entangled part of his own professional work. Likewise, I consciously place myself (sometimes uncomfortably), within the framework of my research, attentive to the ways that I operate a liminal position that inflects upon the outcomes of representation and responsibility.

Secondly, Raghuram and Madge (2006, 271), demand ‘attention to a diversity of perspectives and priorities’ as part of postcolonial research method, and warn against universalising the subaltern experience, recognising instead the ‘range of subject positions’ (272). This involves effort to resist the temptation to re-skew the balance with simplistic counter narratives. Taking on board Sanyal’s (2017) call to ‘dehomogenise’ the subaltern voice, and Tolia-Kelly’s (2014a) suspicion of “monolithic notions of ‘Asianness’” (317), I try to listen carefully and ‘humanise’ Bengali migrants in a way that existing monochromatic records persist in otherwise doing, exploring in particular gender and generation as two emergent intersections of experience (303). I note the complementary relationship with feminist methodologies here and take nourishment from the call to allow women to ‘speak for themselves’ and thereby disrupt official and previous academic accounts (Anderson et al., 1987, 104). I am also comforted by the invitation to take ‘particularity seriously’ (Jazeel 2019, 19) and resist the academic incentive to provide tidy or comparable narratives that may sit neatly with the way the academy has traditionally desired to know the Other.
Finally, as postcolonial methodological practice, I borrow from the *decolonizing* influence and think also about ‘sharing of knowledge’ with the community of research (Smith 2012, 16); I take this as a serious contract in the relationship between researcher and researched, particularly given research has so often been experienced by marginalised communities as an ‘extractive’ experience and was a sentiment expressed by many of my participants, personally (Back and Sinha 2018, 174). Luqman Uddin, cited above, was clear that his generation had fought the fight, and that now, it was my generation’s responsibility to make sure ‘the history stays’. In this context I accepted a mandate that went well beyond the superficial sharing of ‘surface information’ (ibid) and welcomed the need to think clearly about how research interacts with, and contributes to, the way that we know and understand the world. I was clear from the beginning that this could not be a tokenistic gesture, added at the end of fieldwork and I discuss later how that challenge to correspond with the research community and share knowledge with them in a way that was culturally meaningful and accessible, was pursued.

My research approach therefore takes direction from the productive tension that sits in the relationship between postcolonial, feminist and decolonial strands of geographic practice. I attempt to work through the fruitful challenge offered by the discomfort of emphases (Jazeel 2019, 198) and take forward the idea that geographic research should contribute to the urgent challenge of ‘imagining postcolonial futures’ (ibid 21).

### 3.2 Fieldwork

*Sites of initial research*

I began fieldwork by contacting day care centres in Tower Hamlets so that I could circulate within the local older Bengali community. The first place I managed to gain access to was Sonali Gardens, a local council funded day care Centre in Shadwell, to which centre users were referred. The actual building was also used by other older people’s service providers, but I was located within the Bengali users group, which was also exclusively staffed by Bengali staff. Most users were picked up by a council vehicle and spent a half, or full day here, where they were offered tea and refreshments and if there for the whole day, also given a hot lunch. The space was clearly demarcated by gender, and men and women sat in separate, but identically arranged, rooms. There were on most days between 15-25 people in each room and the seating plan meant that everyone sat around the edge of the room, in comfy chairs, conversing with their near neighbours, or sometimes involved in bigger, group conversations. In the men’s room, there was generally less conversation and the giant TV screen on the wall was often the mainstay of attention, with the
channel always switched to a Bengali community news channel. There were also two smaller prayer rooms which all users would attend for their ritual prayers. I was introduced to the centre’s manager through a personal contact, and for my first few visits, he accompanied me to the rooms and made sure myself and the research project were introduced to staff and users. After these first ‘induction’ style visits, I was permitted to just sign in and sit in whichever space I chose.

Even with permission to locate myself anywhere in these rooms, after my first couple of visits to the men’s room, I became conscious that I was disrupting the highly gendered ‘rules’ of the centre and I therefore adjusted to a routine where I would ‘drop by’, offer general greetings, ask if anyone wanted a specific chat (an offer that was only ever taken up once), before then moving to sit in the women’s room. The women, aged between 60-80, were boisterous and friendly and because I was something out of the ordinary routine, I was always warmly welcomed. Every visit would start with a round of the same questions, about my village address in Bangladesh, my marital status, the number of children I had and sometimes, whether I could cook Bengali food. My gender and my ‘fulfilment’ of cultural traditions clearly impacted on access to spaces of research and the conversations people were or were not prepared to have with me.

The second space I gained access to was Toynbee Hall. Only a few miles from Sonali Gardens, Toynbee Hall was an entirely different community space: this was a charity-based community centre which had long established roots in the local area, originating as a university settlement. The users here, though of a similar age profile, were generally more physically and mentally robust, and were users by choice, rather than through referral. The community centre was an open space, with kitchen facilities, tables and chairs available all through the day and staffed by usually at least two workers. In addition to the opportunity to drop in and chat, there was a weekly timetable of sessions ranging from Bingo to chair exercise classes, reading groups and film clubs. Though aimed at the whole community, Toynbee Hall was most successful in recruiting older people in their 60s-80s and the ethnicity of users here was much more mixed than Sonali Gardens. There were Bengali users and, whilst the women would usually arrive in pairs, with another Bengali speaking friend, there were also couples and individual men who used the space and who mixed with users from different ethnic backgrounds.

I spent a day a week in each location over a period of 6 months. My connections to both sites were enormously instructive as they became spaces where I could initiate and listen in on ‘reminiscence’ style conversations. These informal conversations helped to direct my research questions away from my original focus on exploring squatting as part of social movements and to think more closely about home and homemaking. Although my research practice fell short of formal social reminiscence methods (Cohen
I treated the centres and the conversations engaged in them as ‘aperitif’ research spaces, which helped me to achieve a broader spatial and temporal contextualisation of the local communities. I refrained from taking notes, for fear of disrupting the space and flow and instead would spend a good deal of time making detailed notes and reflecting upon the interactions and conversations, after leaving. Many of the people I talked to had been residents of Tower Hamlets for several decades and their interest in my research, the rapport I managed to build with them by becoming a regular visitor to their spaces, meant that I was able to gather a broader sense of how people looked back on and talked about the 1970s, in a group setting. This was particularly helpful given that oral history interviews that I had begun to conduct were obviously ‘dyadic’ (Ward 2012, 140), and highly personalised.

The community spaces therefore served as a useful complement to the individualised nature of the oral history interviews but more broadly, they were also useful spaces for conversation and reflection on my developing research questions. Back and Sinha (2018) in their reflection on methodological practice, talked about engaging participants in evaluating and reflecting on their research imperatives; the conversations in these community spaces, though far looser than theirs, helped to similarly refine the ‘analytical terms of reference’ and to shift over to what emerged as important to the community (178).

At the same time as these interactive and very sociable visits, I also began to undertake the lonelier but also important, archival research, which I detail in this next section.

**Archives**

I used several different archival sources including the Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives (THLHLA) the London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), the George Padmore Institute (GPI) and the British Film Archives (BFI). The main source of material was THLHLA where the evidence was mostly council housing committee minutes and local and national newspaper cuttings. THLHLA had already collated a small folder of items which related to the Bengali squatter movement, so there was some existing curation of the period and events. There were about 20 items in this folder; mainly newspaper cuttings which covered the racist violence suffered by Bengali migrants, using headlines like ‘London’s battered Bengalis’ and ‘Bengalis living in Terror’. However, I sought to go beyond this small collection to locate the institutional discussions that were had around the squatters, looking at how the local council housing department in its various incantations, viewed and handled the housing crisis. I also followed a similar set of documents related to the Greater London Council (GLC) at the London Metropolitan Archives. Given I was interested in exploring the squatter experience from the perspective of the Bengali squatters
themselves, it was clear from the outset that their voices were not going to be found in these official sources but they were useful for considering questions around representation.

I was also able to access the Race Today archives at the George Padmore Institute, which while recording the events purportedly from the vantage and interests of the squatters, was exclusively authored by the academics and activists who did not squat with the Bengali community. The Race Today Collective was a black radical activist group which came to sympathise with, and actively support, the Bengali squatters, and was critical in bringing together individuals and disparate tenants groups under the umbrella of the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG), in spring 1976. In addition to the organisational and legal support offered, the Race Today Collective, composed of the writings of Darcus Howe, Leila Hassan, Farrukh Dhondy and Mala Sen, published a series of magazine style periodicals that sought to provide intellectual support to the wider Black Power struggle (See Figure 3.2). Between 1974 and 1978, the Bengali squatters’ movement featured as a central Race Today struggle and was featured in almost every issue.

Figure 3.2 Race Today Journal cover with the slogan ‘We will not leave this country’ (1976, JOU/1/184)
Another archival source that I unexpectedly came across, and which became a turning point for my inquiry, was at the British Film Institute. The first was a documentary series made in 1980 by a local producer and director Simon Heaven, who had worked at the Montefiore Centre just off Brick Lane in the late 1970s through to the early 1980s. The three short films comprising the series called ‘Home from Home’ focused on the settlement of the Bangladeshi community and explored themes around work, housing and ‘culture’. Heaven worked closely with the local community during this period and the films present a visually engaging and generally sympathetic view of the struggles of the Bengali community. He spoke to several Bengali male migrants during the episode called ‘A safe place to be’ and gathered their views about the housing deprivation experienced. There was a second documentary called Credo an LWT religious affairs series which had an episode filmed in 1978 and which featured the settlement of the Bengali migrant community in East London. The third film resource at the BFI, was a fictionalised TV series called ‘King of the Ghetto’, written by Farrukh Dhondy from Race Today and loosely based around the Bengali squatter events. This series centred a white character called Matthew as the key protagonist in the events. The programme was aired in 1986 on a late night BBC2 slot and was one of Dhondy’s notable steps in his rise to industry fame. All these film archives were useful in capturing the ‘emergent politics’ of multiculturalism and its representation, in London’s East End (Malik 2009, 232).

Although the documentary and TV series sources of archival material were generally sympathetic in the tone and narrative that was presented, the stories were mostly articulated by non-Bengali, non-squatting, activists. Even in Heaven’s documentaries that do feature some Bengali interviewees, what emerged quite powerfully were the absences and silences (DeSilvey 2007, Hodder 2017). Even more so, where Bengali migrant stories were covered or documented, there were virtually no Bengali women’s voices. This was despite the arrival of women and children being well known as the turning point in the housing crisis that ensued; this is a point I return to below.

Oral history interviews:

Many researchers on home have used some form of in-depth biographical interview to explore how people understand and materialise home (Blunt 2011, Blunt and Bonnerjee 2013, Fenster 2013, Ghosh 2014, Lahiri 2011, Nowicka 2007, Tolia-Kelly 2004a & 2014b). One particularly notable example of biographical interviews can be found in Giorgi and Fasulo’s (2013) work where they followed a Moroccan migrant squatter family in Rome. Using interviews, supplemented with in-situ conversations, and employing self-ethnographic techniques of participant video and photos to explore the experience of that family’s homemaking effort, they gave their participants significant control over the material that was
collected. Unlike researchers who have fruitfully conducted research in-situ and used relevant home artefacts to support and navigate those conversations (urban gardens: Hondagneu-Sotelo 2017a & 2017b, communal buildings Cancellieri 2017, squatted home Giorgi and Fasulo 2013, high rise building Ghosh 2014, material surroundings: Boccagni 2014, Burrell 2014, Lopez 2010, Salih 2001, visual and material focus: Tolia-Kelly 2004a and 2004b), I was researching a squatter community from 45 years ago, and so I took the sentiment of these approaches, that hinged on participant-led direction, as the lesson to be carried forward into my own work.

I decided to use oral history interviews as the method most suited to putting participants centre-stage, as narrators of a largely self-directed conversation. Oral history interviews first and foremost chime with the effort to recover hidden histories and to think clearly about representation as a postcolonial commitment. They provided opportunities to hear the story, from the view of ordinary Bengali migrants who occupied the squats. The interviews opened spaces for participants, some of whom had never spoken about these experiences, not just to speak but also to be listened to on their own terms, acknowledging that participants are ‘knowledgeable about their own lives’ (Back and Sinha 2012, 175, see also Jazeel 2019). This was certainly advantageous and critical to the final shape of the research as participants talked less about squatting as social movement – originally a major consideration – and much more about the domestic, the neighbourhood and transnational home which then became the foci of my work. Secondly, recording and an agreement to deposit the oral histories with Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, was one of the few ways to preserve them for future research and reference, and to disrupt the existing archival material and representation, with material that tells these ‘Other’ stories.

In preparation for fieldwork, I undertook training with the ‘Oral History Society’. Part of the training involved submitting a ‘problematic’ extract ahead of the event and being prepared to talk it through with colleagues during the session. I had few examples to choose from at the time and submitted an extract from the very first interview I had done. I was aware of numerous flaws, mainly in the sound quality and that my participant actively defamed lots of well-known figures, and I was concerned about the legal ramifications of archiving such material. However, the trainer ignored what I had assumed were the problems and seized on the fact that the participant at one point briefly mentioned my father. He was interested to know, why the participant knew anything about me and when I explained that I had introduced myself and my interest in the research by telling him briefly about my family, he responded categorically, ‘without wishing to be rude, no one is interested in you,’ (Fieldnotes 18.09.2019). We exchanged views on this, I felt that I owed my participant something of myself before I could engage in
asking deeply personal and private questions, he claimed that such an introduction would ‘influence’ the interviewee and ‘colour the account given’. Instead, he suggested to all of us trainees to avoid personal introductions and to ‘try to treat the interview as a blank piece of paper on to which the participant is writing their story’ (ibid). On reading more, I recognised that his perspective was indeed shared by other historians. Ni Laoire (2000) for example talks about sharing something of the experience of return migration to Ireland with her participants, but decided against offering this information, for fear of ‘attempting to over-identify with participants’ and wanting to retain a ‘safe space’ for people to articulate their heterogenous experiences in her interviews (375–376).

However, there is a strong tradition within feminist and postcolonial research that rejects the underlying rationale in this view; that denies that there is some objective ‘truth’, waiting to be unmasked, or that oral history is a ‘heroic process of reclaiming ‘the voice of the past’” (Smith and Jackson 1999, 368). Instead, there is the argument, that aligned with my own approach, that all interviews are ‘co-produced’ by the participant and researcher. Harvey (2015) describes this as a dialogic approach, one that recognises interviewee and researcher as ‘both active participants, cocreating meaning through each utterance in the immediate conversation’ (30). Some of this stems from a feminist objection to ‘masculinist rationality’ (Rose 1993, 6) and draws on this heritage, to reject the assumption that ‘a knower ... can separate himself from his body, emotions, values, past and so on’ (ibid 7). Indeed, Portelli (1998) describes oral history interviews as a ‘shared project’ (70 emphasis added) speaking in complex ways, to Spivak’s (1988) question about the voice of the subaltern and the role of the researcher.

Spivak did indeed challenge academia to [re]present the subaltern voice and cautioned against the infiltration of researcher voice in that so-called ‘recovery’. However, it would be foolish to imagine that one can simply erase oneself from the interview, and therefore, as Portelli (1998) says, it is desirable that we actively acknowledge and visibilise ourselves in the roles we play in the oral history process. My research was guided by this idea, that it is impossible to simply ‘collect[ing] people’s lives’, and that the process of ‘telling’ in an interview, whether intentional or not, is a shared endeavour (Harvey & Riley 2009, 2). Without doubt, my story was entangled in this research right from the outset, and the idea that simply by not disclosing that experience to participants, I would be able to avoid those experiences influencing the research, was both unrealistic and, more importantly, undesirable.

Geographers Harvey and Riley (2007) relate the idea of manufacturing so called distance and impartiality, to the wider debate about ‘reliability’ in oral history. In line with my trainer’s exhortation to manufacture a space like a ‘blank piece of paper’, there were and are some historians that have sought to document
individual accounts and eliminate bias, errors and ‘fabrication of memory and impact of retrospection’ and to check ‘the consistency of sources’ in their oral history interviews (Harvey & Riley 2007, 2). However, for my purpose, the investigation of individual experiences of home and homemaking stretched across broad scales that ranged from the domestic to the transnational and temporally across some 45 years, it was precisely this retrospection and reflection that I was interested to explore. It is for these reasons: the interest in ‘[p]lace memory and place identity’, (ibid 3) that geographers have increasingly used oral history as a method. Andrews et al., (2006) suggest that oral history methods ‘clearly demonstrate unique insights into the history of places. Indeed, what these narratives provide is recollection about self, about relationships with others and a place, insights rarely provided in such depth by other methods’ (170).

3.3 Recruitment of participants:

I interviewed 39 people in total, gathering conversations with a diverse range of participants, male and female, younger and older, all of whom are permanently based in the UK (see Appendix 1). Most fieldwork was brought to an abrupt end with national lockdown measures associated with the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic in March 2020. However, I did continue to speak to participants with whom I had already built up relationships, during this time, and I also conducted a further four interviews, once lock down restrictions had eased a little in July/August 2020.

I was very fortunate in my research endeavours as, just as I was starting my doctoral research, a National Lottery Heritage Fund supported community history project, by East End Connection, on Bengali Squatters in Fieldgate Mansions from the 1970s to 1980s, was also getting underway. I got in touch with the lead on the project and attended the launch event. At this event, I met three well known squatter activists and managed to secure their contact details as a starting point for my research. East End Connection struggled with the timeline on their project as their interviews were due to commence just as Covid-19 restrictions came into operation, but my contact with them was ongoing and generated mutual benefit. I used a snowballing approach from that initial event, increasing contacts through the people I met (see Figure 3.4).
Figure 3.4 – recruitment of participants
I was also able to obtain an interview slot on a Bengali community TV channel, Channel S on their Sunday ‘magazine’ style show as well as a ‘call out’ via the Imam at East London Mosque, where they also allowed me to set up stalls and distribute flyers I had designed and had translated into Bengali (see Figure 3.5). I distributed the flyers through all my social media contacts and opened a Facebook page (which currently has 237 members), to which the flyers directed contact. That Facebook page continues to be active and was a successful way of promoting the research, sharing progress and directly and indirectly recruiting participants.

This ‘stretching out’ into the community both through individuals, word of mouth, social media and through these other institutional and community spaces enabled me to engage with a wide diversity of participants: from those who had gone on to make a local political career in Tower Hamlets, to those who had never talked to anyone about these events before. Of those 39 interviews, 8 participants engaged in
at least 3 oral history sittings over a period of 6 months and were willing and able to contribute a much more detailed account of their experiences.

Nevertheless, I found it difficult to recruit female participants. This difficulty can be explained partly in that my recruitment started with public figures of some local standing, who had moved from squatting into local council politics. Snowballing through them meant that they introduced me to other men, like themselves. Also, the demographics of that particular population: older men now, but at the time, they had been teenagers or young men – the 1.5 generation; their mothers who had accompanied them had passed away and most had not been married, to have shared those squatter experiences with their wives.

Another factor that emerged during conversations with users at Sonali Gardens was that where women had arrived in the 1970s, they were not always aware of their housing status. I recall for instance spending an afternoon sitting next to an elderly lady who had initially said to me she had not been a squatter, but who later in our conversation described breaking into a neighbouring house and occupying it. For this woman, the vocabulary I used, and even my Bengali use of the closest term dhokhol, had not registered as relevant. Not until a lengthy conversation had passed and she was telling me about when her husband had broken into a nearby flat - what she assumed was a minor detail in the much broader litany of hardships she faced, did she realise that she and her family had been squatters. This is not to suggest that all women were unaware of housing status, but for many, they had just arrived and they were less likely to have been directly involved in initiating the squatting (although, there were examples when it was the female squatter who did push for it, as talked about in Chapter 6), and therefore less likely to be able to recognise the experience, in the terms that I was describing.

I did make effort to work my way around this and contacted Bengali women’s groups in Tower Hamlets, however, there is a paucity of these services and many though functional on paper and in council listings were defunct due to lack of funding. Had fieldwork not been cut short, I had planned to spend more time in the women’s section at local mosques, where I might have been able to meet and converse with more older women, and this is a potential focus for follow-up research.

3.4 Conducting the oral history interviews:

The effort to be as inclusive of diverse participants as possible meant that I was also eager to find ‘safe’ spaces in which to conduct the interview and was fortunate to secure a study room at Toynbee Hall. I was able to book this space and used it for many interviews with male participants (14 out of 27). For all 14
participants, Toynbee Hall was a space with which they associated in the 1970s when it had been the site of legal and community services that many had accessed or a space where they had gathered for community meetings. I did not however interview any female participants here, mainly because I was comfortable both culturally and from a ‘risk’ perspective to meet unknown women in their homes, than I was with their male counterparts. Also, offering to conduct interviews with men with whom I had no previous acquaintance in their homes was culturally inappropriate so first interviews with men at home were only ever undertaken where the request or invitation made clear that wider family were also going to be present, which mitigated the cultural and personal risk of those visits.

That said, and beyond the material conditions of the space, I was also keen to make the interviews a linguistically safe and open place and offered participants the opportunity to undertake the interview in either English or Bengali. My first language is Bengali, but having been born and brought up in Britain, and speaking only to my parents and older family members, my fluency, at least initially, was limited. Despite this, 19 of the 39 interviews were conducted in Bengali. However, 14 of those were among the last 18 interviews that I conducted and on reflection, this pattern demonstrates an unconscious direction, by myself as researcher, on the behaviour and choices of participants. By about three months into fieldwork, I had spent considerably more time in Toynbee Hall and Sonali Gardens, and my Bengali language skills were therefore markedly improved. Looking back now, I can see that where I thought I was offering a choice to my participants in whether to conduct the interview in Bengali or English, they may have been guided in their choice, by their assessment of my linguistic skills. In the earlier stages, participants generally opted for English where they were able, I think this was because they could gauge my limitations, whereas towards the middle stages, where I felt I was making the same offer to participants as previously, my ability to make that as a credible offer was, I think, that much more obvious, and the take up of Bengali language-based interviews was consequently, markedly higher. This speaks back to the earlier question, about who is in control of an interview situation, and highlights nuances in the notion that even as the researcher ‘in charge’, I was in fact being read and mitigated for, by participants.

In the end, there were few interviews that were conducted exclusively in either one language or another, and most participants dropped in phrases and words from both. This was interesting and challenging right from the outset: one of the first and enduring difficulties was thinking about how to phrase certain ideas that didn’t really translate across cultures. The word squatting for example has no direct equivalent and I used the word dhokhol or occupy, which was the closest equivalent that Bengali speaking friends and family approved of. This brings me to another issue of working across two languages, what Halai (2007)
describes as ‘cultural decoding’. As my research progressed, and with the increasing importance of ideas about ‘home’, I settled into a long debate about whether there was a Bengali word that might capture the material and affective qualities of that term. I posted this dilemma on the Bengali Squatters Facebook group and I was rewarded with various different words including ‘ghor’ (means close to house, and usually used to give a specific address), ‘bari’ (which refers to village or ancestral house) and finally ‘basha’ (refers to a town-based house). However, none of the terms has the combined reference to place and feeling that is embedded in the English word ‘home’ and likewise, the word home cannot capture the Bengali understandings of home that refer implicitly to ancestry, family and urban/rural spaces. On the other hand, it is from Bengali language that the terms ‘desh’ (homeland) and ‘bidesh’ (foreign country/place) (Ballard, 1994, Gardner 1995) are derived, and which interact with a great deal of migration literature on migrant home and homemaking. This attention to the incongruence between languages ‘pulls us into otherness’ (Jazeel 2019, 36) and drawing on Apter (2013), Jazeel argues ‘these moments...puncture the expansionist ambitions and gargantuan scale of EuroAmerican neo-imperial knowledge structures.’ (Jazeel 2019, 37). In the end, in practical terms I would usually rely on a combination of the words, and even where I was using Bengali as the interview language, I would sometimes use the English word ‘home’, as participants themselves would often invite it in their dialogue.

Speaking with and interviewing my parents, Abdul and Guljahan, was a testing ground for the other interviews I conducted. As stated previously, it was their stories and experiences shared with my siblings and I as we grew up that had inspired this research, and interviewing them formally for my research, was the peak of my entangled positionality in the research. I also interviewed my older sister Rasna, which was enlightening as her contribution revealed memories and perspectives that we had never before shared. Scraton (2004), says ‘revisiting deeply sensitive issues is always an emotional, and often painful, experience’ (185) and it was through the early interviews with my family, that I became attentive to the impact of my interviews and what it meant to ‘care’ for participants. I became attentive to how much of an emotional experience the interview was, even though these were experiences my parents had shared with me before. There was a strain to their efforts because they recognised that as an interview, they were performing this story for me in a way that was qualitatively different. My father for instance relayed a story about a fire in an overcrowded building he had lived in in 1969, where two young Bengali men had died, and he became tearful and upset when telling the story.

Likewise, many participants recounted stories of racist bullying and attacks which were traumatic events. There was one time that both the participant and I cried, during the telling of a story where he had been
severely beaten up. In hindsight, I was not adequately prepared for the ‘emotional worlds’ (Holmes 2017, 76) encountered in the interviews, however, in a way, it was these raw emotional experiences that supported the insights I was able to gain (Blakely 2007). For others, it was plainly difficult to share the grimy details about their housing conditions and they simply opted out of the research. I am certain that there were many in the community spaces who had squatted but who declined to nominate themselves for interviews, because for them there was some shorom – shame attached to their experiences. As one person who joined the Facebook group exclaimed, ‘They went all that way to London to end up squatting?!’

Even where there was not a dramatic story to tell, the interviews were always reflective conversations and actively engaged participants to review the decisions and outcomes of their lives - this at a more subtle level was in many ways, just as emotionally exhausting. With my parents, I was aware that my interviews had been ‘disruptive’; I had intervened with my questions, stirred up memories that had been sedimented and asked them to review and make reflective judgements, and I was alert to their discomfort. With this knowledge, I therefore always made sure to follow-up with phone calls to check that all participants were okay. I also knew and kept details of organisations that were available, that I could direct participants to for support, but mostly I made sure to stay in contact with participants, to call them so that they felt that the stories they shared with me were valued, and that was treating both them and the stories shared, with respect and care; I think that this was in many ways the best emotional balm; something that can’t be approved or scripted in an ethics process, but which felt most intuitive to the engaged and tangled way that my story had come to interact with and solicit theirs.

3.5 Positionality

My biggest asset in terms of recruitment and the overall conduct of my research was that I am a Sylheti Bengali woman, born in the East End and that I still live in east London, albeit in Walthamstow and not Tower Hamlets. One of my participants used the phrase ‘nijor manush’ or ‘own people’, to explain why he was making an exception to speak to me and why he would normally avoid speaking to researchers. He saw me as one of his own people and this was similar refrain from many of my participants. I speak Bengali, I always dressed in a culturally appropriate manner and in my conversations with people, I navigated to common ground by sharing my parents’ experiences and that I had been born and lived in a squatted house (Ahmed 2016, 42). There was warmth and palpable support that was generous right from the
beginning of my initial call out, all the way to the unexpected conclusion of interviews, when the COVID-19 lockdown was imposed.

However, my insider status was also problematic because, despite our similarities, my participants and I were also very different, and I far more privileged, in many ways. I speak English fluently and have through my education and professional background acquired middle-class status and cultural capital. In my ‘usual’, everyday clothes, and as someone who doesn’t wear the hijab, I can be fairly innocuous in a crowd; unlike most of my participants who were less assimilative in these features. In that sense my experience of being Bengali in east London, is markedly different to theirs.

These dynamics were however changeable. For instance, when interviewing senior older Bengali men, I always referred to them as ‘chacha’ which means paternal uncle, and both features – their age and gender, would in our shared Bengali cultural contexts have ascribed the participants significant ‘power over me’. However, in the research context, those positions were more complicated. As researcher, I was always recorder ready and there to ‘take’ an interview from them with the purpose of translating it into a language that most could not fluently read, with a plan to weave their words into a narrative for my thesis, to be presented and consumed by an audience of academics, that they would never meet.

Gardner (2002) who has spent her academic life studying the Bengali community both here in London and in Sylhet, defends her positionality and ethnographic work arguing ‘it is more useful to focus on shifting identities in relation to the people and issues ... melting down what apparently seem to be ‘obvious’ divides (such as those of age or race). Thus, while there may be much that an apparent outsider does not understand, there is also a great deal to be shared’ (224). She makes a case for acknowledging that identities are far from unitary and that different facets of our identity, as I suggested above, may bring us more or less close to participants, on this more incremental scale. Her conclusions can be critiqued, for instance, Smith (2012), who calls for more ‘indigenous researchers’, may be doubtful that Gardner can share equitably across the ‘obvious’ divide. But Smith’s critique leaves open the wider question of, what constitutes indigeneity? Datta (2012, 18-19) observes the precarity of what might be called her indigenous position when interviewing squatters in Delhi:

I was located between the position of an insider and an outsider – I was Indian by birth, I was a Dilliwali (Delhi-ite), but I was also middle-class, and I had grown up in those neighbourhoods where many went to work as domestic help, beauticians, drivers, and cooks. I also lived in the UK
– I was repeatedly asked how they could be sure that I was not taking pictures to show foreigners the filth that they lived in?

On the other hand, there are those who would argue that the power dynamics of researchers engaging with marginalised communities may not be so obviously unidirectional. Sharp (2005), for instance describes how when researching outside one’s frame of reference, ‘one can feel entirely powerless and dependent upon others and their better knowledge of challenging, or simply very different environments, languages and customs’ (307). As stated before, I was, at the beginning of my research out of my depth with my Bengali literacy levels and was at times subject to jest by participants, for my poor Bengali. Although this did not feel like an equaliser in the relationship, it was nevertheless a healthy reminder that there is always unexpected fluidity to research relationships, and positionalities.

It is also important to note that I was, likewise, not comfortable with my place in the academy. There were many reasons for this, one of the critical ones being my age – I had returned to complete this doctoral research almost two decades after my Masters and was significantly older and definitely more detached from the academic circle than all of my PhD colleagues. However, this was just an additional layer to the ‘normal’ range of discomfort that comes with being from a working-class, minoritised ethnic background, ‘interloping’ in mainly middle-class, white institutions. There is always an associated discomfort, a sense of being out of place and unfamiliar with the deep cultural codes that map these spaces, Smith (2012, 5) describes it as:

There are a number of ethical, cultural, political and personal issues that can present special difficulties for indigenous researchers who, in their own communities, work partially as insiders, and are often employed for this purpose, and partially as outsiders, because of their Western education or because they may work across clan, tribe, linguistic, age and gender boundaries. Simultaneously, they work within their research projects or institutions as insiders within a particular paradigm or research model, and as outsiders because they are often marginalized and perceived to be representative of either a minority or a rival interest group.

This idea of a position between the binaries of inside/outside that Smith alludes to here, became increasingly important and relevant to me during this research. I was not a perfect match with the community of my research nor was I perfect match with the academic research community, but in the end, I felt that these were equivocally to my advantage. McNess et al., (2015, 295), drawing on Bhabha (1994) talk about a ‘liminal space’ arguing that “research may require us to distance ourselves and yet at
the same time to become immersed. We are neither complete observers, but often working in that ‘third space’ in between” (ibid 311). This falls in line with Spivak’s call for ‘hyper self-reflexivity’, a critical interrogation of our layered privileges (1988). Griffiths (2018), drawing on Spivak’s insights, reflects that as an academic from a working-class background, his positionality vis-a-vis the academy and empire is notably different to others: ‘Imperialism was not and is not a project of the working classes, whatever my privilege, it is not of the same order as that of the elites: geography’s skeletons are not mine’. (6) I shared these sentiments in relation to my research: although I was an academic researcher and I was conducting fieldwork within a Bengali community associated with significant levels of deprivation and marginalisation, the assessment of me being nijor manush, wasn’t incorrect. The Bengali community in Tower Hamlets is a diverse one, and that phrase was used, not to suggest I was identical to ‘them’, but because there was recognition that there was enough about me that was familiar and trustworthy, unlike those who had come before, and who had just ‘taken’ (Smith 2012, 16). Like Jazeel (2019) whose book cover depicts his mother and grandmother having just cast their first vote in a UK election in 1951, I felt an ‘amalgam of personal self and academic investigation’ (14), and that blended position, I would argue was positive investment in this research and worked to aid reflections on representation and participant voice.

3.6 Research analysis:

The nature of my research meant that I came to be doing all three different research activities at the same time which was beneficial as it enabled me to explore the panorama of the picture emerging from all three vantage points on an ongoing basis. I analysed and reflected on the data as I went along, keeping a field diary, making notes, keeping annotated photos of archive items, transcribing interviews as I did them. This was important not just as an efficient way of managing the workload, but because it compelled me to reflect continually on the data that was emerging, not as a periodical part of fieldwork, but as integral to my ability to reflect and analyse the stories and accounts as they were emerging. This approach was less aligned with triangulation, and better described by Freeman’s (2020) idea of ‘collage as a methodological framework in geography’ which in its attention to the way that research ‘is more open to spontaneity and the shifting frame of research’ is a more accurate reflection of how I tried to let the emerging material develop both my research questions and the lens that I applied (328). In particular, the idea of ‘collage’ diverges from triangulation in the sense that the latter is concerned with how different research methods navigate to often one point of convergence (Denzin 1970), whereas collage retains a commitment to reflecting ‘a more complex understanding of a research area’ (Freeman 2020, 338).
Oral history interviews: whose voice?

I chose to transcribe interviews myself; partly this was because the financial implications of translating Bengali language interviews were well beyond the scope of my research grant, but also because I quickly realised how much more deeply I was able to listen to the interview and on repeated listening, how much more I was able to glean in the transcription process. However, in many ways, the power relationships evident in the oral history process, were even more evident in this latter stage (Temple 1997, 2005, 2006).

As already stated, oral history has been advocated as a method which is driven by ‘democratic and emancipatory impulses’ (Abrams 2010, 154), but even in the 1970s when oral history was enjoying considerable academic appeal, Passerini and Portelli (1979) criticised it for its ‘facile democratisation’ and was scathing of its supposed ability to deliver the ‘authentic’ voice of participants. Speaking to the postcolonial concern to be able conduct research in a manner that does not colonize the participant or treat them as subjects to be mined for a detached academic purpose, and what Maggio (2007) asks as ‘[C]an the subaltern be heard?’ (emphasis added), I spent considerable time thinking about the process by which to translate, transcribe and analyse the rich material I had collected.

Transcribing in all oral history interviews involves the researcher assuming editorial control over the words spoken and their [re]presentation as text and word documents. The aurality of the interview is stripped away by the interviewer and the act of story-telling is embedded in a text that is then selectively used by the researcher, to support a view they are interested to narrate. Whilst Portelli (2018) sees this layer of researcher activity as just another part of the co-creation of the interview (247), others have expressed significant reservations about the power dynamics invested in those actions. Bassnett and Trivedi (1999), offer a postcolonial view on this idea: ‘Translation is a highly manipulative activity that involves all kinds of stages in that process of linguistic transfer and cultural boundaries. Translation is not an innocent, transparent activity but is highly charged with significance at every stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems.’ (2). Their criticism in many ways deprives oral history of the claim that it can recover hidden voices. When voices are translated into a language in which they were not spoken, and into documents that participants cannot check or verify, there is certainly a loss of meaning on the part of the participant and an injection of interpretation on the part of the researcher that fundamentally detracts from the ‘experiment in equality’ that Portelli (2018, 243) describes. Another concern is the active ‘marginalization of minority voices’ (Cahnmann 2005, 246) that is involved in translating, when, as in this case, I took dialogue from Bengali and translated to English.
Mindful of these considerations and wary of the losses that penetrate the entire process of transcription and translation, I did briefly attend to the idea of lexical translation, where the ‘focus is on obtaining the most word equivalences’ (Cormier 2018, 335). Lexical translation has the benefit of being attentive to each word spoken by the participant and aims to retain as much proximity to the words spoken as possible. The translation achieved is often cluttered and lacking in fluidity but has the advantage of ‘defamiliarizing the language’ meaning, ’postcolonial writers can bring readers face to face with the reality of difference and call into question the supremacy of the standard language’ (Bassnett and Trivedi 1999, 13). However, when informally speaking with some participants, I was quickly and conclusively disavowed of this being an agreeable compromise in the way that I might translate their oral history interviews. Like Temple (2013) whose participants expressed concern about ‘foreignising translations’ which might distort the meaning of their words, there was consensus amongst those I asked, that they wanted their words to be coherent and meaningful, and this priority essentially relieved them of concern that my editorial interpretation might jeopardise authenticity.

The alternative approach was then to aim for ‘conceptual equivalence’ (Cormier 2018, 336), where ‘[M]eaning must...have priority over form’ (Wallin and Ahlstrom 2006, 733), which returns us to Spivak’s question, and the wider accusation of facile equality. Regardless of my original motivation to create a shared and collaborative space in the interview, as the researcher, I became author to the voice of the participant. There were ways that I could have attempted to mitigate and mediate this: one was to engage participants with the material I had produced and to get them to oversee and offer corrections (Harvey 2015). In most cases I made the judgment that such an offer would have made participants uncomfortable – most had little to no formal education in England and would have been alarmed by the idea that the interview would extend into them reading and reviewing a formal document, in English. Those who I did offer to, declined and indicated that they were satisfied with my intentions. A second measure I could have taken, was to get a second translator to listen, read back, review and discuss interpretations (Temple 2013, 107). This too was beyond the financial scope of the research and the closest equivalence that I could manage was to use Bengali speaking family and friends to assist with words and phrases that I found difficult to translate. Jazeel (2019) reassures however, that even the engagement with this process is a ‘necessary and important problem...insofar as it involves some kind of movement across terrains of difference’ (36) and a welcome acknowledgement of the limits of the world being able to made accessible through European knowledge and conceptual structures. In the end, like Abrams (2010), I concluded that there was a responsibility to be as faithful as possible, ‘to acknowledge
The oral history interviews were the mainstay of my research; my practice of them were by no means textbook examples of conducting ‘good’ oral history, the language issues I encountered; the time that participants were prepared to give me, along with simple technical issues that at times disrupted these very special conversations are not to be glossed over (Harrowell et al., 2018). However, with each interview, I became a better practitioner and was able to navigate language, space, time and equipment much more effectively. The imperative to listen that is very much at the heart of oral history practice, allowed me to hear the spatiality and scales of home and homemaking that participants lived and remembered; they alerted me to doors and windows, things that I would have missed had I begun the interview with set questions about their experiences. One important gesture to retaining the richness of the interviews, is that in my empirical chapters I quote extracts and conversation at length and also indicate where I have translated Bengali interviews into English. Therefore, despite the significant dilemmas that arose in terms of the post-interview analysis of the material collected, the richness and diversity of those stories made this a worthwhile methodological balance. Most oral history interviews are recorded here with the participants real name, there were however a couple of occasions when it became clear to me that the participant had not comprehended fully the public nature of the interview material they had consented to – which became obvious when they would ask me to not mention certain things they had said. In those cases, I have given them a pseudonym to protect their privacy and also observed their expressed limitations.

**Archives: interacting with the absences**

As stated previously, I also used four different archival sources. As these archives were in the main about the squatters’ movement, I was limited to trying to assess how Bengali squatters were perceived by officials and activists, that did not squat. This wasn’t unexpected given that archives are noted for their ‘discardment’ when it comes to histories of marginalised communities (Hodder 2017 453). My approach took insights from Stoler (2002), who argues the purpose of archival research is not ‘knowledge retrieval’ but ‘to move along the grain’ and to investigate the ‘circuits of knowledge production in which they operated’ (100). Thinking with a postcolonial lens, she makes an important distinction, between ‘archive-as-source to archive-as-subject’ and encourages an approach of working with the archives to engage with thinking about ‘“fact” production’ (87, emphasis added) rather than retrieval. In terms of my work it meant working *along* the grain (Ibid 99), exploring not just the decision-making that happened, but to
consider how Bengali migrants and their needs were viewed by housing officials and popular local media. Like Wemyss (2009), who observed that ‘silences in historical narratives are deafening to those who are aware of them and infuriating to those who know that they are there’ (25), I read the archives for discussion about Bengali migrants, their housing conditions and their claims for housing. I analysed the archives, reading them for how events were represented and to determine the ‘consensual logics they inscribed’ (Stoler 2002, 103), with a broader research view to ‘compare with the way that they were experienced by those who participated in them’ (Wemyss 2009, 25). So, whilst the archives may not have recorded Bengali voices, they remained useful for establishing broad chronological context, documenting the actions of relevant housing institutions, and most importantly, revealing the dominant representation of the Bengali migrants and the way their claims were extinguished, during the housing crisis.

What this meant in reality was searching for the ‘texture and granularity’ (ibid 100) of how housing authorities understood and responded to housing issues. In many cases, it was only by juxta positioning extracts from housing records that differential treatment of Bengali migrants could be detected. For example the extracts below are derived from the same committee minutes8, but show a notable difference in tone and outcome for the people referred to:

\[ I \text{ do feel that the situation is an extremely unhappy one (planned decantment taking longer than anticipated). The anxiety caused by the delay may well have had a deleterious on both Mrs Rosamund and the children, and I feel that it is unfortunate that this should be exacerbated by their overcrowded living conditions.} \]

\[ The \text{ family comprises, parents and daughters, aged 13 and 9. Both Mr and Mrs Hayden have suffered from polio in the past and Mr Hayden is severely crippled, using two crutches, and driving an invalid carriage.} \]

Compared to the next extract:

\[ The \text{ property is apparently managed by Mr Somru Meah who had apparently been living there since September 1967. Together with Mr A. Motobil he occupies 2 rooms on the first floor. The only other habitable room in the house is on the ground floor and this is occupied by Mr. Amir and Mr. Shah Lal.} \]

---

8 L/THL/A/21/1/3 Housing Letting and management committee 1969-1970
The medical officer is concerned that a Mr. Sardar Mohamed has been allowed to sleep on the landing, and action is shortly to be taken against the manager for such an offence under section 90 of the Housing Act 1957.

There is a litany of similar notes throughout the 1970s housing planning and management reports. The overcrowded housing conditions of the Bengali migrant community are noted only for the sanctions that need authorisation by Committee Chairs, rather than alerting to a need for strategic attention to what was manifestly an overall problem of housing allocation and planning (Glynn 2014). Similar notes depicted the shortage of housing for Bengali migrants as a problem with the way they lived, rather than the system itself, and so ‘sleep[ing] on the landing’ was an ‘offence’, not a symptom of a housing problem. Analysing the ‘archives-as-subject’, allowed me to trace how Bengali migrants were represented as the problem, rather than the housing deprivation that they experienced.

There were also one or two exceptions that did document the Bengali community’s struggle from the community perspective. One such example was a petition (see Figure 3.6) which was signed by approximately 80 Bengali men and women, circa 1978, and was part of a campaign to save the squatted East End Community School, which had been threatened with eviction (see Chapter 5). As with much of the archival material, I tried to refer back to it as talking points with participants where relevant during the oral history interviews (Blunt & Bonnerjee 2013). It was sometimes in this interaction between the archive and individuals in the space of interviews, that the nuances of stories that I had otherwise read differently, emerged. One example worth recalling is that shortly after finding the petition, I had shown a participant a photo of the document, and instead of recalling it in the way that I had read it in the archives - namely as an example of community self-organisation and assertion, he was immediately scornful: ‘Agh, that man – he harrassed everyone for their signatures – no one even cared about his school! We just signed it so he would go away!’ (Khosru Miah fieldnotes dated 4th February 2019).

---

9 L/THL/A/21/1/3 Housing Letting and management committee 1969-1970
Figure 3.6 A petition to save the squatted East End Community School THLHLA reference: I/SPP/4/5/2/1 East End Community School

To the Co-ordinator, Spitalfields Project
192 Hambury Street, London, E.1.

Sir,

We the undersigned most humbly request that you kindly install a Portable Cabin in the Davis Mansion Playground to accommodate the Eastern Community School. This School has been serving as the only Centre of various cultural, social, educational and recreational activities. A Portable Cabin can not be a permanent arrangement. We need a separate building for our School which will serve as a fully equipped community centre as well. It is a long standing demand of the Community. This School and the above mentioned community centre must be on the west side of Commercial Street as this is the most deprived area in Spitalfields. We earnestly request you either to build a new structure for our School and Community Centre or properly convert an existing building for the purpose. We further beg to inform you that no other arrangement for the school and the Centre is acceptable to us.

Names

1. [Signed]

2. [Signed]

3. [Signed]

4. [Signed]

5. [Signed]

6. [Signed]

7. [Signed]

8. [Signed]
Amusing though this response was, on a serious note it was reminder of the need for caution and highlighted, that as researchers, we ‘contribute layers of meaning to the documents we encounter’ and that these meanings may not necessarily be congruent to the experiences they try to understand (Clifford et al., 2016, 121).

My original intention had been to organise these interactions between the archives and participants in a series of formal workshops in collaboration with THLHLA, and to get groups of participants to engage with selected archival material. This would have allowed me to hear and think about how these materials were understood and remembered by participants in a collective setting. It may have been an opportunity to also probe individual experiences, to draw on ideas about ‘re-memory’ and the wider temporal and spatial connections that bridge ‘individual and collective consciousness’ (Tolia-Kelly 2004a, 327). COVID-19 restrictions, however, brought this ambition to an early and unsatisfactory conclusion and this remains something for further research.

I used a similar ‘archive-as-subject’ approach to analyse those archival sources which ostensibly came from a more intimate and supportive connection with Bengali migrants. The Race Today journals included articles documenting events in the housing struggle and making political statements about how these events linked to wider anti-racist struggles in 1970s London. However, apart from short quotes and interviews, the voices of Bengali squatters were still limited, and even here, there were no Bengali female voices.

Likewise, the ‘Home from Home’ documentary series, mentioned above, was written and produced by Simon Heaven, a local community worker who was sympathetic to the Bengali community, and is the only material which featured any extensive Bengali voices. Predictably these voices are exclusively male; despite women appearing alongside their husbands in the interview scenes, they are silenced observers. Analysing the documentary as a ‘representational space’ and reflecting on the ‘construction of mental maps’ (Chanan 2010, 147), the sympathetically intended documentaries do extend opportunities for Bengali male migrants to speak about their housing hardship and also highlight some of the generational differentiation that my oral history interviews reveal. However, at the same time, the documentaries do not escape what Chanan (2010), drawing on Said, calls, the ‘imaginary geography with which the West sees the East’ calling them ‘subjective visions in which the gaze is asymmetrical’ (ibid 148).

Similarly, ‘King of the Ghetto’ a TV series, written and produced by Farrukh Dhondy fails to challenge or subvert that asymmetrical gaze. Dhondy had by then moved on from Race Today, and his four-part drama
focused on a white character called ‘Matthew’ who is a fictionalised depiction of Terry Fitzpatrick – one of my squatter participants, who plays a troubled, ‘white saviour’ character (Cammarota 2011). Malik (2009) reviews the series as deeply problematic for the way it ‘serves to re-emphasise how Asians have been blurred or obscured from London’s history and public representations of the city’. (239). She argues that most ordinary Bengalis were represented as ‘silenced objects’ and almost all Bengali female characters were ‘muted’ (ibid). Alexander’s (2011) work reaches a similar conclusion about the ‘two-dimensional and essentialized versions of the Bangladeshi presence in the East End’, in a dispute over the filming of Monica Ali’s Brick Lane, some three decades later. Like these examples, I analysed the storyline, script and imagery of the TV series, noting the representations of Bengali passivity and depictions of Bengali squatters as mainly insignificant (and corrupt) political actors, against the diverse emerging voices from my oral history interviews.

Reflecting on these sources and noting the absences and distortions that they offered, led me to consider how my own research might disrupt and challenge the dominant representations in the existing archives and share knowledge in ways that were accessible and meaningful to the community of research. The next section addresses this point.

3.7 Sharing knowledge, shifting the gaze and community engagement

The asymmetrical nature of the archival gaze, whereby Bengali squatters were mostly talked about and represented through the accounts and actions of (mainly white) others, was the consistent thread through all the archival material. I concluded that my work was an opportunity to intervene in and disrupt these archival records and the representation that they offered. I had agreed with THLHLA that I would deposit my oral history interviews with them, and this would be enhancement of their collection - offering pluralised accounts of the events from both male and female Bengali participants. However, although this collection might be valuable for an academic researcher or an avid local historian, I was mindful of Smith’s (2012) injunction against superficial dissemination, and the need to share knowledge in ways where there is opportunity for engagement and reflection. Taking my parents as a gauge, I could not be satisfied that they, as people with modest English language skills, were likely to feel that these oral history deposits was an adequate or accessible record of their contribution, or that Luqman Uddin’s rejoinder to me, quoted at the beginning of this chapter me that I had to make sure that ‘the history stays’, was fulfilled by this alone.
I therefore became interested in shifting the gaze, quite literally, and to think about ‘what happens when those who have been distant subjects of the occidental camera take up the camera themselves and turn it on their own real conditions of existence’ (Chanan 2010, 147). Cognisant of the delight that sharing the 1970s documentaries across my professional social media platforms had inspired - despite the poor visibility of Bengali people and the tropes that they nurtured, I settled upon an idea to create a short film that would collect some of the accounts I had researched, and offer alternative and accessible representation.

In January 2020, I applied for and secured a Queen Mary collaboration award of £10k and worked with 8 participants, men and women, to create a short documentary called  

দখল  

Dhokol  

(Occupy). I recruited a local Bengali film company called Film Pill, and over the course of eighteen months and despite various almost catastrophic shutdowns and obstacles thrown up by COVID-19 restrictions, we have produced a 25-minute documentary. The film is spoken mainly in Bengali with English subtitles, it features three female and five male participants, and has a soundtrack featuring Bengali traditional folk songs about migration and home.

I appear peripherally in the film as a nod to my role in the research and production process, but I decided not to have a narrative voice or presenter role in the film and instead prioritised participants as competent articulators of their own experiences (Brannen 2010). Ultimately, the film ‘simply by rendering visible the previously unseen, overlooked and excluded’ (Chanan 2010, 149) did ensure representation on terms that highlighted and corrected, the dominant erasures and distortions in the archive. Making sure the ‘history stays’ as exulted by Luqman, is then in some ways achieved by  

দখল  

Dhokol, and also attends to my commitment to behave responsibly as a postcolonial researcher, sharing knowledge and accounting to the community for some of the conclusions to which they contributed.

Though the film is not yet ready for distribution, the aim is not to hand it out as a one-way ‘gift output’ from my research, but to share it in a critically open manner. We have agreed to host it in for example the Kobi Nazrul Centre and Brady Arts Centre and to make it accessible to the community. The dual language film seeks to engage both younger and older generations in conversations. In June 2021, as part of the Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives ‘Bangladesh50’ series, I spoke about my research and invited a participant to appear as co-speaker. Likewise, with the distribution of the film, I will invite participants to host those screenings with me and be part of the community Q&A sessions. The ambition is to share the research findings in ways that  

include  

rather than  

appropriate  

the stories.
3.8 Conclusion

My fieldwork experience made me appreciate just how important and demanding it is to conduct postcolonial research. Speaking to so many older Bengali people and being given the opportunity to listen to and collate their extraordinary stories was a humbling experience and I was profoundly changed, in unexpected ways by the experience. I had started out with three overarching commitments, to think about representation, to value diversity of voices and to think about how to share knowledge in a way that was meaningful to communities of research, and I remained consistently committed to these aims.

Although I understood theoretically Spivak’s question about power and positionality from the outset, it was only through the actual practice of fieldwork that I was able to genuinely comprehend the hazards and limits involved in trying to ‘recover’ previously marginalised or erased voices. In partial compensation, I endeavoured to be reflexive and respectful to the community who were at the heart of my research. I chose oral history as my main method of research and consulted (where possible) participants on how they wanted their transcriptions written up. I took direction and reworked research questions based on what they told me, rather than what I had set as themes ahead of our conversations. And finally, I resisted the temptation to ‘tidy’ the stories into neat narratives and instead allowed the plurality of stories to speak for the untidy experiences I was offered.

Using the archives and conducting observations in related sites of research, complemented this core part of my work, and although Covid-19 restrictions meant that I was unable to curate these different elements to come together as originally intended, they remain part of potential follow-up activities. I would suggest that this possible follow-up research which is less about the dyadic relationship between myself and a participant but rather about a collection of diverse people, coming together to share and explore these events and memories, would offer a range of interesting reflective conversations. In so doing, this might also limit the authorial control of the researcher and meet more fully the aspirations of postcolonial research.

Jazeel (2019) argues that the enterprise of postcolonial methodologies must always be guided by a commitment to make space for the previously excluded (223). And so, returning to Luqman Uddin’s entreaty to me, that his generation had fought the fight, and it was my generation’s responsibility to ensure that ‘the history stays’, I hope in some modest measure the oral histories deposited and the film Dhokol, will give some of those stories the space and recognition they deserve.
Chapter 4: Exploring the Bengali migrant squatted home and homemaking practices in 1970s East London

4.1 Introduction

Literature on the migrant home has taken varied foci, and the material turn has been a significant strand within that (Miller 2001, Salih 2001, Tolia-Kelly 2004a&b). Scholarship has tended to focus on material objects and possessions and explore how the migrant home is furnished or curated to reach back to homes they may have left behind whilst also making homes anew in the place of migration and settlement. My research shifts away from materialism based around consumption and to attend to materiality in terms of the externalised features of the home, the ‘constructed façade’ which purports to act as boundary to ‘private’ space (Chapman & Hockey 1999, 18), symbolising ‘a frontier and barrier’ (Rapoport 1969, 133). Focusing on the interactions and meaning that manifested in those spaces, I argue that doors and windows, as the front of house features, represent significant and highly contentious thresholds in migrant homemaking. I suggest that they became sites for un-homing the Bengali community, denying their right to belong in what was both an intimate and more expansive contestation for home in postcolonial 1970s London. This chapter centres the front of house of Bengali migrant squatted homes as a space of political and cultural significance. I argue that the exteriorised features of the door and windows emerged as a porous boundary between the inside space of ‘home’ and the outside space of the hostile city. Additionally, this threshold (Boccagni & Brighenti 2017) was a significant ‘contact zone’ (McMillan 2009) staging contestations for exclusion and belonging in 1970s London.

The first argument I outline is that the front of house space in the Bengali migrant squatted home was a space for staging contested ideas about belonging and entitlement (Anderson 2013). I argue that by focusing on doors and windows (Horst & Messing 2006), it is possible to witness a migrant community claiming home (Dadusc et al 2019) and the performance of state and street racism (El-Enany 2020) that contested those claims. I highlight how racialised violence inflicted here had the aim of divesting the Bengali community of the ability to feel ‘at home’ (Baxter & Brickell (2014) and to Other the Bengali community in such a way as to register them unwelcome and alien to East London (Elliott-Cooper et al., 2019). In particular, I highlight the gendered tropes that manifested in that violence and the highly gendered resistances that were inspired. I develop this by showing how those threshold spaces iterated the wider conflict in 1970s post-colonial London where the ‘British polity imagined as white’ (El-Enany
2020, 101) was challenged by a Bengali migrant community, that in effect, disputed the ‘amnesia and disassociation from the British Imperial project’ (ibid, 113). I do this by exploring how these ‘un-homing’ encounters generated a collective political resistance and endeavour to examine the role of the Bengali Housing Action Group (BHAG) in resisting and defending against the state and street racism that was experienced here. By making visible the politically significant nature of the resistance in this front of house space, I challenge the dominant ‘deprivation’ label applied to squatter movements that originate in housing hardship (Prujit 2013). In line with Bouillon (2017) and Milligan (2016), I argue that this configuration is problematic as it offers a simplistic ‘victim’ narrative of housing-deprived squatters. In many cases, these have been black and brown migrant communities, taking space in post-colonial European cities, but their actions through this typology have generally been evacuated of political meaning.

A second argument that I develop is that the front of house threshold acted as a cultural marker (Horst & Messing, 2006) and performed varying aesthetic and spatial roles. Curtains were one of the markers that distinguished the Bengali home. I argue that conversations around the aesthetics of this front of house dressing became a proxy for the Othering of the Bengali community. I show how the discussion around curtains reached out to broader debates about ‘group solidarity’ and manifested as ‘important vehicles for defining sameness and otherness’ (Horst & Messing 2006, 35), resonating with Bhabha’s (1994) idea that ‘to be unhomed is not to be homeless’ (9) but to be estranged in these spaces of ‘cross-cultural initiation’(ibid). Drawing also on McMillan’s work on the West Indian front room (2009), where he talks about the West Indian front room as a ‘transcultural contact zone’ and expresses the ambivalence of the space in terms of ‘creolization’ (145), I contend that Bengali migrants navigated the front of the house as a complex space of cultural conciliation, where ‘dressing and maintenance’ revealed ‘a form of impression management’ (137). However, I argue further that rather than being a generative and creative space, as suggested in McMillan’s work, there was a dialectical quality to this effort because embedded in this exterior performance was a desire to protect an interior space of cultural continuity, where domestic food and language practices looked back to home in Sylhet, resisting ‘transcultural’ change. As stated before, the boundaries in this front of house threshold were far from stable, and the performance at the front could be undermined by the way that spaces interacted and leaked into each other, in particular through ‘smells’; creating ‘porous sites of tension’ (Burrell 2014, 155).
4.2 Front of house as a space of claiming home, un-homing and collective resistance

‘I said we need to get in there. So, I … I went and I broke the door’ Abdul Kadir

This section develops several threads around one critical theme; that the doors and windows of the Bengali migrant squatted homes was a space of contested belonging. It relates to Brah’s (1996) idea of ‘diaspora space’ in the sense that I focus on the front of the house as a relational space. I show how the materiality of the home in these thresholds quite literally became the ‘boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness’ (208) and that the conflict here reached out to wider ideas about belonging (Anderson 2013) and entitlement. In taking this angle, I highlight the insights gained from shifting attention away from material and visual artefacts and exploring what may be learned by focusing on these threshold spaces.

Claiming home

Kadir (pictured in figure 4.1) arrived in London in 1957, following in his father’s footsteps who had worked on English ships for decades before his arrival. On my first visit, Kadir sat facing the TV, busy making and checking notes in a small pocket notebook whilst loudly lamenting the news story being read out on the Bengali community news channel. I sat to the side of him, facing the sofa, which his wife and co-participant Sufia, sank into after she had handed me a cup of tea. On the wall opposite, there was a birthday banner and a small string of colourful pom-poms, hung in a set of loops. I asked if there had been a birthday party recently, Sufia laughed and said, ‘we have so many birthday parties here, that we never take it down’. Migrants of between 63 and 44 years, Kadir and Sufia squatted their first few family houses in Spitalfields, spent decades remitting to family and building a remittance house in Sylhet town, and are now council tenants of a small, one bedroom ground floor flat on Cable Street.
Their first interview was dominated by the health of what was then their youngest infant daughter Hajera, who developed an eye infection which became life-threatening and was the reason why the family that consisted of three children at the time, came to London, seeking treatment in 1974. She got better and Sufia was keen to return home; she wanted her children to be educated in Sylhet and had already enrolled her eldest son into a popular English medium school there. But the return home was short-lived, Hajera got sick again, and they came back to London, where Hajera’s health deteriorated to such extent that she required and still does require regular medical care. The family initially stayed in a small one-bedroom flat on Hanbury Street whilst the regular tenant was visiting Bangladesh. However, the space was too small for a family of five and Sufia was pregnant. Having applied for a council flat two years previously and despite repeatedly going back and telling them about his more urgent need for accommodation, Kadir finally decided to take matters into his own hands:

10Kadir: And that’s when it was being said, lots of people were squatting, there was a man called Terry, Terry, in this area, I asked him, and he said, I can get you in a building, he got lots of our people in. Terry said, he said, Delafied House, I’m emptying a building, I think there was a one room, two room flat, second floor, or first floor was it – second floor...? Delafied House. We went, but even there it wasn’t adequate, he gave us, he changed the locks and changed the door, and we went in with all our stuff, and then the police came. They came quickly, the police said you’ve entered here – ‘you know this is council property and you shouldn’t be here’, I said – and I know how to speak by this time, I know how to speak by this time – I can speak properly, I said, I know this is council flat, but I haven’t got anywhere to go and this is empty. They said, ‘you can’t stay’, I

10 All of Kadir’s interviews were conducted in Bengali, so these words are my translation.
said, when I can’t, I can’t, but where else have I got to stay? And in that quick time, with so much
speed I had already thrown a couple of mattresses on the floor, on the empty floor, and told her
(indicates his wife) to sit. The police argued with me, they said you can’t stay here, it’s against the
law, you have to get out, and I said where can I go?

Shabna: Weren’t you scared – quarrelling with the police?

Kadir: No! No! I wasn’t scared! Where was I going to go with being scared?! So they went. So now
I was thinking about what to do, how long did we stay there...?

Sufia: We stayed there long time– we enrolled the children in school, Christian Street...we stayed
six/seven weeks maybe...

Kadir: So, we stayed but we knew there was no point in spending any money because the flat wasn’t
adequate...

Shabna: Why wasn’t it adequate? Was it the flat or the area?

Kadir: The flat, the flat is you can imagine it, it was one room and one sitting room, or two rooms
and a sitting room, that wasn’t enough space. After that it didn’t have this or that – and we would
have to buy the stuff, and we knew they wouldn’t give us the flat, the people and space – it wasn’t
suitable. So, I – my brother was here, my brother said, so what are you going to do, there's no point
spending the money. My brother had rented a property from a Jewish landlord on Goulston Street,
he got a rent-book, he gave an advance and we had to pay rent monthly. It was on the fourth floor,
there was no bath system there, 35 Goulston Street. You had to go up and down the stairs, at that
time, there was a balcony out the back, that's where the cooker was...

Shabna: Balcony? Cooker on the outside?!

Kadir: Yes, balcony outside (laughs). And after that, outside, underneath us, just under us was a
Turkish person, such a khobis11! (Sufia: there wasn’t even a bath!) There weren’t any baths in houses
at that time, if we made even a little noise, he'd come up and we argued with him a few times, and
also, it was broken here and broken there...the water leaked...

Shabna: And you weren’t squatting, it was all broken and you were paying rent, but still...?

Kadir: Yes! Paying rent! And if the landlord doesn’t fix it who will? And why would he fix it? A
broken building, all the flats were broken. Anyway, we stayed there for a while...(inaud) Now we

11 A swear word meaning an evil/impure person -used as a common insult/
were right on the top, in front of us was the market, if you opened the window, the market, Petticoat
Lane market, if anything dropped, it would drop on the people below. It was the market after all,
doing that, we stayed there for a long time.

After that, I was going in the direction of Wheeler House one time, and I saw the flat we went into,
that flat was empty, there had been some whites there but they had left, I said to her (indicates Sufia)
I want to occupy that flat, I said will you be able to – there are lots of white people – lots of khobis,
all khobis, upstairs – all around, they’re all khobis boys, she said, ‘whatever will happen will happen’,
I said we need to get in there. So, I … I went and I broke the door.

Shabna: Not Terry?

Kadir: No Terry-berry, I broke the door, once inside I called out to someone I knew, I got him to
stay there, I got him and made him sit there – so I went, but you need to have a mattress or two to
claim it, so all the way from Wentworth Dwellings I got a mattress, I carried it on my head, I ran
and got it in here, I got it from that high...So, I got in and got her (indicates Sufia) to sit down and
that’s when we were pelted with stones, from all directions, stones, those boys – there was a play
area, there was a net area, they all started throwing stones, they broke all the glass, the front and side
window all of them. I got a dha12 and went out and shouted that if you throw another stone I will...

Shabna: Just as you got in?

Kadir Yes, just as we got in, (Sufia: white khobis boys) yeah, khobis, not even khobis, just seeing us
y’know, it had been their friend’s flat that had gone away, moved away, so I went out with the
dha...and as soon as I went out with the dha, they went, I said I would chop them if they threw
another stone. So, I had to clean it all up again, and then did what I could with the mattresses, the
police came...The police came, and we said where would we go? I said we applied two years ago,
they don’t give us a flat or anything else, where do you want us to go?

Sufia: That was our one point!

Kadir: If you need to take us to court, do it! Go away. I said that! There was a case against me. After
that, the area management, he was such a big… Mr Haggerty he was such a khobis estate officer, he
came and said go away and said dirty things, I said don’t speak to me in a dirty way, or I’ll chop
you, he said, ‘get out of here’. I said take me to court or give me a rent book, he said ‘no way, no
way!’ I thought he was really going to get me out, he had authority...

---

12 Floor-based kitchen knife used in south Asian kitchens
... And then a court letter came saying that we had to get out by this date – and if we didn’t – then they would lock us. So now we were in a difficult situation and by this time, I had done quite a lot of shopping – there had been no gas and I got gas and I did a lot of stuff...

Kadir was adamant that he was entitled to council housing and despite a long campaign to obtain a tenancy, he says like most other Bengali families struggling in overcrowded conditions, he was never made a single housing offer. He ‘claimed’ the flat by what was colloquially accepted as the marker of squatted occupation, hastily retrieving a mattress and throwing it down (Wall 2017, Wates 1980). In ‘A Safe Place to Be’ (1980 - see Figure 4.2) one of the documentary sources I used from the BFI archives, Kadir features in a meeting of about twenty Bengali men, where he rails at the council’s disregard for his housing needs and his young family’s hardship:

I am waiting for last five years for Tower Hamlets, Tower Hamlet council. They, they didn't give me any flat. So what I have to do? I get only one room. We are living six, seven people. Seven member of us, no bath, no, er proper toilets and I couldn't get any other flat. I can't buy any flat myself because there is no house for selling in this area. So where I have to live?! We have to be squatting. We can’t stay on the street with a little kid. We are – therefore Bengali people have to do these things. (15min 04secs)

Figure 4.2 Kadir pictured here in ‘A Safe Place to Be’ (BFI Archives)
His frustration was nested in an understanding which surfaced repeatedly in his interview; that he had ‘long family links’, he was a ‘legal citizen’, a ‘long-term worker’, ‘a taxpayer’ and ‘resident of the local community’, all of which was denied by the council who he believed treated him and other Bengali families as unwelcome arrivals, a narrative premised on popularised 1970s colonial amnesia (El Enany 2020). The state deprivation was matched by the ‘khobis’ white boys who had responded with a hail of bricks and stones that shattered every glass panel in the front of house space, and then by the repeated threats of the estate manager.

This interaction in their front of house space would have been entirely at odds with their home experiences in rural Sylhet. As outlined in Chapter 2, the *bari* – or rural dwelling that both Kadir and Sufia had experienced, was organised around a concentric, zonal system which regulated who was permitted to approach the dwelling (Gardner 1995, Ghafur 2002). The family’s privacy and security were guarded not by the convention of glass windows and front doors but by the social rules that directed who was permitted in that space. Windows on the other hand, have a different liminal quality, where those on the inside generally have the capacity to select the level of filter for where the ‘public space of ‘outside’ is supposed to finish and the private space of the home start’ (Burrell, 2014 152). In the case of Kadir and Sufia, and many hundreds of other Bengali migrants, the racialised expectations of who ‘belonged’ to the neighbourhood, could not be secured by the front of house spaces. The breaking of windows meant that the racial hostility of the street outside crashed quite literally into the space they had moments earlier claimed, immediately rendering it a space of vulnerability and threat. Kadir’s response was to take up a *dha*, and to emerge from the flat to threaten the boys, who in this instance quickly dispersed, but who remained regular perpetrators of violence and intimidation, calling his children ‘Pakis’ and telling them to ‘go back home’.

This angry exclusion was littered in many of the archival sources I found and included letters of complaint to local newspapers and tenant petitions organised by whole estates. One example states: ‘*we the tenants would like to make it plain that we do not want any more Asians on the Digby Estate... All we want to do is to live in peace on the Estate with our own kind and colour and for our children to have a safe play place to play in.*’ The letters pages of local newspapers offered similar sentiments, that Bengali migrants were unwelcome and alien to the East End:

---

13 L/THL/A/31/1/3 Health and Housing management committee 1973-1974
It has taken the British people many years to evolve our present culture where it is generally regarded that one family per house is quite sufficient, then along come the immigrants to whom three, four and five families is nothing unusual. They then turn what were recently quiet respectable streets into overcrowded slums.

Am I a racialist? Well if a racialist is someone who is sick and tired of seeing British people living in hostels for the homeless and the immigrants flooding in, then I am a racialist.

If a racialist is someone who is fed up with being told that our schools and classrooms are overcrowded and then sees the playgrounds full of immigrant children then I am a racialist.

It would do our politicians well to remember that you can only sweep a certain amount of dirt under the carpet before someone falls over the lump.

The lump is now swelling ominously. (1968)

There is a clear prioritisation of the needs of the ‘British people’, above what is framed here as the illegitimate claims of the Bengali migrant community. It is also interesting to note that Bengali families are implied to possess a primitive culture and that the overcrowding they experienced was deemed to be a matter of choice and a cultural norm, rather than a housing crisis they suffered. This is in sharp contrast to how many participants described the expansive dwelling space they were accustomed to in rural Sylhet (something I return to in Chapter 5). The sentiments of the letter concur with the rocks and stones that crashed through the windows of Kadir and Sufia’s squatted home. They express anger that the social provisions to which the white British community felt entitled - were being depleted by this undeserving group of migrants. This stands in direct contrast to Kadir’s claim that he and his family had an accrued investment and therefore a right to these social resources (Anderson 2013).

Sufia (pictured in figure 4.3), Abdul Kadir’s wife, had settled in London as a reluctant migrant. Her daughter’s illness had left her with little choice but to take up residence in the place that could offer the healthcare they needed. Her grandfather, father and uncles had variously worked on English ships and lived in East London long before her birth, but she stressed that she herself had never aspired to being a ‘Londoni’. At the time of the interview, she was around 73 years of age, in good health and like her husband, energetic in her words. She recalled that she was regularly at home alone with her children,

---

14 Tower Hamlets Local History Library and archives ref: LCX00001 (newspaper cuttings file)
whilst Kadir worked in a garment factory on Brick Lane. He worked long hours and she recalls the ‘khobis’ council man regularly banging on the front door: he would ‘come and give me trouble and he would threaten me and I would just threaten him back – he was a little khobis’.

Sufia talked at length about the hardships she faced. She was by then a mother of four young children, and occasionally undertook ‘piece-work’ on a sewing machine at home. She also saw herself as the defender of their squatted home and stated pragmatically, that ‘whatever you are dealt – you have to work with it’. She acknowledged that many migrant women who had limited English language skills would have found the visitations by the local estate officer frightening, but like her husband, she shrugged: ‘I was courageous, I said, I won’t leave! I wasn’t scared – how are you going to live if you aren’t courageous – they’re not giving it to you!’.

This articulation of claiming and appropriating something that she felt she was otherwise owed - and her defiance in those conversations with the estate manager in their doorway was replicated by other Bengali women in her position. It was one of the informal squatter rules that leaving the squat unguarded could result in a council person breaking in and ‘reclaiming’ the flat, and so many Bengali women - at least in the infancy of establishing their squat - were obliged to remain at home to assert the claim to home. Nothing of the representation in the documentary and media archives I recovered, even hints at female voices of opposition nor registers the contestation of belonging that ricocheted in the encounters here.

The Bengali women that appear in Hoffman’s photographs and in the BFI film archives appear fleetingly: as vulnerable and muted characters that are peripheral to the main story. However, the realities of the

---

15 Sufia’s interviews were conducted in Bengali and her words are my translation.
squatted home and the nature of gendered labour patterns (Wilson 1978), meant that women were effectively the day-to-day guardians of the squat and most likely to experience and navigate the state and street violence that circulated those spaces.

Shafia was another female squatter, possibly the most boisterous of the women that I spoke with. She had married her older sister’s husband, when her sister had unexpectedly passed away and gone on to become step-mother to children that were only slightly younger than her. Her husband was significantly older, and she recalls that living in awfully overcrowded accommodation with her (step)children, meant she was impatient to squat, going against her husband’s more cautious approach. She even recalled that she and a female neighbour, both desperate to escape their crowded living conditions, had conspired to approach Terry Fitzpatrick to help them obtain a squat, without their husband’s consent. In the event, her husband initiated the conversation and the family moved into and squatted an empty property on Varden Street. Even here, Shafia\(^\text{16}\) recalls ‘I had a lot of courage, I wasn’t scared’. Like Sufia, Shafia engaged in defiant conversations whenever she was visited by council officials who intermittently came around to demand they vacate the property. She recalls clearly, standing by the front door, engaging in conversations that she laughingly says, she barely understood: ‘What they were saying who knows? But you can tell from their tone, can’t you? But I said what I could. I would just say, “come back another day – I don’t understand”, I did understand – of course I understand, they were telling me to get out, but I just kept saying I didn’t understand! (she laughs).

The encounters in the doors and window spaces highlighted here, reveal something of the highly racialised and gendered contestation for belonging. They indicate that materialist approaches to exploring migrant home, would benefit from extending the research lens from interior objects to material threshold spaces and how, in this case, doors and windows were significant sites for claiming home and belonging. In particular, they highlight how some of the most hidden squatters – Bengali women, were in fact at the very centre of those conversations.

Un-homing encounters

Mashuk Miah arrived in London in 1973 as a 15-year-old boy with his mother and two brothers. The family initially stayed with his sasa’s (paternal uncle’s) family in Weaver House, but they were two families, comprising ten people, squeezed into a three-bedroom flat. He recollects his father who had been in the UK for over a decade by this point had made efforts to apply for council housing only to be told that

\(^{16}\) Shafia’s interviews were conducted in Bengali and her words here are my translation.
without a 52-week proof of continuous residency in Tower Hamlets, they could not even apply to be on the council waiting list. His father’s previous decade long stay was disqualified, because he had made a short trip home, like many other migrant men to accompany his family over. His father then made a strategic decision, one that was designed to navigate their way onto the housing list - through squatting:

Mashuk\textsuperscript{17}: He (His dad) hadn’t stayed here, it was the law at the time, you had to stay here any way or how, for 52 weeks and you have to provide your proof and then we’re gonna take you, after that, in between, we, that's when we went to the squat. Some people suggested it to us, that’s how people were staying, from Desh, they were staying like that so that they got both their 52 weeks proof and they had somewhere to stay. If there was an empty house, they would get the furniture and stay there.’

The five-year Greater London residency qualification, plus a 52-week continuous residence policy in Tower Hamlets, and later housing policies like the ‘Sons and Daughters\textsuperscript{18}’ policy that was implemented in the late 1980s, prioritised existing tenants. Whilst the policies were presented as fair and equitable, they had a significant and detrimental impact. They specifically impacted the ability for Bengali migrant families (who may well have had at least one member residing in the borough for many decades) to obtain the housing to which they felt they were entitled (see Glynn 2014, 158). The housing allocation system worked to effectively un-home the Bengali community simply by the passive operation of a policy that denied their right to social housing. For example, Mashuk’s father with the support of sympathetic white squatters, went along to a flat he had spotted in the same building, broke in, changed the locks and claimed the space by moving in some beds. Mashuk says that he recalls the family did get an eviction notice early on, ‘they said we have to get out and they would get us out – but we said where can we go – and we said but we are a family, we’re not single – where can we go?’

Apart from this early interaction, Mashuk says that the family were otherwise left alone. He understood that this was because the council simply did not have the resources to deal with the increase in squatters that had emerged simultaneously. He says, we lived there ‘like our own house’. Yet clearly, the squatter status and the uncertainty of their security in their squatted flat impacted their decision-making. The family enjoyed two years of rent-free accommodation. However, they were still determined to secure a permanent tenancy, and so he says his father applied for the housing waiting list once they had been in

\textsuperscript{17} Mashuk’s interview was conducted in Bengali and his words are my translation.
\textsuperscript{18} This was a housing allocation policy that prioritised long-established tenants families and which was seen to have inherently racist outcomes by favouring white tenants (Glynn 2014, 158)
their squat for 52 weeks and reached the qualifying threshold. After a further year, they accepted the
council’s offer to ‘go homeless’, which meant they were placed in temporary hostel accommodation in a
hotel in Finsbury Park before being rehoused to a flat in Bethnal Green.

Unlike the squat which the family found and appropriated on their terms, the council flat they were
allocated moved them out of the Spitalfields area and onto the border nearer Bethnal Green; a short
distance away, but with significant security implications:

Mashuk: ...when we got a flat – after we went homeless, the flat we got – it was in Bethnal Green,
Hollybush House, Hollybush Street. That area – the National Front – that was where they had their
main office...

Shabna: Tell me...

Mashuk: Well, so we had got a flat having gone homeless, it looked okay, and there was a few... what
do you call them, Afro-Caribbean people, there were a few of them, and so we got along with them, we
stayed a few days, and then it turned out that the National Front boys would come in the evening and
would gather around the building, every evening, about er, 60/70 sometimes a hundred boys here, they
would gather around the building. Then it looked like, me and my other brother, they wouldn’t do
anything to us, but if they saw someone older, they would spit on them or they would throw things at
them and swear at them and call them Paki.

Shabna: They didn’t do that to you?

Mashuk: Not to us

Shabna: And why do you think that?

Mashuk: We were young, we might fight back, that’s why. And also, we had a group, we were
friends and we used to come and go and there were a few of us and they would see we had friends,
so that’s why they didn’t mess with us, they were our age, these boys...

One day about 9 o’clock – they came, they had come much earlier, and then about 9-10, the boys
started throwing bricks at our window, the glass in the whole, the whole flat was smashed, every bit
of the flat.

Shabna: And you were inside?

Mashuk: We were inside. We were inside. All smashed. They smashed everything. So me and my
two brothers, we wanted to retaliate, but they said no! Don’t you dare (Shabna: who?) - My mum
and dad, they said don’t go out, but we did, we were young, 17/18, and we threw some things back, but there were nearly 70 of them so it did nothing and our parents were saying, no don’t go out. So after they went, they went and they didn’t come back, and the next day, we left that flat.

Shabna: Every window broken (Mashuk: all broken) And you stayed there that night?

Mashuk: We stayed there that night, we called the police, the police came, at that time not everyone had a phone, our next door - the African people, they called the police, once the boys were throwing, the police came, but the police came with their sirens on and so of course all the boys ran, so no one was there - just us the victims in the house, so they said do you know them, do you recognize them, how could we? There about 100 of them, and they don’t live in this building, these boys, they’re from the outside, just roaming this area.

Shabna: And at this time, are you the only Bengalis in the building?

Mashuk: Yes, we were the first ones.

Shabna: And they didn’t target your African neighbours?

Mashuk: No, just us. We alone were targeted.

Shabna: So you went out in the morning, so where did you go?

Mashuk: We went to another building, whose house did we go to...[long pause]? We went somewhere, we found an empty flat, there were people leaving that flat and we went inside.

Shabna: So squatting again?

Mashuk: Yes, squatting again. Again squatting.

Shabna: So you went in...

Mashuk: Yes, we stayed there a few days. And from there, they didn’t let us stay there like normal like they had before, because the family that had just left, they were going homeless and they had been squatters too, and they hadn’t told us they were being evicted, and that evening we went in, and the next, next day when the workmen came around to clean, they found us people already in there (laughs). They said you have to get out, we won’t accept this, we won’t accept it, you have to get out! We said but where have we to go, this is what happened to us, ask the police, there's a report.

Shabna: And had you told the council?
Mashuk: The council had just said, stay there we will fix it, and we said these boys come here all the time, they will attack us again, how can we stay there like that in that house. And then they said well, we’ll take you homeless.

Mashuk’s family having navigated their way through squatting to a permanent tenancy with the council, found themselves victim to street racism breaching the front of house threshold. In his account, he is aware that the racist hostility embodied in the bricks that crashed through their windows had a very specific target and that their direct, African-Caribbean neighbours, longer-term residents of this estate, were undisturbed. The contrasting treatment of the two families hints at the complexity of racialised dynamics in 1970s London, which I argue is missed in the exclusively class-based analyses of these events (Glynn 2014). Mashuk’s account reveals something of the specific ways in which colonial race ideologies marked out the Bengali community specifically, as the Other. In Mashuk’s case this was experienced as a violent un-homing encounter in the shattering of the windows in his family’s newly acquired home.

In a 1978 episode of *Credo*, an LWT religious affairs series, archived at the BFI, the opening credits begin with the sights and crashing sounds of windows being smashed. A Bengali family of two adults and two children are then pictured, sat on a bed, in front of a large window, with what looks like an olive-green bedsheets covering it, in a makeshift manner (see Figure 4.4). In the scene that follows, the Bengali woman though framed in the initial wide shot is then cut out of view, as the man through a Bengali interpreter explains that their windows were regularly broken by racist neighbours who would ‘throw bricks, bottle, whatever they can get hold of...’ and kick down their front door.

*Figure 4.4 Credo in the BFI archives*
The narrator notes a point similar to that made by Mashuk, that ‘the Bengalis have often seemed far easier targets than other immigrant groups and have been the victim of much greater number of attacks than for example the West Indians in the same area’ (6.00min). The main Bengali interviewee, Gulam Mustafa, Secretary of Brick Lane Jamia Masjid, concurs that this is because Bengali Muslims were a passive and ‘peace loving people’. Dan Jones, a well-known and much respected white anti-racist activist and local youth worker at the time is interviewed offering a similar assessment; reporting that the physical deficiencies of the ‘little Bengali tailor’ as well as their cultural temperament, was part of the problem:

It’s basically the Sylhetis that are copping the brunt of the violence and harassment, they speak little English, they come from a totally different – rural to urban, city...they are people unused to the way of life here, they have a tradition of being very peaceful people, of very non-violent people. In a strange way, the expectation of the lads on the street here, the local kids, is for the men, the boy to show his manhood by fighting back – by hitting, there’s a kind of urge from the host community for people to fight back, people say they respect the West Indian lads, because they can fight – can look after themselves, there’s a kind of urge to violence that’s kind of expected of the Bengali community by the host community in a strange way. (10.00minutes)

The views expressed here reveal the racialised codes of belonging (see Lawrence in CCCS 1982, 72-73), that do not necessarily fit with the idea that belonging was simply “contingent on ‘whiteness’” (Amin 2002, 972). Mashuk’s family were unhomed by the very specific way they were targeted; their windows were shattered, but not the windows of their immediate black neighbour. The ‘West Indian’ community referred to in the extract, certainly did not escape racism, but there was at times an uneasy alliance whereby black young men were able to operate within racially mixed friendship groups, as featured in Daniel and McGuire’s The Paint House (1972) and to coordinate racialised attacks against Bengalis. In this ‘insider’ account of the East End Collingwood gang, the group of mainly white English, but also ‘West Indian’ young men, talk gleefully about their ‘Paki-bashing sprees’, whilst the authors explain this arrangement by stating ‘there was never any physical violence between the mob and West Indians, this is perhaps because of the big build of the West Indians’ (70 emphasis added). Bengalis in contrast to this stereotype, were characterised as physically weak and passive; ideas that vibrate with the colonial ideology of ‘the effeminate Bengali’ which were constructed and utilised as part of the British Imperial domination of India (Dimeo 2002,83). Those ideas that Dimeo identifies as originating as a ‘strategy of British defence against ... growing middle class of educated and erudite Indians’ (ibid) in late nineteenth-century Calcutta, were, I argue, evoked in the bricks that un-homed Mashuk and hundreds of other Bengali families in 1970 East London.
The complex racialized and gendered tapestry evident in the street violence were also intersected by generational differences. Mashuk, recognised that he and his brother were never direct victims of street-based racist violence, pointing out ‘if they saw someone older – they would spit on them or they would throw things at them and swear at them and call them Paki...Not to us...We were young, we might fight back’. Additionally, the racist violence in the window space, instigated not only a predictable terror in the moment, but an ‘emotional drama’ (Burrell, 2014, 152) between the two generations inside. The parents forbade their sons from leaving the safer, though breached inside space of the home, but Mashuk and his young brother refused to listen and emerged to throw, what he accepted were token bricks, back. This generational divergence on how best to navigate racist attacks is an area I revisit in Chapters 5 and 6 where I suggest that this divide was rooted in differing transnational and diasporic identities and home attachments. For Mashuk and his family, the insecurity generated in their front of house space in this incident meant that the family having secured this tenancy after years of housing strategy, were effectively un-homed, and returned to squatting as their escape.

Unlike Kadir, Sufia and Mashuk’s family, who deliberately squatted, Abdul Masabbir and Guljahan (my parents) became squatters quite inadvertently. Along with another couple, the young family paid a Sikh man they thought was a private landlord a sizeable deposit and secured a rent book for number 12 Deal Street, a small, dilapidated house, just off Brick Lane. They came to realise there was a problem. After a few days of moving into their house, council officials visited, inquiring how they had come to enter a council condemned property. This visit was followed by streams of eviction notices that filtered through and were pasted on their front door. Masabbir described how this predicament led to their front of house threshold becoming a doubly tense space. The Sikh ‘landlord’ would keep returning, with a group of ‘goondas’ (thugs) and they would bang on the door demanding ‘rent money’, which the couple now refused to pay.

Masabbir19: ...this man had got a duplicate key and taken our £500 and he used to stay on Roper Street… and he was making money from us people. But I got in big trouble, because I had spent the money on the furniture, I had spent £500, and hearing this, the man who had come in with me, I came home from work and found that he had gone to squat, taking my beds and blankets, right opposite, 18 number, 18 or 20 – I've forgotten, that house is still there. Others had done it, and people had told him no one can get you out, you won’t have to pay £25 rent and you won’t have to put up with that man shouting at you. That man made up his mind and just went. Now I

---

19 Masabbir’s interviews were conducted in Bengali and his words are my translation.
was alone with my wife and also my wife didn’t know English, and I didn’t want to leave my job, that man came, he would come and demand rent and she was scared that she didn’t know any English or what to say or respond.

It is interesting that Masabbir’s co-tenant recognised the ‘rogue’ landlord as a bigger threat to his family’s housing security and decided to leave Masabbir, both £500 out of pocket, to squat in a council property - literally across the road, presumably with the belief that the council was less aggressive in its handling of squatters, than the rogue landlord. This decision left Masabbir’s wife, eldest daughter Rasna, and now a new baby (me), alone in the house for much of the time. Again, there is a gendered experience in that Masabbir’s job as a sous chef in a restaurant in the City, meant that he was out of the house for much of the day and early evening, whilst Guljahan who had taken on home stitching work and had two young children, was now like Sufia and Shafia, at home, by herself. In his account, Masabbir lamented the lack of council housing offered to ‘hardworking, legal migrants’ and accepted that he simply did not possess the English literacy skills he needed to petition his case. He suggested that in the end, it was his wife’s fears that prompted them to leave the squat.

Guljahan, had a different account, as a 20-year-old Bengali migrant woman, she described how happy she had first been when learning that after 6 years of marriage and having stayed with her in-laws at their village residence, she was leaving to come to London to join her husband.

Guljahan: I was happy, I was really happy, I'm going, I don’t have to do this work anymore (laughs)! (Shabna: So you came here happy?) Yes, yes! But when I came here I thought - oh my God, where have I come, I can’t go home to Khujar Khola (her family village) anymore! When I came here I didn’t like it, but when I left (Sylhet), I was so happy to come after all those attempts to get entry, everyone was happy, everyone was happy I was coming.

Just before she left, she took a photograph with her mother-in-law and her first child, Rasna (see Figure 4.5) and it is significant that the standard studio backdrop used for the photo, is a picture of a ship; a nod to the long shipping connection between Sylhet and East London referred to in Chapter 2 (Adams 1987).

---

20 Guljahan’s interviews were conducted in Bengali and her words are my translation.
Guljahan described her excitement at leaving Sylhet, mainly, she says, because she disliked working in her husband’s household. The family was an affluent farming family, and whilst most of the work was done by labourers, during the harvest season, extra work had to be completed quickly, and everyone in the family would be called upon to ensure the grain was threshed on time. Ironically, their move to Deal Street in London, was partly motivated by the fact that Guljahan would be close enough to the garment factories of Brick Lane and could have piece-work delivered to the house. Noting this economic activity reiterates the role of gendered labour on housing choices (Kershen 2005, 157). This subverts the trope of Bengali women fixed inside the home and shows that some of this domestic fixity was not simply because of traditional gender roles, but because women had become active economic migrants – and in Guljahan’s case, was earning to send remittances to supplement those earned by her husband.

There is also a gendered element to how Masabbir ‘s sense of pride relies on it being his wife’s fears that had meant that they decided to leave the squat and forego any hope of recovering the ‘key money’ that had been paid. Guljahan’s account on the other hand, suggested that her husband was just as anxious about the hostile interactions that took place at the door. The insecurity in their front of house threshold invaded their sense of wellbeing and deprived them of feeling ‘at home’. Both participants recalled how worried they became about whether they could withstand the pressure they experienced in this space.

Figure 4.5 Family photograph taken in 1975, just before Guljahan migrated to London.
Guljahan recounts how her husband was intimidated by the arguing, and that the rogue ‘landlord’ and his goondas would arrive at all times of the day and night and bang loudly on the door and loiter outside their house. Part of their discomfort was also ‘shorom’, - the shame of the situation - the ‘landlord’s’ threat was that he would break down the door and throw their belongings out on to the street. Guljahan recounts as well, that they thought that the council with the repeated eviction notices that were posted through their letterbox and that were pasted on the front door and windows, would eventually involve a police intervention, and that they would remove all their belongings from the property to evict them. This certainly was not an unfounded fear. The Race Today magazine that documented the Bengali housing crisis carried this story:

Case 6: On August 15, Bethnal Green police led by Inspector Eatherton, broke down the door of a first floor flat in Arthur Deakin House, Woodseer Street, E1 and physically evicted Mr Sunahahr Ali and Mr Fazlu Miah and their families who had squatted the flat 24 hours earlier. The police had been called by the GLC caretaker of Arthur Deakin House and by a white tenant on the ground floor who did not want Bengali squatters moving into the building. The two people who complained came into the flat with the police who proceeded to put the belongings and furniture of the family onto the balcony and board up the empty flat. (Race Today, Asians and the Police. (December 1976/January 1977, Race Today Journal JOU/1/1/89))

The front of house space was clearly experienced as a site of un-homing, not only did it not observe the cultural etiquette of the rural Sylheti dwelling, but the loud and hostile attention drawn to them as squatters was something that deprived Masabbir and Guljahan of security and their sense of dignity. Though squatting was not a criminal matter at the time, the couple were unsure of their legal position and having heard stories like those reported in the Race Today journal, where the contents of the home were literally spilled out on to the street, they felt that these threats were unassailable. After about nine months of constant harassment, my parents were effectively un-homed by the experiences and fled the ‘accidental’ squat. They had experienced their front of house space as a conflictual, un-homely space, and found the ‘drama’ there a source of embarrassment. Both the council’s eviction notices and the rogue landlord circulating that space meant that they found their position in the house untenable and instead took reprieve in the hard comfort of a floor in a flat, on the other side of London.
Front of house conflict and collective resistance

What Masabbir and Guljahan lacked was access to a network within the community. The isolation they experienced was, however, an uncommon experience. Most participants reported that being part of a wider squatter community gave them confidence and, in many ways, added a level of security to their front of house experiences. Although it started with ‘just individual families breaking into derelict houses that dotted the area’ (Glynn 2014, 121), by the mid-1970s, this took a different turn. With the number of families squatting increasing and the prominent involvement of a white squatter activist Terry Fitzpatrick, the housing issue came to the attention of a group of Black Power activists called the Race Today Collective. In doing so, the sporadic instances into a loosely organised squatters’ movement (Reeve 2009). Race Today activists purported to ‘advance the struggle for Black Power, the fight for women’s liberation, and the anti-colonial campaign to free the Third World’ (Field 2019, 1). This collective included a small number of activists who went on to have considerable influence in the activist space, including Darcus Howe, Farrukh Dhondy and Mala Sen (see Figure 4.6 for an example of a cover of the journal).
Their stated objectives were to support grass roots campaigning, and in December 1975, they decided to weigh in on the Bengali housing crisis, writing ‘we do not promise a bloody revolution...only a good fight’ (Race Today December 1975, JOU 1/1/78). It is interesting to note that none of these activists were Bangladeshi-Bengali – though Mala Sen as an Indian-Bengali, spoke formal Bengali giving her the advantage of communication. These non-Bengali activists identified Terry as an uneasy ally, for although he was sceptical about the Black power ideology of the group, he was also the most suitable – English speaking entry point, into the housing struggle for the Race Today activists. The culmination of these activists’ interest and the grassroots squatters was the creation of the Bengali Housing Action Group or BHAG, in spring 1976. As an acronym, it has two different but equally appropriate meanings, for it can mean ‘share’ or with a slightly different intonation, ‘tiger’.

Figure 4.6 Race Today journal cover (September 1974, JOU/1/1/63)
The front of house space remained important in the context of organised squatting, but where in the other incidents that space was a site of confrontation between the *individual* family and the state officials or street racists, the affiliation with BHAG brought with it the wider support they actively offered. All families who were assisted into squats were given a simple document to have by the front door with telephone numbers listed in case of emergency. Khosru Miah a squatter himself and a BHAG activist recalled one such incident:

> We squat that family in the afternoon, we move him there’ and then by the evening ‘he rang, and straight away all of us go and get him out of there and when we go there we saw so many stone in his house – all his glasses are broken...we go and rescue him and after that I think we put him somewhere in Christian Street or somewhere, I don’t know – I can’t tell you exactly in details – it’s quite a long time ago – that’s how we used to face the racialism and every time you - in one building if you saw two or three Asian people there had to be some problem there.

As stated already, the act of breaking windows was not an organised racist campaign. However, it was universally translated as an act that denied the Bengali family, the safety and privacy that was sought in a new home and was thereby an act of un-homing targeting Bengali families specifically. The family that Khosru referred to, unlike Masabbir and Guljahan felt part of a network of squatters and were able to call on BHAG’s support. The security of the front of house space in the context of BHAG instigated a collective response with the family’s immediate ‘rescue’, and relocation.

Before I met him, Khosru had been described to me by other participants as the ‘Bengali giant’. He had assisted them with squatting and physically defending the community in violent clashes and organised vigilantism (see Figure 4.7 for a photo of him in 1976). Now, he is an unassuming 74-year-old man, who walks slowly with the aid of a walking stick, his face graced with a billowing grey beard (see Figure 4.8). Khosru explained that he came to squat after an older white man, in the leather factory where he worked, asked him why he constantly moved from one house to the next. Khosru had explained that he could only secure short stays in shared rooms and was moved on when the landlords or sub-letting landlords needed the space for someone ‘closer’ in kinship. The man evidently felt some sympathy for this predicament and took Khosru to a vacant property and showed him how to break in:

> Khosru: ...I think it’s 1970 something....’70 something – I don’t know. Then after that I was – when I squat – do squatting myself – then I help lots of people, to squat.

> Shabna: So what did you think when this man first said squatting – was it something you had heard of before?
Khosru: No, I don’t heard of before, then he..

Shabna: And he was an English man?

Khosru: He’s an English man. Then he told me I’ll show you how to get a flat and all these things and you can have your own flat, so that’s how, he, he, he do the squatting for one flat for me. He showed me what to do, so I said yeah.

Shabna: What did he do?

Khosru: He just stand in front of the door and he hit door with his bum and it open – there's a, Yale lock, so lock is open, so he change the lock and give the key and said this is your flat...and he said, he told me that be careful. When you ...open the door, straight away change the lock, otherwise will bring trouble. I said, okay. After that I helped so many people, I don’t know how many people I do – I helped so many people to get their own flat and all these things and then.... once, yeah then, suddenly I don’t know how I met Terry and he was talking about....I don’t know, I can’t tell you actually how I met Terry – I met Terry, Terence John Fitzpatrick his name is, I met him, and he told me all about this. Then, yeah, after that he asked me to go somewhere, when I go there, I saw Farrukh Dhondy, Mala Dhondy, Terry and … I think Darcus Howe, yeah, I think Darcus Howe is there as well. So, we talk about these things, then also, I think there was a solicitor or somebody – I don’t know, I can’t tell 100%, I meet al.,l these people, so then we decided to do something for the – Bangladeshi people and all these things and then they ...put this name the Bengali Housing Action Group and they, there the work started. Then we squat one whole building – in Woodseer Street – which is called Pelham building.
Figure 4.7, Khosru featured holding Mala Sen’s left arm on an anti-racist demonstration, in Race Today June 1976

(JOU/1/1/84)

Figure 4.8 Khosru Miah February 2019 (photo taken by me)
Khosru’s description of the ease with which he had been guided to squat stands in contrast to the years of housing hardship he had experienced. He gathered that the inaction of the housing authorities to Bengali housing needs was embedded in racist indifference. This assessment forged his connection to Race Today and BHAG. He became good friends with both Farrukh Dhondy and Mala Sen, (who he is pictured with in Figure 4.7, at an early anti-racist demonstration in June 1976) and talked modestly about his ‘community service’. He argued that squatting seemed the only sensible measure to take when the housing authorities refused to take the housing needs of the Bengali community seriously, whilst at the same time, boarding up and damaging functional properties, to prevent squatting.

The Race Today editorial which followed the squatter movement over two years, understood the housing crisis as a clear manifestation of a ‘black working-class’ struggle, and in an article entitled ‘Housing Struggle: The Tiger is on the Loose’ (March 1976), they stated:

‘For years the British state has bought immigrant labour on the cheap, dodging the necessity to house, to skill and reproduce the black labour force from conception to retirement. The presence of organisations such as the Bengali Housing Action Group, begin to put an end to this evasion’ (Race Today 1976, JOU1/1/81)

Though few participants expressed this sentiment as directly as the statement here, all of them, including Khosru, articulated an understanding that as migrants, they offered cheap labour in the garment factories on terms they knew were not attractive to white people. They felt aggrieved and angered by the deleterious manner the local council shirked the Bengali community and their housing needs.

Khosru’s involvement with BHAG, involved ‘opening up’ empty flats and providing the additional support of ‘reinforcement’ if squatter families came under threat either from council officials or ‘neighbourly’ violence. Like the family that they rescued and re-squatted in Christian Street, Khosru recalls that he and Terry were commonly called out to defend families experiencing harassment in their front of house space. The pair acquired a reputation for their boldness and willingness to engage in confrontation. The system relied on a ‘telephone tree’ of communication, whereby telephones based in local cafes would be called in cases of emergency, and groups of young men would be dispatched to provide support to families experiencing the kind of harassment that Guljahan and Masabbir had found so threatening.

Terry was critical to this system. He had moved to East London in 1974 to join friends squatting in Stepney, before moving into his own squat at number 12 Aston Street. He was a builder by trade which meant he
became well known for supporting new squatters as they opened-up properties and needed help to fix them up. As a squatter himself he was also conversant with the legal standing of squatters.

…by certainly the end of 1975, certainly the police have given up being aggressive, very often they wouldn't turn up if somebody phoned up and said, ‘Oh, the squatters have broken in’, they’d just say it’s a civil matter, we've got better things to do. There were too many. What's happening, it's happening every day, somewhere in Tower Hamlets. Somebody was breaking into somewhere and moving in a mattress and then my rule was get the door open, get the kids, the pots and pans, and the mattresses, get them in. That's it. We're in. Occupation. Put the sign on the door and just stand your ground at the door. Doesn't matter who turns up - civil matter - go away. And the GLC might come around and say, ‘oh, you've got to move’ and people would say ‘we're not moving’. And that was it.

Terry’s account highlights the significance of the door both as the obvious point of entry for squatters but also the stage on which the challenge to the squatter occupation would unfold, and where eventually, he argues, that challenge was through the sheer scale of squatting attrition, finally defeated. As a white man of Irish descent, Terry was cognizant of the racialised dynamics involved in the housing exclusion that Bengali families faced, but his was not a politically inspired anti-racist commitment to their cause, rather a pragmatic defence of their right to housing. He described the situation in 1975 as:

…it was like guerilla warfare, people would just say, uh, they'd come around and say, oh, ‘what we're going to do?’ I’d say break in, change the lock put this sign up. Any problems? Give us a ring. Okay? But by the end of ‘76, the council's just given up. They didn't, they didn't try to meet anyone. It was just, just trying to get their own tenants in as quickly as possible.

In our interviews, it was interesting to hear that despite this squatter activism, Terry strongly argued against the idea that there was any ‘kind of conscious political organization’ on the part of Bengali squatters and suggested ‘it was absolute desperation and need’ that animated Bengali squatters. Despite his defence of the migrant community – he was at times disparaging of Bengali squatters, stating for instance that they only came to BHAG meetings because there was a self-interested reliance on the support that was given to them. Glynn (2014) similarly concludes that Bengali involvement was ‘pragmatic rather than ideological’ (122). Both reach these conclusions despite acknowledging that Bengali squatters were not just aware of the racist housing system that had deprived them of housing in the first place, but that this sat in direct tension with their articulated understanding of the long lineage they had with East
London. This included the entitlement accrued through taxes they and their forefathers paid as workers, citizens, and previously, subjects of empire.

In contrast, I argue that by focusing on the front of house threshold we can detect ‘the intimate effects of dispossession’ and the micro-politics that ‘vibrated’ through conversations in the threshold space (Katz 2017, 598). Bengali migrant housing deprivation was implicitly based on discourses that ‘extinguish[ed] the claims of colonised populations to material and temporal and colonial resources’ in the metropole (El-Enany 2020, 220-1), and to which conversely, Bengali migrants felt they and others before them, had invested. On the other hand, Terry and Glynn (2014) understand ‘radicalism’ and ‘conscious politics’ in ways that deprived Bengali migrants the significance of their actions in this contest. As stated in Chapter 2, it is this same sentiment that underpins Vasudevan’s (2017) disinterest in Bengali squatters. I do not dispute that for many Bengali squatters, their priority and immediate concern was directed by the significant housing deprivation they experienced. I am also clear that squatting was a pragmatic response to this desperate situation. However, in line with Bouillon (2018), Milligan (2016) and Wates (1976), I argue that this does not strip them of political significance. In fact, I would argue, quite the opposite. To squat in response to state and street racism were highly political decisions and politically charged homemaking encounters even if they were not immediately iterated as ‘self-consciously articulate[d]’ political dialogues (hooks 1992, 45).

The modest popular coverage there has been of the Bengali squatter movement has not endorsed this view and focused almost exclusively on Terry’s role. In an episode of ‘The Secret History of Our Streets’ (Season 1, Episode 6, 2012), it is ‘Terry’s confrontation with the GLC’ that is heroised, depicting choreographing an otherwise helpless, besieged community. This documentary also refers to ‘King of the Ghetto’ (1986) a dramatisation of events, written by Farrukh Dhondy of Race Today, for the BBC (see Chapter 3) where a fictionalised Terry features as the main character. As a troubled but humanised hero, here again, he is presented in contrast to a generally bland set of Bengali characters and virtually no female Bengali voices.

Returning to Khosru, who squatted long before Terry had arrived in Stepney, he was clear that Bengali families squatted not just because of housing deprivation and the availability of empty properties, but because like Kadir and Sufia, they believed they were entitled to that housing. One of the most ostentatious of those claims was made when BHAG squatted Pelham Buildings, an old tenement block with approximately 42 dwellings. Pelham appears in ‘A Safe Place To Be’ (BFI Archives); long, sweeping shots of the building with a camera angle that makes the tenement block loom ominously, do not depict
Pelham as an inviting place to stay (see Figure 4.9). Forman (1989) describes the conditions in the flats as ‘pretty dreadful’ (82). Clare Murphy, Terry’s partner and youth worker at the time, recalls that the GLC owned building was empty because the previous, mainly white working-class tenants ‘had fought to get a compulsory purchase order on the grounds it was unfit’. Health and Housing management committee reports from 1972 detail tenant deputations raising ‘bad staircase lighting, dumping of furniture, infestations of fleas, rats etc...’ as part of their campaign for wholesale rehousing. But despite these obvious issues, Terry recalls, ‘It was heaven for your family’ and, ‘It had an inside kitchen, a toilet. The gas, water and electricity were on...I mean as far as Bangladeshis was concerned, Pelham buildings was 10 times better than living on some estate in Poplar.’ His words reiterate the safety element that was so highly prized in a home, especially at a time when attacks on the front of house in more isolated locations were part of the everyday un-homing interactions experienced by the Bengali migrant community. Terry and Khosru thought that at its most populous, about 300 Bengali people squatted in Pelham Buildings. Eventually, as part of the settlement reached with the GLC in 1978, all of them were offered formal tenancies (Glynn 2014, 124).

Interestingly, Pelham Buildings had been renamed in the 1920s, its original name had been Schwartz Building and was inhabited by Jewish tenants. Terry recalls first arriving with Bengali squatters and noticing that ‘every single doorway had the mezuzah’ and ‘when the Bangladeshis got settled down, they

---

21 (L/THL/A/31/1/2 Health and Housing management committee 1972-1973)
said ‘what’s that?’ ‘what’s that?’ So, I’ve got a screwdriver and prised it off – I’ve opened it up and shown them it’s Hebrew – Jew Man writing’. The mezuzah may have been left by tenants long gone by the time the Bengali squatters moved in - but it was a poetic reminder of the importance of doorways as thresholds of encounter. Alexander’s (2014) work on the mezuzah and the ‘construction of social spaces in antiquity’ (100) explores the way that '[P]racticing the ritual of mezuzah was one way of negotiating the meaning of the built environment...in arbitrating the boundary between inside and outside and in giving meaning to space on either side of the boundary’ (102). This symbol on the outer door of each flat was not only reminder of communities of people that had moved through these spaces before them, but also trace of the ways that those communities might have practiced rituals that ‘stake[d] a claim for Jewish presence in the public spaces of a multicultural urban environment’ (107). Here were Bengali migrants claiming that same space, in a very public display of squatting, many decades later.

In this section, I have set out how migrant homemaking in the context of a squatter movement is usefully explored by attention to the front of house space. The doors and windows were, I argue, significant sites of political contestation and allow exploration of highly racialised ideas about migrant belonging and entitlement – especially as it was contextualised in post-colonial 1970s East London. I have shown how attending to doors and windows allows attention to encounters that were essentially about claiming home and highlighted the gendered nature of those interactions. I also explored the twin and mutually reinforcing state and street racism that visited the doors and windows, which made them sites of unhoming, and again drew attention to how narratives of exclusion were based around gendered ideas that reach back to colonial tropes about Bengali passivity. The final point I developed was how those front of house spaces also generated and linked to wider squatter organisation and how the network of support that evolved registered the doors and windows of squatted homes as critical lines of collective defence. By employing a postcolonial lens, it is possible to detect in all these encounters the tension between popular colonial amnesia that erased the long Bengali connection to the East End, diminishing their rights to social resources and, in contrast, Bengali migrants defending those spaces and their actions based on a sense of accrued entitlement. Keeping a transnational focus allows attention to the disjunction of the front of house experienced in London, compared to the rural Sylheti context, which would have previously mapped their experiences. The liminality of the space is precisely the opportunity for the navigation and mediation of these contested ideas of belonging in that threshold space; like the mezuzah in Pelham Buildings, the doors and windows in the Bengali squatted home became a threshold for arbitrating who had the right to make home in 1970s East London.
4.3 Front of house as a space of cultural conciliation and transnational continuity

‘...we should live the way people expect us to live... if not better.’ Mahmoud Hassan

This section explores how the front of house threshold was a site for cultural negotiation curated to protect transnational homemaking practices that sought to recreate the Sylheti home. Drawing on McMillan’s work where he recognises the West Indian front room as ‘transcultural contact zone’ (2009, 145) and a space of ‘creolization’ and thinking about Bhabha’s ideas about liminal spaces and mimicry, I explore how the front of house represents something of the ‘ambivalent relationship between colonisers and colonised’ (Blunt & Wills 2000, 188). In contrast to McMillan, I argue that on the one hand, the windows and curtains of Bengali migrant homes represented an attempt at cultural conciliation and assimilation - to mimic the cultural style of their English neighbours. However, the front of house threshold was not a ‘straightforward reproduction’ because it acted as a mask for an internal space that remained committed to transnational cultural continuation in terms of food and language practices. In this way the front of house threshold was effectively a ‘fissure of colonial rule’ and became a dialectical space of both conciliation and continuity (Blunt and Wills 2000, 188).

Unlike all the Bengali women who feature as silenced subjects, the voices of local white women appear very prominently in the documentary ‘A Safe Place To Be’ (1980) (See Chapter 3). Their conversations about their Bengali neighbours reveal a complex set of observations on their part. They flit from disdain and dislike to gentle understanding and even admiration:

You know when they buy a bit of curtain to go in the flat. Well, they buy one bit, either it goes right across and that stays like that there for ages or else they get two but they knot ‘em and tie ‘em up. Y’know, they never make them look nice - it’s they don’t understand, because they never had curtains and things. Do you know what I mean? And I think if they’re shown... because I’ve been in a few, they’ve asked us how do you get this and where do you get it? You go in their homes, they're better than ours (11minutes, 40 seconds).

In another part of the documentary, a younger white woman recalls how it was through an uncovered window, that she was able to glimpse a little of the interior of her Bengali neighbours’ flat and how they managed the space:

[there was a]...flat on the end with about 12 men, there wasn’t any women at the time, must have been back in Bangladesh and 12 of them used to go to work and another 12 of them would come
home and sleep, and you could see through the window all of the bunk beds, where they used to sleep... (she laughs). (12mins)

The extracts reveal something of the curiosity that can be focused on the front of house space. The conversations link to what Garvey (2005) calls the ‘pedestrian gaze’ and how this gaze can act as an intrusion but also as a conduit for satisfying curiosity by peering into domestic space. In the first segment, the women’s conversation may superficially be about the niceness of the curtains; ostensibly they were talking about how the netting should be gathered and dressed either side by thicker fabric, and cleaned regularly, but this can also be read as the ‘context for sameness recognition’, or as was in this case, ‘a perception of significant difference’ (161).

Chunu Meah, a young activist, who started the prominent youth activist group, Bangladesh Youth Movement, remembers:

Oh, other people were squatting, squatting all over East London... I mean, you made an application, you'll be waiting years and years before something comes up. I don't know what it was. But what was the reason, but I mean, there were empty flats. But it was not been offered to Bengali. And they were making excuse, like Bengalis don't know how to live. They have this way of doing the curtains, the windows. And you can tell if it's a Paki house. And that's what it was, you know... but for God's sake, give them a chance to transform you know, it’s a new environment...

And he goes on to say:

It was, it was it was literally unfair. It was because I mean I remember it was John something – there was so many other councillors, I forgot that name now, I mean, they would come on a TV or not some, you know, news and all that, all these Bengalis don’t know how to live, they don’t know how to mix, they keep themselves isolated, you know, but you got to understand the concept these people just come from so and so and so, there’s a language barrier, there are religious you know, barrier - and you expecting to just mingle with you in the very next day. So, they were just like, very negative, you know...portraying the Bengalis that they don’t know how to live.

Chunu’s reference to knowing ‘how to live’ suggests that Bengali migrants struggled to conform to the front of house aesthetic demands; to live the way that their English neighbours did in their dressing of windows and that this was a contributor to what Lawrence (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982) described as the Asian community being ‘viewed as the most alien’ of black communities (73 emphasis added). Horst and Messing (2006) in their study of visual struggles in a multi-ethnic Dutch neighbourhood, discuss how the front of house space or the window, in particular, is a ‘borderland.
between public and private domains’ and can tell us about the way ‘different groups and individuals relate to their neighbourhood and their cultural and social environment’ (23). In that study, Dutch respondents who viewed ‘open curtains’ as the Dutch way, ‘linked certain styles of curtains to foreignness’ and interpreted them ‘as a negative symbol of deviance and a rejection of neighbourhood customs’ (32). They were especially critical of long and non-transparent net curtains in migrant homes for being obstructive and registered them as a wilful ‘withdrawal from the neighbourhood’ There is a recognition here that there were very different understandings between communities about what was communicated by styles of curtain dressing (ibid).

Curtains that obstructed or concealed might be viewed as unfriendly and even hostile when the custom is to have them frame the ‘view in’, as an inviting ‘front stage’ (Horst & Messing 2006), but Bengali migrants whose housing architecture did not necessarily conform with these ideas, navigated this terrain with different priorities. Hajera, the infant squatter who was mentioned earlier on as the daughter of Kadir and Sufia, was also interviewed as part of my research. She was one of the youngest participants and whilst only a young girl during her family’s squatting episode, had vivid memories of her childhood home. Hajera talked about curtains in terms of their aesthetic and cultural symbolism, but she also referenced the security they provided:

In the East End, I think many families would be worried about leaving their curtains open. I was in fact told off if I left a curtain open by my own parents. My parents were less comfortable about their place in white society and were therefore still reserved so they would close their curtains. Later in life I inherited that notion that you would always close curtains, and realised that other people left them open - they were much more comfortable about the interiors of their homes being viewed... Nothing to be ashamed of. Also, when you are worried about petrol bombs and stones smashing windows, you tend to keep the doors and the curtains shut.

The attention of the outside gaze is explicit in Hajera’s words; her parents’ discomfort about their ‘place in white society’ meant that they would use curtains not to frame the view in, but to obstruct it. The motivation seemingly, that what was inside the home would not meet with the approval of the pedestrian gaze. However, her comment also reveals not just a cultural discomfort but a security consideration; closed curtains added a protective layer against the shattering and regular assault of a hostile city. Burrell’s (2014) work develops precisely this idea, that domestic practices are directly ‘contextualized’ through their ‘immediate geography’ (147) and how residents on the inner-city street that was the site of her work were ‘concerned with physically keeping outside forces out of the home’ (152). Her participants described
how they would arrange their furniture away from the windows and doors or evacuate those rooms at the front of house altogether to mediate unwanted external intrusions. The white women in the documentary on the other hand, like the older Dutch respondents in Horst and Melling (2006) interpreted this defensive gesture of having the curtain pulled across, as confirmation of Bengali inability to ‘fit in’ and in turn probably led to increased levels of hostility towards what they described as the ‘Paki house’.

Indeed, that hostility was instrumental in the window dressing practices of other participants. Abdul and Guljahan for example found themselves in a squatted property which had broken front windows. Nonetheless, Abdul explained ‘we didn’t bother with them, they would just get broken again’ explaining why despite their nearly year-long stay in the property, they made a pragmatic decision to leave them broken. Like several other participants, they also expressed ambivalence about investing in the materiality of the property. Guljahan remembered:

   The curtains were ones that were here already – we didn’t change them. They were the ones that were here – it wasn’t worth changing them, we didn’t know if we were staying or going, every day someone would come and say you can’t stay here and so we didn’t change the curtains, they were just net curtains and material – they weren’t nice – but we didn’t change them.

Her explanation for leaving the curtains, despite acknowledging that they weren’t ‘nice’ is related directly to the insecure tenancy of the property. Again, in another interview in ‘A Safe Place To Be’, a generally sympathetic white lady bemoaned the way that Bengali families would fail to make front of house repairs or aesthetic efforts:

   If you look around now, it is Bengalis that live here. Their houses if you go inside, y’know you can eat off their floor, I know that but the outside, they don’t live on the outside and they don’t understand they should keep the outside the appearance of the place, y’know because it makes the place last longer. You know? And it looks nice when people walk through or whatever.(14 minutes 20 seconds)

This white woman interprets the lack of conformity in the front of house space as neglectful of the neighbourhood, which contrasts with how squatters like Abdul Masabbir and Guljahan who felt that the precarity they experienced as squatters made investment in those spaces, irrational. Also, as stated in the previous section, most families experienced the front of house as a space of un-homing. They were therefore unlikely to curate those spaces for their aesthetic quality.
However, the more common experience reported by participants was that Bengali migrants were anxious to achieve some cultural conformity in their front of house spaces. For example, Hajera’s father, Kadir, recalls a time he had to go to court to give a witness statement against a local English lady who had duplicitously accumulated money from Bengali families, promising to buy them the ‘right kind of curtains’:

[ she said]...your curtains aren’t nice, I will get some for you – and so I said okay. She took like £10 or £20 – I can’t remember the exact amount – she didn’t get us anything... she took money and she gave other people in Brun House, but not us...

The woman had apparently amassed a small fortune, defrauding money from local Bengali families on the premise of buying them ‘nice’ curtains. When asked, why they had felt the need to accept this lady’s offer to buy curtains, and why they hadn’t bought them themselves, they both shrugged and explained they did not know the ‘right way’. The couple pointed to the fact that in Sylhet curtains had different functional purpose and were used to separate out space in fluid living quarters. Curtains were generally colourful, light fabric hung across a strip of cord, over doors to demarcate space internally, rather than a common or uniform front of house feature. Windows at the front of rural houses in Sylhet generally have bars and were inset from a covered verandah space, further inset from a large open courtyard space and related to the concentric zonal spaces of the Sylheti rural home (Gardener 1995,26). The front of house space is also spatially different in the Sylheti village where gender roles underpin what is considered an ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ house:

...the ‘Outer house’ corresponds to the ‘male domain’. Female and male zones have opposite character to each other. Male zone (outer house) is the buffer or filter between the private inside and public outside. Privacy in a house with respect to male and female, is maintained in different ways in addition to the physical separation of the two domains. These include behaviour pattern, wilful avoidance, time zoning etc. Hence the boundary between the male and the female zones is flexible and varies according to time, period and occasion. (Hasan 1985, 39-40)

The architectural features of front of house spaces in Sylheti village houses interact with the outside in a much more prescribed way, relying on these concentric zones to establish contact with the ‘public world’ in a way that relies on gender and family proximity to determine access. The margins are therefore spatially thicker and the opportunities for a stranger’s gaze to fall upon a window is mediated by the norms that dictate who is able to come that close to the front of house. Although this is not necessarily the same in Sylheti town houses, or indeed remained the same now, as even rural village homes take on the features of more urban, western-style housing (Gardner 1995), it goes some way toward explaining
the anxiety that participants like Kadir and Safia felt about their capacity to read the cultural aesthetics of curtain practices in London and enlisted rogue people to help them manage that space.

In addition to the families who paid this English woman to help them buy the ‘right curtains’, other participants also invested great diligence in acquiring the ‘respectability’ that was signified in that space. Mahmoud Hassan was a young man when he arrived in 1980. He and his family were not squatters for housing, but along with a group of friends, he squatted an empty flat in an estate in Stepney Green to create a youth centre for Bengali boys in the local area. Mahmoud went into considerable detail describing his father’s very meticulous attention to the curtains in their Stepney Green council flat and his account tells us much, both about the family’s relationship with the outside world and his relationship with his father:

Mahmoud: I think one of the curtains still we have – Mahera (his sister) kept it. Yeah, so we bought that, my dad actually bought that from Sunday market. However, that curtain came from a five star hotel and it was very expensive curtain and er my dad bought it and he goes, if I were to buy this from, from normal, normal shop, I wouldn’t even know where to go. Secondly, I wouldn’t be able to afford this. So he, he I remember he actually dry cleaned it and we all put it up and it was a really good quality curtain and it's green, curtain thick, with the lining behind it...So my dad he used to do a lot of things around the house. He was er...my mum's handyman, you know like normally, dad’s from back home, don't do that. They're laid back. But my dad was set like - we used to have, we had to do a lot of things. Wash the carpet and wash the stairs and leave - clean everything. Yeah, people used to use the lift as the toilet you know, in those days, only our lift was smelling nice. We had to clean it. But still people did that, but we used to, to clean it. So, curtain was, we had net curtain and thick curtain and I mean, thicker curtain in every room. I still remember the stripy floral curtains.

...I do remember, I do remember - actually don't want to say it in a bad way. But our people mostly were bachelors prior to late ‘70s ‘80s. So when families came, families came and we don't have curtain culture back home, as such, but because we lived in the city, we did have, - not net curtain, we had thick curtain, in the evening we used to pull it, pull the curtain, but most of the time in the summer those curtain needs to be taken off because your windows are open, there is no point. So we had curtain in the sitting room I remember, and in Comila. But when you came here my dad used to actually make a point of that we, we should live the way people expect us to live, so that's what he used to say - if not better. So that's what he, he did mention that, .... he did mention that, he used to wash it on iron it and put it up again. And it was mostly my job, was mostly my job but he used to buy it. I still remember he took me many times to this curtain shop, we would change
curtain, every couple of years, I think more often than I do mine, I also bought very expensive
curtain, but I don't change it as often, but my dad used to change, we used to buy from market,
market stalls, Petticoat Lane Market, this Jewish gentleman he used to have these curtain and my
dad used to go and buy them, measuring it and all this nitty gritty I used to do, and I used to hang
them and there were and hooks on both ends.

...people think, they used to think, our people think, why gather - just put one straight and then
another straight behind it. But no, we had gathering, I used to, wait it was two and a half times, I
still remember that - two and a half-length. So you have to buy two and half, if it’s one meter you
have to buy two and a half meters. So, as I said, I'm very observant and my, my dad gave me the
responsibility and he still does.

Mahmoud’s account provides useful insights for understanding migrant homemaking. He clearly
recognises that part of the difficulty was that Bengali migrants did not have a ‘curtain culture’ as he
described it, and so his father’s domestic practice of dressing his window appears ‘actively made in
cognizance of the social gaze’ (Garvey 2005, 167). Whilst the material turn has focused on objects and
artefacts within the home, Mahmoud’s account suggests his father understood that the front of house
space was, what Horst and Melling (2006) describe as ‘a device for embedding oneself in certain social
collectives’ and his father’s instruction that ‘we should live the way people expect us to live... if not better’,
represents careful cultural ‘impression management’. McMillan (2009) argues this presentation is ‘not a
simple imitation of white bias and ideals...but rather the consequence of having to negotiate dominant
ideologies and regimes of power that objectified race in the realm of the domestic’ (153). The white
women in the documentary noted how Bengali houses used net curtains but strung them across as one
flat piece, they observed this domestic practice as a failure of imitation and thus read it as a marker of
incompatibility. Mahmoud’s father on the other hand went to some len
gth to work within his ‘domestic
pragmatics’ (148) and purchased expensive ex-five-star hotel curtains in the local second-hand market,
dry cleaned to dress that front space and to cover perhaps ‘what the home didn’t have’ (149)

Whilst Mahmoud’s recollections are the most elaborate of all participants, they find resonance with the
wider experience of participants like Kadir and Sufia. They both expressed some concern that their front
of house spaces should be curated to reflect some cultural conciliation with the help of those who were
more familiar with the aesthetic codes. At the same time however, their practice is evocative of Bhabha’s
idea of ‘mimicry’, in which ‘colonised subjects adopt the coloniser’s habits, lifestyle and values’ and yet
that ‘adoption is never a straightforward reproduction’ (Blunt & Wills 2013, 288) because all participants
had a firm commitment to homemaking practices inside the home that prioritised transnational cultural
continuity. Hall (1993) and McMillan (2009) explore a similar dialectic of identity and domestic practices that navigate both appropriation and subversion. Returning to the idea of thresholds and margins, it appears that Bengali migrants by trying to practice the outward signs of cultural conciliation, were at the same time nurturing a protective space inside that allowed them to maintain cultural continuity - a continued attachment to Sylheti home.

Curtains as cover for cultural continuity

Mahmoud recalled that despite his father’s careful attention to maintaining outward cultural conformity, he was also very strict about speaking in Bengali at all times within the house and went to great lengths to ensure that grocery shopping was able to sustain an authentic Bengali diet. Hajera also remembered, with some grievance that speaking Bengali was an unequivocal rule in her home:

...there was a very strong emphasis in my family to make sure that we did speak Sylheti and didn't forget it and tried to think about a Bengali heritage. Erm... I think it would have been better to have erm, clearer focus and for my dad to have been able to explain why it was important – but he never rationalised it – he just told us of when we spoke English. He really, really told us off when we spoke English – I found that quite hard.

Similar experiences are repeated by all participants that were young children or teenagers in a family squatted home. Maryum, whose family squatted on Romford Road, just behind the Royal London Hospital after a family dispute made them homeless, remembers:

...we all spoke Bengali at home – but my kids can't speak Bengali.... I actually tell my parents off, because they used to speak Bengali to the children, and then they suddenly stopped and started speaking English, and I said I was relying on you to keep that, really... alive. They’re like ‘oh children these days’. I can speak Bengali, my dad actually insisted we speak nothing but Bengali in the house and basically I knew Bangladesh was home, but I hadn't been there.

In this dialectical performance between the internal and front of house spaces of the home, we are again reminded that these boundaries are relational spaces, porous and permeable and that efforts at keeping these spaces distinct were breached by ‘leaks’ between these spaces. For example, several white participants in Dench et al., (2006) described their resentment with neighbours speaking foreign languages which disrupted their sense of homeliness. One of their participants recalled: ‘When Asians are talking their own language and you hear them when you go down the stairs or in the streets, it’s like whispering behind your back because you can’t understand anything’ (65). The participant here felt that
an alien migrant group was invading the familiar space on their local estate and that ‘old Bethnal Greeners’ were being mercilessly ‘dispossessed of the comforts of family based – community life’ (ibid 31).

As one of the cultural markers that spilled spilt out of the front of house, language was also commented on by white people in the documentary sources and was a consistent source of frustration and indeed contempt. Bengali was perceived as an inferior language (Lawrence in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982, 73) and as a failure of cultural conformity. This links to Valentine et al (2008) who look at how language can define people as being ‘in place’ or out of place’ (387). I suggest that there was a strong transnational inheritance in this attachment to language. For Bengali migrant families in the context of having just secured independence in part based on a Bengali language movement, they were prepared to attempt to curate the front of house space to conform with cultural practices of their neighbours, however, the inside space of the home was committed to maintaining cultural continuity, even where this was the source of tension and conflict. In some senses this relates to Tolia-Kelly’s reference to the ‘diasporic journey’ where artefacts or in this case, home language are ‘imbue[d] with a heightened significance’ (2014a, 325), because they are remembered, or practiced, in a racially and culturally hostile landscape. This commitment to retaining Bengali language was also tied to the transnational homemaking imaginary and the idea that many participants had at the time, that they would return home with their families having secured the remittance fortune they had set out to accumulate, and that their children needed to develop or retain the Bengali language skills that would smooth that return transition (I return to these ideas in Chapter 6).

One of the other main complaints of white neighbours was the smells produced by Bengali food and cooking habits, again a white woman in ‘A Safe Place to Be’ states:

Some curries are different to others, some got that right pongy smell. And it's like Jews, if you go past some Jewish houses when they're cooking fish on a Thursday for the weekend, it's vile smell, it's a certain fish, on your one certain fish, and it's a very bad smell, but it can't be helped. You do tend to get a terrible smell of our cabbage when it's cooked. And yeah, I love our cabbage, I love any green stuff, but still when it's cooking - I've felt horrible.

This somewhat ambivalent statement is kinder than examples in Dench et al., (2006) where participants complained that ‘the smell of their cooking is awful and it comes right through the air vents’ or ‘there’s a Pakistani moved in. You get the smell of curry all the time’ (173). The leaking of smells out of and into homes disrupted the façade; the attempts at cultural conciliation were frayed by domestic food practices.
that could not be concealed within the curated exterior. Soyful Alom, a young squatter in Nelson Street, registers the impact of these ‘homely smells’ on the wider neighbourhood and even goes as far as to accept liability:

Soyful: …where there is some indigenous population and because of our certain situation and behavior and approach and lifestyle, the white indigenous didn't like very much, so the racism and the attacked on the street and letterbox all this is become an issue. But, attacking someone in your own home or your the street obviously this is a racism factor, no doubt about it, but we have certain problems as well, our lifestyle our food, our clothing our behaviour and, and so on...

...but home, is somewhere you feel safe, you want to live after hard work you wanted to rest, you wanted to see your family, you wanted to sleep well, cook, eat rice.

Some of our behaviour, in this context, for example if you are frying the hootki (dried fish) in a small flat, smells bound to escape ...so these are the kind of issues and we have many other different issues, similar other new communities coming down and settling, because – they used to take hootki and so on – obviously they cannot change it overnight, and they have to have it.

Soyful’s account reaches back to when he arrived in London in 1977 as an 18-year-old boy to join his father who had been in London since 1965. He and his family squatted on Nelson Street having arrived to a single overcrowded room for accommodation and failing to secure council housing. His account of the smells that seeped out of Bengali homes reveals a complicated view. He suggests that the racism that was inflicted in that front of house space was inspired by the persistence of Bengali cultural food practices that the ‘indigenous’ population ‘didn’t like very much’ and he links racist actions both on the street and ‘through the letterbox’ to a view that ‘we have certain problems’.

Participants in Daniel and McGuire’s work (1972) confirm that they were certainly aware of these cultural markers that made Bengali migrant homes stand out: Let’s face it, immigrants do make the place slummy ‘cause in their countries they don’t live the same as us they eat different food and everything and it must smell, and they do different things like the way they put their rubbish out and all that. (22) However, despite Soyful suggesting that perhaps some of these food practices should have been moderated for their new environment, later in the interview, he talks about home as a place of retreat and one where you would want to ‘cook, eat rice’. He identifies a need and value of persisting with cultural foods, because after a hard day’s work you wanted those ‘home comforts’ (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2017). The tension here between both wanting to achieve some cultural conciliation with the neighbourhood on the outside and the desire to ‘feel at home’ inside, demonstrates the dialectical relationship between the homemaking
efforts of Bengali migrants in these spaces. This showcases how, that although the front of house may have been curated for an impression of cultural conciliation, the incongruence of retaining cultural continuity inside would often leak out and undermine that effort.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have highlighted the benefit of focusing on the front of house, in particular doors and windows as spaces that offer a ‘peculiarly auspicious vantage point’ (Hirsch & Smith 2017, 225) when exploring, in this case, the significance of the Bengali migrant squatted home. I have drawn on several examples that have shown how by focusing on this liminal space, we can trace migrant homemaking, which is not quite outside or inside, the home. I have argued that this space became a critical arena for confrontation and resistance when the home was acquired through squatting and subject to un-homing through state and street racism. The interactions in this space tell the ‘small stories’ of resilience and resistance (Katz 2009) and challenge the simplistic notion of the deprivation typology, arguing that it obfuscates the fundamentally political nature of a Bengali migrant community claiming squatted homes in 1970s East London. It also reveals the forms of gendered understandings that directed both some of the racialised hostility Bengali migrants faced and the gendered nature of responses in these spaces. Overall, it suggests that critical geographies of home, might benefit from expanding that lens, from thinking beyond furnishings and objects and to consider the actual material experience of the housing structure and relational interactions with those spaces, as a way of exploring migrant homemaking, particularly in hostile conditions. When thinking about migrant homemaking as a relational experience, one that is anchored around belonging and entitlement, it is the front of house space that becomes the theatre for those encounters; material geographies of home need to be more attentive to these important sites of interaction.

I have also argued that the front of house was a space for negotiating a cultural settlement and that this process was inherently dialectical. On the one hand, Bengali families aware that their cultural unfamiliarity with curtains left them vulnerable as the ‘Paki house’ and tried to achieve some cultural conciliation in terms of what they understood as the wider aesthetic codes of curtains. This was not an easy task for Bengali migrants who were unfamiliar with the use of curtains in window spaces. At the same time, this concern to emulate a ‘respectable’ front of house was symbiotically connected to domestic practices inside that worked to nurture a space of cultural continuity - shielded by this carefully curated outward presentation. And yet, as I have shown, these spaces inevitably leaked into each other. Such
conceptualisations contribute to developing ideas around migrant homemaking practices and suggests that a focus on either cultural assimilation or cultural continuities can miss the tentative and tense relationship that can be revealed in these front of house spaces.

The ideas explored here begin to set out my key conceptual contributions; first they show why having a postcolonial lens that attends to the colonial activity in the events is important to understanding how belonging was so deeply contested in these threshold spaces. The colonial erasure that guided the housing deprivation and the violent Othering in the windows and doors can only be understood if we acknowledge that longer history. Nevertheless, the focus on this space can also only be understood if we frame the migrants’ transnational experiences as part of the analytic whole; for the Bengali migrants their inheritance of home and for many, their continued aspirations for a return home were also essential factors in how they navigated those spaces. As I have shown here, those transnational inheritances and attachments were gendered and generational in their differentiation.

Secondly, the postcolonial lens also helps us be measured and careful about how we define home and notice how the thresholds of home are not universally defined or understood. The squatted home was the site of state and street racism and interacted with the outside space in ways that were both unusual to Bengali migrants’ experience of rural home and which were defined by hostile attention. I have argued that the experience of home thresholds is perhaps a more significant migrant homemaking focus than has been previously determined.

Finally, I have been critical of how squatting typology has tended to eradicate migrant squatters who may initiate their squatting from one of deprivation, of political significance. In the accounts analysed here I have shown how even where squatters were not necessarily conscientiously making grand political gestures when they took a house and claimed it as a squat, they were nevertheless acting against a racialised system they recognised was failing to meet their needs. The existing typology and the unthinking application to vacate Bengali squatters of their political significance is a fundamental failure of geographic imagination and tells of how sloppy conceptual frameworks can diminish scholarship.

The next chapter takes some of the ideas developed here and stretches them out into the wider neighbourhood. In this, I move away from the squatted dwelling and shift my attention to squatter vigilantism and the claiming of home in the para.
Chapter 5: Bengali migrant homemaking in the 1970s East London para

5.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to explore beyond the immediate threshold of the domestic space to examine how Bengali migrant squatting involved homemaking practices that reached out into the surrounding streets and neighbourhood. In the South Asian context, this is a crucial consideration given, as established in Chapter 4, home is less contoured in terms of inside and outside spaces, and there is generally a concentric zonal nature by which space around a dwelling is configured (Ahmed 2006). In this arrangement, space is highly gendered with significant regulation of female mobility and considerable license for male mobility (Ghafur 2002). This relates to critical geographies of home, which recognise its ‘multi-scalarity’ and suggests that ‘imaginaries of home and home-making’ processes’ can range from the immediate physical dwelling to much larger imagined communities. Focusing on the neighbourhood, I examine how feeling at home in urban space is a ‘mutually constitutive’ experience whereby home on domestic and urban scales are intricately connected (Blunt & Sheringham 2019). The ‘threshold crossing capacity of home’ (Ralph and Staeheli 2011, 518), into the para or neighbourhood, is recognised as an important site of home and ‘significant space of belonging’ (Bonnerjee 2012, 5, see also Lahiri 2011).

By centring how migrant homemaking can be constituted in the ‘interconnectedness of domestic and urban realms’ (Blunt and Sheringham 2019, 13), I take a contrasting approach to considerable scholarship on squatting that tends to foreground the urban. Through concepts like ‘right to the city’ and ‘insurgent public spaces’, research has focused on the impact of squatters in ‘hegemonic urban landscapes’ (Hou, 2010, 1). Instead of viewing the actions of Bengali migrant squatters as acts of alternative citizenship which, as explored in Chapter 2, is a familiar refrain of this body of work (Holston 2008, Hou 2010), I frame them as practices of homemaking. In doing so, I suggest that this recognises the primary experience of Bengali squatters was to produce safe and familiar home at the scale of the para (Bonnerjee 2011, Ghosh 2014, Lahiri 2011).

Critical to this chapter are the post-colonial geographies of 1970s East London. Bengali squatters were concentrated in a relatively small area in Spitalfields and Whitechapel. Yet, like Jacobs (1996) and Massey (1993), I argue that the local competition for home or para that emerged in this squatter movement were
situated in the much wider racialised geographies of postcolonial 1970s London. In this chapter, I argue that the material character of squatted homes required Bengali squatters to ‘domesticate’ their immediate urban environment. For many participants, everyday domestic practices like bathing and cooking had to be performed outside the dwelling because of the material deficiencies of their squatted dwellings. Thus, the wider public neighbourhood had to fulfil some of the basic functions associated with private home (Schmelzkopf, 1995). These were culturally familiar homemaking practices for Bengali migrants for whom ‘the public-private dichotomy as it relates to the West’ (Lahiri 2011, 864) are anyway generally incompatible with the extended home in South Asian context (Ahmed 2006, Appadurai 1987; Chakrabarty 1991; Ghafur 2002, Kaviraj 1997). However, when transposed into the context of 1970s East London, these practices became dangerously charged journeys. The impact of these encounters was highly gendered, and where for male migrants who had previously enjoyed para as a type of ‘parochial space’ or a ‘home territory’ (Lofland 1998), their experience in 1970s Tower Hamlets was an acute deprivation of that spatial liberty and mobility. On the other hand, for Bengali women who would have been culturally versed in more regimented zones of ‘spatial confinement’ (Ghafur 2002, 42), the experience of performing domestic practices outside the physical dwelling was more nuanced and offered both challenge and opportunity.

This leads to my next argument: the collective vigilantism that emerged from the squatter community was part of a wider resistance to street racism and is best understood as a gendered homemaking practice. I argue that the deliberate un-homing iterated in street racism and the spatial deprivation that Bengali migrant men experienced was in sharp distinction to their experience of para in Sylhet and generated solidarities of resistance. For Bengali men, being ‘at home’ in Sylhet had involved unrestricted mobility, and I argue that the squatter vigilantism that reached into the neighbourhood was an effort to recreate ‘home territory’, nested in the cultural understanding that Bengali, masculine home was a broad connective space between the dwelling and the para. In this discussion, I explore how the resistance to street racism was also intersected by generation. It was primarily the younger men and boys who organised patrols and fought back and who were nurturing something of a diasporic identity whilst older men tended to operate a more restrained attitude, namely because their transnational home imaginations remained committed to a return to Desh. Where postcolonially inspired popular representations activated age-old colonial tropes about the passive, ‘effeminate Bengali’, I argue instead that it was this generational intersection, rooted in whether they had the intention to stay and make home in East London, that determined whether they were prepared to fight back.
5.2 Domesticating the urban

‘...there was no gas, I had to go out to cook’ (Husnara Matin).

Spitalfields has been described as an ‘area on the edge’ (Kershen 2005, 1), historically a space of negotiation between the ‘included’ and the ‘excluded’. The junction of Brick Lane meeting Bethnal Green Road was precisely such a margin; the National Front relocated its East London branch office to the Carpenters Arms pub and would sell their newspaper Combat just under the railway arches at the north end. Two other pubs further along the Bethnal Green Road, Blade Bone and the Salmon and Ball ‘stood as guardians of white supremacy’ (Kershen 2005, 187). These pubs and the newspaper pitch marked a frontier space – beyond which Bengali migrants came to learn to fear for their safety quickly – a space that claimed notoriety for first crowning the term ‘paki-bashing’ (Glynn 2014, Leech 1980). ‘Racial vigilantism’ is the term Husbands (1982) uses to describe how the National Front policed the ‘respected boundary: the railway line out of Liverpool Street Station as it runs from Shoreditch High Street ... to Bethnal Green station ... and crosses and divides a number of major streets, of which the most notorious is Brick Lane’ (ibid 21). Husbands argued that informal racialised understandings of the neighbourhood were demarcated by geographically distinct markers of the ‘edge’. This was not to suggest that Bengali migrants were significantly safer on the other side of that railway line – the National Front went on violent sprees up and down Brick Lane on more than one occasion – but Husbands’ idea of a ‘clear boundary function’ (ibid) and the pattern of racial attacks are important to understanding how Bengali migrants experienced the space of their neighbourhood as hostile and unwelcoming.

Most participants squatted within a close geographic area in and around Spitalfields and Whitechapel (Kershen 2005, 83) in run-down, empty properties. The GLC, which owned the majority of the properties along with Tower Hamlets Borough Council, had emptied out slum housing with the ambition of future redevelopment. However, with budgets tight, these plans had failed to materialise, leaving empty boarded-up properties (Forman 1989, 16). At the same time, the housing allocation policy, which required applicants to have been residents of Greater London for at least five years and with at least one year of that being in continuous residence in Tower Hamlets (Glynn 2014), made it difficult for Bengali families to register or be allocated social housing.
Gedu Miah came to the UK aged 11 with his mother and three older brothers in 1968. Initially living in Birmingham, his father and paternal uncles had all worked in factories in the city and his grandfather before them had served as a sailor in the British Navy. The family still retained his grandfather’s ‘Noli’ papers which conferred upon him, as Gedu understood it, British citizenship. Gedu was a remarkably youthful-looking 63-year-old man. When we first met, he wore a short leather jacket that sat just below his hips, his face was neither freshly shaven nor did it court a traditional beard. During the interview, he sat forward on his seat, refusing the full recline of the chair, his legs swung slightly to the side of the table, his mobile phone and keys on the table – as if he might have to make a quick exit. He had a catch phrase that he repeated periodically in the interview ‘it was not easy Shabna, life was not easy’. And certainly, his account of the time is one of considerable hardship. Both his parents left and went back to Bangladesh just after 1971, leaving Gedu in the care of his three older brothers. By this time, the brothers had all moved to Spitalfields and were fortunate to rent a flat on Hanbury Street which they shared with other single men. Gedu recalls negotiating with his father before he left:

I don’t like – you know sleeping with anybody – I want to sleep in my own bed, so when, before I moved from Birmingham I said to my dad to tell my brother that I’m not going to share with anybody, and I wanna do my own thing – so they said, okay you can sleep the single bed in living room. And there was – a very tiny, tiny, kitchen where you had the cooker – the sink being shared by two flat, two flat – and toilet was outside – there wasn’t hot water system, you know the old paraffin heater – I don’t know if you ‘member, the old paraffin heater, every Thursday…big lorry comes in, knock the door – ‘paraffin man, paraffin man’ everybody give [inaud] and you know, you put this, and keeps you warm. It was, life hard, 2/3 people, because of the… accommodation, you know, most people were sharing a bed…. And you know…

Gedu acknowledged that he was fortunate; he and his brothers managed to rent a property albeit one that had no heating or hot water. These conditions were repeated in flats and houses across Spitalfields at that time (Glynn 2014, Forman 1989). The nature of these deprivations, or the dysfunctional materialities of the home, required a relationship with the outside space of their homes in order to fulfil functions that were at least in London, beginning to become considered as inside home functions. As stated previously, in Sylhet, these home functions would routinely ‘take place in public’ and therefore meant that inside/outside spaces would ‘intersect and overlap’ (Lahiri 2011, 864) as a cultural norm. But in 1970s London, this was increasingly a marker of the Bengali community’s inadequate housing provision.
Gedu’s description of the lack of access to hot water, was followed up with an account of how he would occasionally take a quiet moment to fill up a tin bath that was in the house:

So you, you boil up water with cooking pot and then put it in a bucket if it’s enough – then you lock the door in here and you know have a shower – just put some water in … because if you, if you really wants to have a bath – 9 o’clock, no way you can have bath because of the public bath – there was one public bath in – just off Brick Lane – after the bridge – if you do right, I think it’s called Cheshire Street – and one in Bow – but they were closed by … weekend latest I think is 7 o’clock, 7.30, there was one on York Hall. Life was, life was hard … and hard plus, people, most people, couldn’t speak English.

The public bath system, which had been a lauded advancement and marker of public health improvement in the Victorian period, was by the mid-1970s a fading norm as bathrooms were built inside newer homes. However, for Bengali tenants and migrant squatters, the lack of internal baths required them to perform this intimate task in public space. More significantly and referring back to the racialised geographies of the area, these public baths were in Bethnal Green and Poplar: areas that they identified as inhospitable and would normally have avoided. In Bangladesh, Gedu had grown up bathing in the *phooshkoni*, a freshwater pond located at the front of his *bari*\(^{22}\), which was used by male villagers and a smaller one at the back of the *bari* which was allocated to women. All of my participants who arrived as migrants were accustomed to public bathing spaces similar to that which he described, though in the less affluent baris the same village pond was shared by both men and women, usually with different access points and temporal regulation so that privacy was maintained (Gardner 1995, 27). However, in contrast to the use of the *phooshkoni*, which was considered a fully functional part of the stretched home, freely available and a space for male sociability (Gardner 1995, 27), Gedu’s visits to the public baths were accompanied by the regular and routine threat of racialised violence and required collective planning and action. The use of public baths in this sense generated the need for solidarity among men in a way that that would have been unfamiliar and unnecessary to the masculinity-endorsing way in which they would have used the *phooshkoni* in Sylhet and was in many respects ‘a marker of their ‘downward social mobility’ (Datta et al., 2009, 856).

Mashuk Miah whom we met in the previous chapter, also talked about how visits to the public baths were dangerous events, and had to be carefully organised. Mashuk had a clear idea of the racialised

---

\(^{22}\) Bari is a Bengali term with varied meanings including a family’s village home, the term also has connotations of ancestral family connections to an area or land.
geographies of the streets in his neighbourhood and his comments indicate the strategies he and his friends would develop to navigate their way around the risks that this racialisation manufactured:

Mashuk: When we stayed in Pedley Street – in Wheeler House – at that time – half of Brick Lane was the Asian people’s – we could use it regularly – and half – from Pedley Street – from there to Shoreditch – from that side – the white people – young whites – they used to trouble our people - we couldn’t go that way, we could go this way – but not the other side. That’s where we fought – if we even went that way – and we had to go that way because of the Baths – at that time there weren’t baths inside – baths were outside – what was it called – Cheshire Street – there was a Bath there we used to go to that one – it was near our house, but you would always get in a fight – every Saturday or Sunday – Sunday was market day, and there would be fighting – or on Sunday ... We needed to go, we had to go to the Baths – we had to go and so we would go as a group – if we went as a group – they wouldn’t trouble you – but if they found you one or two – they would hit you. They would ask you for what was in your pockets. One time, there were four girls – girls! - They surrounded me and said ‘what’s in your pocket? Give it’. I said girls! Want what’s in my pocket? No, no! I chided them and they went.

Mashuk (pictured in Figure 5.1) had arrived to join his father as a 15-year-old boy and had, throughout his childhood, enjoyed the sumptuous pleasure of roaming his Sylheti village freely and being at leisure to wander local *baris* and even go some considerable distance into the local *bazar*. Bathing was a social activity and would have involved extended periods of playfulness with other boys and young men. The disruption of his spatialised gender norms, not only in how moving around in the neighbourhood required much more collective planning but highlighted in his reaction to being accosted by a group of white girls, reveals how Mashuk experienced a challenge to his masculinity. Mashuk also talked about ‘half of Brick Lane’ as the ‘Asian people’s’ and was like others, able to identify clearly the point at which the security of the street, shifted. The racialised access to the street directed the choice of routes that were taken. He and his friends developed a colloquial map of the area avoiding going beyond the railway bridge near the Bethnal Green end of Brick Lane, apart from for the essential trips to the public baths.

---

23 *Bazar* – local outdoor market place
Luqman Uddin was a 15-year-old squatter with his family in 1976 (see Figure 5.2). He had originally arrived to stay in one small room above a restaurant on Grays Inn Road. His father, who had been in Leicester for some years, had recently migrated to London looking for employment in the garment industry. Luqman, along with his mother, and younger brother, arrived and, struggling to find accommodation, rented a single room above the restaurant in Kings Cross. The overcrowding and shared facilities with several other families and the restaurant staff, were, he said, ‘intolerable’ and so to ease the burden, the teenage Luqman was sent to stay with a Mama (maternal uncle) in Tower Hamlets. It was on a journey with his Mama to new job in an embroidery factory on Cable Street, that they spotted the boarded-up flats on Fieldgate Street. Luqman recalled that he already knew that a great many Bengali people were squatting and he claimed there was little controversy over the decision to tear down the boards of a flat and reunite the family in one space. He recalled that the flat was in dismal condition; there was no gas or electricity line and, like another participant, Maryum, who squatted with her parents as a much younger child on that same street, they installed a ‘shower’ that hung over the toilet, so that you had to close the lid of toilet basin and shower over it.
However, these washing facilities were inadequate and Luqman recalled, like Mashuk and Gedu, how trips to the baths brought them into racially hostile situations:

Luqman\textsuperscript{24}...we went to public baths, Poplar had baths, Poplar Bath, Hackney Bath – public bath – so once a week we would go public bath. At that time – if you think about my Amma – and other family – they didn’t know English, or English society – they had not adopted it and so it was very difficult- so they would somehow manage a bath at home.

Shabna: So the women bathed at home and men went to the baths?

Luqman: Not everyone – 50%, but the problem was transport – and also on top of that you had racism, near those baths – the whites didn’t like us and would swear at us and they would attack us. We would attack them too from time to time...

The accounts here point to just how racially hostile the neighbourhood or \textit{para}, usually experienced as a space of the extended male home in Sylhet, became for Bengali men in 1970s East London. Luqman noted

\textsuperscript{24} Luqman’s interviews were conducted in Bengali and his words are my translation.
vaguely, how his mother would ‘somehow manage a bath at home’. Most female participants did indeed bathe at home and this too brought its own hardships. Hajera, whom we met in the previous chapter, shared one of her most vivid memories of her first squatted home of the ‘grey iron, freestanding tub’ which had appeared in her childhood home and recalled:

It was really hard to have a bath – I remember the very first time somebody had a bath in that building – it was quite a novel thing, bit like having a TV in the mid-1980s – you would know which home had a TV set. So, I remember that we didn’t have a bath – that was quite difficult and then we had a bath and that was seen as a luxury in what was then a condemned squat. It was squalid basically (laughs) but as a child you don’t know what is squalid and what isn’t - so you just think this is home.

She recognised in hindsight the ‘squalid’ nature of her family’s squatted flat and how as a child her reference points were so limited that this had just been ‘home’. However, as a woman now in her late-40s, she recalls a recent event she had attended which had reminded her off just how skewed her reference point had been at the time:

I mean I was watching a film the other day in Mulberry School – they had made a story about Aldgate with local residents who had lived in the area for the last 70/80 years odd. And there were lots of Jewish families who are in their 80s, talking about the first time they had a bath in their homes. That was actually in the 1940s, I was describing the bathtub coming, in late 1970s, so just imagine the levels of poverty there, that people tell you about their stories of poverty, but they are probably my grandparents’ age, and we had to live through that poverty in the same way and find our way out of that. So that, that always makes me reflect a little bit, because whenever you hear people tell stories of poverty they’re often telling stories of when they were younger – 70 years ago, but we experienced that poverty and that very deep poverty in my lifetime, with my parents, and it wasn’t my parents’ poverty alone, it was ours as well, but you don’t realise that until you’re a little older and you start reflecting back on all of that.

Hajera’s account underlines the argument developed in Chapter 4, that exploring home through a lens that addresses the materiality of home in a broader sense, rather than just looking at possessions and artefacts, can reveal much about the wider relational experience of home. Her positive memories of the arrival of a tin bathtub in her squatted home and the later realisation that this was a reflection of a level of poverty that she had not been able to register at the time, offer an important insight into both the levels of hardship experienced and the normality that it assumed just by virtue of its prevalence across the community. Hajera and her mother, like Luqman’s mother, stayed at home to bathe in this tin
bathtub, while her father and brothers would make their way across the racially hostile territory to visit the public bath. Female participants explained their reduced usage of public baths partly because of perceptions of safety and because many of them were young mothers and the added practicalities of taking children along were harder to manage. Some, however, did make the journey. One participant, Rohima, recalled:

...we had a gamla bath – a tin bath – we bathed in those – we used to warm up the water – it was so hard with a jug... and once a week we would go to the public bath – we would go but it would take a whole day with all the children – he had to take the day, he (her husband) would take off – it would take the whole day – bathing them two at a time and after dressing them...

This and other accounts noted that the visit to the baths for women was generally a family affair and that private or sociable needs for female company were irrelevant to those fewer visits. In reminiscence conversations with Bengali older women at Sonali Gardens Day care centre, bathing emerged as one of the key threads in their recollections of that period. Many of them said they had indeed used public baths usually as a family group but, like Luqman, they agreed their visits were less frequent than the men in their household, mainly, because of fears about safety but also because of concerns about not being able to speak English and worries about privacy. One of the women at the centre, Ewhla, squatted in three different properties when she first arrived in 1975. She was not clear about why she moved so many times, but the first two squats where she initially stayed were shared properties and she recalled with anguish the strains of having young children and having only one toilet between 3 or 4 families. She recalled that they had to keep a bucket under the bed and she would have to empty that into the drain outside because her children would *mogoz khailitha* ‘eat her brain!’ because being young, they always needed to go to the toilet, and in the queue for access, ‘accidents’ were common.

Ewhla was unlike most of the other women at Sonali Gardens. She looked much younger and had dyed jet-black hair. She wore a scarf but, whilst almost all the other women wore it as a pinned hijab, hers was draped over her head with a considerable band of her hair exposed at the front. She was happy to talk and would do so loudly and with animation in front of the group, but it was only when the attention of the group was disrupted and people were called away for afternoon tea in the main canteen area that she stayed and, leaning in, spoke to me more quietly. She told me that her husband was a drinker and that he had been a reckless man. She said that when she first arrived, he, like many Bengali men, had ‘other

---

25 Ewhla is a pseudonym as this was not collected as part of an oral history interview and emerged in the conversations at Sonali Gardens.
women’. She didn’t offer any further information but, for Ewhla, the point was relevant because, she recalled, she had tried to go out and visit public baths, but that due to her lack of English literacy, she had no idea how to get to them Cheshire Street safely, nor how to navigate the bath system when she arrived. Her husband - and she was not clear if it was his drinking or his absence because of his ‘other woman’ – was unreliable and so, despite wanting to use the public baths, she felt unable to navigate unfamiliar streets and confront the risks of racist ‘khasra (dirty) boys’ attacking her and her children, and so she had desisted and bathed in the inadequate space at home. In this case, it is possible to detect both the absence of a culturally prescribed male guardian to supervise and ‘protect’ her mobility (Ghafur 2002, 42), overwritten and exacerbated by the unfamiliarity of the space and the racialised threat, that a journey to public baths presented for her as a Bengali woman.

Ewhla was also unusual because, unlike many other participants who expressed mixed feelings, she insisted she never regretted coming to this country. Despite agreeing with most women in the room, who said that they had enjoyed superior bathing facilities in Desh, she felt she was still better off in London. Ewhla spoke about how she had been married and moved into her husband’s village when she was just 14. As the most junior member of her husband’s household, she had been expected to perform considerable domestic chores. Migrating to London had released her from those duties and she had enjoyed ‘being free’ of these ties and responsibilities. This echoes the wider argument that migrant women generally experience ‘relative improvement’ in their ‘status and autonomy’ (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2017, 113), but Ewhla’s account of her unreliable relationship with her husband indicates that her ‘freedom’ was punctuated by a great deal of hardship.

In some senses her subordination to her husband’s unreliable absent/presence fulfils that discourse of female passivity: ‘[a] colonial image of powerless South Asian women, submitting to patriarchal relations’ (McDowell et al., 2012, 139). The context in which she found herself made that virtually impossible to avoid. However, whilst Ewhla may have given up on the public baths, she was by no means resigned to her environment. One last story she told me before picking up her bags to walk through to the canteen area, was about the harassment she experienced at the hands of a white neighbour who lived directly below her squatted flat. This neighbour had repeatedly complained about the noise that Ewhla’s young infant children made, banging on her ceiling with a stick at the most routine sounds, a reminder that that material thresholds of home can extend beyond doors and windows, and were in this case, the floor separating flats above and below. Ewhla recalled that she had tried to satisfy the woman’s persistent complaining and had bought extra off-cuts of carpet to lay on top of the existing carpet in the flat, as
added soundproofing. One day having exhausted herself and her children trying to keep quiet and having heard the familiar thuds of the broomstick, Ewhla had taken a kitchen knife and raced downstairs to berate the woman for her intolerance. The neighbour, alarmed at her appearance with a knife at the door, set her dog on Ewhla, who suffered a significant bite to her left hand. She had to make repeated visits to the Royal London Hospital for nine months to receive a course of injections but, she says with defiant satisfaction, the neighbour never disturbed her again. Her account disrupts the one-dimensional accounts of the passive Asian woman: stranded at home - trapped by the nature of culturally prescribed patriarchal dependency upon her wayward husband and the fear of street racism. Ewhla was dependent and fearful and this did curtail her journey to the baths, but she was also a human being with limits for how far she could tolerate the injunctions of a racist neighbour.

In that same session at Sonali Gardens, another strand of the conversation that emerged during the general chatter about baths and toilets was how access to bathing arrangements made it difficult to perform the ghush (cleansing bath) after sexual intercourse. The conversation was conducted through lots of gesture, eye movement and, of course, lots of muffled laughter. The door to the large room, which was normally left open was firmly closed and even then, voices were lowered to conspiratorial tones. As Muslims, both men and women are required to bathe after sexual intercourse and become ‘paksh’ or clean before performing ritual daily prayers. The women recalled how being so restricted in their access to washing facilities they resorted to using wet towels and kitchen sinks and ultimately had to simply ‘make dua’ or pray that Allah would accept their deficient attempts at bathing: ‘you just had to hope it was enough’ said one woman, laughing into the scarf she had drawn up to her mouth. These stories hint at how private and intimate sexual relations within the home were also put under pressure by the materialities of the squat and reiterate the ‘interplay between home and wider social and material contexts’ (Blunt & Sheringham 2019, 827).

Komla Bibi is Luqman’s mother and can be seen with her young family in Figure 5.2 above. She is in her 80s now and was one of the oldest participants in my research. I visited her in her home, a new flat in a mixed tenure development, just off Aston Street. Aston Street was in the late 1960s and early 1970s the heart of a white Tower Hamlets squatter collective (Glynn 2014, 121). It was also where Terry Fitzpatrick, introduced in Chapter 4, had begun his squatting career, first encountering the Bengali housing crisis, and from where he went on to become one of the community’s key supporters. Komla though herself a squatter, was unaware of this other history. She sat on her bed for our interview and asked me several times about my marital status, enquiring about the number of children I had and told me I looked like one
of her granddaughters. She was curious about why I would be spending my time - given she had established I was a mother of two children - asking her about a house she had lived in 45 years ago. When pressed, she said she did not recall much about it: ‘it was a broken house’, there was nothing more to say, ‘we broke in – everyone was doing it,’ she said matter-of-factly. What did emerge from our conversation was that she found the racist violence and the threat of it a serious impediment to her access to space outside her squatted home:

Komla: There was so much fighting.

Shabna: who used to fight?

Komla: The English - they couldn't stand to look at us! But Allah sorted it out! There was so much fighting — I was so scared – I used to stay at home.

Shabna: What about taking your children to school?

Komla: Well, my kids were older – their father used to take them, I was too scared – it was lots of bera sera (winding route).

Komla went on to talk about how the fear of racist violence meant that she went out very infrequently and only when she was with her husband. She recalled constantly crying and wanting to go home (see Wilson 1978/2008 for other accounts of isolation and loneliness). She had left two daughters, Luqman’s older sisters, in Desh because they were not classed as dependants by racialised and restrictive immigration rules, and she felt enormous sadness for their absence and for the wider family network she had left behind. She never visited the baths – she had a tin bath at home and would fill it up with water boiled on the stove. Whilst women in rural Sylhet would have experienced a significant degree of ‘spatial confinement’ in what Ghaful (2002) describes as the wider ‘urban public realm’ (42), they would also have enjoyed substantial mobility within the ‘inner zone’ of their bari and experienced the courtyard and as an open and accessible space for a variety of communally achieved, household chores. As noted by Ahmed (2006): ‘during the day, the courtyard becomes the territory of women because most of the men are away working in the fields or outside the homestead. In addition to various household activities women also visit neighbours and spend time in their courtyards, unhampered by the presence of men during the daytime’ (12). This also extended to bathing which was also a sociable activity – rarely did women bathe alone and Komla would have enjoyed bathing with her female kin and fellow villagers and enjoyed the sociability of that segregated space. Komla’s fears and the restriction to her mobility were clearly painful

26 Komla’s interviews were conducted in Bengali and her words are my translation.
in her early migration experiences (see Wilson 1978), taking her from an expansive *bari* and networks of solidarity and care derived from her daughters, and her wider kinship networks, to ‘spatial confinement’ that was contoured not by gender norms, but by the threat of racialised violence.

Husnara Matin, just a few years younger than Komla and like her, a widow of some 15 years, had a different experience. Husnara came to squat in Varden Street in 1975, a street that came to form part of the BHAG squatters’ network and which was home to many other Bengali squatter families. She and the other squatters became familiar with Terry and, with BHAG’s support, eventually won official tenancies from the GLC in 1978. Some 45 years later Husnara continues to live in the same address, now a legal tenant, she sub-lets a room and shares her home with a Sri-Lankan family, whose young child emerged intermittently during our interview, only to retreat shyly if spoken to. Husnara and her husband arrived in London in 1972 as employees of the Bangladesh High Commission. Both were educated, and she had accompanied her husband on several foreign postings before coming to London and so she possessed a confidence in her migration opportunities that other women did not necessarily have. In 1975 her husband, and many other colleagues at the Bangladesh High Commission, were ‘let go’ (something I return to in Chapter 6) and the family moved from West London and tried to find accommodation and rent rooms in shared spaces. Still, they were unable to secure adequate accommodation. They heard about people paying ‘key money’ to what she called ‘hipsy-tipsy’ white squatters on Varden Street, who were moving out:

Husnara\(^{27}\): …the English were selling up – and it wasn’t real English – they were hipsy tipsy – you know so many different people – they stayed 10-12 people – they would leave the house for £200, £100 for a house – for them, it was – they had stayed for free – but now that their slowly – their comfort was reducing – they slowly began to leave – at that time £200 was the equivalent to £10,000.

And so, they paid £400 to the not ‘real English’ white squatters to obtain the key to a property, in which they then became the squatters. She recalled how her family were the first in the street, but within months all the white squatters had left, and Bengali families had moved in. This was likely one of the turning points in the character and, quite literally, colour of squatters in the area.

As stated in Chapter 1 and 3, Hoffman’s intimate photos record the experience of these white ‘hipsy-tipsy’ squatters, and Vasudevan (2017) in his chapter ‘Who are the squatters’? London’s Hidden History’,

\(^{27}\) Husnara’s interviews were conducted in Bengali and her words are my translation.
highlights the role of these ‘misfit’ squatters’ who were experimenting with ‘alternative political identities and subjectivities’ (55). Husnara, and a few other participants, noted that the interaction with white squatters in the initial act of appropriation, but there was no meaningful or supportive wider relationship. It was at my first fieldwork event, a timely launch of a community heritage project called ‘Struggles of Bangladeshi Squatter’ (3rd July 2019), aiming to recover Bengali voices in the accounts of Fieldgate Street squatters, that a white woman who had been one of those squatters, and who had become visibly agitated during the presentations, stood up to protest at what she perceived as an inadequate focus:

With respect of course to all my Bangladeshi neighbours then and now, but I draw attention to the fact that there were, you know, teachers and actors and by actors I mean actors and actresses … but it was the sort of activist, left wing, unorthodox – that kind of element of erm, that inspired the visionary, the creative, sort of outside the law slightly, that we would take risks and erm, that also built into the protests and we undertook including the many, many meetings in both languages, so if I were to be interviewed, it would be the dramatic side of it, that’s where it was...

The woman, Norma28, who I spoke to after the conclusion of the event, was articulating plainly, what the academic and popular representations of squatters in East London had expressed obliquely: that Bengali squatters, like Pruijt’s (2103) description discussed in Chapter 2 and 4, were housing deprived families who had little political motivation or significance, and that squatter organisation or radicalism was rooted in the community of white squatters. Norma was annoyed at the title of the launch and the focus of the heritage project on Bangladeshi squatters which, she argued, was missing (ironically) the main ‘actors’. However, Husnara’s account disputes both this broad point and also indicates that some women, were more actively involved in wider squatter struggles:

Husnara: When we first arrived it was like a jungle, the skin… skinheads – hai! They used to give us trouble, after dusk we couldn’t go out of the house, they would hit and grab us – our sons in particular. If our sons went out they would hit you, tear your shirt, hit and beat you, take your watch, your money, whatever you had or even if you didn’t, they would beat and leave you...

Husnara recalled she managed like Rohima by bathing at home, but as a woman, it was specifically the absence of gas and electricity that pushed her out of her squatted home to perform her gendered domestic role of cooking and feeding the family:

28 Norma is a pseudonym as these accounts come from field notes and from the youtube video of the event, rather than a direct interview.
Husnara: We used to use paraffin heaters, lit with paraffin – using paraffin that’s how we lived – what choice did we have there was no electricity – but it was so smelly – the whole house, so we used the paraffin – and getting out of that – that was it, even getting out of that was so hard. Doing all that – it was so hard and so much suffering – this house- and I had to find a way out of that as well – that was our suffering. So much work and suffering. I stayed here for 6 months burning candles – candles – I had to stay like that and I’d go and cook elsewhere – there was no gas, I had to go out to cook.

Shabna: Where did you go?

Husnara: Romford Road, just there Romford Street – there were a few houses with gas and electricity, and I knew a couple of people – so I used to go and cook there – I’d go in the morning and cook and come back, I’d buy candles and water bottles on the way home. One day – near New Road- there were Jewish shops- they had breads and olive – that kind of stuff. This Jewish woman asked me, ‘I see you go in the morning with children, and in the afternoon, I see you come back with candles and water in your arms– where do you go and come from?’ So I told her. After that the Jewish people left too –the Bengalis moved in and almost all the leather factories and clothing factories on New Road – they, there were beautiful factories and they became Sylheti – some partnerships with Jewish and Turkish and by the time we could do it ourselves – they had moved out. Now all the Jewish people have moved out to Finchley and in that direction – there they have a place called for Jews – like Banglatown – there is a Jewish Town. But there were also skinheads – we all had to fight – even us – we would, when they attacked – I would grab a rod and go out and quietly, when the police came – we put the rod discreetly under the car – we had so much trouble – but we even enjoyed that fight (laughs) – if I’m honest, we enjoyed that fight! Life was sad and happy, so much khosto (difficulty). In Bangladesh there was one war, here there was another war and we won this place, we claimed it. Nowadays, people arrive – they do travels (agency) people do that – but there was no peace on the street – the peace on the street – it was us – the ones who came first, we won this peace on the streets, through our hard work – we ghoresee (made home), now people can sit on carpet on a nice platform. Now it’s so quick, - people can arrive and come and sit, they can make a shop, a travel agent, and this and that– but this place we ghoresee – we worked hard and suffered and our children supported us. Now I am an old – all the problems, all the troubles – me and my husband and my children...we all went through them together.

Her reference to ‘it was us, – ones who came first, we won this place’, speaks in contrast to the popular and academic diminution that was neatly illustrated in Norma’s intervention at the Bangladeshi squatters’ event. Husnara actively includes herself and her actions as being critical to claiming the neighbourhood.
Husnara’s domestic role in this instance compelled her to make regular trips outside her squatted home to be able to feed her young family. Unlike the ‘public’ bathing which might have been culturally familiar, cooking was normally located inside and at the back of the bari, performed exclusively by women; by performing her domestic gender role, Husnara was brought into contact with the neighbourhood in ways that she would not have experienced in Sylhet. She uses the word ‘ghoresee’ during this part of her interview, which literally translated means ‘we home-made’, or ‘made-home’ and she is unequivocal in stating that it was squatters like her and her family that ‘won this place, we claimed it’.

In her account, she also speaks about the racist violence that was experienced and her intervention in at least one incident. The reference to the police and ‘discreetly laying the rod under a nearby car’ demonstrates an understanding that the police were an unlikely aid in that confrontation. They also suggest that she was willing to threaten physical resistance to the encounters of street racism that punctuated her experiences of the neighbourhood. Her account is markedly different to Komla’s who found the push outwards distressing and frightening. Husnara, on the other hand, whilst lamenting the routine violence experienced by young men, found positivity in the outward push of her squat experience. Taking her cooking outside of the home brought her into sociable contact with other families and she framed her day around school drop-offs, cooking in other homes. Meanwhile, she was also taking on home-garment work and filling her day with activities to support other women with trips to the hospital or accessing health care services.

Komla, Rohima, Ewhla and Husnara’s words are a powerful contrast to the Bengali women who were given only superficial appearance and sat muted in the archival documentaries. The women who sat as silent shadows beside husbands or were seen hastily making their way on threatening streets, but whose voices were categorically never heard. Through these women’s accounts and narratives of other participants, the homemaking of para are brought to life – mediated through the materialities of their dilapidated squatted properties. I have argued that attention to the performance of home in terms of bathing and cooking, stretched home into the local neighbourhood, but that this somewhat culturally familiar practice of para had significant gendered implications for Bengali migrants. Bengali migrant men who would have enjoyed public bathing in their village ponds as an endorsement of their masculinity were confronted with substantial racialised restrictions on their mobility. For the women, there was a more mixed picture, some withdrew from the neighbourhood, fearful of the racialised violence they might encounter, whilst others were pushed out of their squat to perform domestic practices like cooking.
The next section explores the emergence of vigilante patrols from within the younger, male squatting community and argues that this collectivist approach to resisting street racism was rooted in a diasporic effort to recreate para.

5.3 Creating a safe home in the city:

‘Just put in a gear man and go, go, go...’ (Gedu Miah)

Racialised violence as a disruption of Bengali male spatial liberty of the para

Many participants practised direct action not only to obtain a home for themselves through squatting, but also in organising patrols that would operate to survey and secure this wider neighbourhood around the squatted community. This vigilantism could be framed as an ‘articulation of an alternative right to the city’ (Vasudevan 2017, 243) and interacts with Alexander’s (2011) work on “claiming” and ‘making’ space in East London” (201). However, I argue that Bengali migrants and younger, single, male squatters – the 1.5 generation (Rumbaut 2004) were, through their actions, resisting street racism and claiming para or the neighbourhood as home. In this sense, I argue that the vigilantism employed against racialised violence and its generational intersection provide useful tools to explain diasporic and transnational homemaking imaginaries. As I have made clear already, in the South Asian context, ‘home’ for men is not confined to the domestic dwelling. It intersects ‘private’ and ‘public’ space in ways that do not sit comfortably with conventional western understandings of those spaces. Bearing this in mind, and drawing on Boccagni (2016), Cancellieri (2017) and Hogdagneu-Sotelo (2017b), I consider the vigilante practices of Bengali younger migrant men trying to increase the security of their community as less about civil society and procuring the rights of citizens and more about how they ‘invest[ed] meaning and effort into the project of making claims to a new home’ (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2017b, 115). In doing so, my work contributes to research that argues that migrant homemaking is usefully explored when ideas about home register cultural and gendered nuances. In turn, I argue that ‘generational’ characteristics and responsibilities emerge as useful harbingers for those nuances.

In a Race Today article called ‘Assaults on Asian’ (October 1976, 79 JOU/1/1/107) there is a disturbing list of street assaults on Bengali migrant men, which itemises, for example, glass bottle attacks, knife stabbings, incidents of men being stoned and kicked to unconsciousness and anger at the ‘indifferent’ attitude of the local police force. In Daniel and McGuire’s (1970) study of an East End gang, members talk plainly about the ‘hobby of Paki-bashing’ (22) and at one point casually describe an incident where rocks
were thrown at a ‘Paki’ on a paddle boat in Hyde Park boating lake, who was then knocked unconscious and drowned. This kind of casualised, street violence was, by the mid-1970s, an everyday risk faced by Bengali migrant men (See ‘Blood on the Streets’, Tower Hamlets & Stepney Green Trades Council 1978 for accounts of this violence). Race Today urged the creation of what they called ‘an alternative defence force’. They wrote: ‘we put forward the strategy of organised and disciplined self-defence groups...from within the Asian community. Their implementation is now urgent if the streets are to be made safe to walk on...’ (Race Today, October 1976 79 JOU/1/1/107). However, the threat and infliction of racist street violence was not just an existential threat to physical security, it was also a subordination of cultural practices of masculine, spatial liberty and their experience of *para*.

Mahmoud, introduced in the previous chapter, described the space and freedoms he enjoyed in his village, before he migrated:

...the village life was – we had like four ponds, big ponds in the house, and you can spend hours swimming and doing all this stuff and a lot of trees to climb. Yeah. And I was, I was very active, very active kid. Unlike my other brothers, I was like, I could, I could spend whole day doing stuff. It was very nice to be in the village during that time, ‘cause that's it. I still look back. Yeah....

Others like Mashuk Miah, who was in his mid-teens when he left Bangladesh, also recalled the spatial liberty of his village in vivid detail; he spoke about the access they had to the ponds for recreation and the freedom he had to roam across different villages and out into town, which was some distance away:

Well, in the front, in the north – there on that side we had a phokoir and on the east, there was a path... and there was one sorokh (foot bridge) – you had to cross two baris to get to the bazaar – Amra bazar it was called... I used to go around the whole area by myself, I was 15...14 after all.

The accounts from male participants of home in Sylhet, testify to gendered spatial norms that meant that Bengali ‘men’s territory is outside the homestead’ (Gardner 1995, 27). Most of the migrants in my study were from a relatively affluent background and came from a demographic that could ‘afford to take the risk inevitably attached to migration’ (ibid 40). These migrant men and boys would have been accustomed to enjoying free reign of the *para*. Indeed, the act of migration was in many ways an endorsement and reinforcement of what Gardner calls their ‘active masculinity’ (Gardner 2002, 105), creating a staggering juxtaposition to the downward mobility and racialised marginalization they experienced upon arrival (Datta et al., 2009, Ryan & Webster 2008) in East London.
Chunu, who migrated to London aged 11 in 1969 with his mother and three siblings, also recollected the bounty of his village, the space to roam and the mobility he enjoyed. Additionally, and like other participants, he also talked about his family’s fears about moving out of the Spitalfields area where some semblance of **para** was established, simply through the density of the community:

Chunu: We were there quite some time. Because I remember dad made an application and the place they offered - after a few years, it was like Poplar, places that dad did not want to go.

Shabna: Poplar was an area he didn't want to go, was there a reason for that?

Chunu: The reason was like there was a lot of racism, lot of abuse. And you were picked on, so there was there were certain places that he was like, no go area. Nobody wanted to go to Bethnal Green. Nobody wanted to go to Poplar, nobody wanted to go to Wapping. It was basically - the choice was made, that there are more Bengalis in E1, so don't go out of E1. So I don't know what it was in his mental state that did not want it to go out of E1. It was because he probably thought we were a lot safer...And all you hear those days was... someone got beaten up, because he lives in Poplar. Someone got beaten up because he lives in Bethnal Green and this the whole block is all white and just one family. So it was like, it was ongoing every single day, every single week. It was endless – or that in some places, some friends I had they went to work, the place was broken into, that’s how it was.

Chunu’s account refers back to the importance of **safety** and **security** as critical determinants in housing and homemaking decisions, and the understanding that beyond E1 and the Spitalfields area, a Bengali family was the likely victim of regular racist attack. Helal Abbas, introduced in Chapter 4, also arrived as a young boy and became the Secretary of BHAG at the age of just seventeen. He was clear that home in 1970s East London was defined by the in/security of the space in which it was located, and that the **vigilante** patrols that emerged in June 1976, formed because of this insecurity:

...because police protection wasn’t there...the police never turned up. The police never took seriously, and one of the justifications of some of the senior police officers was, police was a reflection of the society we live in and that's basically saying well, if there's racism out there and there's racism in the police, what do you expect us to do?

For Helal, racist policing interacted with his experience of housing deprivation and racist violence. The vigilante patrols that emerged from the squatter community involved groups of younger men, driving around in cars after dark, making sure that their presence visibly covered routes from the tube station. This form of direct action was seen as a pragmatic extension of the squatting movement and seen as a
substitute to police indifference at best, and their racism at worst. Home was not just the domestic dwelling that was acquired, it had to connect, with some assurance of wider ‘physical safety’ and spatial liberty in the para. Helal described it as: ‘...people were tired of telling how many times they got beaten up, how they got treated like a piece of nothing’.

Chunu never squatted himself but actively supported other families to break in and squat. His family lived in cramped, but what he described as comparatively decent accommodation but even so, he was cognisant that the wider environment was incredibly insecure and hostile:

At first it was like okay, this is all different. Call it a man-made jungle or whatever, okay, but it was all different. Very quickly you realize like it was like it's sort of isolation. It was like, the language barriers, the peoples, the colours ... and everything. So, it was like, what am I doing here? Who do I know? What is this – all this and it was like it was boggling but because you cannot comprehend the surrounding, the people, the atmosphere, and the society itself. So, it was really weird. I mean, I probably say was really weird. Because you had no friends and you couldn't – I mean, literally back home, you can just like, when you're bored, you can go out because you live in a village and you can run around – here you can't you're not supposed to, you know, open the door and leave it, so it was like, it was like more of a prison than a lifestyle.

Chunu’s description of his arrival to a ‘prison’-like space, is the most overt expression of similar sentiments expressed by many participants and is in sharp contrast to the narratives of para that he and his male peers had enjoyed before migration. For Bengali young men like Chunu, this unfamiliar restriction to their mobility and the loss of para was a profound challenge to their traditional gendered relationship to space. The so-called ‘man-made jungle’ he referred to was an entirely appropriate description, because the restriction was inflicted, in most cases, by other young, white men. However, as noted in Daniel and Mcguire (1970) and in Chapter 4, there was also a notable ‘West Indian’ contingent involved in the racist attacks, as in the later murder of Altab Ali. As stated in the previous chapter, it is possible to detect something of the ‘effeminate Bengali man’ in the popular representation of the violence inflicted and the response generated; Bengali men were said to be cowardly and didn’t fight back and were thus regarded as alien to the rules of ‘brute masculinity’ that dictated the dynamics of space in 1970s East London (Ware 1996, 80). However, as I argued previously, I think that this colonially inspired representation of passivity obfuscates a more nuanced reality; one characterised by generationally differentiated attachments to home and homemaking. There was a ‘generational’ intersection, whereby participants recalled that the slightly ‘older generation’ of married men, those with remittance responsibility and crucially a
commitment to ‘return home’, were generally reluctant to engage in violent resistance and did indeed counsel restraint and patience. However, whilst racist gang members and even Bengali community supporters like Dan Jones, found explanations in colonially-inspired understanding about Bengali male innate passivity – and thereby made them appear as alien and incompatible with East End culture, I argue that their attitude was fundamentally rooted in a transnational attachment to Desh as home.

**Transnational homemaking attachments of older men**

In the documentary, *Credo* (1978) Gulam Mustafa, a married man in his thirties, then Secretary of Brick Lane Jammia Masjid criticised the actions of young Bengali men saying:

*We are peace loving people, we are not violent, so, and also people feel, they are here in this country to work, earn their living and learn the skills and do as best as could possible, being a representative of their country, like an ambassador. They don’t want to put their country’s name into jeopardise ...*(3 minutes, 19 seconds)

Gulam’s statement emphasises Bengali migrants being *visitors* to this country, here to work and earn money to take back home, echoing previous research that suggests how ‘paid work is a crucial construction of masculine identities’ (Datta et al., 2009, 865). Soyful Alom, was a single, young man whose older brothers bore the family remittance responsibility therefore absolving him of them. He was also a squatter and vigilante activist, and like Gulam, noted the importance of work and the concomitant transitory attachment of the older generation:

Soyful...we call them 'workers generation' they came, and they were living in a very squalid conditions, 3, 4, 5 people in a room or living in a shift situation, I'm talking about my grandfather or my father's generation, and they were living because the term and conditions of their employment was contractual, and they lived and worked 2 year, or 3 year or 4 year and then you go back home, that was the psychological assessment, that after 3 year, because I am here temporary...

Embedded in this discussion is not only the importance of work in shaping masculinity but what McKay calls ‘double masculine consciousness’ (2007, 630), whereby older male migrants saw their gender identity fulfilled based on the remittances earned and the ‘delayed gratification’ they would enjoy when they returned home to Sylhet (ibid), rather than by engaging in street fights in Spitalfields. Soyful and Ghulam both mentioned the importance of *work* in affirming the older generation’s sense of masculinity. The hardship of their work helped construct a masculine identity that affirmed their ‘role as providers’ (Datta et al., 2009, 866), and was nourished by ‘bideshi status’ (Gardner 1995, 62). Soyful called them the
‘workers generation’ and he differentiated them to his own peers. Unlike himself and younger male migrants, this generation was preoccupied with their transnational commitments and an eventual return home (something I return to in Chapter 6).

Both Kadir and Masabbir fall into that slightly older generation. Both were in their mid-thirties, had young families here in London, and significant remittance responsibilities to family and kin in Sylhet. Despite being squatters in very different circumstances, they shared a view that they were going to go ‘back home’ and that whatever they were earning was for the home and family they would both return to, in Sylhet. Kadir described it as ‘here we are citizens’, but that his ‘heart’ and ‘roots’ were firmly secured to Sylhet. Both men recalled violent incidents that they experienced and the racialised threats that framed their lives. For Kadir, who lived, worked and eventually owned a factory on Brick Lane for over thirty years, he was very conscious of the younger organisers of vigilante action, his eldest son being involved in that activity in the 1980s. But unlike his willingness to help support other homeless or struggling Bengali families to find and appropriate places to squat, Kadir was clear that he did not have the inclination or as he said it, the time, to support those wider vigilante actions. He was busy working to save money and ‘go back home’. He described one incident where he had come out of the public baths and was intercepted by some white men:

Kadir: One time, at the Baths – Poplar Baths – me and her uncle (inaud) said come let’s have a bath, we had a bath, came out, there was a coffee shop outside – just underneath the baths. I got him a glass and myself a glass – just warm milk, we just bought it and put it on the table, suddenly two white men came in and picked up our glasses and started drinking, criticizing, and I thought, no need for argument and even then I was careful, I thought no need for argument, I had that back then I wouldn’t start an argument in an uncomfortable situation, only if I could win, so I said, ‘you take our milk – you find it good?’ He said ‘very tasty’, I said ‘you want another glass?’ He said ‘no thank you’, and then they just left, because I had said that – they got embarrassed they wanted to start an argument, they were such khasra (dirty) people, that was their manners.

Kadir went on to state that he was not willing to engage in confrontation because whatever the indignity of the situation, these were temporary afflictions to be ‘smartly’ tolerated; that the type of people that were likely to engage in this kind of racist and violent behaviour were ‘khasra’ meaning dirty, and lower class and unworthy of response. Kadir’s recollection of his non-violent response to this situation and Masabbir’s eventual decision to leave Tower Hamlets, were, I argue grounded in a view that they were on a migration trajectory that involved a return home. Thus, they concluded at the time that hostility here
was best escaped, not by engaging in violent confrontations that might further injure or cause legal problems with the police, but by earning their respective fortunes and returning there. This balancing of interests is only revealed when the postcolonial attention to racialised violence and transnational home imaginary are employed as integrative lenses. Interestingly, Kadir who was explicit that he was entitled to a council house and that squatting was an appropriate response to that racialised deprivation, did not consider this incompatible with his refusal to engage in vigilantism more widely. For him, vigilantism was an effort to change a racially hostile neighbourhood that was an unworthy ambition, given that once they had achieved their remittance priorities, they would leave behind both the squat/council house and the ‘khasra’ neighbourhood.

Diasporic homemaking aspirations of younger men

However, for younger Bengali migrant men, it was squatting and housing activism that facilitated their entry into organising the Anti-Racist Committee of Asian in East London (ARCAEL) (Glynn 2014, 126). An article in Race Today (April/May 1977 JOU/1/1/92) by Mala Dhondy, reports on a local community meeting and talks about this ‘generation gap’ (68) in the conversations about how best to tackle the street racism that blighted the experience of para, and like Glynn, suggests that this younger generation ‘were ready to fight for their place in their adopted country’ (ibid). All those who were part of the vigilante patrols were younger men and a great many of them were squatters or squatter activists. Caroline Adams a prominent and much-loved community worker of the time, and author of ‘Across Seven Sea and thirteen rivers’ an oral history collection of older and early Bengali migrants (1987) noted in an interview (quoted in Glynn 2014, 126) that the vigilantism promoted by ARCAEL ‘transformed the consciousness of many young people ... The Bengali community had come of age and could no longer be patronised or ignored, at least not without a comeback.’

Ashfaq Kazi was a 13-year-old boy when he and his family came to squat in Varden Street. In his interview he made a careful delineation between what he called the ‘big brother types’ who were the older teenage boys – the so called 1.5 generation (Rumbaut 2004) and the ‘uncle types’ who were the slightly older, married men who generally also carried the bulk of the remittance responsibility for their respective families. Ashfaq witnessed the modest age difference as significant in terms of their outlook and response to the racist violence that plagued the community. He argued that the big brother types like Chunu and Gedu, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter were determined to resist the racist violence in a way that related to a sense that London was their new home and related their vigilantism to the emerging attachment to diasporic home. This contributes to the interplay between transnational and diasporic
identities and suggests that for the big brother types, there was a developing diasporic identity and attachment to London in a manner that was different to the uncle types who remained more attached and committed to transnational obligations, and an eventual return home.

The *Race Today* editorial line also understood squatting and vigilante action as intimately related struggles. In the October 1975 journal edition, a report about events stated, ‘It is not simply a question of homelessness. It is that too, but tied up in the fight for a decent home is a fight for the preservation of a community...’ (*Race Today October 1975, 223* JOU/1/1/76). The reference to ‘preservation of a community’ and a fight ‘against racial attacks’ links squatting to the contestation over para. Farrukh Dhondy, now a well-known writer and media professional, wrote this article and was one of the *Race Today* activists that were involved in BHAG’s vigilante patrols. In our interview, he flicked through the archival material that I had collected, exclaiming with happy surprise at almost every turn of the page, at the articles he and others had written, and which he had long forgotten. Dhondy is now 76 years old. He is still very active and works on various media projects, for which he travels frequently between India and England. As a wealthy Parsi migrant, he arrived in the 1970s on a scholarship to study Quantum Physics at Cambridge University. At the end of his studies, he was reluctant to go back and ‘make bombs for the Indian government’, so he stayed in the UK, moved to London and joined the Black Panthers. He described with relish the adventures he had with the activism of the group, but with its collapse he became one of the founders, along with Darcus Howe, of the *Race Today Collective*. Dhondy made a clear connection between squatting, vigilantism and the securing of para. Like Helal, he talked about police negligence and even of their complicity with racist attacks as one of the main reasons for resorting to this direct action: ‘Complain to the police? The police would laugh at you – you got beaten? Good. Show me the bruise - ha! Give you another one – slap!’

Dhondy went out on the vigilante patrols and recalled with glee the violence of some of their encounters:

...we started vigilante groups, you know that – to stop paki bashing, and we had fights. Terry was in one or two of them, I was in one or two of them, actual physical fights with guys who landed in vans looking for people to beat up then we said get back in your manor, fuck off from here – you know, Khusroo I think fought a lot – and actually maimed somebody (laughs)!

Dhondy saw squatting as more than a campaign for housing. He argued then and stands by this view still, that creating the ‘*alternative defence force*’ alongside the squatting movement was critical to building a movement. This was not just about claiming a home in the quiet shadows of the most dilapidated
properties in the East End, but the claim to *para* around that squatted zone, where the Bengali community was not besieged by racist violence. He wrote:

*The Bengalis are victims only to the extent that they are in the process of becoming protagonists. Their self-activity on the housing front resulted in a large-scale squatting movement which in 1976, was transformed into a vigorous campaign around a demand for decent housing in the E1 area. Then in 1977 when white racists intensified their murderous campaign, a section of the community responded with an organised self-defence force.* (Race Today July/Aug 1978, 99 JOU 1/1/101)

Dhondy’s interview and archival writings suggest that, at least amongst the BHAG activists, there was a clear understanding that squatting and wider community safety were co-constitutive pillars for the construction of home. For younger Bengali men, vigilantism was an attempt to remedy or at least mitigate the loss of control they experienced in the *para* and was a means to restore some ‘homely relations’ in how they were able to navigate that otherwise threatening space (Cancellieri 2015, 58). These young men engaged in squatter vigilantism not because they were campaigning for some form of urban citizenship (Holston 2008), but because they were engaged in creating a new diasporic home in 1970s East London.

Gedu, now a 63-year-old grandfather who still owns a property on Hanbury Street, just off Brick Lane, was not a squatter himself, but through his involvement with BHAG, was involved in the takeover of Pelham Buildings ‘BHAG’s fortress’ (Glynn 2014, 122) and was also regularly out on the night-time vigilante patrols:

Gedu: I think we got in there (Pelham Buildings) ...was it Thursday – I can’t tell you, but within week – ten days – full up. Because every house – not house, every flat, was overcrowded and there was a limit, people, you wouldn’t believe it Shabana, people would not want to go live Shadwell Garden because of the white racism, people would not want to go Shoreditch, people would not want to go Hollybush Garden, just off Bethnal Green Road. I ‘member - Terry and I went to put in Hollybush Garden and three hour later he came and knocked my door, I'm a bachelor – single man, I don’t stay home, goes to other things I came [home at] midnight and the man’s still crying there – so I say ‘what’s wrong bhaisab? What you doing in my house?’ He said ‘too much white people man – they knocking on my door- it's a big trouble’ so I said, ‘okay, sit down – we'll go’ and there was a big row between myself, Terry and the others - you know. I said you can’t have this in this country, it wasn’t easy – people, because in ‘70s, ‘70s...people our forefather, I'm very happy to say – their English wasn’t good, so they would want to stay all in ...near each other, they don’t want to go somewhere and ... most of them English wasn’t good and if there is trouble, their
aim was to come here earn some money, go back home to their family, when we came here I mean, after ‘bout three year of my life in this country, I said sod it man enough is enough, we not going to get beaten up. If someone beat me I’m going follow him, till I, you know I take the revenge.

Gedu’s account describes in some detail the racialised geographies that Bengali migrants experienced. He notes like Soyful, the attitude of the so-called ‘forefathers’ who simply wanted to work and go back home with their remittance earnings, contrasting it to his own view on the litany of violence that he suffered, saying, ‘I said sod it man, enough is enough’. He went on in the interview to talk about the strategy of patrolling the commuting routes used by Bengalis, returning from work and making their way home:

Gedu: Squatting, we’ve done ... squatting and patrolling same time together - because every night, people were getting beaten up by racists and on ‘70s today, you probably have two car in your house, you have one, your husband have one, or your daughter, son has … in ‘70s there was probably handful of car amongst our friends. And I remember Terry had Ford Zafire – it’s a massive big car, and we used to go out 8/9 o’clock in the even... night time and patrol underground, till underground closes, people come out, use the underground, getting beaten up, we were patrolling the whole street up to 3’4 o’clock in the morning, and me Terry couple of other people, started of one day probably over a year! Over a year- and seven days and er, it wasn’t easy, it wasn’t easy...and sometime, you have to defend you know, not to get your own sasa, baba – fellow country men not to get beaten up... I mean forget about me, people had fear, if anybody was going to come 10 o’clock from Hoxton Place to Hanbury Street or Brick Lane, it was a fear I mean you know, if you get beaten up once, you have fear in your life, you may get another time, but we as a young kids, you beat me today – tomorrow I will come with my friend and beat you up – find you, you know.

Gedu’s description of the ‘rounds’ and hours of ‘patrolling’ that he, Terry and Khosru among others would undertake, speak to a lack of faith in the police to provide the security that might have prevented these regular attacks. They also highlight the very real fear that Bengali migrant men experienced in the neighbourhood space, that as para in Sylhet, would have been a space of male sociability and liberty.

Gedu:...it wasn’t shame I would say proudly, our forefather...didn’t came here to defend. That was the biggest er sad thing for their life, we came here, we said no, my uncle, my dad, my fellow country uncle – not gonna be beat up by this white honky shithole, if they done something wrong, yes. They haven’t, they...’70s people were working up to their bottom, you know leave home 6 o’clock in the morning, if you had to go far, start 7/half 7, don’t finish till 7or 8 o’clock, by the time they got home – its 8 o’clock, cook, eat, go to bed, next morning. Life wasn’t easy, on top you get beaten up when you go outside your home we said, no, no, no, no, no. And I think it’s with
the help of Allah, Terry was a miracle to us – come and join, you know, you know, he was a proper Jack the lad, on his early day, you would, you know, he would go and fight anybody, he didn’t have … fear, you know, sometime me and him was going patrolling, if there is too many, he’d say - you drive the car - I'll go and beat the shit out of them – you know, and I said – I can’t even drive.. he said – just put in a gear man and go, go, go...

Gedu’s words emphasise the different ways that gender and generation interacted with the street racism of 1970s East London. Migrant masculinities were performed in this space in ways that related back to how they navigated and measured their attachments to home. The uncle types nurtured and compensated for the erosion of their masculinity in public space by focusing their energies on work (Datta et al., 2009) and transnational home. The younger generation, like Gedu, said ‘no, no, no, no, no, no’.

It is important to note that by situating squatting and the accompanying vigilantism within a framework of young, male migrant homemaking, I do not deny the political nature of the interactions or detract from the wider political movement that grew from these actions. Indeed, I would argue the political confidence generated by these actions also became the birthing ground for some of the first Bengali local political actors, who did go on to interact with and become part of the institutional structures of democratic decision-making (I return to this in Chapter 6). Helal, Soyful, and Nurul another Pelham Building squatter, were all squatters and became some of the first Bengali elected local councillors in the early 1980s. As Terry Fitzpatrick stated in his interviews, for him it was obvious that the housing struggle was:

Terry: …where a lot of the younger activists cut their teeth, what they, what they were shown was, you can move into a house, you can move into a block of flats, and you can back the state off and get rehoused. [Yeah] So if can do it over houses, I can do it over other things.

There is clearly interaction with ideas around insurgent citizenship; in the absence of being able to rely on the police, squatters and vigilante street patrollers in many ways represent ‘instances of self-help and defiance’ and relate closely to the idea of ‘guerilla urbanism’ (Hou 2010, 15). However, where these acts of insurgent citizenship centre the urban and are defined by a desire to change the ‘urban hegemonic landscape’ (ibid) and focus on public, political space, I reiterate that the younger male squatters were nurturing a diasporic identity and iterating homemaking practices. Squatter activists and the vigilante street patrollers rooted their actions in understanding of what was necessary to recreate para and restore some culturally familiar experience of gendered mobilities and the extension of home into the neighbourhood.
5.4 Conclusion:

This chapter has taken ‘home’ and homemaking ‘as extending beyond the physical home’ (Staeheli and Nagel 2006, 1601) and paid attention to the South Asian understanding of para as home. The role of squatting in conceptualising the arguments is critical. This is essential because in the first instance, the direct action taken to house themselves and the materially deficient quality of many of the properties squatted, were directly relevant to the need for Bengali migrants to interact with and perform domestic functions in the wider space of the city, in many cases propelling them into violently hostile spaces. These experiences were fundamentally gendered. I suggest that this was significant to the second argument developed here, considering specifically vigilante patrols that tried to secure safe space around the squatted community. These vigilante patrols operated, I argued, to resist and challenge the hostile city – to liberate Bengali men from the crushing violence that limited how they would otherwise have enjoyed public space or para, as a masculine homely environment in Sylhet.

This chapter also advances existing work that seeks to destabilise home as a fixed domestic dwelling and suggests that home in the rural Sylheti context extends beyond the domestic dwelling in zoned and gendered ways. Each section has explored how migrant home and homemaking interact with, and go beyond, the dwelling. I have taken the approach of exploring squatting as an act of homemaking and, in so doing, revealed how actions that might be viewed as shaping public space and resisting dominant urban hegemonies of exclusion and marginalisation, may be more sensitively understood if the mobilisation of these actions is framed as culturally mediated practices of Bengali migrant homemaking. I have argued that participants’ accounts demonstrate the desire and ambition to make home for themselves and their families in the wider space of the neighbourhood or para. Whether it is the practice of bathing and cooking in areas outside the home or the vigilante patrols to secure safe space and masculine mobility, these actions contribute to the understanding of squatting as an act of homemaking and home as multiscalar.

Finally, I have reiterated the benefits of bringing postcolonial and transnational approaches into critical dialogue. The so-called ‘passivity’ and ‘effeminacy’ of Bengali men (Dimeo 2002, Sinha 2017) which was seemingly used to inspire and justify the racist violence they suffered, can only be understood when referenced with the generationally differentiated transnational and diasporic home making attachments of the Bengali migrant community. It is important to note that younger Bengali men were by no means passive and, as related here, organised vigilante groups extending out from their squatting experience to
defend the community. However, it also appears that there was in the older generation, a transnational home imaginary which allowed them to tolerate and conciliate themselves to the racist violence suffered here, because in their mind, they were always returning there.

The next chapter takes this idea of the transnational home imaginary and explores it over the longer life-course. In this I take up the gendered and generational differentiation that marked experiences in the 1970s and explore how they developed and manifested in their evolving home aspirations.
Chapter 6: Exploring the Bengali migrant squatted home, then and now.

6.1 Introduction

Building on previous chapters which have focused on the squatted dwelling (Chapter 4) and then the wider neighbourhood, or para (Chapter 5), this chapter takes the multi-scalar home and extends into transnational home and homemaking (Al-Ali & Koser 2003, Blunt & Dowling 2006). In doing so, I contribute to ideas about desh (homeland) and bidesh (abroad) (Ballard 1994, Gardner 2002) and argue that the nation(s) as home was a significant animator in the homemaking practices and imaginaries of Bengali migrant squatters. Here, I seek to offer greater clarity on how the experiences of squatting and the wider neighbourhood were rooted in the transnational connections that migrants nurtured and negotiated in this period. I do so by actively engaging the temporal and intertwined character of each country - post-war Bangladesh and post-Empire Britain - and I argue that both contexts became significant animators in the way that home was imagined, and homemaking practices were prioritised. Bangladesh, an infant country, had just emerged from a brutal civil war and the legacies of that conflict were very much alive, energising migrants in complex ways. On the other hand, post-colonial Britain, was managing the long decline of Empire, busily enacting immigration laws that were obstructing routes that had previously facilitated fairly relaxed transnational travel for migrant communities, who were increasingly racialised as alien and invasive (El-Enany 2020). By inviting participants to reflect on events and decisions from 45 years ago, this section is also underpinned by the importance of ‘life-course’ work (Gardner 2002) or ‘life trajectories’ (Boccagni & Erdal 2020). Through this, I suggest that there is a gendered and generational interplay with how home attachments were understood, reviewed and secured over time.

Transnationalism emphasises the ‘multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the border of nation states’ (Vertovec & Cohen 1999, 447) and Bengali migrants of the 1960s and 1970s, were observed by Gardner (2009) as ‘transnationals par excellence’. She notes that Bengali migrants displayed transnational behaviours well before some of the transport and technologies of the later twentieth century that serviced these relationships, were available to them. She highlights how Bengali male migrants lived and worked ‘in Britain but returned as often as they could to East Pakistan...where they were still heavily involved in social networks of kinship and village community, as well as regional and national political activities’ (235). As outlined in previous chapters, I have argued that the neutralised register of the here/there relationship embraced by transnational approaches is enhanced when it takes
‘seriously the centring of colonialism’ (Mayblin & Turner 2020, 14). I concur that this means not just engaging a temporal perspective but recognising that Western-derived conceptualisations cannot be generically mapped across places and peoples (ibid 57). It has also been my contention that postcolonial attention to excavating colonial inheritance in a particular metropole can slip into narrow spatial contextualisation and vacate the place of origin, of meaning and significance in migration research. In this chapter, the integration of both frames is particularly fruitful for it enables me to consider the transnational homemaker practices and imaginaries within a framework that is attentive to the colonial inheritances of 1970s London. Drawing on Ahmed et al., (2003, 3) I also address the ‘variegated textures of habitation and migration in transnational circuits’, again addressing gender and generation as significant markers in those navigations.

The first key argument I develop in this chapter centres on the temporal context and connected geographies of post-independence Bangladesh with 1970s London to suggest that it generated divergent generational responses. I argue that there was a political inheritance of the 1971 Bangladesh civil war on how migrant squatters understood and articulated their response to the state and street racism they experienced in 1970s London. Many migrants had survived a brutal nine-month civil war, some had been in London for the entire duration and supported it through political organising and fundraising, others had returned to offer support to the liberation movement. Although fundamentally different struggles, migrants connected the decades-long political, economic and cultural oppression Bengalis had experienced in their relationship with East Pakistan, to the hostility they experienced in the state and street racism in 1970s East London. And yet this was not a straightforward inheritance. For the older ‘uncle types’ (as identified in Chapters 4 and 5), the inheritance they received was post-independence pride and interest to return home and rebuild their infant country. On the other hand, the ‘big brother types’, took inspiration from the liberation struggle to resist racialised oppression in what they saw as their new home, in London. This generational differentiation is one that has been consistent through previous chapters in terms of how the squatted home (Chapter 4) and wider para (Chapter 5) were conceived and reacted to, and I argue that the best explanation for the divergence is found in differential transnational and diasporic home attachments each generation nurtured and practiced.

The second key argument focuses the temporal lens more dynamically to show how past, present and future transnationally based and blended home imaginaries (Ahmed 1999, Ahmed et al., 2003), were significant animators in how participants navigated squatting experiences. In this section, I focus on the remittance home and the family to which migrants were remitting, arguing this was an important home
attachment for ‘uncle type’ migrants who saw squatting and London as only a temporary, transitory phase, tolerated only for the future return to desh and home. Here, I argue that the transnational family is critical for the home attachments that it generated, and I demonstrate that remittance as homemaking was not just about building new physical homes, but also about nourishing the family relationships that defined those spaces and made them homely.

The third and final argument takes the premise that ‘conceptions of home are not static but dynamic processes’ (Al-Ali & Koser 2002, 6). I argue that over the 45 years since participants squatted, ‘where one’s family lives’ has shifted and that those older migrants are now settled into homes that they had not expected to make, here. Their lives are linked to their children, and grandchildren, in East London. The place that had initially been divested of material or affective homemaking, has turned out to be their final home. Like Ahmed (2016) who notes that after the initial shrinking of the physical family in the 1970s, there has been a return ‘to an extended form of family’ in which older women appear to position themselves as ‘potential matriarchs’ (102), I trace this gendered shift and argue that whilst early decision-making was dictated by migrant masculinity and in particular the male responsibility as ‘providers and breadwinners’ (Datta et al., 2009 856), over the life course, this has been relinquished to an emergent maternal power (Pustulka 2016, 2018) or ‘matriarchal authority’ (Ahmed 2016, 103). I argue that migrant women, now as established mothers, grandmothers and mothers-in-law, exercise their grand/maternal attachments to act as the ultimate arbiters in these more finalised homemaking decisions.

6.2 The political inheritances of the 1971 civil war

‘In Bangladesh there was one war, here there was another war and we won this place, we claimed it.’

Husnara Matin

The civil war of 1971 loomed large in the minds and memories of many participants and would frequently emerge in ostensibly unrelated conversation. On one occasion, I was engaged in a light-hearted conversation with a group of women at Sonali Gardens day-care centre, the women were sniping at younger Bengali women, who they said, walked about like they were ‘beta manush’ (men-folk) carrying big bags and always out and about, with no restrictions. We had laughed when I had picked up my enormous rucksack and I pointed out that perhaps they were referring to me. They reassured me that they were obviously not, because I was ‘carrying important books’ and ‘completing important research’. The women had continued laughing and carried on, now talking about marriage proposals that young women boldly refused and the conversation flitted around these generational injunctions. A lady called
Lutfa whom I was sat next to, started talking to me about her marriage and the death of her husband at a young age. Our conversation shrank from the jovial banter that was being batted around the room and she began telling me about her unusual migration story. She had arrived to London as a 20-year-old widow in 1972, raising her children here as a single mother. Her husband, a Londoni, had travelled to Sylhet to accompany her on her scheduled journey to join him in London, but his return was mis-timed with the outbreak of the civil war. He could have returned to London, but she was pregnant, and he insisted, despite the family’s counsel and pleas, that he would stay. Just a few weeks into the war, he had been rounded up, along with all the young men in their Sriramishee village and shot by a Pakistani military unit in the courtyard outside the main line of baris (village houses). She recalled returning to the village to see dead bodies scattered across the courtyard. Her father-in-law was one of the older men who had evacuated to the jungle area with the women. He had returned with her, and in shock at seeing his dead son, had fallen face first into the dirt. Lutfa recalled that her most vivid memory was not the bodies - these were indistinct in her mind – but that of her father in law’s front teeth embedded in the ground as he had fallen and hit his face, teeth angled and protruding from the hard soil, a gruesome reminder of the events, that remained in the ground for weeks afterwards.

Shortly after the birth of her son, she used the papers that had been previously arranged, to come to London. Her own father and uncles were all in London and had shared accommodation with her now dead husband. They decided that it was better that she use her immigration papers whilst she could before any further restrictions potentially jeopardised her right to travel to London. She raised her infant child, and two older children, as a single mother and never re-married. Lutfa’s story was not unique, but I remember it so well for the juxtaposition of the conversations around it. Many participants had equally tragic and violent memories of this period. But even for those not directly involved, the war featured strongly in explaining their loyalty to Bangladesh.

The nine-month civil war was rooted in the much longer legacies of British colonialism, and the partition of India in 1947 to create the post-colonial state of Muslim Pakistan divided across East and West Pakistan and separated by 1600km of Indian territory. The relationship between the two territories was, from the outset, characterized by inequality. The Western wing assumed dominance despite East Pakistan’s demographic majority, and ruled with poorly disguised economic neglect, political discrimination and cultural marginalisation (Ahmed 2004, Riaz 2016). When the results of an election in 1970 gave East Pakistan and the nationalist Awami League Party, with its leader Sheikh Mujib a parliamentary majority, the West Pakistani leadership refused to relinquish power. Instead, it launched a military attack that
culminated in what some have described by some as ‘attempted genocide’ (Jahan in Totten et al., 2013, Riaz 2016).

The popular narrative that tells the story of this war revolves around the brutal violence that so many experienced first-hand, which essentially pitted a military against an unarmed civilian population. However, the story is rooted in the longer history of cultural oppression and identity, particularly linguistic ties that triggered an earlier language movement in the 1950s. This movement created ‘language martyrs’, whose transnational significance can be seen in the Shaheed Minar structure erected in Altab Ali Park in the 1990s (Alexander 2011). The original memorial in Dhaka, commemorated the killing of Bengali student demonstrators on a protest to recognise Bengali as an official state language in 1952 (Islam in Maloney 1978). This early conflict galvanised the beginnings of a sustained movement, initially for greater autonomy, and eventually independence. Thus, the fight for Bangladesh, was a fight for homeland. As Pavri (2008) puts it:

All of the dreams and aspirations of the Bengali people became attached to the possibility of gaining control over their own land and thereby their own destinies until no solution short of that would have been acceptable. Hence, the 1971 war became their “muktijuddo,” - war that liberated their homeland (110).

After a stumbling start and allegations of inefficiency and corruption, Sheikh Mujib, the first Prime minister of Bangladesh was assassinated in 1975, heralding the beginning of regular political and military disruption in the subsequent decades (Gardner 1995, 22). The way that participants talked about their transnational relationship with desh was underpinned by what were then these temporally close events. In my research, it became clear that participants carried something of the political and cultural inheritance of this activism into the way they understood and, in some cases, resisted their marginalisation in London.

Although the attempted genocide (Riaz 2016, 4) inflicted by the West Pakistani state and military are distinct to the state and street violence experienced by Bengali migrants in 1970s postcolonial London, there are certain threads of the experience that I argue resonated with squatter activism. The first was the obvious institutional deprivation they faced within the housing system and second, of course, was the wider violent racism they confronted as a daily part of their lives in East London. Both iterations of racism were, as I have already argued in previous chapters, efforts to un-home (Baxter & Brickell 2014, Elliott-Cooper 2019, Porteous & Smith 2003) the Bengali community in the East End; to exact upon them slow but regular violence that would deprive them of the ability to feel a sense of belonging or to feel ‘at home’.
This relied on presenting the Bengali community as ‘alien’ and ‘inferior’ (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982, 78) and was evocative of the West Pakistani diminution of cultural identity that had played such a significant role in the lead up to the 1971 civil war. Riaz (2016: 19) for example, described the ‘deliberate attempts of the state to crush the cultural heritage of the Bengali people and, thus render them subordinate to the alien culture patronized by the state apparatus’ and described the behaviour of the West Pakistani state as ‘internal colonialism’ (ibid). The entanglement of the memory and narrative of the 1971 civil war, and racist violence in 1970s London, is probably best exemplified in the siting of that replica Shahid Minar structure referred to earlier, in the park that was re-named after Altab Ali, the garment worker, who was murdered in a racist attack in 1978 (Alexander 2011, 591). Alexander highlights the interaction between ‘youth movements in East London’ and ‘liberation struggles in Bangladesh’. I expand upon this by noting specifically the relationship to squatting and squatter activism.

Husnara Matin, introduced in previous chapters, was the only squatter I interviewed who remained in the home that she had squatted in 45 years ago. Husnara was a mother of three daughters when she began squatting, and she talked in terms that stressed explicit commonality between the housing struggles Bengali migrants faced in the East End and the civil war that they had just fought in Bangladesh. Indeed, it was transnational politics that was the catalyst for the housing hardship she and her family suffered. She had arrived in the UK in 1972. Her husband deployed here to staff the Bangladesh High Commission in London. In the mid-1970s, when the Awami League government at the helm of the Bangladesh independence movement was overthrown, and the leader Sheikh Mujib was assassinated, many of the staff employed by the previous administration had their contracts terminated. Husna and her husband lost the house in west London that the High Commission position had subsidised. With their now four children, the couple moved to Tower Hamlets relying on their migrant networks to organise emergency accommodation. With no job and no house, they moved around sleeping in shared accommodation before finally coming to squat in Varden street, in what became a BHAG stronghold, just behind the Royal London Hospital, where as a widow Husnara, now aged 74, still lives.

Husnara’s squatting experience has this unusual link to events in Bangladesh’s political upheavals, but it was not the only connection. As related in Chapter 5, Husnara repeatedly talked about fighting to stay in this country – and identified some inheritance of the Bangladesh conflict to the ‘war’ they faced here:

Husnara:...we all had to fight, even us [women]…we had so much trouble, but we even enjoyed that fight (laughs), if I’m honest, we enjoyed that fight! Life was sad and happy, so much kho...
(hardship). In Bangladesh there was one war, here there was another war - and we won this place, we claimed it.

Shabna: Did you ever think about leaving and going back to Desh?

Husnara: Going back to desh, I never thought that, my desh is my desh and I will go, but just going, no, the high commission, we left the high commission in '77 – his job had gone in '77 those who had been there, those who entered there - (intrans) because of that, we all lost our jobs, it was also politics, we - those who were part of Mujib’s support, we were expelled, others took new jobs, my husband, we thought about chasing after new jobs in new places, and we wanted to concentrate on our children and we decided to settle here, you need to settle in one place to get a good education, we had moved around so much, in Pakistan one time, in Dhaka one time, in Saudia Arabia one time, going from one place to the next, and so to settle in one place, we decided to stay. We decided, we could help people here, it was everyone together, and so we settled here and so from there, we would go to Desh, we would go every year and so we went then and now, but we had settled here. After that we became British, we got our passports, how it was best, that’s what happened. Still, after independence, if it was our Banghabandhu’s (reference to Mujib) desh, we might have thought about it, but after independence, we thought about this area (intrans) we stayed. We became British, and by becoming British we made it comfortable, we didn’t have a masjid, we didn’t know even what Eid was, we used to cook some pulao and that was Eid! We used to go to Brighton, that was Eid, but now, Eid it’s like Bangladesh… and that’s why the people now, they can do it and everyone now has it comfortable and easy and it will be more, and that will happen more, the place we have, we also have desh, we are Bengali so Bangladesh is still ours, we have both, as long as I live - I will enjoy that.

Husnara’s loyalties oscillate between the local and the national. Her interview is littered with references to Bangladesh, and her affection and patriotism adorn the walls of her home in the photographs and nakshi (a specific style of Bengali embroidery) embroidered tapestries that are proudly displayed, (see Figure 6.1)
However, homemaking was never about labouring for a return to Bangladesh, she and her husband were of a different social class to the majority of agricultural, Sylheti families, and their families in desh were not reliant on them for a remittance income. The couple committed to making Britain a ‘comfortable’ place and she talks about the community’s creation of an institutional and cultural presence through the masjid (mosque) and madrasah (religious school). Political events in Bangladesh explicitly framed her decision to settle in East London. She elaborates ‘if it was our Banghabandhu’s (a term used to describe Sheikh Mujib meaning friend of Bangladesh) desh’, meaning they might have had a stronger desire to return. Still, as it was, the political climate was not one that she and her husband found hospitable. Therefore, she says, they settled on making home in Britain and in Ahmed’s (2003, 9) terms ‘inhabiting the grounds of the present’, asserting themselves in the squatter movement.

The connection between the civil war and squatting in London, was further exemplified when, asked about the role of women in the squatting movement:

Husnara...here were lots of English women, lots of English women, there were some of us who had been here a while, we got involved, we got involved and we did lots of demonstrations - along with them, with thousands and thousands, we said, we may not have walked with them, but we fed them, we gave them space for meetings, there used to be lots of meetings, this [her house] was a meeting space, there were Labour Party meetings here, lots of meetings here, this was a meeting space for the Labour Party, community meetings, (intrans) there were loads, and so we women were behind all of these events. See us or not see us, there was lots of work we did, that you may not see, but it
was going on. There is lots of work that you can’t see openly, the grocery shopping, the feeding, getting that – we supported that, we supported with a lot of work. Like during independence, so many women worked so hard – but their work is not recorded in history. Their stories are not told. They fed people rice, delivered that food, went into the walking, walking into the jungle to help the mukti judha (freedom fighters), it was exactly like that here too, we did that work here, so much, we did so much, we kept strong, we had to figure out how to get legal as squatters, we figured out how to get legal, how to get electricity, I mean there was so much, so much work that we did, so much hardship we faced, we suffered and we were also rewarded, but we did work so hard. All the houses, that were here, the ceiling - the coal, everywhere they used to burn coal and it was so hard to clean the coal, it was so grubby. It was such a sufferable job.

Husnara recognises that women’s labour in both events may not have been the centre-stage activity that made headlines, but she insists on the value of the work women performed; work ‘that you may not see’ yet were pivotal to the success of both movements. Her words ‘bear witness to gendered silencing in the sites of history’ and the way that ‘official’ histories of the 1971 war, for example have suppressed women’s experiences and contributions (Saikia 2011, 11). Husnara points to the labour of care and nourishment played by women who fed the freedom fighters that hid in jungles and sees the connection to her feeding the people who would meet at her squatted house, organising the collective response to eviction threats and letters. Although only obliquely stated in her interview, Husnara’s husband seems to have suffered an emotional breakdown after the losing his job and the difficulties he encountered transitioning to lower-skilled, manual jobs like waitering in restaurants. Without pressing the point of his reduced capacity, Husnara related how she personally was the one who visited the utility company offices and negotiated the reinstatement of gas and electricity lines when there was official pressure on such companies to refuse such squatter requests. Her words also hint at how women were also involved in ‘regrounding’ communities ‘through the reproductive work they do within the family’ (Ahmed et al., 2003, 12). They conducted the ‘sufferable job’ of making the dirty squat a home habitable for family, a homemaking labour that many Bengali women would have performed, but generally rendered invisible in accounts of 1970s squatting.

Nurul Hoque, and his wife Anwara Begum, were squatters in Pelham Buildings (see Chapter 4) - BHAG’s ‘fortress’ - that was occupied in spring 1976. That same year, the couple also squatted a basement flat just a short walk from Brick Lane where they set up a Bengali language supplementary school called the East End Community School (EECS) (see Figure 6.2 for an image of the school). Nurul and his wife were from Chittagong, a port city in the south. The couple were educated and had arrived in the UK with Nurul
pursuing further study. They had been in Bangladesh for the first part of my fieldwork, only returning to London just before the March 2020 Covid19 lockdown. Therefore, our communications were conducted over a series of telephone conversations, always with the promise of meeting in person, at some point. However, as an 85-year-old man who was also recovering from cancer this promise was sadly never fulfilled. In addition to the telephone interviews, Nurul and his wife both wrote and self-published their memoirs about this period in English and Bengali and he was also interviewed in the ‘A Safe Place to Be’ documentary, archived at the BFI (see Chapters 3 and 4).

As already stated, Bengali language was critical to the independence movement (Glynn 2014, 43, Riaz 2016), and the cultural and emotional attachment to language inherited from the events leading to the 1971 war, was I argue instrumental to Nurul’s campaign, and the wider community support for a Bengali language school in the East End. Complaining about the racism and cultural alienation that Bengali children experienced in local mainstream schools, he argued:

_These realities of negligence and discrimination against our community compelled us to organise this school...The school symbolises our cultural aspiration. We are British but we are Bengalees. The United Kingdom is our homeland. We are an integral part of British Society but we want to maintain our cultural heritage and identity._ (Hoque 2012, 37)
Nurul makes reference to the UK as ‘our homeland’ but it is a home that insists on ‘the gathering of intimations’ of home (Ahmed et al., 2003, 9), and specifically the ability to support the cultural transmission of Bengali language which had been at the heart of the conflict with East Pakistan. His defence of the squatted school sits in line with vigilantism of the younger ‘big brother types’ from chapter 5, whose diasporic homemaking intentions mobilised them into vigilante patrols, and here articulates as a defence of the squatted language school. Nurul went on to state:

_We will not tolerate that nonsense. We are the rightful citizens of this country. We are not ship deserters. We have not come here unlawfully. We have come here as a legacy of imperialism We have come here... legally. And we have been accepted by the ordinary people of this country. So we have nothing to fear. Nobody gives you freedom. You have to fight for it. Nobody fights for you. You have to fight for yourself. So we have accepted this lesson._ (Credo 1978, 19 minutes)

Nurul makes explicit reference here to the ‘legacy of imperialism’ and finds in that relationship the legitimacy of Bengali people to make a claim for home and belonging in Britain, drawing on Sivanandan’s now familiar refrain ‘we are here, because you were there’ (Gordon 2014, 2). He speaks directly to the narrative of post-colonial erasure and distancing that was energetically nourished in 1970s Britain (El-Enany 2020). Even with the reference to the ‘ship deserters’, his words demonstrate a clear cognisance of the ‘nonsense’ that sought to diminish the long connection between Britain and Bangladesh and the rightfulness of their citizenship claims. The definitive call to fight for freedom and that no one will willingly hand it over, is evocative of his own activism in the events leading up to the civil war, including as an undergraduate student when he was involved in the Bengali language movement in 1960s Chittagong. There is a clear inheritance of there in how Nurul understands and resists the racialised exclusion that Bengali migrants faced here.

Terry, also introduced in previous chapters, made the same link. His assessment of why Bengali migrants became key squatter protagonists in the 1970s relates back to both the tight-knit migrant networks with which they operated and a political attitude they brought with them:

...by the early part of 1975 ...I was starting to understand about Bangladeshi culture, about Sylhet, the Liberation War had just finished I knew it had been a terrible thing, and what struck me was that was the resilience of these people. You know, you've, you've come out, first of all, a war and then a monsoon, which typhoon in which 3 million people have died. Erm, and you're quite happily in the centre of one of the richest cities on the world moving into a state-owned house. Nobody worried about it.
Terry makes clear reference to the close historical context of the civil war and the hardships people had suffered. For him, this and subsequent experiences had given Bengali migrants a ‘resilience’ and boldness, that was quite unique. In another interview, he goes on to make an even more explicit link:

For the younger ones, they imported the culture direct from Sylhet – they had just fought a war for their country against the Pakistanis and then they came over here and then took that fight straight to the streets here.

So, they had just had this whole fight against the Pakistanis who just committed brutal war crimes against them – they weren’t going to come and just be pushed around all over again.

This refusal to be ‘pushed around all over again’ links back to the vigilante patrols discussed in Chapter 5 and the way that younger migrant men, in particular, were reluctant ‘to turn the other cheek’.

Ashfaq Kazi was a 13-year-old boy who became a squatter in the same street as Husnara Matin and it was his reference to the ‘uncle types’ and the ‘big brother types’ discussed in Chapter 4. Ashfaq’s family had been in Dhaka during the beginning of the war. His father, a diplomat, had been stationed as part of the Pakistani Diplomatic service in Hong Kong, but just before the war he had been posted back along with all other Bengali employees. His father had then ended up being imprisoned for the entire duration of the fighting. At the same time, Ashfaq, just eight at the time, along with his mother and two other siblings, took refuge, first in his paternal grandparent’s village and then finally, in his mother’s natal village outside Komilla. He spent the war unsure of his father’s fate and talked with happy energy of the day when shortly after the conclusion of the war, his father had come strolling down the main road leading into the village. He recalls feeling shy and relieved, hiding in the folds of his mother’s sari. A couple of years later, the family were then posted to London, and Ashfaq remembered with some horror the conditions of the houses they lived in - the High Commission’s wage did not go very far in London. The family moved into East London, initially renting a shared room with another family, before moving into a shared house. During these experiences, he remembers his father meeting Terry, Farrukh Dhondy and Mala Sen. His father was educated and literate, quickly becoming a person people in the Bengali community would turn to for assistance with their housing bureaucracy. This then linked him to other squatters, and in 1974, Ashfaq remembers the family moving into 12 Varden Street (seen below in Figure 6.3), understanding only much later, that they had become squatters.
Ashfaq, joined the Bangladeshi Youth Movement in 1978 initially as a social space, somewhere where he played football and cricket, but it also became the place where he began to link his housing experience and the wider racism the community faced. He described the way that the ‘big brother’ types he met there understood their militancy and their demands for self-organisation, based on two key principles, the first being that they were *British citizens* and that their labour, the labour of their fathers and grandfathers entitled them to safe and permanent home in Britain. Secondly, that they actively excavated their London based political activism to the resistance that their forefathers had offered in the liberation struggle, and as Terry noted, that they had not just fought of one oppressor, to simply acquiesce to another. Ashfaq recalled:

> At that time the youth we were really politically active, whatever the issue there would be lots of activity and demonstrations - and I went back to the BYM just a few months ago and now it’s just a club, it’s somewhere people just hang out you know and I think it’s because they don’t have those experiences to draw on, you know, in the 1970s there was that level of political activity around the civil war – there was those social discussions going on with the big brother types, and you know, you absorb that don’t you? So, I’m glad I’ve had all those experiences because they helped shape my own life.

Whilst highlighting how the transnational inheritance of the 1971 war nurtured squatter activism amongst some migrants, other participants returned to why some older, or ‘uncle type’ migrants urged caution. Helal who was just a young boy when he arrived and who went on to become Secretary of BHAG, observed...
that the inheritance from there to here acted to diminish the London based political activism of the ‘uncle types’ generation. Helal argued that this generation was committed to returning home. The domestic politics of post-independence Bangladesh proved a distraction and diversion away from squatter activism in East London. The ‘uncle types’ were caught up with the priorities of domestic politics in Bangladesh:

Helal: They were pre-occupied with the Bangladesh independence war and its aftermath...because they were the generation that was still going back home, they were sorting out back home, they weren’t interested in what was happening and community organisation here.

Helal very clearly identifies a transnational attachment to Bangladesh as the reason for the relative indifference of the older generation to the wider squatter activism here. Kadir, prior to his squatting experience and during the civil war had actively fundraised to raise monies for the *Mukti Bahini* (freedom fighters), he had attended marches and demonstrations in Trafalgar Square, Hyde Park and picketed the Pakistani High Commission, calling on the UK government and the world to intervene in the terrible acts of violence. Kadir was also part of a group of Bengali migrants who chartered a plane and flew to India. They then then illicitly made their way across the border into what was still East Pakistan to deliver the monies raised. These seem like extraordinary acts now, and likely they were at the time, but he talked about them, as though they were trivial contribution. Kadir was the ‘uncle type’ that Ashfaq and Helal described, who despite feeling entitled to the benefits of housing in this country, squatting when those needs were not met by the state and also helping others to break in and squat too, was at the time welded to a return home. Like Masabbir, also another ‘uncle type’, they saw themselves as legal British citizens. They claimed a legitimacy for their place in East London which was nourished by an understanding that a Bengali community had long established itself here and worked to pay their taxes and earn their rights here. However, beyond squatting to claim a home for themselves, they were less enamoured with the younger generation’s slogan ‘here to stay, here to fight’ (Glynn 2014) because as the next section will discuss, the uncle types were in their mind, only here to stay - for a short time, and therefore did not consider it worth the fight.

6.3 *Desh* as home – remittances and family attachments in the ‘uncle type’ generation

‘Load of people’s houses are empty - back in Sylhet – people from the other part of the Sylhet and they lives in those luxury houses – while those old people are still struggling here’ (Dilai Miah)
In this section, I move on to focus on squatting that was linked not just to the state and street racism that fundamentally framed it, but also to this ‘highly transitory’ (Wiles 2008, 117) mindset, where ‘uncle type’ migrants in contrast to their younger peers, saw themselves as ‘sojourners’ (Ballard 1994) and retained significant transnational homemaking attachments. This generational intersection is something that I highlighted in Chapter 4 when I explored the differential way in which older and younger migrants negotiated the violence that visited the front of house evident in Mashuk’s story, and then in Chapter 5 to show how squatter activism, namely in the form of vigilantism was something that older migrants desisted from. In the section above, I argued that there was some explanation for this lack of wider interest, due to their particular inheritance of the 1971 war; that they were keen to return home to build a new country. In this section, I switch from the younger men, to shift my focus to the remittance relationships these older migrant men maintained, mainly with the view of building a remittance home that they would go back to enjoy and the family relationships they would reunite with.

I examine how ‘the work of homebuilding is intimately bound up with the idea of home: the idea of a place (or places) in the past, and of this place in the future’ (Ahmed et al., 2003, 9 original emphasis). In taking this longer view with participants. I trace the temporality of transnationalism and the shifts that emerge over time. I argue that for older ‘uncle type’ migrants and their young families, the idea of home remained the past home they had left in Sylhet and their actions in the present were directed towards the future home they were building and would return to. In this imaginary, family relationships and attachments were critical home-connectors (Baldasser et al., 2007) and in the Bengali cultural context, these were far wider than the immediate nuclear family and mainly derived from wide patrilineal connection. I examine how economic remittances interacted with these relationships and made them early anchors for the imagined return home (Simoni and Voirol 2020). However, I am also concerned to go beyond remittances as financial relationships and to consider them as ‘emotional attachments’, what Burman (2002, 50) describes as ‘yearning’, which is both ‘nostalgic’ and ‘future-oriented’ and which I link here to the idea of shifting loyalties over the duration of a life-course (Gardner 2002) or life-trajectories (Boccagni 2020). In this I contribute to the developing consensus that family life has too long been marginalised to the ‘backstage’ (Hochschild 2010, 1125) and that this is based around the type of ‘blithe generalisations’ (Jazeel 2019, 20) that originate in Western individualistic accounts of migration (Baldassar et al., 2018) but which sit uncomfortably with the Bengali migrant context in my research.
Abdul Masabbir, my father, grew up in Chaatak, a village area in Sylhet and only wore his first pair of shoes, on the day he left his village to travel to London, in 1963 (see figure 6.4). He had gone to school only for a few short years, before as the eldest son, he had begun work on his father’s rice fields.

When he left Sylhet, he was a man in his early twenties and as a man in his seventies now, he began our interview reciting a short ditty:

> You went to London  
> Fields and land sold  
> Get your passport quickly  
> The days are counting down  
> It meant – you know, in our country there were few jobs, and if you could come to this country, you’d get a better job and get a better life.

He left his immediate family, mother, father, two brothers and three sisters and wider kinship network. The better job and better life he described were not an individualistic pursuit. The journey he began in his uncomfortable new shoes was undertaken to collectively improve the extended family’s fortunes. His father had sold agricultural land to fund his journey and his indebtedness to that initial investment and
the family he left behind, have lasted his entire lifetime (Rahman 2013). Masabbir had initially been satisfied with behaving as ‘inter-continental commuter’ (Ballard 1994) and visited his wife and family on long recuperative retreats to desh, once every few years. When he applied, and was finally able to get his wife and infant daughter entry to the UK in 1975, he did not consider this a conscious decision to make home in London, rather he explains it as a combination of the situation in Bangladesh being ‘quite bad’ but also as response to fear about immigration law changes, or as he describes it, ‘they weren’t happy about so many of our people coming, they were trying to make it stricter for us’. Like other participants, there was anxiety that access would eventually be denied. The post-colonial immigration framework that ‘moved to introduce controls targeted at racialised subjects and commonwealth citizens’ (El-Enany 2020, 4) is directly linked here to how Bengali migrant men began to shift position. Rather than fall foul of this new bordering regime, men like Masabbir, who still very much saw themselves as sojourners decided to bring their families over, whilst simultaneously remaining committed to the return home. So, when asked whether this act was testament of more permanent settlement in the UK, he was emphatic that ‘no, no – at that time it was never in my mind to stay.’

Masabbir’s role as ‘family provider’ was mediated in Bengali cultural terms; the ‘family’ and ‘kinship’ had wide remit and included his ‘gusthi’ who include extended and multi-generational family members and attiyo, non-blood related, village based ‘family’ (Gardner 1995, 29). It is relevant to note here that one of the ways that the Bengali community were Othered in 1970s East London, was through the way that Bengali families both in their extended nature and for the number of children. They were depicted as ‘primitive’ and ‘alien’ compared to the racialised heteronormative nuclear family, as the ideal type in Western culture (Hewitson 2012). This sentiment was picked up in Dench et al.,’s (2006) 1990s study where white participants argued that it was through ‘cultural preference’ that Bengalis suffered ‘overcrowding’ (162). It was not the social housing system, but the Bengali migrants themselves that purportedly created the crisis, because as one participant put it ‘they all have so many children and this area can’t cope with all these people’ (175) and another resentfully noted ‘All the new houses are for immigrants. Big houses, for big Pakistani families’ (179). The idealisation of the European nuclear family is apparent; Hewitson (2013) describes this as ‘an instrument of colonisation’ (93) promoting an idea of family form and size as signifying a ‘racial hierarchy of primitive to civilised’ (ibid 107) and Bengali families in their complex extended relationships (Amin 1998), were in 1970s East London, deemed as signal of primitive culture and Othered.
In the Bengali cultural context the *attiyo* – or the extended family that can extend beyond blood lines is however ‘one of the principal factors of social, political and economic organization’ (Gardner 1995, 29) For the older ‘uncle types’ like Masabbir, it was the enduring commitment to the transnational family (Baldassar & Merla 2013) they had left in *desh* that consumed their energy. Masabbir’s remittances have for 57 years, supported his wider *gusthi* and *attiyo* with housing, utility line extensions, business ventures, migration opportunities for brothers and nephews, purchase of agricultural land, medical expenses, weddings, burials, and pilgrimage trips to Mecca in Saudi Arabia; in line with Osella and Osella (2003) Masabbir relentlessly performed his migrant ‘manhood’ and ‘mature masculinity’ (129) performing his role as *Londoni* son, whilst at the same time, avoiding the street conflicts that would have proved his ‘brute masculinity’ (Ware 1996, 80) in 1970s, East London terms. His commitment in these early days is illustrative of Baldassar et al’s (2007) conception of a ‘transnational family’ which, despite the spatial distance and lack of physical proximity, ‘retain their sense of collectivity and kinship’.

Masabbir remitted to support his family to improve the village *bari* residence (his family home - see Figure 6.5) which is a large bungalow home retaining in its outer structure in the traditional style with a large *uthan* (courtyard) at the front with a *phokoir* (freshwater pond) at the back. It is now inhabited by one of his brothers and his brother’s family. Masabbir’s father died in 1980 and never enjoyed the material benefits of his son’s improvements. However, he did manage to pay for him to perform a rarefied pilgrimage to Mecca, which Masabbir considers his most worthy filial gift. The original *bari* structure has been expanded and is now serviced with electricity, an ‘English style toilet’ and a hot water shower, for Masabbir’s return visits. These visits have become increasingly irregular. His last visit in January 2020, he feels, might well have been his last.
Although Masabbir invested a significant amount of money in his ancestral village home, he never imagined returning to live there with his Londoni family. Instead, like many of his migrant peers, the remittance home he envisioned for his return, was built in the town, a location that was considered more palatable for children and the migrants themselves, who had become accustomed to city life through their migration journey. Along with the money earned by Guljahan’s piece-work, the couple built a three-storey basha - townhouse - in the urbanised heart of Sylhet, in a place called Upo Shohor, where Londoni migrant remittances also fund all the neighbouring residences (see Figure 6.6). In the early days of erecting the foundations and paying for the building, he tells me he was absolutely committed to ‘returning home’, and imagined his large family spread across the many levels. By the mid-1980s he had moved his mother and youngest brother into the house. He made sure that they had all the home accessories that a Londoni basha29 would expect, including air conditioning, fridge/freezers and satellite televisions. Masabbir calculated that he had invested more than £300,000 in the last four decades but also admitted that he had not spent more than about 6-8 months there in total.
In contrast to these ‘palatial’ remittance homes (Gardner 2016, 199), and the family attachments to parents and siblings they nourished, Guljahan, his wife recalled how sparsely furnished their squatted home in London, in 1976 was:

Guljahan: In my room, I had a bed – me and my daughter – we had a cot- she was in the cot...we started with just four walls – we bought second-hand beds, - with springs – so we had a second-hand bed – and that’s how we stayed... We didn’t buy anything in those days - nothing new – we only bought secondhand stuff from the market, but in those days the stuff was much more durable and lasted so it was okay.

Linking back to Chapter 4, Guljahan also talked about her curtains, referring to the fact that they were ‘horrible’ but that they had no inclination, especially in the squatted home, to make any financial investment as they had no idea how long they would stay. This commitment to a transitory stay - that London was a temporally limited phase - marked their subsequent housing journey. The couple moved around in shared accommodation for many more years, sleeping on floors, squeezed into one room with three young children before being given a council tenancy in 1979.
The racialised immigration controls that were enacted during the 1970s and 1980s took away the security of entry and restricted the ‘sojourner’ lifestyle that the ‘uncle types’ like Masabbir had enjoyed in the previous decades of transnational migration. Mobility, which is so important to ‘family-hood’ (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002, 3) across transnational space, had become racially exclusive (El-Enany 2020) and now with families and children enrolled in schools, trips back home were more financially costly and led to difficult conversations with schools. It was only in 1988, after they had redeveloped the bari residence (earlier Figure 6.5) and built the main structure of their basha (earlier figure 6.6), that the couple, exhausted by a council housing system that refused to give them anything more than 2.5 bedroom flat, finally bought a four bedroom house in Hackney. Ironically, the post-colonial immigration system and educational disapprobation on long holidays home had, by its inflexibility, coercively created the conditions where the family had begun to feel they had to choose one location over the other (Ahmed 2016, 110).

The couple had dreamed ‘of the good life’ (Gardner 2016, 199) whilst living in ‘far less glamorous homes in the United Kingdom’ (ibid 199) and had been motivated by a ‘future oriented project of promised happiness’ (206, ibid). This also fits with Bradley et al’s (2007) observation that remittances have a significant impact on tenure choice, and that ‘attachment to a native country...influences the relative attractiveness of owning’ (454). Central to their decision was the family and attiyo attachments in Desh that were prioritised. The couple had made significant economic investment in the remittance home they expected to return to, but an attachment to parents and siblings underpinned that commitment, and through those relationships, the past and future homes were tied together. However, these attachments declined because although the material dwelling went from imagination to solid structures, the family members that inhabited them aged and died. Masabbir described this shift:

And I am retired – but before thinking I would retire there permanently – nowadays – plans changed – I have 7 children, I have 14 grandchildren – and if I go there and settle down there and sleep and get the rent and expenditure – that's not make me happy... because I feel it – I want to be near my children, I want to be near my grandson, granddaughter. That is the situation – but very, very hard life it was to build all this up... My mum is dead, my dad is dead, only one brother and one sister in Bangladesh – so I’m going soon – but I don’t know how long to stay. But I regret – all that money invested and the way I worked to give that money – it's really – I feel to cry – and if it’s this money – if I kept in here, and buy some flat or some... house or anything – is was maybe more happy. But still on one hand I’m happy – because I’m going soon for a holiday – I have a place in town and I
have a place in the bari – that I can stay, all these places have a bathroom, Alhamdulilah – on one hand I’m happy.

The reference to ‘all that money invested’ should not be underestimated. Like all participants, Masabbir worked in the lowest paid jobs, serving out his postcolonially ordained economic role in a 1970s London that was willing to exploit his labour, but denied entitlement to the social resource, or as El-Enany puts it, ‘the spoils of empire’ (2020, 2) to satisfy his family’s need for adequate housing. The dynamics of his lamented decision making are easily framed as misplaced migrant decisions, around the myth of return, but that is only if we actively ignore the Global North/South economic disparities that fixed the labour and migration patterns and the racialized immigration laws that curtailed the mobility that might have sustained a more equalised transnational relationship. Masabbir’s sadness for the years of labour and toiling in restaurant kitchens that were invested into a remittance home he now knew he would never inhabit, was a familiar story.

Matin Ullah arrived in the UK in 1972 shortly after the independence war. He was 16 years old and migrated to join his parents in Birmingham before moving independently to London. Having spent a few years sharing accommodation with large groups of other single, young migrant men, he squatted along with another family in a second-floor flat in Pelham Buildings. Matin recalled how older Bengali migrants like his father lived extremely frugal lives. He recalled that while his father worked hard and earned a reasonable salary as a factory worker in Birmingham, his lifestyle here denied any pleasure or excess. Indeed, he did not consider entering any tenancy let alone freehold ownership, because he was never staying:

Matin30: That’s why we didn’t really make houses and baris here, we couldn’t – we didn’t make it – other, other zats (ethnic groups) did, but freehold properties – our people, we weren’t interested, we were all thinking we were going home, everyone thought like that, first, first we didn’t even bring our families, we didn’t bring them - our families – we thought how would they stay here?

...People like my father, that generation, they lived differently, they had so much pressure – family were always pulling, pulling, attiyo were always pulling, pulling, just keeping up with those demands – he couldn’t do anything in this country really - or in Desh, because of those demands. Other people did, a lot of other people managed it, but not my baba and he died, still working and giving.

30 Matin’s interview was conducted in Bengali and his words are my translation.
Matin’s friend, Shamsul Hoque joined us at this stage of the interview. The pair had met during this time and remained close friends. Shamsul Hoque had arrived before Matin, coming to the UK on a ‘boy voucher’ sponsored by his brother, and joining their father, here in London. He had arrived in the late 1950s as a 13-year-old boy and started work shortly after his arrival. Like Matin, he suggested that remittances and family responsibility dictated Bengali migrant behaviour:

Shamsul\textsuperscript{31}: We tolerated those conditions, those really difficult conditions – I mean there was no limit to our difficulties then – and we wouldn’t have done that, we only did it because we were giving all our taka and money to our attiyo... we had to – our people, our heart is soft, if we don’t give that money, if we didn’t help – I got my sisters married, I got nieces and nephews married, I sent people to Kuwait and Dubai – we helped them all – and now they can earn for themselves – but we had to help them – but by doing that we didn’t see our children and to that we are guilty – we didn’t think, we stayed in squatting places, very bad conditions for our children, and they say now – you didn’t see us – you just saw everyone in Desh, and to them, we are guilty.

All of these participants, and others too, retold migration stories centring on hardships and downward mobility (Gardner 2016,199), always offset by the imagined home they would return to in desh. Bidesh, London, was the site of toil and labour, but because it was temporary, it was tolerable in the context of future compensation and rewards. However, as Shamsul says, he is regretful of some of his decisions, ‘we didn’t think - we stayed in squatting places, very bad conditions for our children, and they say now – you didn’t see us’. The expression that the children here, weren’t ‘seen’, is one that was taken up by many of the younger children squatters that I interviewed.

*Child squatter experiences of transnational obligations and attachments*

Bashir Khan is in his mid-fifties now but was a child when his parents squatted in the late 1960s. His father, who had died seven years before, was one of the earlier migrant men. Jumping ship when it arrived in Liverpool during the second world war, his father had married an English lady and had a son with her. When that relationship broke down, his father had clubbed together with a group of Bengali men, to move to London in the late 1950s:

Bashir\textsuperscript{32}: They said London was the city – and that if you went to the city – you'd earn more – and plus more and more people were going and at that time, those places [Liverpool] were really dark, even in the day it used to be dark – there used to be a lot of fog, you couldn’t see anything. They

\textsuperscript{31} Shamsul’s interview was conducted in Bengali and his words are my translation.

\textsuperscript{32} Bashir’s interview was conducted in Bengali and his words are my translation.
used to say they would put bricks in front of the door... (smiles), to recognise the door – they would put a mark, some way to recognise it.

Bashir’s father married his mother on a return visit to Bangladesh in the early 1960s and they both arrived in London in 1965. As such, his mother might have been one of the earliest Sylheti women to come over with her husband at the time. His father had by now established a small leather factory on Brick Lane, but struggling with accommodation, Bashir describes how his parents settled long-term, into a squat:

Bashir: Well, when they had first arrived in London – that time they stayed by squatting (Me: in 1965?) yes, yes, by squatting, at that time there was lots of Irish people – if you gave them a little money they would let you in – they would break in for you – that's what the Irish would do.

Shabna: So why did they squat – why couldn’t they get something by other means?

Bashir: They couldn’t find it by other means – this was how it was done at the time. This was how people got in. That’s how everyone got in – that was how it was for a long time – we finished our primary school and then we changed.

By 1973, he and his two brothers were sent back to Bangladesh with his mum, whilst his father stayed on in London working and remitting. In what turned out to be a five-year separation, Bashir explained that his father thought that if they didn’t spend time back home, his children would become ‘noshto’ or damaged by English culture. They returned to London only when their passports were about to expire, and subsequently continued to make shorter regular trips. He recalls that his parents had little commitment to staying in London and were always imagining and investing in their ‘future oriented’ home in Sylhet, despite its significant deprivational impact on his childhood:

Bashir: The squatting house was all broken up – completely, there wasn’t any paint on the walls – the walls were all damp – the walls were black – broken – not very good at all.

Shabna: And was there a toilet, a bathroom?

Bashir: The toilet was broken – we had to fix it.

Shabna: So you got in and fixed it?

Bashir: Yes, yes.

Shabna: Did you have gas/electricity?

Bashir: The system for gas and electricity was metered you understand, or you got it from your neighbour – you got it desher style (laughs and indicates hooks with his hands)
Shabna: So did your dad do that?

Bashir: Yes, he did and also, when he put coins in that meter – he would get those coins out and put them in again (laughs) and get electric. And he then told other people, and he did it for other people – he helped a lot of people.

Shabna: So staying like that – he was living by spending as little as possible – as little on gas and electricity and no rent, why do you think they lived like that?

Bashir: I think what they saved from that – they would send it to bari – in Desh and then when your sasa (uncle) was selling his neighbouring piece of land – fields, or the neighbouring house was selling it, in those days people were crazy to buy the neighbouring laga tooma (neighbouring land) so they would save and buy that – now people don’t do that – no one buys like that – people don’t even go – our children won’t go.

Shabna: So, your dad stayed in hardship – trying to send money to Desh, did you mum work too?

Bashir: Yes, my mum worked as well. She used to do lining (in the house?) bringing it in the house – lining work – in the house, she used to sew, on the machines - it was factory work - and do all the cooking...

Shabna: So she was mum to three children and on top of that she is also working in the house (and all the cooking etc), and yet, she’s sending all her money to Desh, she wasn’t wanting to build a nice house here?

Bashir: No, they didn’t think we would stay here – we were never going to stay here, we thought at the time that, after a little time, we would return to Desh – that’s why people did things for back home more...that’s where we were going to actually stay.

Bashir is clear that both his parents worked hard for a remittance income and that all financial investments looked back to the family members and a future home in Desh. The squatted home in this context served to be financially attractive as they could spend monies that might otherwise be paid on rent, to feed the remittance priority that both parents were committed to. Bashir says his father made considerable use of the remittance home after retirement, splitting his time between Sylhet and Bethnal Green, but notably, whilst his father made extended journeys by himself, his mother who died in the mid-1990s, would only undertake shorter visits with the children. His father, in another indication of his desh based family attachments, made inheritance stipulations that favoured the non-migrant family that he had left behind.
- namely his brother and their children that had inhabited the remittance home, rather than the ‘absent ones who built it’ (Boccagni and Perez 2020, 11):

Bashir: We have a basha in Shibgoing, (I know it) yes, Shibgoing, near Uposhor end – we have a five storey basha

Shabna: And who stays there now?

Bashir: It’s rented out and my sasar goror (paternal cousin) bhai stays there.

Shabna: So does your sasar ghoror bhai stay there as a caretaker?

Bashir: No, no, he stays there – he collects the rent, he gets the money – we don’t go and we don’t say give us the rent – give it. I said to our dad that our sasar ghoror bhai are eating all the money from it – he turned around and said to me - ‘well you’re in this country – you should go and make your own’, do you understand? Do you see that – ‘don't touch mine – I have given it to them and let them eat’. That was the end, so we left it.

Shabna: So how did you feel about that – that money your dad sent, because you suffered?

Bashir: We ate less, we wore less – even we wore torn shoes, shoes - not like now – where people buy clothes, they wear them two days and throw them away – it wasn’t like that, after I wore it, my brother would wear it, or my brother would wear it and I would wear it – it was like that, and after if it was even a little bit good still, we would send it to Desh and they would wear it. Not like now – now you get something – if you don’t like it – you throw it – it's gone in the bin.

Shabna: But your dad said...

Bashir:...For me to make my own.

Shabna: How did you feel about that?

Bashir: Me? I felt – I spent my whole life staying together, earned money and gave it all – and now he says to me make your own – how could I do that? But still I did it.

Shabna: You made your own?

Bashir: I made my own – in Shaforan – I made it and rented it out – but I’m going to sell it – my children aren’t going to go. I’m going to make – even a one-bedroom flat here, at least I’ll get more rent here – I'm going to get the money here once I’ve sold it.
Bashir’s resentment is clear: ‘We ate less, we wore less – even we wore torn shoes.’ His parents’ focus on family, and home in desh, had been experienced as housing and material deprivations, but which were framed to him by his parents as an investment in their family’s future and material rewards they would all go back to desh, to enjoy. Therefore, there was clearly conflict when Bashir realised that the remittance home that the children had always been counselled as their reward, was in fact gifted as an inheritance to the remittance-receiving uncle and cousins in Bangladesh. The shock and indignation of this decision were evident even now in Bashir’s telling of the story a decade later, and the hurt caused by his father’s response - ‘well you’re in this country – you should go and make your own’ remains, I suspect, an unhealed wound.

Rasna, my big sister, was three years old when Guljahan migrated and she has no personal recollection of the squatted home that she lived in. However, Guljahan recalled in her interviews that Rasna had spent her early infancy ‘like a free-range chicken’; the first grandchild of the eldest and Londoni son, she was adored by her grandparents and had the full reign of the bari. Arriving to London as a three-year-old in the winter, she moved into a tiny attic room above a restaurant, with no access to outdoor space, no bathroom and a toilet located in the restaurant’s basement, three storeys below. She had never worn nappies and she refused Masabbir’s attempts to persuade her that their housing situation required it. Like Bashir, Rasna also had an impressive recollection of how the hardship of those early housing decisions and deprivations marked her childhood and adult relationships. She describes her early life as feeling:

…very transitory, how we lived, it felt very hard, how we lived, and the amenities, living without – everything - where we played, lived, slept it was all in one room and then having to share other amenities and things like that...we never had our own space...it always felt very transitory, always very uncertain.

What she recalls as ‘transitory’ was our parent’s disinclination to settle, their commitment to returning home meant that for at least three years, unable to secure council accommodation and having left the squat, they moved from one room to another, sleeping on floors and sharing rooms until in 1979, they finally got a council tenancy. Even then Rasna recalls that our parents, like Bashir’s, were fixated on the family back home and describes them constantly working to support the family, and by then, the remittance home project they had started:

Rasna: We lived basically hand to mouth – I remember mum would work and I don’t think it was actually that long, but in my head she would put the twins [our younger siblings] with bottles at either end of the sofa, tucked up at angles on cushions, while she would get on with machining, but
I remember that, that financial element of sending money home – dad was constantly sending money home and mum was supporting that, by working herself and living within very frugal means – now looking back at it and unpicking it, it sounds horrendous – but to be honest, we didn’t know any better, it was hard – we went to a school in a white working-class area and we were bullied and it was not just because we were brown, but also because we were really poor.

In assessing those decisions, she talks not only about the material impact that our parent’s decisions made, but in a similar vein to Bashir, also about emotional resentment; that these decisions were not ones related to the financial capability of our parents but related directly to values they attached to the family members ‘back home’ and the future home they were building there. She recalls a trip to Bangladesh in the early 1980s and our parents buying new clothes and toys to take as gifts for uncles, aunts and cousins (Salih in Al-Ali & Koser 2003, 58). Even now, she flinches at the memory, because she had only ever worn second-hand clothes, and then passed those down to us siblings, until they frayed and completely fell apart:

Rasna: There’s huge resentment about what he... has provided – what he deprived us of in order to provide for others – I think that’s an immigrant thing, that’s immigrant guilt, that’s always gonna be there – that dad always felt – and he was the oldest son and he’s always felt – he couldn’t get his head around being any other way – if I explored that – I could be hugely resentful that he didn’t really do anything here – his ambitions were always for Bangladesh, and when we say well we’re never going to go there – they always get upset and says ‘Why not? that’s your home!’ But we don’t feel that affiliation – apart from that drainage...

Rasna describes Masabbir’s remittance responsibility, particularly his ‘immigrant guilt’ as something that shaped him as a person and as a father. Hajera, introduced in previous chapters, is of a similar age to Rasna, squatted a flat in Wheeler House with her parents Kadir and Sufia, and who were later awarded the tenancy there. She recalls similar experiences:

...home was quite cramped – so study space was hardly there and also the fact that we had a lot of human traffic and so I don’t know if it was the healthy... upbringing in that sense – it was probably quite chaotic. Erm, stressful, very little sense of childhood there.

The ‘human traffic’ that Hajera refers to here was her parents’ familial and attiya obligations to host and accommodate newly arrived migrants to London. This commitment, often arranged by kinship networks based in Sylhet, meant that even in the three-bedroomed squatted home in Spitalfields, the five siblings slept in one room, to ensure that they had space to fulfil this wider transnational family obligation. Hajera
recalls that it was not until she was an adult that she came to understand that there was a separate space in a house that served as a family social space or a ‘living room’, as her childhood had involved seeing all the rooms, as sleeping slots. She remembers this time with some reproach, not just because her parents were fulfilling transnational obligations and inadequately fulfilling her own, but also for more sinister reasons:

Hajera: So, my dad had a factory – he would see lots of cousins, relatives, from the villages work in that factory, they’d have nowhere to stay and we’d house them all on our floors. So I grew up, I think in an unprotected environment in that case because there would have been so-called ‘uncles’ in the house – with growing, girls – teenagers and not great things happened – I would never repeat that experience on any child of mine – ever actually, so, where there’s a nice rosy story to tell of community’s supporting each other – there's the other side of that – you're actually allowing men who are not very close to you – God know what their values are about paedophilia and child abuse and you’ve let them in your home. And you’ve let men into your home because you want to help them economically cos you want to give them a hand – but at the same time, culturally if anything happened – you’d have to sweep it under the...so in a lot of those homes – child abuse was quite rife – very rife at the time, I remember growing up, knowing that in different houses, various children were being abused – not knowing quite who to tell for example...

Hajera’s recollections draw attention to a darker side of that ‘community support’ that her parents prioritised. As a girl and teenager, growing up in a household where there was a constant stream of young and older men passing through, she reveals the sense of powerlessness and tension experienced in her home and those of others, because of the performance of those transnational familial obligations. Sufia and Kadir recall their actions at this point as acts of obligation to attiyo. Nonetheless they also register them as something of a ‘repository of their future life projects and a means to negotiate their social status' (Boccagni 2014, 280). They note that if one wanted to return home at some point, there was a duty to maintain and service the needs and ambitions of one’s attiyo that remained in Sylhet, and those newly arriving here. That this place-making behaviour (Boccagni & Murcia 2020) disrupted and disturbed the actual physical and emotional safety of home experienced by their young daughters here, was something that they were unaware of, or inattentive to.

For Hajera, these transnational familial obligations did not just claim space and generate trauma among the children in the household, but like the contribution of others including Rasna, also imposed economic hardships. Abu Sufian is the youngest of Hajera’s siblings and he was chaperone to two interviews that I
conducted with his parents. In conversation with him afterwards, he expressed considerable surprise and indeed disbelief at his parents’ account of their priorities and actions:

It’s strange the way that mum remembers it – she’s talking about supporting our education – but I can tell you that as a kid I didn’t feel that from them. They were fixated on going back home – everything was about back home – she says she was supporting our education, but it wasn’t our education here – it was all about going to Bengali school and making sure we spoke Bengali at home – it wasn’t to do with our normal school...I tell you that even now, if my dad had £100 now and he could either buy me or even my daughter some....school books let’s say, he wouldn’t do it, if he had the choice that money would go back home – buy someone back there something. Without a doubt, it’s always been that way and still is now.

(Fieldnotes taken after interview)

Hajera, in a separate interview also suggested that her father’s general remittances and remittance home priorities, were an economic hardship. Similarly, like Bashir and Rasna, she says that she and her siblings would do without here, in order to ensure that family in Sylhet were maintained. However, that remittance home is now empty:

Hajera: We built erm, we built on top of the mud home that we had, with a lot of pride. Erm so much of my dad’s (laughs) savings went into rebuilding his ancestral home. Which has very little economic value – which causes a lot of arguments in the home at the moment around who is going to maintain that home, because actually it’s very difficult on the current salaries that we have to maintain anything back in Bangladesh – there’s no rule of law so properties rights have to be enforced in different ways and you have to enforce them by paying a lot of money to grease the system, same as Pakistan, same as India – nobody’s got spare cash lying around – so it causes a lot of angst in the family around, the legacy and how it’s gonna be protected. My dad regularly... gives money back to support the village – and obviously the community networks we have, have to be maintained in some way – so my dad’s sense of honour, and pride and prestige is still part of Siramishee community networks and you only maintain that by making contributions financially – and they make contributions to mosques, madrasha’s (Islamic school) and schools. I think most Bengalis do.

Shabna: Do you?

Hajera: I do help my dad, yes.

Shabna: So, you help your dad remit – so it’s two chain – two links in the chain?
Hajera: So my view - because I’m a development professional – I think there are better ways to support Bangladesh, not by building madrashas for example – maybe...building and supporting a teaching workforce that’s sustainable - because simply building a school isn’t actually going to improve education – so I think about more holistically supporting Bangladesh, that’s how I would do it – but my dad obviously doesn’t have that understanding – so they think it’s direct delivery, service delivery that’s what they want to do. But I work in international development – so I have a very different perspective on how you support productive development in Bangladesh, than hand to mouth charity. But that’s what he knows and what he does. But he’s, he’s very passionate about that – erm, sometimes we find it hard – we'd say well Dad, you’re not economically actually able to contribute – but he doesn’t ever think of himself as – economically not able to support (laughs) so, you know, I just help my parents a lot, so that they can keep up their charitable contributions, and all of us siblings – I in particular do support my parents economically.

Shabna: And did your dad ever go and live in this bari...

Hajera: Not long term, no (laughs)

Shabna: Did he ever plan to?

Hajera: Yeah, of course! I mean that’s the sad bit. You spend all your life savings – or what little life savings you had – but never got the chance to live in it.

The reason why they never got to live in it, is that though the physical dwelling in Sylhet had been developed and refurbished with decades of labour in London, all the family members, the home-connectors that had once acted as the affective glue for that Deshi homemaking project, had perished:

Sufia: ...all my family are here now – but he (Kadir) has no one – everyone in desh, his mother, mama, mami, mother, sasa and sasi – no one, everyone is dead. I have no one there – everyone, my sasa, sasi, and my whole family is here – and my children are here – why would I go back? There’s no peace there. ...And if you go back – your children’s reading and writing would get interrupted – they would fall behind, and you couldn’t do that. And now I don’t want to go – my children are here.

I have argued here that the older ‘uncle types’, along with their wives, were more likely to nurture transnational identities and remain connected to return home through both the transnational family relationships and remittance homes they developed or created in Sylhet. In this way the older migrants tended to have a more transitory attitude towards the home they squatted and occupied in London, because for them it was in every sense, a temporary stay. The hardships that they tolerated and the
material deprivations they experienced and which their children, in some cases, are resentful of, were managed by the idea of returning home. In this way, the temporally present home was always overshadowed by the past home they had left behind and the future home that they were building. As I have shown here, homemaking was not simply in the material investments in the remittance home, but also in the family obligations and relationships that this behaviour nourished. In that sense, my work contributes to the developing understanding that transnational families are critical anchors in migrant homemaking imaginaries and practices.

6.4 The role of maternal authority in the finalised homemaking decisions of Bengali migrant families

‘I’m not going to go – so he has to stay – if I’m not going, what’s he going to do by himself – he can’t function there by himself – it’s like that’ Rohima Bibi

In this final section, I trace the evolution of these transnational family relationships over some four decades and argue that gender again emerges as a defining marker of experience. I draw on the considerable work by Gardner that is relevant to this section (2002, 2001, 2016). I also build on the idea of the ‘contradiction’ that underlines migration as prosperity and therefore happiness, and yet migration as leaving loved ones behind and unhappiness (2016). However, where Gardner along with others (Salih, in Al-Ali & Koser 2003) have emphasised the sense of unease or ‘dichotomy’ (2016, 201) that strains this relationship, I agree with Ahmed (2016) that with the luxury of a longer temporal lens, it is possible to detect a ‘matriarchal authority’ (103) asserting attachment to family and home here, in London. I argue that older migrant women, now not just new mothers but grandmothers and mother-in-laws, can be seen to assert maternal power in later life homemaking decisions. Concurring with Pustulka’s work on ‘Mother Pole’ (2014, 2018), Bengali migrant women drew on their culturally permissible ‘older woman’ status (Gardner 1995, 220) to direct their families’ homemaking outcomes. The older female participants, who had once been directed by remittance-based migration decisions, dictated generally by male elders in their patrilineal family or by their husbands emerged as active and assertive. These women stated clearly that their attachments to children and grandchildren anchored them and by default, their husbands, to home in London.

As stated in Chapter 4, many of these migrant women were in their early twenties and thirties and whose voices and experiences of squatting have been erased from the very modest and partial accounts of the Bengali squatters’ movement that exist (Glynn 2014, Forman 1989). All of the women were on at least
their second migration journey having moved to their husband’s village based on a system of patrilocal marriage (Gardner 1995). They had then, in most cases, migrated to join their husbands after the civil war and therefore been in Bangladesh during those nine months. Many recalled going into hiding for some of the time, though none revealed anything of the horrific sexual violence that was implied as the primary threat that they were hiding from in these movements, and that has been increasingly accounted for in recent years (Mookerjee, 2006, Saikia 2011). Most of them arrived as young mothers which was for many a significant rupture from the networks of female care and solidarity that exist in an otherwise highly patriarchal society (Gardner 1995, 201). Like Ahmed (2016) notes, these women also confronted the culturally unfamiliar practice of ‘mothering alone’ (99) which was a significant deviation from the normative structure of collective responsibility shared both vertically across generations with grandmothers and horizontally with sister in laws (Wilson 1978, 25). Others however had experienced that network as oppressive, positioning them as junior members of a large joint extended family where there was significant labour and responsibility, making migration a relief and a new opportunity. Very few said anything about having migrated out of choice. They had come because their husbands and in-laws had decided upon it, as one participant put it:

Rohima: Choice? No, you didn’t have that in Bangladesh – in Bangladesh – you didn’t have that – girls didn’t have any choice – girls had no choice...

Shabna: So that did not even enter your mind?

Rohima: No, not at all – wherever your brother or Ma gave you – that’s where you went.

However, the argument that I set out here indicates that whilst those early migration decisions were usually centred around male migrant needs and aspirations (Gardner 1995 10, Gardner and Shukur in Ballard 1994 150, Glynn 2014 10), in their latter lives, it was the older women that generally settled the home outcomes. This concurs with Sylheti gender norms in the sense that older women, especially those with some economic status, sons and daughters-in-law, would accrue considerable ‘personal power’ (Gardner 1995, 204). But, like Pustulka & Trabka (2018, 669), I suggest that the ‘dimension of power and agency within maternal identities’ remains under-researched and under-estimated.

Sufia certainly centred herself in her family’s later homemaking decisions. She reiterated her commitment to her children’s education as the pivotal factor shaping her decision-making in the late 1980s, noting that she realised that they had invested too many years in London, and could never go back and enter
mainstream education in Bangladesh without detrimental impact. This is interesting given both her children, Hajera and Abu Sufian had, as discussed in the previous section, recalled this period differently and felt her emphasis on education had been desh directed. In my interview, she pointed to the birthday bunting looped across her living room wall, she could not even contemplate long leisurely trips back home, let alone returning for good:

Sufia: My home is here, I am at home here, in this country, for me, I am at home here – here is where my children are – it's where I get peace, yes. I don’t really want to go.

Gardner (2002) notes this shift over life course:

‘...as the first generation has grown older, their relationships with their children have changed. Now, rather than having dependents in desh, to whom remittances must regularly be sent, many elders are physically dependent upon their children, who are based in Britain. The reluctance of these children to return to Sylhet was one of the prime reasons cited by our informants for staying in Britain’ (218)

Gardner suggests that relationships with desh as home, have over the life course and with the naturally diminished social relationships, fundamentally changed. She concludes her work by emphasising the ‘deep feelings of rift and division’ that her participants describe (ibid 220). However, I suggest that Sufia, like other participants, does not evidence the ‘anxiety’ or ‘tension’ that Gardner here, or others like Salih (in Al-Ali & Koser 2003, 64) have described. Instead, I argue she is assertive in her maternal authority – that her sense of home, is based not around the material dwellings that she had originally remitted to create but was anchored by her children and her grandchildren. She says quite categorically ‘Why would I go back?’ The past and future tied home imaginary that had directed so much of their early material remittance practices, was now an empty bari, a burden on the now extended remitting family who had to finance its upkeep, despite having no promise of hosting a return home. And the couple, Sufia and Kadir, live alone now in their one-bedroom council flat, their home full of photos of their children and grandchildren, birthday bunting permanently hung in celebration of the many grandchildren’s birthdays they enjoyed together.

That none of their children lived with them as a traditional familial norm for intergenerational living was put down to housing conditions which did not accommodate extended family living, and yet like Ahmed’s (2016) respondents, grandparenting had enabled Sufia to overcome ‘the spatial family rearrangements that are necessary in the UK, and restore[s] daily contact between respondents, their children and
grandchildren (124).’ She had babysat several of her grandchildren whilst their parents (her son and daughter-in-law) would go to work, and one of the grandchildren, a 10-year-old girl, was present for one of my interviews, curling up around her dhadhi on the sofa, as she listened to the interview.

Guljahan, my mother, like Sufia, had laboured in the early decades to ensure that her children were culturally trained for transition to a home she had retained close transnational connection through remittances, gift-giving, regular communication, and the cultural home life she nurtured. I first interviewed her the day before she was leaving for an extended visit to Bangladesh. Like Salih’s Moroccan participants (in Al-Ali & Koser 2003) she had performed considerable transnational commitment ‘through consumption practices’ of elaborate gift-giving for the remaining family and had already sent the items off as cargo as the considerable weight, would have taken them beyond their luggage allowance. She was going reluctantly; property management, i.e., the remittance investments they had made over the last three decades, required both of them to be present and it was an emotional wrench for her. In this way she was certainly similar to Gardner’s elderly participants (2002), where she worried about her failing health and access to medical attention during the visit, as well as leaving her children and grandchildren behind. When asked about the remittance home that she would be staying in for her visit, and whether she considered that ‘home’, she answered: It is my number two home. Because this is the first one – this is where my children grew up, this is where... they all are – they all are here.

Guljahan, like many other women spoke of her economic remittance work and the reproductive social labour she performed in her early decades as a migrant with a firm attachment to ‘return home’. She was particularly worried about the corrosion of traditional cultural values and remembers worrying about her daughters’ propriety in a country where she believed girls were encouraged to behave improperly, and like Riccio’s Senegalese migrants to Italy, thought of Sylhet as ‘moral home’ (Riccio 2003, 79, see also Gardner 1993, 9). But despite this worry, she remembers a point in the mid to late 1980s when her oldest daughter was starting secondary school that the couple began to discuss whether to buy a house here or to make the move back to Sylhet:

Guljahan: Yes, we wanted , at that time we wanted, their dad said, that my children are getting bigger , they were all old now and he wanted to take everyone to desh and he wanted you to be schooled in Bangladesh, he didn’t want to stay, it’s not important to stay here, he said let’s go, you go to Bangladesh, if you go desh, they will learn Bangla, in this country they only learn English. I

33 Dhadhi – means paternal grandmother
said no, I didn’t want my children to go to Bangladesh, because I thought they can’t do their education there or here, they won’t finish anywhere. So, I never went, and I never went for visits without you, it’s the first time I’m going without you now.

My parents did not go back even after my father retired a few years ago. Guljahan reports that it was her insistence on the need for her children to complete their education that anchored them to London in a way she had not initially planned for. As a result, they bought a house in Hackney in the late 1980s and live there now, owning the house outright, whilst the remittance home they built together, sits as ‘empty house’ (Boccagni 2014,288).

They were not able to fulfil their traditional roles as eldest son or eldest bhou (daughter in law), as care givers for their ageing and elderly parents in Sylhet. As migrants, their caregiving responsibilities had to be performed through remittances; ‘a return home’ would have reneged on that responsibility. The parents’ deaths came after they had already shifted attention to a more permanent home in London, the fact that almost all their gushti (multi-generational kin) of their parents’ generation had died, entrenched rather than inspired their shifted homemaking. Both Guljahan and Sufia’s account in this sense offers nuance to the idea that transnational homemaking necessarily involves ‘double belonging’ (Salih in Al-Ali & Koser 2003, 65), or is ‘multi-located and contested’ (Armbruster in Al-Ali & Koser 2003, 32), because both relate a sense that whilst they retain commitments and attachment to desh, their home is unambiguously located around their children and grandchildren in London. Like Sufia, none of Guljahan’s children live with them, an outcome which caused significant upset. They live in a large four bedroomed house and the convenience of housing restriction and having a ‘socially acceptable reason for families not to live together’ (Ahmed 2016, 106) was something they could not avail. Both her sons had married and both had performed a compromise of staying for six months with their wives in the family home - before buying and moving a short distance away. However, like Sufia, Guljahan had also babysat six grandchildren, for three of her children including myself, over a period of some 7-8 years. This along with regular weekend visits and financial contributions maintained by both her sons and some of her daughters meant that she was able to maintain some semblance of the ‘cultural norms of patrilocal households’ (ibid).

Rohima Bibii, is a 70-year-old widow, her account is like the others in some ways. She came here as a young mother. Soon after, she began working on a sewing machine and supported her husband in his

34 Rohima’s interviews were conducted in Bengali and her words here are my translation.
remittance responsibilities to the family. She had married her first cousin, so the remittances sent directly benefited her own family and siblings too. Like the other women, she also recalls that learning to read and write Bengali was a priority and that her life was dictated by both her garment work, which would have produced the economic remittances she was sending back home and her children’s Bengali education. She shares, ‘Yes, even today – all of them, they all speak Bangla – they speak it with me – I don’t speak English – I don’t even know how – I don’t understand it – I didn’t go to school you see...’. At that time, she reported a shared understanding between herself and her husband, and they were both working for a ‘return home’. She recalls her husband with touching fondness, she says, he would buy her the most beautiful sarees: ‘he had good choice – he had really good choice – whatever it was, the sarees he would buy me – the women would go and search for it – that where did I get it from? He would buy me such beautiful things...’

However, unlike the other women, she is reproachful of her late husband and says that she could never shift his homemaking attentions from desh. He worked and remitted all their money building a basha that is rented out to tenants now. She does not identify a pivotal moment, but with her three children at school, and her youngest child (born with some physical disabilities) picked up each day by a local school bus, she accepts that her transnational homemaking efforts had to be reconsidered; that her children were never going to be able to ‘go home’. Of that period, she says that she tried to persuade him into making a more permanent investment in buying or furnishing their home here with greater commitment, but despite what she describes as a loving and respectful relationship and unlike the other women, her husband’s attachment to a future home in desh, could not be shifted:

Rohima: He didn’t want to ever buy – he didn’t want to – he never had the inclination to buy anything – he wanted to buy in Desh – he bought fields and land, he didn’t... and now who’s eating that now? No. he didn’t want a house – he didn’t do anything here – we didn’t even have this sofa – he didn’t spend money here – I bought it after he died...

He wanted, in his head – he would go back there – he thought he would get old and that he would go back with his children and we would grow old there but that didn’t happen, he went to desh – he took me – in 2010, he went for Qurbani (religious festival) and within a few days of that, he died in desh, that’s where he was buried.

Shabna: So, he thought he would live there – but he didn’t get that chance..?

Rohima: Even if he got the chance it wouldn’t have happened.
Shabna: Why?

Rohima: How would he – his children are here – I’m not going to go leaving my children, my children here? I’m not going to go – so he has to stay – if I’m not going, what’s he going to do by himself – he can’t function there by himself – it’s like that – later he used to be so regretful – why did he do that... I wanted to buy a house here – in my mind – I would say that we should buy a house- at least we would have a house ourselves – we would live in it with our children – we could make it nice – but today we don’t have that.

The transnational family which instructed her early period of migration had as part of ordinary life-course events, weakened and her four children here had become the family relationships around which her affective sense of home revolved. She reported that her husband could never go back to the remittance home he had insisted they build, because ‘I’m not going to go leaving my children, my children here? I’m not going to go – so he has to stay – if I’m not going, what’s he going to do by himself – he can’t function there by himself – it’s like that’. So, despite never convincing her husband to make more investment in homemaking here, her refusal to retire back home with him because of the children essentially blocked that return home. The outcome was clearly not satisfactory to either of them, he never lived in the home he imagined and built with his remittances, and Rohima did not buy the home she wanted here in London. Her point about the sofa, having been bought after her husband had died, is perhaps a symbol, of finally, her ability to home-make here in London, only once her husband’s death and therefore the drive for ‘return home’ had passed. In her current council flat, Rohima lives with her eldest daughter and son-in-law, she only briefly mentioned her son, who had married outside of the Bengali community and with whom she has infrequent and strained relationship.

Shafia squatted on Varden Street, and though she had now been rehoused to near Wapping, she had known several of the other participants including Sufia and Ashfaq’s squatter families in the 1970s. Shafia was just 18 and had as stated in Chapter 4, married her much older brother-in-law, after his wife – her eldest sister - had suddenly died. She had arrived to London and inherited two teenage ‘step’ sons and shortly afterward had her own baby. She went on to have three children with her husband, who, despite the age difference and circumstances of their marriage, she had great love and admiration for. She talked of him with much fondness, but also asserted that his gentle nature meant that she was the one to push him to squat for instance and that his compliant nature meant he had far more reservation about squatting than she did:
Shafia’s interview was conducted in Bengali and her words are my translation.
maternal power to commit to home in London. Shafia lives in a housing association flat with her son, daughter-in-law and her two-year-old grandson. In many ways of all the women, she has achieved the most traditional matriarchal position, stating that her daughter-in-law performs much of the domestic household labour (Ahmed 2016, 127). However, she also notes that she also contributes significant grandmothering and spends considerable time enabling her daughter-in-law to work and study.

Sufia, Guljahan and Shafia’s accounts diversify the argument that ‘contemporary maternal identities rely on the premise of assigning a full responsibility over child-raising to women without granting agency or power’ (Pustulka 2016, 47). All of the participants talked about negotiating family relationships and the compromises they had accepted as their children navigated filial obligations in ways that transitioned from traditional cultural norms. However, they were also adamant that family relationships with children remained ‘emotionally close’ even though they may have become ‘spatially more distant’ (Ahmed 2016, 127). Like Pustulka, I argue that the decision to surrender the remittance home to ‘second home’ in Guljahan’s words, and instead making home in what was once considered a transitory place, was rooted in these older women’s authority.

So, over four decades later the women who arrived as young mothers and who inadvertently became the primary guardians of their squatted homes in 1970s East London have in many ways become the primary guardians of the only home they now know. These women, almost unanimously silenced in the archival and academic accounts of the time, came from rural Sylhet and confronted the state and street racism that was inflicted on their squatted home. In many ways, both physically and affectively, they toiled with their husbands for the return home, from what was then a hostile and unhomely city. However, early migration decisions were based on male migrant remittance responsibilities, which later changed with the arrival of women. Yet as I have shown, female migrants, now in their 60s, 70s and 80s, asserted their maternal attachment to their children and grandchildren as the priority home-connectors. They exercised maternal authority to make home here.

Bringing this section to a conclusion, I return to Husnara Matin. When asked about where she was most happy and at home, she responded:

I’m happy here (London), yes. Happy because – where I have my shekur (roots) – my shekur is Bangladesh but my branches and leaves are here, they have grown here – my branches and leaves, my children are my branches and leaves – so I think my branches and leaves need to stay here – I understand that – but still I love my Desh – my Bangladesh, I love it.
Her use of roots and branches as metaphor for the way her family has evolved, and how that impacts on her ‘need to stay here’ may be a familiar one, but it is nonetheless powerful testimony to her extraordinary journey and her attachment to her once squatted home, here in East London.

6.5 Conclusion:

In this chapter, I have highlighted how the transnational relationship was a complex tapestry of connections which are framed by the post-colonial context and were nuanced by generation and gender. I first set out how the 1970s temporal context was very much a part of the canvas on which these relationships were drawn. This was both in terms of the post-1971 civil war in Bangladesh and the decline of Empire in 1970s Britain. I argued that there was a generational differentiation in terms of how the political inheritance of the Bangladesh liberation struggle was iterated. Thus, whilst the younger ‘big brother types’ took the lessons of a liberation struggle against Pakistan to nourish their squatter activism in the fight against the street racism they encountered, older ‘uncle types’ on the other hand, were less likely to engage in those confrontations as their political inheritance was an enduring commitment to return and help rebuild the ‘shonar Bangladesh’ (Golden Bangladesh). This is an important reminder to view the transnational relationship as highly contextualised, because there can have complex and differentiated outcomes on the interactions that migrants have here.

The second argument I proposed is how those older ‘uncle types’, along with their wives, invested in remittance homes and transnational family relationships in Sylhet, treating the squatted homes and London as a transitory space – one that was to be tolerated. Here the past home, inhabited by transnationally based parents, sibling and wider gusthi and attiyo relationships, was the primary home-attachment, and remittances nurtured those relationships binding them to imagined future-oriented, return home. In this section, I explored how the children of those families experienced those decisions. Some of these squatter children look back resentfully to how the transitory attachment their parents had to home in London, had inflicted unnecessary deprivation on them here.

The third and final point pursued in this chapter is that there was a pivot at some point in migratory and life stages, where families realised that the remittance home they had invested in, was to remain empty. I traced the gendered motivations for migration and homemaking decisions as they evolved over the life-course. I also highlighted how the transnational family relationships that initiated the migration journey had, over time, ceased to be the primary home-connectors. That as migrants aged, the children that had once felt not ‘seen’ were now, along with the grandchildren they had produced, the home-connectors
that anchored the families in London. I argued that there was a pattern of significant maternal power in this decision-making and that female migrants, once directed by male transnational family-based priorities had come to acquire the social and family position that enabled them to pivot those decisions; that here and London, had indeed become home.

These arguments reiterate my broader conceptual contributions, that the postcolonial and transnational frames operating in dialogue, are a useful optic. I have shown how the post-colonial immigration laws and the remittance economy that governed Bengali migrant decisions were not incidental – and as Mayblin and Turner (2020) recommend, must be centred. At the same time, they are not sufficient explanation in and of themselves, and it is only with the integration of a transnational optic that it is possible to trace the wider inheritances of the civil war and gendered family responsibilities, that were also critical factors in how Bengali migrants navigated these experiences. I have also explored home in ways that register the Bengali transnational family as being a highly significant animator in homemaking imaginaries and attachments and contributed to wider scholarship on the transnational family, both the spatial here and there relationship, as well as the temporal then and now dimensions.

The final concluding chapter draws out these contributions and suggests how this work might be developed in future research.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

Once there were dozens of sewing machines buzzing away in what were rag trade ‘factories’. When I was a kid, I would listen to the banter between the workers gathered around five or six sewing machines to a room. The sound was poetic: the buildings were alive with work and beauty. Now there are one or two people living there. 36

The so called ‘Battle for Brick Lane’ or Save Brick Lane campaign may have entered its dying phase, the photograph below (figure 7.1) was taken at one of the last protests held before the local planning committee voted to allow the development of the Truman Brewery complex, against popular local opinion. 37 The demonstration had taken the form of a mock funeral, lamenting with anger, what is perceived to be the relentless marginalisation of the local working-class community by corporate re-development plans. In the article, Singh argues that the plans should not be passed off as ‘gentrification’, but as ‘social cleansing’.

![Demonstration down Brick Lane and into Altab Ali park on 12th September 2021](https://tribunemag.co.uk/2021/09/the-truman-brewery-development-will-kill-brick-lane)

---

The way that younger Bengali community activists have framed their opposition has evolved since the 1970s. There is attention to working-class solidarity in a way that feels more organic than was evident in Glynn’s (2014) analysis of movements in 1970s and 1980s East London. Rajina, a co-founding member of Nijor Manush, a grassroots campaigning organisation, talks about the plans as ‘attempting to socially cleanse the local working-class communities’ and she reaches back to the area’s radical history to enrich the campaign:

To remember that this lane has borne witness to previous battles and fights against racists, against the local establishment for better education and housing. This campaign merely seeks to continue this radical tradition of the area. 38

What had for decades remained oblique about the Bengali migrant struggle for housing and home has in recent years received more attention, and Rajina’s reference to ‘housing’, is testimony to this growing awareness. The activism and protests generated by the Truman Brewery development plans have inspired communities to reflect and consider how these past struggles interact with their own contemporary ones. My research offers a significant contribution to that wider conversation and to academic scholarship about Bengali migrant home and homemaking in 1970s London. I begin this chapter by drawing out key findings and contributions while also suggesting possible routes for further research.

7.1 Key conceptual contributions:

Early on in my research, and in trying to negotiate my theoretical approach, I oscillated between the transnational which heeded the spatial and temporal connections that emerged in my interviews and the postcolonial, which registered the resonance and continued activity of colonial power and discourses in the contestation for home and belonging. Neither one in isolation could trace nuances of the events and experiences. It was this that nudged me to recognise the benefit of integrating the two lenses and to find ways of bringing them into critical dialogue with one another. Mayblin and Turner (2020) call for the centring of colonialism in migration research, and it was precisely this absence, or the peripheral register of the colonial relationship between Bengali migrants and East London in transnational research, that I found frustrating (Gardner 1993, 2002, Zeitlyn 2012a, 2012b). The remittance economy central to research on transnational circuits and flows is determined by the colonial context. Also, the pathways for migration and mobility to maintain those connections are also framed by immigration systems and

---

38 https://www.amaliah.com/post/62488/save-brick-lane-campaign
borders that erase historical connections and constrict Bengali migrant movement. The colonial is not contextual but deeply embedded in the relationship between here and there. At the same time, the postcolonial migration scholarship that has highlighted the ongoing and colonial discourses that animate how places and communities are Othered, or who may indeed engage in their own Othering for complex purposes, can neglect the inheritances that migrants bring with them in those exchanges (Jacobs 1996, Wemyss 2006, 2009). There is inattention to how transnational inheritances and the value of what is navigated here, is calculated in a much broader equation of here/there. Drawing on Alexander’s research on the Bengali diaspora (2011, 2018, 2019), I noted how her work navigates these lenses to bring them into an analytic partnership. Her research is interdisciplinary and not confined to my simplified dualistic categorisation, but I highlight these two aspects for my research purposes. Alexander registers the colonially inspired Othering in placemaking contests whilst also retaining attention to transnational attachments, and it is this integrative approach that I tried to develop in my own research. I have shown how a critical dialogue between postcolonial and transnational optics can reveal both the colonial activity in the state and street violence that un-homed Bengali migrants, and how it inspired resistance to that deprivation. I also argue that the transnational lens registers the value of inheritances outside of that framework and avoids the sometimes-reductive tendency of postcolonial lenses that privilege the migrant in the metropole and diminish the transnational values and experiences that migrants bring with them. Bengali migrants carried with them their broader homemaking experiences of rural Sylhet but they also brought quite specific inheritances of the 1970 liberation war. My work has tried to show the benefits of finding lines of intersection between these optics.

I highlight how understandings of migrant home and homemaking are improved when we can trace the significant activity that can emerge in threshold spaces. The materialist lens of migrant homemaking has focused on artefacts and objects and how these have archived and connected homes in different spatial and temporal locations. The idea that domestic objects can signify identity and belonging, and these are processual and evolving features which engage with the wider post-colonial landscape (Tolia-Kelly 2004a&b), are carried into my work, but transferred into threshold spaces. In my research, I develop an argument for attending to the materiality of doors and windows and highlight how important these spaces were for migrants contesting and making home in a racially hostile 1970s London. I integrate both the south Asian understanding that thresholds of home may be more nebulous and stretched than in traditional Western conceptualisation, and the way that experiences of racism made these thresholds spaces of liminality and contestation. Conceptualising home in this way helps to highlight that migrant homemaking is always a relational experience.
Finally, I offer some disruption and challenge to the scholarship on squatting in the Global North which has tended to revolve around ideas about the urban and narrow definitions of what is political. By exploring the Bengali squatters’ movement, I have highlighted how the typology implicitly and explicitly accepted by so much of this research has framed housing deprived squatters as empty of political motivation. I highlight how this has tended to promote an exclusivist view that has privileged mainly white counter-cultural squatter communities, with political status. In addition, I argue that the urban centred focus which tend to engage with autonomous political movements that are fixated on urban property distribution and ownership, miss that sometimes, the squat can be a more intimate appropriation of home and homemaking. Nevertheless, where this home is appropriated in a context of state and street racism that homemaking effort is still deeply political.

These broad contributions are reflected upon in the next section, reviewing the spatial, temporal and inter-related scales through which my research progressed these ideas

7.2 Squatted home and front of house thresholds

The virtual erasure of Bengali squatters from existing literature on squatters in 1970s London rests on a typology that defines housing deprivation as a specific and separate category to political squatting (Pruijt 2013). The ‘deprivation’ label is used to essentially extinguish the possibility that squatters, like the Bengali migrants could be deemed political, highlighting only their destitution and deprivation. My research challenges this assumption for the exclusivist outcomes it generates and argues that although all Bengali squatters may not have self-consciously scripted political conversations in those spaces, the act of squatting and their defence of the squatted home in those conflictual threshold spaces, made them highly political encounters.

This is precisely the problem with Vasudevan’s (2017) lack of attention to the Bengali squatters in his review of the ‘Hidden history of squatting in London’. His focus, I argue, is diverted by ‘autonomous politics’ and a preoccupation with squatters who explicitly articulate the aims of disrupting urban property politics. Bengali migrants had squatted to overcome their housing deprivation and the racist violence they experienced when sent out to isolated estates. Participants often linked their personal and community’s lineage to East London, through their attention to the long colonial history, the labour they performed, taxes they paid, and the social benefits to which they, therefore, felt entitled (El-Enany 2020). The front of house space was a space where this claim for belonging was made, and in many cases, this was a gendered experience as it was Bengali migrant women involved in defending that space. The conflictual
conversations may not comply with the self-conscious autonomous politics (Vasudevan 2018, Mudu & Chattopadhyay 2019) with which the mainstay of squatter literature is preoccupied, but that does not negate the deeply political nature of the interactions (hooks 1992, Jazeel 2019).

The benefit of oral history interviews and the careful task of personally transcribing interviews revealed the threshold space of the squatted home as the most directly memorable feature of the squatted home. This developed into my first key argument, that the front of house was a space of contested belonging and a highly political threshold. Participants talked about the windows smashed by rocks, doors that were vandalised, as well as the estate managers and council officials who would appear in their doorways demanding they vacate. The doors and windows of the squatted home became the spaces where the inside and outside interacted. The dominant post-colonial narrative that migrants were unwelcome outsiders, exploiting resources that they were not entitled to, iterated in that brutal and officious violence was variously resisted by Bengali migrants, who instead highlighted their accrued entitlement. I also highlighted that there was a distinctly gendered experience here and that women who were the most muted in all the previous modest accounts, were the most active in this space and in those conversations. The gendered labour patterns, including that Bengali woman were performing home-based garment work, meant that they were the most likely to confront this violence.

A second argument that I put forward, identified the significance of cultural meaning that is negotiated in front of house spaces. The hostile conditions of the 1970s London went beyond the un-homing practices (Brickell & Baxter 2014, Elliott-Cooper et al., 2019, Porteous & Smith 2001) that were the broken windows and hostile conversations at the door; they were the ways that Bengali family front of house spaces were identified as out of place and Othered. What came across repeatedly, was the concern Bengali migrants had for trying to manage their front of house space - particularly their curtains - in a way that was culturally compliant with the aesthetic norms of their white English neighbours. I argued that this compliance was strategically rooted in a much deeper commitment to cultural continuity. Bengali migrants were not engaging in a transcultural exchange or mediation of their cultural practices (McMillan 2009). Instead, I argue that these efforts at the front of house to emulate the cultural norms of their neighbours were actually designed to mask the continued cultural practices inside the home, that looked back to Sylhet, and food and language practices of back home. The liminality of this space is important, as it highlights how migrant homemaking is a complicated compromise. However, the aesthetic efforts that many participants described were undermined by the porous nature of these spaces and how inside language
and food practices that they remained committed to, would spill out of the front of house space, continuing to render them Othered (Burrell 2014).

By focusing on the thresholds of the squatted home, I argue that it is possible to reveal both the political and cultural meanings that are at stake when migrant groups make home and claim belonging in a hostile environment. I suggest that in doing so my work contributes to developing more nuanced ways of exploring migrant homes drawing on the ideas developed around material objects in the home, and applying them to this wider materiality. I argue that the liminality of migrant homemaking can be explored by tracing those threshold spaces where there is relationality and interaction between migrant and non-migrant communities.

7.3 Squatting and the homemaking in the para

My second key focus scales outwards form the immediate squatted home and into the neighbourhood. In doing so, I was concerned to explore squatted homemaking in the wider locality and how this interacted with the racially hostile environment of 1970s London. My work contributes to critical geographies that understand home as multi-scalar, emphasising that the Western universalist attention to a physical dwelling is incongruent with south Asian understandings of home that regard it as much more nebulous and concentrically organised around a range of inside and outside spaces. I make the point that this specific understanding of home helps to enable a shift away from the urban centred focus found in squatter research (Davis 2006, Holston 2008, McFarlane 2011) and to notice that Bengali squatter activism spilt out into the neighbourhood as part of a gendered homemaking practice rather than a claim to urban space. In this way, my work suggests that thinking about squatting in terms of homemaking can reveal a more intimate claim for belonging derived in culturally relevant understandings of home as para.

I explore the way that the material deficiencies of the squatted home pushed Bengali migrant squatters outwards and forced them to domesticate the city for the fulfilment of bathing and cooking functions. I highlight the gendered impact of the situation. For Bengali men, in particular, bathing was a highly sociable activity in Sylhet and was part of the way they enjoyed the broader space of the home and para. However, in 1970s East London, bathing in the public baths became a fraught activity as it brought them into racially hostile areas and undermined how they had enjoyed spatial liberty at home. Many Bengali women declined to visit the baths at all for fear of racial attacks, but some were compelled out of their homes to cook for their families, thereby engaging with the neighbourhood space in a way that was at odds with the more restricted access they had experienced back home. The sense of the neighbourhood being a
place of hostility and violence, at complete odds with their experience of para back home (Blunt & Bonnerjee 2013), generated male solidarity and led to many squatters also becoming part of vigilante groups that would patrol the area.

I also argue that it was possible to detect a generational and gendered differentiation in this vigilantism and that this can only be understood when linked to homemaking aspirations. It became clear that the younger generation of male migrants actively engaged in vigilantism. I argue that the impetus for their actions was derived from a desire to recreate the spatial liberty and sense of para that they had enjoyed back home. The older generation, the ‘uncle types’, were less inclined to go beyond the act of squatting and lend their support to vigilantism. However, where the popular representation of this in the archival material explained this attitude in racialised tropes about Bengali male effeminacy (Dimeo 2002, Sinha 2017), I contend that this was more accurately linked back to divergent homemaking attachments. I argue that the ‘uncle type’ migrants nurtured their masculinity in their enduring transnational attachments. In contrast, the younger ‘big brother types’ developed a diasporic identity and attachment to home in London. In this way, I argue that by exploring squatting outside of the narrow urban/citizenship centred focus, it is possible to detect gendered and generational homemaking imaginaries as pivotal to these wider squatter interactions with the neighbourhood.

In doing so, my research highlights the importance of understanding migrant home and homemaking as a gendered and generational experience and contributes to the postcolonial invitation for recognising plurality (Jazeel 2019, Sanyal 2017). Like Bhambra (2014) I argue that the value is not just engaging diversity and dehomogenising marginalised communities ‘but that we think differently from how we had previously thought’ (5). I make a case here for being attentive to how gendered and generational iterations of home manifested very differently in the way that Bengali migrants experienced and responded to racialised violence and hostility. I highlight how by registering the experiences of Bengali migrants from their view of home as para, we can understand squatting in a way that disrupts the urban-centred scholarship on squatting.

7.4 Squatting and the transnational home stretched across time and space

My final research area was concerned to highlight the transnational connections that animated Bengali migrants in the 1970s. I sought to highlight the stretched nature of transnational home and homemaking and consider its impact on participants both at the time, and over their life course. I argue that the 1970s as temporal context was important not only for the post-colonial white imaginary that Britain was
conjuring (El-Enany 2020) and which contributed towards the racialised hostility that Bengali migrants confronted, but also for the political inheritance of the Bangladesh civil war that migrants carried with them. In this way, I argue for the need to remember and value that migrants have a history, and transnational inheritances that they carry with them from there.

One of the key arguments I advance was to highlight that the Bangladesh liberation struggle had important but divergent impacts on Bengali migrants. Many identified parallels between the struggles of East Pakistan against the oppression and discrimination they faced at the hands of the West Pakistani government and the racialised hostility they confronted in 1970s London. I highlight again the generational differentiation that became apparent, where ‘big brother types’ took lessons from the 1971 civil war and were inspired to challenge the racialised hostility through increasingly organising into anti-racist activity that sprung from squatter vigilantism. As stated already, the ‘uncle types’ resisted this more combative approach – but again, I argue it is better explained in their commitment to a return home and an enduring transnational attachment; a desire to return and rebuild their infant homeland, rather than the racialised effeminacy that was the dominant (mis)representation of this attitude.

I also argue that these ‘uncle types’ iterated their homemaking through a commitment to remittance home and the transnational family that they had left behind (Baldasser et al., 2007). I suggest that it is reductive to think about family in the narrow nuclear unit that is often the mainstay of western definitions (Gardner 1995, 2002), and I examine the broad and yet compelling range of family relationships Bengali migrants maintained. These went beyond the extended family and would often extend into attiyo, or the non-blood relations in the wider village. I argue that the older ‘uncle types’ nurtured this return home as part of their migrant imaginary and maintained only a temporary attachment to London. This meant that in reality very little material or affective attachment was cultivated in the transitory space of London and the vast majority of material investment was returned to Sylhet, and the family that had been left behind. What was particularly interesting was how child squatters remembered this period and the resentment that emerged in their recollections of a time when they suffered those material deprivations, based on homemaking attachments they did not necessarily fully understand, nor share with their parents.

In the final argument, I trace these family obligations to their latest iteration – but in doing so I came to hear that whilst it was male-oriented decisions around earning and remittance potential that animated migrant activities and responsibilities at the beginning of the journey, now some 45 years later, it was Bengali women who made the final decision. I highlight how life-course is an important factor in understanding migrant homemaking decisions over a more extended temporal period. I argue that, unlike
previous work that tends to highlight ambivalence and tension in the homemaking outcome (Gardner 2002, Salih in Al-Ali & Koser 2003) the older women – now grandmothers as well as mothers – were unequivocal that home was here in London. I argue that the role and significance of older women’s maternal power (Ahmed 2016, Pustulka 2018) have been underestimated. The final home for Bengali migrants, was decided by maternal commitments to family relationships that were now fixed here.

By tracing the transnational experience in these ways, my work contributes to understanding transnational homemaking by highlighting how that connection can involve what migrants bring with them, in this case as a political inheritance, as well as the traditional focus on what it is they return. This section also reiterates the theme that runs through all previous sections and argues that gender and generation function as key markers of experience, and that there is considerable merit in attending to those features when trying to explore migrant home and homemaking. Finally, I also suggest that focusing on the life-course and mapping individuals to the wider relationships and obligations that punctuate that life-journey is an important way of exploring migrant homemaking, over that longer temporal period.

7.5 Methodology as responsibility

Beyond the theoretical and conceptual contributions outlined here, I also consider my research as advancing postcolonial methodology. Taking seriously Jazeel’s (2019) invitation to think about postcolonialism as methodology with the aim of ‘persistent effort to unsettle the contours of power’ (15) and for ‘thinking against the grain of colonial power’s lingering and subjugating effects’ (16), I committed to research methods that centred my participants, resisting universalist application of conceptual tools derived in Western contexts. The oral history interviews with participants grew into positive relationships and the obligations that this entailed compelled me to think carefully about what ethical and non-extractive research looks like. The reality of ‘giving voice’ (Spivak 1988) to people that had previously been marginalised was unexpectedly difficult and became my most existential research dilemma. In Chapter 3, I reflected in detail on the considerations that I struggled with as I worked in Bengali and English, translating and transcribing words that were not my own, for an audience almost wholly removed from the community of research. The conclusions I came to in terms of methodological practice are not necessarily prescriptive for others, but they are at least a recognition that postcolonial methodology might be measured by the rigour of initial intentions and the integrity of commitment, as well as the actual empirical output.
The film দখল Dhokol (see Figure 7.2) is a significant and positive contribution and brings together an empirical and methodological ambition that changes the archival landscape. A dual language film, that challenges the asymmetrical gaze of the previous archival films and documentaries, the research output here went well beyond superficial dissemination and recorded participants in their own words and language, and in doing so, requires the audience to do the work to engage with the stories that are shared. দখল Dhokol is engagement with the research community in a way that not only acknowledges their contribution to the research but stands as a correction to their previous marginalisation and erasure. The research ethics process did not direct the responsibility I felt, but I argue that this is a shortcoming of that process. Ethical research ought to value community engagement as a more central part of the qualifying criteria. I would argue that my commitment to do this as integral to my research rather than as an incidental output at a later stage, is a best practice model for community engagement. The ethics process ought to make mandatory, that research findings are shared in a meaningful and accessible way to the community of research.

I have also secured a book contract with an East London publishing company, and I am in the throes of writing a ‘social history’ of the events in a less academic and more ‘popular’ style. The book is due to be published in Autumn 2022 and will, I hope, contribute to the momentum of wider interest that the East
London Bengali community has attracted, in this, the 50th anniversary year of Bangladesh independence. The civil war and Bengali migrant stories connected to the struggles have featured in a host of programmed events across Tower Hamlets and beyond. It appears, as stated earlier, that with the ‘Save Brick Lane’ campaign, there is something of a ‘coming of age’ as the younger generation are alerted to the significant events and continued impact of their parents’ and grandparents’ migration stories on their own place in London, and as part of the Bangladeshi diaspora. The book will have at its heart the oral history interviews collected. In this format, it will be able to reach not only a younger British Bengali audience who have developed an appetite for learning more about their migration history but also a broader audience. In this way, it aims to contribute to the still early discussions popularised by the Black Lives Matter movement in terms of decolonising knowledge, in this case, about the Bangladeshi community’s role and place here in Britain.

There were inevitably research ambitions that I did not manage to fulfil; COVID-19 restrictions blocked my ability to complete the group-based research that I had planned to pursue. I could not bring participants together and listen to how the individual stories told to me might have been inflected and elaborated when brought together with others who had similar stories to share. The archival workshops where I would have liked to engage participants with archival materials would also have been an interesting way to think about the interaction between private memory and public archives. This remains a potential avenue for future research.

Of course, the Bengali community’s role and place in the East End have shifted considerably since the 1970s. The development of Banglatown and the complexities of the pressures that this and broader ‘redevelopment pressure’ has generated, has already been the subject of significant research (Alexander et al., 2020). In this work, there has been attention to the wider intergenerational relationship between early migrants and their now increasingly reluctant children and grandchildren, to work in the restaurant trade, that had once been at the heart of the Banglatown development (Alexander 2011, Begum 2004, Jacobs 1996). I would suggest that this intergenerational conversation is a generous site for further research. The ‘Save Brick Lane’ campaign shows that the reluctance to work in the same trades has not, however, diminished the younger generation’s sense of the East End being home. In July 2021, I worked with a journalist at the BBC Asian network on a piece that was looking at contemporary housing issues in Tower Hamlets and who was interested in covering the earlier Bengali squatter history. For this item, I was able to organise an intergenerational interview with Khosru, one of my participants, along with a 19-year-old local Bengali student (see Figure 7.3).
They spoke at length about their experiences of housing in Tower Hamlets. Despite over sixty years difference in age and nearly five decades after the height of the squatter movement, they found remarkable resonance in their conversations about housing shortage and overcrowding, highlighted in particular, by the COVID-19 impact on the Bangladeshi community. The piece called, ‘Rising up against racism: London’s forgotten Bangladeshi squatters’ (see Figure 7.4) was published on the BBC news website in October 2021, as a 3-minute news item and generated enormous interest, one of the most watched videos on the website for that week.
It would be of significant academic interest to explore and engage younger activists involved in the Save Brick Lane campaign with older squatters and to think about how ideas around home and belonging are progressed in those conversations, and differing contexts. It would also be pertinent to explore how the racialised Othering that the Bengali community faced in the 1970s, has evolved in the post 9/11 and 7/7 climate of securitisation – epitomised in the revocation of citizenship to Shamima Begum (Johnson & Fernandez 2019, Masters & Regilme 2020). Again, that analysis across generational and gendered identities and solicited through intergenerational conversation would be of significant value to understanding the emerging and evolving diasporic and transnational identities, within the Bengali migrant and British-born Bengali community.
7.6 Final thoughts

The seeds for this research were set some 45 years ago, when my young migrant parents struggled to give me and my sister a home, in a racially hostile 1970s London. In 2018, I came to conduct this study as a sense of obligation that there was a period of social history that was likely to be lost if there was not some effort to find and record the experiences of my parents, and of so many like them. In doing so, I was determined to give voice to a marginalised community, and in many ways, I have satisfied that ambition. Along the journey, I unexpectedly found my own voice through a research process that has challenged and changed me in fundamental ways. The participants I met generously shared their stories; listening to them made me rethink what I thought I knew about myself, my diasporic identity, and my relationship with the Bengali community. Khosru Miah once told me that he had never talked to anyone, including his own children, about his squatting or squatter activism. I hope that this research and the outputs that arise from it mean that his children and those of others will have a better understanding of the significance that Bengali migrant squatters made to the homes and lives we have today, and a history of 1970s East London, that records the Bengali community’s homemaking journey.
Appendix 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oral history interviewees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviewees (listed in order of date of first interview):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. ********** A single young man when he arrived to squat in London in the early 1970s, Terry supported Bengali families to squat, and thereby became a critical support to BHAG and Pelham building squatter. He now lives with his partner in Hackney.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. ********** Came to Tower Hamlets in 1972 to take up a hob as youth worker in Avenues Unlimited. She was well known to many of my Bengali participants – especially the 1.5 generation and was involved in supporting families in their housing struggles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. ********** A child squatter who grew up in a squatted flat in Fieldgate Mansions, her family secured a tenancy and eventually have moved to Redbridge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. ********** Helal arrived as a young boy in the early 1970s, he went on to squat with his older brothers and went on to become secretary of BHAG. He also became one of the Bengali community’s first local councillors. He still lives in Tower Hamlets.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. ********** Was an 18-year-old boy who arrived to squat with his family in Nelson Street, he was active as part of the Bangladeshi Youth Movement and was later elected as a councillor and served as Tower Hamlets civic mayor. He now lives in Redbridge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. ********** Was originally posted to London with her husband who worked for the Bangladesh High Commission. She was the only squatter to still be in the house she originally squatted some 45 years later. She and her husband had no remittance responsibility and actively supported other Bengali families to squat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. ********** Was a child in a family who were given a council home, but who shared their bathroom and kitchen facilities with nearby Bengali squatters, who didn’t have these facilities. Now lives in Ilford.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. ********** Was a teenage boy, who lived with his brothers in rented accommodation before buying a house in Hanbury Street. He had no remittance responsibilities and became a BHAG squatter activist, breaking in a squatting Bengali families and part of the wider vigilante patrols. Still lives in Tower Hamlets, in the same house.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**37. ******</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrived to join her husband in the mid-1970s, they struggled to find accommodation for the family and squatted in Varden Street. The family were supported by BHAG and eventually won a tenancy. She is now a widow and lives with her son and his family in Poplar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**38. ******</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrived in 1973 as a child with his family. His father worked for Bangladesh High Commission and being literate was sought out by Bengali squatters who needed support. The family moved into a squat in Varden Street in 1974, gained tenancy and stayed until 1983 at which point they bought a house in Wanstead where he now lives with his own family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**39. ******</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child squatter arrived in 1975 with Abdul and Guljahan and lived for approximately a year in Tower Hamlets, her family moved out of Tower Hamlets after feeling forced out of their squat in 1976. She now lives with her own family in Walthamstow.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TOTALS:**

| 12 Female | 23 squatters | 19 Bengali |
| 27 Male | | 20 English |
Bibliography


Bhan, G. (2009). ‘This is no longer the city I once knew’. Evictions, the urban poor and the right to the city in millennial Delhi. Environment and Urbanization, 21, pp. 127–142.


Credo (1978). Directed by Bob Bee [Film]. British Film Institute Archives.


*Home from home: A safe place to be* (1980). Directed by Simon Heaven [Film]. British Film Institute Archives.


'Race Today': Vol 7 Issue 1. Jan (1975) JOU/1/1/67
'Race Today': Vol 7 Issue 2. Feb (1975) JOU/1/1/68
'Race Today': Vol 7 Issue 3. Mar (1975) JOU/1/1/69
'Race Today': Vol 7 Issue 4. Apr (1975) JOU/1/1/70
'Race Today': Vol 7 Issue 5. May (1975) JOU/1/1/71
'Race Today': Vol 7 Issue 6. Jun (1975) JOU/1/1/72
'Race Today': Vol 7 Issue 7. Jul (1975) JOU/1/1/73
'Race Today': Vol 7 Issue 8. Aug (1975) JOU/1/1/74
'Race Today': Vol 7 Issue 9. Sep (1975) JOU/1/1/75
'Race Today': Vol 7 Issue 10. Oct (1975) JOU/1/1/76
'Race Today': Vol 7 Issue 11. Nov (1975) JOU/1/1/77
'Race Today': Vol 7 Issue 12. Dec (1975) JOU/1/1/78


249


253


**List of documentary sources:**


254
