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978-1-107-15018-8 — Housing, Class and Gender in Modern British Writing, 1880–2012
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Introduction

> Home. I searched but could not find myself.
> –Bernardine Evaristo, *Lara*, new ed.
> (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2009), p. 123

i Moving away from home

This is a book about the representations of the relations between housing, interiors and forms of self and collective identity. It addresses how accounts which frame individuals within domestic space articulate intricate stories of class, gender, social belonging and exclusion. More broadly, this study aims to reflect upon and challenge various domestic myths and truisms through an analysis of particular residential settings that have often been deemed marginal or peripheral to dominant images of home. Thus against idealised or abstract notions of home, my book analyses and historicises representations of four distinct British domestic settings in literature and non-fiction from the nineteenth century to the present: slums, boarding houses, mid-century working-class childhood homes and council housing estates. But rather than seeking simply to add more marginalised residential forms to the academic record, this book shows how attention to these contexts and locations might present significant alternative ways of reading and thinking about the meanings of housing environments and culture more generally. For as I will argue, domestic spaces that do not form part of a hegemonic narrative of home not only force a reconsideration of lofty pronouncements about dwelling and being, but are also key sites through which to re-evaluate conventional ways of linking interiors, housing and identity.

This study therefore aims to shift attention away from an insistence on the general importance of home and many of the assumptions that this ubiquitous term implies. For in popular and academic discourse, home is often posited as a rooted place of belonging, a transcendent signifier which cuts across cultures and identities, or a privileged location through

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which models of selfhood are found or forged. Invocations of home can all too often be predicated upon narrow models of housing: the self-contained home of one family, as opposed to multiple occupancy; home ownership rather than renting; the house as a site of leisure or the expression of personality rather than a workplace. In addition, imaginings and analyses of home are frequently governed by an ideological framework which posits an implicit or explicit association between place of residence and a sense of self. So while studies of home have radically expanded in recent years to encompass non-normative domestic spaces (including attention to the institutional domesticity of asylums, prisons and missionary settlements), traditional and even conservative ideas surrounding the function of the dwelling continue to hold sway. In other words, the locations of the domestic within studies of home have shifted, but the underlying tenets which privilege forms of bourgeois interiority often remain in place.

My concern is with a multifaceted and often problematic idea that exists in cultural descriptions of domestic space, specifically the notion that there is a steadfast and evident correspondence between self-identity and the interior – or between home ownership and self-possession. The analysis in this book therefore constitutes an attempt to move the focus away from discussions of the interior that are (consciously or not) based on a tenacious conception of bourgeois interiority. For that very notion, in which the individual's real self is to be found 'at home', is founded on a spatial model which privileges the idea that essential truths lie at the heart – or hearth – of some kind of interior. It follows that while this book is concerned with a variety of dwellings, it challenges the long-standing ideological tenet that truth lies 'within' and argues that there is much more at stake than narratives of self-identity in descriptions of living spaces.

Throughout this work, my intention is to extend the range of housing environments that are deemed to be significant or of cultural and aesthetic value and to reframe approaches to the interior more generally. By moving away from home and 'insidedness' as a locus for the private individual surrounded by a repository of signifying objects, I emphasise the significance of the social interior and, more broadly, the sociality of domestic space. This is achieved through a consideration of three connected topics: the idea of housing in relation to more expansive concepts of interiority (including collective networks of relations which extend beyond those of the nuclear family); the interior as a part of a wider public world in its constitution and function; and the social and ideological nature of the

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Excerpt
More Information

particular narratives and forms through which cultural images of domestic space are represented.

My emphasis on private homes as forms of social space is based on the recognition that the domestic interior, as a material object and discursive construct, is fundamentally shaped by economic and class relations. For as the sociologist Paul Harrison puts it: 'A house is not merely a physical entity. It is the product of social relations, of builder and buyer, of landlord and tenant, of successive generations of inhabitants and owners with particular incomes. The occupants are an inseparable part of the story'.[1] In this respect, the term 'housing' can serve as an important supplement to conventional ways of imagining home and interiors. For while 'home' and 'interior' are firmly rooted in literary and cultural discourse, 'housing' is a word which is more frequently encountered in the disciplines of the social sciences and often has political associations in public discourse. But as several recent studies have shown, the idea of housing can provide suggestive and profitable ways of thinking about the role of domesticity in cultural texts.[2] In this regard, Matthew Taunton notes that 'housing is one of the key mechanisms by which economic relations are transformed into lived experience and cultural practice'.[3]

Moreover, as a collective noun, the word 'housing' itself underscores the way in which home is as much about social relations as it is about the self, emphasising the sense of people living cheek by jowl rather than in detached seclusion. Indeed, the term is commonly used in social or political discourse to denote *other* people's places of residence; we talk about 'housing allocation', a group's 'housing needs' or, indeed, a 'housing crisis'. Housing, unlike the idea of home, is thus not primarily bound up with notions of self-identity, affect and comfortable seclusion. A distinct practicality underscores the word because as the historian John Turner writes, 'housing' in English can function as a noun or a verb (the gerund, 'housing', specifically denotes the act of putting people into homes).[4] Thus at a semantic level, 'housing' highlights a social process and signals complex issues of agency and power within the very language used to describe where people live. The sense of transition and movement in the word

[1] Paul Harrison, *Inside the Inner City: Life Under the Cutting Edge* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 192.
[2] See, for example, Peter King's 'The Room to Panic: An Example of Film Criticism and Housing Research', *Housing, Theory and Society* 21:1 (2004), 27–35, and Matthew Taunton, *Fictions of the City: Class, Culture and Mass Housing in London and Paris* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
[3] Taunton, *Fictions of the City*, p. 2.
[4] John F. C. Turner, 'Housing as a Verb', in John F. C. Turner and Robert Fichter (eds.), *Freedom to Build: Dweller Control of the Housing Process* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1972), p. 151.

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Excerpt
More Information

further establishes the way in which for many people, domesticity has been and is about flux rather than rootedness: from the dislocations of migrancy, to the trauma of eviction, to the insecurity of tenancy in a private rental market. Summoning images of bureaucracy and welfare rather than private life and homeliness, 'housing' does not have the cultural capital of the word 'property' or the rich symbolism of 'home'.[5] But this is not necessarily to its detriment. To use housing as a lens through which to read the domestic in literary and social documents can perhaps offer a more historically based and materialist perspective which profitably strips back some of the veneer of that talismanic word and idea 'home'. Housing, in this sense, might function rhetorically as a counter to home and its ideological accoutrements of belonging, identity, the nuclear family, nostalgia and the imagination.

An attention to housing thus necessarily brings with it a closer consideration of the economic and class relations of domestic space – aspects that are often excluded from invocations of home. For the history of housing reform and planning in Britain, from nineteenth-century Victorian liberalism to the neoliberal discourse of home ownership, is explicitly a story about money, the British class system and the social attitudes that accompany it. The protracted reports into slum dwellings in Victorian Britain, for example, are underpinned by nineteenth-century constructions of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. And in the late twentieth century, Margaret Thatcher's notorious Right to Buy policy, allowing council tenants to purchase their own homes, was a key element in the attack on a fundamental form of working-class life and served to propagate the neoliberal doctrine of property ownership as a form of social mobility. Since the 2008 crash, housing, homes and their relationship to ideas of class, social mobility, well-being and forms of migration have been at the forefront of social and political debates. Indeed the issue of housing is arguably one of the key domestic political issues of our times; as Ben Chu puts it: 'Britain has a nightmare, and its name is housing'.[6] The singular noun phrase, 'housing crisis', nevertheless elides a plethora of interlinked complications related to shelter in twenty-first-century Britain: the shortage of social housing caused by a failure to build a sufficient number of new homes; the deregulation of the rental market sector; house price inflation;

[5] Anna Minton notes that housing 'is not a sexy subject. . . . "Property", on the other hand, has spawned supplements filled to bursting and countless television programmes'; *Ground Control: Fear and Happiness in the Twenty-First-Century City* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 113.

[6] Ben Chu, *The Independent*, 9 February 2014, www.independent.co.uk/property/house-and-home/property/britain-is-suffering-from-a-housing-crisis–who-is-to-blame-and-how-can-we-fix-it-9113329.html.

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a lack of affordable homes (particularly in London and the South East); cuts to welfare benefits and their impact upon the affordability of social rents; the effects of poverty and poor housing on physical and mental health. The problem, as James Meek notes in his searing analysis of the housing question(s), is 'Where will we live?'[7] As the title of his essay implies, the crisis is collective, if not immediately for those who currently reap the benefits of consecutive housing 'bubbles', then certainly for future generations. Housing questions are therefore always a product of their time – ones which develop according to variations in social policy and political agendas as well as changing fashions and tastes.

The historical range of this book, which broadly moves from mid-Victorian liberalism to post-Thatcherite neoliberalism, is crucial in providing a critical framework which establishes the historicity of particular discourses of interiors and housing in British cultural and social life. Through case studies of housing environments that exist and form part of a cultural imaginary, this book encompasses key historical moments which include Victorian reformism and philanthropy, the restructuring of Britain after two world wars, the arrival of the *Empire Windrush*, the Butler Education Act and the Right to Buy policy. It is not my aim, however, to provide a comprehensive overview of writings on interiors and housing over a period which encompasses such profound social change, and this book does not set out to provide an exhaustive historical narrative.[8] A broad historical scope is nevertheless key to this study's intention to examine a number of significant historical and cultural developments in forms of domestic ideology.

ii Traces and imprints: The ideology and iconography of the bourgeois interior

In order to mount an analysis which examines apparently deviant or non-normative forms of domestic dwelling spaces, it is useful to set out briefly the constitution of the dominant model from which these 'other' dwellings

[7] James Meek, 'Where Will We Live?', *London Review of Books* 36:1 (2014), www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n01/james-meek/where-will-we-live.

[8] Existing analyses of literary representations of working-class domestic space include Carolyn Steedman, 'What a Rag Rug Means', in Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd (eds.), *Domestic Space: Reading the Nineteenth-Century Interior* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 18–39; Philippa Tristam, 'Dorothea's Cottages: The Houses of the Poor', in *Living Space in Fact and Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 66–115; and Nicola Wilson, *Home in Working-Class British Writing* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), which was published as this book went to press.

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Excerpt
More Information

might be seen to depart. As a number of important critical studies have documented, the regulative and hegemonic ideology of domesticity was institutionalised in the Victorian period.[9] Rather than summarising this well-traversed terrain, I will examine one important aspect of the so-called Victorian 'cult of domesticity' – namely, the ideology and 'symbolic power' of the interior.[10] For critics have shown that in the nineteenth-century, revelations of selfhood – or interiority – were often crucially located at home, along with the concomitant idea that the self could be exhibited and 'read' as a form of domestic display. But I argue that the after-effects of this particular ideological construction have perhaps been far more long-lasting than other aspects of Victorian domesticity. For although the modernist rejection of the Victorian interior – of its apparently stifling, fussy, ornamental finishes – was deemed to be revolutionary in terms of style, it perhaps differed rather less in terms of the content of the domestic imaginary itself. In other words, interiority may have looked different across the course of the twentieth century, as elaborate mouldings and cornices became firmly *démodé*, yet the idea of the interior as signifying individuality and privacy, and the belief that we are bound up with our rooms in necessarily meaningful ways, have never quite gone out of fashion.

The notion that interior domestic space reflects and expresses the life of its occupant is an enduring cultural trope, as evinced by its recurrence in the pages of the British novel. Classic examples are the revelation of Mr Darcy's true nature through the perfectly proportioned rooms at Pemberley; Miss Havisham's decaying dressing room in Satis House; and the enduring traces of Rebecca's presence that suffuse the spaces of Manderley. In these instances, the dwelling place, with its panoply of signifying objects, is constructed as a projection and an extension of the proprietor or inhabitant: interior space is literally 'full of character'. These literary examples support the theory that posits a link between ideas of privacy, individualism, domestic space and the 'rise of the novel'. Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei, for example, have traced a literary tradition in

[9] See, for example, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Jane Hamlett, *Material Relations: Domestic Interiors and Middle-Class Families in England, 1850–1910* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

[10] See Pierre Bourdieu's discussion of the 'performative discourse' of symbolic power as 'the power to make things with words' in 'Social Space and Symbolic Power', *Sociological Theory* 7:1 (1989), 14–25 (23).

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More Information

which 'novels *and* houses furnish a dwelling place – a spatial construct – that invites the exploration and expression of private and intimate relations and thoughts'.[11] The correlation between the words 'interior' (a spatial setting) and the recorded use of 'interiority' (denoting 'inwardness' or 'inner character or nature') in 1701 also seems to bolster the idea that a cultural shift towards privatisation, reflected and produced in the modern form of the novel, aligned images of interiors with individual identity.[12] Briganti and Mezei reaffirm this association by pointing to the coalescence of terms used to describe literature and domestic architecture ('structure, aspect, outlook, character, interior, content . . . liminal, threshold, entry point, style, perspective').[13] Indeed, according to Diana Fuss, this process of 'interiorization' gathered pace in the Victorian period: 'The interior, defined in the early modern period as a public space, becomes in the nineteenth century a locus of privacy, a home theatre for the production of a new inward-looking subject'.[14]

The idea of domestic space as a crucial framing device for the modern individual is also key to the writings of two of the most commonly cited theorists of the interior: Walter Benjamin and Gaston Bachelard.[15] Bachelard's phenomenological study *The Poetics of Space* presents an image of dwelling in its most eulogised and lyrical form. The house, according to Bachelard, is a space of origination, unity and permanence: 'Without it, man would be a dispersed being. . . . It is body and soul. It is the human being's first world. Before he is "cast into the world," as claimed by certain hasty metaphysics, man is laid in the cradle of the house'.[16] According to this account, the conception of the house lies outside history, functioning

[11] Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei, 'Reading the House: A Literary Perspective', *Signs* 27:3 (2002), 839. For other studies that posit a connection between the increasing privatisation of bourgeois identity and the centrality of representations of domestic space and houses in literature and art, see: Tristam, *Living Space*; Charles Rice, 'Rethinking Histories of the Interior', *The Journal of Architecture* 9:3 (2004) 275–87; Victoria Rosner, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

[12] Charlotte Grant provides a useful history of the changing senses of the term 'interior' in 'Reading the House of Fiction: From Object to Interior, 1720–1920', *Home Cultures* 2:3 (2005), 233–50.

[13] Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei (eds.), *The Domestic Space Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), p. 321.

[14] Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms That Shaped Them* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 9.

[15] See Walter Benjamin, 'Louis-Philippe or the Interior', *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, Harry Zohn (trans.), (London: Verso, 1983), pp. 167–69; Walter Benjamin, 'I [The Interior, The Trace]', in Rolf Tiedemann (ed.), *The Arcades Project*, Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (trans.), (Cambridge: Belknap, 2002), pp. 212–27; Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Maria Jolas (trans.), (Boston: Beacon, 1994).

[16] Bachelard, *Poetics*, p. 7.

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Excerpt
More Information

as a prelapsarian site which pre-exists the moment that the individual is 'cast into the world' and thereby becomes a social being. Through the analogy of the home as a type of 'cradle' or 'womb', Bachelard insists upon the existence of an intimate, timeless and universal connection between self and home:

> But over and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits. After twenty years, in spite of all the other anonymous stairways, we would recapture the reflexes of the 'first stairway,' we would not stumble on that rather high step. The house's entire being would open up, faithful to our own being. We would push the door that creaks with the same gesture, we would find our way in the dark to the distant attic. The feel of the tiniest latch has remained in our hands.[17]

Needless to say, there have been many challenges to Bachelard's evocation of home as a cloistered, nurturing place of wonder, intimacy and protection.[18] Yet despite the evident problems with Bachelard's class-blind, universalising and often sentimental theorisation of home, many critical essays and studies of home return to this particular work. I would suggest that it is perhaps the tone and style of *The Poetics of Space*, encapsulated by the passage above, which accounts for its tenacious presence within discourses of home across academic disciplines. For the idea that home and self are innately and timelessly bound together coheres around a seductive and compelling form of rhetoric: one which uses the language of universality to conceal its social and historical specificity. Indeed Bachelard's *Poetics* does not just describe the apparent allure of home, it enacts it.

Benjamin also conceived of the 'age-old – perhaps eternal' image of the dwelling as a protective space for the individual, evoking the idea of the 'maternal womb' and the 'shell' as original forms of human abode.[19] But for the nineteenth-century bourgeois citizen, Benjamin argued, the need for 'dwelling in its most extreme form' had become a type of addiction, buffering the bourgeois citizen against the shocks and estrangement of modernity.[20] Thus in the section or convolute of *The Arcades Project* entitled 'The Interior, The Trace', the domestic interior is presented as a space in which an array of objects is designed to produce an effect of privacy and security. For Benjamin, the interior serves as the location in

[17] Bachelard, *Poetics*, pp. 14–15.
[18] See, for example, the introduction and essays contained in Gerry Smyth and Jo Croft (eds.), *Our House: The Representation of Domestic Space in Modern Culture* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), and King's 'The Room to Panic'.
[19] Benjamin, 'I [The Interior, The Trace]', p. 220.
[20] Benjamin, 'I [The Interior, The Trace]', p. 220.

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Excerpt
More Information

which the bourgeoisie is comforted and estranged by an assortment of fetishised commodities and objects. For as Benjamin noted, 'the private citizen who in the office took reality into account, required of the interior that it should support him in his illusions'.[21] Thus whereas for Bachelard the original house is somehow 'physically inscribed' within the individual for all time, Benjamin emphasises the reverse: the domestic interior as a type of canvas on which can be found the traces of human inhabitation. Indeed, the 'fit' operates in such a way that the individual is integrated – almost rendered into an object – within domestic space. In this way, he observes that the nineteenth century

> conceived the residence as a receptacle for the person, and it encased him with all his appurtenances so deeply in the dwelling's interior that one might be reminded of the inside of a compass case, where the instrument with all its accessories lies embedded in deep, usually violet folds of velvet. What didn't the nineteenth century invent some sort of casing for! Pocket watches, slippers, egg cups, thermometers, playing cards – and, in lieu of cases, there were jackets, carpets, wrappers, and covers.[22]

Epitomised by the decorative fabric 'plush' (which Benjamin describes as 'the material in which traces are left especially easily'), the classic bourgeois dwelling serves to encase and record human imprints in a strange, lingering display of private life.[23]

More recently, Diana Fuss' fascinating and moving exploration of interiority in the context of the rooms inhabited by four writers and thinkers – Emily Dickinson, Sigmund Freud, Helen Keller and Marcel Proust – brings together the model of reciprocity between self and interior and tropes of the mould, imprint and trace. Her aim in *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms That Shaped Them* (2004) is to investigate precisely the 'houses that sheltered and shaped the imagination of writers' or how spaces 'mold the interior lives of the writers who inhabit them'.[24] But while ascribing to rooms a type of animate quality or agency, Fuss' methodology is also underpinned by the idea, posited by Benjamin, that the individual leaves his or her 'trace' or 'imprint' within the domestic interior: that rooms, in other words, are a sensitive medium that express something meaningful about the lives of the individuals who reside within them. The cultural mythology of the writer's room thereby functions as the epitome of the posited alliance between interior space, the individual subject and creativity. Fuss' approach is certainly illuminating as a way

[21] Benjamin, 'The Interior', p. 167. [22] Benjamin, 'I [The Interior, The Trace]', pp. 220–21.
[23] Benjamin, 'I [The Interior, The Trace]', p. 222. [24] Fuss, *Sense of an Interior*, pp. 1, 4.

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Excerpt
More Information

of understanding these specific writers and individuals within their object-world environments. But the method itself is premised on and therefore reiterates the link between an intimate, sensory alliance between individuals and interiors which is, as I have argued, a specific aspect of bourgeois ideology.

The poetics of the bourgeois interior is relevant and illuminating with regard to particular socio-economic spaces, or the rooms of certain individuals at particular points in history. And yet like all ideologies, its effect has been to produce a type of naturalised imaginary of home. Drawing on comments by Karl Marx on ideology, Stuart Hall notes that

> ideology works because it appears to ground itself in the mere surface appearance of things. In doing so, it represses any recognition of the contingency of the historical conditions on which all social relations depend. It represents them, instead, as outside of history: unchangeable, inevitable and natural.[25]

This historicising function of ideology might explain why students in the classroom nod in recognition at Bachelard's evocations of garrets and cellars, lavender-scented wardrobes and small caskets (features with which they may well be entirely unfamiliar in reality). This and the fact that a significant trend in popular culture, embodied in countless property programmes and real estate pitches, conveys the standard assumption that self-identity is reinforced and expressed through the image of the home. It appears, as Julia Prewitt Brown argues, that while the former property-owning gentry, or 'ruling class', may now have been dispersed into more free-flowing forms of global capitalism, the 'mythology of bourgeois domesticity is with us still'.[26] From Victorian liberalism, which promoted the idea of home as a site for the formation of character, to neoliberal notions that home ownership is a form of citizenship and full subjecthood, it is clear that a wide range of discursive practices have provided precisely a stock of images, motifs and premises to furnish the apparently natural idea that the 'real self' is to be found indoors. Thus it is clear that the ideology of home is iterated not only in the particular values ascribed to descriptions or representations of models of domestic life or interiors, but in the very discourse which expresses, in Hall's turn of phrase, 'a recognition of the things we already knew': namely, that domestic residence is central to the formation and display of self-identity.[27]

[25] Stuart Hall, 'The Rediscovery of "Ideology": Return of the Repressed in Media Studies', in Michael Gurevitch et al. (eds.), *Culture, Society and the Media* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 76.
[26] Julia Prewitt Brown, *The Bourgeois Interior* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), p. 6.
[27] Hall, 'The Rediscovery of "Ideology"', p. 75.

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