# Exploring Unbelonging: Negotiating the Concept of 'Home' in Neill Blomkamp's District 9

**Adharshila Chatterjee**

## Home is Not Here: Unmaking Homes in the Postcolony

Douglas' 1991 essay highlights the localisability of home in the following statement - 'The question is not "How?" nor "Who?" nor "When?" but "Where is your home?"' (Douglas 1991, 289) - thereby underscoring one of the foundational ideas associated with homes and home spaces - the notion of belonging in and to a specific, fixed place/space. Douglas' categorisation of homes and non-homes, thus, could be seen as a convenient starting point for our reconstruction and recovery of the imaginaries of 'home' from historically essentialist and romanticised conceptions, in the context of spatial

and political reconfigurations in the postcolonial Global South. Any critical attempt at exploring the evolving geographies and counter-geographies of homes/homelands, of belonging/un-belonging requires a concomitant understanding of the increasingly unstable topographies of home (from OE. ham, 'fixed residence or dwelling') and an acknowledgement of the gradual loss of fixity and rootedness that underwrite the etymological scope of the word. Thus, our negotiation with the concept of 'home' in the postcolony must be premised upon the broader scope and contexts of specific geopolitical and socioeconomic impetuses generated by what Hardt and Negri (2000) identified as the emergent global neo-Empire of the twenty-first century (Hardt and Negri 2000, Preface xii). The radical dialectics of 'home' are shaped and reshaped amidst the disorienting trajectories of different kinds of mobilities - economic migrations, internal and cross-border displacements, refugee crises etc. - resulting in new structures of power, governance and political/cultural/economic ecologies.

Exile - physical, political and cultural - becomes one of the most pivotal experiences that shapes the postcolonial subject. In South Africa, the public and private legacies of exile, both external and internal, manifest in culturally transmitted memories, stories and histories about the loss of home and homelands. In her study of the Masupatsela generation, Zosa De Sas Kropiwnicki (2017) writes:

> Being in exile is both about being en route, away
> from somewhere and towards somewhere else, and
> about never arriving—the arriving would only be the
> return to the initial place of home, and yet that is
> already a non-arrival as the home from which one
> left is no longer the same, and the person who left
> is no longer the same as the one who arrives back.
> (Kropiwnicki 2017, 53)

Exiled bodies are always in transit, always mobile and
yet never truly settled, plagued by an endless restlessness
and rootlessness. Homes are rendered tenuous, as mar-
ginalised and (often) gendered subjects constantly tran-
sition through different mappable or unmappable places
and non-places (Augé 1995), between the axes of homes
and nonhomes. This deterritorialisation of homes as
fixed spaces and loci of identity produces a sense of
unbelonging that cannot be categorically reduced to only
a political experience born of divisive governance, poli-
cy and socioeconomic practices. It must also be seen as
a product of familial and institutional acculturation of
racialised difference and performative identities. To exist
as Other in spaces marked by colonialism is to bear and
pass on the generational burdens of silence and trauma
- to embody historically implanted lack, poverty, political
erasure and marginality.

The postcolonial and diasporic subject is, thus, in-
evitably impacted by both the traumatic uncanny of
homes-turned-nonhomes and the irrepressible drive

to replicate fantasies of belonging within/amidst non-home spaces, even as they compulsively aspire towards an emancipatory mobility. The spectres of home haunt the collective cultural memories and performative rituals of domestic living and knowing in the postcolony. In postcolonial discourses, the ideas of home as a private domain (distinct and separate from the public, while still allowing inside-outside exchanges) and a site of domesticity, familial economics, hierarchies, intimacies and violence allow for diverse heuristic approaches to navigate the politics of belonging and unbelonging. How and where can we begin to delineate the contours of this unbelonging? Could departures/arrivals from and to homes/nonhomes/homelands constitute a suitable parameter for charting this gradual erosion of the sense of belonging? Or should we extend our discourse beyond the question of mobility and embrace the uncomfortable reality that our experience of unbelonging is ultimately a direct psychospatial manifestation of processes and practices related to governance and policy-making in the postcolony? In the South African context, the spatialities of home/house are embedded in the historical precarities of segregationist urban and housing policies of the 20th century that were the primary tools of social and spatial control, implemented initially by the South African Party (and later, by the National Party) to ghettoise non-white populations and demarcate tangible racialised borders between white and non-white space/bodies/lives.

A historical overview of land and housing policies since the 1920s in South Africa demonstrates the clear economic agenda of white minority-led governments to actively restrict social and economic capital for non-white subjects. The Housing Act of 1920 and the Native (Urban Areas) Act of 1923, for instance, were largely driven by massive socioeconomic and epidemiological anxiety over the 1918-19 Spanish Flu outbreak, leading to urgent implementations of urban housing policies for people of colour that would effectively allow authorities to isolate the infected, black working-class population to crowded and poorer sectors, away from the wealthy white communities (Vestbro 2012, 350; Mabin 2020, 454). An additional impetus was provided by the emergence of labour unions for black workers, which made it imperative for Apartheid administrators to enact and impose spatial control over these potentially disruptive politico-economic bodies (Vestbro 2012, 352). The strategic "spatialisation of race and racialisation of space" would reach its apotheosis during the Apartheid and would go on to produce a series of discriminatory policies that continue to inflict a legacy of privation on people of colour in South Africa (Lipsitz 2007, 10). These spatial tendencies to demarcate and designate separateness through land policies later fuelled Apartheid era legislations like the Group Areas Act and the Population Registration Act which led to the creation of rigid classifications and separate "townships" for different non-white racial groups. Iain Low (2005) illustrates this divide by contrasting the

architectural designs and cultural orientations of the typical three-bedroom "white" dwellings in gated communities and its low-cost "black equivalent" NE 51/9, referring to Non-European houses with three bedrooms, kitchen and dining for black South Africans permitted to reside in urban areas, which serves to exemplify the multi-dimensional effects of land and housing laws in manufacturing and sustaining transgenerational racial inequities that continue to debilitate the lives of working-class, non-white citizens of South Africa (Low 2005, 39). Apartness was manifested and embodied in policy that turned homes into public templates of instantiated white dominance and racial hegemony.

## No Homes/Nonhomes for Nonhumans: Mapping Alienation and Unbelonging in District 9

The origins of Anglo-American science fiction and related SF genres have been historically implicated in colonial fantasies and hysteria about exotic Others, along with a glorification of territorial and techno-scientific occupations by post-industrial, neo-colonial enterprises, thus delaying and complicating the possibilities of postcolonial interventions in emergent discourses around SF (Rieder 2013, 4). However, in 2004, Nalo Hopkinson had noted the incredible potential of reimagining SF narratives as disruptive tools of radical challenge against hegemonic representations of colonised subjects, recommending postcolonial writers to "take the meme of

colonizing the native, and from the experience of the colonizee, critique it, pervert it, fuck with it" (Hopkinson 2004, 9; quoted in Burnett 2015, 133). The postcolonial genealogies of SF genres, especially in Africa, must, then, engage with the complexities of navigating spectacular visions of Afro-futurism while negotiating and archiving the political, spatial and racial traumas that continue to haunt its people and communities. The contested scope and implications of the term "post/-colonial" itself centrally position colonial histories as points of both origin and departure for critical discourses on race, identity, body and space. In the context of South Africa, for instance, the visceral legacies of Apartheid have shaped the collective consciousness of the body politic and must, therefore, be accommodated within the critical frameworks of our inquiry into postcolonial SF narratives.

Neill Blomkamp's 2009 SF film *District 9* is based on the director's 2005 short film called *Alive in Joburg* where the residents of an impoverished township express their vitriolic and xenophobic views on "aliens" (Van Veuren 2012, 573). The title of *District 9* (though set in Johannesburg) carries obvious resonances of Cape Town's District Six and its brutal history of forced dislocation, disenfranchisement and segregation. During the Apartheid regime, District Six was systematically purged of its black and "coloured" working-class residents in the 1960s, propelled by new principles and policies of "ur-

ban renewal," and while Blomkamp's cinematic engagement with the sordid memories of the Apartheid in *District 9* takes on largely allegorical forms, the overlaps and parallels between the spatial histories of District Six and the narratives of alienation and marginality in the film are obvious and apparent (Jethro 2009, 19). In fact, a number of academic works on Blomkamp's film examine Johannesburg as a physical site of trauma and resistance tied to the Apartheid regime and go on to explore a multitude of issues such as xenophobia, segregation, the configuration of the post-Apartheid city, and the past and future of African urbanities (Raubenheimer 2021, 17). This paper builds upon those discourses to locate the spatial imaginaries of homes and nonhome spaces in Blomkamp's alternate version of Joburg in relation to "alien," othered bodies that inhabit the uncanny spaces of *District 9*'s militarised, segregated camps and ghettos.

Unsettling echoes of Apartheid emerge as the film opens with different characters detailing the arrival of an alien spaceship in 1982 in Johannesburg and proceeds to document, in highly biased and subjective narratives, the mass paranoia, escalating anger and disgust of the humans against the extraplanetary refugees, unfolding over the next twenty years and narrated mostly through snippets of old and current video footage. At first glance, *District 9* seems to feature the usual paraphernalia of an urban dystopia - from the arrival of an alien race from the outer space to advanced weaponry and bureaucra-

tised necropolitics - and yet it consistently defies narrative expectations by positioning the aliens (pejoratively referred to as "the prawns", signifying "bottomfeeders" or scavengers) not as a neocolonial invading force but rather as terrified refugees, accidentally stranded in unfamiliar and inhospitable territory, firmly indicting the culture of speciesism, xenophobia and labour exploitation that typify the human-alien interaction in the film. The term "prawn" possibly also owes its origin to the "Parktown prawn", a species of king cricket found in South Africa (Kapstein 2014, 159). The starving, helpless aliens are "rescued" from the mothership and granted temporary asylum amidst mounting international pressure and rising paranoia among human citizens, as violent politics of apartness and segregation begin to emerge from the outset, recorded in video testimonies of the human interviewees in the film (Rosello 2018, 36). The cinematic narrative employs a documentary format, communicating the past and the present through archival and current video footage. The panoptic gaze of the camera eye further underscores the impersonal nature of bureaucratic violence, deployed through discriminatory policies, hyper-paranoid security protocols and outright police/military aggression. The treatment of the prawns in *District 9* is framed within frighteningly familiar rhetoric of dehumanisation that is legitimised and normalised in the film, since the target group is, after all, non-human, visibly "alien" in every sense and, therefore, deemed expendable. The theme of alienation and the language of

apartness in the film is inextricably tied to the spatial politics of home and belonging, articulated through a visual grammar of marginality. One of the key scenes of the film is the aerial shot of *District 9* - comprising sprawling, heavily surveilled zones, filled with clusters of shanties that were originally designed to be temporary camps and nonhomes, built to both shelter and simultaneously confine the prawns. The scene evokes the inescapable spatial memories of black townships during the Apartheid. The aliens are emplaced in a "state of exception," spatially located within the municipal and jurisdictional boundaries of Johannesburg and yet irrevocably separate and apart (Agamben 1998, 9; Price 2017, 238).

Perhaps the most visually significant spatial motif in the film is the looming silhouette of the suspended alien spacecraft, hanging over Johannesburg, that serves as the only physical link to a distant home planet for the dislocated, unhomed prawns and for their next generation, born on earth and yet never truly allowed to belong to their birth planet. The protagonist of the film is Wikus van de Merwe (played by Sharlto Copley) who is a mid-level employee at the Department of Alien Affairs at the MNU, his name overlaid with obvious associations with the buffoonish comic figure of Van der Merwe, which further highlights the localised cultural setting of the film (Kapstein 2014, 154). The narrative hinges on the transmutation of Wikus - from a bumbling and egotistical extension of the bureaucratic

machinery of the MNU to one of the prawns after an accidental contamination - and the consequent rupturing of the psychophysical borders between the familiar and the alien, the subject and the other. The story moves forward after a brief retrospective recounting of the arrival and subsequent condition of the extraterrestrials, narrated through multiple human voices, alternating between cautious and casually genocidal, as we arrive at the present moment of crisis in the film. The language soon devolves from scientific bewilderment to political hate-mongering and conspiracy theories. The film's present involves human agitation against the aliens and the impending removal and relocation of 1.8 million alien refugees from District 9 to District 10 - "from their present home to a better and safer location 200 kilometers outside of Johannesburg" (in Wikus' words, as he parrots the company propaganda) which leads to escalating confrontations between armed mercenaries and cornered, frightened aliens. The neoliberal corporation MNU (Multinational United) is appointed by the government to carry out the mass eviction. It is during this forced relocation that Wikus, the field officer in charge of the operation, is exposed to an alien fluid, triggering his quasi-Kafkaesque metamorphosis, portrayed in protracted scenes of visceral body horror, as Wikus's human body begins to unravel and come apart.

## Navigating Apartness: Bodies Without Homes in *District 9*

The first shots of the Alien Relocation Camp, with its heavily militarised grounds and barbed wire fences are incongruously juxtaposed against the spurious, cheerily ironic background narration by Wikus - "we have built a nice, new facility where the prawns can go and be comfortable," underscoring the insidious nature of the bureaucratic necropolitics at play. The social ecology of the prawns is detailed through the film's documentary-style narration which describes the slums of District 9 as sites of crime and violence: gambling, prostitution, addiction, gangs, illegal weapons trades etc. The racially-charged, xenophobic rhetoric surrounding criminality becomes a recognisable trope, used to justify the most inhuman of atrocities that are inflicted on the aliens. It quickly becomes apparent that it is, in fact, primarily the aliens who are targeted and exploited by human scammers. For instance, one of the scams run by Nigerian gangs is to sell cat food at extremely high markups to the prawns or to trade high-grade weaponry in exchange for cat food. Wikus, in one of the early scenes, uses cans of cat food as alternatives to tear gas shells to both diffuse tension and to trick prawns into signing the eviction notice. Unsuspecting prawns are frequently attacked, mutilated, and their body parts are consumed by Nigerian gang leaders in the hopes of gaining the power to use bio-engineered alien weapons. The film plays up the figures of Nigerian

crime bosses and drug lords, a common trope in South African media, mapping the uneasy power balance between these two groups of 'aliens' - the prawns and the Nigerians - who share the same "nonhome" i.e. the slums of District 9 (Kirsten 2018, 7). The complexities of the alien psyche and personality are systematically sublimated and reduced to static and redundant stereotypes of infantilism, savagery, weirdness and otherness. Rachel Tolen demonstrates the colonial and majoritarian construction of "dangerous classes" as largely built on the logic and language of disposability of certain kinds of bodies - "the unemployed, vagrants, the poor, criminals, drunkards and prostitutes" - that conveniently emphasise the need for reform through disciplinary intervention by institutional bodies (Tolen 1995, 81; quoted in Rosello 2016, 38). "Where there's a slum, there's crime," says Sarah Livingstone (played by Nathalie Boltt), a sociologist who is also one of the interviewees in the film. The shacks and the slums, which serve as home spaces for the aliens, are, thus, preemptively encoded with socio-legal threats of deviancy, bodily/behavioral non-normativity, and criminality.

In the chaotic scenes following the beginning of the forced displacement, the majority of the prawns are characterised as "workers" - largely docile and infantile, lacking any direction or agency in the absence of proper leadership, their leaders presumably having died of disease. The neo-imperial and majoritarian disdain for

alien lives is repeatedly manifested in the films, as portrayed in a scene where Wikus discovers a shack filled with alien eggs and newly hatched babies and proceeds to cheerfully abort a couple of fetuses to demonstrate the workings of the makeshift alien "womb," offering morbid souvenirs of the impromptu abortion to the camera crew. The film engages with the biopolitics of speciesist population regulation in the very next scene, which shows Wikus presiding over the destruction of the shack which served as a nest for eggs, excitedly comparing the sounds emitted from the burning eggs with the popping of popcorns: "The little guy, what's left of him, pops out there." As the lives and bodies of the aliens are repeatedly and callously violated in the film, the audience is forced to acknowledge and grapple with South Africa's fraught history of xenophobia and bigotry, the term "alien" being commonly associated with foreigners, migrants, and non-native residents. Ashton L. Kirsten draws political parallels between the representation of xenophobia in Blomkamp's film and the Gauteng incident of 11th May, 2008, when xenophobic violence had swept the province, leading to the deaths of sixty-two migrants, hundreds of rapes and assaults and rampant looting (Kirsten 2018, 2; Nord and Assubuji 2008, 2). The rapid peripheralisation of the prawns through physical displacement, internment and potential extermination is visually reinforced through the spatial spectre of the camp, ironically named "Sanctuary Park," co-opting the non-humans - the vulnerable,

political Other - within Agamben's conceptualisation of "bare life" (Agamben 1998; Price 2017, 243).

The camera tracks the events following Wikus' appointment as a field officer - his initial jubilation and his actions as the officer in charge of the evictions - interspersing them with soundbites from his colleagues, family and friends in the aftermath of his exposure, their reactions ranging from pity and performative sympathy to sheer hostility. Cilliers Van Den Berg has connected Wikus' transmutation with the Deleuzian concept of "becoming" or "becoming-other" (Van Den Berg 2020, 1166). His transformation from perpetrator to victim begins with the modifications of the most visible and vulnerable site of identity - his body. His capacity and right to belong to the privileged, dominant group is gradually eroded, as involuntary anatomical and physiological changes become increasingly apparent. An inevitable disintegration and withering away of home accompanies Wikus' loss of human body and his descent into abject alienness. The undesirability and disposability of the "alien" body is always contiguous with the impossibility of belonging. The rapid dissolution of the protagonist's home, sense of self and the attendant possibilities of returning home is vividly shown in a visceral scene where Wikus attempts to amputate his infected arm after a call from his brainwashed and distraught wife (played by Vanessa Haywood). Wikus' infection triggers a series of spatial displacements - from his suburban home to the

hospital to the sterile torture chambers of MNU, used for illicit medical experiments on the prawns. Torture and psychophysical humiliation effect a complete and sudden loss of identity, agency and bodily autonomy. Wikus' bound and semi-transformed arm is operated by MNU officials as a tool to kill illegally captured aliens, his transitioning body a potential harvesting ground for "billions of dollars worth of biotechnology" and genetic capital. As his body is transformed into a "specimen" and a passive site of transaction, Wikus is permanently dislocated from the private, ordered, intimate realm of home and repositioned within the vicious circuits of the capitalist marketplace.

After Wikus breaks out of the MNU laboratories, in the ensuing media spectacle, he is falsely reported to be infected and disfigured as a result of "prolonged" interspecies sex with aliens. The public is warned of a potential contagion and asked to maintain physical distance of at least twenty meters, evoking the culture of public hysteria, stigma and misinformation around the AIDS crisis in South Africa as well as punitive histories of Apartheid laws of sexual regulation and censorship, such as the Immorality Acts and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (Kapstein 2014, 160). This further concretises Wikus' apartness, otherness and unbelonging in explicitly physical terms. As Wikus frantically tries to call for help and encounters only rejection from human friends and family, the alien spaceship hangs in the backdrop, a sin-

ister reminder of his irrevocable transgression of the borders between the human and the non-human, citizen and alien, subject and other. The film only peripherally engages with uncomfortable questions of race and gender by projecting them onto the othered, abject body of its protagonist. Under the panoptic gaze of the camera, his body bleeds, vomits, cries, tears, grows, breaks and reshapes itself into something else, something other. An important spatial association is established in the film between the aliens and trash heaps, alien bodies often seen sitting among, wading through and subsisting on waste. As mentioned earlier, the derogatory term "prawn" is connected not only to the aliens' appearance, but also to their propensity for scavenging. Following his escape, Wikus is caught on camera as he hunts for food in the trash. Expanses of wasteland filled with trash constitute the spatial grammar of privation and abjection of unwanted, "excess" bodies - the "waste" of society - accumulating on the margins of the city, away from the resources and capital of the urban centres (Brophy and Malley 2020, 199).

In *Borderlands/La Frontera,* Gloria Anzaldúa defines "borderlands" and borderland dwellers in the following way:

> A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los at-

ravesados live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal" (Anzaldua 1987, 3).

Loss of home, expulsion from the sphere of normativity and the straddling of hybrid identities characterise the trespassers and transgressors who inhabit these unstable borders and thresholds. Spaces are volatile and fluid, produced and contoured by the performative rituals of existence and experiences that occur within them. The alien township now becomes a potential sanctuary and refuge as Wikus finally begins to experience a new, fragile sense of belonging and camaraderie in the company of an alien named Christopher (played by Jason Cope) and his young son, as they work towards a common goal - to steal the confiscated alien liquid from the MNU, to return the two aliens to the mothership and potentially reverse Wikus' metamorphosis. The second half of the film focuses on Wikus' psychopolitical transformation into a figure of rebellion and resistance - a familiar reworking of the white saviour trope - as he launches an attack against the MNU and helps Christopher and his son board the mothership, enabling them to return to their distant homeland, even at the cost of his own (Trinder 2019, 9). The spatial processes of the demolition of District 9 and the relocation of an ever-growing alien population to District 10 at the end of the film parallel the de- and reconstruction of Wikus' body into

a prawn. His exile from home is now absolute and permanent.

The romanticised ending of the film hints at Wikus' possible retention of human memory and impulses, as the last shot of the film catches him - now fully transformed - sitting among trash heaps and visually reconfiguring the ruins of home, memory and identity into the metonymic remnants of his humanity - in the form of handmade items for his wife, created out of trash. District 9 is a fascinating political allegory about the instabilities of homes and borders, of belonging and unbelonging. Yet, there is no conventional triumph or glorified possibility of freedom that awaits the audience at the end of the film. Perhaps, Anzaldúa's formulation of "nepantla" or borderland can be applied to locate Wikus as the archetypal "in-betweener", embodying the precarity and liminality of existence on the margins. Anzaldúa writes: "Those of us who live skirting the otros mundos, other groups, in this in-between state I call nepantla, have a unique perspective [...] the perspective from the cracks gives us different ways of defining the self, of defining group identity" (quoted in Keating 2005, 1). Wikus' previous desire to reintegrate with the dominant group is disrupted and sublimated by his traumatic assimilation with the disenfranchised and disempowered; and yet, as a perpetual borderland dweller, his existence remains, till the end, in a state of in-betweenness, trapped in the exclusionary psycho-spatialities of different borders.

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