



## “Suicide Heights”: Council Estates As Sites Of Entrapment And Resistance In Hello Mum

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### Abstract

Council estates have been contestable social spaces of contemporary urban life in metropolitan cities like London and the marginalizing spatial experience they provide for the “working class” has been a problematic topic for many disciplines like architecture, sociology, psychology and literature. Considering the significance of space for the body in literary works, this essay analyses the black British woman writer Bernardine Evaristo’s fifth work, *Hello Mum*, a short-fiction, which revolves primarily around a fourteen-year-old black teenager Jerome’s tragic experience in a council estate in London. In this essay, scrutinizing Bernardine Evaristo’s novella *Hello Mum* and inhabiting a council estate as a challenging spatial experience, I suggest the teenager victim Jerome’s narrative reveals a kind of physical and psychological entrapment and resistance to the dominant ideology of the council estates, offers an alternative perception for the black people who are obliged to live in such marginalized places.

**Keywords:** Bernardine Evaristo, *Hello Mum*, council estates, teenage gangs, racism, gender

Council estates are dwelling places for a considerable proportion of population in many cities, especially in London. A typical British council estate is made up of various types of homes, including flats, terraced houses and maisonettes. Yet, although they appear in many different architectural forms, Ravetz suggests that there is some essential feature of “estateness” which contributes to their reputation and continued presence in political and social consciousness (2001, 177). The council estates in England were built gradually, starting in mid-nineteenth century, but basically between 1919 and 1970s, and they were initially intended for the large working classes and owned by local councils. The state-subsidized projects still continue in the present day England, although they are mostly implemented and managed by private companies. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, though, the situation has altered, since the politics of housing changed in 1980s under the Right to Buy policy which allowed the tenants to buy their properties (Beswick 2011, 434). However, Beswick underlines that by the “subsequent governments’ implementing shifting policies on social housing provisions– these spaces have become additionally contentious and complex” (422).

From architectural point of view, then, council estates provide an iconic legacy of Britain’s twentieth-century social housing experiment, hence, they are especially a significant socio-cultural and historical feature of British history. In the same vein, in her research article “Theatre Applications: Locations, Event, Futurity”, Beswick states that the image of council estate is often used in popular representation, from documentary and television to music video to symbolize the urban “grit” of contemporary inner-city life. Particularly in the theatre, urban political and working class drama has been set on or around estates “in attempts to deconstruct or expose the impact of life on these estates or to examine what such places denote” in contemporary society (Beswick 2011, 421).

Apart from the theatre, though, council estates as an intriguing subject and location for fiction is revealed in Black British woman writer Bernardine Evaristo’s fifth work *Hello Mum* (2010), from a black teenager’s point of view. *Hello Mum* is a short fiction about juvenile delinquency, set in 2009. The book’s cover bears the picture of a black boy and the inscription “[a]story of murder and heartbreak”. The tragedy involves the brief but sad life of a fourteen year old boy, Jerome, who inhabits a London council estate with his single mother Kimisi, a black woman of thirty-four and his four-year-old half-sister Shontelle. Jerome, with the desire to belong to a powerful gang, joins the Kamikaze Kru and for a higher standard of living, he accepts the gang leader Delmar’s brother Dexter’s offer to act as a drug dealer and is killed on his first day by some other gang’s members. Apart from her other five fiction, it is the only work Evaristo presents with the dedication: “For the children...”, though paradoxically it is not a children’s book, but a cautionary realistic fiction, a warning for the concern of both youth and adults.

As for the form, peculiarly, the story is narrated by means of a letter written by Jerome to his mother after his death; composed of eleven chapters with subtitles. His letter serves two purposes: firstly, clarifying Jerome’s mood and the series of events that caused his death; and secondly, as he underlines with bitter humor, “for once” his mother “can’t

answer back” (4). The mother Kimisi is not given a voice, so, the reader is exposed to a series of significant events through the lens of a teenager; Jerome is a protagonist whose parents do not understand him. In that, Evaristo projects two crucial issues: teenage gangs on the inner estates in London and the problematic single mother and teenage son relationship in the subdued context of racism and discrimination.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I’ll focus on the former, exposing the crucial challenge the council estates position as sites of entrapment and resistance, especially for the black teenagers like Jerome. The council estate they inhabit is revealed as a pivotal location; a site for home, yet a space which confines the inhabitants and makes them feel entrapped, thus emerging as an instigator of crime. Is it possible to resist and liberate oneself from a council estate? My contention is that the council estate that Jerome inhabits in *Hello Mum* signifies all: a space for confinement, resistance and liberation.

Lefebvre’s book, *The Production of Space* ([1974] 1991), moving away from the dominant historical and cultural narratives of social production, gives a spatial analyses of the production of society, considering a relationship between the perceived, the conceived and the lived space (Soja 1996, 79). Lefebvre’s model of “spatial practice”, signifies the everyday practice of lived space: “spatial practice might thus be defined [...] by the daily life of the tenant in a government-subsidized high-rise housing project” (Lefebvre [1974] 1991, 38).<sup>2</sup> In Jerome’s view, the lived space is combined with a negative conception for both the perceived and conceived space. The negative feeling the council estates produce is also noted; in Jerome’s view, the lived space amounts to a negative conception for both the perceived and conceived space. In her essay on social housing Emily Cuming also maintains that the word “housing” itself is almost a synonym for “poor housing” and “loaded with negative associations of insensitive planning, state policy, and social control, lacks the cultural capital associated with the word *property* or the comforting [...] parameters of *home*” (2) (emphasis original).

Moreover, as Lefebvre notes, in the practice of space, the experience of the body is central, “social practice presupposes the use of the body” ([1974] 1991, 40). Jerome is born in a confined space created by the estate and at fourteen the trouble emerges. For psychologists, the adolescent period is a “developmental phase defined by transition” (Sauter et al. 311), during which “identity” is the “primary psychosocial crisis” (Garcia 2010, 167). Therefore, in this “decade”, adolescents have to cope with various kinds of stress. Concordantly, Jerome’s letter starts on the day he was murdered and he highlights with direct emphasis on numerous instances arising out of entrapment in a council estate: the strain of the uncommon heat reflected by the tall buildings, his anger toward his mother, especially for having to live in an estate and then the police who circle above by a helicopter day and night: “their red beams swooped down like they was [sic] hunting animals”, although the youngsters are “just standing around chatting nonsense” (2). The police surveillance does create a psychological and literal sense of entrapment on the teenagers as the animal metaphor reinforces, despite the fact that, “place-based” crime prevention is significant for the authorities (Weisburd et al. 2009, 461). Paradoxically, though, when the consequent murder of the day is considered, even constant police surveillance cannot deter the gangs from crime.<sup>3</sup>

The teenagers are not the only ones who conceive the estate as a site of confinement, though. Another serious indicator involves the amount of adults who commit suicide that Jerome presents with slight exaggeration:

<sup>1</sup> See Sebnem Toplu “Juvenile Crime or a Corollary” in *Fiction Unbound Bernardine Evaristo* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, [2011],2014)

<sup>2</sup> In *Thirdspace*, Soja’s central argument, drawn from critical engagement with the French spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre, is that spatial thinking has been previously confined to one of two perspectives. Soja calls “Firstspace” the modernist approach to space in its concrete or “real” material forms. Firstspace thinkers positivistically approach space as mathematically and quantifiably measurable [...] Lefebvre calls this kind of space “perceived space”. Scholars who approach space as “Secondspace,” or what Lefebvre called “conceived space,” take the opposite tack, approaching spaces as mental constructs or “imagined” representations. Secondspace thinkers assume that “spatial knowledge is primarily produced through discursively devised representations of space, through the spatial workings of the mind” (79). “In its purest form,” says Soja, “Secondspace is entirely ideational, made up of projections into the empirical world from conceived or imagined geographies” (79). It is not that material reality does not exist; rather, these thinkers believe that materiality can be comprehended fully by thought. Secondspace thinkers “read” spaces as texts in order to interpret their meanings. In the past three decades, Secondspace epistemologies have been dominant amongst critical thinkers in the academy. Soja goes beyond Lefebvre in describing Thirdspace as “an-Other” zone (57). According to Soja, Thirdspace not only unites the dualism between real and imagined, it is “radically open to additional otherness, to a continuing expansion of spatial knowledge” (61). It is “a space of extraordinary openness, a place of critical exchange” (5). Since Thirdspace is constantly expanding, it remains open to the possibilities for social change and renegotiations of power, boundaries, and identity. *Thirdspace* bears the marks of a mid-1990s postmodernist manifesto. <http://disgorgedintotalrecall.tumblr.com/post/30112057564/edward-soja-thirdspace-journeys-to-los-angeles-and>

<sup>3</sup> As a result of their longitudinal study, Weisburd et al. report that the very high concentration of juvenile arrest incidents in Seattle points to the importance of place-based crime prevention for reducing juvenile crime. By addressing only a relatively small number of street segments in the city, police or other crime prevention authorities can potentially target a large proportion of officially recorded juvenile crime. The finding of stability across time further reinforces the importance of place focused crime prevention. “If the most active hot spots are likely to stay very active over time, they provide a very stable focus for intervention. Though place-based crime prevention has not been a major focus of delinquency prevention, our work suggests that it may be an area with great promise” (2009, 461).

I looked up at the top floor balconies and wondered when the next person would chuck themselves off. Thump! The postman found the last one. I made up lyrics about it: *Another man down/Blood on the ground/Lost and found/ Get used to the sound./Another man down/Don't stick around/You can't take flight/Suicide Heights*

I used to lie in my room at night expecting to see dead bodies falling outside my window like in films.

Nice place I had to live in. Thanks. (2)

Therefore, in the very first pages Jerome exposes his home as a site plagued with pressuring authorities, as well as having a large amount of suicides; a living space conceived as both confining and fatal. Jerome's last line signifies that the blame for such bleak living space is on the mother, which raises the question whether the mother had any choice in the matter or not, since Kimisi is a poor and single black woman with two children.

Consequently, in the very first pages of his narrative, Jerome's state of mind reflects that of a typical adolescent. He blames everything and everybody, his living space, the unusually hot weather, his mother, the police, older people and teenage girls. Thus, from his vantage point, all are guilty (except his four-year-old half-sister Shontelle) in preparing the background for what he has done; he tries to become a drug dealer and is murdered by a teenage gang right after his first attempt.

Although Evaristo's Jerome is an unreliable narrator, in the sense that it is a subjective teenage narration, most of Jerome's complaints render troubling social facts such as poverty, low-paid jobs, education, race and gender and parenting, yet firstly, the stifling effect of the council estates that this essay focuses on. Anne Power maintains that in Britain, the gap between the poorest people and the average has grown significantly since the late 1970s. People in the lowest income groups are increasingly overrepresented in council housing. Most council housing is built in large, separate, single-purpose estates, therefore area-based poverty has grown. In these areas, housing, income and social factors are interacted to create a "steep decline" (Power 1996, 1535). Cuming likewise underpins that

[g]eographically, estates are often negatively characterized by their marginal status – even when they are situated in inner-city areas, their construction and design has often resulted in a boundedness and segregation from mainstream metropolitan life. Architecturally, too, they are ubiquitous and often physically prominent (high-rises in particular are designed to be seen from afar) [...] To address the space of council housing then is to explore a landscape that lies beyond such categories as the "metropolitan," "urban," "suburban," and even "slum," [...] its current day incarnation [is] "social dumping grounds". (2-3)

Apart from what the council housing signifies, as a lived in space, its literally confining spatial structure is depicted in Jerome's narration as follows: "[m]y room wasn't a room, it was a cupboard. If I stood in the middle of it and stretched my arms out I could touch both walls" (5), "I could only walk fourteen steps in the whole flat" (9). Therefore, the construction also amplifies their metaphoric entrapment. To avoid the stifling effect, the outbound nearby space, such as a park is not available, either. Jerome reiterates his mother's yearning for "the good old days" in the 1980s when the youngsters could spend the whole summer playing in the park "pretending it was the countryside" (4). What Evaristo draws on is relevant with social studies; from the mid-1980s Delanty points out, there has been an entirely different view of the city since the neighborhoods had either become ghettos (located on the "edge city") or "gated communities", resulting in the fact that the city lost its connection with the community (2003, 56-57). Conveying what his mother related to him, Jerome reveals that "the good old days" has been when the estate was new and "before the riots happened" in the early 1980s which "ruined everything" (4). Shutting down of the youth club, "they" started organizing things for the children to do; "they" referring to the local authorities. Keith states that in the United Kingdom, local authorities are required to work in partnership with other agencies including the police, to develop crime-reduction strategies. However, it contains within it "a moralizing reinvention of individual selves and some straightforward disciplinary measures, such as youth curfews, to create time-spaces in the public sphere where young people will not be allowed" (155). Hence, Evaristo divulges how the strategies of local authorities have developed negative corollaries for the free space of estate inhabitants.

By the same token, conceptualizations of space and place and their significance for both identifications and identity formations on individuals have been the focus for various contemporary disciplines. Reay and Lucey argue that place and identity are "powerfully" connected, but "often in ways which involve active processes of exclusion" (2000, 410), so experiences of places and spaces are "structured in all sorts of ways by broader social power relations which include race, class and age as well as gender" (410) (emphasis original). Place and space conceptualizations also posit gendered disparity because of the "masculinity of the public space and its exclusionary impact on and dangers for females of all ages" (410). Since prevalent anxieties about gangs; "a black crime wave" and "out-of-control drug consumption" all focus exclusively on youth cultures, children living on inner city council estates are highlighted as both at risk and a

potential risk for others (Reay and Lucey 2000, 411). Children's understandings of and relationships to the local are powerfully shaped by broader social relations in which class and race are "just as potent as gender" (Reay and Lucey 2000, 425). In *Hello Mum* class differences among the gangs are salient. The gangs are constructed by black boys of around fifteen who look nineteen because they do not attend school, but rather go to the gym and wear designer outfits. Jerome depicts Kamikaze Kru's leader Delmar as follows:

Delmar wouldn't be seen dead in anything from Primark [from which shop Jerome's mother has to buy their outfit] Labels all the way, ya get me? I always checked out what he wore. Everyone did. That day he had on a black T-shirt with "WU TANG" written across it in big white letters. A pair of True Religion jeans with a real Gucci belt. On his feet? Brand-new Prada sneakers [...] His diamond and gold stud earrings were real, too. (30)

Although ironically this affluence is acquired through drugs, the situation is incompatible with what a single poor mother can provide to her teenage son. They all live on the same estate, yet the gang leader Delmar's affluence is acquired through his brother's leading a drug traffic which sadly denotes the only way out for poverty, for teenagers. As Garcia states, teenage gangs form at a critical period when adolescents "migrate toward peer relationships and begin to separate from their parents and are faced with "the task to form their own identity" (Garcia 2010, 167).

As for the spatial significance, studies reflect that links between gangs and space are important. Not only gangs are spatially concentrated among disadvantaged neighborhoods, but they also occupy what they term "gang set space", which is a geographically defined area within a neighborhood where gang members "hang out" (Ralphs et al. 486). These areas are also referred to as "the life space of the gang" (Klein 18). Most teenagers are not capable of realizing that the gangs can only rule the estate; once they cross the boundaries of their terrain, they become ordinary. Jerome realizes that too late, on a walk with the gang leader on his last day: "the crowds was so thick everyone became a blur of faces and voices" (53) "even Delmar couldn't walk in a straight line anymore" (54). Out of his ruling space, the formidable Delmar becomes a nobody, so losing his self-confidence, he remains quiet.

It is difficult for young people to avoid association with gang members in the same estate. They attend the same schools, youth and community centers; places of worship, sports, music and drama groups, and hung out the same streets (Ralphs et al. 496). Meanwhile, the schools often take insufficient precautions to sustain their students' safety. In *Hello Mum* Jerome believes that his school looks like a "mental asylum" (56) and he recounts the rules of the "mental asylum" as follows:

For a start, don't bring your mobile phone to school or someone will take it off you.

Two, don't ride your bike to school, 'cos someone will use chain-cutters on it.

Three, don't wear platinum, gold or even silver jewellery unless you've got a bruv called The Dexter!

Four, don't carry more than £2 and if you do, hide it in your briefs (not socks 'cos *they*'ll make you take off your shoes).

Five, don't look at anyone you don't know, 'cos *they* might stab you up for disrespecting them.

Six, don't bring a knife into school 'cos *they*'ll search your bag at the entrance. Throw it over the wall instead and pick it up later, yeah?

Seven, don't take drugs, just sell them.

Eight, if you're gonna bring in a replica gun, don't wave it around at assembly 'cos you'll end up being excluded.

Nine, join a gang for protection.

Ten, if you can avoid all of the above, get educated. Boring! (56-57) (emphasis mine).

The rules create an ambivalence since "they" in the citation above signifies both the gangs and the school administration which are both "the others" for Jerome. In the picture of school life drawn by Jerome, the school administrators try to prevent violence but they cannot; the gangs also rule in the schools and Jerome's last remark is highly significant in the way it reveals that education becomes boring for teenagers.

Evaristo also mentions the gangs of girls: Delmar's sister Delice is beaten badly by a gang of girls because she passed through the gang's area "even though she was with a friend who lived there" (13). She has been hospitalized for three weeks and when she recovered, her parents sent Delice to Barbados to live with her grandmother. Thereby, Evaristo reveals that another solution to the confinement in the estates is being sent to exile from family. Here an interesting turn in the topic is exposed, which is about the concept of "home" vs "the homeland". Since the inhabitants of the particular

estate Evaristo depicts are all black, they are the children of mostly first or second generation immigrants. "Home" is England for the teenagers living in the estate, yet intriguingly, being sent to the original homeland of the parents becomes a threat, since it is an exile from home, family and friends. This particular resolution becomes a threat for Jerome's best friend Adrian, too; his father threatens Adrian that if he does not obey the curfew, he will be sent back Ghana, to his grandparents.

Jerome, who decides to join a gang and the related drug traffic, is not a violent youth; he is only an adolescent who yearns for a better life style and attaining power that he witnesses among his peers in the gang. Evaristo does not give any evidence about the violent gang-members' families, yet the narrative implies that Jerome has never seen his father and he hates his step-father who has also deserted them.<sup>4</sup> The gang leader Delmar also hates his father who is in jail for murder: "[m]y dad can rot in prison, as far as I'm concerned. He should've been more careful, ya get me? As Mum says, only a dad can turn you into a man, innit? Instead I've spent my whole life being dragged into prison to see him. Once a month and I've always hated it" (59). What Evaristo reveals is the fact that if the father is in jail, the teenage son regards him as a failure and in contrast, the absence of the father in Jerome's case does not lead to violence, but does not suppress his inclination for crime, either. Accordingly, the outcome of the situation is that the council estates, especially in London, aim at providing a living space for the single mothers, yet ironically, the confined space of the teenagers with similar problems render facility in the formation of the gangs.

The major factor in Jerome's decision to join a gang is also disclosed as his feeling of injustice caused by a gang attack. He goes to a party at Deptford to his friend Adrian's cousin Michael's who is a nineteen-year-old student. The house is attacked by a gang called the Deptford Warriors. The police arrive quickly and the crime is prevented; however, twelve people have to go to the train station to get home and since the gang members follow them, they are once more attacked with "knives and baseball bats" (20). Adrian and Jerome manage to run away, the older ones stay and fight, but the police arrive and no one dies. Adrian's father learns about the trouble and puts him under "curfew" (23) and threatens him that if his grades do not get better he will be sent to Ghana as I mentioned above. The reason why Adrian does not want to go back to Ghana is highly intriguing: "over there you couldn't backchat your teachers or elders and if you did they beat you so bad you never did it again. They used canes and everything. Adrian said kids over there was obedient 'cos they had no choice" so Jerome adds "Sounded like hell to me" (23). For psychologists, though, father involvement is positively associated with children's peer relationships and psychosocial adjustment, as well as social, emotional, and cognitive development (Leidy et al. 46). What is revealed in Evaristo's narration is that, Jerome's single mother tries to discipline her son and fails, whereas Adrian's father manages to discipline him and has a rewarding outcome since Adrian decides to study at university and become an architect. Jerome becomes quite jealous so tries to discourage Adrian telling him to be realistic, since he believes people like "them" cannot leave that neighborhood because they are "gangsters". Adrian starts crying so Jerome regrets saying it, but Delmar sees him with Adrian so Jerome leaves him immediately and joins Delmar. This episode suggests that although Adrian does not have any friends, having a disciplinarian father he acquires hope for the future. On the other hand, by choosing a powerful gang and friend, Jerome chooses death. Would a father have saved him from the inevitable? According to most psychologists the answer is probably yes: "fathering matters regardless of family type or ethnic background" (Leidy et al. 2011, 64). Moreover, "fathers make unique contributions to adolescent adjustment above and beyond mothers' parenting" (64).

Apart from the stifling spatiality of the estates, the society also discriminates black people especially if they are poor and male adolescents, similarly reinforcing that the space they inhabit is unwelcome in the cities. In this vein, Jerome blames the society for what he has become; because he is black, he has been treated like a potential criminal everywhere he went: by the bus drivers, the Fedz" (the Police) and the men in the shops (14). Furthermore, when he walked on the streets girls and women crossed the road as if he was going to "snatch their bags or stab them" (15), starting from when he was about eleven years old. His mother Kimisi succumbs to racial discrimination, but as a teenager Jerome concludes with the frightening remark: "if everyone thinks I'm a scumbag criminal, I'll be a scumbag criminal" (15). Thereby, ostracized by the white society, confined in a council estate, Jerome cannot see a way out, except for joining a gang to become powerful, and drug dealing to earn a significant amount money, since unfortunately these are the only examples of success he perceives. As Said's masterpiece *Orientalism* (1978) also reveals geography is socially constituted, from which we can deduce that so are locations in the cities, since this discursive production of space is created by existing physical and social formations. Eventually, Jerome's resistance is manifest in a criminal act, yet, although it is adverse, the act is what the society proposes him; either suffer in what you have or make a move.

<sup>4</sup>Interestingly, there is no mention of Kimisi's parents, either. However, by Evaristo's very ingenious technique, Jerome's father and his family are disclosed in the following fiction *Mr Loverman*, with a slight change of the last name (Cole-Wallace to Cole-Wilson). The main character Antiguan born Barry's (Barrington Jedidiah Walker) brother Larry arrives in England earlier than him, has got three sons, his wife dies when the twin boys are very little and the eldest son Melvin six years old. Melvin gets derailed on losing his mother and takes to drugs at a young age and leaves home to return at Larry's deathbed in 1979. After his father's death, his uncle Barry relates

As for Melvin? Never did get his act together. Ended up caught in what I call the 'revolving door for recidivists'—at Her Majesty's Pleasure.

Last saw him early nineties. Dudley [Melvin's brother] told me a few weeks back that one of Melvin's pickney was killed by a gang. Boy called Jerome, known as JJ, fourteen years young, lived with his mother, last name Cole-Wilson. We'd not known he existed and apparently Melvin ain't seen his chile in over ten years.

He failed him. No excuses. He did. (*Mr Loverman* 162)

Hollander and Einwohner argue that, resistance can be understood mainly in terms of *action* and *opposition* (538) (emphasis original). They note that “resistance includes activity, and of course that activity occurs in opposition to someone or something else” (539). Consequently, confinement leads to resistance in Jerome’s case and ends in his death. Conversely, my contention is that Jerome’s death is a form of his liberation from the estates and the discrimination that the society stifles him with. The author also intriguingly envisions freedom for Jerome by an act of narrative resistance; Jerome is able to narrate his life after his death, as extricated from all the constraints, forever free.

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