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Sanghamitra Dalal
College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA
Selangor, Malaysia

Longing to Belong in One's Own Homeland: Tracing the Topophilic Cartography in Anita Sethi's *I Belong Here: A Journey Along the Backbone of Britain*

Abstract

In this article I will read *I Belong Here: A Journey Along the Backbone of Britain* (2021) by Anita Sethi, the Manchester-born woman of colour, to explore how journeying through natural landscapes can be perceived as an emblematic reclamation of one's home and belonging. A victim of a race-hate crime that questioned her right to belong in her country of birth on account of her race, while she was on her way from Liverpool to Newcastle on the TransPennine Express train in 2019, Sethi resolves to undertake this journey on foot across the Pennines, a range of uplands in the northern England—known as the "backbone of Britain" and designated "Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty"—in order to reclaim her right to belong and roam freely in the land which she longs to call home. As her physical act of walking amidst intense beauty is intertwined with her internal journey of growing up as a brown woman in a predominantly white Britain, the narrative traverses beyond the Pennines, and is transformed into a testimony of how nature salves wounded souls in a fractured world, subjects who are strangely interconnected by myriad cultures and identities, movements and migrations. Consequently, drawing from the idea of topophilia, proposed by Gaston Bachelard and popularized by Yi-Fu Tuan, I will argue that Sethi's memoir eventually transcends the disturbing reality of being the estranged Other and charts a topophilic cartography to shepherd the alienated and the unhomed toward a sense of home and belonging.

Keywords: home, belonging, topophilia, nature, Pennines, Anita Sethi.

INTRODUCTION

The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) describes hate crimes as "criminal acts committed with a bias motive" (15), where the victims are deliberately targeted because of their affiliation with a particular group that shares common characteristics. These characteristics are referred to as "protected characteristic . . . such as 'race,' language, religion or belief, ethnicity, nationality, sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, or other common feature that is fundamental to their identity" (15). Recent reports show that there is a steady increase in hate crimes world-wide. For example, Research Briefing no. 8457 published by the House of Commons Library, UK, on Hate Crime Statistics in November 2022, records that while there has been a steady increase in racial or religiously aggravated hate crimes since 2015, the highest rate of hate crime for all offences recorded by the police per 100,000 population in 2021–22 was in the Greater Manchester Police Force area (Allen and Zayed 4).

Given this context, in this article, I will read the Manchester-born, woman of colour, Anita Sethi's memoir, *I Belong Here: A Journey Along the Backbone of Britain* (2021). The memoir is written following Sethi's experience of being a victim of race-hate crime while she was on her way from Liverpool to Newcastle on the TransPennine Express train in 2019 that questioned her right to belong in her country of birth on account of her race. The memoir documents not only her emotional and psychological distress but also records the literal journey she has undertaken on foot across the Pennines, a range of uplands in the northern England, known as the "backbone of Britain" and designated "Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty." Her memoir further intertwines her physical act of walking amidst intense beauty with her internal journey of growing up as a brown woman in a predominantly white Britain in order to reclaim her belonging in a place which she calls home. *I Belong Here* won a Books Are My Bag Award and was shortlisted for the Wainwright Prize for UK Nature Writing, Royal Society of Literature (RSL) Ondaatje Prize, Great Outdoors Award, and Portico Prize.

ANITA SETHI AND RACIAL PREJUDICE

Sethi's[1] ancestral Indian heritage can be traced back to the history of the colonial practice of the indentured labour system in the 19th century. Her mother's ancestral family were shipped from British India to British

[1] Anita Sethi is a British journalist and writer and the recipient of a RSL Literature Matters Award. She has written columns, features, and reviews for national and international newspapers and magazines including *The Guardian*, *Observer*, *the i paper*, *Independent*, *Daily*

Guyana and her mother, after gaining a nurse traineeship, migrated to England alone at the age of 21. Sethi's father's family were sent from India to Nairobi, Kenya, when both countries were British colonies, and her father was born in Kenya. Following Kenyan independence from Britain her father also migrated to the UK at the age of 19. Sethi's parents eventually met in London and married in Manchester and Sethi was born in Manchester as a result of multiple migrations which are part of colonial history, and thus become part of British history as well. However, Sethi has to confront the recurring query of where she is actually from, right from her childhood, which conceals the stereotypical racial implication that Sethi does not belong in her land of birth.

In 2019, as she was travelling from Liverpool to Newcastle on the TransPennine Express train, Sethi became a victim of a race-hate crime. After asking a fellow passenger, who was playing loud music in the train compartment, to turn the volume down, she was met with a torrent of racist abuse: "Do you have a British passport? Get back on the banana boat. Paki c**t! F**k off!" (Sethi, *Belong* 26). As the rest of the compartment remained silent, Sethi, the only non-white British person present in the compartment, resolved to make an official report, first to the train staff, and then to the police at Darlington and Newcastle respectively. The accused was arrested, charged, pleaded guilty, and was convicted of "a racially aggravated public order offence, using threatening, abusive, insulting words and behaviour" (Sethi, *Belong* 12). Even though Sethi is relieved at the successful conclusion of the legal procedure, she continues to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, as she fails to overcome the hideous insinuation that she has no right to belong to a place that she calls home. In addition to this terrible incident in the train compartment, she has also been racially abused twice while walking on the streets, in Nottingham and London, in the same year.

Even before her experience of race-hate crime on the TransPennine Express train, Sethi confronted the casual banter "Well, you don't look like it" when she replied that she is from Manchester, UK, to the question "And

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Telegraph, *Sunday Times*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age*, *The National*, *New Statesman*, *Granta*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Stylist*, and *BBC Travel* among others. She has also been published in the anthologies *Women on Nature*, *The Wild Isles*, *Common People*, *The Seasons* nature writing anthology, *Seaside Special: Postcard from the Edge*, *We Mark Your Memory*, and *Solstice Shorts* among others. Apart from being a guest critic, commentator, panellist, and co-presenter on several channels including BBC Radios 2, 3, 4, and 5, the BBC World Service, ITV, Times Radio, Sky News, and ABC Australia, Sethi was an International Writer in Residence and Ambassador for Journalism at the Emerging Writers Festival, Melbourne, and a writing fellow at the Wheeler Centre of Books, Writing, and Ideas. See https://anitasethi.com/writing/

where are you from?" by none other than the then Prince Charles at the Commonwealth People's Forum where Sethi was one of the speakers. As she goes through a range of emotions "from shock to humiliation to rage" at the casual ignorance of the history of the Commonwealth and colonialism from even the corridors of power, Sethi, in an open letter to Prince Charles, published in *The Guardian*, and titled "Dear Prince Charles, Do You Think My Brown Skin Makes Me unBritish?" (2018), recalls how British history lessons at schools are conspicuously silent on the histories of "immigration, the British empire, the Commonwealth and colonialism," thus unwittingly perpetuating racial prejudice and hegemonic power structures in the society. Barbara Perry's central idea of "doing difference," as identifying one of the major causes of hate crime committed toward marginalized communities, likewise indicates an existing social power dynamics. According to Perry, hate crimes reinforce the hegemonic and hierarchical boundaries of the supposedly dominant and the subordinate groups in society, where violence and intimidation are directed to those who are seen as different, thereby reminding them that they are the "other" which implies "you're different, you don't belong" (141).

Therefore, Sethi's resolve to undertake the journey on foot across the North Pennines is not only to assert her right to roam freely in her home country but also to affirm an un-Othered existence in Britain. In spite of being a novice walker and naturalist, Sethi's determination to explore the hills and moorlands in the North also addresses the tacit acceptance of the fact that the countryside of England has not traditionally been a place for people of colour. According to Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), only one percent of visitors to England's National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are people from Black, Asian, or minority ethnic backgrounds. Growing up as a daughter of a single mother who never had the luxury of enjoying expensive holidays, Sethi clearly recalls one memorable childhood holiday trip to the Lake District. Standing under the vast expanse of hills, lakes, and skies she realizes that there is an intimate bond between human and nature and that being in nature can become a cathartic experience—despite having been frowned at by a local resident who comments: "You don't see many brown folks out here in the countryside" (Sethi, *Belong* 80). In documenting her experiences of walking in natural beauty, following her horrible experience of being a victim of race-hate crime, Sethi's memoir thus transforms into a testimony of how nature salves wounded souls in a fractured world, subjects who are strangely interconnected by myriad cultures and identities, movements and migrations. Therefore, in the following section, I will first examine the concept of topophilia or love of place as proposed by Gaston Bachelard and Yi-Fu Tuan, indicating how a deep connection between the sense of

place and the sense of belonging exists. I will then explore how Sethi's memoir charts a topophilic cartography to shepherd the alienated and the unhomed toward a sense of home and belonging.

THE CONCEPT OF TOPOPHILIA AND BELONGING

W. H. Auden first used the word "topophilia" in his introduction to the collection of prose and verse written by John Betjeman, titled *Slick but not Streamlined* (1947). Auden's attempt to define topophilia marks this emotion with a certain kind of attachment to landscape and environment. However, he significantly points out that his idea of topophilia has little in common with simple nature love. As he maintains: "Wild or unhumanised nature holds no charms for the average topophil because it is lacking in history" (qtd. in Betjeman 11), Auden's perception of topophilia is not limited to responding to the beauty of the landscape but identifies it as a passion for the landscapes that are suffused with the past.

However, Gaston Bachelard's use of the term topophilia in his *The Poetics of Space*, which was first published in French as *La Poétique de l'Espace* in 1958, and translated into English in 1964, has expanded the acceptance of the term widely. Bachelard identifies topophilia as "felicitous space" and "eulogized space" which seeks "to determine the human value of the sorts of space that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces, the space we love" (xxxv). Yi-Fu Tuan in his *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (1974) refers to the term topophilia as a "neologism" (93). Even though the term is not an absolutely new word in the literal sense, as it has already been used by Auden and Bachelard before, Tuan's application and understanding of topophilia encompasses a wider range.

Approaching the idea of topophilia from the point of view of human geography, Yi-Fu Tuan defines topophilia as "the affective bond between people and place or setting" (4). Edward Relph suggests that Tuan's proposition is more about "-philia than about topo-, more about environmental attitudes and perceptions . . . than about the characteristics of places that contribute to those perceptions." In the preface to his volume on topophilia Tuan observes that although human beings and their environments are interconnected, environments for human beings are not only a resource, but also "sources of assurance and pleasure, objects of profound attachment and love" (xii). He further explicates that such affective ties between human and environment vary in intensity, subtlety, and modes of expression, such as response to environment, can be ranged from aesthetic to tactile. However, he significantly points out that

topophilia is "not the strongest of human emotions" but can be compelling when a particular place or environment, which is normally associated with a sense of home or a locus of memory, transcends that simple implication to assume the role of a carrier of "emotionally charged events or perceived as a symbol" (93). Environment predominantly provides potentially infinite "sensory stimuli, which as perceived images lend shape to our joys and ideals" (Tuan 113), and topophilia can appropriate many different forms, varying greatly in emotional range and intensity, namely, "fleeting visual pleasure; the sensuous delight of physical contact; the fondness for place because it is familiar, because it is home and incarnates the past, because it evokes pride of ownership or of creation; joy in things because of animal health and vitality" (247). Therefore, the idea of topophilia evokes an integral relationship between place and home, which, in other words, indicates an intrinsic affiliation between place and a sense of belonging.

However, belonging is a term which is frequently used but difficult to conceptualize. Antonsich ascertains that the idea of belonging is "vaguely defined and ill-theorised" as often the notion is taken for granted, as if "its meaning is somewhat self-explanatory" (644). In the introduction to their edited collection *Youth, Place, and Theories of Belonging* (2020), Sadia Habib and Michael R. M. Ward argue that belonging is a complex process which is predominantly "a personal dialectic in constant negotiation with one's surroundings" (1). They further profess that even though the perception of belonging is personal, the notion of belonging is inherently localized, as it is interwoven with a sense of place and its individual and collective histories, and is informed by "intersectional identity categories," thus making belonging "racialized, classed, gendered, and linked to place" (2). Thus, in the Foreword to the above-mentioned volume, Greg Noble proposes that the idea of belonging should be identified by a set of "practices," taking into account its "situated" nature, which underlines the "scales" of belonging which he identifies as local attachments articulated or disarticulated with "other registers of ethnicity, nation, and transnationality" (xvii–xviii). Hence, belonging is not simply given, but is constantly constructed and negotiated, and "operates in complex circuits of recognition" (xviii). Noble distinguishes belonging, being a set of practices, as a form of labour, where as "an expressive emotional attachment or detachment" reacts in ways that "increases or decreases the body's capacity to act" (xviii). Belongingness, thus produced, is also not just negotiating with the place and other human beings but forged in relation with "the spatial and non-human elements of one's environment" (xviii).

As a woman of colour in a predominantly white Britain, Anita Sethi has not only experienced several instances of macro and micro aggressions since her childhood, but also realizes that the place she calls home constantly

questions her right to belong in countless subtle (and less subtle) ways. However, she refuses to succumb to the existing racial prejudice that stops her from freely exploring her home country. Her journey through the North Pennines transforms into a journey of reclamation where her attempts to assert that "I belong in the UK as a brown woman, just as much a white man does" (*Belong* 12) lead to negotiating and constructing her sense of belonging in her own way. In addition, Sethi's experience also evokes an understanding of how belongingness can be shaped through vast mountains to tiny creatures, from deep rivers to fleeting raindrops, and how journeys through the natural world can be "emotionally restorative" (302), connecting her to the place which she calls home.

TOPOPHILIC CARTOGRAPHY OF BELONGING

I Belong Here was published as the first book in the Bloomsbury Wildlife trilogy, and Anita Sethi has been hailed as a "powerful new voice in nature writing" (Cowdrey). Even though *I Belong Here* can be considered a part of the New Nature Writing genre, popularized by the practitioners such as Robert Macfarlane, Richard Mabey, Mark Cocker, and others since the late 1960s, Sethi's memoir carves out a different path. Sethi's encounters with nature, particularly during her walks across the Pennines, are not just to highlight the everyday connections between the human and non-human natural world, but to provide instances how physical experiences of being in the natural world can work as an act of resistance and reclamation, in response to deeply ingrained racial prejudice against the other, which results in perpetuating a sense of unbelonging. Sethi recognizes the need for belonging as a basic need, like water, air and food, the vital elements for all living organisms, and her search for belonging throughout her journey and her memoir is articulated in the call: "How could I feel a sense of belonging in my own body, in my own self, in the world? . . . How can nature help us to find a greater sense of belonging" (Sethi, *Belong* 9)? In her examination of new northern voices, Chloe Ashbridge rightly refers to Sethi's book as offering a trajectory of "developed post-pastoral engagements with nature writing" in facilitating "a reclamation of the English countryside from its imperial connotations while also recognising its history as a site of exclusion" (599–600). However, I will focus on Sethi's physical, emotional, and psychological responses while walking through the Pennines, and how her inquisitive vision and understanding unearth the harmonious interconnection of similarities and differences existing in the natural world, leading her to reclaim a sense of belonging to the land she calls home.

Opened on 24 April 1965, Pennine Way is the first National Trail in England and is one of the UK's most famous long-distance walks. Starting from Edale in the northern Derbyshire Peak District, it follows the Yorkshire Dales, through the Swaledale Valley, across the north Pennines, and over Hadrian's Wall in Northumberland to the Cheviot Hills, ending in the Scottish Borders in Kirk Yetholm. The trail offers spectacular landscapes and rich wildlife areas, including three National Parks and various National Nature Reserves. Some of the well-known spots along the route are Kinder Scout, Stoodley Pike, Top Withins, Malham Cove, Pen-y-Ghent, Tan Hill, High Force, Cauldron Snout, High Cup Nick, Cross Fell, Hadrian's Wall, and The Cheviot ("Pennine Way"). Sethi documents her varying experiences of being a race-hate crime victim, including while undertaking the Pennines walk, in five chapters in the memoir, in addition to a Prologue and an Epilogue. The titles of the chapters, namely, Mouth, Skin, Backbone, Lifeblood, and Feet, immediately indicate how her traumatic experiences and her transformational reclamations are intertwined in her mind and body, responding simultaneously through different aesthetic and tactile sensations.

For example, throughout the book Sethi repeatedly highlights how the sight of a river or even the sound of a flowing stream calms her down: "I hear the river before I see it, and the sound makes my heart surge as all remaining weariness drains away . . . I am lifted sky-high by the sight, and its wild energy washes away a skein of grimy anxiety" (*Belong* 84). However, as she looks at the River Aire she contemplates how flowing water, rivers, and oceans are all interconnected with each other, irrespective of geographical borders and boundaries. She reflects on how the River Aire flows through the northern cities and towns before joining the River Trent at Trent Falls to form the Humber Estuary, and how the Humber flows until it meets the North Sea, which is part of the Atlantic Ocean. She further notes that this is the same Atlantic Ocean which borders Guyana and into which the Berbice River runs, nearby which her mother grew up. Colonial history has mostly erased the history of the Indian indentured labourers on sugar colonies in the Caribbean, but as Sethi's visit to the National Archives in Georgetown, Guyana, to search for her ancestral history reveals, nature connects the borders and their respective inhabitants. Evoking Auden's idea of topophilia in which natural landscapes acquire greater significance because they exude the past and fuse into the present in which migration and displacement are a reality, Sethi remarks while pausing for breath on a footbridge across the river: "[H]ow we are living at a time when we need to build bridges not walls, not only across rivers but also cultural divides" (85). Sethi further points out that how nature prompts us to naturalize all kinds of colours and textures irrespective of racial differences. The river

water often changes its colour from blue to brown as it flows along. The tree barks beneath the moss are also naturally brown, while the particular skin colour of black or brown has been demeaned in a place where diverse colourful nature spontaneously thrives. Sethi thus pines for an affirmation as all colours and textures which are parts of the natural world "need . . . to be reclaimed as beautiful" (105), so that a sense of belonging between different races and colours can be constructed.

Sethi's visit to Malham Cove, a natural wonder which is protected by law, not only brings her attention to the concept of protected characteristics, but also inspires her to notice that faults, clints, and grykes are not merely empty gaps or cracks, but also a potential environment and microclimate for rare wild flowers and ferns to thrive, which Sethi perceives as a sign of optimism in desolation. She writes: "Far from being lifeless up here, life has found a way of growing in the most unexpected of places, through cracks and fissures and breakage. It seems miraculous to see, uplifting and hopeful" (127–28). Similarly, she perceives Horton Scar as "not only an absence but also an opening, a possibility" where all the emotional scars and holes can be allowed to fully grieve and eventually alchemized into showing "who and what we love" (197–98), transforming her from a victim to a survivor.

Sethi's final destination, Hadrian's Wall, which is protected as a scheduled monument because of its historical importance, reveals how fear of immigration and prejudice against the Other has existed since the days of the Roman Empire. The 73 miles or 118 kilometre long wall was built between AD122 to AD130 to guard the Roman Province of Britannia from the barbarian invasion of the northern ancient Britons. However, against the glowing evening sun Sethi regards the famous Sycamore Gap Tree,[2] which stood by the side of the Hadrian's Wall for hundreds of years between two distinctive curves in the earth, caused by melting glacial waters, and she quietly meditates on the ways in which the natural world ceaselessly witnesses our histories and stories, our existence and predicaments, our violations and transgressions, since time immemorial.

In tune with Tuan's observation, Sethi's physical journey through the Pennines eventually transforms into a symbolic journey, providing sensory stimuli, including corporeal and emotional, which transfers her from hate and trauma to joy, happiness, and belonging. Sethi's constant negotiation with the flow of the river, wild ferns and flowers, wide range of mountains

[2] Due to an act of vandalism the historic Sycamore Gap Tree was felled overnight on 27 September 2023, causing some damage to the Hadrian's Wall. A 16-year-old boy and a 60-year-old man have been arrested on suspicion of criminal damage and released on bail (Jagger).

and vast expanse of valleys in the Pennines, leads her to a practice of constructing belongingness in the situated nature, which, in its manifold varieties, signifies that, in spite of differences of race, class, colour, or creed, human minds, like the shifting and changing elements of nature, are strangely interconnected by myriad cultures and identities, movements and migrations. As Habib and Ward point out, Sethi's eventual unearthing of her rightful place in the north is a result of her personal dialectic with the natural world which salves her wounded soul and fosters her deep love for her home—a place where her sense of belonging has been questioned or denied by others.

CONCLUSION

Sethi's quest for reclamation thus forges a novel cartography of belonging which fuses the literal trails of the Pennines documented in the OS map with the desire paths of a scarred and traumatized psyche. The text traverses the routes of migration histories, ponders the transient and unsettled homes that people strive to create along the way, wonders how to feel settled in one's own skin when one is at the risk of racism, and discovers how places make people and vice versa. Evoking Yi-Fu Tuan's proposition that affective bonds between people and places are capable of radiating assurance, pleasure, attachment, and love, Sethi's embracing of the amazing nature of the Pennines in search of belonging obliges her to question the nature of belonging itself. She examines whether one can truly belong to a place or a place can entirely belong to an individual. Belonging, in its aggressive forms, implies notions of ownership, indicating an existence of power hierarchy, which eventually leads back to the same stereotypes that result in prejudice, marginalization, and race-hate crimes. Enthralled by vast, wild, ancient, and timeless nature, Sethi realizes how we are "all temporary guests on this earth" (*Belong* 296). Since we will take nothing of our belongings with us, the only way to establish a sense of belonging to ourselves and to our environment is not to search for finding oneself, but to lose and dissolve ourselves in the manifold heterogeneity of the surrounding landscapes and mankind, which teems with diverse wildlife and assorted organisms, varied colours and textures, faults and fissures, gaps and scars. As Sethi allows herself to dissipate in the landscape, she invokes the ancient Maori saying: "I am the river, and the river is me," which gently guides her to settle into "the sound and sight and smell of the river and its wildlife . . . the shell between the self and world dissolving as I walk" (170). Such a diffusion of the self in nature and mankind generates empathy and fosters an understanding of the Other through a different viewpoint.

Sethi's consultations with Dacher Keltner, the founder-director of the Greater Good Science Centre, based at the University of California, Berkeley, which sponsors scientific research into emotional and social well-being, testify to the same perspective. Keltner rightly points out that nature can be healing to various post-traumatic stress disorders. He identifies how a human body, similar to an antenna, responds to the sensuousness of nature, the sound, the scent, the colour which can directly calm down one's stress response. He also emphasizes the significant element of "awe," asserting that "when you get out in the wonders of nature you feel awe and you feel there's a lot more to life than the trauma, there's more to this story" (Sethi, *Belong* 235). Sethi's narrative thus travels beyond her personal trauma and the Pennines, and reinscribes the sense of belonging through her words, her skin, her love, empathy, and forgiveness. Reiterating the observations of the Father of the National Parks, John Muir (1838–1914), who highlights the interconnectedness of natural formations and formations of human beings: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe" (87), Sethi solemnly observes, in a similar fashion, that all external journeys are intrinsically internal, and that one needs to find belonging within one's self. "The body itself is a landscape and for the first time in a while I feel I am fully inhabiting myself and simultaneously inhabiting this place, becoming the sea and sky" (298), Sethi writes, and as her wounded body and soul symbolically transmute themselves into an embodiment of natural elements she finds her way home in the land of her birth by tracing the topophilic cartography of belonging.

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Sanghamitra Dalal is Senior Lecturer at the College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Selangor, Malaysia. She completed a PhD in postcolonial diasporic literature at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, and had taught in India and Germany. Her research interests include postcolonial migration and diasporic literatures, with

special interest in South and Southeast Asian literatures in English; transnational and transcultural literatures and cultures; life writing and food writing. She has published articles in indexed journals and book chapters with Routledge and Palgrave Macmillan.
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0742-3415
sanghamitra@uitm.edu.my